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L. Douglas Wilder

## **The November Elections And the Politics of Deracialization**

By Joseph P. McCormick, 2nd

The election results of Tuesday, November 7, 1989, with the victories by African American candidates in a variety of settings, have led political pundits and other would-be analysts to offer a variety of opinions on what has been the impact of one of the most influential features in American electoral politics, the role of race. This article examines the elections where African Americans captured the chief executive's post, in both large cities and in the state of Virginia, discusses some of the more salient features of these victories, and then describes a pragmatic political strategy that may help to explain why these Blacks won.

### The Dinkins and Wilder Campaigns

Much of the media attention has been focused on the victories of David Dinkins ('50 graduate of Howard's College of Liberal Arts) as mayor of New York City and L. Douglas Wilder ('59 graduate of Howard's School of Law) as governor of Virginia. The outcomes of these contests represent "firsts" for the city of New York and for the state of Virginia. In both of these contests Wilder and Dinkins faced white opponents in electorates where whites constituted the majority of the registered voters. Both won by margins considerably less than had been predicted weeks before the November 7th election (Dinkins by about three percent and Wilder by less than one percent).<sup>1</sup>

Given the makeup of their respective electorates, Wilder and Dinkins crafted campaigns designed to generate support from African Americans as well as white voters. Interestingly, in both Virginia and New York City, the victors gained majority support from those who were pro-choice on the volatile abortion issue. Dinkins purportedly got 58 percent of his votes from those New Yorkers who were

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pro-choice. He also gathered in about 30 percent of the white vote.<sup>2</sup> Wilder, on the other hand, gained 40 to 43 percent of the white vote. This is in a state where whites make up about 80 percent of the general population. African Americans represent about 18 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Wilder forged a bi-racial coalition of African Americans (from throughout the state) and young white voters (largely from northern Virginia) to win. One journalistic account of Wilder's victory pointed out:

"Although Wilder made a special effort . . . to energize the black vote, he did so with a message about statewide political and economic progress—one that was appealing to white voters as well. By fashioning a political message that transcended racial lines, Wilder left unanswered questions about any special goals he may have to help black Virginians."<sup>4</sup>

As was the case with Wilder, the composition of New York's electorate forced Dinkins to weld together a multi-racial coalition by advancing a racially transcendent message. Evidence of the apparent appeal of this sort of message can be

seen in some of the other contests around the nation where African American candidates won on November 7th.

### Victories in Large Cities

As of January, 1988 about 60 percent of the 6,793 African Americans who held office in the United States were at either the county or city levels.<sup>5</sup> Given this distribution, there were undoubtedly a number of victories on November 7th where African American incumbents retained their offices while others were elected to office for the first time. Here the discussion focuses on the larger cities (population >100,000) where African Americans were elected or re-elected as mayors. The composition of the electorate, in most of these cities, forced many of the victors to take up a racially transcendent message that produced the multi-racial coalition needed to win.

The most noticeable characteristic shared by the African Americans who won office in seven of the largest cities (including New York) is that *all had previously held an elective office* (see Table 1.). Of these seven, two were incumbent mayors (Carrie Perry in Hartford and Coleman Young in Detroit). Two previously held office as state senators (Mike White in Cleveland and John Daniels in New Haven). Two held office as city councilmen (Chester Jenkins in Durham and Norman Rice in Seattle). The seventh, (David Dinkins in New York) had been Manhattan borough president.

Experience as an elected official is an asset in any electoral contest. It is that much more of an asset for an African American candidate who seeks to run for office. The 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson clearly revealed how a candidate may be confronted with the "insufficient experience"

challenge from would-be detractors.

