David Dinkins and New York City, 1989-1993: Political Coalition Building and Governance at the Dawn of the Age of Identity Politics

James J. Barney

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by

James J. Barney

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ABSTRACT

Charting the rise and fall of New York City’s first African American mayor, David Dinkins, this study provides insight into the complexities of governing and coalition-building in New York City during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of both identity and conservative politics shaped New York City during Dinkins’s 1989–1993 administration. Dinkins skillfully built a diverse and multiracial political coalition that first unseated three-term mayor Ed Koch in a Democratic primary and then beat Rudy Giuliani in the general election of 1989, only to see the coalition disintegrate in the following years.

Dinkins’s rise and fall derived from the nature of his political coalition, a loose alliance of disparate elements in New York City’s electorate unified by their opposition first to Koch and then to Giuliani rather than a coherent unifying ideology. Dinkins’s struggles to deal with racial tension, crime and drug epidemics, the height of the AIDS crisis and activism, a secession movement in Staten Island, and a recession resulted in him losing his reelection bid in 1993.

Analysis of Dinkins’s responses to five flashpoints in New York City’s political history illustrates ways in which Dinkins failed both to maintain his coalition and to expand his base of support. He struggled to address the often-conflicting demands of African Americans, Hispanics, ethnic whites (Jews, Italians, and Irish) in the outer boroughs, the LGBT community, and white liberals, leading to Giuliani’s victory. An examination of Dinkins’s mayoral term provides insight into the real or perceived failure
of liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s to navigate the rise of identity and conservative politics. This study of Dinkins’s career elucidates the relationship between government policy, social activism, political coalition-building, and governance during an era when the base of the Democratic Party changed. This study also adds to the debate over the causes of the political realignment of the era and the effectiveness of social movements to effectuate political change.
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Introduction

In the 1980s, when he was Manhattan Borough President, David Dinkins described New York City as a “gorgeous mosaic” composed of separate and unique neighborhoods that created a complex but beautiful city unlike any other city in the world.\(^1\) When he published his autobiography in 2013, Dinkins again described the city as a “gorgeous mosaic.” Yet during his term as mayor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, New York City faced a collection of serious problems that included the lingering impacts of the 1970s fiscal crisis and the 1977 blackout, increased racial tension, white flight, a crack epidemic, the apex of the AIDS pandemic, a recession, a real estate slump, and even a secession movement that threatened to tear the city apart. Together they rendered New York City a nearly “ungovernable city.”\(^2\) New York City’s genuine problems were exasperated by a tabloid and a local press that sensationalized the city’s numerous problems, creating a sense of malaise and fear that the city was drifting back to the “bad old days” of the 1970s. \(^3\)

\(^1\) Dinkins’s characterization of New York City as a “gorgeous mosaic” challenged the notion that New York City was a “melting pot,” and Dinkins’s characterization of New York City as a collection of different neighborhoods and a city divided by race, class, ethnicity, and religion was the subject of a classic work by Daniel P. Moynihan and Nathan Glazer that emphasized the city’s divisions. See Daniel P. Moynihan, and Nathan Glazer, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City, 2nd ed. (Boston: MIT Press, 1970). When Dinkins wrote his autobiography, he incorporated the term “gorgeous mosaic” into the title. See David N. Dinkins, A Mayor’s Life: Governing New York’s Gorgeous Mosaic (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

\(^2\) The notion of New York City as an “ungovernable city” was coined by Vincent Cannato in describing the troubles faced by Mayor John Lindsay. See Vincent Cannato, The Ungovernable City (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

\(^3\) The term “bad old days of the 1970s” became a common phrase in the 1990s to contrast the 1970s with the 1990s. For a discussion of New York City’s history from the 1970s to the 2000s, see Thomas Dyja, New York, New York, New York: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).
When Dinkins, who had only previously won one race for elected office and who was completing his single term as Manhattan Borough President, announced that he would challenge then-Mayor Ed Koch, who was attempting to secure a fourth term in office, in the 1989 Democratic primary, few, including Dinkins himself, believed that he had a realistic chance of winning. To the amazement of most political pundits, Dinkins and his gifted political advisor Bill Lynch crafted a diverse and multiracial political coalition that resulted in the election of New York City’s first African American mayor.  

This dissertation explores how Dinkins dealt with five flashpoints during his mayoral term from 1989 to 1993. These flashpoints include the marches conducted by Reverend Al Sharpton into the white neighborhoods of Howard Beach, Queens, and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn; protests by African Americans against a Korean grocer in Flatbush, Brooklyn; the political crisis caused by rising crime and the crack epidemics, with a focus on Washington Heights; the activism and demands of LGBT and AIDS activists; and the emergence of the secessionist movement in Staten Island.  

Dinkins’s electoral success in 1989 derived from forging together a diverse political coalition, unified in its opposition to the policies of Mayor Koch. Dinkins was defeated in 1993 because he was unable to balance the conflicting demands of the constituent parts of his

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4 This work uses the terms “African American” and “black” interchangeably as the term “African American” was not commonly used in the period explored in this paper despite advocacy for the adoption of the term. See Isabel Wilkerson, “‘African-American’ Favored By Many of America's Blacks.” New York Times, January 31, 1989, A1. This study also is cognizant of the contemporary debate over whether “black” should be capitalized. This study has opted to use lower case solely because the term was not generally capitalized during the time explored in this work.

5 This work uses the initialism “LGBT” to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual community and “AIDS” refers to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, those who tested positive for human immunodeficiency virus often suffered from a collection of ailments referred to as “AIDS.”
coalition. As these five flashpoints reveal, Dinkins failed both to maintain his coalition and to expand his base of support, as he struggled to address the often-conflicting demands of African Americans, ethnic whites in the outer boroughs,\(^6\) white establishment liberals, and the LGBT community, leading to Rudy Giuliani’s victory in 1993.

On December 23, 2020, Dinkins passed away, only a few weeks after the death of his long-time wife, Joyce. Dinkins’s death sparked an outpouring of largely positive obituaries for a man who had been the subject of harsh criticism by New York City’s tabloid and local press during his time in office.\(^7\) Dinkins, a soft-spoken liberal, lacked the bravado and bluster of both his predecessor, three-term mayor Ed Koch, and his successor Rudy Giuliani. In 1993, many in New York City viewed Dinkins as a well-meaning man who was simply not up for the job, and New York City voters cast Dinkins out of office, ending his political career. But the passage of time has led many to reconsider Dinkins’s time in office and legacy, and this dissertation represents one such attempt.

\(^6\) The study uses the term "ethnic whites." This term, commonly used during the time explored in this work, distinguishes first, second, and third-generation New Yorkers of European origin from other whites. For example, political polls of the era often separated whites from ethnic whites recognizing voting differences between ethnic whites and other white New Yorkers. In such polling, Italian, Irish, Jewish, or peoples of "other" European origin were segregated into separate categories, further reflecting the notion that there were political differences within the category of ethnic whites. Because Italian, Irish, and Jewish voters composed the majority of ethnic whites, this study focuses on Italian, Irish, and Jewish voters. For a detailed discussion on ethnic white voting patterns and their impact on New York politics see Joshua Zeitz, *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and Shaping of Postwar Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

A single-term mayor of New York City at first glance may not appear a worthy subject of extended study. In fact, Dinkins, whom I had the opportunity to interview in a one-hour, off-the-record interview in October 2019 at his office at Columbia University, expressed a combination of surprise and delight that he was the subject of increased academic inquiry in recent years. However, Dinkins’s career is worthy of study because he built a diverse multiracial political coalition. An examination of Dinkins’s response to various crises adds not only to the scholarship on New York City’s recent political history, but also sheds light on the possibilities and tensions of modern liberalism during a transition period between the Great Society liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s to the neoliberalism of the Democratic Party at the national level in the 1990s. Understanding Dinkins’s mayoral term may be even more relevant with the recent election of Eric Adams, who was elected the city’s second African American mayor in 2021, and who will likely confront problems similar to those that Dinkins confronted three decades ago.

This dissertation’s case study method focuses attention on a limited number of episodes, providing a manageable way to explore subjects as vast as New York City and modern liberalism. While New Yorkers often emphasize the uniqueness of the city, this work can illustrate that the political, cultural, economic, and social trends occurring across the United States also shaped New York City. The case study approach can

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provide a useful way to locate linkages between local events and broader trends and historiographical questions.  

Much of the scholarship on Dinkins to date has focused on the tabloid coverage of his political race, tenure as mayor, and on-going political feuds with Koch and Giuliani. This dissertation has a wider focus than tabloid news coverage. Instead, it relies heavily upon an examination of other news sources, including the gay press as represented by OutWeek, a weekly publication whose short two-year run overlapped with both Dinkins’s first two years in office and the high point of the AIDS crisis; the New York Amsterdam Press, a weekly African American newspaper based out of Harlem; and the Staten Island Advance, a conservative daily newspaper with extensive coverage of local politics on the island. Additionally, this work relies upon newly available archival collections. In recent years, historians have obtained access to the papers of Mayors Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani. Columbia University’s library took possession of the Dinkins Papers and Archives in 2015, and the Koch and Giuliani Papers and Archives have finally found a permanent home in the La Guardia and Wagner Archives at La Guardia Community College. In total, there are hundreds of boxes of documents in the three collections. This dissertation draws heavily upon these three collections.

This work draws heavily on media accounts and polling because a review of Dinkins’s Papers revealed a politician who commissioned numerous polls and monitored

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the op-eds written about him and his policies in the mainstream press including the *New York Times*, *New York Post* and *Daily News*. While an earnest liberal, Dinkins was also aware of the realities of electoral politics and how his success was dependent upon the electoral process that required forging a coalition composed of people from diverse backgrounds and how the media played a key role in New York City’s politics.

Moreover, this work’s five case studies explore episodes that provide insight into how Dinkins’s training as a lawyer shaped his response to the various crises that he faced. This legal training emphasized careful deliberation, balancing legal rights and interests, and an appreciation of legal precedent. Often the media and his opponents viewed Dinkins as indecisive, ignoring how Dinkins’s response was a product of his experience as a lawyer who had an appreciation of existing legal precedent and the legal complexities posed by the situations he faced.

My personal experience inevitably shapes this work. Dinkins’s time in office overlapped with my high-school years at a Catholic all-boys school in Brooklyn, New York. I also grew up in Canarsie, Brooklyn. This neighborhood in the southeast portion of Brooklyn, once an ethnic white enclave composed largely of Italians and Jews, underwent rapid demographic change in the 1980s and early 1990s. The neighborhood transformed into one populated by middle- and working-class African Americans and Caribbean immigrants. On paper, I fit the profile of a person who may have resented Dinkins’s election. But this stereotypical profile of the typical ethnic white from the outer borough ignores the thousands of outer borough ethnic whites, like my grandmother and me, who voted for Dinkins. While I supported Dinkins during his failed 1993 reelection
bid, this study strives for objectivity and tries to analyze Dinkins and liberals from multiple perspectives.

My personal background as an ethnic white Brooklynite influenced the selection of the case studies in this work and those topics excluded from the project. Several of the chapters in this work explore the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Staten Island in an attempt to provide a nuanced explanation for why a sizeable percentage of working-class whites abandoned their ties to the Democratic Party. By exploring how multiple factors influenced the motivations of ethnic white New Yorkers, this dissertation confronts the caricatures of ethnic whites found in some of the literature. The Italians and Irish in the outer boroughs have often been “otherized,” both by the Manhattan-based media and in much of the scholarship, which has not seriously tried to understand the motivations of these New Yorkers.

While this student explores many topics in New York City’s political history, race is a dominant theme in this work. Racism, both latent and overt, played a significant role in the opposition to Dinkins. While many white New Yorkers would not articulate as much at the time, a significant portion of white New Yorkers viewed the election of the first African American as a living embodiment of New York’s changed demographic nature and a representation of their loss of political power and status. Many white New Yorkers from all backgrounds simply could not move beyond their ideological, racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties to cast their votes for an African American candidate in 1989. In the preceding decade, large numbers of whites left the city, and many others, who remained in New York, lamented “changed neighborhoods” and “crime,” code words often used to mask racism. Thus, race played a prominent role in the political
landscape of New York City. Yet the narrative of a racially polarized polis, popularized by the media, ignores the hundreds of thousands of whites from all boroughs and backgrounds who crossed the racial divide and cast their ballots for Dinkins in both 1989 and 1993. Factors other than race deserve consideration in the evaluation of the political decision-making of all New Yorkers, and this work explores the complex political landscape of New York City that Dinkins confronted.\textsuperscript{11}

In recent years, historians have explored how intra-racial conflict among various segments of New York City’s white population shaped the political landscape of the city, dividing whites into a collection of warring factions organized by class, religion, ideology, location, and other factors.\textsuperscript{12} Unlike other African American politicians who rose to political power in African American majority cities such as Detroit and Atlanta in the 1970s and 1980s, Dinkins’s political coalition included various segments of white New York. For example, Dinkins coalition not only included a large segment of white liberals and the gay and lesbian community but also a sizeable minority of ethnic white voters in the outer boroughs. Understanding the opposition to Dinkins requires not only an analysis of conflict between whites and African Americans, but also a deeper appreciation of intra-racial conflicts that divided white New Yorkers.

\textsuperscript{11} During the writing of this dissertation, several major historical works have been published that relate to the topics addressed in this work, including AIDS activism, Staten Island history, and how race relations has long shaped policing in New York City that has richly supplemented and enriched this work. For an example of the recent scholarship on New York City see Thomas J. Campanella, \textit{Brooklyn: Once and Future City} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Wayne Dawkins, \textit{City Son: Andrew W. Cooper's Impact on Modern-Day Brooklyn} (Oxford, Miss: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), Martin V. Melosi, \textit{Fresh Kills: A History of Consuming and Discarding in New York City} (New York: Columbia University, 2020); Sarah Schulman, \textit{Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

This work also explores Dinkins’s place within the black freedom movement. When I interviewed Dinkins in October 2019, I saw that his small Columbia University office was cluttered with numerous pictures of the mayor among leading figures in the black freedom movement, including Nelson Mandela, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Harry Belafonte. During the interview, Dinkins spoke of his love for the Brooklyn Dodgers and how his favorite player was Jackie Robinson, who broke the color line in professional baseball. He spoke about how he saw the same type of hatred in the eyes of white New Yorkers in the 1980s as was exhibited by whites in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. Dinkins clearly saw himself as a racial pioneer who was part of a larger movement that sought to break down barriers that prevented African Americans from succeeding in the United States. Yet many white New Yorkers minimized the historical significance of Dinkins’s electoral victory in 1989. They further failed to comprehend why the city’s African Americans took great pride in Dinkins, and they resented that criticism of Dinkins was often viewed as motivated by a racist double standard.

Dinkins’s 1989 victories in the primary and general elections illustrated the potential for African American politicians to forge multiracial coalitions. Based on the model set forth by Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 Rainbow Coalition, Dinkins’s campaign brought together the white liberal establishment, women voters, young voters, African Americans, Hispanics, the LGBT community, and labor unions. This approach provided a model for national electoral success that was embraced in the 2008 presidential election by Barack Obama. Dinkins’s ability, even if only briefly, to build a coalition that transcended the racial polarization of the era illustrated that the path to
political power in non-African American majority cities necessitated cross-racial coalition-building.

At the same time, Dinkins confronted criticism from within the African American community. Some African Americans argued that his policies did not benefit the black community whose support had ensured him victory in 1989. Such criticism demonstrates the diversity of opinion within black politics that many white New Yorkers, at the time, did not fully understand. Dinkins, a moderate liberal, often faced his sharpest criticism from African American critics like Reverend Al Sharpton and Sonny Carson, figures who have not yet been the subject of extensive scholarly research.

Unlike other African American leaders who engaged in civil rights activism and community organizing, Dinkins earned respect by taking a different path, one worthy of study. While Dinkins was not born in New York City and spent a considerable amount of his early life in Trenton, New Jersey, he had longstanding ties to Harlem and New York City’s African American communities. When he was a young child, after his parents divorced, Dinkins regularly visited Harlem to see his mother. After his service during World War II as one of the first African American Marines, he attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. and then Brooklyn Law School. He went on to become an attorney. Dinkins was largely the product of New York City’s Democratic political club system, a holdover from the Tammany Hall political machine system that governed

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13 As discussed in the body of this study, Dinkins expressed modesty regarding his military and academic successes. However, Dinkins's enlistment in the Marines during the World War II era and attendance as a law student in the 1950s were extraordinary achievements. Dinkins was one of the first African American Marines and represented a racial trailblazer in his attendance at Brooklyn Law School. Also, Dinkins tended to minimize the role played by his father-in-law Daniel L. Burrows, who was one of the first American Americans elected to public office in New York City and New York State, played in his political career.
New York City for sizable portions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Trained as a lawyer, Dinkins embraced the establishment liberalism represented by the Great Society at the national level and Mayor John Lindsay at the city level. John Lindsay, who served as mayor from 1966 to 1973, fully embraced the Great Society programs of the era and forged a multi-racial political coalition, providing several opportunities for African Americans like Dinkins. During the Lindsay years, Dinkins was able to serve a single year as a New York State Assemblyman and the President of Board of Elections in New York City due in large part to his connections with Harlem’s powerful political machine that aligned with Lindsay.

Rather than a charismatic leader of a social movement or a protester, Dinkins described himself, during our October 2019 interview, as a candidate who lost more races than he won and whose electoral successes were “accidents.” Despite Dinkins’s modesty and tendency to downplay his achievements, Dinkins’s coalition provided a blueprint that President Obama largely replicated on the national level.

