

Eastern Shore

Cane takes early lead in Democratic Shore vote

Victory would set up racially historic election

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SALISBURY — Former Wicomico County Commissioner Rudolph C. Cane took an early lead last night in an election that could produce the Eastern Shore's first African-American state legislator.

With eight of 13 Wicomico County precincts reporting, Cane held an almost 2-1 lead over Troy A. Johnson, with a third candidate, Cambridge City Councilwoman Octavene Saunders, trailing far behind. Two-thirds of the district's voters are in Wicomico County, with the rest in Dorchester County.

Election officials said unofficial totals from all precincts in Wicomico County showed Cane with 1,196 votes, Johnson with 608 votes and Saunders with 77.

The winner in the three-way primary will face a black candidate, Republican Jacqueline B. Jones, in the Nov. 3 general election. The 43-year-old businesswoman and college professor was unopposed in the GOP primary in District 37A.

Party leaders feared Johnson's candidacy would produce a repeat of the 1994 general election, when farmer Don. B. Hughes, a white Re-

publican, beat Cane by 20 votes.

Black voters, who make up 60 percent of the district's 32,758 residents, apparently split their ballots in 1994 between Cane and former Dorchester County Commissioner Lemuel D. Chester II, who ran as an independent.

This year, with Chester sitting out the race, Hughes decided against seeking a second term and endorsed Jones, who served as his legislative aide.

With two black candidates — Cane and Saunders — already set for the Democratic primary, Johnson, a white, entered the race Aug. 6, the filing deadline. Johnson is the son of former Del. Samuel Q. Johnson.

"I think that people had pride, and did not want the same thing to happen again," Cane said last night, referring to the split vote of four years ago.

He credited his lead to more than 600 votes from one predominantly black precinct in northwest Salisbury, where he and his supporters had mounted a vigorous voter registration effort. In addition, Cane said, he walked the entire precinct during the past three weeks, while his campaign sent three mailings to voters and set up a telephone bank to help get out the vote.

Wicomico County election supervisor Judy Ritter, said, "I've been here 17 years, and I believe that's the highest vote total ever in that precinct."

Meanwhile, Johnson acknowledged that the strong get-out-the-vote in that North Salisbury precinct made the difference. "We worked hard," Johnson said of his own campaign, "and it was worth every bit of it."

District 37A, the only majority-black district in Maryland outside Prince George's County and Baltimore was drawn under a federal court order after civil rights activists filed a lawsuit challenging the district lines drawn by the General Assembly.

Election officials said total turnout in Wicomico County was about 25 percent.