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Wanted: A Progressive Mayor

After two decades of Republican rule, will New York finally elect a progressive to City Hall?

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Democratic mayoral candidates, from left to right: Bill de Blasio, John Liu, Christine Quinn and Bill Thompson. (AP Images)

On election night in 2009, I ran into a prominent New York City progressive political operative. I asked him if he thought the Democrat running for mayor, William Thompson, stood any chance against two-term incumbent Michael Bloomberg. He gave me a dismissive smirk. "Come on," he said. "Bloomberg's got every political consultant in town. Who's Bill Thompson got?" I named Thompson's campaign manager. "Yeah," the operative said. "Him against the world. Not a fair fight."

About the Author

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Jarrett Murphy is the editor of City Limits (citylimits.org).

Also by the Author

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Jarrett Murphy

as speaker of the City Council largely cooperated with the centrist Bloomberg administration.

Two hours later at Thompson's headquarters, when early returns showed the Democrat running neck and neck with or even slightly ahead of Bloomberg, I saw the same progressive operative in a corner texting furiously in an apparent mixture of excitement and panic—seemingly both thrilled and terrified that New York might elect a candidate he agreed with but had counted out.

In the end, of course, Bloomberg won, and Thompson became the fifth consecutive Democrat to lose the mayoralty in a city where his party enjoys a six-to-one registration advantage.

Now New York is preparing to vote for mayor again, and polls suggest that Democrats have a powerful advantage. But in more than one recent mayoral race, progressives have seen early optimism vanish by Election Day. And a Democratic win doesn't guarantee a progressive victory: the Democrat now leading the pack is Christine Quinn, who

Thus, the 2013 race frames the same question that's been asked after every mayoral campaign since 1993, and all but one since 1977: Why, in such a famously progressive place as New York City, is it so hard to elect a progressive mayor?

Gracie Mansion's Ghosts

The old adage has it that there's no Democratic or Republican way to take out the garbage. There is, however, a clear difference in how progressives and conservatives take out the trash—who should take it out, how much they should be compensated for it, where to send the garbage, how to get it there, and who should pay for the whole operation. Simply put, those who believe that a primary responsibility of government is to try to make the world a more just place—to help those with less power against those with a lot—are progressives, and New York City used to elect them as mayors.

Modern New York City politics begins in 1933 with the election of Fiorello La Guardia, a progressive Republican who built low-income housing, schools and hospitals and helped shape the urban aspects of the New Deal. He was elected to three terms. After two subsequent managerial mayors, Robert Wagner Jr.—far from a pure progressive, but a mayor who built housing for the poor and incorporated minorities into the civil service—served for twelve years.

Then came John Lindsay, a liberal Republican (he later switched parties) who sought racial harmony and better conditions for the poor, but took his hits for shaky management and

alienating working-class whites. Lindsay left office widely regarded as a failure—an impression that hardened when budget practices linked to him were blamed for the city's near bankruptcy. The fiscal crisis consumed Lindsay's successor, Abraham Beame, dooming his 1977 re-election bid.

That '77 contest was a turning point in the city's political narrative. Onetime left-winger Edward Koch campaigned in part on his support for the death penalty—irrelevant as a municipal matter but powerful as a symbol of his break from traditional progressive pieties. Koch won and governed for twelve years, much of that time spent in conflict with minorities and in cooperation with wealthy developers. He was ousted in the 1989 Democratic primary by David Dinkins, who then beat Republican Rudy Giuliani to become the city's first black mayor.

Dinkins's achievements as mayor were overshadowed by a crime wave and a nasty recession. Giuliani won the rematch in 1993, then introduced a menu of budget cuts, workfare and aggressive police tactics. He was easily re-elected in 1997.

In 2001, Bloomberg won a narrow contest over progressive Democrat Mark Green, who was hobbled by a bitter dispute within the Democratic Party about whether Green's campaign had used racially divisive tactics to win the primary against the strongly progressive Fernando Ferrer. Four years later, Ferrer became the city's first major-party Latino mayoral nominee but ended up being dramatically outspent by Bloomberg, who won by a landslide. After getting the City Council to overturn term limits, Bloomberg prevailed again in 2009.

Political leaders are complex creatures who both shape and are shaped by prevailing conditions, so even mayors who weren't progressive have sometimes found common ground with the left. Koch built hundreds of thousands of units of affordable housing. Giuliani was fairly friendly to immigrants and gays. Bloomberg, a pro-business centrist, pursued gun control and an ambitious environmental agenda. Fiscal conservatives disparage all three for increases to the city budget.

But while Koch was complicated, Giuliani not uniformly reactionary and Bloomberg no conservative, none of them were progressives. At best, with a nod to Beame and Dinkins, one could say New York has had eight years of progressive rule in the past four decades. At worst, there's an argument that the city hasn't had a progressive leader since Lindsay left City Hall, reportedly with tears in his eyes, on the last day of 1973.

