

# *The Black and Independent Alliance*

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## **The Black and Independent Alliance**

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As with all things that are becoming you never read about them in the newspapers. But something new is becoming in New York City politics. What is that new political reality? Its starting point is the long awaited revolution in the black vote. 47% – nearly half – of black New Yorkers broke away from the Democratic Party and voted for the independent Republican Michael Bloomberg. This shift was chronicled only briefly in the spasm of always conservative post-election analysis, perhaps with the hope that the old ways of municipal politics will reassert themselves. The basic rule of political thumb in New York City is that blacks are not wanted by the Republican Party and therefore can be thoroughly neglected by the Democratic Party. New York City's political class has been happy with this arrangement, and was startled to see it disrupted, even if it helped re-elect Mike Bloomberg.

Still, the “disruption” is whispered about in the corridors of power (the political class) as is the Independence Party (IP) total for Bloomberg – 75,000 votes – meaning that 1 out of every 10 voters cast their ballot for Bloomberg as an independent. One City Hall reporter exclaimed to me that the IP vote for Bloomberg was significantly higher than it had been in 2001 – yes, I replied, 26% higher – though he had not (and still hasn't) written a word about it.

These two interconnected Election Day results – the revolution in the black vote and the increase in the Independence Party vote for Bloomberg – reveal the matrix of a new political paradigm: a becoming. They show the coalescence of two under-represented – arguably, under-enfranchised constituencies – whose political aim is nonpartisan reform of the political process itself.

### **The Black Electoral Revolution**

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The story of how Mike Bloomberg, a white billionaire Republican, received the support of 47% of the city's black voters, itself has many starting points. Not least is the mayor's first campaign in 2001 when, near the end of the Democratic Party primary process, Mark Green's campaign (employing traditional Democratic Party racist tactics) attacked Green's then primary opponent, Fernando Ferrer, for having the support of Al Sharpton. Twenty-five percent of black voters responded by backing Bloomberg's long shot election bid.

But another starting point (a very well kept secret) in this tectonic shift took place in the earliest stages of planning the mayor's re-election campaign. Already forecasting in the summer of 2004 that Ferrer would be the Democratic nominee, the mayor's inner circle and the mayor himself, believed it inevitable that the vast majority of black voters would go for the Democrat. Some even questioned whether he could match his 2001 showing of 25% of black voters, since they believed the vote was an anomaly, and the appeal of a majoritarian (though imaginary) coalition of color – the vaunted Latino/black alliance – would prevail.

I was at some of those early meetings and I argued a very different view. The black vote for Bloomberg in 2001 was, in part, a revenge vote against Mark Green's racist insults. But it had another dimension as well. Bloomberg ran in 2001, not only as a Republican, but also as the candidate of the Independence Party. Independence leader Lenora Fulani campaigned for Bloomberg in the majority black districts of the city, building a network of support for him well before the Green/Ferrer/Sharpton melodrama played out. This activist network agreed that they would benefit politically by acting – and voting – more independently. The events at the end of the Democratic primary reinforced that, and the two trends combined to bring Bloomberg his 25%. I argued to the mayor and his inner circle (I'm a little moon that orbits his inner circle) that the black vote in 2001 was some complicated mix of paying back and looking forward, that is, paying the Democratic Party back for its vulgar racialism and looking forward to a new political modality – independent voting.

My argument to the mayor and his advisors in the summer of 2004 was that the 2001 experience – and the percentages it produced – could be cultivated and built upon. I argued that in the black community there was a discernible dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party that was ongoing and a decade-long trend toward independence. Backed up with organization and leadership talent of the kind the Independence Party brought to the table – we could upend conventional expectations with respect to the black vote. At the time, there was not much receptivity to this perspective.

As the campaign got underway some six months later, there seemed to be little change in the campaign's attitude towards the black vote. Bloomberg wanted to continue his partnership with the Independence Party. The IP vote in 2001 – 59,091 – had been his margin of victory. His advisors saw IP's vote-getting value in its special access to Independence's 95,000 registrant base, and the IP line was identified as an "escape hatch" mainly for white Democrats who would prefer not to vote for Bloomberg on the Republican line. The idea that IP would play a vital, if not catalytic, role in shifting the black vote was not

considered, though IP strategists – myself included – believed it surely would.

