

GUEST ESSAY

'New York City Is a World Unto Itself.' But It May Tell Us Where Democrats Are Headed.

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On the Democratic side of the New York mayoral contest, Eric Adams, the African American former police captain and Brooklyn borough president, continues to hold a lead over Kathryn Garcia and Maya Wiley. From a national vantage point, the most significant element of Adams's campaign so far lies in his across-the-board success with working-class voters of all races and ethnicities.

Before we turn to the possible national implications of the race, we have to understand the extent of Adams's victory, at least as far as first-choice balloting went. In census tracts with a majority or plurality of whites without college degrees, Adams — who repeatedly declared on the campaign trail that “the prerequisite for prosperity is public safety” — led after stage one of the New York City Democratic primary last week, according to data provided to The Times by John Mollenkopf, director of the Graduate Center for Urban Research at C.U.N.Y.

Adams took 28.5 percent of the first-choice ballots among these white voters, compared with the 17.1 percent that went to Garcia, who is white and has served as both sanitation commissioner and interim chairman of the New York City Housing Authority, and the 15.4 percent that went to Wiley, an African American who has been both legal counsel to Mayor Bill de Blasio and chairman of the Civilian Complaint Review Board, a New York Police Department watchdog.

Adams's strength in non-college white tracts shows that his campaign made substantially larger inroads than either Garcia or Wiley among white working-class voters, a constituency in which the national Democratic Party has suffered sustained losses.

On Staten Island, the most conservative of the five boroughs, Adams led the first-choice voting with 31 percent to Garcia's 20 percent and Wiley's 17 percent. In the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump carried Staten Island with 61.6 percent of the vote.

Adams's biggest margins were in Black majority non-college tracts, where he won with 59.2 percent to Wiley's 24.4 percent and Garcia's 4.7 percent. In Black majority college-educated tracts, Adams won a plurality, 37.5 percent, to Wiley's 32.5 percent and Garcia's 13.0 percent.

Counting all the census tracts with a majority or plurality of adult voters who do not have college degrees, Adams won decisively with 42.1 percent — compared with Wiley's 19.7 percent and Garcia's 10.3 percent. Both Wiley and Garcia continue to pose a threat to Adams because they have more support among college-educated voters, who make up roughly 40 percent of the Democratic primary electorate. According to Mollenkopf's data, in census tracts with a majority of college-educated adults, Adams's support fell to 14.7 percent, Wiley's rose to 26.2 percent and Garcia won a plurality at 34.9 percent.

If elected in November, either Garcia or Wiley would be the first woman to serve as mayor of New York — the first Black woman in Wiley's case. In the first round, Garcia was strongest among college-educated whites, among whom she was the biggest vote-getter, while Wiley's winning constituencies were college-educated Black and Hispanic voters.



Mark Peterson/Redux

Growing public anxiety over the sharp increase in gun violence in New York proved crucial to Adams's success, although it was not the whole story. A May Spectrum News NY1/Ipsos NYC Mayoral Primary Poll of 3,249 New Yorkers found that crime and violence topped the list of concerns, outpacing affordable housing, Covid and racial injustice. Through June 6 of this year, 687 people were wounded or killed by gunfire in the city, the most for that period since 2000.

The results in the mayoral primary so far are evidence of the continuing power of Black voters to act as a moderating force in a Democratic Party that has seen growing numbers of white voters shift decisively to the left. The results also suggest that Adams's strategy of taking a strong stand on public safety in support of the police, combined with a call to end abusive police practices, is an effective way for the party to counter the small but significant Black and Hispanic defections to the Republican Party that began to emerge in the 2020 presidential election.

I posed a series of questions about the implications of the still-unresolved New York City Democratic Primary to a group of scholars and analysts.

Nolan McCarty, a political scientist at Princeton, argues that the initial tally affirmed a basic but often overlooked truth about the Democratic Party nationwide:

The outcomes are more evidence of an innumerate punditry that conflates the share of educated, professional voters who support the Democratic Party with their electoral clout. It remains true that a majority of Democratic voters are working class without college degrees. So it is the same dynamic in New York that played out in the presidential race. While other candidates battled over the support of the highly educated segments (of all races), Biden understood where the votes were.

While most of the national attention has focused on levels of education in shaping the partisanship of white voters — with the more educated moving left and the less well educated moving right — a parallel split has been quietly developing within the multiracial Democratic coalition. Ray La Raja, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, elaborated in his reply to my email:

There has been a growing education and age divide in the Democratic Party beyond racial divisions. Additionally, Adams tapped into an N.Y.C. pattern of politicians winning with strong “outer borough” ethnic support. In the past it was white ethnics — Italians, Irish and Poles living in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens — who supported the Tammany-style politicians. Today it is Hispanics and Blacks from different parts of the diaspora supporting Adams, who leveraged his shared background with voters, with ties to powerful political institutions (e.g., municipal unions) much like Tammany.