* * *

Demographic Destiny

To explain this trend, one has to figure out how much of the city's recent past can be captured by a single narrative, and how much is the product of unique battles every four years.

One unifying truth, says University of Massachusetts professor and Lindsay biographer Vincent Cannato, is that New York City may never have been quite as liberal as people have imagined. After all, in neither of his mayoral elections did Lindsay win an outright majority. Regardless of how progressive New York politics were in Lindsay's day, the mood certainly shifted afterward. "Post-Lindsay, the fiscal crisis kind of did put a damper on the progressive left in New York," Cannato says. "There was also a kind of political consensus after the fiscal crisis that there weren't going to be big programs because we couldn't afford them."

Meanwhile, the city's near-death experience led to broad acceptance of the notion that what's good for Wall Street and the real estate sector—and only them—is good for the city. "The fiscal crisis reshaped politics in NYC," says Baruch College professor Douglas Muzzio. "The constellation of players and their influence changed."

Another critical factor has been race. Virtually every recent election in the city has been characterized by a pronounced racial polarization. At one pole is usually a Democrat supported by white progressives and most blacks and Latinos. His or her opponent gets the backing of most of the white population along with small portions of other racial blocs. Because progressives depend on a more heterogeneous ethnic mix, their coalition is harder to maintain, observes John Mollenkopf, a City University professor and leading demographer. Koch, Giuliani and Bloomberg all enjoyed solid support from working-class whites. Meanwhile, racial tensions between Green and Ferrer hurt progressives in 2001; blacks never rallied to Ferrer's 2005 run; and Latinos weren't galvanized by Thompson's 2009 bid to become the city's second black mayor.

The city's population has changed over the past four decades, but the shifts haven't necessarily favored the left. Whites may be a shrinking share of the city's voting-age population, but they are still more likely than most other groups to vote. And the white population is continuing to evolve from working class to professional class, making the city's whites more likely to be culturally liberal—i.e., supporting abortion rights and same-sex marriage—but less likely to feel strongly about economic issues like wages and inequality, around which a broader progressive agenda might be built.

Within the racial blocs, moreover, there are trends toward the right, according to veteran Democratic political strategist Hank Sheinkopf. The white population includes rising numbers of Orthodox Jews and Russians, often conservative. The number of African-Americans, traditionally liberal, is dwindling; the number of Caribbean-Americans, who are decidedly less liberal, is growing. "The demographics have changed," Sheinkopf declares. "And demography is political destiny."

In the background is a steady decline in voter participation. Historian Fred Siegel notes that turnout in mayoral elections fell by nearly 50 percent between 1993 and 2009. Dinkins benefited in 1989 from the energizing effect on black voters of Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential run. But Barack Obama's White House win in 2008 did little for Thompson's mayoral bid the following year.

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Gloria Johnson

Quinn is no progressive. For example, she did nothing to stop the closing of St. Vincent's Hospital so that luxury condos could be built. Anybody But Quinn in the primary. Hoping that Thompson or Liu is elected.

Robert Jensen

The small base of Progressives don't win elections and in the case of NYC, don't govern well. It's seen nationally. Here in Oklahoma Democrats outnumber Republicans but all of our members of Congress are Republicans, as is the governorship and the state legislatures. Progressives simply can't recognize that the majority of Democrats see Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, JFK and FDR as governing on behalf of working class people not Progressive ideologues..When a majority of Democrats see Progressives, they see Michael Moore, Anthony Wiener, Mike Dukakis, Bernie Sanders, Ralph Nader or Al Sharpton. The Manhattan Progressives, frankly look down their noses at the great unwashed majority of working class, blue collar Democrats, even those who they would deride as clinging to their Bibles and guns, who will vote for a moderate Democrat but flee from the polls when asked to vote for a 'Progressive'..I am a NYC native who cast my first vote ever for John Lindsay when he ran, and won, as the candidate of the Liberal Party of NY.

31Forever

I'm curious as to which of these candidates they're portraying as the Progressive/More Progressive/Pure Progressive candidate.....

Manhattan

It seems politicians like Bloomberg wear it on there sleeves. I just think they put a bunch of liberal issues and spun a wheel ala wheel of fortune and started to campaign on the issue the arrow landed on. Though I wonder if there any politician who is a socially conservative republican but is a liberal on economic issues. Because I keep on seeing the opposite view everytime one of these guys voice there latest support for gay marriage or immigration reform.

maria565

I support John Liu for Mayor and think he offers the strongest rebuke to the NYC for the rich only/business model we have seen under Bloomberg But every one of the candidates except for Quinn, I would be very happy with.