



*New York City Mayor  
Michael Bloomberg*

# Unpopular Partnerships

(BLOOMBERG'S DILEMMA)

Jacqueline Salit

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**M**ichael Bloomberg is a man of supreme self-confidence. Some call it arrogance. There are important differences between the two, but with Bloomberg they sometimes bleed together – making him formidable and oddly vulnerable at the same time.

It is halfway through his first term as the mayor of New York City. That he sits in City Hall and presides over the nation's most affluent and culturally influential city is still surprising to him. He did not expect to win the 2001 election. Campaign aides weren't worried that their cell phones didn't work at B.B. King's, the site of their election night party – they didn't think anyone would be calling.

Bloomberg, one of the wealthiest men in America, appreciates things of quality and of substance. His acquired taste for the political cuts against that, as the political world is coarse and shallow. He is constantly uncomfortable in it. Still, he sought it out.

Why did he? Bloomberg must ask himself this question more than a few times a week. He is not a political visionary. Neither is he a political hack; indeed, he has no traditional ties to the party system. A lifelong Democrat who registered Republican to run in an uncluttered field, he won narrowly, his margin of victory coming from the Independence Party's crucial Column C. Nominally, he is the city's Republican mayor. Attitudinally, he is an independent, and was visibly touched when he received a thunderous standing ovation from 400

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independent voters at an Anti-Corruption Awards dinner last December, when he was introduced as the independent mayor of New York.

Mike Bloomberg's road to City Hall was unorthodox. His attitude toward the New York City Republican Party was that of a mergers and acquisitions specialist who swallows up an enterprise with significant real estate (Column A on the ballot) and a national brand name, but no productive capacity to speak of. Bloomberg's advisors saw clearly that he could take the Republican nomination without any serious opposition. That he ended up in a primary run against GOP conservative Herman Badillo (Bloomberg won handily) was of virtually no consequence.

It was Bloomberg's posture toward the minor parties – New York allows candidates to run on multiple party lines – that was most disconcerting for his Democratic opposition.

Bloomberg decided early on that he would not seek the cross-endorsement of the Conservative Party, or of the newly minted Working Families Party, widely considered to be a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Democrats. While he did request the nomination of the Liberal Party (which he didn't get), he and his inner circle decided that the endorsement of the Independence Party was key. One reason he needed it was to attract independent voters – nearly 20% of the city's electorate. The other was to make it possible for Democrats to support him without having to pull the Republican lever.

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Bloomberg pledged to the Independence Party that, if elected, he would champion its cause by supporting nonpartisan municipal elections – a system of choosing city officials that would enfranchise nearly a million independent voters excluded under the partisan arrangement. Independence backed his candidacy. He won by 35,000 votes, polling 59,000 on the IP line.

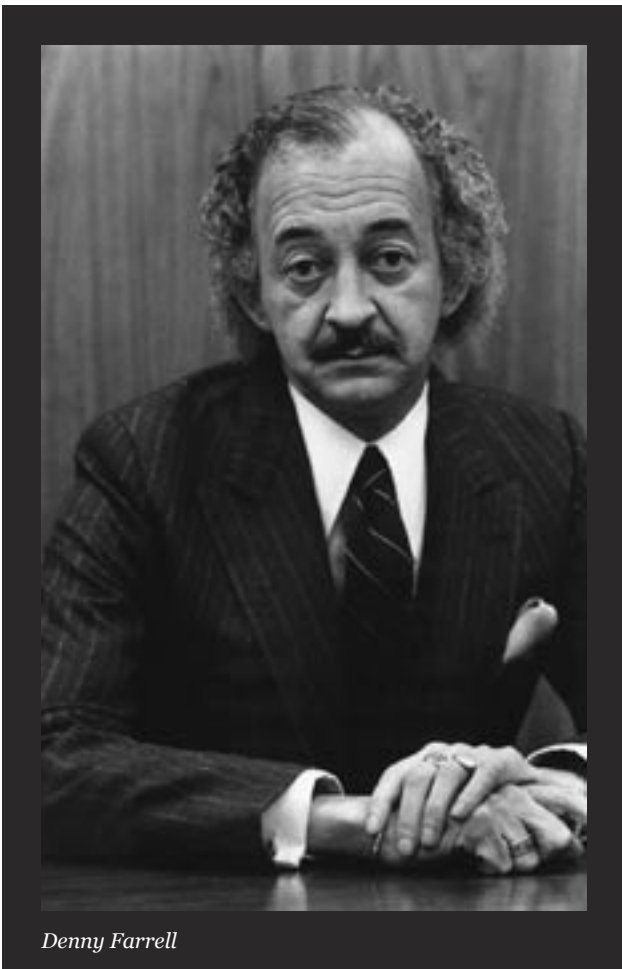
The new mayor spent his first two years in office making a string of defining leadership moves, notably gaining control of a failing and overtly politicized school system. He raised property taxes to right the city's witheringly unbalanced post-9/11 budget. He averted a transit strike, led New Yorkers through a blackout, handled a major maritime disaster at the Staten Island ferry,