Nonetheless, with assistance from the Bloomberg camp, the Independence Party began to “drill down” into its base, a cross-section of white independents who span the ideological divide from Bay Ridge to Cobble Hill to the Upper East Side of Manhattan and younger black and Latino voters who’d rejected the expected Democratic Party affiliation. Phone banking, surveys and outreach to independents yielded more detailed information about the extent to which these voters valued political reform and saw the Independence Party as the key vehicle for achieving it.

Meantime, in the beginning of 2005, Fulani set out to assemble what she called the “Bloomberg on C” Coalition, a network of black and Latino community leaders – mainly Democrats. These activists – a mix of clergy, small business entrepreneurs, educators, police and corrections officers, sanitation workers, Democratic district leaders – bought in on two ideas: that the mayor deserved re-election. And the “added value” argument that voting for Bloomberg as an independent gave the black community a new source of leverage. Voting for Bloomberg on Column C, the Independence Party line (hence, the name “Bloomberg on C” Coalition) made a statement, not just about the independence of the candidate, but about the independence of the voter.

Fulani’s question to these leaders was: Did the black community want to assert its political independence in order to improve its political position? The enthusiasm for Fulani’s “Bloomberg on C” strategy cut across class lines. Poor and middle class, welfare and homeowner – the appeal of voting for the nonpartisan Bloomberg gained traction. It soon became clear that, at the very least, this outreach immunized Bloomberg against the Republican stigma, making him acceptable to vote for – even on the Republican line. Beyond that, it introduced a new modality of voting – on Column C, the Independence Party line – as a way to draw attention to the black community’s greater political independence.

As the “Bloomberg on C” effort began to take root, the Bloomberg campaign began its survey of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, creating its now-famous database with a new set of postmodern “meta categories” which defied the traditional race and neighborhood-based paradigms of Democratic Party-style campaigns. Bloomberg’s strategists were, in their own way, doing battle with identity politics, promoting the mayor’s record of achievement on the merits, without invoking the more traditional categories of political persuasion. In the course of these surveys, they began to see what the Independence

Party, Fulani and the “Bloomberg on C” Coalition had already discovered (and inspired): Bloomberg was appealing to a cross-section of black voters on a significant scale.

Naturally enough, the Bloomberg campaign began to adjust its game plan, bringing on black advisors with links to the Democratic establishment. The press conference launching the Bloomberg campaign’s “African Americans for Bloomberg” featured high-profile non-political black celebrities, such as restaurateur Bea Smith and fashion model Iman. Magic Johnson came on board, too. These were not political heavyweights – in fact, most of them weren’t even city voters. Nonetheless, the press conference was a clear signal that the Bloomberg campaign had come to believe that the black vote was in play.

The first public measure of the depth of support that had been generated for Bloomberg among black voters came in a Marist poll two weeks after Fernando Ferrer won the Democratic primary. The Marist survey showed that 53% of black voters backed Bloomberg.

Some Bloomberg advisors told me they did not believe the numbers. But, apparently, they did feel confident enough in their black support to decline having the mayor participate in a televised debate at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem in early October.

The black Democrats, mortified by the Marist poll, struck back. Al Sharpton, who had kept a low profile during most of the campaign (apart from vocally supporting Bloomberg’s West Side stadium deal which Ferrer ferociously opposed) critiqued Bloomberg for disrespecting the black community. The campaign defended itself saying Bloomberg didn’t want to debate so early, the broadcast partner (NY1) did not have a large viewing audience, etc. Some of Bloomberg’s major black endorsers, notably Rev. Floyd Flake, criticized the decision and hoped the mayor would change his mind.

