

# The Political Catbird Seat in New York in 2001

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The African-American vote may well determine who is the next Mayor of New York City. Currently, five Democratic candidates plan to run for Mayor of the City of New York: former City Councilman Sal Albanese, Bronx Borough President Freddy Ferrer, Public Advocate Mark Green, City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, and City Council Speaker Peter Vallone. Four of these candidates are white, and one, Ferrer, is Latino. The Republican Party candidates have yet to announce, though there is speculation that State Assemblyman John Ravitz or former Congressman Herman Badillo will seek the Republican Party nomination. In addition, Michael Bloomberg, the founder and head of Bloomberg L.P., a leading media company and one of the nation's most prominent philanthropists, is frequently mentioned as a potential candidate for mayor. With term limits preventing Rudy Giuliani from running for a third term, the Democrats are well situated to regain the mayoralty in 2001. Democrats outnumber Republicans 5 to 1 in New York City: it would take a fiscal crisis, earthquake, or a significant increase in crime to elect a Republican as mayor next year.

Historically, Republicans get elected to the mayoralty every 30 years. In 1933, Fiorello LaGuardia was elected Mayor as a candidate of the Republican and Fusion Parties; in 1963, John Lindsay was elected Mayor running as a Republican-Liberal Party candidate; and in 1993, Rudy Giuliani, running as a Republican-Liberal candidate, defeated incumbent Mayor David Dinkins. Like previous Republican Mayors, Giuliani has not groomed a potential Republican successor, and furthermore, the Liberal Party is not likely to endorse a Republican in the 2001 mayors race. There is no visible evidence that Republican Party leaders in New York have sought to attract Black and Latino voters, unlike their Republican counterparts in other states.

The most prominent non-elected African-American leader in New York City, Reverend Al Sharpton, is reported to be considering a run for Mayor in 2001. Sharpton, who lost the Democratic mayoral primary to Ruth Messinger in 1997, has several options in 2001: he could run for Mayor; endorse another mayoral candidate; or focus his energies on candidates running for other local offices, such as city council, district attorney, or comptroller. Should Sharpton run for Mayor, he would be the only African-American candidate in the Democratic primary, and would certainly get into a run-off. According to the New York City election rules, the nominee for mayor must receive 40% of the primary vote in order to prevent a run-off between the top two vote getters. In the 1997 Democratic primary, Ruth Messinger barely defeated Sharpton, with just above 40% of the primary vote.

Until recently, it seemed likely that Sharpton and other African-American politicians in New York City would align with Bronx Borough President Ferrer, in an effort to build a coalition of Latino and Black voters in the mayoral race. But, the outcome of the September 12, 2000 primary election in New York City has raised doubts about the political viability of the Ferrer candidacy. In that primary, four candidates, including two African-Americans, that were endorsed by Ferrer's political patron, Bronx Democratic leader Roberro Ramirez, failed to win their primary elections. Many African-American politicians now question the benefits of a Black-Latino alliance in the 2001 mayoral race.

Historically, the Black and Latino communities have had a difficult time working together in mayoral races. In 1973, Congressman Herman Badillo thought he could succeed John Lindsay as Mayor and lost badly in the mayoral primary. In 1977, Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton was unable to get enough votes in the primary to even qualify for a runoff. And, in 1993, when Rudy Giuliani defeated incumbent Mayor David Dinkins, more than one-third of the Latino vote went to Giuliani.

Rather than unify behind the candidacy of Ferrer, it is possible that African-American leaders will establish separate coalitions with each of the white Democratic candidates for mayor, all of whom are actively seeking Black votes in next year's primary election. Should African-Americans pursue such a multi-candidate strategy, it would further tear at the present fractures in the alliance with Latino politicians – a tear that would endure for years to come. As Angelo Falcon of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund has observed, despite numerous efforts, a Black and Latino coalition has "not been developed at the scale that is needed to make a serious impact on the city's politics." In fact, Falcon has pointed out that while there is a commonality of interests between Blacks and Latinos on some issues, serious factors still hinder coalition building between these groups in New York.