In 1992, New York City hosted the Democratic National Convention that nominated Bill Clinton. During the Democratic Party's primary, Dinkins remained neutral. By 1992, Dinkins's brand of big-city liberalism fell out of favor at the national level as the party embraced a candidate in Clinton. Clinton promised something different that was neither conservative nor liberal.14 However, as an unreformed Great Society liberal, Dinkins did not make an ideological transition during his time in office. Even though Dinkins's brand of liberalism faded at the national level, Dinkins's campaigns and

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his time in political office shed light on a transition period in the Democratic Party that has not been a great deal of historical inquiry.

This dissertation draws upon various historiographical trends and adds to the scholarship in various fields of modern United States history, most prominently political history. It is further influenced by trends in the fields of social history and urban history. Thus, a brief historiographical review is necessary prior to turning to the five substantive chapters.

Until the 1960s, practitioners of political history dominated the historical academy. Since the 1960s, critics of political history have argued that the field’s traditional focus on political leaders ignored large segments of the population. Moreover, critics have also argued that political historians have traditionally failed to consider how social, political, and cultural change often occurred due to the activism of groups previously viewed as lacking in political power, such as African Americans, women, and members of the LGBT community. Social historians have researched the activities and essential nature of the black freedom, feminist, and LGBT movements. In doing so, they have challenged political history’s top-down view of political, social, and cultural change. Other critics of political history have argued that the field previously ignored the methods and tools used by political scientists, including the use of polling data and

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15 The author is aware of the criticism of political history from historians of all varieties, especially those who argue that politics merely reflects the underlying economic structure or economic changes occurring within society. Larger economic trends, including the deindustrialization of New York, the suburbanization and the migration and immigration trends of the post-World War II era, and national economic recessions shaped the political landscape of New York City and play a significant role in this work. Furthermore, the 1970s fiscal crisis that nearly bankrupted New York City and limited the New York City policymakers’ range of movement for a generation cast a large shadow over New York City politics and the actions of Dinkins. Furthermore, New York City politicians like Dinkins operated within a complex system of federalism where many decisions required coordination between local, state, and federal political institutions who had to approve budgets, taxes, and policy initiatives.
demographic analysis as well as research on political behavior. In early years of the twenty-first century, practitioners of political history sought to address the criticisms of the field. And some commentators have identified the development of a “new, new political history” that has attempted to incorporate insights and developments in the field of social history and political science to create a political history for the 21st century.\(^\text{16}\)

Since the 1960s, the ascendancy of social history has transformed history as an academic field. While this work is predominately a political history, the work of social history has broadened political history’s focus beyond the acts of the political elites. Social historians have focused their research on peoples previously ignored by the academy. In the field of social history, much of the historical work on the black freedom, feminist, LGBT, and conservative movements in the United States are “revisionist interpretations” of each of these movements. By seeking to re-cast each of these movements in a new light by asking new questions about either the essential nature, motivations, origins, or effects of each of these movements, this new scholarship has challenged widely held scholarly and popular beliefs about these four social movements.

While addressing four different social movements, the historiography of each possesses common themes. Historians of all four movements have often broadened the geographical or chronological scope of inquiry beyond that frequently found in the popular narrative of these movements or the prior scholarly treatment of the movements. For example, the scholarship on the black freedom movement has broadened inquiry to include the activities of civil rights activists in the North and West and the times before

and after the period from the landmark decision in Brown v. The Board of Education to the March on Washington. Similarly, the research into feminism has emphasized the diversity of the female experience, and the role played by non-white and working-class women as well as by lesbians in the struggle for sexual equality. Thus, the scholarship into feminism has broadened the focus of inquiry to historical actors previously ignored in prior narratives that predominately featured middle and upper-class white women. Instead, social historians have emphasized how feminism is a diverse movement composed of various factions with varying goals. Also, the scholarship of modern conservatism in the United States has challenged the popular narrative that depicts modern conservatism as predominately motivated by racism or white backlash to the social and political changes in the South in the 1960s. In particular, historians of modern conservatism have focused on the diverse motivations of conservatives and the activism of conservatives in the North. In addition to exploring the development of the LGBT


19 For examples of recent scholarship on conservatism in Northern cities, see Ronald P. Formisano, Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Daniel C. Kramer, and Richard M. Flanagan, Staten Island:
movement and the movement’s AIDS activism, historians have focused on the intersections between the LGBT movement and other social movements. Finally, much of the scholarship on all four of these movements has sought to identify ways in which the movements interacted and shaped each other.

The work of social historians has also influenced the field of urban history. Historians of urban history have explored the role of cities and government policies in shaping the course of various social movements. For example, historians have explored how government policy and the suburbanization process in cities like Detroit and Oakland shaped both the black freedom and the modern conservative movements and how, in turn, the modern conservative and the black freedom movements shaped the cities. Other urban historians have linked government policies such as court-ordered

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busing and integration of the public-school systems with the emergence of the
conservative movement in the North.  

Similarly, historians of the LGBT movement have argued that public and private spaces in cities like New York City and the attempts to regulate those spaces influenced the LGBT movement.  

Additionally, historians of the 1980s and 1990s identified the emergence of a “culture war” with its roots in either the 1960s or 1970s that impacted the politics and culture in the United States. Historians like Robert V. Daniels described the transformation of the 1960s as the “fourth revolution” that transformed politics of the United States. Similarly, Allen J. Matusow in *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* argued that the rise of activism based on sex, sexuality, race, and national origin in the 1960s and the embrace of “identity politics” transformed the Democratic Party and liberalism in the United States. Other historians like Andrew Hartman in *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* described how the political, social, cultural, and economic changes ushered in by the 1960s sparked a cultural war. According to Hartman, this conflict pitted religious as well as social and political conservatives against liberals over issues of race, sexuality, religion, the role of


government, and other hot-button issues.\textsuperscript{29} Robert O. Self in \textit{All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy} linked the emergence of the feminist, black freedom, LGBT, and other social movements with a conservative backlash.\textsuperscript{30} Other historians have argued that the emergence of identity politics in the 1960s led to the disintegration of the New Deal coalition and the emergence of a conservative era in the politics of the United States.\textsuperscript{31} Still other historians argued that the critics of conservatism mobilized using grassroots methods at the local level throughout the 1980s and early 1990s despite the strength and popularity of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush at the national level.\textsuperscript{32}

For the past three decades, historians and political scientists have explored the impact of identity politics and the rise of conservative politics on national politics. These historians and politicians have also presented solutions for the problems caused by the rise of these two trends. For example, in \textit{The Age of Fracture}, Daniel T. Rodgers argued that the increase in identity politics undermined the universalism of a prior era.\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, Arthur Meier Schlesinger in \textit{The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society} lamented the breakdown of the “melting pot” ideal of the earlier generation as politicians of the 1980s focused on their appeals to ethnicity, race,


sexuality, gender, and religion dividing the electorate into competing factions.\textsuperscript{34} To address the negative impact of identity politics, David Hollinger in \textit{Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism} advocated for the need for new universalism that emphasized commonalities rather than differences between people.\textsuperscript{35} While acknowledging the debate over the effect of identity politics among historians and political scientists, this study renders no normative judgment on identity politics. Instead, it seeks to assess the impact of the emergence of identity and conservativism on New York City politics and governance during the Dinkins era.

The broader trends in fields of political, social, and urban history have influenced New York City’s historiography. Historians of New York City have delved into interactions between various social movements by exploring certain flashpoints in the political history of New York City, such as the struggle to desegregate the New York City public school system, the Crown Heights Riots of 1991,\textsuperscript{36} and the boycotts of Korean grocers by African-American protesters during the Dinkins era.\textsuperscript{37} Likewise, historians of New York City have researched how government policy impacted poverty,


economic and neighborhood development, and race relations, as well as issues related to crime and law and order. Moreover, historians of New York City politics have analyzed the tenures of Mayors Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani in works influenced by the scholarly developments in the fields of political, urban, and social history. Other historians have started to investigate the breakdown of the Democratic political machine and the emergence of identity politics in New York City. Additionally, the lines between history and political science have blurred as historians have adopted many of the tools of political scientists in examining the politics and history of New York City.


Influenced by the current trends in political, social, and urban history as well as political science, this dissertation aims to do more than to chart the political rise and fall of a single politician in New York City. Instead, it addresses broader historiographical questions, such as “How did the rise of both identity and conservative politics shape electoral politics and governance in New York City during the Dinkins era?” and “In what ways does an exploration of the Dinkins era provide insight into the changes in politics, political culture, and party system of the United States in the era?” By exploring Dinkins and New York City politics of the 1980s and 1990s, this dissertation adds to the historiographies of the black freedom, feminist, LGBT, and conservative movements conducted by social and urban historians who have started to draw connections between governmental policy, urban politics, and social activism. Furthermore, a case study of Dinkins’s career provides insight into the difficulties posed by political coalition building and governance during the age of identity politics.

This study’s thesis is that the fragile nature of Dinkins’ political coalition and his inability to navigate the complexities of modern liberalism played a significant role in explaining Dinkins’ defeat. A review of Dinkins’ time in office provides insight into liberalism during the Great Society liberalism in the 1960s and 1970s and the neo-liberalism adopted by Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party at the national level in the 1990s. While this thesis may not seem groundbreaking in 2022, Dinkins and the initial commentators did not fully appreciate the skill required to assemble a complex political coalition or the difficulties governing during this transition period. Dinkins attributed his failure to white racism, while his detractors cited his incompetence or poor decision-making. These assessments overlooked the inherent complexity of Dinkins’s
undertakings, the changing nature of liberalism during the era, and the shifting political landscape of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Commentators at the time, in large part, described New York City as divided by race. However, this dissertation paints a more complex political landscape. New York City was divided by race and many other cleavages explored in this work. Again, to a person in 2022, these facts seem apparent. But the task of a historian is to focus on a specific period of inquiry and take historical actors on their terms. Dinkins overestimated the role of political identification and race while ignoring many other factors that contributed to the electoral behavior of New Yorkers of the era. Furthermore, a great deal of diversity within each constituent part of his coalition further complicated Dinkins’ ability to govern and his electoral fortunes. Again, Dinkins, at the time, failed to understand the complexity of his coalition.

While this study focuses on the complexities of Dinkins’s coalition as the predominant factor in explaining Dinkins’s governance problems and ultimate electoral defeat, Dinkins also exercised agency that one should not gloss over. Dinkins made a series of political calculations and decisions as he tried to balance the often-conflicting interests of his coalition. He often made political miscalculations in doing so, in part, because he failed to fully understand or respond to the demands of his coalition that included a considerable number of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs and LGBT voters who played critical roles in his electoral success in 1989. Thus, this work critiques Dinkins’s political choices at various points, especially in the chapter dealing with the Staten Island secession movement. At other times, this work defends Dinkins against what I deem as unfair criticism levied against him from various critics who have not fully
appreciated the realities of the complex political landscape that Dinkins faced at the time and given the nature of his coalition.

This dissertation aspires to add to the already robust scholarship on the wave of African American mayors elected in large cities of the United States in the post-Civil Rights Act era. Historians have engaged in similar studies of Harold Washington in Chicago,\textsuperscript{42} Coleman Young in Detroit,\textsuperscript{43} and Maynard Jackson in Atlanta.\textsuperscript{44} Unlike other African American mayors, however, Dinkins was able to rise to power in a city where the percentage of African Americans never constituted a majority or a plurality of the population. Thus, the dissertation builds upon the work of political scientist Ravi K. Perry, who in \textit{Black Mayors, White Majorities: The Balancing Act of Racial Politics}\textsuperscript{45} analyzed the unique political difficulties faced by African American elected officials in the white-majority cities of Toledo and Dayton, Ohio. Additionally, this work was influenced by Raphael J. Sonenshein’s \textit{Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles} that explored how African American Mayor Tom Bradley was able to forge a biracial political coalition in Los Angeles that lasted for nearly a generation but


\textsuperscript{44} Ronald H. Bayor, \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta} (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{45} Ravi K. Perry, \textit{Black Mayor, White Majorities: The Balancing Act of Racial Politics} (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).
collapsed in the aftermath of the acquittal of the policemen who beat Rodney King, which led to days of unrest and violence that consumed the city in 1991.\textsuperscript{46}

Dinkins, as the first African American mayor of New York City, is an example of the success and ultimate failure of a liberal African American politician who has not yet been the subject of intense historical research. A study of Dinkins provides insight into the real or perceived failure of liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s to navigate the rise of identity and conservative politics. His career helps explore the relationship between government policy, social activism, political coalition-building, and governance during the era of identity politics and conservatism.

Adding to the historiography of working-class whites in New York City by exploring why working-class and middle-class ethnic whites moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party in New York City in the 1990s,\textsuperscript{47} this dissertation provides insight into how a traditional liberal like Dinkins struggled to juggle the often-conflicting interests of his complex political coalition that included a large number of ethnic whites


in the outer boroughs. Such analysis sheds light on coalition-building and governance in the late 1980s and early 1990s, what has become known as the “era of identity politics.”

Furthermore, this dissertation weighs in on a narrower historiographical debate over Dinkins’s rise and fall. While various events that occurred from 1989 to 1993 in New York City have been the subject of scholarly investigation, few historians have sought to explain how Dinkins rose to power and why Giuliani, a man with extremely high unpopularity ratings even among his supporters, defeated Dinkins in 1993.

Writers and historians who have commented upon Dinkins’s rise and fall divide into two camps. The first camp depicts Dinkins as overcoming white racism in his 1989 election and then succumbing to it in his electoral defeat. In his autobiography entitled *A Mayor’s Life*, as well as in a series of post-election interviews, Dinkins argued that his loss to Giuliani and much of the opposition to his policies derived from racism. Wilbur C. Rich, in *David Dinkins and New York Politics: Race, Images, and the Media*, also

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48 Thus, while this paper focuses on a handful of ethnic white enclaves where opposition to Dinkins was intense, including Staten Island and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and Howard Beach, Queens, these neighborhoods were not representative of the voting patterns of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs. As discussed in this body of this study, support for Dinkins, along with ethnic whites in the outer boroughs, was similar to the support for Dinkins among whites citywide, and Dinkins would not have won the election in 1989 without the support of a sizable share of ethnic white electoral in the outer boroughs that constituted an element of Dinkins’s coalition.

49 The term *identity politics* was originally used as a term of derision by conservative commentators who argued that Democrats assembled a coalition of disparate groups based on little more than grievances and a common enemy. See Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Kindle Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). However, some activists on the political left have embraced the term, arguing that identity, including racial identity, provides a basis for African Americans and other minority groups to exercise political power. See Christopher T. Stout, *The Case for Identity Politics: Polarization, Demographic Change, and Racial Appeals* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

depicted Dinkins as the victim of white racism.\textsuperscript{51} Other historians have depicted Dinkins in a more unforgiving light. Chris McNickle in \textit{The Power of the Mayor: David Dinkins: 1990–1993} argued that his defeat derived from his incompetence and poor policies.\textsuperscript{52}

While this dissertation analyzes the reasons for Dinkins’s electoral defeat in 1993, its focus is not exclusively on whether Dinkins was a good mayor or the victim of racism. Of course, the racism of the era at all levels of society impacted not only Dinkins’s ability to do his job effectively, but also shaped and influenced how broader white society viewed his effectiveness as mayor. The impact of racism on Dinkins’s time in office and an evaluation of Dinkins’s effectiveness as mayor cannot be separated.\textsuperscript{53}

Each chapter of this study weighs into separate historiographical debates. As a unified work, these five chapters add to the discussion over the nature and limitations of liberalism during a transition period from the Great Society to the neo-liberalism, the causes of the political realignment of the era, and the effectiveness of social movements to effectuate political change. Moreover, the dissertation adds to the debate over the


\textsuperscript{53} In addition to those issues discussed in the body of this introduction, this study provides valuable insight into other historiographical debates. First, this project seeks to spark future study into the interactions among social movements and ways in which these interactions shaped the demands and actions of the social movements and, in turn, ways in which these interactions shaped the decisions of politicians, urban spaces, and dynamics of urban politics of cities like New York City. Second, this dissertation provides valuable insight into the politics of the enclaves of working-class ethnic whites in Brooklyn, Staten Island, the Bronx, and Queens often overlooked in the historiography of New York City and the conservative movement in the United States. \textit{See} Joshua Freeman, \textit{Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II} (New York: New Press, 2001). Finally, the dissertation adds to the historiography of the Democratic Party and modern liberalism in the city. For example, the dissertation explores the breakdown of the New Deal coalition in New York City as working class and ethnic whites left the Democratic Party in large numbers as the party embraced “identity” politics. And an exploration of the political realignment that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, using Dinkins as a case study, adds to the political science debate into the causes of the political realignment.
origins of drug laws and policing in the United States and politics during pandemics, both subjects of contemporary discussion.

No single book or dissertation can comprehensively cover New York City. There are various subjects omitted from this dissertation that warrant further study. My planned monograph based on this work will more deeply explore several issues briefly discussed in this work, including how feminist agitation not only shaped New York City politics, but also modern liberalism;\textsuperscript{54} the decreasing power of unions in New York City politics; and the complex relationship between city, state, and federal politics. Moreover, the process of gentrification that transformed New York will feature in my future work.\textsuperscript{55} Likewise, the relationship between New York City’s Hispanics and blacks along the borderlands of upper Manhattan and the Bronx, the political and cultural changes ushered in by the massive immigration that began in earnest in the post-Cold War era, and the emergence of neoliberalism in New York\textsuperscript{56} in the post-Dinkins era all warrant further exploration.