The “Bloomberg on C” Coalition directly responded to Sharpton. Fulani appealed to the black community to choose “record over rhetoric” and not succumb to knee-jerk nationalistic appeals of the sort Sharpton was offering. The “Bloomberg on C” Coalition staged a large informational picket outside the Apollo on the night of the debate where Fulani emphatically endorsed the “electoral revolution” underway in the black community – a revolution manifest in the 53% showing in the polls.

A few days after the Apollo debate, a new set of polls showed Bloomberg’s support among blacks holding at 48% while 72% said Sharpton’s criticism made little difference to them one way or the other.

Bloomberg's ultimate performance among black voters on Election Day was the result of multiple factors. Bloomberg's message of fairness, progress and independence penetrated deeply. The Independence Party, the "Bloomberg on C" Coalition and Fulani served to validate Bloomberg in the black community. They were the unpaid, unacknowledged voices for a new black empowerment strategy. They helped to remove the stigma of voting Republican and produced votes for the mayor on both lines as a result of the credibility they gave him.

On Election Day the Independence Party and the "Bloomberg on C" Coalition fielded a vote pulling operation targeted to the black community. In districts where they worked, up to a third of Bloomberg's vote was cast on Column C. Citywide, 1 out of every 8 black voters pulled the Column C lever.

It is worth noting that the media-generated controversy surrounding IP and two of its principal leaders, Lenora Fulani and Fred Newman, had no impact on the vote. For all the charges of anti-Semitism and divisiveness leveled against Fulani and the IP, this media campaign failed to peel away voters or to disrupt the most significant (and independent) black/Jewish coalition in decades. Bloomberg polled 70% of the Jewish vote and 47% of the black vote.

Top echelon black and Latino Democratic Party leaders have already done the math and noted that if the Independence Party had endorsed Democrat Fernando Ferrer, rather than Bloomberg, the 249,000 vote gap between the two candidates could readily have been closed. Since both Bloomberg and Ferrer are social liberals, and much of the IP vote came from black and white socially liberal areas, it is fair to surmise that IP's 75,000 votes could have been swung to the Democrat. That would have produced a 75,000 vote deficit for Bloomberg and a 75,000 vote added value for Ferrer, narrowing the gap to less than 100,000 votes. One estimate assumes 300,000 black voters cast ballots in the mayoral election, who split down the middle between Bloomberg and Ferrer. But if the IP and "Bloomberg on C" leadership were out of the Bloomberg camp, leaving him without the "street credibility" he needed to persuade black voters to desert the Democratic candidate, the mayor's ability to compete for African American voters would have been severely impaired, much as he originally expected it would be.

This shift on the part of black voters away from the Democratic Party calls into question another serious challenge: with whom are black voters now to ally?

The key alliance that crystallizes off of the 2005 results is a black and independent alliance, an electoral partnership between independent

(largely white) voters and African Americans. This new coalition is distinct from the black/liberal coalition, which is now defunct (witness 16 straight years of Republican mayors) and the black/Latino coalition under the auspices of the Democratic Party, which never had a real chance of succeeding (witness the defeat of Fernando Ferrer). Together, black voters and independent voters are in a position to drive an agenda, with the second term Bloomberg administration and with candidates in upcoming races. The work now is to define that reform agenda and map out the strategies for pursuing it.

## **The Independent Voter**

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Independent voters themselves fall into several different categories. In New York City, there are just under 95,000 members of the Independence Party. (The size of the IP registration base totally eclipses that of other minor parties. The Conservative Party has 22,894 New York City registrants, and the Working Families Party 10,755.) There are approximately 750,000 non-aligned independents – voters who indicate that they do not wish to enroll in any political party. There is also a third category of independent voter – namely those who are registered as Democrats or Republicans, but who choose to vote for a cross-endorsed candidate as an Independent, when they have the option to do so. For example, independent-minded Democrats voted for Bloomberg as an Independent, not simply because they didn't want to vote for him as a Republican, but because they wanted to assert their own political independence. New York Republicans who voted for Senator Charles Schumer, a Democrat, on the IP line in 2004 (he polled 216,198 votes on the IP line) or for Attorney General Eliot Spitzer in 2002 (he polled 256,915 votes on the IP line) wanted an alternative to their own party's choice of candidate. The Independence line gave them that choice.