and worked to heal the racial tensions imprinted by his predecessor Rudy Giuliani.

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But nothing in his conduct of municipal government so aroused the wrath of the Democratic opposition that he had narrowly upended in his bid for mayor as the fulfillment of his pledge to pursue nonpartisan elections.

The mayor's plan – vetted by a Charter Revision Commission he appointed – proposed to abolish partisan primaries and replace them with two rounds of balloting in which all voters, including the city's 770,486 independents, could participate. The measure was put before the voters in a referendum. It was in the public battle for nonpartisan reform that Bloomberg, who had hoped to govern apolitically, felt the full force of the partisan behemoth. No doubt he found it shocking.



Denny Farrell

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**T**he Democrats, led by state party chairman Herman “Denny” Farrell, retaliated against the mayor’s push for nonpartisan reform with unadulterated fury. The proposal was described in the most extreme terms: It was “nothing less than an effort to destroy” the Democratic Party, the liberal flagship *New York Magazine* editorialized. But even those words seemed temperate compared to the seemingly inexplicable hysteria that overheated the political atmosphere in Democratic clubhouses, good government groups, the Democratic-controlled city council, and elsewhere in the media.

Nonpartisan elections, a relatively innocuous reform, are in use in over 80% of U.S. cities. It’s a reform that the Democrats could have absorbed, and from which they might even have eventually benefited. But a nonpartisan system also threatened to undercut machine control of the party. How? With nonpartisans, electoral coalitions are both less durable and more fluid, forming and re-forming around particular candidacies in the interests of the coalition partners but not necessarily or inevitably in the interests of the party. As the late Walter Karp, the brilliant political analyst,

once explained, party organizations are engaged in a “constant endeavor to prevent the organization from fragmenting into an unbossed coalition of independent local coalitions...If it fragmented this way, the would-be party bosses would lose control of the party and with it control over nominations and political power itself.”<sup>1</sup>

Democratic Party hysteria was further magnified by the fact that the impetus for nonpartisans had originated from a dangerous source – the independents. Independent voters would have been nourished by a nonpartisan system and the Independence Party would have been further empowered as the recognized leadership of this “outsider” constituency. This scenario presented severe problems for the Democrats, as they don’t support populist democracy – although they thrive on the myth that they do. They cultivate the “prime voters” – those core supporters who can be counted on to come out in primaries and who invariably vote for the Democratic nominee. Democratic bosses sell the party as the party of the people; to benefit the Democratic Party, in their view, is to benefit the people. Conversely, anything outside its immediate influence – e.g. the independent voter – is an enemy of the people. For the Democrats, who live in and rule over the universe of the prime voter, empowering independents and expanding democracy are way too risky – especially if that democratic expansion weakens the control of the party machine.

Thus the Democratic establishment went full bore after an unsuspecting Bloomberg. *How dare you disrupt our political way of life*, the Democratic elected officials screamed. *How dare you pursue political reforms that we have not sanctioned*, the good government groups harrumphed. *You’re just a billionaire trying to buy an election, a rich white man determined to impose your will on the people*, minority and liberal officeholders and union leaders wailed. But it was for state Democratic Party chairman Denny Farrell to enunciate the most bitter attack of all: *How dare you partner with those despised outsiders – Lenora Fulani and the Independence Party?*

Farrell has been dutiful in his role as executive cheerleader, celebrating the defeat of Bloomberg’s proposal for nonpartisan elections as if it had been a holy crusade to save the motherland from invading barbarians.

