

Tuesday's primary sets stage for historic mayoral election in Milwaukee

Posted on Monday, Feb 14, 2022

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For WisPolitics.com*

Eighteen years later, Marvin Pratt still has second thoughts about his campaign slogan.

"It's time!" Pratt's supporters chanted to rhythmic clapping in 2004. It was time, they contended, for Milwaukee to elect its first Black mayor — time for a person of color to lead what had become a majority-minority city.

But it wasn't time. Pratt, then the acting mayor, mounted the strongest campaign of any Black mayoral candidate before or since. Yet Tom Barrett, a white former congressman, still surged past him to capture the city's top office.

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Now, almost halfway through his fifth term as mayor, Barrett has departed to serve as U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg. Now another Black Common Council president, Cavalier Johnson, has taken over as acting mayor and jumped into the race to succeed Barrett.

And now, finally, Pratt believes it really is time.

"Most people know this time there will be a Black mayor," Pratt, who turned 77 in May, said in a recent interview. "When I ran, people probably viewed Tom Barrett as saving the city."

Johnson is the acknowledged front-runner in a field of seven on Tuesday's primary ballot. Four are Black — Johnson, Milwaukee County Sheriff Earnell Lucas, Democratic state Sen. Lena Taylor and community activist Ieshuh Griffin. Three — Ald. Marina Dimitrijevic, Taylor and Griffin — are women, in a city where no woman has ever held the mayor's office. Only two — former Ald. Bob Donovan and events planner Michael Sampson — are white males.

Leveraging his de facto incumbency, substantial campaign treasury and significant outside spending, Johnson has led in every poll released to date. Those polls also show Taylor and Donovan battling for second place, Dimitrijevic and Lucas struggling to gain traction, and Sampson and Griffin lacking any credible path to victory.

If Johnson, Taylor or Lucas ends up facing Donovan or Dimitrijevic in the April 5 general election, Pratt predicts, "the African-American person is going to win."

That would not have been a safe prediction in the more racially polarized environment of 2004, Pratt says. Back then, he recalls, people warned him that his campaign slogan might be too divisive.

"'It's time' stoked fears of the racial division that is always present in Milwaukee," Pratt says.

Then as now, the primary field was large and diverse, with a short window to campaign. Like Barrett, former Mayor John Norquist had resigned in December of the prior year. Unlike Barrett, Norquist stepped down near the end of his term, his political career cut short by a sex scandal.

Besides Pratt, the February 2004 nonpartisan primary ballot featured four Black candidates: then-Sheriff David Clarke, former Police Chief Arthur Jones, former Milwaukee Public Schools board member Leon Todd and lobbyist Frank Cumberbatch. Only one of the 10 contenders, business owner Sandy Folaron, was a woman. Four were white males: Barrett, then-Ald. Tom Nardelli, former Municipal Judge Vince Bobot and teacher John Pitta.

Barrett, whose former congressional district had included roughly the northern half of the city, was viewed as the favorite, although Pratt was closest to being an incumbent in a race where no incumbent mayor has been defeated since 1940. Meanwhile, Clarke — who had been appointed by former Republican governor Scott

McCallum in 2002 but ran as a Democrat to win his first term later that year — was emerging as a conservative voice.

In the primary, Pratt finished first, with 38% of the vote, followed by Barrett, with 33%. Of the eight candidates eliminated, only Clarke scored in the double digits, with 17%.

Pratt was the first — and still only — Black mayoral candidate to finish first in a primary, and only the second to reach the general-election ballot. (The first Black candidate in a mayoral general election, then-Sheriff Richard Artison, didn't face a primary in his 1996 challenge to Norquist.)

The 2004 primary results showed signs of the electorate's racial polarization, based on an analysis by John D. Johnson, research fellow in the Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education at Marquette University Law School (and no relation to Cavalier Johnson).

Although the city's total population was 45% white, 37% Black and 12% Hispanic, the voting-age population was 54% white, 31% Black and 10% Hispanic, according to the 2000 Census. Based on the voting-age population of each ward, Marquette's Johnson calculated that, in the primary:

- Pratt commanded 73% of the vote in majority-Black wards, compared with 13% for Barrett and 8% for Clarke.
- Barrett took 39% of the vote in majority-Hispanic wards, while Pratt and Clarke received 20% each.
- Barrett won 45% of the primary vote in majority-white wards, followed by Clarke with 23% and Pratt with 16%.

