

Bloomberg victory highlights disintegration of New York Democrats

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Last week's victory of Republican candidate Michael Bloomberg in New York marks the third successive mayoral election defeat for the Democrats in the largest city of the US. For the first time ever a Republican mayor in New York has been succeeded by another.

Although there are virtually no significant policy differences between Bloomberg—a lifelong Democrat who became a Republican for the election—and losing Democratic candidate Mark Green, the result highlights some fundamental political changes taking place in the city and throughout the country, especially in the wake of the events of September 11. The election further underscores the increasing gulf between the masses of working people and the existing political system, which can only lead to huge social struggles in the future.

Only 10 days before the election, Green was leading in the polls by double digits. Bloomberg, the founder and chief owner of the financial news empire that bears his name, had been an ineffective campaigner. The press speculated that the silence of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani on the race suggested he might not want to endorse Bloomberg if it seemed that the Republican was heading for defeat. It appeared that Bloomberg might be heading for a fate similar to that of multimillionaire Ronald Lauder, who tried to win the mayoralty back in 1989.

Green's lead in the polls evaporated rapidly in the days leading up to the vote, however. When the ballots were counted, Bloomberg had won by a 3 percent margin. There were several obvious and immediate reasons for this outcome:

The billionaire candidate, 61st on the Forbes Magazine list of the 400 richest Americans, had spent more than \$50 million of his own money—only a bit more than 1 percent of his net worth—in the course of the campaign and more than four times that spent by the Democrat. Households were bombarded with numerous glossy brochures, and the closing week saw an avalanche of carefully designed ads on radio and television.

The record spending had an effect, although by itself it would probably not have made the difference. A determining factor was the endorsement of Giuliani, which was also carefully timed for maximum effect. The incumbent mayor, who has received an unprecedented buildup in the media in the weeks since September 11, taped endorsements which were broadcast nonstop in the days before the vote. Bloomberg himself disappeared from his own advertising, which became a personally delivered testimonial from Giuliani on behalf of Bloomberg as his successor. The media responded to this in predictable fashion, suggesting that a vote for Bloomberg was the next best thing to a third term for the man whom the newspapers and television had anointed as a symbol of the city, a man virtually above

criticism, in the weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center.

A third major ingredient in the Bloomberg victory was the bitter split among Democratic politicians, which only deepened following Green's runoff primary victory over Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. Green disclaimed all knowledge of racially derogatory publicity and phone campaigns against Ferrer, but Ferrer, Bronx Democratic leader Roberto Ramirez and black politician Al Sharpton all blamed the Green campaign and claimed he had stolen the nomination from Ferrer. Ferrer issued a tepid endorsement of the Democratic candidate, but clearly signaled that he would not at all mind if his supporters punished the Democratic nominee by withholding their support.

The above factors certainly played their role in the outcome, but they must be examined more carefully in order to grasp the real meaning of this election. Most important were the events of September 11, which accelerated certain economic and political processes already under way in the United States as a whole, and especially in New York.

Economic storm clouds were already gathering before September 11. The outgoing mayor was increasingly unpopular, and in fact hated in minority working class neighborhoods throughout the city. There was widespread and increasing resentment over the gulf between rich and poor that had grown so drastically during Giuliani's terms in office, a social polarization with which Giuliani openly and proudly identified himself.

Under these circumstances the economic and political establishment which in fact dictates the political agenda and, through its control of campaign financing and the media, substantially influences the outcome of the vote as well, was leaning in the direction of a Democratic return to City Hall. They knew very well that no Democrat would touch a hair on the heads of the Wall Street interests, but a mayor with certain ties to the unions and minority communities was considered appropriate.

Political calculations changed after September 11. The economic cost of the attack on Lower Manhattan was calculated at more than \$100 billion. More than 100,000 jobs were lost, and the economy began a freefall. The number one issue became, not talk or vague promises of improved education or measures against inequality or police brutality, but "rebuilding" the financial district and imposing drastic austerity measures.

Giuliani and his backers gave serious consideration to circumventing the term limits legislation he had himself enthusiastically supported in order to get him a third term, or at least a term extension. When this proved impossible, renewed attention was focused on Bloomberg.

Green made absolutely clear that he was prepared to carry out the dictates of Wall Street. From the outset of his campaign, well before September 11, the Democratic aspirant had tried to demonstrate that he had broken with his past liberalism. The man who had worked with consumer advocate and environmentalist Ralph Nader now surrounded himself with men like former police commissioner William Bratton. Adopting a phrase used by the *New York Times* in an editorial, he attacked his Democratic rival Ferrer as “borderline irresponsible” for suggesting that he represented “the other New York” that had not benefited from the stock market boom. When Giuliani demanded that a way be found to extend his term at least three months, Green gave his approval.