The mayoral elections in Cleveland and Detroit shared two characteristics that separated them from the other five large cities where African Americans won. First, both Cleveland and Detroit are cities where African Americans make up at least half of the eligible voters. Second, in both of these contests, the victors faced other African American opponents. Coleman Young, the four-term incumbent mayor of Detroit, defeated accountant Thomas Barrow. Young is reported to have won about two-thirds of the African American vote and 15 to 35 percent of the white vote in a city where African Americans comprise more than 60 percent of the total population.<sup>6</sup> The power of incumbency (and the attendant experience) along with the size of the Black electorate in Detroit essentially meant that Young did not have to be as concerned in appealing to whites as was the case for Blacks who sought to win in many of these other large cities.

In Cleveland, State Senator Mike White defeated former City Councilman Chair George Forbes. Forbes, a 26-year veteran of Cleveland's City Council and its turbulent history of racially divisive politics, was unable to make much of an appeal to the city's white electorate. This is not at all surprising given Forbes' combative style which throughout his public career in Cleveland had frequently put him at loggerheads with white politicians, both Democrat and Republican.<sup>7</sup> While Cleveland is perhaps the most racially polarized large city, Mike White was able to gain enough support to win. Ironically, in Cleveland, where racial bloc voting in local elections has been the norm for the past 25 years, the white electorate found itself in a situation very familiar to African Americans—the choice of a “lesser of two evils”: the younger state senator who made a concerted effort to appeal to white voters versus the older more combative veteran politician who apparently hoped that African Americans support alone would be sufficient to win.

In the other five cities, each candidate faced a white opponent (see: Table 1). In four of these cities—Hartford, New Haven, New York, and Seattle—African Americans make up less than half of the electorate.<sup>8</sup> Of these four cities, in only one, Hartford, was there an African American incumbent. Mayor Carrie

Perry retained office by gathering about 70 percent of the vote. Of these four cities, Mayor Carrie Perry's margin of victory was the widest. Given its size as a part of the total population in 1980 (see: Table 1), the African American population of Hartford, in 1989, is probably approaching 50 percent. This would lead one to speculate that Perry's campaign strategy depended less on support from white voters than was perhaps the case in either New Haven, New York or Seattle.

Table 1.  
Selected Data for Cities (>100,000 pop.)  
Where African Americans Won or Retained the Office of Mayor (Nov. 7, 1989)

City & Name Winner*	Percent votes won	Race of Opponent	Percent African Americans (1980 census)
1. Cleveland, OH (Mike White)**	55%	Black	43.8
2. Detroit, MI (Coleman Young)***	56.4	Black	63.1
3. Durham, NC (Chester Jenkins)**	53	White	47.1
4. Hartford, CT (Carrie Perry)***	74.3	White	33.9
5. New Haven, CT (John Daniels)**	70	White	31.9
6. New York, NY (David Dinkins)**	51	White	25.2
7. Seattle, WA (Norman Rice)**	58	White	9.5

Sources: These data were compiled from a variety of print media sources within two days of these elections. Subsequent data analysis may yield percentage differences slightly different from those reported here. The data reported on the racial composition of the cities is the most recently available from the U. S. Census Bureau.  
\*: Incumbent mayor Richard Dixon was re-elected in Dayton, Ohio. No data on the margin of victory were available at the time this paper was written.  
\*\*: Winner previously held elected office other than that of mayor.  
\*\*\*: Winner was the incumbent.

A bi-racial coalition was responsible for the victory of two-term Councilman Chester Jenkins in Durham, N.C. In the aftermath of his win, Jenkins told the press: “Black candidates can no longer be perceived only as the candidates that are interested in the social side of the equation. We need also to stress to the voters that we can handle fiscal responsibilities . . . We must be able to address the pocketbook issues as well as the non-pocketbook issues.”<sup>9</sup> Jenkins' winning effort brought together a coalition that included labor, white liberals and environmentalists to defeat a Republican candidate allied with conservative Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.).<sup>10</sup>

The contest in Seattle is one where victorious Norman Rice had little choice but to forge a message that would have significant appeal to a predominately white electorate. African Americans make up only 10 percent of the electorate in Seattle. Rice, a three-term city councilman, is said to have opposed a divisive referendum on the busing issue that was on the ballot at the same time. Given the racial divisions that have been seen across the country on the busing issue and the racial composition of the electorate that he faced, it is not at all surprising that Rice did not endorse school busing. Rice's margin of victory was greater than in four large cities where African Americans make up 25 percent or more of their respective electorates (see: Table 1).

