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1997: Democrats Can Dream, Can't They?

With the Republicans in control of Washington and Albany, local Democrats are now licking their wounds and looking to recapture City Hall. If Conservatives and Republicans seek revenge against Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and if looming budget cuts weaken the quality of life here, the Democratic nomination may even be worth something in 1997.

The 1997 Democratic primary will surely be the most influential mayoral contest since 1977, when seven candidates sought the nomination and the runoff between Ed Koch and Mario Cuomo show-cased the state's two most powerful Democrats of the following decade. As Congressional Democrats learn to live without power, perks and staff, and Albany Republicans reinforce their suburban/upstate power base, the mayor's office is now the best game in town for Democrats. In the holiday spirit, let's be thankful that New York City still makes room for wishful thinkers.

Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger is one of the city's most knowledgeable public officials, but she is too liberal for most voters outside Manhattan's West Side. Messinger has appeal for women, liberals and Harlem voters eager for State Sen. David Paterson to become the next Manhattan borough president. While Messinger might dominate a crowded Democratic primary, her ideological baggage could be a liability in a general election.

Mark Green, a liberal with brains, a telegenic personality and political resiliency, has made the public advocate a serious job, despite the best efforts of the City Council and mayor to weaken him. But Green, who got more votes than Giuliani in 1993, may wisely choose to sit tight and prepare to run for senator in 1998 or mayor in 2001.

City Comptroller Alan Hevesi proved he can wage hand-to-hand combat when he beat Elizabeth Holtzman in 1993, but does he have the stomach to take on Giuliani in 1997? Not likely, unless the city's budget mess gets so bad that Hevesi emerges as the Democrat who can take the Queens County vote from Rudy.

Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, with a strong base among Latino voters, has sharp political instincts, but he is not well known beyond his home borough. A respectable run by Ferrer would give him the exposure and fund-raising base for a subsequent race in 2001, but is Freddy prepared to give up his job as borough president in order to run for mayor?

Should Bill Clinton wind up like Jimmy Carter, a Southerner who can get elected but not re-elected, some members of our Congressional delegation may be eager to move back to New York rather than wither under Republican rule. Brooklyn's Charles Schumer, a crime-fighting

Democrat, would be a formidable mayoral candidate since he has good ties to business leaders and the African-American community, but his eyes are on the governorship. With Harlem no longer the center of black political power. Queens Congressman Floyd Flake or Brooklyn Congressman Major Owens might well decide to run for mayor since their Congressional seats would not be jeopardized.

Of course, weak political parties and television advertising now allow anyone to emerge as a viable candidate. So watch out for the Rev. Al Sharpton, Roy Innis, City Councilwomen Ronnie Eldridge and Virginia Fields, and even John F. Kennedy, Jr. (Don't laugh: Why should New York be practically the only state on the Eastern seaboard without a member of the Kennedy clan in political office?) But for a Democrat to win, Rudy must flounder not likely for a mayor who in less than a year has vanquished Legal Aid lawyers, Board of Education bureaucrats and sanitation workers.

The only hope for Democrats is if those Republicans who want to terminate Rudy's career nominate someone else, forcing him to run as a Liberal-Fusion candidate and splitting the moderate-to-conservative vote. Then a Democrat capable of mobilizing liberals and minorities would have an opening into City Hall.

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