\textsuperscript{56} For a discussion of New York City’s transformation from the liberal state of the 1960s to the modern era see Benjamin Holtzman, \textit{The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
This work begins during the last years of the Koch era and ends with Dinkins’s defeat in 1993. Chapter One explores how the deaths of two African American males, Michael Griffith in 1986 and Yusef Hawkins in 1989, in white neighborhoods led to a series of protests by civil rights groups, which shaped how whites viewed Dinkins and how Dinkins viewed ethnic whites. This conflict thrust racial issues into the center of the 1989 election and played a role in propelling Dinkins into office, while alienating a large percent of ethnic white New Yorkers.

Chapter Two details how African Americans led by the black nationalist Sonny Carson instigated a small protest outside of a Korean-owned grocer in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in the early months of Dinkins’s tenure. This incident led to an unfair narrative by the mainstream media, portraying Dinkins as a weak mayor who did not have the ability to bring racial healing to New York City.

Chapter Three describes how an exploration of the unrest in Washington Heights in 1992 provides insight into the politics of crime, crack, and demographic change. This chapter challenges the popular narrative that the war on drugs in the late 1980s and early 1990s was driven mainly by racial animus, as Dinkins ran in 1989 on a “get tough on crime” message and these policies initially had widespread support among all racial and demographic categories in New York City at the time. Paradoxically, the chapter details how Dinkins’s implementation of such policies alienated both minorities and whites.

Chapter Four details how Dinkins, during the apex of the AIDS crisis in New York City, sought to balance the demands of ethnic whites, white liberals, LGBT, and AIDS activists, while satisfying no constituency completely. This chapter will specifically address how the demands and activities of AIDS activists and the LGBT
community alienated many ethnic whites, especially Catholics and conservative African Americans, preventing Dinkins from expanding his political coalition.

Chapter Five explores the Staten Island secessionist movement. This chapter details how a United States Supreme Court decision that struck down the Board of Estimates, the body charged with taxation and land use, was the spark that resurrected long-standing grievances between City Hall and many voters in the predominately white borough. This chapter explores how the Staten Island secession movement provides insight into how race was a dominant, but not exclusive, factor in the secession movement that threatened to divide New York. Other factors—including the upstate versus downstate dynamics of New York politics, party politics between Republicans and Democrats, issues of class and grievance, and history—all influenced the secession movement. 57

The Epilogue concludes by describing how an exploration of Dinkins-era New York City is relevant given the 2021 election of New York City’s second African American mayor Adams. Though direct parallels between Dinkins-era New York City and United States politics during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump cannot be drawn, analysis of the struggles Dinkins faced in managing his coalition illuminates both the challenges Adams may face and the shifting demographics of the Democratic Party.

57 The future monograph of this work will include additional chapters. These future chapters will consist of a detailed discussion of how Dinkins struggled to address the demands of feminists and explore the politics of gentrification and the interplay between Hispanics and African Americans in upper Manhattan and the outer boroughs. Also, the future work will include a deeper discussion of the role of Jewish voters, the 1992 Democratic National Convention hosted in New York City, as well as the impact of economics on New York City politics.
Chapter 1

The Belly of the Beast: Dinkins, Sharpton, and White Backlash

A series of high-profile events occurred during the last years of New York Mayor Ed Koch’s time in office that exposed the racial cleavages that divided white and African American New Yorkers. These racial divisions shaped the Democratic primary contest between Koch and David Dinkins in the summer of 1989. These events included the 1984 shooting of several African American teens by white subway passenger Bernard Goetz, the 1986 murder of Michael Griffin in Howard Beach by a group of white teens, the April 1989 rape of a white female jogger in Central Park, and the August 1989 murder

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2 For a detailed discussion of the Howard Beach criminal trials, see Charles Hynes, and Bob Drury, Incident at Howard Beach: The Case for Murder (New York: Putnam Press, 1990).

3 What became known as the Central Park jogger rape case was particularly powerful in stirring racial tension. At the time, a vast majority of New Yorkers of all races believed that a group of African American and Hispanic teenagers perpetrated the horrendous rape that left the jogger, a white woman who worked on Wall Street, hospitalized. Years later, DNA evidence would prove that false confessions and a media frenzy resulted in the African American and Hispanics teenagers’ wrongful convictions. However, the news coverage of the events at the time fueled the narrative that New York City was divided by class and race. The Central Park jogger rape case has been the subject of reinterpretation over the years. In the immediate aftermath of convictions, journalists investigated whether the verdicts entered against the black and Hispanic teens were based on evidence, focusing on the confessions of the teens. See Timothy Sullivan, Unequal Verdicts: The Central Park Jogger Trials (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). In contrast, in the 2010s, writers have re-interpreted the convictions via a class, race, and gender focusing on the lack of DNA and physical evidence connecting the teens to the crime. See Sarah Burns, The Central Park Five: The Untold Story Behind One of New York City's Most Infamous Crimes (New York: Vintage, 2012).
of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn by a group of white teenagers. These four events, in combination, played into the perception that New York City was fractured by ethnicity, class, and race. They sparked a series of protests by Reverend Al Sharpton in the period from 1986 to 1989, including marches into the predominately Italian American neighborhoods of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and Howard Beach, Queens that are the focus of this chapter.

Sharpton’s protests cast a long shadow over Dinkins’s 1989 campaign and his first years in office. While Dinkins cited his desire to heal the racial tension of the Koch years in his 1989 campaign as his motivation to challenge Koch in the Democratic primary, many whites, due to a racialized worldview, unfairly linked Sharpton’s activities to Dinkins. That type of thinking poisoned Dinkins’s ability to bridge the racial tension between ethnic whites and African Americans in the outer boroughs.

The controversies influenced Dinkins’s decision-making. Given these views, he concluded that at least some portion of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs were irreconcilable racists who were unwilling to vote for an African American. This belief, while at least partially true, affected Dinkins’s ability to merge a majority of ethnic

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5 In recent years, historians of the black freedom movement have focused their attention on the northern activism of African Americans after the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter seeks to add to that scholarship because this chapter aims to explore how the street activism of men like Sharpton influenced the political process as African American politicians like Dinkins assumed political power. Thus, this work is in conversation with the works on African American mayors and that on-street activism of African Americans in the North in the post-1960s. For examinations of the experiences of African American mayors see David R. Colburn and Jeffrey S. Alder, eds. *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City* (Champaign, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and J. Phillip Thompson, III, *Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for Deep Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
whites in the outer boroughs, most of whom were lifelong Democrats, into his political coalition. Thus, while a significant minority of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs crossed the racial divide and voted for Dinkins in 1989, Dinkins was unable to expand his appeal among ethnic whites, in large part, due to the racialized worldviews of the era. Dinkins’s political philosophy, at its core, sought racial reconciliation, and his calm personality contrasted sharply with angry voices like Sharpton. Dinkins’s approach provided an opening for Rudy Giuliani, an Italian American and Republican, who was not afraid to exploit racial tension and the white public’s fear of loss of status, to nearly defeat Dinkins in an overwhelmingly Democratic city in 1989. Paradoxically, the news coverage that focused on a racially divided city also created the political opening for Dinkins to successfully challenge Koch. The news coverage of issues dealing with race launched Dinkins’s mayoral bid and turned out African American voters in large numbers.

Several scholars have already explored how media representations shaped perceptions of African American politicians in general and Dinkins in particular. An exhaustive review of Dinkins’s papers housed at Columbia University, as well as sources not available to prior scholars, reveals that Dinkins and his advisors closely monitored both the print media as well as local news coverage, which impacted his agenda even more than suspected by prior commentators. Also, the marches by Sharpton and other

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6 Some political scientists have argued that Dinkins’s electoral victory was the product of the emergence of African Americans as a unified bloc of voters. See Chris McNickle, To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

black activists from 1986 to 1989 and how they shaped the broader public’s views of an
African American politician like Dinkins provide insight into the black freedom
movement in the Northern city.⁸

The media coverage of Sharpton’s protests into predominately white
neighborhoods, including Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, shaped both how Dinkins
viewed ethnic whites and how some ethnic whites viewed him. The marches damaged
support for Dinkins among some portion of ethnic whites. The images of the counter-
protesters, some of whom engaged in disgraceful and racist behavior, led Dinkins to view
at least some portion of the ethnic white vote in the outer boroughs as overtly racist
enemies.

In this drama, there are several actors, including Dinkins, Sharpton, and the Italian
Americans of Howard Beach and Bensonhurst. The title of the chapter comes from a
widespread feeling that certain white communities were unwelcoming to African
Americans. That is, they were viewed as the “belly of the beast,” reflecting a
characterization of certain white neighborhoods, including Howard Beach and
Bensonhurst, as largely irremediable enclaves of racial hatred. In fact, Sharpton
compared Howard Beach to apartheid era South Africa.⁹ While Dinkins did not use such

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⁸ In recent years, scholars of the black freedom movement have started to explore the activism in
the Northern City in the period after the 1970s and this chapter seeks to add to the scholarship on the black
freedom movement in the North. See Peniel E. Joseph, Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History
Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era (New York: Routledge, 2006); and
Manning Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990

march-in-queens.html. In October 2019, I sat down with Dinkins for an informal talk as I was writing this
chapter, and he stated that one could accurately characterize Howard Beach and Bensonhurst as hostile to
inflammatory language in public or private, he recognized the hardened racism of certain white communities. A sizable portion of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs opposed Dinkins despite his rhetoric during the 1989 election that called for racial reconciliation. However, some political miscalculations also played at least some role in why ethnic whites rejected Dinkins, ultimately dooming his tenure in office and his reelection bid.

The marches further exposed cleavages within the African American community that the mainstream press, for the most part, overlooked or did not fully understand. These cleavages include the battle over political supremacy between New York City’s traditional site of political and cultural power within the African American community (Harlem) and a brash upstart (Brooklyn), the intergenerational conflict within the African American community, and the political differences between Dinkins and Sharpton.

Dinkins, a product of the World War II generation and machine politics of Harlem, faced political pressure from younger men from Brooklyn, including Sharpton. While Harlem had traditionally been the site of cultural and political leadership for African Americans in New York City, massive immigration from the Caribbean and migration from the South transformed Brooklyn into the borough with the largest number of black voters. The black influx in Brooklyn created a unique political culture. It differed in critical ways from the Democratic club brand of politics represented by the so-called Harlem Gang of Four, composed of Percy Sutton, Basil Paterson, Charles Rangel, and Dinkins. The Gang of Four dominated Harlem politics for more than a generation. They viewed obtaining political power as the most effective way to protect the rights of

African Americans at the time. He noted that he attempted without much success to make political inroads into both communities, but he faced, as he called it, a “brick-wall of resistance.”
African Americans in New York City. For the Gang of Four, political power translated into government programs and policies that benefitted African Americans. Dinkins and the other Gang of Four members advocated for multiracial coalition-building not only because it was central to their political philosophy, but also because it was nearly impossible for African Americans to obtain broader political power, given the demographics of New York City and New York State.

The gradualist approach advocated by Dinkins contrasted with the activism of Sharpton, who grew tired of the slow pace of racial progress in New York City and believed that direct action via marches and protests could shine a light on the continued presence of racism in New York City. Sharpton argued that he modeled his direct activism on Martin Luther King, Jr. He used protests as a means of exposing injustice and shaming white New Yorkers for their racism. While his detractors claimed that Sharpton was an opportunist and racial provocateur who profited from racial tension, Sharpton claimed in his 1996 autobiography entitled Go and Tell Pharaoh that he used the media attention generated by his activism to confront an unacceptable level of racism, which white New Yorkers sought to ignore.10

Despite the fact that Dinkins did not engage in street activism. Dinkins confronted Jim Crow and institutional racism. In a 2014 interview, Dinkins reflected how racism shaped his view on the world.11 He noted that he spent time during his childhood in both Harlem and Trenton, New Jersey. He described how he received a world-class education


11 David Norman Dinkins, interview by Megan French-Marcelin, Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.
in the segregated school system that existed before World War II, in large part because he
was educated by men and women who were trapped in their positions due to the racism
of the era. Moreover, Dinkins recounted how he tried repeatedly to enlist in the Marines
but that many recruiters refused him because they filled their quota of “Negroes.” He was
falsely told that he had “high blood pressure” by the military doctors. Dinkins refused
to take no for an answer and went to a private doctor who certificated that he was
physically fit for service, and this allowed him to become one of the few African
American Marines during the World War II era. In an interview, Megan French-
Marcelin repeatedly asked Dinkins about segregation and Jim Crow, but Dinkins avoided
direct answers, leaving the interviewer to insert a footnote where the interviewer inferred
that Dinkins “did not want to give power to the Jim Crow past that he assuredly
encountered.” After his time in the armed service, which he described as an honor,
Dinkins mentioned that he and a friend sued a bar for discrimination because the bar
refused to serve them. He jokingly recounted how this lawsuit was one of the few
lawsuits that he won. Dinkins characterized his actions as insignificant compared to the
civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s like John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Nelson Mandela, Paul Robeson, and Harry Belafonte. However, Dinkins clearly refused
to submit to the racial order of the Jim Crow era.

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12 Dinkins, interview, 4–6.
13 Dinkins, interview, 5–6.
14 Dinkins, interview, 5–6. Dinkins served in the Marines from July 1945 to August 1946. Therefore, Dinkins entered his military service as World War II was ending.
15 Dinkins, interview, 20.
16 Dinkins, interview, 15.
In the same interview, Dinkins detailed how he largely operated in a black-dominated world, describing his rise to political power in a self-deprecating manner. After his military service time, he reluctantly attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. He did not have any interest in school at the time and was forced to attend university because his mother-in-law did not want him to waste his G.I. Bill benefits. He then engaged in some odd jobs until he decided to go to law school. As he colorfully told the interviewer, he decided to go to law school because “you don’t have to be too smart to be a lawyer.” He explained that he decided on Brooklyn Law School because he could work at night in his father’s liquor store. According to Dinkins, he avoided political activism during law school because he was a married man and was juggling studies and a new marriage. As a struggling attorney, Dinkins joined a political club to obtain clients and connections.

Dinkins’s political involvement provided him with a long series of African American mentors. Soon he found himself deeply involved in a politically connected circle of friends and associates that included Hulan Jack, a Caribbean-born politician who was Manhattan’s first African American Borough President, and Ray Jones, who was a major player in what remained of the once-mighty Tammany Hall political machine. Dinkins described how his political involvement in Democratic club politics of the 1960s

17 Dinkins, interview, 9.
18 Dinkins, interview, 34.

19 Dinkins, interview, 35–38. Prior to the breakdown of political machines like Tammany Hall, as the Democratic Party in New York City was referred to, political candidates were selected by political machines. Political opponents and reformers often referred to political machines like Tammany Hall as “corrupt institutions.” However, some historians have discussed how both political parties grew out the political machines of the 19th century. See Terry Golway, Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics (New York: Liveright Press, 2014).
resulted in long-term friendships with the leading young African American politicians of the era, including Charles Rangel, Basil Peterson, and Percy Sutton. Dinkins recounted how he entered electoral politics first as a candidate for assembly member to briefly fill a newly created state assembly seat to represent Harlem. He took this step because he was asked to do so by Ray Jones, who said, “Boy, you want to run for Assembly?” However, Dinkins’s time in the Assembly was short-lived as he spent less than a year in Albany. He returned to private law practice and then was appointed to serve as the President of the Board of New York City Election, where he served one largely uneventful year from 1972 to 1973. Thus, Dinkins’s rise to political power came, in large part, from Democratic Party structures in the 1960s and 1970s and from significant political connections within the Harlem-dominated political machine of the era.

Especially important in understanding his single term as mayor is that, in the interview, Dinkins indicated that he was not ideologically driven. Instead, he described how he was aligned with men who were political rivals of Harlem’s long-serving Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who helped shepherd much of the Great Society legislation through Congress. He noted that he helped Charlie Rangel upset Powell when Powell was plagued by a series of scandal in the late 1960s. Dinkins seemed to indicate that the realities of the moment rather than differences in ideology dictated his decision-making. For example, he described how the African American political class was deeply

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20 Dinkins, interview, 37.
21 Dinkins, interview, 41.
divided between Harlem and Brooklyn factions, but these divisions derived in large part from politicians’ personalities and not from political differences.\textsuperscript{22}

Dinkins emerged as a rising African American political star during John Lindsay’s second mayoral term (1970–1973) and Abe Beame’s only mayoral term (1974–1977) as both men sought out allies within Harlem’s political clubs.\textsuperscript{23} Beame, who served as mayor during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, sought to appoint Dinkins to the position of deputy mayor. In New York City government, deputy mayors have significant administrative powers, overseeing a wide range of tasks delegated to them by the mayor. If Dinkins would have been confirmed, he would have been the first African American deputy mayor in New York City’s history. However, during the nomination process, news emerged that Dinkins failed to file and pay taxes for several years, thwarting his nomination.\textsuperscript{24} Instead, Beame appointed Dinkins to serve in the high-paying patronage role of city clerk, whose main tasks including issuing marriage licenses, maintaining vital

\textsuperscript{22} Dinkins, interview, 42.

