

Black Candidates Win Panhandle Primaries

By Terry FitzPatrick

SOMETHING HISTORIC happened in the May primary election in conservative Potter County: every black candidate on the ballot won.

The election campaign revealed increasing political savvy among black politicians here, showing what blacks have to do to win county-wide races and suggesting, as well, that some white voters have learned to cast their ballots for a black candidate.

The four black candidates ran in the Democratic primary for posts ranging from county judge and county commissioner to justice of the peace and county court at law. None faces a Republican opponent in the November election, so all four will assume office in January (barring any successful write-in campaigns). The only incumbent black was Lewis Brazier, a Potter County justice of the peace.

The hottest races were for county judge and county court at law (misdemeanor court). Elisha Demerson has apparently become Texas' first black county judge. He ran as a fiscal conservative and avoided the "black candidate" label.

Demerson, 34, is a senior physics scientist at the Pantex nuclear weapons assembly plant. He has served two terms as county commissioner, representing a predominantly black precinct.

"I think it would have been a very serious mistake to have run as a black candidate," Demerson told the *Observer*. "If I'd have come across as a black candidate with a black cause it might have frightened a lot of the non-black vote." Instead, Demerson blasted incumbent county judge Ed Poole for maintaining an outside private law practice and for raising taxes.

Demerson demonstrated uncharacteristic panache by sitting in Poole's own chair in the commissioners' chamber to announce his campaign to unseat the judge. Demerson submitted his candidacy papers for the election less than an hour before the filing deadline and

brought black minister Will Thirkill along to file for the commissioner's seat. Demerson would leave vacant to run for county judge. No one else filed for that seat in time. Observers didn't give Demerson much chance of winning, but the tax hike issue gained him the initiative, and questions about Poole's law practice kept Poole on the defensive. Demerson carried 16 of 32 precincts, enough to claim his support went far beyond the black community.

The black vote did make the difference for Morris Overstreet, even though he did carry some affluent white neighborhoods. His bid for a vacant seat on the county court at law brought Overstreet victory in his third bid for public office. He ran against a white assistant prosecutor and first-time candidate.

Overstreet, 36, is a liberal lawyer (by Panhandle standards) and former prosecutor who was told to "Sit down, boy," during a public debate in his unsuccessful 1982 race for district judge. Overstreet is best known for his diligent defense of prostitutes against energetic crackdowns by Amarillo law enforcement authorities. "This time we were fortunate that we had some issues that were not black-white issues," Overstreet said.

He won this election by getting black voters to the polls in large numbers. He also had a bit of luck.

"I think the timing was right," Overstreet said. "There was enough going on in the Republican party that those individuals who might be unwilling to vote for a black would go ahead and vote in the Republican primary."

Overstreet calculates that 3,000 fewer people voted in the local Democratic primary in 1986 than did four years earlier. This year also saw a big increase in the number of people voting in the local Republican primary. Presumably,

Panhandle conservative Democrats crossed over to vote for Kent Hance in the Republican gubernatorial race, and this helped local black Democratic candidates.

As the returns came in election night, Overstreet's opponent was ahead until the very last precinct came in, the black precinct. Overstreet won because the church-oriented organization working for Demerson and him turned out 33 percent of the potential black voters compared to an 18 percent turnout county-wide.

"As far as the 'powers that be' are concerned," Overstreet said, "they should be smart enough now to realize that we are to be reckoned with in terms of the ability to win elections and influence people."

"While we may not have a mandate, more than 50 percent of the people who voted on May 3rd agreed with what we stood for," he said.

Overstreet and Demerson did not need to run as "black candidates" because they are well known in the black community already. They feel avoiding the black candidate label will make managing the positions they've won a bit easier.

"There are black people that are afraid of the Morris Overstreets and the Elisha Demersons if they hold up a banner for black causes," Demerson said, and he feels that confronting the white community won't work.

Overstreet agrees: "It would have been very easy for me or Elisha to have reverted back into a black-versus-white issue. But we have been at it long enough and are cool-headed enough to understand that you cannot win on black issues and have harmony." □

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