How Levar Stoney appears to have pieced together a surprise victory Tuesday

BY NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Wednesday, November 9, 2016 1:10 pm

Even Levar Stoney's most dedicated supporters weren't expecting him to claim victory in the Richmond mayoral election Tuesday night. Polls headed into the race put him in third place citywide and - at best - winning the city's two swing districts, forcing his way into a runoff election on Dec. 20.

Instead, early results (only absentee ballots have not yet been counted) put him winning on the first ballot with five districts, taking precincts in the city's core from the East End and Manchester to the Museum District and the Fan.

So what happened on Election Day that turned things around?

Morrissey fizzles out

The biggest election-night surprise was the extent to which former Del. Joe Morrissey's expected base of support failed to materialize at the polls.

Stoney was the biggest beneficiary, winning two districts that had been considered Morrissey strongholds.

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Richmond mayoral candidate Levar Stoney, right, laughs at a remark made by Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, left, while waiting in line to vote Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016, at the Richmond Public Library in Richmond, Va.

In one, the 7th, which covers the East End and Church Hill, his campaign anticipated performing well in and possibly winning. The other - the 6th District, which runs from North Richmond to downtown and across the river into Manchester - offered an unexpected victory.

Was the polling in the run-up to the election wrong? It depends on how you look at it.

The last poll, released by ChamberRVA, put Morrissey in the lead with 20 percent citywide. That's about the percentage of the vote he took on Election Day.

But the same poll also said nearly 40 percent of voters were undecided, and it was always assumed at least some of those voters would break for Morrissey.

They didn't, and it appears they instead flocked to Stoney and his nearest opponent in the race, former Venture Richmond Director Jack Berry.

It's unclear whether Morrissey's support had always had a low ceiling or late allegations and the emergence of new lewd text messages hurt him.

On election night, Morrissey said he felt the latter played a role.

Students turnout in droves

Stoney's campaign said it was prepared for the other big surprise of the night: that Stoney won the city's 2nd District, which includes much of the Fan.

Going into Election Day, Berry had said he was confident he would take the 2nd District.

Stoney's people, meanwhile, said they had been expecting a substantial boost from Virginia Commonwealth University students, who strongly favored Stoney and turned out in droves for the presidential election.

In the two precincts with the most students, Stoney took more than twice as many votes as Berry.

Berry, meanwhile, was strongest in wealthy precincts that straddle Monument Avenue.

A good feeling

Headed into the election, Stoney remained optimistic about his chances for an election night victory.

But it's hard to imagine a candidate saying anything else on the eve of an election, and the fact that he declined to name five districts he thought he could win suggested he wasn't particularly optimistic about the surprise districts he ended up winning.

Still, members of Stoney's campaign staff said that in the final weeks of the race, they became increasingly optimistic as internal polls started showing more undecided voters coming over to his side.

Likewise, they said the positive response they were seeing to their get out the vote operation gave them a sense the race was turning their way.

"We always thought there was a path to victory on election night," said Stoney's spokesman, Matt Corridoni.