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Democracy Shivers New York's Timbers

If it can happen in Russia it can happen anywhere. Even in New York. No, I'm not talking about a rightwing take-over - Rudy Giuliani is a far cry from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy - and no mayor of New York will ever make the trains run on time. I'm talking about democracy, and it's pulling into the station.

Like Moscow until lately, New York City has long been a one-party town. For most of this century, the Democrats have controlled almost all of the citywide and borough offices (with the notable exception of Staten Island, of course, where GOP stands for Guy's Own Party and is a Molinari monopoly). And when Republicans such as LaGuardia, Lindsay and Giuliani get elected, it is typically with the help of a third party, creating an odd, three-legged race that provides an acceptable alternative to stumbling Democrats. But just as last year's elections in Russia demonstrated that a competitive political system can grow in a former communist state, New York City may also be witnessing the rise of a competitive two-party system.

The success of the Democratic Party in New York has stemmed from the fact that the overwhelming majority of registered voters - 2,258,410 are Democrats, while only 464,524 are Republicans, and a modest 26,683 are registered Liberals. However, the apparent five-to-one Democratic majority may be seriously exaggerated, according to Jerry Skumick of Prime New York, a consulting firm that analyzes election data. Skumick notes that voting lists include the names of people who may have inadvertently registered more than once during the rash of voter registration drives in recent years. In addition, since the list of registered voters is no longer purged of people who don't vote once every four years, some folks may have moved and/or passed away. While the majority of registered voters is still Democratic, the official lists may exaggerate the extent of Democratic dominance.

One of the ironies of local political life is that the City Charter Revision of 1989, which Democrats controlled, has actually produced more representation of all minorities, including Republicans. Today, seven out of 51 City Council members are Republicans, and approximately 300,000 votes were cast for Republican City Council candidates in the 1993 - almost twice as many as in 1989.

If the traditional Democratic coalition of white ethnics, minorities and liberal Jews continues to fray, new cleavages within the Latino and black communities may usher in a competitive two-party system in New York City. To take advantage of this, the Republicans will need to reach out to communities of color who are concerned about schools, safety and jobs.

In 1993, Giuliani received 865,574 votes on the Republican line and 62,351 votes on the Liberal

party line. David Dinkins won 874,344 Democratic votes. Thus the Republicans came within 9,000 votes of the total Democratic vote for mayor. When John Lindsay ran for re-election, the Republicans rejected him because he was too liberal. Should Giuliani run for re-election in 1997, the Republicans must embrace new groups if they want to become more than just a collection of local clubhouses.

Competition is one of the fundamental values that underlie American culture and politics. In business, competition spurs productivity while enhancing consumer choice. In sports, competition is regarded as the basis for excellence. That's why we have the Olympics: to allow the best from all parts of the world to compete against each other. In politics, competition occurs within the framework of two-party politics. At the national level, presidential elections are our domestic political Olympics. Instead of trials, we have primaries, and instead of commercial sponsors we have political action committees. As two-party competition heats up in New York City, we may find ourselves no longer hopping to the finish line in gunny sacks.

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