

The Independence Party and the Black community: A power partnership

by Dr. Lenora Fulani

The Independence Party vote of 142,817 broke numerous records on Election Day and that success has political meaning for the African American community. The IP vote was fully 26% of Mike Bloomberg's vote, and 13% of the total votes cast on November 3rd.

The IP vote for Bloomberg on Column C was the highest mayoral vote on a minor party line in 40 years and double our vote total from four years ago. Minor party cross-endorsements have been crucial in New York City mayoral contests for 60 years, as they give candidates a way to broaden their appeal and voters a way to make a statement about their own political agenda. As one political old hand put it, the IP numbers "reflect rising disillusionment with the major parties." They also, as this commentator noted, were a sign of "the desire of many voters to support Bloomberg but not to identify themselves with Republicans." Obviously, many of the voters in question here are Democrats.

The Independence Party and its high performance Column C are the linchpin for a new reform coalition in New York City that respects the mayor's independent

governance (while not agreeing with every decision or policy) and wants to build an ongoing political environment in which partisan and special interest influence are reduced. The black community is, and will continue to be, a strategically important pillar of that coalition.

In 2005, the black vote split, with 47% of African Americans voting for Bloomberg. In 2009, the Democratic nominee was Bill Thompson who, as an African American, was expected to poll significantly higher among black voters than Freddy Ferrer did four years earlier. He did and Thompson polled 76% of the black vote. Thompson had hoped to replicate Barack Obama's levels of support among black voters – which hit the 95% mark. He also hoped to stimulate a large Obama-style turnout among black voters, especially younger black voters. Neither of these goals were met. While young voters age 18 – 29 were 13% of the electorate (they split 48/49 Thompson/Bloomberg), young black voters age 18 – 29 were only 3% of the electorate.

The share of the black vote that went for Bloomberg in 2009 was down as compared to 2005. But,

the share of the black vote for Bloomberg on the Independence Party line went up dramatically, evidence that the Independence Party's roots and popularity in the African American community are deepening and consolidating.

For example, in 2005 in Central Harlem 21.1% of Bloomberg's vote was cast on the Independence Party (rather than the Republican) line. In 2009 in Central Harlem 33.6% of Bloomberg's vote was on Column C. In Southeast Queens (the 33rd Assembly District) the IP share in 2005 was 10%. In 2009, it grew to 24.5%. In Brooklyn's 40th AD (represented by Inez Barron), the IP share of the Bloomberg vote nearly doubled, growing from 12% to 23.5%. This pattern is similar in all 11 majority black assembly districts. The point being that while the Democratic Party remains the dominant political force in the black communities, a progressive, pro-reform and anti-party opposition force is growing in size and in power, and that force is the Independence Party.

Some black Democratic leaders have expressed their unhappiness that more was not done to get Thompson elected, whether it be Obama's lukewarm endorsement

or Rev. Al Sharpton's MIA-style support. Whatever their criticisms might be, I have shared with several of them that they might consider the fact that the Independence Party endorsement – and its 142,817 votes – went to Bloomberg rather than Thompson. Had the situation been reversed, Thompson would be busy planning his inauguration and putting together his transition team.

This fact of political life (not to mention simple arithmetic) should not be forgotten by anyone in the black community who looks to the Democratic Party as the beacon for progressive change. There was an overarching reason that the IP did not endorse Bill Thompson, though he did come to us for the line. It was that Thompson either could not or would not prevail upon his Democratic Party elders to support a simple but positive democratic reform – nonpartisan elections. With a nonpartisan system, New York's 1 million independent voters – about 55% of whom are black, Latino or Asian – would be permitted to vote in the first (primary) round of voting.

At the time of the negotiations I believe that Thompson and his campaign manager Eddy Castell, both of whom I respect, understood that an IP endorsement would be crucial to the outcome. Certainly the mayor and his team appreciated that. But some hardcore Democrats were so committed to preserving the power of their-party-as-they-know-it, that they would not reach out a hand to

empower independents, even if it meant losing City Hall for the fifth election in a row. In my book, the black community can ill afford self-serving tactical blunders of this kind.

Bill Thompson is telling a similar story. On KISS' Open Line this week, he was asked about the Independence Party and said that it was our disagreement over nonpartisans that prevented us from coming together. One caller wanted to protest my support for Bloomberg, though Bob Pickett and James Mtume – acknowledging differences in our community over independent politics – nonetheless expressed interest in and support for what I have achieved.

But the serious question that must be asked by those disappointed in the results is why the Democratic Party is so adamantly opposed to nonpartisan elections at all? The Democratic Party has a 5 to 1 voter registration advantage in New York City, but won't even discuss this reform. Why not? Because the Democratic leadership doesn't think they should have to work for their majority. They want power in their hands regardless. They don't want to talk to independents or to new voters and they don't want to create coalitions. They simply want to run the show – entirely on their own terms. Question: Who sacrificed the opportunity to elect a black mayor? Answer: The Democratic Party.

That's been my critique of the Democratic Party all along. They think they own this town and are entitled to rule. What the Independence Party has shown is that nobody owns this town and that it belongs to no one but the people.

I believe the black community will benefit substantially from the results of this election. Mike Bloomberg has been a good mayor and, in a third term, having won with a breakthrough vote on the Independence Party line, he should be free – and motivated – to promote a genuine reform agenda. The black community will be the beneficiaries of improved schools, health care, and crime reduction. But as importantly, the black community's role in and with the Independence Party, positions it for greater and greater political leverage.

There are those (mainly high-ranking Democrats, media personalities and IP's own state chairman) who hoped (and schemed) that the Independence Party and I would vanish. Sorry guys (and Madame Secretary of State), that did not happen. Instead, the Independence Party has grown phenomenally and it is "badder" and "blacker" than ever.

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Note: Official results from the Board of Election, which were being finalized at the time of publication, put the Independence Party vote total at 150, 073.