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A Divided D.C. Poses Challenge for Next Mayor

Racial, Economic Gap Widens

By D'Vera Cohn and Craig Timberg
Washington Post Staff Writers
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The Washington that goes to the polls for tomorrow's primary election is more fractured along lines of race and class than it was a decade ago, with the city getting richer and whiter as its black community shrinks and declines economically.

Citywide, the median household income rose in the 1990s for whites, to \$67,266, and dropped for blacks, to \$30,478, according to figures from the 2000 Census released last month. The city's black middle class, long the swing voting bloc, got smaller over the decade, the census figures show.

The trends help make Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), who is running a write-in campaign for reelection, the favorite. His most solid supporters are the city's increasingly plentiful upper-income white voters, polls show, while his biggest detractors are the least affluent black voters, who in recent elections have been less likely to cast ballots.

His leading rival, Anacostia minister Willie F. Wilson, is making a political pitch to win these disaffected voters and others who believe that Williams caters to the downtown business community at the expense of lower-income neighborhoods.

The next mayor will have to govern a city increasingly divided along a gulf of class, income, race and geography. And as the government is pulled by the demands of widening extremes, it faces growing needs from its rising number of poor residents. They include an increasingly vocal immigrant community that does not yet have sufficient numbers on the voter rolls to swing elections.

This split is not unique to Washington. But sociologist John Logan of the State University of New York at Albany, who has studied census figures for urban areas including New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Newark and Baltimore, said the District is the city where "the movement in the wrong direction is the most pronounced."

"It's definitely a place where the color line is deepening," he said. "It is the kind of situation where you expect political cleavages to be more difficult to resolve."

Those sorts of cleavages -- as well as hopeful signs of



Two men work on a car in Mount Pleasant, one of several neighborhoods seeing a rapid shift in their demographic makeup. (By Lucian Perkins - The Post)

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consensus -- can be seen in rapidly changing communities such as Mount Pleasant, located between Rock Creek Park and 16th Street NW. It is on the less-prosperous eastern side of the park, but even modest homes there routinely go for at least \$350,000, double what they did a decade ago.

"Mount Pleasant is the District's melting pot," said Terry Lynch, a resident for 20 years and the politically active executive director of the Downtown Cluster of Congregations. "It really is a microcosm of the city's strengths and weaknesses."

The main thoroughfare, Mount Pleasant Street, is the picture of diversity on a Sunday morning: A pair of African American friends are working on a car. A white couple are pushing a baby carriage up the street. And a Latino family is heading to the store, upbeat music spilling from the minivan.

They live divergent lives that occasionally come together at the grocery store or the Latino restaurant Haydees, but they also clash in political battles over such neighborhood concerns as playgrounds, police tactics or what should be sold at the corner liquor store.

"I was unaware of how voracious and vitriolic and passionate politics can get," said Gwen Davidow, an advisory neighborhood commissioner who is white and moved to the city three years ago. "I was unaware of how much race and economic class play into so many decisions that are made."

Davidow is among a wave of newer, mostly white residents who have settled into the pricier apartment buildings, the renovated rowhouses and the stately homes with back yards and large trees. She and others successfully pressured neighborhood liquor stores to stop selling single-serving containers of beer, a move that many credit with a decrease in public urination and other antisocial behavior along Mount Pleasant Street.

But such changes are not universally embraced.

Clarence Weathersby, 46, an African American carpenter who has lived in the community since 1969, blames the complaints of newcomers for the increasingly aggressive tactics of police, who he says hassle people on the street for no apparent reason. He also dislikes the ban on selling single-serving alcohol, saying it unfairly targets lower-income people who can't as easily buy a six-pack.

"It's like you're targeting and singling out certain people," said Weathersby, who plans to vote for Wilson. "It's bias."

The District's population has stabilized and may even be rising after decades of loss. But analysts say that in a majority-black city where most residents live in largely segregated neighborhoods, the District's widened demographic differences raise the risk of political fractures or indifference to other groups' needs.

Even as the city drew moneyed whites and participated in the longest sustained economic boom in the nation's history, poverty rose across the District. According to the recently released census figures, the poverty rate held steady in the 1990s in Ward 1, where Mount Pleasant is located, and rose everywhere else.

It rose most sharply in the areas that have been the home of the black middle class -- Wards 4 and 5 -- as well as in Ward 8, east of the Anacostia River, which remains the poorest of all. In that ward, nearly 4 in 10 people are poor, according to the census.

Population Shift

Roll your mouse over each location to get general demographics based on 2000 census data.

