



THE COMMITTEE FOR A UNIFIED INDEPENDENT PARTY

To: Independents in the CUIP Networks
Fr: Jackie Salit
Re: The Bloomberg Story
Date: May 30, 2007

The continuing stories about a possible independent presidential candidacy by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg prompt me to brief all of you on Mike's history with independent voters and the independent political movement. The media assumes that if Mike decides to seek the presidency that he will automatically have the support of independents. My view is that nothing is automatic. Even a billionaire has to prove himself to independents.

I helped Mike do this in New York City twice, as I ran both of his mayoral campaigns on the Independence Party line. He ran twice as a fusion candidate—on the Republican and Independence Party tickets. In his first run in 2001 independent voters provided his margin of victory—the 59,000 votes on the Independence Party line put him over the top. In his second run, in 2005, he polled 59% of the total vote. Independents and black voters (an astonishing 47% of African American voters broke with the Democratic Party) were key to that landslide.

The Days of Independence

Mike began to develop an appreciation for independent voters and the issues we have to deal with as second-class citizens when I first put together the partnership between him and the Independence Party in 2001. The IP negotiating team, which consisted of myself, Fred Newman and Cathy Stewart, put a proposal for nonpartisan elections on the table to Mike and his political strategist Bill Cunningham. This reform breaks up clubhouse control of the primary process by ending partisan primaries and replacing them with a two-round system open to all voters. We showed Mike how the partisan system discriminated against 20% of the electorate—1 out of every 5 voters—because New York City's nearly 1 million independents were excluded from first round voting. Bloomberg asked Newman whether the Independence Party was truly prepared to support a reform which weakened the power of parties, including, of course, the Independence Party. Newman gave him an emphatic "Yes," underscoring that the purpose of the independent movement is to reform politics, not to preserve itself. Bloomberg pledged to support nonpartisans if elected.

After being elected in 2001, Bloomberg appointed Harry Kresky, a prominent election attorney who represents independent voters and candidates, to a Charter Revision Commission to investigate whether and how to implement such a reform package. Immediately, Kresky came under pressure to resign from the Commission on the grounds that his controversiality as an independent would taint the process. Kresky fired off a letter to Bloomberg informing him that he had no intention of resigning and would champion the interests of independents in the charter revision process. Bloomberg stood by Kresky, the only independent appointed to the Commission. When this commission voted to table the nonpartisan question (Kresky was the only commissioner to vote against tabling), Bloomberg empanelled a second commission a year later which did put a proposition for nonpartisans on the ballot.

When the campaign to pass that proposition got underway in 2003, it quickly turned vicious. The entire roster of Democratic Party elected officials opposed the measure along with many Republicans, and the Working Families Party, the Green Party, the so-called “good government” movement and every major daily newspaper but one. Bloomberg came under heavy attack for partnering with independents—especially with IP leader Lenora Fulani, one of the most outspoken advocates for nonpartisans. The opposition was in an uproar, accusing the independents of trying to destroy the Democratic Party. (Actually, the opposite was true, as events would soon reveal.)

Polling showed the measure had majority support among the public, but the outcome turned on which side had the resources and the apparatus to pull voters to the polls. Cathy Stewart and I met with Bloomberg to ask him to put his financial muscle behind the initiative. He put \$7 million into the project, but earmarked all of the money for a direct mail campaign, though I had asked him to spend much more and to include funding for TV commercials and a ground operation. It was a classic case of too little, too late—brought about by some combination of Mike’s naiveté about how rabid the Democratic Party clubhouse was about defeating nonpartisan elections and how ambivalent his advisor Bill Cunningham (a career Democrat) was about supporting something that would empower independents. The measure lost 70% to 30%.

I spoke with Mike the day after the election. He was pretty upset by the loss. I tried to explain to him that for independents to become powerful, we had to build rooted and ongoing organization on the ground. Some months later I asked him for \$10 million to develop those networks in New York City. He eventually gave me \$250,000 to do that in the Independence Party in the run-up to his re-election campaign in 2005.

I would say that Bloomberg has had a modest (very modest) commitment to this important aspect of building an independent political movement. Throughout the years of the Reform Party, this was a constant tension with Ross Perot. Those of us in the “bottom up” democracy wing of the party, with Reform’s National Secretary Jim Mangia leading the negotiations, pressured Perot to invest in the development of the Reform Party at the base. He never did. His failure to do so opened the door to Pat Buchanan’s destruction of the Reform Party, which he executed with only handfuls of followers. In the brief period that Perot loyalists lost control of the party—when Jack

Gargan was elected chairman and Cathy Stewart was appointed to head up party building—serious plans were laid to develop the party at the base. But Perot's lieutenants, together with Buchanan, illegally overthrew the democratically elected leadership and put an end to that initiative.

Perot's attitude towards rank and file independents (not unlike former Colorado Governor Dick Lamm who made an unsuccessful bid for the Reform Party nomination in 1996, Tom Golisano in New York, Jesse Ventura in Minnesota and Ralph Nader) was to relate to independents as disempowered Americans who should be grateful for the fact that a bigshot had shown up at our doorstep. The idea that independents should be listened to, supported and respected was basically nowhere in the picture. For each of these individuals, it was all about what they could get for themselves, not what they could do to build a movement. Bloomberg has a slightly better track record in this regard. But given his wealth and the fact that he professes to be something other than a professional politician, he has held back from giving as much support as he could to the independent movement.

