

## Ralph Becker: 'I want us to succeed together'

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Buoyed by a front-porch campaign that made him a household name and demographics carbon-cut for victory, Ralph Becker pounced onto the Salt Lake City mayor's chair Tuesday night, pummeling Dave Buhler by the widest mayoral margin in at least two decades.

The Democratic Utah House leader shellacked Buhler, an affable and moderate Republican, 64 percentage points to 36 percentage points in a contest that saw a towering turnout due to the contentious school-voucher choice.

The lopsided result continues a nearly three-decade drift of capital voters rejecting a Mormon Republican for mayor.

"It is important that there be another view represented in this state," said Becker as eight microbrews and four types of wine flowed during his election party at Squatter's Pub Brewery.

The mayor-elect, who replaces lightning-rod Mayor Rocky Anderson, said blue-hued Salt Lakers show a "real pride, almost defensiveness" in crimson-soaked Utah about staying on the progressive path. He pledged to work well with others, listen and be proactive with proposals.

"I want us to succeed together," Becker said. "I want to be united."

Tuesday night's blowout was evident early. Just 47 minutes after polls closed - before vote counts were posted - Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. lobbed a call to congratulate Becker. Less than 45 minutes later, Buhler called Becker to concede.

"He ran a great campaign, and I appreciate that he is going to change the tone of the mayor's office," Buhler said with characteristic class. "I like Ralph Becker very much, and he'll be a fine mayor. I've told him he will have my full support."

A self-professed "underdog," Buhler, who will leave public service in January after two terms on the City Council and a previous state Senate stint, declared he will take a break from politics.

Placid, but passionate about smart growth and environmental stewardship, Becker promises a progressive agenda without Anderson's bombast. He says he wants to downplay divisions in Utah's capital and emphasize a softer style.

Cresting with a larger-than-expected primary win, Becker rode the momentum to roll over Buhler. He piled more cash, dodged controversy and steered around the sniping to protect his lead.

"The odds were stacked against [Buhler] from the get-go," said Stan Lockhart, Utah Republican Party chairman, pointing to the capital's liberal populous.

Becker's foot campaign - a manic volunteer army that stalked virtually every city doorstep twice - stomped the life out of an opponent overmatched by both demographics and his Democratic foe.

"Becker seems like he'll be an innovative mayor," Avenues voter Jeff Bastar said. "He's liberal enough for the younger generation."

Anderson, who attended the party at Squatter's along with Salt Lake County Democratic Mayor Peter Corroon, said he is pleased with the outcome.

"This is going to make a huge difference to have someone," Anderson said, "to continue the progress we've made."

The departing mayor said he is not bitter about leaving and predicts Becker will have "a bit of an easier time" with two new City Council faces.

After each escaped a crowded Sept. 11 primary, Becker vs. Buhler became a contest largely about tone. Neither wanted to alienate voters, but both promised a gentler substitute to Anderson.

Buhler mixed aggressive attacks on Becker's record with a folksy, everyman ad campaign intent on branding him the reasonable guy. He labeled Becker a "dreamer," ineffective during 11 years in the Legislature and out of touch with city issues.

Becker dismissed the swipes, pointing to a career built on consensus. During more than a decade on GOP-dominated Capitol Hill, Becker thrived as a mild-mannered legislator adept at making deals and maintaining relationships.

Becker was elated by the wide margin, saying the bigger it is the more it "gives me a lot of momentum going into the office."

By a more than 2-to-1 margin, primary voters who had preferred Jenny Wilson or Keith Christensen broke to Becker over Buhler, according to the Utah Colleges Exit Poll.

Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said Becker benefited from being non-Mormon, pro-environment and even-tempered.

"It was Becker and not Buhler who was seen as the anti-Rocky as far as his approach," Jowers said. "Becker was able to win over the get-rid-of-Rocky crowd."

Nationally, Jowers notes, "Republicans are really a declining brand. That should not impact city elections, but it can on the margins."

With Becker's progressive credentials and hard-charging street campaign, that margin turned into a tidal wave of support.

But, moments after Buhler called to concede, Becker's thoughts turned to a much smaller constituency: one.

"I need to call my mother," he said.

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