

Up the Ladder from Down the Ballot

Minority candidates for high elected office

By Patrick Reddy

Over the past few decades, the movement of African American and Hispanic citizens into high elected office in the United States has been sure but exceedingly slow. With Colin Powell's 1997 announcement that he would not run for president in 2000, the best hope for further minority empowerment in the upcoming election lies in those offices just down the ballot—governorships and US Senate seats.

Black and Hispanic Democratic candidates, in particular, face an uphill fight to gain these top spots; indeed, even white Democratic gubernatorial and senatorial candidates have been struggling since the 1994 mid-term elections. For minority Democrats to win these statewide posts may well take another massive, across-the-board Democratic sweep, as in 1932 or 1964. Black or Hispanic Republicans will have a tougher time than their Democratic counterparts being nominated, but they may have an easier time getting elected.

Generally, African American candidates who win elected office generally do so in one of three ways. First is the traditional approach of working one's way up the political "ladder": win a local office like city council or state representative, post some accomplishments, then move up to mayor or Congress and, later, hope to take a shot even higher. This tactic was used unsuccessfully by Tom Bradley in California and then successfully by Doug Wilder in Virginia. The problem inherent with this approach is that Democratic candidates are dependent upon a very fragile coalition of minorities, liberals and working class whites for success. The last group, particularly older whites, is especially prone to defecting from black Democratic candidates.

The second model involves running as a Republican, as Ed Brooke did in Massachusetts; that way, a candidate doesn't have to worry about defections by white Democrats, and may profit from minority votes that cross over into the GOP column. But black candidates tend to be moderate-to-liberal Republicans and are often blocked by conservatives in GOP primaries; witness the attacks on Colin Powell by the hard right in 1995 when he was considering a presidential bid.

The third way is to win a Democratic primary in a crowded field and then hang on in the fall against a weak Republican, as Senator Carol Mosely-Braun of Illinois did in 1992. The problem here is the low probability of "drawing to an inside straight"—everything must go right, and that's rare in any campaign.

Hispanic candidates for office have tended to use slightly different models than blacks. The most common one is simply

to rely on a massive Hispanic turnout; governors and senators in New Mexico have successfully used this tack. Another way is to run as Republicans, as some black candidates do, and appeal to crossover Democrats. Florida Governor Bob Martinez followed this road to election in 1986.

In virtually every state, a minority candidate will need at least one-third of the white vote to become governor or US Senator. Historically, these have been extremely tough numbers to get. Of the 17 black candidates nominated for governor or senator by the two parties, only three have been elected: Republican Senator Ed Brooke of Massachusetts (1966 and 1972), Governor Doug Wilder of Virginia (1989), and Senator Mosely-Braun, for an average of one success *per decade*. Hispanics have also struggled to win these statewide offices. Four of the five Hispanics elected governor or senator since 1945 have come from New Mexico, which is nearly half Hispanic; this also represents an average of one success per decade. Dozens of minority candidates have lost primaries, and numerous more have been discouraged from even trying by the long odds of winning these posts.

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But change may be in the offing. Despite the dismal overall turnout, 1998 marked an upsurge in voting by the black and Hispanic communities. Black turnout roughly equaled that of whites for the first time ever, and Hispanic turnout hit an all-time high of 50% of eligible citizens. Moreover, the black and, especially, Hispanic shares of the electorate have been steadily growing. The black, Hispanic and Asian share of the 1996 electorate set a record of nearly 20%. As of this year, immigration and high minority birthrates had caused the nation's non-Hispanic white population to fall below 75% for the first time, with blacks at 13% of all Americans, Hispanics over 11%, Asians 4%, and one or two percent "other."

The biggest concentrations of African Americans are in the South and in northern industrial states like New York, Illinois

Table 1

Up and Comers: Black and Hispanic Prospects for High Statewide Office

Dennis Archer, Mayor of Detroit (D)

Detroit's second black mayor has already served in state office. He was appointed to the Michigan Supreme Court in 1986 and was re-elected in 1990. Unlike his fiery predecessor, the late Coleman Young, Archer has reached out to suburbia—exit polls last year showed him with a 2 to 1 approval rating outside the city, making him a likely candidate for senator in 2000 or 2002. Although he has only begun to make a dent in Detroit's tremendous problems with stadium, casino, and downtown redevelopment projects, he has gotten good marks as an administrator. A graduate of both the Detroit College of Law and the Detroit housing projects, his biggest problem will be overcoming his city's negative image in the suburbs and upstate Michigan.