Actually, the record shows that Mike has become more conservative and less willing to go to bat for independents, the longer he has been in the political game. But, in the early days he took stands on behalf of independents in numerous situations. For example, as the 2001 campaign was getting underway insiders told me that Bloomberg was coming under pressure from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to break with the Independence Party because of criticisms it had of Fulani and Newman, whom the ADL charged were anti-Semitic. (Fulani and Newman, who is Jewish, have been critics of Israeli policy toward the Arab world, but are not anti-Semites.) I was told that Bloomberg communicated to the ADL that he would not bow to the pressure, nor would he provide any financial support to the organization.

At the end of 2004, as Mike's re-election campaign began, he was scheduled to appear at the Independence Party's annual Anti-Corruption Awards in front of an audience of 500 independents from across the city. In response, Democratic Party mayoral candidates held press conferences denouncing his plan to attend, again trying to foment a split between Bloomberg and the independent movement. Bloomberg attended the event in spite of the pressure and announced to the full house, including all of New York City's media:

"To all the critics who are rushing out to criticize me tonight, criticize me for being here tonight, let me point out that this night is about the one million New Yorkers who are denied the most basic rights by the two major political parties."

Bloomberg concluded his remarks with the following:

"We all know that election reform takes time. That's because those who have benefited from the system are the ones who fight hardest to preserve it. So if we're going to succeed, we need an independent coalition of citizens who believe in reform, who believe that our election laws should treat every voter equally, who believe that low levels of competition and participation are not healthy for

democracy. The Independence Party is helping to build that coalition and I am happy to join you in doing so.”

On these occasions Bloomberg stood up for independent voters, the independent movement and the Independence Party. But as the major parties’ war on the Independence Party became more acute, so, too, did his equivocation.

The 2005 Re-Election Campaign

There were two remarkable features of Bloomberg’s re-election victory in 2005. First, his Independence Party total went up by 26% as compared with the vote total from 2001. (The mayoral vote totals on other party lines declined between 1% and 25%.) Second, he polled 47% of the black vote in a rare turnaround of the traditionally pro-Democratic Party voting pattern among African Americans. The strong endorsement of Bloomberg by Lenora Fulani, an influential and popular figure in the black community, and campaigning by the Coalition of Outsiders were key to this realignment.

These events set off a political blowback from major figures in the state Democratic and Republican Parties (including New York Senator Hillary Clinton, Governor Eliot Spitzer and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno) who colluded with the Independence Party’s state chairman Frank MacKay in attempting to destroy the New York City wing of the party, which had gotten Bloomberg elected and became the single most powerful “on the ground” force inside the party. They felt the New York City organization was too much of a loose cannon (i.e. was too independent!) to allow it to continue to operate. The attacks escalated and reached something of a crescendo when 130 members of the IPNYC—including the independents who had worked hardest to get Bloomberg elected, myself among them—were targeted by MacKay to be thrown out (disenrolled) from the party.

I personally appealed to Bloomberg to intercede and to speak out on behalf of the independents who had been a mainstay of support for him and for political reform, the very people who he had enthusiastically cited for building a force for long term political reform. He was silent and did nothing. As it turned out, the independents under fire won in court (we actually won 14 out of 16 lawsuits brought in connection with MacKay’s scorched earth policy). One judge went so far as to suggest that MacKay’s campaign was politically motivated—a good deal more than Bloomberg himself was willing to do.

The Road to the White House

What does this record mean in terms of how independents should view an independent presidential candidacy by Mike Bloomberg? It means we should be prepared to place certain demands on him should he decide to run, including that he recognize and respect the movement, the people and the organizations that introduced him to independent politics and put him in office in the first place. It means that every time a reporter writes about Bloomberg running as an independent, he or she gets calls from all of you telling them that independents are becoming organized, that we are not

simply a passive group of voters waiting for some bigshot to put their stamp on us, that we intend to put our stamp on them.

I think Mike Bloomberg is a good person and he has been good for New York. Independents can be proud that we elected him and moved the city beyond the divisions of the Giuliani years. At the same time, I have seen how Mike has sacrificed some of his own political independence in order to fit in with the two party establishment. I am a realist and I know how powerful those pressures can be. In all honesty, I've been disappointed in some of what he's done—or not done—as the case might be. The antidote to that, for the long term, is our continued work to make independents more powerful. That will create a counterweight to the unchecked power of the major parties and make it possible for Bloomberg—and others who might aspire to be independent leaders—to be more independent themselves. Creating that power does not involve building a national political party, rather it entails strengthening and developing a national independent movement that gives independent voters direct influence in the political process.

For the short term independents have to put the pressure on would-be independent presidential candidates. That's one reason I wrote this memo to all of you—so we can be clear on the records of those who might want to use our independent movement on a road to the White House.

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