Older Black voters, La Raja continued,

will continue to be a moderating force in the Democratic Party. They deliver votes and they are pragmatic in their vote choices. They bear the traces of New Deal liberalism with bread-and-butter concerns about jobs, education and safe neighborhoods to raise families.

There are significant differences between the values and agendas that shape the voting decisions of the Garcia constituency, of the Wiley electorate, and of those Black voters who were the core of Adams's support, La Raja notes:

Garcia won the good government progressives and liberals south of 110th street in Manhattan, who are more likely to be executives at major institutions of finance, technology, entertainment and fashion. These voters want a livable city to support their institutions. They — like The New York Times editorial board — believe Garcia is the most credible on managing city operations. Wiley, in contrast, gets the young progressives just across the river in Brooklyn and Queens who haven't quite made it up the career ladder yet. They have fewer institutional responsibilities. They are less likely to vote out of a desire to get well-functioning government and more based on their personal values.

Jonathan Rieder, a sociologist at Barnard and the author of “Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism,” had more to say in his reply:

The local discussion of crime gets entangled in the national culture war within the Democratic Party and within “liberalism.” As with “limousine liberalism” before it, what some dub “woke” liberalism flourishes in the zones of the educated and often affluent whose lives, neighborhoods and moral understandings differ from those of working and middle-class people.

Because of this, Rieder contends, the party remains caught in what has become a 50-year “battle between what used to be called lunch-pail Democrats and more righteous ones, between James Clyburn and AOC.”

Rieder argues that

For all the gradual shrinkage of white non-college voters, the Democrats still require a multicultural middle to include non-affluent and lesser-educated whites in their majority coalition. And that will be hard to secure if the party is identified with ceding the border, lawlessness, ignoring less privileged whites, exclusionary versions of anti-racist diversity that smack of thought reform, phrasing like Latinx that large numbers of Latinos find off-putting, esoteric or perplexing, and so much more.

Taking a more optimistic stance, Omar Wasow, a political scientist at Princeton, acknowledges that the primary “reflected these intraparty divisions along lines of race, income and education,” but, he argues,

What was more surprising was the level of cohesion. Candidates from a wide range of backgrounds ran and, overall, there was remarkably little race-baiting rhetoric. In the final high-pressure days of the campaign, calls to vote along racial or ethnic lines did increase but, given the high level of diversity in the candidate pool and in New York City more broadly, the relatively limited presence of appeals to in-group solidarity or out-group antipathy was remarkable. While some of this behavior is specific to New York, it also likely reflects a strong norm among elite Democrats more generally that certain kinds of ethnic threat and resentment politics are off-limits.

Wasow agrees that Black voters have become a moderating force in Democratic politics:

Put simply, direct experiences of racism and dreams deferred appears to have forged a more moderate or pragmatic politics among African Americans. Where the whiter, more liberal wing of the Democratic Party was considerably more optimistic about the country's willingness to elect a woman, a democratic socialist or a person of color, African Americans exhibited far more skepticism. Given the narrow margins with which President Biden won, the Black assessment of national white voting behavior does seem to have been more accurate.

For two generations, Wasow continued, “Democrats have struggled to articulate a response to attacks that they're ‘soft on crime.’ Some candidates co-opted toughness and others emphasized ‘root causes’ but ‘law and order’ kept winning.”

In this context, according to Wasow, “Adams's activism as a cop against police abuse is a powerful embodiment of the position that recognizes both demand for reform and desire for public safety.”

Adams affirmed this two-pronged stance toward policing and crime on his website:

Our city faces an unprecedented crisis that threatens to undo the progress we have made against crime. Gun arrests, shootings and hate crimes are up; people do not feel safe in their homes or on the street. As a police officer who patrolled the streets in a bulletproof vest in the 1990s, I watched lawlessness spread through our city, infecting communities with the same terrible swiftness of Covid-19.

At the same time, Adams declared,

We face a crisis of confidence in our police. I understand that mistrust because as a young man, police beat my brother and I at a precinct house — and we still carry the pain of that. I called out racism in the NYPD as an officer and helped push through reforms, including the successful effort to stop the unlawful use of Stop-and-Frisk. The debate around policing has been reduced to a false choice: You are either with police, or you are against them. That is simply wrong because we are all for safety. We need the NYPD — we just need them to be better.

The strong appeal to Black voters of a candidate like Adams who combines calls to reform police behavior while simultaneously pushing for aggressive enforcement to increase public safety can be seen in the results of a survey Vesla Weaver, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins, conducted with colleagues during the week after George Floyd's murder.

Specifically, Weaver found that:

40.5 percent of Black respondents (compared to just 16.7 percent of whites) strongly agreed with this statement: “I have rights as a matter of law, but not in reality.” 60 percent of Black Americans agreed ‘The Constitution doesn’t really protect us from the police’ (compared to 32 percent of whites). Similar breakdowns occurred on “the official rules say the police can’t do certain things but in reality, they can do whatever they want.”