\textsuperscript{23} Mayor Lindsay’s time in office has been the focus of several books as his legacy remains the subject of fierce academic debate. For example, some historians have written about how Lindsey’s Great Society agenda played a large part in explaining New York City’s fiscal problems in the 1970s. See Vincent Cannato, \textit{The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York} (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Other scholars have focused on how Lindsay’s brand of liberalism alienated white working-class voters. See David Paul Kuhn, \textit{The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Still other historians have painted a more positive view of Lindsay’s impact on New York City. See Joseph P. Viteritti, \textit{Summer in the City: John Lindsay, New York, and the American Dream}, illustrated ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{24} Dinkins initially argued that he believed that he complied with tax law because his law practice filed tax returns. However, he later filed the four missing years individual tax returns with all movies due for those years. While state agencies investigated the situation, Dinkins never was prosecuted. See Josh Barbanel, “Records Provide Fresh Details About Dinkins's Tax Lapses,” \textit{New York Times}, June 30, 1989, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/30/nyregion/records-provide-fresh-details-about-dinkins-s-tax-lapses.html}
records, and on occasion officiating at weddings. Dinkins served in the role of city clerk from 1975 to 1985.

Dinkins had a complex relationship with the next mayor, Ed Koch, who rose to power by building a coalition of ethnic whites and white liberals with a plurality of minority votes. In the 1977 mayoral election, Dinkins noted that he admired fellow Gang of Four member Percy Sutton, who had a short-lived run for mayor. Dinkins described how Sutton’s 1977 campaign influenced his own run in 1989 as Sutton focused on a “get tough on crime” approach, racial reconciliation, and a broad coalition to rebuild New York City after the fiscal crisis. Dinkins stated that he believed that the media killed Sutton’s election chances by not properly covering his campaign. Dinkins, along with the other members of the Gang of Four, threw their support behind Koch in 1977. However, Dinkins stated that he soon soured on Koch because he did not like his style. Koch had a combative personality and at times made statements deemed racially insensitive. Most importantly, Koch alienated many African Americans when he decided to close Sydenham Hospital, a Harlem hospital. During the early years of the Koch administration, Dinkins further alienated the mayor by endorsing Mario Cuomo when Koch challenged Cuomo in the 1982 gubernatorial primary.

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The relationship between Koch and Dinkins worsened over time. In 1985, Dinkins, who lost by landslide defeats in his two prior runs for the Manhattan Borough president position, finally secured that office without Koch’s political blessing. Dinkins’s 1985 victory was, in large part, due to the organizational efforts of Jesse Jackson, who mobilized and registered a sizable number of African American voters in 1984. Dinkins and Jackson had a close relationship as early supporter of Jackson during his 1984 Presidential bid.

The simmering tension between Koch and Dinkins dated back to at least April 1984, during the presidential primary in New York. Dinkins was angered by Koch’s constant criticism of Jesse Jackson. In early 1984, Jackson referred to New York City as “Hymietown” when either talking privately to a companion in an airport or during an off-the-record portion of a talk with reporters. Koch repeatedly raised this comment, arguing that Jackson was an anti-Semite due to his criticism of Israel. Dinkins argued that the Koch’s attack on Jackson, by focusing on a single private comment, ignored both the historical nature of Jackson’s 1984 presidential run as well as his decades of activism. Furthermore, Dinkins argued that Koch’s attempt to link Jackson with Louis Farrakhan, an outspoken member of the Nation of Islam who made a series of anti-Semitic remarks, was a racist attack on Jackson. Dinkins further believed that Koch crossed a red line when Koch controversially stated that “Jews would be crazy to vote” for Jackson and endorsed Senator Al Gore, who at the time had little to no chance of winning the
Democratic nomination. Koch defended his comments by arguing that Jackson’s criticism of Israel raised questions about his support for Jewish people.

During the 1984 Presidential election, Koch also heavily criticized Jackson for his refusal to condemn the anti-Semitism of Farrakhan. Koch’s criticism alienated many African Americans, including Dinkins, who endorsed Jackson in the 1984 primary. According to Dinkins, he had won in 1985, in large part, because Jackson’s 1984 presidential run provided him with a model for forging a multiracial coalition that he lacked in his prior unsuccessful runs for that office. His campaign advisor William Lynch and pollster Bill Johnson provided him with advice on the nuances of Manhattan politics that he lacked during his first two failed runs for that office. These two men would also eventually suggest that he challenge Koch for mayor in 1989.

Once elected to Manhattan Borough President, Dinkins emerged as a frequent critic of Koch on a host of issues, including Koch’s treatment of race relations. Dinkins argued that Koch worsened race relations through his heated rhetoric and policies. While Koch emerged on the political scene as a liberal, he was also known for his colorful language and behavior that at times alienated African Americans. For example, during

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28 Purnick, “Koch Defends.”

29 Louis Farrakhan emerged as a leader of a group of African Americans who adhere to a religion referred to as the “Nation of Islam,” which is not in communion with orthodox Islam that grew out of the teachings of an African American preacher named Elijah Muhammad. Koch compared Louis Farrakhan to a Nazi leader, citing the Nation of Islam’s depiction of Judaism as “gutter religion” and the creation of Israel as an “outlaw action.” Moreover, Koch sought to link Jackson with Farrakhan by asking Jackson to repudiate Farrakhan. See David W. Dunlap, “Koch, on TV, Criticizes Jackson,” New York Times, July 2, 1984. https://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/02/us/koch-on-tv-criticizes-jackson.html.

30 Dinkins, interview, 72.
press conferences, Koch often referred to criminals as “animals” and “thugs” and labeled neighborhoods as “ghettos,” terms that some African Americans viewed as reflecting Koch’s racial insensitivity. Moreover, Koch stated that he would not be held “hostage” by the African American community that was looking for special treatment. Koch’s statements and polices including his decision to close Sydenham Hospital led to strained relations between his administration and the African American community.31 Dinkins, as Manhattan Borough President, took issue with Koch’s tendency to vilify African Americans and their neighborhoods. Dinkins often noted that the Koch administrations’ hand-off policing policies caused crime to fester in African American communities. In the view of Dinkins, police spent most of their time responding to emergencies rather than preventing crime from happening, and crime prevention required an increased police presence in African American communities.32 The Koch years featured the emergence of crack cocaine and there was more than one thousand nine and five murders, setting a record.33 Dinkins’s criticism of policing during the Koch era caused the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association to endorse Koch during the 1989 primary.34


In the 1960s and 1970s, Dinkins skillfully operated within the traditional power structures in Harlem and then Manhattan. However, he never ran for contested citywide office prior to 1989. Thus, Dinkins had extraordinarily little contact with ethnic whites in the outer boroughs. His political mentors were, in large part, elder African Americans who skillfully obtained political power in Harlem.

While Dinkins was rising to political power via the Harlem party machine, several factors, including suburbanization and deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, contributed to demographic changes in New York City.\(^\text{35}\) During this time, millions of white New Yorkers left the city. As white New Yorkers left for the suburbs of New Jersey, Long Island, Westchester and parts farther afield, the percentage of non-whites increased due to migration and immigration. Thus, starting in the 1960s, the racial composition of New York City underwent a massive transformation. In the early 1900s, whites in New York City constituted more than 95% of the population with a small but rapidly growing African American community. While there was a large growth in the city’s African American population in the period from 1890 to 1910, there were less than one hundred thousand African Americans in New York City in 1910 in a city of nearly four million people.\(^\text{36}\) In stark contrast, in 1989 whites in New York City were a minority in four of the five boroughs. These demographic changes were most dramatic in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens, as many previously white-working class neighborhoods became predominately African American neighborhoods, especially in


portions of Brooklyn and Queens. Harlem, once the largest population center of African Americans in the city, became surpassed by Brooklyn in the 1970s.

As neighborhoods transformed, racial tensions between remaining whites and African Americans emerged. So did real and perceived boundaries separating white and African American neighborhoods. African Americans were generally not welcomed in New York City by the outer boroughs’ white populations, which feared their presence. There was heavy resistance to the integration of the public school system in the outer boroughs, which contributed to white flight to the suburbs. For those who remained, many parents moved to predominately white neighborhoods or pulled their children out of the public school system, fleeing to the nation’s largest Catholic school system in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1972, resistance to integration made national headlines. Thousands of white parents refused to send their children to Canarsie’s public schools when the New York City Board of Education mandated the busing of black and Puerto Rican students into what was previously a white enclave.37 The battle over school integration played a key role in explaining the emergence of a distinctive brand of conservatism in an overwhelmingly Democratic city.38

With these shifting demographics, a large share of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs grew skeptical of government at all levels.39 The working-class ethnic whites of areas like Canarsie often felt that white liberal elites like Mayor John Lindsay had, in the


racist vernacular of the era, “sold them out” to curry favor with the rapidly growing minority populations. Many ethnic whites viewed the liberal Great Society programs as incentivizing the migration of African Americans and Puerto Ricans into New York City.

The demographic changes had a real-world impact on their lives. For example, many of the residents of Canarsie in the 1960s and 1970s were, in large part, recent transplants from other Brooklyn neighborhoods who left their old neighborhoods as African Americans and Caribbean immigrants transformed Brooklyn. Many of these ethnic whites who settled in Canarsie from other neighborhoods invested their life savings in the recently built single family homes in the area. These whites associated changed demographics with decreased real estate values and increased crime. They reached these conclusions based on not only fear, but also their observations of what happened to previously white working-class neighborhoods like East New York. The presence of African Americans led to an initial drop in real estate values, fueling an exodus of white homeowners who converted their property to rental units or sold to African American buyers. For many ethnic whites, peaceful coexistence with African American neighbors was not an option, and whites, for the most part, did not draw nuanced distinctions between middle class African Americans, immigrants from the Caribbean, and poor African Americans.

In the face of the changed demographics, most ethnic whites in the outer boroughs developed two responses to the presence of African Americans: fight or flight. The fight response is illustrated by the violent resistance to perceived encroachment by two African American young men in two white enclaves, Howard Beach, Queens and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, as well as the African American response to racist violence. In the battle
between whites in the outer boroughs and the growing population of African Americans in Brooklyn and Queens, Dinkins found himself largely as an observer to and a commentator on the conflicts.

By the 1980s, Canarsie, a once-white enclave that fiercely resisted busing in the 1960s and 1970s, transformed demographically, resulting in a neighborhood that was nearly evenly split between African Americans and whites. By the mid-1990s, Canarsie, along with the adjoining neighborhoods of Flatlands and Flatbush, emerged as predominately middle class African American neighborhoods. However, some white neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens populated by working-class Italian Americans emerged as white strongholds that resisted demographic trends.

Millions of Italian Americans can trace their roots through New York City. They have played an influential role in shaping the city’s unique culture. Italian Americans, given their large numbers, had an impact on nearly every aspect of the city’s life, including its politics. In 1989, nearly one million Italian Americans, representing almost one quarter of New York City’s white population, lived in New York City, with a majority of Italian Americans living in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. Those Italian Americas in Brooklyn and Queens lived in a handful of enclaves, including Howard Beach and Bensonhurst.

Despite their large numbers, Italian Americans experienced a long history of discrimination in New York City. This discrimination impacted their social mobility and assimilation into the broader white society. In the general public’s imagination, strong

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linkages existed between the Italian American community and organized crime, even though members of organized crime made up an exceedingly small percentage of the Italian American community. Moreover, a combination of factors, including discrimination, language barriers, class differences, and differing social expectations, played a role in the low graduation rates of Italian Americans. In the 1970s and 1980s, high school graduation and college attendance rates of Italian Americans were similar to that of African Americans and Hispanics in New York City. As late as 1990, less than 70% of Italian Americans graduated high school and less than 50% Italian Americans went on to college.\footnote{Felicia R. Lee, “20% Dropout Rate Found for Italian-Americans,” \textit{New York Times}, May 1, 1990, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/01/nyregion/20-dropout-rate-found-for-italian-americans.html}.} A May 1, 1990, \textit{New York Times} article cited how many Italian American youth suffered from low self-esteem due to stereotypes, impacting their educational outcomes.\footnote{Lee, “20% Dropout.”} In 1976, the Chancellor of the City University of New York took the unprecedented step of designating Italian Americans as a “protected class” in employment decisions in response to a class-action lawsuit that alleged a long history of discrimination against Italian American students and a lack of Italian American faculty.\footnote{For an examination of the litigation between Italian Americans and the City University of New York, see Liana Kirillova, “When Affirmative Action Is White: Italian Americans in the City University of New York, 1976–Present,” MA thesis (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 2016). See also Francis N. Elmi, \textit{The Invisible Minority: A History of the Italian American Struggle for Justice and Equality at The City University of New York} (New York: Queens College, 1996).} The Italian American population was, in large part, lower middle class or working class. The income levels for the majority of Italian Americans during the 1960s and 1970s was only slightly higher than that of African Americans and Hispanics. Thus, it could be argued that the resistance of Italian Americans in New York City to changed
demographics was a clash between two groups that were competing not only for land, but also for increased status in New York City’s complicated social class hierarchy. Some ethnic whites used race as a means of stigmatizing blacks as a means of creating and then trapping blacks into a permanent underclass. This dynamic was in play in the outer boroughs as ethnic whites sought to maintain their fragile status in the face of deindustrialization.

While Dinkins lived most of his adult life in upper Manhattan, Sharpton grew up in Brooklyn, attending Tilden High School in the late 1960s and early 1970s, alongside many Italian Americans. This difference left Dinkins unprepared to address the concerns of Italian Americans. At the northern edge of Canarsie, Tilden High School underwent a demographic change in the 1970s. Once a nearly all white school composed of Jewish and Italian-Americans, it became nearly evenly split between whites and African Americans in the early 1970s. At Tilden High School, Sharpton witnessed discrimination first-hand. He saw the violent clashes between whites and African Americans as well as the fierce opposition of a segment of whites to integration of the

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44 For a discussion of the complex relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans, see John Gennari, Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017). In what Gennari describes as the “edge” between Italian American and African American worlds, the two groups have a deep understanding of each other even if there are occasional moments of tension and violence.


46 To date, Sharpton’s placement in the black freedom movement has not been the focus of a great deal of serious historical scholarship. Sharpton in the late 1980s and early 1990s emerged as the most prominent civil rights activist in New York City. However, Sharpton was also known for his confrontational and provocative style, and, as such, he was a highly controversial figure. However, Sharpton’s activism built upon and grew out of a long tradition of civil rights activism in New York City that has only recently been extensively explored by historians. For an examination of the civil rights activism in New York City from the post-World War I era to the recent era, see Thomas J. Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (New York: Random House, 2009).
schools. Sharpton was a high school student at the time that the white parents of Canarsie led a boycott against busing.

Unlike Dinkins, who felt at ease court-side at tennis matches and toney restaurants in Manhattan, Sharpton’s style and mannerisms derived from the streets of Brooklyn. Labeled as a troublemaker by his many enemies in the white press, Sharpton was known at the time for a hairstyle modeled on the musician James Brown, who was his mentor, and his flashy street clothes that included tracksuits, gold chains, and other jewelry. Conversely, Dinkins’s prior training as a lawyer taught him the importance of being deliberate and cautious, and he never engaged in street activism. For example, when asked what he was doing during the 1964 unrest in Harlem following the death of a teenager by a police officer, Dinkins stated that he had not been personally involved in any protests because he was an attorney and he had a wife and children. Instead, Dinkins developed a large network of influential whites and African Americans by playing tennis, attending benefits, and gaining membership in social clubs and political organizations. In contrast, Sharpton’s experiences were grounded in the black churches in Brooklyn and grassroots community organizing. Sharpton described how his activism was driven by anger to injustice. His message was for the dispossessed African Americans who were growing tired of the continued presence of all forms of racism from police brutality and discrimination to the living conditions in predominately African American neighborhoods. In his media appearances, Sharpton shamed white New

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47 Historians have sought to historicize the 1964 unrest in Harlem. See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University, 2007).

Yorkers for their racism and refused to submit to middle-class white expectations of respectability. For whites who were unfamiliar with the long history of activism within the African American community, Sharpton’s activism appeared opportunistic rather than growing out of a long tradition of civil rights activism.

Despite their differences, Dinkins and Sharpton both agreed that the media of the era was racist. Dinkins frequently criticized the media’s coverage of him and the African American community. However, Sharpton believed that the media was a valuable tool in the fight against racism because the images produced would provide indisputable proof to whites of the prevalence of racism. Thus, rather than avoid the media, Sharpton sought it out. Sharpton’s constant media presence had a significant political impact on Dinkins because many of the city’s African Americans viewed Sharpton as leading the fight against racism in the city, while many African Americans viewed Dinkins as an overly cautious politician who was not always bold enough to take the lead on many issues. However, few whites understood the complexity of African American politics and often crudely linked Sharpton and Dinkins. For example, Dinkins was constantly asked by the mainstream press about whether he supported Sharpton’s actions or position. The constant querying regarding Sharpton was a source of constant irritation for Dinkins.

Sharpton used direct action, including demonstrations, boycotts, and protests. During the Koch years, he sided with some extremely unpopular causes. He argued that he sought to expose the persistence of racism in New York by directly confronting it at every opportunity. In response, his detractors argued that he was a media hound who sought the spotlight as a means of self-aggrandizement. Sharpton responded that he used the media as a tool to expose racism because the mainstream media refused to do its job.
For example, during the criminal trial of Bernhard Goetz, a white man who shot several African American teens on the subway in 1984, Sharpton protested outside of the courthouse for months, demanding justice for the teens. Sharpton labeled Goetz a racist vigilante who used overwhelming force, even paralyzing one of the teens. In the 1990s, as a part of a civil suit to recover damages from Goetz, video and audio recordings that were suppressed as unduly prejudicial in his criminal trial revealed that he did, in fact, harbor racist ideas. After Goetz was acquitted on the most serious charges and convicted solely on a gun possession charge, Sharpton alleged that the Goetz trial illustrated the racist nature of the criminal justice system because African Americans who committed similar offenses received harsher sentences than whites.