Registered independents, while spanning the ideological spectrum from left to right, share a concern about the nature of the political process itself. They are reform-oriented, anti-clubhouse and anti-corruption.

Bloomberg's joint efforts with the IP identified him both as a reform mayor and as a reform candidate. In 2003, Bloomberg and the IP partnered in an effort to pass nonpartisan elections. Though the measure failed, it helped to "brand" Bloomberg as a genuine anti-clubhouse reformer and IP as the sole political party willing to put a wholesome democratic process ahead of its own narrower interests, since the adoption of nonpartisan elections would take away IP's power to cross-endorse in city contests.

A breakdown of the IP vote for Bloomberg in November in some key “culturally-liberal” areas shows an increase from 2001 of as much as 150%. In these districts, independent voter registration is growing at a more rapid rate than Democratic and Republican registration. At some polling sites on the Upper East Side the IP vote for Bloomberg was higher than the vote for the Democrat. These are also districts where the growth and depth of IP’s infrastructure has made it possible to reach many more independent voters and to mobilize them on behalf of particular candidates. Taken together, these independent and independent-minded voters now constitute a critical constituency for reform in New York politics. (They and the Independence Party have been a crucial factor for reform-minded Republican candidates who have to overcome a 5 to 1 Democrat to Republican registration advantage.)

## **The Basis for the Black and Independent Alliance**

The black community has been in need of a new electoral partnership for sometime. The black/liberal coalition, long a source of black political power, imploded in 1993, when David Dinkins sought re-election, but was deserted by enough white liberal voters to turn City Hall over to the Republicans for 16 years, marginalizing the black community until this year’s seismic shift. The much advertised black/Latino alliance – organized under the auspices of the Democratic Party – has never materialized, largely because the identity politics-based political paradigm of the Democrats does not produce consensus or coalition, it produces racial polarization, competition and antagonisms between different groups, including (for obvious reasons) between Latinos and blacks (they are competing for the same “welfare state” dollars).

While politically and culturally very different, black voters and independent voters share an interest in breaking out of traditional, partisan and ideologically over-determined policy making. Reforms like nonpartisan elections would empower independent voters to participate in first-round, often decisive voting – from which they are currently barred. Nonpartisans would likewise free black voters up to make fluid alliances (e.g., Bloomberg on C) that reflect their interests. For example, as long as the Democratic Party maintains control over the black vote and the Teachers Union maintains control over the Democrats, black voters are effectively prevented from backing candidates who support education reforms they’d like to see enacted – such as school vouchers. A nonpartisan system would liberate them to create new alliances – with independents and even conservative whites

– in favor of candidates who reach out to them on the basis of support for the voucher option.

Similarly, the current education system is based on a very narrow and, some would argue, outdated pedagogical framework, with limited insights into the capacity for human development, generally speaking, and youth development in particular. The black and poor communities – most in need of a developmental model in order to close the achievement gap – are the most disadvantaged by a political structure that does not permit developmental innovation. Rearranging the power dynamics, as a black/independent alliance has the potential to do, opens the door to a variety of new coalitions for developmentalism in education, in health and mental health care, in economic and cultural projects and in overall urban planning.

For independents, the partisan gridlock in Albany (and Washington) is a frustrating roadblock to the nonpartisan merit-based governance they want. That political parties increasingly legislate based on what's best for themselves and not for people – not for progress, but for special interests – is a major factor driving New Yorkers towards political independence. No wonder the Independence Party is the fastest growing party in the state.

The days of “anomaly” Republican mayors are over. A new era of competitive citywide elections, prefigured by Rudy Giuliani, has been re-defined by the Bloomberg victory. The growth of the Independence Party and its role in cultivating political mobility among black and other traditional Democratic constituencies is key. The 47% of the black vote for Mike Bloomberg and the 75,000 votes on the Independence line – in other words, the black and independent alliance – is the base from which a new and independent reform movement can now operate.