Those figures show Clarke ran significantly better in white and Hispanic areas than in Black neighborhoods. In mayoral races nationwide, Pratt says, "Black electeds who were in law enforcement were more appealing to the general public than anyone else" of color.

However, Pratt concedes, that wasn't true of Clarke or of Artison, Milwaukee County's first Black sheriff. Artison lost to Norquist in 1996. But Artison was facing an incumbent, while Pratt and Clarke were competing in only the third wide-open mayoral race since 1948.

Once the 2004 race was down to two, Pratt said he became more of a target. He

complained of unfair news coverage, criticized then-District Attorney E. Michael McCann and bristled at opposition from the Milwaukee Police Association, the rank-and-file officers' union that he sees as "closely tied to right-wing people and probably pro-Trump" these days.

The police union has longstanding ties to Republicans. It endorsed then-President Donald Trump for re-election in 2020.

Much of the negative media attention in 2004 focused on Pratt's campaign finances, including a six-figure difference between his financial reports and his campaign's bank balance. He also had billed both his campaign and the city for some travel expenses. McCann found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing, just sloppy record-keeping, but still charged Pratt with five civil counts of violating campaign finance laws.

Pratt paid a \$2,500 fine. Barrett and other critics pounced on the error, depicting Pratt as a poor manager unfit for the mayor's office.

"A lot of this is going to sound like sour grapes," Pratt conceded. "It may sound like I'm ranting ... (but) there were a lot of slings and arrows thrown at me."

Taylor also thinks Pratt fell victim to "dirty tactics." She was the first Black woman on the general-election ballot, falling to Barrett in 2020 after advancing out of a four-way primary.

"It wasn't about his ability," Taylor says of Pratt. "It wasn't about his skills. It wasn't about whether he had the heart for the people."

In fact, Pratt says, "Unlike the current crop running for mayor, I had a record of accomplishment."

During his nearly 18 years on the council, Pratt served as the first Black chairman of the powerful Finance & Personnel Committee and the second Black council president. He sponsored legislation requiring city contractors to hire a certain percentage of Milwaukee residents for public works projects. As acting mayor, he championed and signed legislation creating a program to help drivers earn back licenses that had been suspended for unpaid parking tickets.

"I always liked Marvin," says Donovan, who was finishing his first term on the council in 2004. "I worked well with him." Donovan, who lost to Barrett in 2016,

says he thinks Pratt had “a better rapport” with council members than Cavalier Johnson does today.

Johnson had served only one term as an alderman when he was elected council president in 2020, on an 8-7 vote with all other Black council members opposed. He told Milwaukee Magazine (<https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/history-is-on-hold-in-milwaukee-mayors-race/>) that the council’s internal politics didn’t reflect the sentiments of the broader Black community.

Despite Pratt’s qualifications, the 2004 general-election vote was even more racially polarized than that of the primary. According to John Johnson’s analysis of the voting-age population:

- Pratt carried all 121 majority-Black wards, with a combined 83% of the vote to Barrett’s 17%.
- Barrett carried 133 of the 138 majority-white wards, with a combined 80% of the vote to Pratt’s 19%. Pratt narrowly carried five majority-white wards in diverse neighborhoods.
- Barrett carried all 27 majority-Hispanic wards, with a combined 68% of the vote to Pratt’s 31%.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported that turnout was up 28% from the primary in the wards that Pratt carried, compared with a 12% increase in the wards that Barrett carried. Although Clarke endorsed Pratt after the primary, exit polls showed that Barrett picked up 77% of those who voted for Clarke and 71% of those who backed other candidates in the primary.

Overall, Barrett won 54% of the vote. Pratt’s 46% still stands as the highest percentage of the general-election vote for any mayoral candidate of color, compared with 40% for Artison in 1996 and 37% for Taylor in 2020.