At the time, white and African American public opinion differed sharply on the Goetz verdict.\textsuperscript{49} Whites viewed Goetz as motivated by his desire to defend himself, while African Americans viewed Goetz as a man who engaged in excessive force due to his racism.\textsuperscript{50} Darell Cabey, who was paralyzed by Goetz, brought a civil suit against Goetz for damages. During this civil suit, recordings of Goetz’s racist ideas not only changed public opinion on his motivations, but also resulted in the imposition of a 1996 verdict against Goetz that totaled nearly $50 million in combined compensatory and punitive damages. The events surrounding Goetz’s shooting illustrated the skewed media portrayal of racial events and the larger climate that Dinkins confronted.


\textsuperscript{50} Gross, “Public’s Response.”
Dinkins, Sharpton, and the Italian American communities in the outer boroughs intersected in the aftermath of another incident that thrust the previously sleepy Howard Beach neighborhood into the national spotlight and transformed New York City politics: the 1986 death of Michael Griffin, an immigrant from Trinidad who was fleeing from a mob of mostly Italian American teenagers.

The death of Michael Griffin began with the breakdown of his car in the isolated and remote neighborhood of Broad Channel, Queens, located several miles away from Howard Beach. On the night of December 19, 1986, Griffin, along with two of his companions, walked more than three miles from Broad Channel to Howard Beach to get help. While walking, Griffin had a verbal altercation with a group of white teenagers. The white teens were on their way to a party. Griffin and his companions arrived at a pizzeria and had a quick meal at around midnight. As they finished their meal, a group of white teenagers confronted Griffin and his companions. During the fight, Griffin was savagely beaten and sought to escape by running away. Chased by several white teenagers, Griffin ran onto the Belt Parkway, located only a few blocks from the pizzeria. A passing car driven by another white teenager, unrelated to the pack of teenagers who attacked Griffin, accidently struck and killed Griffin.

The media sought to emphasize the racial polarization of the city in its coverage of the event. Members of many organizations, including the Catholic Church, participated in the marches and protests in Howard Beach; however, the media, for the most part, focused its attention on Sharpton, creating a distorted view of the protests. For example,

the television coverage focused on Sharpton despite the fact that hundreds of white 
Catholics also marched against racism.\textsuperscript{52}

Sharpton’s protests and demonstrations almost always faced disorganized 
counter-protesters. These counter-protests mostly involved small groups of ethnic white 
youth. In Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, groups of Italian Americans yelled racial 
slurs, and a few held up and threw watermelons at the African American protesters. Other 
counter-protests stuck up their middle fingers in defiance, while yelling “Niggers go 
home! Get out of here!”\textsuperscript{53} In Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, Sharpton attracted larger 
crowds of counter-protesters that were mostly young men and teenagers, but also 
included some adult women and men. Sharpton described how the response from whites 
in the 1980s was similar to what he read about that happened in the South in the 1950s 
and 1960s. Sharpton noted that his Howard Beach protests became worldwide news 
because he had exposed a bastion of racial hatred within the most famous metropolis in 
the world. When people turned on the news that night and saw grown-ups, homeowners, 
and taxpayers standing out on the streets of New York City yelling, “Nigger! Nigger! 
Nigger!” they couldn’t believe it.\textsuperscript{54} One of those shocked people was Dinkins. The 
images from Howard Beach had significant political implications for Dinkins, as it made

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Smothers, “1,200 Protestors.”
brooklyn.html}.
\item[54] Sharpton and Walton, \textit{Go and Tell Pharaoh: The Autobiography of The Reverend Al Sharpton}, 
103. For an analysis of Sharpton’s continued role in New York City politics in the Giuliani years, see Evan 
Mandery, \textit{The Campaign: Rudy Giuliani, Ruth Messinger, Al Sharpton, and the Race to Be Mayor of New 
York City} (New York: Basic Books, 1999), which discusses the role that Sharpton played in the election of 
1999.
\end{footnotes}
racial tension one of the leading themes featured in the media’s coverage of the last years of Koch’s tenure. The emergence of race as a central issue provided an opening for emergence of an African American politician like Dinkins who promised to heal the racial tension of the era.

Located a short distance from numerous beach communities, Howard Beach in the 1980s had more in common culturally with suburban areas in Long Island and New Jersey than with the rest of New York City. The neighborhood of Howard Beach is located on a peninsula separated from the rest of Queens by Jamaica Bay, the Belt Parkway, and land owned by one of the world’s busiest airports, John F. Kennedy airport. The neighborhood is a short distance away from the border that separates Queens from Nassau County in Long Island. Unlike Manhattan, many Southern Brooklyn and Queens areas like Howard Beach have a suburban feel, with neighborhoods composed of one family residential homes.

In 1986, Howard Beach was a predominately Italian-American and Jewish-American neighborhood with a population more than 95% white. This population of Howard Beach was, in large part, a product of two trends in New York City history. The first trend was a massive post-World War II building boom in the 1950s to the 1960s. Thousands of single-family homes provided ethnic whites with their first taste of home ownership. The second trend was of white flight. Howard Beach was largely populated by whites who moved into the area in the 1970s and 1980s from previously white neighborhoods like Flatbush and Canarsie in Brooklyn that underwent demographic

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transformations. Thus, for the most part, whites who lived in Howard Beach in 1986 were relatively recent transplants who sought out the area because it remained one of the whitest and most isolated neighborhoods. At the time, the physical barriers that separated the area from the rest of Queens, as well as high real estate values, were considered obstacles that prevented African Americans from purchasing property in the area.

A generation of demographic change coincided with rising crime rates. Whites often complained of the deterioration of so-called “good” white working-class neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens as those neighborhoods became, in the racialized vernacular of the era, “ghettos.” Events like the Blackout of 1977 that featured widespread looting and arson played into a narrative of a city in a generation-long “death spiral” that fueled not only further white flight but also anxiety and fear among the whites who remained in predominately white outer borough communities like Howard Beach.56

A large influx of African Americans from the South and immigration from the Caribbean into Brooklyn’s center from the 1960s to the 1980s resulted in ethnic whites moving into coastal areas of Brooklyn and Queens. Tension existed over the perceived boundaries between white and African American areas, erupting in low-level violence. Gangs of white and African American youths often clashed in the 1960s and 1970s in the border areas in Queens and Brooklyn. Thus, the incidents of Howard Beach fit within a long pattern of racial tension in the borderlands between white and African American neighborhoods in the outer boroughs.

The 1986 death of Griffin occurred only one year into Dinkins’s term as Manhattan Borough President but represented evidence of the pervasive racism found in some white communities in the city. While several of the white teens who chased Griffin were arrested days after the incident, the prosecution of the white teens took place over several years and was a major local news story for years. Mayor Koch sharply condemned the attack and was vilified by Howard Beach residents, who said that Koch had unfairly labeled the neighborhood as a racist enclave. Moreover, Koch called for the creation of an independent commission to investigate racism in the city.\footnote{Joyce Purnick, “A Break with the Past: Koch and Racial Attacks,” 

For Dinkins, the Howard Beach attack was not an isolated incident. A trained lawyer, he did not weigh in on the events of Howard Beach until the verdicts were rendered against the white teens. Thereafter, Dinkins, sharply condemned the Griffin murder as well as the Howard Beach community and the counter-protesters that Sharpton faced. In 1988, Dinkins regularly linked the events in Howard Beach to the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, describing how Griffin’s death represented just the latest example of a black person killed by whites in New York City. While speaking before the Brooklyn Law School Minority Alumni in 1988, Dinkins stated:

Indeed, is there any difference between the lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955 and the tragic death of Michael Griffin in Howard Beach in 1986? It is a further indictment of our society that it takes something as vile and
ugly as a lynch mob in New York City in the year 1986 to shock this city and nation into action. Racism and racist violence did not begin with Howard Beach. Nor are blacks the only victims.

Arthur Miller, Luis Baez, Willie Turks, Gary Moy, Michael Stewart, Eleanor Bumpurs, Nicholas Bartlett, Juan Rodriquez, the list goes on. Reported incidents of bias related violence have doubled. Statistics aside—just one incident, just one Michael Griffith, is one too many.58

Dinkins dismissed those who argued that the Howard Beach incident was an anomaly, arguing that even one murder of an African American by a white lynch mob indicated widespread racism within New York City’s white population. Speaking to predominately African American audiences in 1988 and 1989, Dinkins emphasized that racism and social structures like underperforming schools and poor housing trapped large numbers of African Americans in poverty.59

Legal proceedings related to Howard Beach incident featured in the local media coverage for several years. In total, nine white teens were convicted for their part in the attack, with the leaders of the attack receiving lengthy sentences. Later Special Prosecutor Charles Hynes, together with co-author Bo Drury, wrote about the legal proceedings in a best seller entitled Incident at Howard Beach: The Case for Murder.60

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The events of Howard Beach eventually were made into a 1989 television movie entitled *Howard Beach: Making a Case for Murder*, which was released a few weeks after the 1989 mayoral election. An op-ed writer in the *New York Times*, like Dinkins and Sharpton, linked and compared the events of 1986 with the violence in the South in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that the incidents of Howard Beach were the product of more than “two hundred years of racism.”

Dinkins repeatedly echoed this idea. For example, in a speech on March 19, 1988, to the Federation of Negro Civil Service Employees, he stated, “Racism and racist violence did not begin with Howard Beach, nor are blacks the only victims.” While comparisons between the South in the 1950s and 1960s and Howard Beach in 1986 made sense to Dinkins, such comparisons angered many ethnic whites who believed that Dinkins had unfairly labeled them as racists. At the time, most ethnic whites had views on race that prevented them from acknowledging how African Americans viewed their actions and behavior as evidence of racism. For example, ethnic whites often failed to acknowledge that their movement from one part of the city to another part of the city was, in large part, driven by racial fear. Likewise, many ethnic whites viewed incidences like the murder of Griffin as isolated incidents, failing to acknowledge that what the current era has labeled “systemic racism” played a part in causing events like the Howard

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Beach murder. Moreover, many ethnic whites were unable to decipher Dinkins’s nuanced arguments about how eliminating racism required changing more than laws. Dinkins argued that whites had to acknowledge how racism played a significant role in causing the poverty and urban blight that many whites blamed on the presence of African Americans.

A week after the murder of Griffin, Sharpton explained that Griffin “was killed due to the color of his skin.” Sharpton took part in a march of more than 1,500 protesters demanding the prosecution of the white teens as well as the appointment of an independent prosecutor. Sharpton and other protesters marched along the same path Griffin took along Cross Bay Boulevard on the night of his death. While the media often described Sharpton as the “leader” of the marches, Sharpton’s group represented only a small part of the marches, as the local Catholic Church and other civil rights organizations also took part.

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64 For a deeper discussion of how white enclaves like Howard Beach prevented whites from developing meaningful relationships with African Americans and from understanding the problem of systemic racism see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David G. Embrick, “Every Place Has a Ghetto”: The Significance of Whites' Social and Residential Segregation.” *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 3 (2007): 323-45.

65 For quotes from Sharpton regarding the events discussed in this chapter and a retrospective of Sharpton see Greg Howard, “Al Sharpton, Reconsidered: Mr. Sharpton has been called a race hustler, a hero, a buffoon, a freedom fighter. He would prefer to be remembered as the Martin Luther King of the North.” *New York Times*, March 9, 2018. [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/nyregion/al-sharpton-reconsidered.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/nyregion/al-sharpton-reconsidered.html).

66 In later years, some commentators would argue that Sharpton coined the famous “No Justice, No Peace” slogan at the Howard Beach rally. However, a compelling case could be made that Sharpton adopted a slogan used by Sonny Carson, a black nationalist discussed in a later chapter of this work, who was quoted as using the term in 1987 New York Times article. See Dena Kleiman, “Limelight Shines Again on Sonny Carson,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1987. [https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/06/nyregion/limelight-shines-again-on-sonny-carson.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/06/nyregion/limelight-shines-again-on-sonny-carson.html).

Sharpton ended his march in front of the pizzeria where Griffin purchased his last meal. As Sharpton and his supporters marched in Howard Beach, small groups of white male teens and young men, as well as older men and women, jeered at Sharpton. Others held up signs with racist messages. Others eschewed overt racism but told reporters that they viewed Sharpton’s protest as merely “a provocation” and an attempt to “cause trouble.”68 Despite the fact that a coalition of groups were present, Sharpton became viewed by many, falsely, as the “leader” of the Howard Beach protest, in part because the media popularized a series of photographs of Sharpton outside of the pizzeria on Cross Bay Boulevard.

While many leaders in the Howard Beach community, including the Catholic Church, denounced racism, the mainstream media often focused on the voices of young ethnic whites who were all too willing to provide the press with juicy quotes.69 For example, some ethnic whites stated that blacks were entering the neighborhood for no other reason than to commit crimes.70 In a December 22, 1986 New York Times article, reporter Jane Gross quoted a twenty-three year old construction worker who wanted to be referred to only as Jimmy: “It is very easy to spot a black person in this neighborhood,

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68 In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were numerous racially motivated attacks by teenagers and young men in New York City along the informal borderlands in South Brooklyn and Queens that separated neighborhood viewed as “white” and “black” by teenagers and young men of both races. In defending their actions, whites often cited a need to “defend their neighborhood” from African Americans who did not “belong” or were “causing trouble.” For a study of the motivations of these attacks see Howard Pinderhughes, “The Anatomy of Racially Motivated Violence in New York City: A Case Study of Youth in Southern Brooklyn,” Social Problems, 40, no. 4, (November 1993): 478–492.


70 Goss, “As Priest.”
and whenever I see one, I know he’s up to no good.”  

By focusing on the unfiltered voices of these young people, the media may have created a distorted picture of the views of most whites.

While Dinkins was largely supportive of Sharpton’s marches, views on Sharpton’s activities reflected a racial split. A large number of whites felt that Howard Beach and its largely working-class white population had been unfairly singled out by Sharpton. For example, a January 30, 1988 op-ed in the *New York Times* noted that the media’s focus on a few angry voices in the crowd ignored the majority of the citizens of the area who condemned the violence of the teens. The essay criticized the media for demonizing the area:

But the media in reporting about the Howard Beach incident were intent on portraying the community as the source from which all evil springs. They ignored the good news that the majority of residents roundly and vehemently condemned the violence and justifiably viewed the confrontation as an aberration. Instead, most reporters busied themselves with the search for an incendiary quote from a person who was willing to say something derogatory about blacks, whites or Howard Beach.  

The op-ed reflected a widespread notion shared by many ethnic whites who argued that both African Americans and white liberals used Griffin’s death to vilify working class whites in the outer boroughs to advance a political agenda. The media did not engage in any serious introspection to assess the role that they themselves played in

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71 Goss, “As Priest.”

sensationalizing high-profile instances of racism and failed to explore deeply the origins of racial tension in New York City.

The Howard Beach incident played a key role in Dinkins’s decision to challenge Ed Koch. In the period from 1986 to 1988, Dinkins repeatedly criticized Koch’s handling of racial issues, arguing that Koch was racially insensitive and divisive. Dinkins argued that New York City needed a mayor who had the ability to heal racial tensions. Thus, when Dinkins challenged Koch in the Democratic primary in 1989, the central message of his primary campaign was that high-profile racial incidents such as Griffin’s death and the Goetz shooting, and the divisions that these incidents revealed, demonstrated Koch’s inability to bridge racial differences. In 1987, Dinkins issued a stinging rebuke of a report issued by a commission formed by Koch to provide recommendations for New York City’s future planning that emphasized the need to develop service industries like law, finance, tourism, real estate and media industries. The report noted that the emphasis of these industries would provide opportunities for all New Yorkers. In the more than forty-page critique, Dinkins argued that the report ignored the “historical racial discrimination which has prevented the assimilation of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.”

Dinkins argued that Koch’s proposals not only exacerbated racial tension, but also ignored the centrality of racism in shaping New York City’s landscape.

Dinkins missed an opportunity to exploit Koch’s missteps. Despite Koch’s close personal friendship with Cardinal John O’Connor, which culminated in the 1989 book “His Eminence and Hizzoner: A Candid Exchange: Mayor Edward Koch and John

His Eminence and Hizzoner: A Candid Exchange: Mayor Edward Koch and John

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Cardinal O'Connor, it was not a foregone conclusion in 1989 that ethnic white Catholics would overwhelming support Koch despite their prior support. In fact, the media noted that many ethnic whites had grown tired of Koch, who was attempting to secure an unprecedented fourth term. In fact, the press coverage of the era focused on how Koch had alienated a large segment of non-Hispanic Catholics, especially Irish and Italians, due to a series of series of corruption scandals and rising crime in the outer boroughs. The press reported that Koch’s weaknesses among ethnic whites provided an opening for a challenger.

However, Dinkins did little to take advantage of Koch’s weakness among ethnic whites. When Dinkins was Manhattan Borough President, denouncing the Howard Beach teens and the racism of Italian American community had little political downside, as Manhattan’s prior large population of Italian Americans migrated in the post-World War II era to the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens. After the verdicts in the Griffin murder, Dinkins described how the verdict probably would do little to change racial views of whites in the city but would deter those who might otherwise have acted violently. “Part of the reason for punishment is to deter others,” said Dinkins. “I'm not suggesting it will make good people out of bad people,” he continued, “but some people who are just as bigoted or racist as ever will think four or five times before they behave

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as they might have if there had not been this case.”\textsuperscript{76} This quote reflects Dinkins’s view that there were large segments of the white population that harbored racist feelings. His statements on Howard Beach alienated many ethnic whites, especially in the Italian American community, who argued that the actions of the teenagers on the night of the incident or of the small group of counter-protesters should not be used to judge them as a whole.

