by Doug Muzzio
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NON-PARTISAN ELECTIONS

As expected, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has created a new commission to revise the city charter -- the fifth commission in the last six years; the second in Mayor Bloomberg's 15 months in office. He has named Frank Macchiarola, the former schools chancellor, to lead it.

In announcing the commission on March 26th, the mayor charged it with considering nonpartisan elections for all city officials and to put such a proposal on the November ballot. The four previous commissions examined nonpartisan elections and failed to propose them to voters. The mayor also called on the commission "to strengthen the operation of city government" by offering proposals on structural issues such as reorganizing and consolidating city agencies and changing the way the city contracts for services and purchases goods.

The issue of non-partisan elections is bound to create intense partisan conflict, pitting Democrats, with overwhelming voter registration advantage, versus Republicans and minor parties, particularly the Independence party. Bloomberg's first policy proposal as a mayoral candidate, on June 7, 2001, was at a Independence Party event, where he endorsed nonpartisan elections in exchange for that party's endorsement.

As I wrote previously on this issue , nonpartisan elections are widely practiced in the United States, but unfortunately too little studied. Proponents of the Progressive Era reform argue that nonpartisan elections weaken the hold of parties, broaden candidate fields, make elections more competitive, broaden candidates' vision, and may increase minority turnout as well as the prospects for minority candidates. Opponents counter that parties are valuable, indeed, essential; that party cues are replaced by less desirable ones such as race/ethnicity and incumbency; that nonpartisan elections have a class bias as well as a Republican/minor party bias; and that nonpartisan elections promote governmental gridlock and encourage extremism.

The mayor hinted, as he has in the past, that he would put his own money in a public campaign for nonpartisan elections. This would be a first, a mayor funding a campaign for major change in a city's constitution -- the mayor as the Four Billion Dollar Gorilla.

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HISPANIC VOTING IN NEW YORK

Once, the New York City political alphabet was simple: the three I's -- Ireland, Italy, and Israel -- were the itinerary for political success. Today, politicians court everyone from Albanians to Zimbabweans. But the most prominent destinations for New York politicians are clear -- San Juan and Santo Domingo -- and the reason even clearer: There are 790,000 Puerto Rican and 407,000 Dominican New Yorkers, according to the 2000 Census. Latinos' share of the general electorate declined to 18 percent in the 2001 general election, after reaching historic highs in the primary and the runoff.

All in all, the census counted 2,160,554 Hispanic residents of New York City in April 2000, an increase of some 400,000 from the 1990 census. Spanish is the second language of politics in New York City (indeed, in the state and the nation).

Slowly but inexorably, the Hispanics of New York City will turn percentages into power.

The huge growth in population does not swiftly and automatically translate into more political clout, however. Many Puerto Ricans (who are U.S. citizens) have left, and the immigrants who have replaced them tend to be younger -- more Hispanics are under 18 years old than New Yorkers overall -- and non-citizens. Even among those Hispanic New Yorkers eligible to register, about 657,000 actually have done so. And among those registered, only 267,000 voted in the 2001 mayoral general election.

On the other hand, those 657,000 registered Hispanic voters represent a 46 percent increase in registration from a decade earlier. And this was at a time when the city's overall eligible electorate actually declined. As a result, Latino registration accounted for about a third of the overall growth in registered voters in New York City during the decade. Hispanic voter registration increased in all boroughs, with the most growth in the Bronx and Queens

It is not so surprising then that from 1989 to 1997, Latinos' share of the total New York City electorate grew (as recorded in the ABC News exit poll) from eight percent in 1989 to 13 percent in 1993 to 21 percent in 1997.

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The vast majority of Hispanics are Democrats. Among Latinos surveyed by the Hispanic Federation in June 2002 who reported being registered to vote in New York City, 74 percent were Democrats; only 10 percent were Republicans. There has been little difference in Latinos' partisan registration proclivities over the last several years. (See Table 1)

But Hispanics made history in the 2001 elections in at least two ways.

