

# How Cherelle Parker won the primary: Black voters, a boost from labor, and a personal story of Philly grit

Breaking down how the Democratic nominee for mayor appealed to voters in Philadelphia.



Cherelle Parker supporters hold up her campaign poster at her watch party Tuesday. Parker has won the Democratic nomination for mayor of Philadelphia.

Heather Khalifa / Staff Photographer

by Anna Orso, Julia Terruso, Sean Collins Walsh, and Layla A. Jones

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There were a lot of reasons Cherelle Parker’s candidacy was never seen as a slam dunk.

She'd never run citywide. Observers said the Democratic Party machine that lined up behind her is weaker than it once was. The electricians' union that once ran city politics [was dulled by scandal](#), and the days of Black organizers in Northwest Philly crowning mayors, some said, [were behind them](#).

But in the end, Parker and those groups charted a course to the Democratic nomination. Supported by a coalition of labor unions and a bevy of Democratic elected officials, Parker [ran up the score in Black and Latino neighborhoods](#), while also drawing substantial support in parts of Northeast Philadelphia.

She appealed to voters through [a personal story of Philly grit](#), a tough posture on crime, and a more moderate ideology than some of her top rivals.

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“I remember people saying, ‘Well, she’s never run citywide before, and she’s only ever been the darling, and she’s never had a fight on her hand, and she’s not grassroots,’” Parker said in an interview Wednesday. “And I’m listening to people say these crazy kind of things, and I’m saying to myself, ‘If there was a picture of Philadelphia, it would be me.’”

While Parker beat out her closest rival by a commanding 10 percentage points, her winning share of the vote with 94% of divisions reporting was the lowest in modern mayoral history. Just 75,914 people backed her, according to returns updated Wednesday. That’s the lowest winning primary total dating to at least the 1970s.

That was in some ways anticipated, given the nature of the divided field, and Parker’s 33% was more than enough to advance to the general election.

Parker will in November take on Republican David Oh, who ran in the GOP primary unopposed. She is heavily favored to win in deep-blue Philadelphia, and if she prevails would become [the first female mayor in city history](#).

This is how she got there.

## **Black voters coalesced around Parker**

Parker's victory was powered by Black voters and residents of the poor and low-income neighborhoods hardest hit by the city's gun violence crisis, [according to an Inquirer analysis](#). The only Black candidate among the top contenders, Parker has been clear that Black voters made up the core of her base.

Majority-Black precincts gave nearly 56% of their vote to Parker, while majority-white ones gave her just 12%. Parker also united two groups of voters who don't always align: more establishment-leaning Black voters and more independent-leaning Black voters. In this race, both groups backed her overwhelmingly.

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While Parker's win came in part from her support from Black Philadelphians, overall turnout in majority Black precincts trailed 2015, the last competitive mayoral race. Only about 30% of registered Democrats voted, and Parker won about 33% of their votes.

George R. Burrell, a former City Council member and ex-mayoral candidate, said her win is "a real statement of greater unity among Black voters than people anticipated."

Still, he said, "even after the effort she made, it shows the division that remains in the city."

While the lowest-income residents didn't comprise a large chunk of the electorate, they delivered Parker a majority of their votes, with about half of voters making between \$50,000 and \$75,000 voting for Parker. By contrast, the wealthiest and highest-income voters were most likely to support Rebecca Rhynhart.

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That may be in part because of Parker’s message, which often centered on her working-class upbringing in the city. Greg Spearman, 69, a Parker voter from West Philadelphia, said she is “in tune with the problems of the community and the challenges that the city is facing.”

”Her passion was overwhelming,” he said.

Barbara Terry, 59, of North Philadelphia, said Parker’s debate performance impressed her. And she said a major consideration was the opportunity to elevate a Black woman to lead the sixth-largest city in America.

”The last person I was impressed with like this was Obama,” Terry said. “Even if she doesn’t deliver on her campaign promises, at least we can say we made history.”

Parker also won by a wide margin among Latino voters, according to an Inquirer analysis. She was endorsed by Maria Quiñones Sánchez, a former City Council member who was the only Latina in the mayoral field until [she suspended her campaign in April](#).

“Cherelle’s historic candidacy spoke to Philadelphians in every ZIP code,” she said in a statement, “and her message resonated with the working-class Black and Brown communities I have represented throughout my career.”