Side by side

Select two locations from the drop-down menus to compare the racial breakdowns of the two. Select from only one drop-down to view one location at a time.

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The poverty rates are for ward boundaries as they existed in 2000, when the census was taken. Boundaries have changed somewhat since then.

Increasingly, the District also is a city of newcomers -- 1 in 4 residents age 5 and older moved to the city in the five years before the 2000 Census was taken. Half the recent arrivals are white. The city is still 60 percent black, but its black population continued to decline in the 1990s, even as whites, Asians and Latinos rose in number.

Many newcomers are immigrants, about half of whom arrived in the previous decade -- meaning they are most likely to need help getting settled and learning English. Half are from Latin America.

"Poquito" -- only a little -- is how Hector Fuentes answered when asked whether the city government is helping Latinos. Drinking coffee in a Mount Pleasant park yesterday morning before heading to his restaurant job, Fuentes, a 54-year-old born in El Salvador, complains that even a small apartment costs \$800 a month.

As newcomers grow in number, data from Washington Post polls show that recent arrivals to the city are less likely to register as Democrats than people who already live in the District. They are happier with the direction in which the city is heading and more likely to say local government corruption is declining. It is longtime residents, most of them black, who are least happy with government services.

The city's white residents are less likely to use public schools or social services. Most white children go to private schools, whereas most minority children attend D.C. public schools. Fewer than 1 in 20 whites used now-closed D.C. General Hospital or had a relative who did, compared with more than half the city's black residents.

In the black community, the shrinkage of the middle class weakens the buffer zone between affluent and poor in the city. Black middle-class households have been a crucial political swing group in the city -- supportive of government programs that help the poor, but also siding with whites on issues such as clean streets.

"Let's face it: There has always been a racial cleavage in the District on a lot of issues," said Jeffrey R. Henig, a Columbia University political science professor who has studied the District extensively. But the black migration to the suburbs, he said, "is tending to disproportionately come out of the more middle-class black neighborhoods and probably . . . those concerned about schools and crime because they have kids."

What is a good-news story for the black community -- the lowering of barriers to buying homes in the suburbs and the rise of black leadership there -- helps drain the city of people who might bridge civic divides, analysts say.

Although the city's Asian and Latino populations are beginning to assert themselves politically, two-thirds were born abroad, meaning that they often are not eligible to vote. With poor residents in general the least likely to vote, the result is that outsized power accrues to the city's whites.

"The numbers you see in major cities are pretty much the same -- growth at the top and bottom, so the middle is going," said Ron Walters, a political science professor at the University of Maryland. "What that leaves behind is a conflict in public policy between the needs of the top and the needs of the bottom. That's what I think is being played out in the politics of the District right now."

Demographics are not always destiny. Liberal whites in Mount Pleasant, for example, often ally themselves with Latinos on social issues. Although many Latinos are poor, there is a solid middle-class presence in the owners of stores and restaurants on Mount Pleasant Street. And some black parents joined Latinos last year to help force the ouster of a principal of a failing neighborhood elementary school.

Alice M. Rivlin, former head of the D.C. financial control board and now a fellow at the Brookings Institution, voices a hopeful view of the city's demographic future because the population loss has halted.

"The demographics are stark," she said. "My hope is that increasing development in the District can benefit both the affluent and the less affluent, that we can have more middle-income housing and more subsidized affordable housing for low-income people."

"But we need the tax base in order to do it," she said, "and that's why the turnaround in population . . . is so important."

Steve Boyd, a black man who has lived in Mount Pleasant for six years, said rising prices are good for the value of his sister's home, where he lives, though he worries that less fortunate people will be priced out. Boyd says that in general, the neighborhood's different races and ethnicities "coexist" -- nothing more, nothing less.

Overall, Boyd, 47, said he likes the city's calmer tone and improved management since Williams took over four years ago from Marion Barry. "Things are on an even keel," he said. "He's doing an okay job as far as I can tell."

As the District grows more diverse, Mount Pleasant may offer some lessons on how different groups will intersect, or not. Jim Graham (D), the white D.C. Council member whose Ward 1 includes Mount Pleasant, is being challenged by a Latino and three black candidates in tomorrow's primary. Four years ago, Graham ousted a four-term black council member.

Graham said he sees some common ground in the priorities of the varied neighborhoods in his ward: "clean and safe streets, and schools that educate."

Still, he said, "we've assembled a lot of diversity in Ward 1. We have a long way to go in creating harmony."

Database editor Dan Keating contributed to this report.

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