Ken Blackwell, Ohio State Treasurer (R)

The former mayor of Cincinnati is also a former Democrat who switched parties in 1981 after Ronald Reagan's election. Robert Taft's election as governor in 1998 has likely set back Mr. Blackwell's statewide aspirations until at least 2002. A fine orator and moderate-conservative in the Eisenhower tradition, he has proven appeal to white voters and would also draw heavy crossover support from rank and file black Democrats. His only obstacle is a crowded field in the very strong Ohio Republican Party.

Jesse Jackson, Jr., Illinois Congressman (D)

The namesake of America's most famous black politician combines his father's liberal politics from the 1960s with a much cooler 1990s style. Polls show he has retained his family's strength with minorities, and he also draws surprising support from suburban whites. He is a likely candidate in 2004 for the Senate seat currently held by Peter Fitzgerald. His chances will depend on a respectable vote downstate and the ability of the remnants of the Chicago machine to crank up a huge vote in the city.

Carl McCall, State Comptroller of New York (D)

New York State's highest Democratic elected official decided against challenging Republican Governor George Pataki in 1998, but he will have a last shot in 2002. New York's population is projected to be almost 20% black and 15% Hispanic by then. New York State also has the nation's largest concentration of city voters. Harlem native McCall could combine bloc votes from minorities with the white liberal city vote to become the North's first black governor. McCall's two greatest problems would be his age (he'll be 66 then) and the possibility of facing New York City's popular Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Marc Morial, Mayor of New Orleans (D)

At 33% of the state, Louisiana's black population share is second only to that of Mississippi. This almost guarantees a black candidate a spot in a Senate or gubernatorial run-off. Once in the finals, a high black turnout and bloc vote mean a black candidate would only need 30% of the white vote to win in the only Southern state that still has two Democratic senators. As mayor of the state's largest city, Morial would be the strongest possible black candidate. But the rest of this state is very conservative, and his city has a reputation as a center of corruption, license, and violent crime.

Alan Page, Minnesota Supreme Court Justice (D)

The former Notre Dame football star and NFL Hall of Famer was the Lawrence Taylor of his time, the first defensive player ever to win a solo MVP award. Both an academic and athletic All-American, he graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School and was elected to the State Supreme Court in 1992. In one of the nation's most liberal states, he may be the Democrats' best hope for a successful black Senate candidacy.

Kurt Schmoke, Mayor of Baltimore (D)

The former Rhodes Scholar and city prosecutor made national news with his call for legalizing drugs in 1988. The District of Columbia's problems have caused an exodus of middle class blacks to the Maryland suburbs, making the state electorate over 25% black. Yale graduate Schmoke has proven appeal to white liberals and professionals. He will be the front-runner for Senator Paul Sarbanes' seat in 2000, should Sarbanes retire. If he makes it to the Senate, an eventual Schmoke presidential run is almost certain.

J.C. Watts, Oklahoma Congressman (R)

Like Dennis Archer, Ken Blackwell, Carl McCall and Alan Page, Julius Caesar Watts has already won statewide office—as a Democrat. The former University of Oklahoma football star and two-time Orange Bowl MVP was elected Oklahoma Corporation Counsel in 1986 and became a Republican in 1989. Elected to the House of Representatives in the 1994 GOP sweep, he was chosen president of the huge Republican freshman class. A Baptist minister and outspoken moral conservative, Watts could easily be elected senator in heavily Republican Oklahoma. All he needs is an opening on the ticket in a state that currently has a GOP governor and two Republican senators.

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and Michigan (about 15% each). Hispanics are mainly located in New York, New Jersey, Florida and Illinois, plus the Mexican-American neighborhoods of the Southwest—Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California and, especially, New Mexico. Collectively, Hispanics, blacks, Native Americans and Asians are currently a majority of the population in

California, Hawaii and New Mexico, while Texas and New York are projected to achieve "minority-majority" status by 2010.

With minorities soon to hold the balance of power in the nation's three most populous states—California, Texas and

Cruz Bustamante, California Lieutenant Governor (D)

The 1996 upsurge in Hispanic turnout caused by California's 1994 anti-immigrant Proposition 187 helped the Democrats retake the State Assembly in 1996 and led to Bustamante's election as the state's first Hispanic Speaker. Unlike his ultra-flamboyant Democratic predecessor Willie Brown, Bustamante, the son of a barber, is deliberately unassuming. In 1997, he helped steer the Assembly through its most productive session since the 1970s and propelled his nice-guy demeanor into a successful run for lieutenant governor. Now a heartbeat away from the nation's most powerful statehouse, this moderate from Fresno is California's first Hispanic statewide constitutional officer since the 19th century. A run for governor or senator in the next decade is forthcoming.