**D**enny Farrell isn’t worried. Farrell is a believer. The ups and downs of the Democratic Party’s political fortunes are, to his way of thinking, just cyclical corrections that occur from time to time. But eventually,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Karp. *Indispensable Enemies: The Politics of Misrule in America*. New York: Franklin Square Press, 1993. p. 20.

he believes, sheer quantity (Democrats outnumber Republicans five-to-one in the city and five-to-three in the state), coupled with the brute strength of his machine (powered by the unions), will restore the party he chairs to the governor's mansion and to City Hall.

Farrell has been dutiful in his role as executive cheerleader, celebrating the defeat of Bloomberg's proposal for nonpartisan elections – “no” on Question #3 garnered 70% of the vote – as if it had been a holy crusade to save the motherland from invading barbarians. Farrell is not a man with a profound sense of history. But he does know how to measure a political situation (he was once a tailor), and to act accordingly.

Although many in his own party criticize Farrell for his lackluster performance as titular head of the party (he was handpicked by the powerful assembly speaker, Sheldon Silver, and is widely viewed as an instrument of Silver's will), he brings a special skill set to his job. Farrell is a student of counter-insurgency. For all the Democrats' official optimism as they look toward the 2005 mayoral and the 2006 gubernatorial races, Farrell understands that they must remain vigilant. They must be concerned that any rebellion within their core constituencies could knock their recovery off track. Farrell, a perennially well-dressed, light-skinned black man, the postmodern embodiment of a colonial comprador, is well suited to his task.

**I**n 1981, New York's minority communities were in revolt. Ed Koch, an anti-Vietnam War Democratic congressman turned racial provocateur, was on his way to a second term as mayor when a Dump Koch movement surfaced in the poorest black and Latino

communities. The movement was instigated by the New Alliance Party (NAP), a small but tactically sophisticated organization chaired by the city council's only independent, Gilberto Gerena-Valentin, in which Lenora Fulani, a black psychologist and educator, first became politically active.

The Dump Koch effort inspired community groups to confront the mayor's allies on the ground. One such group, based in Harlem, was the “Committee for the 80s.” Chaired by John Davis, a sharp-tongued journalist who had a short tenure as executive editor of the *Amsterdam News*, the “Committee for the 80s” saw itself as the catalyst that would ignite a new and independent black empowerment movement. This put it at extreme odds with the Democratic machine in Harlem, which had hitched its wagon to Koch.

In a brash challenge to his elders, Davis and the Committee distributed a provocative poster indicting local politicians for their complicity with the Koch administration. At the top of the list was a little known local assemblyman, Denny Farrell. “WANTED FOR THE CRIME OF SILENCE,” read the banner headline. Farrell's “Wanted” picture was posted on every lamp-post and bus stop shelter from one end of Harlem to the other.

A minor cog in the party machine, Farrell shrewdly understood that being a target of the insurgents could actually elevate his standing in the party. Loyalty is richly rewarded in such circumstances. He gambled that the insurgency would fail and that holding the line for Koch would pay future dividends. His gamble paid off.

The Dump Koch movement did produce a candidacy against Koch in 1981. Labor leader Frank Barbaro polled 36% of the vote in the Democratic primary. The NAP even succeeded in persuading Barbaro to run as an independent after losing the primary, and



the Fulani forces – together with black Democratic insurgents – managed to grab 18% for Barbaro as an independent. Koch waltzed to a second term.

Farrell watched it all with interest, assimilating an important political lesson: Never allow a partnership between black and Latino independents and insurgents to develop. That's too combustible a combination for the liking of the New York Democratic machine.

