

# Lee: Interest among Black voters, south-siders likely to drive turnout in Milwaukee mayoral election

Posted on Monday, Apr 4, 2022

UW-Milwaukee Prof. Mordecai Lee says Black voters and what he says is a “last hurrah” for Milwaukee’s old south side could drive mayoral election turnout above the 22 percent seen in the primary election.

The veteran political scientist told WisPolitics.com in a phone interview that mayoral elections in Milwaukee that don’t coincide with a presidential election usually bring roughly one-fifth of registered voters to the polls. He said mayoral races don’t get voters as excited as bigger races, but Black Milwaukee voters do come out to vote when a candidate or prominent issue motivates them.

Milwaukee Election Commission Executive Director Claire Woodall-Vogg told WisPolitics.com spring break for Milwaukee Public Schools could slightly increase turnout as more residents have more time to vote. She also said turnout likely won’t change much compared to the primary turnout, but she was unwilling to speculate on a turnout number.

She said: “I don’t dare to guess, as I was way more optimistic about turnout in February only to be very wrong!”

**>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Acting Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson’s shot at becoming the city’s first elected Black mayor could bring more Black voters to the polls.

Lee said Milwaukee’s Black voters in the past typically turn out to vote at a lower rate than white Milwaukee voters because many are in lower-income brackets and less educated than white Milwaukeeans. He added those characteristics usually lead

any group, regardless of race, to lower turnouts.

“So that was sort of the average, but then along came (Barack) Obama; and then along came Sheriff Lucas to win in a primary,” he said. “And African Americans have demonstrated that even though historic demographic trends offer a lower turnout, that they will do a higher turnout when they’re motivated to do so.”

Lee added 2014 and 2018 are fairly good example of the low turnout rates because those years lacked presidential elections.

Milwaukee Election Commission data show the following turnout rates for spring general elections in those years:

\*2014 saw a 9 percent turnout rate as 28,818 of 318,863 registered voters cast ballots; and

\*2018 saw a 23.5 percent turnout rate as 58,384 of 248,057 registered voters cast ballots.

In the 2004 race when then-acting Mayor Marvin Pratt, vying then to be the city’s first elected Black mayor, faced Tom Barrett, a white former legislator and member of Congress, saw turnout hit 46.7 percent as 163,026 of 348,936 registered voters cast ballots. But that ballot also had presidential primaries to drive up turnout.

Lee said former Ald. Bob Donovan’s conservative position and long-time support for more police, coupled with a general focus on rising crime in Milwaukee, could also bring more voters to the polls than usual.

Donovan appeals to Milwaukee conservative voters, many of whom used to populate the city’s south side. But Lee noted many of those voters have left the area over the past decades, detracting from Donovan’s voter base and chances at an underdog win.

“I think this election could be called the last hurrah of the old south side,” he said.

Lee added many south side voters of the past were largely socially liberal, but fiscally conservative, and Donovan represents those values well. However, many voters who hold those values have moved away, leaving what Lee estimated is roughly 20-30 percent of registered Milwaukee voters who would likely support the former southwest side alderman.

In an attempt to increase voting access, Woodall-Vogg said her office implemented

nine staffed absentee ballot drop boxes around the city.

Campaigns for Johnson and Donovan separately told WisPolitics.com they will be knocking on doors, continuing to run ads, making phone calls and more to drive voters to the polls.

Voters at nine early voting locations in Milwaukee cast 8,511 ballots in-person as of the end of absentee voting.

Additionally, 27,528 absentee ballots the city sent out that were returned as of this morning. Voters failed to return 7,690 ballots that were previously mailed out.

That means going into tomorrow, Milwaukeeans have already cast more than half the 61,743 votes cast in the February primary.

See more early voting statistics [here](#).

Read more news about the election at the [Milwaukee Mayoral Race page](#).