

# Levar Stoney wins Richmond mayoral contest; all votes tallied

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Wednesday, November 9, 2016 10:30 pm

After a tense day of waiting for absentee returns to be counted, Levar Stoney formally became Richmond's mayor-elect Wednesday evening.

Stoney had come out of election night winning the race — an unexpected outcome for the 35-year-old former secretary of the commonwealth and veteran aide to Gov. Terry McAuliffe who had polled in third place heading into the election.

But with as many as 9,000 absentee ballots still outstanding and narrow margins of victory in two districts, it was unclear whether his lead would survive Wednesday.

It did, and Stoney addressed reporters in the lobby of City Hall just over 24 hours after polls closed, saying he was as surprised by the overall results as everyone else.

“I was confident that we were going to perform well,” Stoney said. “But I would never have predicted that we would win outright on election night, and we did, because as I said months ago, we were building a broad-based coalition.”

Stoney was able to piece together a diverse coalition of voting precincts, with his strongest support coming from areas heavy in millennial and student voters.

He won in five City Council districts: the 2nd, the 3rd, the 5th, the 6th and the 7th. Citywide, he captured 36 percent of the vote, with 35,525 ballots cast for him, according to unofficial numbers.

Former Venture Richmond Director Jack Berry trailed Stoney by 2,078 votes, with 34 percent of the popular vote.

Former Del. Joe Morrissey, the expected front-runner, came in a distant third, with 21 percent of the vote.

The city's voter registrar struggled to count thousands of absentee ballots late Tuesday and Wednesday, meaning that while a Stoney win appeared likely, it was impossible to call the race with certainty.

Richmond chooses its mayor using a mini-Electoral College system, which requires a candidate to win not the popular vote, but in at least five of nine council districts. If Stoney, who won the 3rd and 6th districts by



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Richmond Mayor-elect Levar Stoney looked skyward Wednesday when talking about his late father at City Hall. Stoney was named mayor after winning five of nine districts.

relatively narrow margins, had lost in either, he would have faced Berry in a runoff election on Dec. 20.

Berry issued a statement Wednesday thanking his supporters and congratulating Stoney.

“While the outcome is not what we had hoped for, I know that Richmond will be in good hands,” Berry said. “Richmond has elected a young, inspiring leader with a vision for the future and immense dedication to our schools and children. I congratulate Levar Stoney on his election as the next mayor of Richmond. I wish him the very best and will be pulling for him and the city.”

Stoney said he spoke to Berry on Wednesday evening and the two had “a very good conversation about the future of Richmond and the contest we had over the past 6½ months.”

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**As Stoney said**, even he wasn’t expecting to claim victory on Tuesday and it was widely understood that his best outcome was to force himself into a runoff by winning two swing districts.

So what happened?

The biggest election-night surprise was the extent to which 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.

In one, the 7th District, which covers the East End and Church Hill, Stoney’s campaign anticipated performing well 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.

Whether polling in the race was wrong or just didn’t tell the whole story depends on your view.

The last publicly released poll in the race put Morrissey in the lead with 20 percent citywide, which is about the same percentage of the vote he took on Election Day.

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

They didn’t, and it appears they instead flocked to Stoney and Berry.

It’s unclear whether Morrissey’s support 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.

Stoney said Wednesday that he felt Morrissey ran “a fierce race, but I think the rejection was not just of Joe Morrissey; it was about not having more of the same.”

The other big upset of the night came from the city’s 2nd District, which covers much of the Fan and which Berry was expected to win easily.

Stoney, who said his win there surprised him, credited Virginia Commonwealth University students for pushing him over the edge.

In the two precincts with the most students, Stoney took more than twice as many votes as Berry, who was strongest in wealthy precincts that straddle Monument Avenue as well as precincts along the Boulevard.

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**Stoney said** he would make an announcement Thursday about who will lead his transition team.

“Then we’ll start looking at personnel and looking at, as I’ve said before, getting that comprehensive performance audit review underway,” he said, “make sure we can find the right personnel and strengthen some of the programs we have in City Hall.”

Stoney, who has spent his entire career working in Democratic politics and won the race with the backing of the local branch of the Democratic Party, pledged to pursue a progressive agenda for the city.

“It is my commitment as the next mayor of the city to inject fresh energy, a new approach and new ideas to take the city to the next level,” he said.

He closed his remarks to reporters by recognizing his family and upbringing as the son of a single mother and the first in his family to graduate from college — a story he had emphasized in his campaign.

Stoney said he found out Wednesday that he would be sworn in on the five-year anniversary of his father’s death.

“I know he’s looking down from above and, you know, my hope is that ... I can be a voice for those children who are living in a similar environment.

“That’s what got me into this race and that’s the mayor I want to be for every child in the city.”