## **Labor support was critical**

Parker’s candidacy took off in February when she was endorsed by the [Philadelphia Building & Construction Trades Council](#), a coalition of 30 unions led by Ryan Boyer, a longtime Parker ally.

Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union [announced it was backing her](#) weeks later, and then came the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 98, which has the largest war chest of any union in the city.

The building trades are some of the biggest political spenders in the state — and spend they did.

An independent expenditure committee, or super PAC, called Philadelphians For Our Future spent more than \$2 million on advertising alone and was almost entirely funded by building trades unions. Super PACs can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money as long as they do not coordinate with the campaigns they're boosting, and Philadelphians For Our Future outraised Parker's campaign.

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Not only did the super PAC pay to boost her profile — [it attacked her opponents](#) Rebecca Rhynhart, Jeff Brown, and Allan Domb in the closing days of the race. A separate super PAC funded ads attacking Helen Gym, meaning that Parker was the only candidate in the top tier to not face attack ads on television at any point during the campaign.

The building trades are also known to deploy members in big numbers to help with get-out-the-vote efforts, and the super PAC supporting her earlier this month reported an in-kind donation of \$500,000 from the regional carpenters' union for canvassing efforts alone.

## **Parker had a turnout operation behind her**

Parker, [a consummate political insider](#), was backed by a number of political power centers that undoubtedly played a large role in her win. While the Democratic City Committee didn't make an endorsement in the mayor's race, [chair Bob Brady embraced Parker](#), and more than 40 of the city's 69 ward leaders backed her.

Sam Katz, a former mayoral candidate and longtime observer of city politics, said the backing of the party and organized labor was key in turning out enough voters to prevail in what appears to be a low-turnout election.

“Her campaign was won on election day. She was elected because she had more people to get people out. Period,” Katz said. “And I would argue that the political system dragged her candidacy across the finish line.”

Sinceré Harris, Parker’s campaign manager, pushed back on the narrative that she was the establishment choice, saying she earned endorsements one by one, noting they notched a ward endorsement a week before the election.

“It really did come together piece by piece,” she said in an interview. “It’s a little lazy to say she was the establishment. I get it. We’re not going to say she’s not. But we built it.”

Still, the influence of the party was apparent. Parker ran up the score in Northwest Philadelphia, where she is herself a Democratic ward leader. Decades ago, the Black political family known as the Northwest Coalition formed, and it continues to be known for [high voter turnout and unified political preferences](#).

Parker also performed well in Northeast Philadelphia — especially the more diverse lower Northeast, some of which is part of the Council district she represented and where she was endorsed by 10 ward leaders. While former Councilmember Allan Domb prevailed in most of the upper Northeast wards, Parker pulled about 40% of the vote in seven lower Northeast wards. Domb finished in second in those wards at 17%.

U.S. Rep. Brendan Boyle, who hails from the Northeast, said Parker’s performance there among white working-class voters, coupled with her strong base of Black support, created a winning coalition. Boyle compared it with President Joe Biden’s coalition — and his own.

“My opponents beat me among more affluent white voters, but the reality is there were simply more of my kind of voters,” he said. “And this is the same story in this race.”

## **Her message on safety resonated**

Parker ran on a tough-on-crime platform, [pledging to hire 300 new cops](#) for her signature policing plan, and she has embraced law enforcement’s use of the tactic [known as stop-and-frisk](#).

But Parker has described her policing model as nuanced and community-oriented, with more officers walking in neighborhoods and developing relationships with residents and small-business owners. And she emphasized her personal story of growing up in a working-class Philadelphia neighborhood and being the mother of a Black son.

“She got the benefit of having a tough-on-crime message,” Burrell said, “but also being a Black woman and having a child, and people are hopeful that she is going to see their needs better than others would have seen it.”

That seemed to resonate with voters.

“I think Cherelle Parker understood what needs to be changed in the city,” said Asa Saidman, 27, a Parker voter who lives in Fishtown. “I think the focus on 300 new police officers with the focus on patrolling more so on foot and on bicycles will help, and having the police officers represent the communities they’re coming from, too. I think it’ll provide mentorship and hopefully suppress crime.”

Stephanie Clark, 61, of Mantua, said public safety is her top concern — and largely why she voted for Parker.

“When I heard her talking about it and she was talking about how she wanted to protect her son, because now little kids are getting killed,” Clark said, “that was the most important thing to me.”

*Staff writers Aseem Shukla and Ryan Briggs contributed to this article.*

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