

POLITICS AND POLICY

Letters, Not Levers, Sway Washington's Mayoral Race

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WASHINGTON -- A new political dynamic has emerged in the mayoral primary here: the "W" factor.

No, it doesn't refer to President George W. Bush, although it does portend a replay of the presidential-election mess of 2000. On Sept. 10, Democratic primary voters will be writing in entries for either Mayor Anthony Williams or the Rev. Willie Wilson. And all those W's could make for plenty of confusion in a city with an illiteracy rate exceeding 30%.

Mayor Williams, once considered a shoo-in for re-election, has been forced to run a write-in effort after the local election board denied him a spot on the ballot because his campaign submitted thousands of fraudulent signatures on a petition required to qualify for the ballot. Last week, the Rev. Wilson, pastor of the 7,000-member Union Temple Baptist Church in southeast Washington, announced that he, too, would run a write-in campaign. Four other challengers will be on the ballot, but the real race is between the candidates with W's as initials.

While Mr. Williams remains the heavy favorite among Washington's 266,966 registered Democrats, the potential

confusion means he is using time to campaign that he otherwise could spend running the city. It also adds to the chance of an upset.

Penmanship could become as important as policy in this unusual race: both campaigns and the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics are urging voters to ensure their selection is made legibly. Ann Walker Marchant, campaign spokeswoman for Mr. Williams, says her candidate has a strong base and a strong message -- she just wishes Rev. Wilson's name weren't so similar. "I would prefer if his name were Billy Bob," she says. "The W is going to present a challenge."

David Bositis, senior political analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies here, says he thinks the balloting could be even more complicated than in the Florida debacle of 2000.

GETTING IT WRITE

These are some of the names the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics will accept on write-in ballots in the Democratic mayoral primary.

For Anthony Williams:

- Mayor Tony Williams
- Mayor Williams
- Mayor Tony
- Mayor Anthony
- Tony
- Williams
- A.W.

For Rev. Willie Wilson:

- Rev. Willie Wilson
- Willie Wilson
- Rev. Wilson
- Rev. Willie

- Willie
- Wilson
- W.W.

Source: D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics

"Not only do you have the similarity in terms of names, and people writing in the choice, on top of it you're going to have questions about interpreting the ballots," he says. "I just hope it doesn't degenerate into the Williams and Wilson people arguing at a table over whose name was really written on the ballot."

Historically, write-in campaigns are launched by third-party or fringe candidates, not popular incumbents, says University of Michigan politics professor Michael Traugott. But there are notable exceptions. Incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson didn't file for a place on the New Hampshire primary ballot in 1968 and received 50% of the votes by write-ins. And in June, Long Beach, Calif., Mayor Beverly O'Neill won a write-in campaign to a third term as mayor, despite a city term-limit law that kept her off the ballot.

The critical requirements for a successful write-in campaign are money and name recognition, says political consultant Parke Skelton, who advised Ms. O'Neill's campaign. That bodes well for Mr. Williams, who has 96% local name recognition and more than \$700,000 in campaign funds. But Rev. Wilson has the power of the pulpit and broad support among black voters in this heavily minority city.

District voters in 1998 elected Mr. Williams -- who like Rev. Wilson is African-American -- as a technocratic, results-based reformer, the antidote to predecessor Marion Barry, who was convicted on drug-possession charges while in office but was again

elected mayor a few years later. Most observers agree that Mr. Williams has overseen a broad improvement in city services, and Washington's real estate has made a noticeable rebound during his term. Embraced by business leaders and accepted by Republicans, he has trod a fine centrist line. He has angered Democrats by supporting Maryland Republican Rep. Connie Morella for Congress, and infuriated black voters by closing the district's only public hospital to in-patient care.

Rev. Wilson supported Mr. Williams four years ago, but has become disillusioned by his leadership, he says. "I found [Mr. Williams] not to be the person I thought he was, and I tried to think, who is that person who can mobilize and galvanize the people enough to make a change? I came up with the answer that I was the one to do it."

Washington political consultant Ron Lester, who specializes in polling the area's black voters, says Rev. Wilson will pose a formidable challenge. "There's a real danger for the technocrat-leadership type, because when the luster wears off with white voters, they don't have the grounding in the black community to fall back on," says Mr. Lester, who worked for a Williams opponent in the 1998 primary.

Mr. Williams faced no such danger as of early July, when GOP election volunteers first noticed many signatures on his petition sheets were penned in similar handwriting. A closer look revealed that British Prime Minister Tony Blair, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, singer Billy Joel and the fictional Robin Hood supposedly had signed petitions.

Soon the mayor himself was apologizing. After reviewing challenges made by a local activist group, the registrar of the board of elections whittled the number of credible signatures to 2,235.

That is still more than the 2,000 required to place Mr. Williams on the ballot. But after several days of hearings, the three-member board ruled that forgery had tainted the entire process, and ruled that Mr. Williams wouldn't be included on the ballot. A local court upheld the decision, and last week the board fined the Williams campaign \$277,700.

Mr. Williams still is considered the favorite to win the Democratic nomination -- once the votes are counted to everyone's satisfaction, which could take days. To cast a write-in vote, voters will have to write a name on a ballot sheet and then shade an area that completes a broken arrow. The Williams campaign plans to provide self-inking stamps and engraved pencils to make it easier.

The votes will be counted by optical scanners. But, recognizing the potential for voter mistakes, the election board then plans to count votes by hand, too.

"If the voter writes in a name and then doesn't connect the arrow, the [scanning] machine won't count the vote, but when we sit down to count all the write-ins a few days later, we'll get your vote," election-board spokesman Bill O'Field says. "We'll see voter intent." The board has said several versions of the candidates' names will be acceptable; for example, for Mr. Wilson the board would allow "Rev. Wilson," "Rev. Willie" and "W.W.," among others.

But Mr. O'Field acknowledges that voters could present the board with many vexing possibilities. For example, if a voter wrote "William Wilson" -- using "William" as the formal name for "Willie" -- Mr. O'Field says the board would credit a vote for Rev. Wilson.

All this has some people scratching their heads. "It's confusing because there are so many crazy things going on," says voter

Rosetta Lee, 51 years old, a clerk at a local CVS store. "It's really going to take a lot of thought for me."

The Williams campaign is using some of its money to educate the most likely voters about how to participate in a write-in campaign. Rev. Wilson, who doesn't have much campaign cash, says, "We thank him very much for that educational campaign. He has all the money, let him spend it to educate my voters."

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