### The Political Strategy of Deracialization

In the aftermath of these victories on November 7, 1989, students of American electoral politics have asked whether there is any underlying issue or theme that runs through all these contests where African Americans were successful. Given the variety of socio-economic and demographic conditions that can be found from Seattle to New York City, one is hesitant to say that there is any significant tie that binds the outcomes of these contests. Yet the available data on what is known of the sort of issues discussed by the candidates suggest consideration of an explanation that links the outcomes of most of the contests. This explanation rests on the compelling logic of the political strategy of deracialization.

In the spring of 1976, political scientist Charles Hamilton wrote a paper on what he then perceived to be the approach the national Democratic Party's platform should take toward issues of vital importance to African Americans in the 1976 presidential campaign. The paper focused on domestic policy issues. In a subsequent effort to clarify his position, Hamilton urged that a deracialized political strategy was one in which the Democratic presidential candidate would seek to emphasize those issues that would have an appeal to broad segments of the electorate *across racial lines*.<sup>11</sup> As such, calls for government to play a positive role in the co-provision of decent paying jobs and affordable health care, so Hamilton reasoned, were positions that a *Democratic presidential candidate* could



David Dinkins

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take (in 1976) that would have an appeal to whites as well as African Americans.

The essence of this political strategy is that its proponents would seek to *deemphasize* those issues that may be viewed in *explicitly racial terms*, e.g., minority set-asides, affirmative action, or the plight of the urban underclass, while *emphasizing* those issues that appear to transcend the racial question; relevant examples in 1989: abortion; the fiscal health of the city or state; lower taxes or at least the promise not to introduce "new" taxes.

Hamilton further pointed out that there were at least three assumptions about the nature of American electoral politics that were connected with this political strategy:

(1) *Political participants are willing to act pragmatically and understand that electoral gains, if made, were likely to be incremental.*

This first assumption appears to suggest that a candidate running for office, may not win the first time, but that the election may move the candidate in the direction of eventual victory, given the visibility and experience that the contest will provide. In all of the cities where non-incumbents won, only in Cleveland, with a historic victory by Carl Stokes in 1967, had an African American candidate previously been successful.<sup>12</sup>

(2) *Political participants understand that the ability to reward and punish is the fundamental basis of political power.*

This assumption suggests that those who win electoral contests can ill afford to ignore the voters who voted for the opponent—especially in close contests—for those same voters may be around in the next election to either seek their revenge against or to display their support for the incumbent.

(3) *Political participants realize that elections in the American political system are not for all time but occur from time to time.*

Here Hamilton explains, "... a strategy adopted for one election in a particular context is not written in stone, but is precisely a strategy used at that time to maximize the possibility of achieving certain goals, and which ought to be seen in that very pragmatic, utilitarian way."<sup>13</sup>

An undercurrent of political pragmatism that runs through this strategy is an

acknowledgement on the part of candidates for public office that race and racism are facts of American political life. These are features that can be exploited or strategically side-stepped depending on the race of the candidate and the sort of advice that he or she receives.