Henry Cisneros, former San Antonio Mayor and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (D)

Prior to his 1997 indictment for obstruction of justice and perjury, the Harvard-educated Cisneros was once everybody's choice for Texas's first Hispanic governor and perhaps even America's first Hispanic president. Even President Reagan was sufficiently impressed with Cisneros to try to recruit him for the GOP after his election as mayor of San Antonio in 1981. A messy private life led to several very public separations from his wife (they have since reconciled). And the special prosecutor investigation about whether he misled the FBI during his confirmation as Clinton's HUD Secretary has put his political career in serious jeopardy. Now working for the Spanish Cable Network Univision in Los Angeles, Cisneros has retained many of his Texas ties. Should he be exonerated or escape with a mere slap on the wrist, he would remain a potentially strong candidate for senator or governor in 2002 due to his charisma and proven ability to get out the Hispanic vote.

Fred Ferrer, Bronx Borough President (D)

Ferrer passed up the race for mayor against Rudolph Giuliani in 1997, but will run in 2001. If he can successfully build a coalition with black Democrats, he could win the Democratic primary, which is usually tantamount to election in New York City. If elected mayor of the nation's media center, he would get both massive state and national exposure. A run for governor or senator would be almost certain in the next decade, barring disaster or scandal.

Luis Guterrez, Illinois Congressman (D)

Guterrez has a reputation for being one of Chicago's toughest pols—which is saying something. While in Congress, he's been something of a reformer, generating favorable profiles from national media such as *60 Minutes*. He supported the city's first black mayor, Harold Washington, and then delivered crucial Hispanic votes to Richard M. Daley in 1989 when the machine came back to power. With reasonably good relations with the African-American community and the enthusiastic help of the Daley machine, Guterrez has an outside shot at succeeding Senator Richard Durbin in 2002 or 2008.

Dan Morales, Texas State Attorney General (D)

Elected Texas A.G. in 1990, the very moderate Morales is popular both with grassroots and in boardrooms. He retired in 1998 to pursue a career in the private sector rather than face the George W. Bush re-election juggernaut. If Governor Bush moves on, Morales will likely be the Democratic nominee for governor in 2002. His chances depend on a huge minority turnout and a great Democratic year nationally in a state that no presidential Democrat has won since 1976.

Alex Pinellas, Dade County Mayor (D)

Elected to the most powerful position in south Florida at age 34, Pinellas may be the Democratic Party's "Great Brown Hope" for winning Cuban-American votes, a constituency that voted over 3 to 1 for Reagan and Bush in the 1980s. With deep family roots in the anti-Castro crusades, his good looks and big-league charisma could bring a new generation of (Cuban) Hispanic voters to the Democrats and reverse the state's Republican trend of the last 30 years. He will probably be the Democrats' first Hispanic governor elected outside of New Mexico.

Bill Richardson, Secretary of Energy (D)

The former Congressman and Ambassador to the United Nations is living proof that in politics, as in real estate, location can be everything. Although derided by *The New Republic* as a coddler of Third World dictators, the fact is that Richardson is very popular in New Mexico, the most heavily Hispanic state in America. He would be a solid bet to win a Senate seat sometime in the first decade of the next century.

Loretta Sanchez, California Congresswoman (D)

Ms. Sanchez gained national attention for her 1996 upset of Bob Dornan in conservative Orange County. She easily survived the expected GOP onslaught in 1998, increasing her victory margin over Dornan by 25-fold. Given the late-1990s surge in Hispanic voting, she could get a shot at statewide office in the next decade. Coming from a business background and very moderate on fiscal issues, Sanchez switched parties after the Republicans started bashing immigrants in the mid-nineties. As a Hispanic woman, she would combine an Orange County base (rare for a Democrat) with her appeal to two groups surging in California, women activists and the children of immigrants. Should she win a Democratic primary, her chances of winning a Senate seat would be excellent in the first state to elect two women senators.