Furthermore, the influx of immigrants into New York from Africa, the Caribbean, and South America is profoundly changing the dynamics of politics in New York. For example, non-Puerto Ricans constitute a majority of the Latino population in New York, though Puerto Ricans are still the dominant Latino group in local politics. In Brooklyn, the emergence of Caribbean communities has led to conflict with the native-born African-American political leadership in that borough. And, though Asians constitute almost 10% of the city's total population, it is not clear how this group – which includes individuals from China, Korea, the Philippines, and East Asia – will participate in municipal government.

Each of the Democratic candidates for mayor has working relationships with African-American politicians and civic leaders. Hevesi, who supported Congressman Major Owens in a bitter primary contest that highlighted the deep split between Caribbean-Americans and native-born African-Americans in Brooklyn, can be expected to have the support of Owens along with that of Brooklyn Assemblyman and Democratic County Leader Clarence Norman. City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, who is highly regarded by the African-American members of the city council, has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to unify the disparate members of the city council into an effective counterweight to Mayor Giuliani. Public Advocate Mark Green, who served in the Dinkins Administration, supported City Councilwoman Una Clarke in her unsuccessful challenge to Major Owens and attracts large numbers of minority votes. Green has sought to make the New York Police Department more accountable to citizens and successfully defeated Giuliani's efforts to diminish the role of the Public Advocate. Former city councilman Sal Albanese, though he opposed a civilian complaint board to monitor police behavior, has an ideologically progressive agenda that includes support of the "living wage" in all municipal contracts.

While no African-American is a candidate for mayor, it is important to note that three African-American women are running for Borough Presidencies in New York City. C. Virginia Fields, the incumbent Manhattan Borough President is up for reelection; in Queens, City Councilwoman Helen Marshall is seeking the Democratic nomination for Borough President; and in Brooklyn, Jeannette Gaddis, the deputy Borough President is running for Borough President. This is the first time in the city's history that African-American women have run for Borough President outside of Manhattan.

Moreover, an African-American is seeking the Democratic nomination for one of the three citywide offices in 2001. Board of Education President William Thompson is running for City Comptroller, a position with substantial authority over the city's finances and contracts. The comptrollers office has traditionally been a source of mayoral candidates. Since 1961, five Comptrollers have run for mayor: Lawrence Gerosa, Abe Beame, Mario Proccacino, Harrison Goldin, and Alan Hevesi. Should Thompson, a Brooklyn-based politician who was formerly Deputy Borough President of Brooklyn, get elected Comptroller, he would be the most powerful African-American elected official in New York City and a sure contender for the mayoralty in 2003. More important, the election of Thompson as Comptroller would symbolize the emergence of Brooklyn as the center of Black political power in New York City, and the relative decline of Harlem as the principal source of African-American political leadership in New York City.

Thompson's candidacy, along with term-limit induced city council contests, will help mobilize a strong African-American turnout in the 2001 Democratic primary, reinforcing the need for the mayoral candidates to respond to their interests. Although Latinos and African-Americans each account for more than a fourth of the New York City population, they have quite different rates of voting turnout in New York City elections. The African-American community accounts for more than 25% of the vote in a general election, but in a Democratic primary, the African-American share can reach 40% of the total vote. The Latino vote includes Puerto Ricans who are citizens as well as recent immigrants from Central and South America with lower rates of citizenship. As a result, Latinos account for approximately 13% of the total city vote, though they make up 26% of the city's population.

As New Yorkers prepare for the 2001 mayors race, it's clear that there is no leading candidate to succeed Rudy Giuliani and that the African-American and white vote will be split among several candidates. For many African-American politicians, their eyes are already on the 2002 gubernatorial election, when State Comptroller H. Carl McCall will be seeking the Democratic Party's nomination for Governor. The challenge for African-Americans in 2001 is to develop political alliances in the mayoral race that can help McCall in 2002, when he faces the prospect of a primary contest with the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Andrew Cuomo, and a general election against the incumbent, Republican Governor, George Pataki. Simply put, the race for Governor of New York State in 2002 will influence the political calculations of African-Americans in the 2001 mayor's race. Consequently, there is a significant opportunity in 2001 for the African-American community to play a powerful role in the mayor's race by backing a candidate who understands the priorities of the African-American community. Such a candidate could build a strong multiracial coalition, and his election as Mayor would help McCall's candidacy for governor in 2002.

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