

# Early voters relish chance to make history at the polls

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LEANING against a weathered brick wall outside the Palm Center early voting station, Dexter Willis crossed his arms, took a deep breath and soaked up the moment.

He had cast his ballot days earlier, but felt drawn to the spot again, smiling at voters as they streamed by. He wasn't handing out leaflets or stumping for votes, just taking a break from work to watch people potentially make history.

"Sometimes as black males in this society, we put limitations on ourselves," said Willis, a 41-year-old cable technician for a small telecommunications company. "Seeing Barack accomplish what he's accomplished, to me, the sky's the limit."

More than 220,000 people jammed polls throughout Harris County in the first week of early voting, while another 40,000 returned mail ballots so far. The total is more than double the number that participated in the first week of early voting in 2004.

Some Houstonians could not pass up the chance to help elect Sen. Barack Obama as the nation's first black president or Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as the country's first female vice president. Others were drawn by the sour economy or the threat of terrorism. But all said they felt they were playing a critical role in the nation's future.

"I think it's really neat that I got to vote for a female," said Barbara Hunt, a 60-year-old retired science teacher who chose John McCain when she voted at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center in Neartown because she believes his foreign policy experience makes him better equipped to keep the nation safe.

Based on this week's turnout, University of Houston political scientist Richard Murray projected 1.3 million or more people will cast ballots in Harris County this election. About 25 percent will come from black voters, he estimated, up from 18 percent four years ago.

Voting among all racial groups is up, but blacks are voting even more heavily than others, he said. More than 44,000 people had voted at predominantly black polling places by Thursday, compared to just under 20,000 in the first four days of early voting in 2004.

"It shows something about the savviness of the Obama campaign," Murray said. "They said a long time ago they would increase black turnout across the country by 30 percent. I think it's actually probably driving it up 40 to 50 percent."

At the Palm Center, a predominantly black polling station in southeast Houston, several dozen voters and campaign volunteers clapped and cheered as 103-year-old Lena Atkinson arrived to cast her ballot. Wearing a star-spangled hat and shuffling on the arm of Democratic Congressman Al Green, Atkinson made her way to a booth where poll workers helped her navigate through the electronic ballot.

Leon Abbs, Atkinson's 80-year-old son, said he and his mother were proud to be part of history as they voted for Obama.

"I was in one Depression," Abbs said. "I don't want to get in another."

### **Not just skin color**

Among the people cheering and snapping pictures of Atkinson was Vickie Waller, a 46-year-old Wal-Mart manager who said Obama's historic candidacy prompted her to vote for the first time.

"It sounds pretty good what he's talking about," Waller said. "And I like who he is as a person."

But many Palm Center voters said they participate in every election to honor their ancestors who were denied that right. And while most were thrilled to get to vote for a black man, many said Obama's politics mattered more to them than his skin color.

"I want a Democrat in the office," said Cassel Clement, a 50-year-old apartment complex property manager. "Eight years of (a Republican) is enough."

Clement said she would vote straight-ticket for the Democrats because she believes they will do a better job restoring the faltering economy.

Experts expect this year's election to draw a record number of straight-ticket voters, with possibly enough Democrats to tilt the results toward the party's candidates.

With that in mind, Carter Higley spent about an hour outside the Neartown polling place urging voters to re-elect his mother, Republican Justice Laura Carter Higley, to the 1st Court of Appeals.

The younger Higley, who works for a private investment firm, said he planned to spend every lunch break throughout the early voting period asking people to pay attention to the down-ballot race.

"To vote straight ticket negates a lot of qualified candidates," said Higley, 29.

A few steps away, Jennifer Beegle stood amid a sea of colorful campaign signs waving a navy blue McCain-Palin sign at passing cars.

Beegle, an ardent Hillary Clinton supporter, said she was so disgusted by the Democratic Party's handling of the primary campaign and with Obama's vice-presidential selection that she began volunteering for McCain and voted Republican in all but two races. She said she voted for Democrats Rick Noriega for the U.S. Senate and Michael Skelly for Congress.

"I support John McCain one-hundred percent and I love Sarah Palin," Beegle said. "If I can't have Hillary, they are the second best."

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