Consider the most recent example of an effort involving the exploitation of racism. While President George Bush denied any open endorsement of the "Willie Horton" strategy in the recent

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presidential election, certainly his campaign strategist understood the subliminal power of connecting Governor Michael Dukakis with a convicted African American rapist and with a policy initiative (incorrectly) attributed to Dukakis. Thus a strategy on the part of the Bush campaign that linked a vote for the Democratic presidential candidate with the fears of the white electorate aided the Republican Party in retaining control of the White House in 1988.<sup>14</sup>

Correspondingly, Jesse Jackson's campaign for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination was one in which he appeared to deemphasize the sort of issues and symbols that were more apparent in his 1984 campaign. Jackson's 1988 campaign was clearly more successful, i.e., he got more total votes, especially from whites, than was the case in 1984. It can be surmised that the 1988 results were not only influenced by the 1984 contest, but *during Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign he (and his advisors) made a decided effort to appeal to white voters, e.g., farmers and blue collar workers, in a way that had not been stressed in 1984.*

Jackson also sought in 1988 to avoid the sort of issues that in 1984 were seen as a direct challenge to the most ambivalent part of the Democratic coalition,

white Southerners, e.g., his 1984 call for the leadership of the national Democratic Party to dismantle the run-off primary system in the South.<sup>15</sup>

Jackson's performance in the 1988 presidential primaries indicates not only a greater amount of support among white voters, but also suggests that these voters found a less racially intimidating Jackson in 1988, a possibility that appears to be linked with Jackson's comparatively deracialized campaign style.<sup>16</sup>

This shift in campaign style, from a more openly racially confrontational one, to one that placed greater emphasis on issues that transcended race, may not have gone unnoticed by many of the African American victors in the recently held elections.

In New York and Virginia, Dinkins and Wilder took a pro-choice stance on the abortion issue. This racially transcendent position gained support for both candidates from women and pro-choice activists.

In Cleveland, White was the only candidate with measurable support *among both African Americans and white voters.*

In both Durham and New Haven, biracial, liberal forces joined to defeat predominantly white, more conservative Republican candidates.

Finally, Norman Rice's opposition to a busing referendum apparently did him little harm among the white voters in Seattle.

While the socioeconomic and demographic circumstances in these seven large cities and the state of Virginia make the search for a unifying explanatory theme difficult, *the fairly consistent persistence of race as a potentially volatile issue in American politics suggests that a political strategy of deemphasizing racially salient issues may explain why this nation now has some newly elected African American mayors and one newly elected African American governor.*

### Beyond 1989: A New Black Politics?

What do these recent events portend for the future? They suggest a number of things. Among some white voters in this country, African American candidates for public office are now seen as less threatening. Notwithstanding his self-congratulatory claim for credit in the Dinkins and Wilder victories,<sup>17</sup> Jesse Jackson's two tries for the Democratic presidential nomination may have awakened portions

of the white electorate to consider the non-racial merits of voting for a candidate who happens to be African American. Such white voters, it could be argued, might have voted for African American candidates even if Jackson had not been such a dominant player during the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns.

While that is indeed a possibility, speculating about such a possibility would produce no data from which white motives for supporting a candidate could be reliably deduced. What is known, however, is that most of these victorious candidates who ran in areas where African Americans did not constitute the majority, made appeals to white voters that were of a deracialized nature. Sufficient numbers of white voters responded to elect these candidates, and the candidates realized the strategic necessity of bringing together bi- or multi-racial coalitions through the use of an essentially deracialized issue agenda.

Will such a strategy continue into the future? There is every reason that African American candidates for public office at the state and local levels will continue to pursue this strategy in the future because it appears to have "worked."

The cautionary note should be sounded, however, that this political strategy is not foolproof. In two of the more celebrated contests discussed in this article—New York City and Virginia—Dinkins and Wilder *barely* won. Neither of these candidates did as well among white voters as victorious white candidates had done among African American voters in previous elections. White support for African American candidates, therefore, should be regarded as rather "soft" perhaps well into the next decade. What bears closer attention in the future is the nature of the African American electorate.