In February 1989, Dinkins announced he would challenge Koch in the Democratic primary. In his announcement speech, Dinkins never mentioned Koch. Instead, he argued that the city needed new leadership that would focus on solving problems, including the worsening racial divide, rather than making excuses or using divisive rhetoric. Moreover, Dinkins stated that “the question is not so much is the city ready for a black mayor but is the city ready to accept an African American who can persuade them that he cares about everybody in this town.”\textsuperscript{77} Thus, Dinkins emphasized how he sought to bridge the real and perceived racial barriers that characterized the Koch years.

Despite Dinkins’s call for racial reconciliation, both Koch in the primary and Giuliani in the general election sought to use race as a wedge issue. Over the course of the primary season, Koch tried to link Dinkins with Jackson and Sharpton in an attempt to prevent Dinkins from making any traction with Jewish, Italian, and other ethnic white voters who had negative views of both Jackson and Sharpton. After Dinkins defeated


Koch, Giuliani used similar attacks against Dinkins. Rather than distancing himself from Jackson and Sharpton, Dinkins campaigned with Jackson, who visited the city several times during the 1989 primary and general election seasons, and he avoided any direct criticism of Sharpton. These attacks, while playing into racial fears and stereotypes that failed to distinguish Dinkins from other black men, largely achieved their goals. These attacks created a perception among a sizeable percentage of whites that Dinkins could never bridge the racial divide because they believed that Dinkins viewed most whites as racists. Thus, a significant, unmeasurable percentage of whites never gave Dinkins a chance because of his race. There was an unmeasurable segment of the white electorate who may have been open to an African American candidate but were turned off by being labeled racist by Dinkins.\textsuperscript{78}

Director Spike Lee acknowledged that the events in Howard Beach, in large part, inspired some of the scenes in his classic film \textit{Do the Right Thing}, which dramatizes the tension between Italian Americans and African Americans in the outer boroughs during the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{79} In \textit{Do the Right Thing}, an African American crowd burns down a pizzeria owned by a racist Italian American family, reflecting the deep anger felt within the African American community that they were not respected by whites due to racism. The incident started when the Italian American owner, who had a wall full of Italian American celebrities, disparagingly refused to put any pictures of African Americans on the walls of the pizzeria. The centrality of the pizzeria in the movie was important for two reasons. First, Griffin, before being approached by a group of teenagers, had stopped at a

\textsuperscript{78}Measuring white racism is difficult because of the unreliability of polling on issues of race as many whites at the time did not overtly acknowledge how racism played a role in their decision-making.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Do the Right Thing}, directed by Spike Lee (Burbank, CA.: Universal Pictures, 1989).
pizzeria in Howard Beach. Second, pizzerias were one of few Italian-owned businesses that remained after neighborhoods transitioned from predominately white to predominately African American.

Unfortunately, Spike Lee’s caricature of Italian Americans did little to quell tension between the groups. The movie came out in the summer of 1989 and reopened old wounds between the black and white communities. The movie’s soundtrack included a song by the rap group Public Enemy, “Fight the Power,” that became one of the anthems of Sharpton’s protests in 1989, reflecting the intersection between art and politics during the era. The movie’s ending dedication to Griffin and other African Americans who died at the hands of whites motivated thousands of African Americans into the streets.

Such popular culture representations helped fuel the activism that took place after the death of Yusuf Hawkins. On the night of August 23, 1989, a group of ten to thirty Italian American teens armed with baseball bats and knives attacked Hawkins and his companions when they entered Bensonhurst to purchase a used car. The teenagers later would state that they attacked Hawkins and his companions because they believed that Hawkins and his companions were in the neighborhood to attend a party hosted by an Italian American girl who was known to date African American men. After Hawkins was beaten by several teens, an Italian American named Joseph Fama shot and killed him.

The death of Hawkins in late August 1989 led to a series of marches into Bensonhurst on the eve of the Democratic primary between Koch and Dinkins. These marches would bring thousands of African Americans into the streets and played a role in propelling Dinkins to victory, as the timing of the marches increased African American
interest in politics and led to higher turnout. As in Howard Beach years before, Sharpton faced racial abuse and a hostile audience in Bensonhurst, and images of the protests as well as the crowds of counter-protesters shaped the final days of the primary between Koch and Dinkins. The Hawkins murder became a major political issue. While Koch quickly denounced the murder of Griffin, Dinkins argued that Koch’s words did not comport with his years of racialized rhetoric. The protests following Hawkins’s death played a significant role in mobilizing the African American community to turn out to vote in both the general and primary elections. The larger turnout of African American voters played a decisive role in Dinkins’s victory.

While Dinkins was not actively involved in the marches in Bensonhurst, the proximity of the marches and the primary election led many ethnic whites to unfairly link Dinkins and Sharpton. However, the notion that New York City could boil over into widespread racial unrest, which Koch did not possess the skills needed to navigate, resulted in a higher African American turnout and African American voters overwhelmingly voted for Dinkins. Higher turnout of African Americans, in part, offset the ethnic white vote that Dinkins lost in the outer boroughs.

During the 1989 election, Dinkins recognized that he needed to heal his relationship with the city’s population of nearly one million Italian Americans. He would

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80 Again, Sharpton led a small group of protesters. However, like in Howard Beach years later, Sharpton’s group was one of many civil rights groups present at the protests. Despite the fact that Sharpton’s group was only one of many groups, the media again focused their attention on his presence and ignored the diversity of protesters. Within days of the incident, the Kings County District Attorney in Brooklyn, New York, Charles Hynes, indicated several Italian American teens, including Hawkins’s alleged shooter.

make several attempts to do so, including speaking at the National Council of Columbia Associations in Civil Service on September 6, 1989. In the internal memo prepared in anticipation of the event, staffers noted that there was a widespread belief that a future Dinkins administration would favor minorities, especially African Americans. Specifically, the memo, dated September 5, 1989, advised Dinkins to note that he “went to Bensonhurst and knows that act was one of a small minority” and to emphasize how the “nearly one million Italian Americans contributed to the cultural life of the city.”

Staffers also noted that Dinkins needed to address longstanding grievances among Italian Americans, including the belief that they were excluded from the highest levels of leadership in business and government. Dinkins’s advisors emphasized that he should describe the links between Italian Americans, who suffered prejudice and discrimination, and African Americans. For example, the staffers recommended that Dinkins emphasize that the police’s use of the terms “Mafia” and “Cosa Nostra” contributed to stereotypes of Italian Americans. It was also recommended that Dinkins should emphasize how Italian Americans had a long history within the Democratic Party in New York, citing Al Smith, who Anglicized his last name, to then Governor Mario Cuomo.

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83 Memorandum from Staffers to DNC.

84 Memorandum from Staffers to DNC

85 Al Smith was the first Catholic candidate for President in 1924. He had a father who was partially Italian. Smith, who served as Governor of New York, was born with the last name Ferraro and legally changed his name to Smith. Like Smith, Mario Cuomo was Catholic with Italian heritage. Cuomo was elected Governor of New York in 1983 and served until 1994. In 1989, Cuomo was considered as a possible presidential candidate for 1992.
Despite Dinkins’s efforts to reach out to Italian Americans, Dinkins’s advisors painted a bleak picture and advised Dinkins not to count on a significant percentage of whites voting for him in either the primary or general elections. In a campaign memo from March 1989 prepared by a polling company named Marttila & Kiley, Inc. entitled “The David Dinkins Book of Numbers: The Impact of a Voter Registration Drive on the New York Mayoral Race,” political advisors before the primary contest with Koch warned Dinkins that he should not expect more than a quarter of the white vote in either the primary or general election. An unnamed pollster in the confidential internal memo stated,

For all of the reasons we have previously discussed, there will inevitably be a ceiling on your vote among white voters. Frankly, I believe it will be an extraordinary accomplishment if you receive 25% of the white vote in November—and 30% is the absolute maximum number which should even be contemplated for purposes of strategic planning.

While the memo never explains why the advisor viewed such a significant percentage of whites as non-persuadable, it would be a reasonable guess that advisors were impacted by the prevailing wisdom of the era that held that most whites would never vote for a black politician. Also, political analysts at the time believed that polls of white voters were unreliable in a contest between a white and a minority candidate, as a portion of white voters would feign support for the minority candidate and then cast their votes for the


87 Internal memoranda dated March 17, 1989
white candidate. This phenomenon was referred to as the “Bradley effect” after Tom Bradley, an African American, who ran for Governor of California in 1982 and whose advantage in opinion polls in the lead up to election day never materialized.\textsuperscript{88} While in the 2010s, many political analysts called the Bradley effect into question, arguing that factors other than race may explain the underperformance of Bradley and other African American candidates,\textsuperscript{89} the idea infected political planning for more than a generation. Rather than attempt to build his support among whites, Dinkins’s advisors encouraged him to increase the African American turnout, noting that there were nearly five hundred thousand unregistered African American voters that Dinkins could mobilize.\textsuperscript{90} The advisors recommended that he should not attempt to expend limited resources trying to curry favor with white voters.\textsuperscript{91} Instead, according to the recommendations, registering half a million new African American voters, building effective get-out-the-vote efforts to mobilize existing African American voters, and obtaining half of the Hispanic vote and 24\% of the white vote could provide Dinkins with a very narrow path to victory in both the primary and general elections.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{88} In the period from the early 1980s to 2008, there was a significant debate among pollsters regarding whether white voters lied to pollsters about their intention to vote for African American politicians, citing the underperformance of several African American politicians including Bradley. See Ronald J. Vogel, and Phillip Ardoin, “Ask Me No Questions, I'll Tell You No Lies: Does the Bradley Effect Still Exist?” \textit{Race, Gender & Class} 15, no. 3/4 (2008), 65–84.

\textsuperscript{89} V. Lance Tarrance, Jr., “The Bradley Effect: Selective Memory,” last modified October 13, 2008, \texttt{http://realclearpolitics.com}.


\textsuperscript{91} Internal memoranda dated March 17, 1989.

\textsuperscript{92} Internal memoranda dated March 17, 1989.
The confidential memo entitled “The Impact of a Voter Registration Drive on the New York Mayoral Race” further recommended that registration efforts should focus on the racial tension within New York City during the Koch years. The memo ran dozens of statistical situations outlining how increasing the African American share of the vote was the only path to electoral victory, given the demographics of the city and how increased registration of black voters and investment in black voter turnout was the key to winning the election. The memo also recommended that Dinkins present a distinctive message to African American voters that emphasized racial tensions. This message differed from his advocacy of racial reconciliation delivered to the broader voting public. While this political advice may have provided Dinkins with a mechanism to increase black registrants and voters, this strategy conflicted with Dinkins’s broader goal of building a multiracial coalition.

While his political advisors advised him to focus on turning out the black vote, there is no indication that Dinkins adopted such a course of action in either the primary election or the general election. Dinkins gave remarkably similar speeches to white and black crowds. However, there was a perception among a segment of the white population that Dinkins’s public calls for racial reconciliation masked his true intentions.

93 Internal memoranda dated March 17, 1989.

and that he actually would enact policies that would solely benefit African Americans if elected. This unfair perception was, in large part, shaped by the frequent comparisons between Dinkins and other African American politicians and leaders, including Jackson and Sharpton, who possessed different political agendas and methods from Dinkins.

Italian American groups cordially welcomed Dinkins at their events, but Dinkins’s overtures did not persuade the majority of Italian Americans in New York City to vote for him. In white ethnic enclaves like Howard Beach, Bensonhurst, and in several parts of Staten Island, white voters overwhelmingly voted for Rudy Giuliani in the hotly contested 1989 general election. In contrast, Dinkins outperformed his advisors’ projections and received on average anywhere from 35% to 40% of the white vote citywide. Thus, Dinkins’s actual vote tallies among white voters over-performed his private internal polling and strategy memos.

The media coverage in the days after the election tended to highlight both the closeness of the race between Dinkins and Giuliani and the fact that Dinkins was the first African American mayor of New York City. The media’s dual focus on the closeness of the race in a heavily Democratic city and Dinkins’s blackness led to a series of questions about whether Dinkins’s victory was so close because he was black, and these types of questions tended to undermine the historic nature of the election. In media interviews in

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95 Dinkins received around 20% of the white vote in Staten Island. This island was in many respects an outlier in New York City politics and emerged as a nuisance for Dinkins as a secession crisis threatened to tear New York City apart.


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1989, Dinkins rejected the notion that widespread racism played a role in the election’s closeness.⁹⁷

Despite the fact that Dinkins denied that race impacted the 1989 general election, an analysis of the polling results indicated some weakness in Dinkins’s coalition. Specifically, while self-identified liberal whites and feminists overwhelmingly voted for Dinkins, a significant percentage of self-identified white liberals and feminists voted for Giuliani on either the Republican or Liberal party lines in the 1989 general election, warranting further exploration.

As Manhattan Borough President, Dinkins was an outspoken ally for women’s issues and was a lifelong outspoken liberal that embraced a Great Society vision for New York City. Therefore, one would have expected liberals and feminists to warmly embrace Dinkins. However, during the 1989 election, white liberals and self-identified feminists did not uniformly vote for Dinkins. Instead, a sizeable percentage of white liberals and feminists, around a quarter to a third, voted for Giuliani on the Republican Party line.⁹⁸ It is possible that the racialized environment of the 1989 election that featured marches into white neighborhoods frightened some whites, including self-identified white liberals and feminists, who might have otherwise aligned with Dinkins to cross party lines. While the

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motivations for the white liberals and feminists who voted for Giuliani are open for
debate, the existence of a significant bloc of white liberal and feminist voters who voted
for Giuliani reflected weak links in Dinkins’s coalition as he took office.

While some white liberals and feminists voted for Giuliani on the Republican
Party line, other white liberals and feminists voted for Giuliani on the Liberal Party line.
One of the unique aspects of New York’s electoral system is the presence of several
minor parties, including the Conservative and Liberal Parties, who can survive due to a
New York law that allows votes cast for candidates endorsed by minor parties to count in
the tally of that candidate’s final electoral results. The New York Liberal Party’s platform
embraced many of the demands of feminists of the era as the party was pro-choice,
advocated for women’s rights, and called for affirmative action policies that would favor
not only minorities but also women. In New York City politics, the small but influential
Liberal Party viewed its role as a check on the power of the Democratic Party. Therefore,
New York’s Liberal Party often threw its support to Republican candidates and mayors,
acting as a political kingmaker. For instance, in 1989, the Liberal Party endorsed Giuliani
rather than Dinkins, surprising some political commentators who saw Dinkins as more
aligned with the Liberal Party’s platform.99 In 1989, the fifty-five thousand votes cast for
Giuliani on the Liberal line were more votes than the margin of victory that separated
Giuliani and Dinkins in the final tally that year.100 The Liberal Party’s endorsement of

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100 “New York City Mayor-1989,” *OurCampaigns.com*, July 11, 2012,
Giuliani reflected some degree of skepticism of Dinkins among largely white upper-class liberals, those who tended to vote on the Liberal line in New York City. Retrospectively, it is easy to attribute this skepticism of Dinkins to latent or overt racism, the Liberal Party also favored low taxes and a more laissez-faire approach to regulation, positions at odds with the Democratic Party of the Great Society era embodied by establishment politicians like Dinkins. Therefore, ideological differences between Dinkins and the Liberal Party may have also played a key role in explaining the Liberal Party’s endorsement of Giuliani and why some liberals and feminists voted for Giuliani on the Liberal Party line.

The willingness of at least a portion of white liberals and feminists to cross-party lines in the 1989 election also hinted at a broader realignment in New York City politics. In the post-Dinkins era, a sizeable portion of self-identified liberals and feminists formed an essential core of the coalition that ushered in nearly a generation of Republican rule in New York City.

Many white Howard Beach voters have moved away from the Democratic Party in the years since the 1980s. At the same time, traditionally ethnic white enclaves like Howard Beach and Bensonhurst either underwent demographic transformation or became increasingly marginalized in New York City due to changing demographics. For example, Bensonhurst in 1986 was more than 90% white. However, in 2019, whites were a minority as immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East transformed the neighborhood. Likewise, starting in the 1990s, immigration from the Caribbean, Asia, and Latin America transformed southern Queens. While the neighborhood of Howard Beach remains nearly all-white at the time of this writing in 2022, whites represent only
13% of the population in the Ozone Park/Howard Beach City Council District that represents the Howard Beach neighborhood on the New York City Council.

By the 1989 election, New York City was a majority-minority city with white voters making up only around 40% of the electorate. The movement of a sizable portion of ethnic whites from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in New York City overlapped with similar nationwide voting trends. And the shift of a sizeable portion of ethnic whites, aligned with some portion of white liberals and feminists, in New York City resulted in a generation of Republican rule (two terms of Rudy Giuliani and two terms of Michael Bloomberg) in what had been an overwhelmingly Democratic city. The Republican Party’s fourteen-year occupancy of Gracie Mansion ended when Bloomberg became an Independent in 2007 and was reelected for a third term.