Four years later, when Ed Koch was up for reelection again, Farrell's counter-insurgency techniques became even more nuanced. Instead of tamping down the opposition to the mayor from insurgents inside the party, he *became* the opposition. Just as a coalition of black and Latino leaders was prepared to name liberal Democrat Herman Badillo (yes, the same Badillo who became a Republican conservative and challenged Bloomberg) as the Dump Koch standard bearer, Farrell jumped into the race with the declaration that he himself was the minority candidate standing up to the mayor. Badillo withdrew (actually he never announced), and the Dump Koch forces scattered to the winds. NAP leader Fred Newman entered the Democratic primary to expose the "Farrell Fix" and Fulani ran on a similar theme as an independent after Koch easily overcame Farrell's faux candidacy. In the general election, Koch won handily.

In 1989 Koch wanted a fourth term, but the political winds were shifting. Harlem Democrats, Farrell among them, were restless and unwilling to stand down. Black and Latino antagonism toward the mayor had continued unabated and the black Democrats decided the time was ripe for their own ascent. David Dinkins pulled off a Democratic primary upset after the murder of a black 16-year-old in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn impaled Koch on his record of aggravating racial tensions. Farrell's star was rising, too. He understood the game: Control the insurgencies and you control the board.

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**L**enora Fulani is a highly misunderstood political figure. For one thing, she's not madly in love with politics. (She and Bloomberg have this in common.) She has little patience for the plotting and counterplotting, the stupidity and pettiness, of most political dramas. Although the media tend to portray her as a kind of black nationalist Machiavelli, she is neither. Some days she worries more about whether the teenagers in her youth programs will take too many cookies on their plate in one of the corporate settings she brings them into than about who will win an election. But she is no less a power player.

Fulani is often compared to the Reverend Al Sharpton, with whom she worked closely for many years and whom she persuaded to move beyond

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DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

*Lenora Fulani*



*The People's Coalition for Nonpartisan Elections, July 2003*

protest politics into the electoral scene. He became a Democrat. Fulani is an independent. But there is more to the story. Sharpton has been given a level of political respectability by the Democrats, who use him to provide cover for them in the black community. Fulani has been denied legitimacy because she will not provide that cover. She believes the Democratic Party is corrupt, that it has abandoned its core principles and now serves as a brake on the political, social, and economic development of the black community, and of all America. She wants to guide black voters away from the partisan Democratic monolith and create an independent power base that gives the African American community greater political leverage and opportunities for new political alliances. For this hubris she has been variously branded a radical rightist, a radical leftist, a radical anti-Semite, and a radical opportunist.

In 1994, the year the Independence Party won ballot status for the first time, Fulani was a candidate in the Democratic primary for governor against the incumbent Mario Cuomo, while Sharpton challenged Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. (Denny Farrell, the chief counter-insurgent, led a marathon effort to invalidate Fulani's nominating petitions and throw her off the ballot but failed. Sharpton's petitions were not challenged.)

It was then that Fulani and Sharpton went their separate ways, after Sharpton turned against her for suggesting in a radio interview that he had cut a deal with Cuomo. (He had.) He spent the summer trashing her in every black forum he could, but in the end their vote totals were not much different. He polled 26% against Moynihan and she polled 21% against Cuomo. The governor went on to lose to an upstart Republican, George Pataki, in the fall.

Naturally, Moynihan was not worried about losing the primary to Sharpton, although his staffers kept a close eye on what both Sharpton and Fulani were doing. Two of them – Kevin Sheekey and Bill Cunningham – later joined Bloomberg's political team and now serve in his administration. Today they note (with a rueful smile) that Fulani outpolled Cuomo in Moynihan's home precinct of Pindars Corners in Delaware County.

After the primary, upstate businessman Tom Golisano invited her to join his campaign for governor on the Independence Party line. She did, and Golisano polled 217,000 votes – four times the number needed to create a new ballot status party. Fulani re-registered Independence and began building the party's base in the black and Latino communities, emerging over the course of the next five years as a major player in the party, with a substantial base in New York City and networks across the state.

As a brewing revolt came to a head against Golisano-allied party leaders who held tight-fisted control at the top, Fulani's wing of Independence shaped a statewide democracy coalition that overthrew the Golisano clique. The new leadership rewrote the party rules to establish local control and put the party in a position to evolve beyond the standard cross-endorsement model, according to which minor parties hew to an ideological line and attach themselves to a major party in exchange for patronage.

