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Democrats Beyond Hope?

It's easy to see why state Democratic Chairwoman Judith Hope is frazzled. In the city, her candidate lost a gimme to recapture City Hall. Now the *statewide* party is embroiled in a nasty racial feud that's alienated important ethnic blocs.

But what is Hope's answer?

Less democracy.

She wants one of the two Democratic candidates for governor to quit the campaign, to avoid splitting the party next year as the mayoral contest did this year.

Why? Because one candidate, State Comptroller Carl McCall, is black — and the other, former HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo, is white.

In Judith Hope's worldview, blacks and whites can't run against each other. "One of them has to get out [of the election], it's clear," said Hope.

It's nonsense, of course. And, frankly, we'd expect more from Judith Hope. (Indeed, there may be more to this than is public. Her call might, for example, present an honorable out for a candidate who wants to quit anyway.)

Then again, Hope may have touched on something true about New York Democrats. After all, blacks stayed away from the 1997 general election after Ruth Messinger beat a black candidate, the Rev. Al Sharpton, in the mayoral primary. And this year Hispanics jumped ship and voted for Republican Mike Bloomberg after Mark Green beat a Hispanic candidate, Freddy Ferrer, in the primary.

But squelching primaries is no answer. Yes, they can be bitter. But, if waged honorably, they can also focus attention on a political contest, engage voters and work to a party's advantage.

Neither McCall nor Cuomo shows any intention of dropping out of the race. And Demorats across the board were quick to ridicule Hope's request.

Still, the fact that white Democrats risk alienating Democratic voters when they run against minority candidates goes a long way toward explaining why Judith Hope's party is in such disarray.

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