Sharpton’s participation in marches in white enclaves from 1986 to 1989 had several long and short-term impacts on New York City politics. In the short-term, Sharpton’s marches, especially during the last months of the general election, made the issue of race central in the general election, despite Dinkins’s best efforts not to focus on racial politics. Many ethnic whites, encouraged by the media coverage of the era, were unable to distinguish the many differences between Dinkins and Sharpton and how the two men possessed different life experiences, political ideologies, and goals.\(^{101}\)

Sharpton sought to provoke a response from the white community, and he did. The opposition to his activism was almost deadly. After the Goetz case, Sharpton was subject to numerous death threats from lone wolf racists, and the New York Police

Department warned him of various threats on his life. In 1991, one counter-protester in Bensonhurst stabbed Sharpton in the chest.\textsuperscript{102}

Sharpton believed that that established African American politicians like Dinkins had done too little to address racism. While the mainstream press on occasion covered the tension within the African American community, whites for the most part did not understand the complexity of intra-African American politics.\textsuperscript{103} These divisions led to a frosty relationship between Sharpton and Dinkins during Dinkins’s first year in office as mayor from 1990 to 1991. The uneasy alliance between the two men against a common enemy during the general election broke down as Dinkins assumed the responsibilities of governance. Once in office, Sharpton directed his criticism at Dinkins, citing his policing policies as inadequate. For example, in 1990, Sharpton and several other African American leaders accused Dinkins of aligning himself with the white power structures at the expense of African American communities. The marches over Hawkins’s death that started in 1989 continued into 1990, and protesters including Sharpton increasingly focused their attention on Dinkins for his failure to reform the police and confront white

\textsuperscript{102} After Dinkins left electoral politics in 1993, Dinkins developed a closer bond with Sharpton, and Dinkins engaged in protests in the response to the police shooting of Amadou Diallo in 1999. While Dinkins avoided protests in his youth, he got arrested at Police Headquarters in lower Manhattan for protesting the death of Diallo alongside Sharpton and other “Gang of Four” member Charlie Rangel in 1999. See Michael Cooper, “Dinkins Among 14 Arrested in Protest of Police Shooting,” \textit{New York Times}, March 16, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/16/nyregion/dinkins-among-14-arrested-in-protest-of-police-shooting.html. Moreover, Dinkins’s strident criticism of Giuliani and his association with Sharpton during the Giuliani years (1993–2001), reinforced a perception that Dinkins and Sharpton were linked in the prior era. However, Dinkins and Sharpton in 1989 represented quite different perspectives that were brought together only by common enemies.

However, Sharpton’s 1991 stabbing brought Dinkins and Sharpton closer together, as Dinkins rushed to the hospital to visit Sharpton, an act that moderated Sharpton’s previous criticism.

The centrality of race in the 1989 general election slightly increased African American turnout and this, in part, propelled Dinkins to a general election victory, the media’s focus on racial issues made it difficult for Dinkins to govern and hold together his multiracial coalition. For activists like Sharpton, highlighting the presence of racism among a segment of the ethnic white community was enough. However, for politicians like Dinkins who need to assemble multiracial coalitions to govern and be elected, Sharpton’s activism was politically damaging as it alienated a large segment of ethnic whites who remained a large bloc of motivated voters. Dinkins’s political advisors recommended that he focus his attention on increasing turnout of African Americans and not count on more than a quarter of the white vote. Moreover, such advice relied upon both high motivation levels and voter participation among the city’s African American voters. Dinkins struggled to maintain African American enthusiasm during his time in office, and this damaged his reelection bid. Moreover, ethnic whites were turned off by issues of race as many were unable or willing to understand how systemic racism of the era impacted the lives of African Americans.

One of Dinkins’s core messages was that he had the ability to transcend the racial polarity of the Koch years. Sharpton’s presence at several marches in the fall of 1989, weeks before the election, and the media’s depiction of him as the leader of such

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marches, undermined Dinkins’s message of racial reconciliation in the eyes of many New Yorkers, including those in the media that possessed the power to shape the perceptions. An unfair narrative developed in the media during the general election in 1989 that called into question Dinkins’s ability to heal the city’s real or perceived racial tension. Large-scale protests by Sharpton in the months before the general election and tensions on the eve of the general election played into this narrative.

Most important, the marches of Sharpton and the images of the counter-protesters shaped how Dinkins viewed the motivations of ethnic whites. Dinkins came of age in an era of segregation and largely operated in black spaces for a substantial portion of his adult life, which shaped his perceptions of ethnic whites in the outer boroughs. The images of white counter-protesters engaging in racist behavior, even if these counter-protesters only represented a small segment of the population, reinforced Dinkins’s views and led Dinkins to believe that ethnic whites were opposed to him for racial reasons. This assumption may have been reasonable, but it also prevented Dinkins from expanding his support among ethnic whites, and such support was necessary to enact his political agenda at the local and state level.

Ultimately, Dinkins was a product of black institutions and power structures in Upper Manhattan. These experiences propelled him to political power but also limited him, as he had never developed longstanding political relationships with ethnic white voters in the outer boroughs. This potential blind-spot in Dinkins’s preparation for citywide office would prove electorally damaging as Dinkins struggled to deal with several crises during his time in office.
Turf Battles and Media Narratives: The Boycott of the Family Red Apple Grocery Store

In January 1990, there was an altercation between a Haitian teenager and a Korean employee of a Korean-owned grocery store called the Family Red Apple in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. The incident sparked a boycott of this store, which presented David Dinkins with one of his first tests of leadership in office. Despite the fact that Dinkins’s behind-the-scenes mediation efforts deescalated the tension between the Korean and African American communities, and he avoided large scale violence like that which occurred in 1992 in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, the episode played a significant role in shaping the narrative about Dinkins’s leadership. The white press repeatedly noted Dinkins’s failure to quickly end the boycott, calling into question his ability to make good on his promise to heal the city’s racial divide.

New York City, in many ways, was little more than a collection of different neighborhoods, and these neighborhoods were, in large part, divided by class, race, religion, and national origin. Rather than a melting-pot, some described New York City as a collection of neighborhoods with real borders. The boycott of Korean grocers in Flatbush represented a flashpoint that tested Dinkins’s ability to hold together his political coalition and his ability to govern New York City. While the media of the era often described a city divided between whites and African Americans, the boycott of Korean grocers illustrates a more complicated picture of race relations in New York. An examination of these protests and Dinkins’s response sheds light on the problems of
maintaining a multiracial political coalition, especially as urban neighborhoods transitioned from predominately white to majority minority communities. Moreover, an examination of the episode and the media’s coverage provide adds to the scholarship into relations between African Americans and Asians in cities.

An examination of the media coverage of the episode, focusing on how the *New York Times*, the voice of the liberal establishment, and the *New York Amsterdam News*, the leading African American newspaper, reveals how two parts of Dinkins’s political coalition viewed Dinkins and his performance, reaching different conclusions. Dinkins’s papers housed at Columbia University contain numerous folders with clippings from the *New York Times*, as well as from the *Daily News, New York Post*, and *Newsday*. Also, Dinkins had staffers assemble lists of the op-eds published by these papers that referenced him, indicating that he closely monitored media coverage. Curiously, Dinkins’s papers do not contain clippings from the black or Korean press. The local newspapers, along with local television news, amplified local controversies and extended the duration of the coverage of stories such as the boycott.

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The media coverage of the boycotts from the mainstream press, in large part, created a narrative of Dinkins as a weak leader who catered to the African American community at the expense of New York City as a whole and as a man who failed to live up to his campaign promises. In contrast, the black press defended Dinkins’s actions and criticized the mainstream press for its coverage.

The perception driven by the mainstream media weakened Dinkins’s ability to expand his political coalition and govern effectively. The media critics as well as political opponents described Dinkins as a man who refused to confront the perceived worst elements within the African American community. The news coverage also focused on the boycott’s leader, Sonny Carson, a militant black nationalist who had a long and colorful history in New York City politics, heading a collection of short-lived organizations of unknown size. Dinkins’s inability to quickly condemn the racist and at times violent rhetoric of Carson alienated both white liberals and Asian New Yorkers.  

Carson referred to the boycott as a battle pitting African Americans, who had to protect their communities, against exploitative foreign elements embodied by the Korean grocery. At the same time, Dinkins’s eventual call for the end of the boycott after months of negative press coverage and his decision to break the boycott line to meet with the Korean owners led many in the African American community to view Dinkins as caving.

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to pressure from whites and Asians, harming Dinkins’s popularity among African Americans.\(^5\)

The boycotts, which started in January 1990 and lasted until mid-1991, have been the subject of some prior scholarly inquiry. For example, in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*, Claire Jean Kim extensively explored the episode, arguing that the conflict between African Americans and Koreans was the product of white supremacy, as non-white ethnic groups struggled for their placement in New York City’s racial hierarchy.\(^6\) Moreover, Kim argued that the Korean boycott represented the reemergence of black nationalism in New York City as a reaction to changed demographics. Kim engaged in a comprehensive study, and many of the sources used in this chapter overlap with Kim’s extensive work.

Unlike Kim’s work, this chapter seeks to assess the short and long-term political effects of the boycott on Dinkins and New York City politics to illustrate the difficulties faced by an African Americans liberal politician such as Dinkins who sought to balance the demands of the black community, white voters, and the growing Asian community. As a candidate, Dinkins in 1989 promised racial reconciliation. However, his critics pointed to Korean boycott and his inability to quickly resolve the situation as evidence that he could not fulfill a central campaign pledge, preventing him from holding together and expanding his coalition.

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Also, exploration of the boycott provides insight into Dinkins’s relationship with black nationalism. Dinkins’s response to the boycott alienated black nationalists like Carson and, in the long term, resulted in the political neutering of black nationalism in the city as a political force. The political damage caused by the Korean boycott damaged what should have been natural allies within Dinkins’s coalition and further marginalized black nationalism in the city for more than a generation in city politics. While black nationalists like Sonny Carson and other African American activists like Reverend Al Sharpton often railed against Dinkins and his accommodation to the political power structure and political class, Dinkins and other African American political leaders in New York City provided black nationalists with access to political power not otherwise available to strident black voices. This episode represented the end of black nationalism as a viable political force for a generation, as it damaged Dinkins’s ability to govern, foreclosing any influence that black nationalists like Carson had to meaningfully influence the highest levels of political power in New York City politics from within the political power structure. After Dinkins’s defeat, Carson was deprived of access to political power at the highest level in local government. He became merely a social gadfly rather than a power broker in New York City politics.

Spike Lee popularized the tension between the Korean and African American communities in Brooklyn in the 1989 movie *Do the Right Thing.* In that movie, an African American crowd turns their attention to a grocery owned by a Korean immigrant after the crowd burned down the pizzeria owned by a racist Italian American family. The African American mob views the Korean grocer, like the Italian pizzeria owner, as an

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7 *Do the Right Thing,* directed by Spike Lee (Burbank, CA: Universal Pictures, 1989).
“outsider” in the African American community that not only exploited the community but also disrespected African American customers. However, before the African American crowd acts, they are confronted by a broom-wielding Korean grocer who proclaims that he and African Americans are the same because they are not white. This declaration initially pauses the angry crowd but upsets one African American who tells the Korean grocer to “Open your eyes, motherfucker!” Ultimately, cooler heads in the crowd prevail, and the crowd opts not to torch the grocery because the “Korean [grocer] was alright.” This fictionalized episode illustrates the complex relationship between African Americans and Koreans. Koreans and other Asians did not fit neatly into the racial dualism that divided white and black New Yorkers.

Because he was labeled as the leader of the boycotts, Carson is an important figure to analyze to understand the challenges Dinkins faced. Carson had a long history of activism in Brooklyn dating back to the 1960s, and he became politically involved in New York City politics in the aftermath of the unrest in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1964. Carson was a prominent leader who demanded local control over the educational system in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville neighborhoods in Brooklyn during the battle over control of the city schools in 1968. Prior to the strike, Carson accused white teachers of engaging in widespread abuse of black and Puerto Rican students in

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Brooklyn. A *New York Times* article from February 1, 1969, quoted Carson as saying that there were “dastardly transgressions heaped upon young black minds seeking in earnest to gain entrance into the affluent level of the American dream.” In the same article, Carson demanded that the city take action to discipline teachers, or the black community “would have no choice but to act.” Threats, implied or expressed, would become a reoccurring part of Carson’s rhetoric.

Carson’s political ideology had many intellectual influences, ranging from the ideas of the Black Panther Party and Afrocentrism to the Nation of Islam. While Carson’s ideology varied over the years, it always included a strident call for black self-reliance and independence for blacks. Given the radical nature of his proposals, which ranged from the formation of a black colony outside of New York City to black control of black communities, his views often sparked controversy and earned him a reputation as racial provocateur in the New York press.

In the years preceding the battle over control of the schools in Ocean-Hill Brownsville, Carson advocated for the creation of completely black spaces outside of New York City. *New York Times* articles from 1967 describe how Carson called for blacks to leave Brooklyn to start a self-sustaining black community, in an undisclosed location, because blacks could never get equality in New York City. A June 27, 1967, *New York Times* article quoted Carson as comparing the status of blacks in New York City to that of Jewish people in Nazi Germany. Such comparisons, as well as Carson’s

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11 Kifner, “Core Says.”

description of Jewish businesses in black communities as exploitative, led to accusations of anti-Semitism against Carson.\textsuperscript{13} Another \textit{New York Times} article in 1967 quoted Carson as saying that he needed about a million dollars to launch his all-black agricultural colony outside of New York City.\textsuperscript{14} Such a radical solution, in Carson’s view, was necessary because blacks in the city “were becoming infested with the same illness as whites” as city life deprived blacks of connection to the soil and their culture.\textsuperscript{15} Carson’s idea about the need for completely black spaces and the presence of non-blacks, whether police or businesses, would reemerge during Carson’s activism in the 1980s and during the boycott of the Korean grocers in 1990 to 1991.

Originally a member and leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Brooklyn, Carson staged a noisy walkout from the group in the summer of 1968, citing how CORE’s national office had not done anything for “black people for several years.”\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{New York Times} cited Carson as saying that he favored the “destruction of white capitalism in black communities” and he added that he did not hate “whitey” but he wanted black people to know that it was “beautiful to be black.”\textsuperscript{17} While Carson would cite ideological reasons for his departure from CORE, Carson’s confrontational activism during the Ocean Hill Brownsville school struggle brought him into conflict with the


\textsuperscript{15} Caldwell, “Core Chapter.”


\textsuperscript{17} “2 Rebel.”
national headquarters of CORE, which sought to distance itself from Carson’s heated rhetoric that often included threats of violence or racialized scapegoating.18

After his split from the national headquarters of CORE, Carson fully embraced black nationalism in the 1970s. In that decade, Carson briefly emerged as one of the leading voices in black nationalism. Originally written under the pen name Mwlina Imiri Abubadika, Carson’s bestselling autobiography entitled *The Education of Sonny Carson* described how crime, poverty, racism, gang violence, and police brutality shaped his youth and the lives of many African Americans in New York City.19 A 1974 movie of the same name further elevated Carson’s stature. The *New York Times* review of the movie described how, despite its cinematic flaws, the film was compelling because it “captured the black experience” in the cities.20 Filmed in African American neighborhoods of Brooklyn with a local cast that included street gang members, the movie purported to chart Carson’s life from a gifted student to a street gang member and ex-convict.21 The movie omitted Carson’s military service during the Korean War as well as his years of political activism. Instead, the movie focused on the main character’s turn to a life of crime and the lack of opportunities in the African American communities of Brooklyn. During the production of the movie, Carson accused the producers of the movie of racism.

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21 *The Education of Sonny Carson*, directed by Michael Camus (Burbank, California: Paramount Pictures, 1974).
for its depictions of blacks and for its focus on black-on-black violence.\(^{22}\) While Carson took issue with the depictions of blacks in the movie, the film portrayed whites, including the police, as outsiders within predominately African American communities who were hostile to African Americans. The theme of non-blacks as outsiders in African American communities would also re-emerge in Carson’s rhetoric in the 1990s.

While finding fame, Carson also found himself in legal trouble. In the 1970s, Carson formed several short-lived organizations that sought to combat drug use and crime in Brooklyn. Many voices within the African American community demanded a “get tough on crime approach,” and Carson was one of the leading voices in New York City politics during the early 1970s. In 1974 Carson said that black men had to take the law into their own hands because the New York City police refused to do their jobs.\(^{23}\)

The same article noted that Carson engaged in several “civilian arrests” of drug-dealers and street criminals, resulting in a conviction for kidnapping and false arrest.\(^{24}\) Carson and members of his group also faced murder charges for the bizarre death of a man who allegedly stole paintings belonging to Carson. While Carson and his associates were acquitted of the murder charges against him, Carson’s conviction for kidnapping and false arrest resulted in a multi-year stay in the state prison in Sing-Sing.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{24}\) Saxon, “Sonny Carson.”

After serving time in prison, Carson returned to his activism. He protested police brutality and the impact of drugs on the African American community in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. A 2002 Village Voice obituary of Carson described him as “Brooklyn’s Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, a man of the people who never forgot where he came from because he practically never left.”

A man who rarely gave interviews to the press, Carson was often caricatured by the white press as a holdover of the militant black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s because he sought to confront all forms of racism using direct action and because he often resorted to hyperbolic rhetoric. Thus, despite his long activism in Brooklyn fighting against police brutality, crime, and discrimination, Carson often found himself labeled as a racist, radical, or troublemaker by outlets such as the New York Times. His repeated refusals to disavow violence and the fact that his protests ended in violent confrontations rendered Carson a controversial figure in the Brooklyn political landscape of the 1980s.