Antonio Villaraigosa, Speaker, California State Assembly (D)

California's second Hispanic Assembly Speaker helped lead Assembly Democrats to their biggest gains since Watergate in 1998. Forced to leave office by term limits in 2000, he is exploring a run for mayor of Los Angeles in 2001. (His likely opponents: County Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Gloria Molina, City Attorney James Hahn and businessman Steve Soboroff). Should he be elected against a strong field, he would very quickly become America's leading big-city mayor. Then the man once described as a "Mexican version of Willie Brown" might yet earn another title: "the Mexican Richard Daley."

New York—minority candidates should be top contenders for governor and senator in those places for the next generation.

Even so, the obstacles to minority victories in most states remain formidable. Why do these candidates have to struggle to win these high statewide offices? The two

most obvious factors are a smaller pool of minority voters than are found in most inner cities (where minority candidates for mayor or the US House of Representatives can count on a sizable minority vote), and lingering white prejudice. Obviously, the bigger the minority base in a given state, the better the chance of a minority candidate winning statewide. (Though,

ironically, black candidates have often done best with *white* voters in places where there are relatively few blacks, e.g., Massachusetts and Minnesota). Only in Hawaii are non-Hispanic whites a minority of the state's voters. Not surprisingly, Hawaii has elected *only* non-whites since 1970.

As for prejudice, the Gallup Poll has regularly asked the question, "If your party nominated a generally well-qualified man for president and he happened to be black, would you vote for him?" In 1958, 55% of whites said they would not. By 1965, a majority of whites said they *would* vote for a black candidate, and the trend has been one of growing tolerance ever since. In the late 1980s, only 13% of white voters were still openly holding out against a black presidential candidate. As of early 1999, Gallup reported, fully 95% of respondents said they would support the right black candidate for president, compared to 94% saying the same for a Catholic candidate (a ridiculous finding, given that we've already elected a Catholic president, and no black has even been nominated. This is a classic case of voters not being truthful about a sensitive subject; the percentage who would vote on racial grounds is probably twice as high as reported).

For gubernatorial or US Senate races, the racist vote is undoubtedly a bit lower. But that 3 to 5% automatic anti-black (or anti-Hispanic) vote can make the difference in a close election, as Tom Bradley found when he ran for California governor in 1982—he lost by 1% despite a good Democratic year nationally, while 3% of the voters admitted to pollsters that they voted against him because of his race. The good news here is that black Republicans have been elected to the House of Representatives in districts over 90% white.

Another factor that handicaps black candidates for senator or governor is that they usually come from their state's largest city, e.g., New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, or Detroit. These cities are shrinking in clout and are often quite unpopular in the suburbs and rural areas (rural state legislators in Missouri and Illinois have been known to boo at the mere mention of St. Louis or Chicago). Even white candidates from these cities often carry tremendous baggage into a statewide race. For example, no Democrat from Chicago or Philadelphia has been elected governor of their respective states since 1965.

For all the problems minority candidates face in races for high statewide office, there will no doubt be such contenders in the coming generation. Table 1, which is based on interviews with party leaders, consultants and pundits, shows the top prospective black and Hispanic candidates for elected office in alphabetical order. (It should also be noted that the Senate's only black woman, Carol Mosely-Braun, lost a tough race for reelection in Illinois last year.) Most of these minority hopefuls are potential candidates for future gubernatorial or Senate races.

Given the problems black Democratic candidates have in holding onto white voters, it may be wiser for young, talented black pols to run as Republicans. J.C. Watts and Ken Blackwell, who are doing so, may well represent the near-term future of black politics. The last two surges in black turnout came during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the mobilization against the Reagan Administration in the 1980s. Black Democrats will need another such swell in turnout, plus a general realignment in a more liberal direction, to win Senate and gubernatorial elections. Black Republicans will need just the nomination, as long as the successful run of Republicans continues.

The Hispanic situation is somewhat different. In New York, New Jersey and Illinois, Hispanic Democrats are in roughly the same position as black Democrats—they need both a high minority turnout and a more favorable political climate. But in California, Texas and New Mexico, where minorities will be the majority within a few election cycles, Hispanic Democrats need only to work on registration and get-out-the-vote efforts. Florida's Cuban community is a primary Hispanic sub-group where Republicans do well. Cuban Republicans can use the black Republican model to win.

Based on historic patterns, we can expect two candidates listed here from both the black and Hispanic communities to win gubernatorial or senatorial elections in the next 20 years. Declining white prejudice and an expanding minority base are good omens for future minority candidates. Undoubtedly, minorities will have a tough time winning high statewide office, and there will be more failure than success. But at least more than one black and Hispanic candidate per decade will be elected governor or US Senator in the 21st century.



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