

Race Issue? Like Votes, Views Split

Pluses, Minuses Seen In Mayoral Results

BY STEPHEN BUTTRY
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Community leaders read one of three messages about race relations from Tuesday's mayoral election:

■ Omaha is a sharply divided city where racial issues can be exploited to win elections.

■ Omaha has progressed to the point where a qualified black candidate can run virtually even with a white incumbent.

■ Race was no issue in the election. Views on the effect of race in the

■ Mayor Daub says his narrow victory sent him a message. Page 14.

campaign were as sharply divided as the voters themselves, who split almost evenly between Mayor Daub and Brenda Council, who was seeking to become the city's first black mayor.

"I have some sadness in hearing people around the community say they could not trust anyone who was black," said the Rev. Damian Zuerlein, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church.

Kathleen McCallister, a member of the State Board of Education and a former Omaha school board member, said the election did not reflect on race relations at all. "I think the vote's too close to pretend that was any kind of a factor at all."

Others saw Daub's 878-vote victory margin as evidence that a black candidate could win a citywide election.

"I guess I thought it was kind of a positive," said the Rev. Michael Morrison, president of Creighton University. "It showed people don't oppose her because of her race."

Bob Boozer, a member of the State Parole Board, said the close finish "showed that a candidate that has an appeal, that has qualifications, that can reach out to the total mass of people, is electable. . . . Maybe in 1997 we can look at the candidates for what they stand for rather than the color of their skin."

Douglas County Commissioner Carole Woods Harris said it seemed from the vote that almost half of Omahans

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were ready to elect a minority person as mayor.

"I think that a black candidate from outside the black community would have an even greater chance of being elected in the future," she said. "Unfortunately, one of the overused concerns was that (Ms. Council) would only represent black Omaha."

Others concentrated on the result rather than the slim margin.

"Apparently Omaha's not quite ready for a mayor that's black and female," said Loree Bykerk, a University of Nebraska at Omaha political scientist.

"People disregarded a lot of facts and just voted along racial and gender lines," said Omaha Police Officer Tariq Al-Amin, president of the Brotherhood of Midwest Guardians, a black police officers association.

Clearly, Ms. Council commanded nearly all the black vote. Yet she also received more votes from whites than from blacks. Omaha's 1990 population was 12.5 percent black. Ms. Council received 49.6 percent of Tuesday's vote.

She had her strongest showing in the predominantly black District 2, the north Omaha area she represented for 15 years on the school board and City Council. She received 87 percent of the vote in the district, which is 66 percent black.

She also won two districts with less than 10 percent black population — the horseshoe-shaped District 1, which includes Benson, Florence and the area around Eppley Airfield, and District 3, including the downtown area.

In Districts 5, 6 and 7, western areas with a black population of less than 2 percent, Ms. Council received 44 percent of the vote.

District 4, a south Omaha area that historically supports Democrats in close elections, went for Republican Daub with 54 percent of the vote. Even there, Ms. Council was drawing large numbers of white voters. The district's 1990 population was 4 percent black and 13 percent Hispanic.

"If anything, you've got to conclude that almost a majority of voting Omahans were ready to elect a black mayor, that there's a substantial color-blindness," said Sen. Bob Kerrey, a Democrat who supported Ms. Council. "I don't think it's right to say anyone voting for Mayor Daub was voting against a black person."

Omaha Housing Authority board member Brad Ashford, a Daub supporter who backed Ms. Council when she ran against Daub in 1994, reached virtually the same conclusion.

"White Omahans have voted for a black woman in large numbers," Ashford said. "I think it says Omaha has gone a long way beyond racial division and hatred."

Carolyn Grice, Omaha Education Association president and a longtime friend of Ms. Council's, disagreed. "It's a city divided," she said.

Ms. Grice said Daub exploited Ms. Council's 1993 letter seeking leniency for David Rice, a black man who was convicted of murdering a white police officer in 1970, when the city was divided by open racial tensions.

"That's a very sensitive issue in the black community," Ms. Grice said. "I think the way he handled it further alienated the black community."

Al-Amin said blacks who failed to vote Tuesday will regret not supporting

Ms. Council. District 2 had the largest turnout, 54 percent, but western districts had a greater increase in turnout from the April 1 primary.

"I think the failure for our numbers to come up, as far as the African-American community, is going to come back to haunt us," Al-Amin said. "I hope our community realizes that getting Brenda into office was doable. We're in for four years of greater oppression."

Don Benning, the Omaha School District's assistant superintendent for human and community relations, said Daub played to voters' biases about women and blacks in attacking Ms. Council as soft on crime.

"That seemed to be the difference maker," Benning said. "I certainly have a concern that a two-tiered society is developing in Omaha."

Leaders who thought race was an issue in the campaign also cited suggestions that Ms. Council would be unduly influenced by State Sen. Ernie Chambers, the outspoken legislator representing north Omaha.

"It seemed to me that there were some scare tactics along those lines," said Cheri Cody, co-chairwoman of Omaha Together One Community, a group of 34 Omaha religious congregations. "We still have a lot of work to do in Omaha in race relations."

Former Mayor Bob Cunningham, who first publicly raised the Council-Chambers link during the campaign, said, "Some people tried to make that a racial issue, but it was not. . . . I don't think there is any racial problem in Omaha."