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Poll: Wharton is election wild card

By **Jacinthia Jones**
Contact
July 15, 2007

Shelby County Mayor A C Wharton would be a 12-point favorite over Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton were the two to face off in the upcoming election for city mayor, according to the latest poll by The Commercial Appeal.

Although Wharton is still weighing whether to run, 30 percent of those polled said they will vote for him if he does. That's the highest level of support for any candidate.

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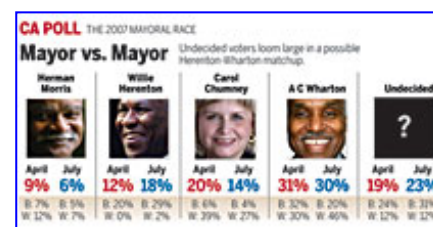
But with 23 percent of voters still undecided, it still could be a dogfight.

The poll surveyed 500 likely voters and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

"A C Wharton is the only possible candidate, who, if he were to enter the

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race, would have a near-certain chance of defeating Herenton," said Steven Ethridge, president and chief manager of the Cordova firm Ethridge and Associates LLC, which conducted the poll.

Watch the report from Steven Ethridge of Ethridge and Associates LLC



That accounts for undecided voters who, Ethridge said, either don't vote or tend to split much like those who have already made up their minds.

When the polling margin of error is factored into the numbers, Wharton leads Herenton by as many as 20.8 points or by as few as

3.2 points.

If Wharton doesn't run, the election becomes a head-to-head battle between Carol Chumney and Herenton.

In April, Chumney led Herenton, 32 to 20. In last week's polling, the two are dead even at 24 percent of voters.

Herman Morris' support dropped from 16 percent to 12 percent with Wharton not running, and the percentage of undecided voters went from 24 percent to 29.

"The truth is, this is a referendum on Willie Herenton -- that you're either for him or against him," said Marcus Pohlmann, a political science professor at Rhodes College.

"There doesn't seem to be a groundswell for any of the alternatives," he said, adding that he was a bit surprised that Wharton didn't pull more support even though he has not announced.

The undecided voters probably aren't "rabid anti-Herenton," so Herenton could pull in more than his share of those, Pohlmann said.

Wharton said he's never used polls to help him decide whether to pursue a particular political office.

"I'm not going to get into dissecting numbers. I'm not into reading the tea leaves," he said. "This is just a decision that my family and I have to make."

They have until Thursday's filing deadline to make it.

Herenton, through his spokesman, declined comment on the new poll numbers.

But at a news conference last month, the mayor dismissed "all these contrived polls showing that a large segment of this community has lost faith in this mayor."

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"That's ridiculous," he said. "I see these people every day. They're black. They're white. They're young. They're old. And they encourage me. They applaud what I do."

Chumney, meanwhile, said she's going to continue running on a message of change. She said the CA poll shows that she is the candidate that can beat Herenton -- even with Wharton in the race.

She said Wharton needs to stay put and work on issues in county government from air quality to funding education and the Regional Medical Center at Memphis.

Erosion in the support for Chumney -- down 6 to 8 points depending on whether Wharton's in or out -- may have slipped because she didn't vote with other council members in calling for Joseph Lee's resignation from the top job at MLGW, Ethridge said.

And when Herenton recently lashed out at the "white-controlled media" and Chumney didn't react with outrage, "maybe, here again, there was a lost opportunity for her to have shown leadership and she didn't."

Ethridge said Chumney led Herenton in the April poll "undoubtedly because she had taken an out-front stance against Herenton on several issues. She was the anti-Herenton candidate. Since then, she has been relatively quiet and has not maintained that position in the context of Herenton being very vocal."

Meanwhile, the alleged plot to trap Herenton in a sex scandal appears to have given the mayor some bounce among black voters.

About 7 percent of those polled said they are likely to vote for Herenton because they believe in the alleged sex plot. As Chumney's support dropped, Herenton's support increased by four to six points depending on whether Wharton was in the race.

Word of the plot had Leslie Simmons fuming, so much so, that he was ready to walk in and vote for Herenton on the spot.

"I don't think anybody could dream all that up, names and dates and everything," said Simmons, who is 54, black and lives in Whitehaven. "There's something to it -- maybe we're not getting the whole story -- but there's something to it."

Simmons said he's calmed since his initial reaction to the story, but he's still leaning toward Herenton. "I think he's done a decent job. He's had some misfortunes like any politician."

But sex plot or not, many white voters, like William Brogan, 84, of Parkway Village, aren't backing Herenton. Never have, never will, Brogan says.

"I'm not gonna vote for the mayor, he's a crook."

Brogan likes Chumney instead.

Peggy Griggs, an "over-60" white woman from East Memphis, is among the supporters standing behind former county commissioner John Willingham because "he's intelligent."

As for Wharton possibly entering the race, she said, "Well, I think a man ought to stand on his own two feet. If he's got that much allegiance to Willie where he can't make up his mind, then he's nothing but a gofer for him."

But Griggs is in the minority in her opinion of Wharton.

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In the racial breakdown of support among Wharton and Herenton, the county mayor claims 46 percent support of white voters -- nearly double that of the April poll. Herenton's white support is virtually nonexistent at about 2 percent.

But among black voters polled, Herenton captured about 29 percent compared to Wharton's 20 percent. The reverse was true in April when Wharton had a larger share of black support at about 32 percent to Herenton's 20 percent.

Ethridge surmised that Wharton's increase among white support was due mainly to their desire to see a strong candidate who could square off with Herenton.

Ethridge attributes Wharton's decline among black voters to "Herenton being successful in activating a small but significant part of his African-American base back over in his direction.

Pohlmann said Herenton has capitalized on the sex plot allegations.

"That gave him a forum to come out swinging. So, the fighting Willie Herenton comes out center stage with stronger support in the black community," he said.

But will it be enough to propel him to a record fifth term?

Rhonda Brown, 36, of Midtown, said she is torn between Herenton and Chumney.

"I'm still listening to what they have to say."

Brown, who is black, praised Herenton for attracting businesses to the city, "but the scandals and the arrogance have overshadowed that." She believes the mayor's version of the sex plot story, but she will support Wharton if he runs.

Percy Porter is among the black voters who hopes Wharton stays out of the race. The 60-year-old from Whitehaven wouldn't divulge his preference for mayor, only to say "not Herenton."

"Mr. Wharton is one of the most highly respected politicians in the city right now, and his getting in would throw everything topsy-turvy and split up black voters and split up some white voters. That would make somebody win who we don't want in there."

Political observers say it's too early to count Herenton out, whether Wharton's in or not.

The mayor hasn't yet touched the \$500,000 he has to spend on his campaign fund. That's money that can be used to flood the airwaves with ads reminding people -- particularly those on the fence -- about the "good side" of Herenton, Pohlmann said. Those dollars also can charter a lot of buses to take folks to the polls.

"I keep telling people, don't bury him yet. Don't write his obituary yet."



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