Over the past two decades, in contests against white opponents, African American candidates for public office have tended to take the African American electorate for granted, i.e., that it would give its overwhelming support. Given the changing demography of urban America, African American incumbents are likely to face challenges from other African American or Hispanic rivals. The widening chasm between the increasingly suburban middle class and the urban underclass may lead to the emergence of new candidates—particularly at

the local level—who seek to improve the material conditions of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic order. These candidates could articulate a more racially specific issue agenda noticeably at odds with the more deracialized rhetoric displayed in the recent elections. Such a scenario could lead to more vigorous competition for the African American vote by these candidates.

Finally there is the matter of what all of this portends for the future of the

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Democratic Party and the 1992 presidential election. Before the 1992 presidential season gets underway there are the congressional contests of 1990. These contests will provide students of American politics with the next opportunity to gauge the viability and desirability of the political strategy of deracialization.

Until that time, speculation will have to be informed on what is presently known about the recent past.

The victories of November 7, 1989 do not necessarily translate into a Democratic return to the White House in 1992. *Only two of the contests examined herein took place in the "Old South" where white male Democrats have tended not to support Democratic presidential candidates.*<sup>18</sup>

Until African American candidates running for state and local offices in the South are able to generate winning bi- or multi-racial support through the use of deracialized political strategies, it is anyone's guess what the results of November 7, 1989 will hold for 1992. □

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- <sup>2</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Dinkins Dismisses Vote Patterns that Nearly Brought Defeat," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 1989, pg. A48.
- <sup>3</sup> See: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 440, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November, 1988* (Wash., D.C.: Govt. Printing Office, 1989), Table 4, pg. 39.
- <sup>4</sup> R.H. Melton, "Wilder's Demographic Strategy Led to Win," *The Washington Post*, November 12, 1989, pg. A1ff.
- <sup>5</sup> See: Joint Center for Political Studies, *Black Elected Officials: A National Roster* (Wash., D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1988).
- <sup>6</sup> Willie Wofford, "How Coalition Politics Put Blacks in Power as Mayors Across Nation," *Jet*, Vol. 77 No. 8 (November 27, 1989), pg. 18.
- <sup>7</sup> See: Dan Balz, "Odds Turn Volatile in Cleveland Mayoral Primary," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1989, pg. A5.
- <sup>8</sup> Accurate data on the racial composition of the electorate in these cities are extremely difficult to obtain. 1980 Census data and more current Census projections have been used to estimate the racial composition of the electorate in each of these cities.
- <sup>9</sup> Wofford, op. cit., pg. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, "Black Democrats' Victories Clouded by White Defections," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 1989, pg. A1ff.
- <sup>11</sup> See: Charles V. Hamilton, "Deracialization: Examination of a Political Strategy," *First World* (March/April, 1977): pp. 3-5.
- <sup>12</sup> William E. Nelson, Jr., "Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of the New Black Politics," in Michael E. Preston et al., *The New Black Politics: The Search for Political Power* (New York: Longman Inc. 1982), pp. 187-208.
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- <sup>14</sup> For one journalist's treatment of the linkage between the Willie Horton incident and the 1988 Bush presidential campaign, see: Anthony Lewis, "The Dirty Little Secret," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1988, pg. A27.
- <sup>15</sup> See my forthcoming: "An Anatomy of a Tactical Miscalculation: Jesse Jackson's 1984 Attack on the Run-Off Primary System," in *The Social and Political Implications of the Jesse Jackson Presidential Campaign*, (eds.) Lorenzo Morris et al., (eds.) (Praeger Publishers, 1990).
- <sup>16</sup> For an analysis of Jackson's 1984 campaign style see, J.P. McCormick, 2nd and R.C. Smith, "Through the Prism of Afro-American Culture: An Interpretation of the Jackson Campaign Style," in (eds.) L. Barker and R. Walters, *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 96-107.
- <sup>17</sup> For an insightful treatment of Jackson's self-congratulatory claims of his role in the Dinkins and Wilder victories, see: William Raspberry, "Well, What Was Jackson's Role?" *The Washington Post*, November 12, 1989, pg. D7.
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