The mayoral election saw the most serious candidacy by a Latino - Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer -- since Herman Badillo's mayoral runoff against Abe Beame in 1973. In the September 25 primary (moved back two weeks after 9/11), Ferrer came in first. Hispanics made up an historically high 23 percent share of the vote, giving Ferrer 72 percent of their vote against three opponents. But he failed to reach the 40 percent threshold, thus forcing a runoff, which his opponent Mark Green won.

The 2001 Democratic mayoral primary elections were, according to John Mollenkopf and Luis Miranda, authors of a Hispanic Federation report, "a watershed for closing the gap between turnout among Latinos and the overall turnout rate." But the effect "proved to be short-lived. It collapsed in the general election." Had Ferrer been the Democratic nominee, it is almost certain that Hispanics would have turned out in record-breaking numbers - perhaps 25 percent.

This brings us to the other major political story of the 2001 New York City mayoral election. In the general election, 47 percent of Latino voters cast a ballot for Republican Michael Bloomberg, splitting the Latino vote with Democrat Mark Green, who got 49 percent. The headline was: "City's Hispanic Shift, Moving Toward the G.O.P."

What's more, this was not necessarily an aberration. It is true that Hispanics voted overwhelmingly Democratic in 1998 for Chuck Schumer (82 percent) and in 2000 for Hillary Clinton (85 percent) and Al Gore (81 percent). But the proportion of Latinos in New York City voting for a Republican candidate doubled in a dozen years, rising steadily from a quarter of the Hispanic electorate who supported Rudy Giuliani in 1989 to the nearly half in 2001. (See Table 2)

The Hispanics in New York City and elsewhere in the country (with the exception of Cubans) have historically voted Democratic. But Republicans recently have been courting Latinos heavily

(in the 2000 presidential and the 2002 Senate and gubernatorial campaigns). Hispanics' strong Catholicism and cultural conservatism would seem to make them receptive to the Republican Party on social issues. And their growing numbers make them increasingly a swing constituency - a dominant one in some jurisdictions -- motivated less by party identification than by ethnicity.

Hispanics in New York City are increasing in number and diversity, sometimes producing conflict and electoral competition among Hispanic groups. According to John Mollenkopf "more recent South and Central American tend to be more conservative. They tend to be somewhat more middle class, higher income, property owning."

Old and new immigrants have produced a large second generation now coming of voting age. Like young people from all ethnic and racial backgrounds, they are less likely to vote than their elders. But, as history makes clear, this will not last forever. Shifts in the New York City political topography historically have been tectonic - gradual -- but inexorable. The Irish, then the Jews and Italians took a generation or two between their arrival in the city in large numbers and their climb to political office. Blacks followed a similar course. And so too will Hispanics.

Table 1: NYC Hispanic Voter And Party Registration, 1996-2002

Year	Percent Registered	Party Registration	
2002	69%	Democrat: 74%	Republican: 11%
2001	66%	Democrat: 74%	Republican: 11%
2000	60%	Democrat: 69%	Republican: 12%
1999	58%	Democrat: 76%	Republican: 9%
1998	53%	Democrat: 71%	Republican: 12%
1997	57%	Democrat: 73%	Republican: 11%
1996	51%	Democrat: 70%	Republican: 15%

Table 2: Hispanic Voting In NYC Mayoral General Elections, 1989-2001

Election	Hispanic Share	# of Hispanic Voters	Vote Choices

2001	18% (EMR)	267,000/1,480,914	Green: 49%
1997	21% (VNS)	285,000/1,357,249	Messinger: 57%
1993	13% (VNS)	245,570/1,889,003	Dinkins: 60%
1989	8% (ABC)	152,000/1,899,845	Dinkins: 73%
1989	13% (CBS/Times)	247,000/1,899,845	Dinkins: 65%

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