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Let's Hop Off the Democrats' Bandwagon

By Lenora Fulani

FOR THE LAST few weeks I've been talking with black business leaders, clergy, media personalities and voters about the mayoral election. Everyone is intrigued about the prospect of having Mike Bloomberg in City Hall, particularly in light of the fact that he polled 25 percent of the black vote, a record-breaking rebuke of the Democratic Party.

When I relate the final numbers to them — that Bloomberg won by only 35,000 votes while 59,000 New Yorkers voted for him on the Independence Party line — they are also intrigued about the new prominence of the independent voter. I tell people I'm not on the transition team — I'm on the transformation team — meaning, I'm out in the black community building off our victory so that we can continue to transform politics and enlarge the power of African Americans.

How do we do that? First, we have to take a close look at what did happen this year. The Democratic Party, with a 5-to-1 city voter registration advantage and the endorsement of every major New York City union, lost the election. Much has been made of Bloomberg's spending more than $69 million to account for Mark Green's loss. But money alone could not have overcome the Democrats' overwhelming institutional advantage.

Much of Bloomberg's spending at the end of the campaign was simply advertising the Democrats' political and racial hypocrisy, a message that rang true with many voters — black, Latino and white. Normally, the Democrats get away with their deeply ingrained racialism. This time they got caught in the act by a guy who was independent enough to be willing — and rich enough to be able — to expose them.



Lenora Fulani, former presidential candidate, chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party, a think tank in Manhattan.

At the same time, Bloomberg carried the so-called Giuliani Democrats and 60 percent of the independents. This is significant because the Bloomberg coalition evolved into one consisting of blacks, Latinos and independent whites (as opposed to liberal whites, the partnership we're normally included in.)



This paradigm shift — the collapse of the liberal (Democratic Party) coalition and the rise of an independent (not the Democratic Party) coalition — has important implications for the African-American community. It underscores that there is a way out of our Democratic Party bind.

Since the Green debacle, the Democratic Party has been scurrying to recover its balance. After state party Chairwoman Judith Hope called for either Andrew Cuomo or H. Carl McCall to bow out of a Democratic gubernatorial primary — a move that may have prompted her resignation — the party installed Manhattan Assemb. Denny Farrell to run the show.

Farrell is famous for playing the role of the placeholder in black and Latino politics. When the upstart black Brooklyn machine planned to run then-Democrat Herman Badillo as the "Dump Koch" candidate in 1985, Denny Farrell jumped into the race to block the Brooklyn coalition and "hold" the spot for a David Dinkins candidacy four years later. The selection of Farrell as party chair makes it look as if it was easier to find qualified leadership for the transitional government in Afghanistan than for the transitional Democratic Party in New York.

As many have observed, however, even with Denny Farrell in place, the racialist rubber is likely to hit the road again in Andrew Cuomo vs. Carl McCall. Hope's resignation notwithstanding, there is talk of Cuomo dropping out, leaving McCall to get creamed by Gov. George Pataki, who is ahead in the polls and has the potential to create a Bloomberg-style coalition on a statewide level. Cuomo will get applause for deferring to an African American, while waiting for a brighter day for the Democrats — and himself.

Meanwhile, there is a gigantic push under way in influential black circles to get behind McCall on the grounds that he will be best for the black community because he is black, because he has enlarged the number of black-owned financial management businesses with state contracts and because he's a Democrat. Since the mayoral election, this last argument seems to have considerably less traction.

Which brings us to the question of what is in the best interests of the black community and how we build off of our gains in November.

In my opinion, the fundamental issue we must concern ourselves with is our political independence. That is our source of power — not black faces in high places or policies that aid some elements of the black business community but leave the majority of non-elite blacks tied to the Democratic Party's welfare state, in one form or another.

How do we cultivate our independence? We reserve judgment. We don't mistake voting Democrat for automatically voting in our interests. We pay attention to which candidates reach out, how they reach out and what kind of statement they're making about their own independence of partisan political machines. In other words, stay tuned.

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