All of these maneuvers finally were of little use. As Giuliani and his policies were universally praised in the weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center, Green had to live down his past reputation as an “anti-Giuliani” politician. The ruling establishment had shifted the political agenda, and Green’s past “leftism,” no matter how much he sought to atone for it, had become an albatross around his neck.

In the closing days of the contest, as the Bloomberg campaign began broadcasting ads labeling Green “anti-police” and “anti-Giuliani,” the Democrat was virtually helpless. Having attempted to associate himself with the “gains” of Giuliani’s mayoralty, Green was in no position to complain as Bloomberg wrapped himself in Giuliani’s endorsement. Having tied his political fortunes to Wall Street and going so far as to criticize Ferrer for insufficient sensitivity to the needs of business, Green was in no position to complain as Bloomberg’s fabulous wealth and his biography as a self-made billionaire were used to argue that he would be best to bring jobs to the city.

The Democratic Party, no longer standing for even the palest version of liberal reform, stood exposed as a gang of rival ethnic factions fighting over the perks and privileges of office. The racial and ethnic split could be clearly seen in the open backing for Bloomberg by all three of the city’s “minority” newspapers—the *Amsterdam News*, as well as the Spanish-language *El Diario* and *Hoy*.

Green’s opponents among black and Hispanic Democrats, like Sharpton and Ferrer, never criticized him on matters of principle. They shrieked instead that his below-the-belt tactics were robbing them of the chance to get their opportunity to rule on behalf of big business. Ferrer’s populism during the campaign was always half-hearted, and when he was criticized by the *Times* and by Green he simply attempted to rebut the accusation that he was “dividing” the city.

After the vote, Sharpton and Ferrer essentially boasted that they had cost Green the election. Television news reports showed the phone wires ripped out of phone banks in the Bronx to underscore the Bronx Democratic machine’s sabotage of the Green campaign. The purpose of this was not to put forward any alternative program, but rather to show that Ferrer, Sharpton and their allies could punish the Democratic Party if their own narrow interests were not attended to. Like their counterparts, these politicians represent the interests of a small and selfish layer of the middle class, not the vast majority of workers of any race or national origin.

Above all, none of the Democrats could make an appeal to workers such as the New York City firefighters, whose own hatred of Giuliani and the establishment boiled over in an inarticulate but explosive way just a few days before the election. They would all willingly forfeit any hope to win the mayoralty rather than make such a class appeal.

The increasing powerlessness of the Democrats in New York City is

an important sign of struggles to come. So-called “New Democrats” were able to make some gains in suburban areas, running essentially as a party of moderate conservatism, of the status quo. In New York, however, the social tensions prevent such a balancing act. Social polarization finds its one-sided political expression, in the absence of any political voice for the working class, in the electoral success of the Republicans.

This does not indicate any shift to the right among ordinary voters and working people. On the contrary, what is demonstrated is the growing disgust among workers for both parties of big business. The voter turnout on November 6 was a mere 1.4 million. This compares with a citywide turnout of 2.3 million last year during the presidential election. It compares with a total of well over 3 million registered voters, and more than 4 million who are eligible to vote. In the wake of the September 11 events, as the media trumpet the emergence of a “new patriotism,” wide layers of working class people saw nothing to choose from between the two big business candidates. In spite of the millions spent by Bloomberg, and the enthusiastic support of Giuliani, he barely eked out his victory on Election Day.

The new mayor will be facing a crisis greater than at any time since the city’s brush with bankruptcy 25 years ago. The unemployment rate had jumped to 6.3 percent even before September 11, and may well hit 10 percent or even more in the next year. The city faces a budget deficit in the range of \$4-6 billion for the next year. Housing, education and health care, all of which had worsened for the working class majority even as the city enjoyed budget surpluses in the days of the Wall Street boom, are issues that will not go away. The growing numbers of unemployed will face a situation in which federal, state and local policies have destroyed most of the welfare safety net. Moreover, political opposition is sure to erupt among students and working people as the real motives behind the Bush administration’s war in Afghanistan and attacks on civil liberties become increasingly clear.

Bloomberg and his advisers are not unaware of these problems. The mayor-elect spent his first few days lining up support from the leaders of the city’s three largest unions—Municipal Workers District Council 37, the United Federation of Teachers and 1199/Health and Human Services—for the austerity measures being demanded by Wall Street. The union bureaucrats were overjoyed by the gesture, commenting that Giuliani had never paid them a visit during his terms in office. While Bloomberg will have little trouble garnering the support of corrupt union officials—many of whom supported Giuliani’s last election bid—his administration is inevitably heading towards a collision with the working class.



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