City and state Democrats vacillated on IP after it acquired ballot status in 1994. While leading Democrats sought and ran with the party's cross-endorsement (Public Advocate Mark Green, U.S. Senator Charles Schumer, and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer among them), the more Fulani's popularity grew among African Americans, the more some party leaders became hostile to Independence. Farrell was the ring-leader of this circle. With a new generation of black young adults coming of age indifferent to the political loyalties of their parents (polls show that between 35% and 45% of African American adults under 30 self-identify as independents, not Democrats), an independent alternative with roots in the black community became all the more threatening.

The Democratic hierarchs, with a gnawing realization that the Independence Party and Fulani stood to penetrate what had been an impregnable wall around black voters, increasingly bore down on them with undisguised hostility. By 2001, the competing Democratic mayoral candidates – Alan Hevesi, Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer – all publicly challenged Bloomberg to forego the Independence Party line, citing Fulani as the reason. He ignored their challenge and affirmed his support for the party and for non-partisan elections. In his first press conference after formally announcing his candidacy, he called for the enactment of this reform.

Bloomberg won his election. Two years later non-partisans lost. But this political journey unearthed a dimension of Democratic philosophy – its diehard opposition to populist democracy – that is not always so readily visible.

Farrell and the Democrats were, plain and simple, on the wrong side of the nonpartisan issue. Backing this most basic democracy reform, which stood to make local elections more competitive and which would have opened the door to nearly a million independents, should have been a virtual no-brainer – if the Democratic Party held to any principles of inclusion and a level playing field. But the preservation of its institutional dominance is now the party's highest (if not its only) priority.

That moral and political failing is rarely exposed, however, because the Democrats are skillful at keeping the focus on whatever Republican travesties happen to present themselves. In this unique case, the Democrats were called to account on an issue of fairness by a non-partisan mayor and an independent movement.

The pressure that the Democrats put on Bloomberg was enough to leave one breathless. "The only person that I truly know that supports Mayor Bloomberg's position is Lenora Fulani," said Harlem's 17-term Democratic congressman Charles Rangel in early July, as the fight over the referendum was coming to a head. "It just seems to me that the mayor has a lot of explaining to do as to why people who have been so supportive of his administration were completely ignored and he would go to someone like Miss Fulani to guide what's left of his political career."

Bloomberg must have been stung by the remark; his subsequent concessions show just how much. He revised his proposal to allow candidates to use party labels in a nonpartisan framework, bowing to the Democrats' insistence that removing labels would confuse minority voters. He also bowed to *The New York Times'* critique – that his motive for the reform was to improve his chances of reelection – by calling for its enactment only in 2009, when he would be ineligible to run (assuming he is reelected to a second term in 2005). In spite of his efforts at compromise, the *Times* opposed nonpartisans at the end and the Democrats, led by Farrell and a cohort of professional electoral assassins hired for the occasion, hammered him as a hapless billionaire out of touch with the people. The day after the defeat Bloomberg seemed both defiant and despondent. It was more than the loss. He'd gotten a glimpse of how desperate the Democrats are to remove him and regain control of City Hall.



*Candidate Michael Bloomberg endorses nonpartisan elections, June 2001.*

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**B**loomberg must govern for the next two years with the knowledge that every step he takes outside the partisan political norms will be punished. The independents are, of course, used to such treatment at the hands of partisans and their editorialists. For Bloomberg, it has only just begun, and he has many factors to balance. The Democrats control the permanent government with which the mayor must do battle every day. Still, he believes in political independence. He's had a partnership of several years with the Independence Party, and through it with the independent voters he wants to empower. The more he enhances that partnership, the more he strengthens his political hand and the legacy of non-politicized governance he hopes to leave behind. But the more he strengthens that hand, the more fierce the blowback from the Democrats is certain to be.

He is the mayor, and a powerful figure. He is also – in some very real way – caught in the crossfire between Farrell and Fulani, between the Democratic machine and the independent movement, between the past and the future. That, for the moment, is Mike Bloomberg's dilemma. **NEO**