Mindful of Pratt’s stumbles, Cavalier Johnson is taking care with his campaign finances and media relations, says Sachin Chheda, the acting mayor’s campaign manager. Chheda believes Pratt was “ill-served” by a campaign team of outsiders who lacked “a handle on the challenges” facing Milwaukee, in contrast to Johnson’s team of local political veterans.

Chheda also says, “Marvin was of a different generation.” At 35, Johnson would be Milwaukee’s youngest mayor in 80 years, and Chheda says “he brings fresh energy”

to the race.

But Milwaukee has changed too. The 2020 Census shows the voting-age population is just 39% white, compared with 35% Black and 18% Hispanic.

“A candidate today certainly couldn’t win a citywide election relying only on white voters,” Marquette’s Johnson says. “In my view, this kind of racially defined election result is unlikely to happen again.”

In addition to their declining share of the electorate, John Johnson notes, white voters are ideologically split between “legacy white ethnic voters and white urban progressives.” Donovan, the most conservative candidate in Tuesday’s race, appeals to the white ethnic constituency. Dimitrijevic, the former state director of the Wisconsin Working Families Party, has garnered the most endorsements from progressive and labor organizations.

Dimitrijevic, who is married to an Uruguayan immigrant, also is actively courting the Hispanic vote. She picked up a couple of key Hispanic endorsements after Cavalier Johnson signed a redistricting plan that Barrett had vetoed in response to Hispanic demands for a better shot at winning a third seat on the 15-member council. Chheda says Johnson made a tough decision after last-minute advice from City Attorney Tearman Spencer left the council with no other options as its statutory clock ran out.

Besides Taylor, teacher Donna Horowitz Richards was the only woman to reach the mayoral general-election ballot. Horowitz Richards advanced out of a three-way primary to face then-Mayor Henry Maier in 1984. She lost that year’s general election, 63% to 37%, then was eliminated in the seven-way 1988 primary to succeed Maier.

Overall, of the 56 individuals who appeared on mayoral ballots from 1960 through 2020, 15 were Black men, four were white women, three were Black women and one was an Asian-American man. Among them:

- Black academic Ed McDonald advanced out of a three-way primary to lose to Barrett, 71% to 29%, in 2012.
- Asian-American attorney Andrew Shaw didn’t face a primary and was defeated by Barrett, 79% to 21%, in 2008.
- Besides Clarke, two other Black candidates scored double-digit percentages in primaries where they came in third. Then-Ald. Joe Davis finished behind Barrett and

Donovan, with 19%, in 2016. Retired factory worker Wendell Harris, running as a Democratic Socialist in the officially nonpartisan contest, took 18% to finish behind Norquist and conservative businessman George Watts in 2000.

- In addition to Horowitz Richards and Folaron, the white female candidates were teacher Teana Wright, eliminated in the 1976 primary, and garment worker Sandi Sherman, eliminated in the 1988 primary.
- Civil rights activist Lucille Berrien was the first Black woman to run for mayor, losing in the 1972 primary, while Griffin finished behind Barrett and McDonald in the 2012 primary.
- Black male candidates eliminated in primaries included Franklin Stribling, a conservative former preacher, in 1968; health-care executive Lee Holloway in 1988; retired postal worker Willie Lovelace, in 1988 and 1992; community activist Michael McGee, in 1992; and community activist James Methu, in 2016.

After then-County Exec Scott Walker was elected governor in 2010, the County Board appointed Pratt to serve as interim county executive during the 2011 special election campaign to fill the rest of Walker's term. That made Pratt the first and only person to run both of Wisconsin's two largest local governments.

Now retired, Pratt has not yet announced who he will support in this year's mayoral election. He is optimistic that the city soon will have a Black mayor, alongside all the other key positions now held by Black officials, including County Executive David Crowley, MPS Superintendent Keith Posley, Police Chief Jeffrey Norman and Lucas.

And yet, Pratt warns, it's not enough for Black people to simply hold those offices. Faced with persistent concerns about rising crime and declining educational performance, they need to show they are thoughtful and effective leaders with outside-the-box ideas that will make a real difference in improving residents' lives, he says.

"It's really hard work," Pratt says. "It's a tough time for cities."