Weaver summed up her findings:

The responses show some alarming divergences in how Americans of different racial positions understand their citizenship, the logic of governing authority, and whether the law applies to everyone equally.

Jim Sleeper, the author of “The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York,” wrote me (citing his friend Curtis Arluck, a Democratic district leader in Manhattan):

Garcia ran better than Wylie among older white voters, even those who skew pretty far left. So she did much better on the Upper West Side, the West Village, Brooklyn Heights, and Park Slope than in the East Village, Astoria or Williamsburg. And Wylie performed much better among younger and more affluent Black voters than those who were older and more working class. Both older white liberal voters and older less affluent Black voters saw Wiley as too “woke.”

If Garcia has more second-place votes to be allocated from lesser candidates, Sleeper notes, she “could well overtake Wylie for second place.” That may not be enough for Garcia to capture first place, according to Sleeper’s reckoning. If Wiley is dropped reducing the final count to Adams versus Garcia, “enough Wylie votes will go for Adams second, so that Adams should prevail.”

Margaret O’Brien Steinfelds, who founded the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture with her husband Peter Steinfelds, argues that Adams’s lead rests on four factors:

(A) the “crime wave” that became the hot issue in the campaign; (B) on Adams’s story of experiencing police abuse and then being in the police; (C) on the emerging sense that Black voters are “moderates” — *pace* the views of progressives and young B.L.M. advocates (Black and white) — that N.Y.C. is a union city and that Adams had important endorsements; (D) Adams was pretty clearly the “working class” candidate and he campaigned in relevant districts. Defunding the police, which Adams opposes, is not a winning policy as Biden’s announcements on crime this past week underlined.

Roberto Suro, a professor of public policy at the University of Southern California, wrote to me to say that:

The New York voting clearly undermines progressives’ claims that a bold agenda on issues like policing is the best way to bring out the Democratic base. That certainly was not the case with New York Latinos and Blacks.

Recognition of these patterns is crucial for Democrats seeking to maintain high levels of minority support, Suro continued:

The same differences among Latinos in New York plays out nationally. Older, working-class Latinos shifted to the Republicans across the country last November amid Trump’s claims that Democrats are dangerously radical. The New York results suggests that segment of the Latino electorate might be susceptible to Republican campaigns next year, painting Democrats as anti-police.

Robert Y. Shapiro, a political scientist at Columbia, put it succinctly: “Black voters are a moderating force and should tell the party to focus on economic, health care, and equality issues, and less on culture war issues.”

Paul Frymer, a political scientist at Princeton, disputed the argument that Black voters have become a moderating force within the Democratic Party:

The pre-election polling data suggests that Maya Wiley is the second choice candidate among African American voters, despite having a political message that is far more progressive on the issues than a number of other candidates, notably on police reform. That ought to push back against a narrative that Black voters are necessarily more moderate than the rest of the party. Wiley is a very progressive candidate and has ample support from African Americans, losing only to a more moderate Democrat, and outdistancing a number of more conservative Democrats.

“New York City is a world unto itself, making it hard to discern national trends from its voting patterns,” cautioned Doug Massey, a Princeton sociologist who has written extensively about urban America.

“That said,” Massey continued,

The election results would seem to confirm that Black and Hispanic voters form the core of the Democratic Party’s base. They appear to be strongly motivated by racial justice and progressive economics as well as public safety, but lean toward candidates who have experience and insider knowledge rather than flashy liberals from outside the system who are proclaiming dreamy agendas.

Maya Wiley and Kathryn Garcia, in Massey’s view,

are insiders to N.Y.C. politics and the bureaucracy with reputations for getting things done, and Wiley appealed to better educated young people and Blacks in Brooklyn, while Garcia appealed to better educated white and Latino Manhattanites. But it was the strong support of working-class voters across all the boroughs that has carried the day so far for Adams, with particular strength among Blacks and Latinos but seemingly with some popularity even among blue-collar whites on Staten Island.

For all the potential embodied in Adams' candidacy, there are deep concerns that, if he wins, he could disappoint.

Adams is a hardened player in the rough and tumble of New York. I asked Rieder if Adams represents a resolution of the difficulty of developing a credible but nonracist approach to crime and public safety. Rieder replied: "I think he's such a flawed incarnation of the stance — his history of corruption, his race-baiting — it's too early to say. Alas."

Adams himself is not given to false modesty. "I am the face of the new Democratic Party," he declared last week. "If the Democratic Party fails to recognize what we did here in New York, they're going to have a problem in the midterm elections and they're going to have a problem in the presidential elections."

While the unresolved primary fight has come down to a contest between Adams, Garcia and Wiley, it is effectively the contest for mayor because the Republican Party has shrunk to insignificance in the city, despite holding the mayoralty for decades not that long ago. Whichever one of the trio comes out ahead, he or she is very likely to run far ahead of the Republican nominee, Curtis Sliwa. Ranked-choice voting — which despite its virtues remains poorly understood by many voters — means we won't know who the next mayor will be for some time. What we do know is that whoever wins will have a very tough row to hoe.

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