

NEW YORK, YOU'RE NO CHICAGO: RACE AND THE KOCH-DINKINS RACE

By Andrew Kohut and Larry Huglick

Expect the unexpected in primary politics, especially in big cities. The results of the recent Democratic mayoral primary in New York are in keeping with that dictum. Race was expected to be *the* decisive factor in what has been described as an increasingly polarized city. It wasn't. It played an important role, but not the decisive one that it has played in other big-city elections.

In the midst of the New York primary campaign, the brutal murder of a young black by a group of whites in Bensonhurst, a predominately Italian section of Brooklyn, galvanized the city's emotions and became a contentious issue between the black challenger and the white incumbent mayor. Prior to the murder, Mayor Edward Koch had been steadily gaining ground on Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins, as more and more white voters moved into the Koch column. The candidates' differing responses to the murder on balance did not redound to Koch's advantage, however, and his drive stalled.

Why didn't racial politics play more of a role in the New York Democratic primary? The results of Gallup surveys for *New York Newsday* and WNYW suggest that the calculus of demographic politics, which has proved so reliable in other places, failed to work in New York because of four factors.

First, it is sometimes easy to overlook the other side of racial politics—that while voters are inclined to support candidates of their own race, they also value racial harmony. Koch's shrill criticism of Jesse Jackson during last year's New York Democratic primary campaign seemed racially insensitive, if not inflammatory, even to many Koch supporters. The negative political fallout was immediately apparent. Surveys taken at the time showed Koch's approval ratings decreasing most sharply among blacks, but the damage was by no means limited to blacks. His ratings also dipped significantly among whites and Hispanics, beginning a downward slide from which Koch did not begin to recover for almost a year. Presidential hopeful Albert Gore, the intended beneficiary of Koch's verbal fusillade, finished a

poor third in the New York presidential primary.

Following the Bensonhurst murder, Koch once again got himself into hot water by directing criticism not only at the those who committed racial violence but also at those who took to the streets to protest the racial shooting. In our post-Bensonhurst survey, Dinkins increased his advantage over Koch as the candidate considered best able to improve race relations.

Second, New York is not like other places. While the city includes its share of white ethnic neighborhoods and solidly black neighborhoods where all politics is seen in stark racial terms, it is not Chicago. A Gallup survey for Times Mirror, classifying city voters on their political values, found that Democrats in Dinkins's own borough of Manhattan fall overwhelmingly into the most socially liberal and racially tolerant voter groupings—whose political values have been strongly influenced by the civil rights, anti-war, feminist and environmental movements that emerged during the 1960s. Even in more politically conservative Brooklyn and Queens, liberal voter types are well represented in the Democratic voter pool.

Jewish voters make up a large share of the white vote in New York and, for this group, strums on the racial chord evoke conflicting emotions. Despite all the recent attention to conflict between blacks and Jews over issues like the Middle East and affirmative action, blacks and Jews have a history of shared political interests. They have often been united in efforts to overcome racial and religious discrimination. While Jesse Jackson has alienated Jewish voters on numerous occasions—his "Hymietown" remarks and his association with Louis Farrakhan are notable instances—the non-confrontational David Dinkins has not done so. By sharply limiting Jackson's role, the Dinkins campaign helped the candidate hold onto his Jewish supporters, who otherwise might have defected to Koch.

Third, at least in New York, age or

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political generation makes a big difference when it comes to feelings about black leadership. Part of the story is simply that younger voters are more apt to be black or from other minority groups. But younger whites are far more willing than their elders to support black candidates. Gallup's surveys during the campaign found whites under 50 years of age dividing their vote almost equally between Koch and Dinkins, but older whites preferring Koch by more than four to one.

Finally, the most basic of issues in all elections is continuity versus change. When the balance of voter sentiment on this dimension tips decisively in either direction, other factors tend to get pushed aside. Koch was unable to counter effectively the perception that conditions in the city had gotten worse during his tenure—particularly during his last term, when reports of scandals in his administration filled the newspapers, and crime and drugs seemed completely out of hand. His poor standing relative to both Dinkins and GOP candidate Rudolph Giuliani in the early polls indicated that many had decided it was time for a change.

From the very beginning, racial factors worked more for Dinkins than against him. The Dinkins candidacy engaged black pride, since his election would represent a milestone—no black has ever held citywide elective office in New York. The Bensonhurst murder did nothing to diminish the black pride factor. It did seem to pull white voters in different directions. Some became less prone to support a black at a time of racial conflict, but others came to see Dinkins as just the kind of man needed to bring the races together.

While injecting drama at the end of the campaign, the Bensonhurst murder failed to change the complexion of the election. It proved to be more of a referendum on Mayor Koch than a New York version of what happened in Chicago or Philadelphia earlier in the decade.

FAT WOMEN, OR DISHONEST MEN?

QUESTION: "Right now do you feel you are overweight, or underweight, or at about the right weight for you?"

	<u>% saying they are overweight</u>
Everyone	43%
Men	37
Women	49

NOTE: Survey by Louis Harris & Associates for *Prevention* magazine, November 11-25, 1987.