Unlike his contemporary Sharpton, a fellow Brooklynite, Carson, for the most part, avoided the media limelight, focusing his attention on direct activism in Brooklyn’s predominately African American neighborhoods. A recorded 1991 speech given to an all-black crowd in the days after the Crown Heights unrest reflected Carson’s confrontational style. In the speech, Carson described the police as “pigs” and whites as “crackers.” Moreover, Carson told the crowd that blacks “were not minorities in their own

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neighborhoods” and that blacks should not accept “occupation from anyone.”

Then he went on to tell the crowd not to accept outsiders who “were stealing everything from [their] communities.”

Carson boldly stated that he “was not afraid of any cracker investigations or threats of jail time” because as black man he had been in prison since the day he was born.

Carson’s speeches reflected an unwillingness to compromise in the face of what he described as the destruction of “his community” at the hands of “racists” and “outsiders.”

Carson used similar language in 1990 when referring to Korean grocers and the presence of Korean businesses within predominately African American communities.

A bombastic street-brawler unafraid to use violence or threats of violence and language interpreted as anti-white rhetoric, Carson contrasted with Dinkins, who during the 1989 election focused on how he could heal the racial tensions that plagued his predecessor’s time in office. A September 14, 1989, *New York Times* op-ed described how Dinkins had won the primary against Koch because of his message of racial reconciliation and healing.

The article noted that Dinkins’s speeches repeatedly sounded the same themes about a need to focus on social problems like crime and drugs rather than “fighting against each other.”

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33 “Mr. Dinkins.”
campaign: to bring New Yorkers together, to bridge boroughs and ethnic groups and races. This was not just an electoral strategy; it is his view of what government is about.”

Dinkins’s 1989 campaign was a product of his political philosophy, whose core was racial reconciliation. The electoral success of 1989 clearly reflected that Dinkins had the support of more than 90% of African American voters, reflecting the widespread embrace of either his message or hostility to Giuliani.

Dinkins’s political philosophy contrasted vividly with Carson’s black nationalism that called for black independence. For Dinkins, African Americans in New York would only prosper if they were fully integrated within New York City society, political structure, and cultural life, and this integration required building coalitions with non-black allies, given New York City’s demographics. In contrast to Carson, who viewed direct action and protests as the tools of a dispossessed people in New York City, Dinkins keenly understood that African Americans in New York City depended upon the willingness of non-black allies to assist African Americans.

Dinkins and Carson also differed in the images that they sought to project. Photographs of Carson in the 1970s and 1980s reflected a style that embraced various strains of black radicalism, from the Nation of Islam to Afrocentrism. Carson wore clothes that cast him as a revolutionary figure. Often clothed in all black, sporting a leather beret, Afro-centric jewelry and holding a stick while he spoke, Carson’s image was of that of an unrepentant radical who had not moderated his image or message with time. During the boycotts, Carson still possessed an iconoclastic style. Middle age did not moderate Carson’s black nationalist message. While his contemporaries like Sharpton

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34 “Mr. Dinkins.”
would moderate their message and dress for broader audiences, Carson directed his message almost exclusively to black audiences and peppered his speeches with curse words and inflammatory rhetoric. In stark contrast, Dinkins carefully crafted an image of an upper-middle-class African American. Photos of Dinkins almost always pictured him wearing business suits, or on occasion, playing tennis or golf. Dinkins’s public persona aligned with his political ideology that appealed to the middle-class aspirations of African Americans for respectability, acceptance, and equal opportunity in a multiracial society. Dinkins’s image contrasted with Carson’s call for self-reliance and the need to directly confront racism using direct measures like protests and boycotts.

Despite their dissimilarity, Dinkins viewed Carson during his 1989 primary and general election campaign as a valuable but potentially toxic political ally. Dinkins sought out allies in Brooklyn’s African American community. In 1989, New York City’s two million African Americans made up 28% of the city’s population. More than half of the city’s two million African Americans in 1989 lived in Brooklyn. Carson, a mainstay of the Brooklyn political landscape since the 1960s, provided Dinkins with much-needed credibility in Brooklyn’s African American communities. However, due to the controversial nature of Carson, Dinkins and Carson avoided direct contact during the 1989 primary and general elections.

Despite the fact that Carson and Dinkins shared little but their skin color, Dinkins’s opponents during the 1989 elections believed that Carson’s past, including his alleged anti-Semitism, would politically damage Dinkins’s image as a racial healer. Events outside of Dinkins’s control launched Carson into the spotlight in the summer of 1989. Carson became a focus of mainstream media attention because he led a march of
over seven thousand black protesters in downtown Brooklyn in the days after the death of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst. The death of Yusef Hawkins in August 1989 and the image of thousands of black men chanting, “Whose streets? Our streets!” and the presence of Carson played into a narrative of a city at a racial boiling point in the run-up to the general election.

Days before the 1989 general election, investigative reporters found out that the Dinkins campaign made several payments totaling nearly ten thousand dollars to Carson for his unspecified organizing efforts in Brooklyn. The New York Times quoted Giuliani as saying that Dinkins had paid off a “street thug” and “convicted kidnapper” so that Carson could deliver the black votes in Brooklyn. In response, Dinkins argued that it had paid Carson for legitimate organizing efforts in Brooklyn because he had longstanding ties within the African American community and headed a legitimate civil rights group. When confronted by the mainstream media about his past rhetoric and his relationship with Dinkins, Carson refused to repudiate his prior statements. In fact, Carson, described whites as exploitative, exclaiming that “whites kidnapped millions of blacks for hundreds of years.” The black press would describe how Carson’s central message had been misinterpreted by the mainstream media, who took Carson’s “anti-


36 Lynn, “Dinkins Explains.”

37 Lynn, “Dinkins Explains.”

white” quote out of context.\textsuperscript{39} Despite Carson’s statements or the mainstream media’s alleged misquotation of Carson, Dinkins did not directly criticize Carson during the general election campaign. Dinkins would soon regret this decision as Carson emerged as the media-appointed leader of the boycott of a Korean-owned grocery that began merely days after he assumed office.

The events that gave rise to the Family Red Apple grocer boycott remain the subject of dispute. In January 1990, a young Haitian woman alleged that several Korean employees of the store assaulted her, while the Korean employees alleged that Haitian youth manufactured the story to escape a shoplifting charge. The \textit{New York Amsterdam News} described how the Haitian woman was accused of stealing some meat, while she alleged that she purchased the meat in another store and then was repeatedly slapped in the face and punched in the belly by the employee when she refused to pay for the meat.\textsuperscript{40} The article detailed how the protests and boycott organically started because the police refused to arrest immediately the employee of the Korean grocer, despite the Haitian female’s injuries and allegations.\textsuperscript{41}

The historian Thomas J. Campanella vividly describes the Flatbush neighborhood as a paradise for Irish, Italians, and Jews who were able to buy high-quality, yet affordable, single-family brick houses built in a building frenzy after World War II.\textsuperscript{42} Fred Trump, the father of former President Donald Trump, profited greatly from the post-


\textsuperscript{41} “Bklyn Group.”

war building boom, constructing hundreds of homes in the neighborhood that fulfilled the middle-class aspirations of working-class and middle-class whites who moved to the area from apartments in other parts of the city. Homes in Flatbush had many of the features found in suburbia, including a small front yard and backyard as well as driveway. For many ethnic whites, the Flatbush homes built in post-World War II would provide them with their first chance at affordable home ownership. The area also had a lively arts and education scene. The magnificent Loew’s Kings Theatre provided residents with access to live music, cultural events, and movies. Brooklyn College provided access to a world-class educational institution and advancement into the educated elite class. Late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the daughter of working-class Jewish parents, was born in this neighborhood and grew up in the adjoining neighborhood of Midwood, representing only one of many examples of the neighborhood’s luminaries.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Flatbush underwent a demographic transformation. The neighborhood’s predominately working-class Jewish, Irish, and Italian populations in the 1960s and 1970s began a generation-long movement away from the neighborhood, replaced by African Americans from other New York neighborhoods, black migrants from the South, and immigrants from the Caribbean.

In the early 1970s, the Flatbush neighborhood had uneasy multiracial character as the neighborhood was nearly evenly divided between whites and blacks. However, the 1977 blackout and its aftermath resulted in mass exodus of white residents from Flatbush. During the 1977 blackout, dozens of small business owners on Flatbush Avenue, the main street in the Flatbush neighborhood, suffered devastating damage due to widespread arson and looting. Images of burning businesses and black youths looting white-owned
businesses during the 1977 blackout fed into already existing racist fears held by many
whites in the neighborhood and the events of the 1977 blackout accelerated already
existing demographic trends.

By 1989, the Flatbush neighborhood was more than 90% black. Driving down
Flatbush Avenue in 1989, one could still see dozens of burned-out buildings and empty
storefronts, more than a decade after the 1977 blackout. Despite Flatbush Avenue’s
depressing appearance, the neighborhood could not be characterized in the racially
tainted vernacular of the era, a “ghetto.”\footnote{For a discussion of how governmental policy created predominately African American communities in Brooklyn, see Craig Steven Wilder, \textit{A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).} Instead, the neighborhood remained
predominately black middle-class, a product of the elevated real-estate prices. Crime
rates in Flatbush were also significantly lower than other African American
neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

A humorous memoir entitled \textit{Flatbush Odyssey: A Journey through the Heart of
Brooklyn} describes the enduring nature of the area’s middle-class nature. Written by a
white man who grew up in Flatbush in the 1950s and 1960s and returned to live with his
mother in the neighborhood late 1990s, the book described an area with radically
different racial demographics as African American and Caribbean-born immigrants
largely replaced ethnic whites, but which retained its strong middle-class roots as black
educated professionals, city workers, and business workers populated Flatbush.\footnote{Allen Abel, \textit{Flatbush Odyssey: A Journey through the Heart of Brooklyn} (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002).} Thus, the protests in Flatbush in 1990 did not grow from a dispossessed and poverty-stricken
neighborhood. Instead, they sprang from a community that demanded a level of respect consummate with their social status in the face of discrimination and poor treatment.

Despite the tendency of the white media to depict all African American neighborhoods in the same manner, African Americans and outer borough whites understood the class-based differences among African American neighborhoods. For example, black New Yorkers viewed Flatbush as a “good neighborhood” for several reasons, including its single-family brick homes and a relatively low crime rates in comparison to other African American majority neighborhoods.

Many African Americans and Caribbean-immigrants argued that their ability to live in a “good neighborhood” justified “respectful” treatment. Blacks in Flatbush maintained that they were “disrespected” by particular Korean grocers in their “community and that this “disrespect” was the driving force behind the boycott. The

45 Scholars have explored the perceived success of black Caribbean immigrants and have noted that the Caribbean immigrants, for the most part, avoided the racial politics of the United States during the first generation. However, the theme of “respect” played a significant role in creating a unique ethos within Caribbean immigrant communities. Protesters, many of whom were Caribbean born, often cited the lack of respect given to them as the driving force behind the protests. See Mary C. Waters, Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Philip Kasinitz. Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), which discusses numerous political differences between African American and West Indian immigrants in New York City.

46 Several scholars have explored the reasons for the emergence of a large black urban underclass in the post-industrialization period. For example, Roger Waldinger concluded that there was a link between white flight and the class polarization found within the African American community. According to Waldinger, the white flight coupled with deindustrialization hit working class African American communities especially hard because many working-class African Americans did not possess the education, skills, or training to fill jobs created in the post-industrial employment market, while at the same time many African Americans found manual labor undesirable, creating an opening for immigrant workers to fill. In the view of Waldinger, African American views on manual work mirrored views of second and third generation ethnic whites who also avoided such work. Waldinger further notes that a relatively sizeable African American middle class developed and tension between the African American underclass and a growing African American middle class emerged. See Roger Waldinger, Still the Promised City? African Americans and New Immigrants in Post-Industrial New York (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999).
mainstream media would often interpret the term “community” as linked to solely to race. For Dinkins, the failure of the media to distinguish and understand the intra-racial dynamics at play during the boycotts represents yet another example of the mainstream media’s failure to understand the complexity of the African American community.

In 1940, New York City’s population was 93.5% white and 6% black, while Asians made up less than 1% of the population. In the post-World War II era, the city’s population underwent a dramatic transformation including the emergence of Asian immigrants. A *New York Times* article in February 1991 detailed how despite the large exodus of whites from the city that the population of New York City grew due to new trends in immigration. In the period from 1980 to 1990, Brooklyn’s Asian communities doubled in size from forty-two thousand in 1980 to more than one hundred and eleven thousand in 1990. The doubling of Asians in Brooklyn mirrored citywide trends as New York City’s Asian population from 1980 to 1990 went from 213,000 to 520,000. The Asian population of New York City increased from 3% to 7% of the population.

New York City’s growing Asian community in 1990 included Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos. Many of the Asian community were first-generation immigrants who started small businesses, including convenience stores, restaurants, and

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49 Fiske, “New York Growth.”

50 Fiske, “New York Growth.”
groceries, to fill the void created when white small businesses fled communities like Flatbush.

The Family Red Apple store, owned by first-generation Korean immigrants who took over an abandoned grocery store, was the site of the original protests. It represented one of the many thousands of foreign-owned businesses that emerged during the era. Korean-owned grocers like the Family Red Apple filled a need in African American communities, since the large full-service supermarkets and convenience stores often referred to as bodegas that did not sell fruits, vegetables, or meats. Scholars have explored how many Korean first-generation immigrants lacked the language skills to obtain jobs, forcing them to self-employment and business creation like starting groceries and convenience stores.51 During the boycotts the owners of the Korean grocers avoided the spotlight, and their voices were often drowned out by other louder voices in the controversy.52

While the mainstream press focused on Carson and his rhetoric, the black press, including the New York Amsterdam News and a small circulation Brooklyn weekly named the City Sun, interpreted the nature of the boycott and its origins quite

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51 For an examination of the Korean immigrant experience, see Moon H. Jo, Korean Immigrants and the Challenge of Adjustment (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

52 The Korean Times in New York City published in English and Korean had a circulation of a few thousand papers and provided the Korean perspective and argued that Koreans were targeted African American protesters because of their race. For a collection of these articles see “Before Saigu: Korea Times Vows to Write For, About Korean Americans,” The Saigu Archive. Accessed on March 6, 2022. https://thesaiguarchive.wordpress.com/2015/09/09/before-saigu-the-church-avenue-boycott-from-the-korean-owners-of-red-apple/ However, the voices of Koreans often were drowned out by louder voices.
differently.\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{New York Amsterdam News} sought to explore the origins of the boycotts, citing numerous times when Carson denied being the “leader” or the “cause of boycotts.”\textsuperscript{54} Carson maintained that the boycotts grew out of the discrimination by Korean grocers, rather than his agitation or hatred of Koreans. According to Carson, “We are not going to tolerate our people, especially our women, to be harassed or attacked as they shop in these Korean owned grocery stores.”\textsuperscript{55} Carson argued that Korean businesses exploited African American communities, demanding that African Americans should not shop in places “owned by people who don’t look like us.”

Carson repeatedly disputed that he had caused the boycotts. However, he was widely viewed as one of the leaders of the boycott by the white press. This association damaged Dinkins. Carson’s quotes dominated the coverage of the events in the white press, creating a media narrative about the boycotts that shaped public opinion and may not have comported with the true driving force behind the boycotts.

Carson may have been the loudest voice and called for a broader boycott, but other protesters argued that the Korean grocers in question treated African Americans poorly or that Korean grocers who owned the Family Red Apple were “rude” to black customers. \textit{The New York Times} described how many African American customers believed that some Korean grocers overcharged for items or charged them for items that

\textsuperscript{53} For an excellent study of \textit{City Sun} and its coverage of many of the major events in New York City history from 1986 to 1996, see Wayne Dawkins, \textit{City Son: Andrew W. Cooper’s Impact on Modern-Day Brooklyn} (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2020), which argues that Andrew W. Cooper’s small weekly newspaper gave central Brooklyn a voice and a separate identity.


\textsuperscript{55} Browne, “Boro Black.”
they did not purchase. The same article noted that much of the anger against Korean grocers derived from the fact that African Americans believed that they had no alternative places to shop. Similarly, the *New York Amsterdam News* quoted several African protesters who repeatedly stated that the protest had nothing to do with anti-Asian sentiment. Instead, the boycott was about the “lack of respect” given to black customers in their neighborhood by the grocers who owned the Family Red Apple. The article also quoted an African American community leader named Elombe Brath who argued that the protests were about the “exploitative manner of the Korean businesses” that did not reinvest back into the community. In their defense, Korean grocers argued that the disagreements sprang from cultural misunderstandings, not their racism against African Americans. They pointed out that they were the victims of racially motivated boycotts.

As the boycotts continued, Carson threatened that in the future there would soon be many “Korean funerals.” The white press repeatedly quoted Carson’s most violent rhetoric, rather than the voices of the many ordinary African Americans who expressed concerns about their treatment by specific Korean grocers.

Also, the press often ignored a point made by numerous articles in the black press related to how the protests were focused on the Family Red Apple store, not on Korean

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57 Sims, “Black Customers.”


59 Baillou, “Rallies.”
grocers in general. The white press had mischaracterized the boycott, depicting it falsely as a boycott against all Korean groceries. In contrast, the black press described how there were several Korean groceries in the Flatbush neighborhood doing “brisk business” and not subject to a boycott. The focus of the boycott on the site of the incident lends credence to the New York Amsterdam’s version of the targeted nature of the boycott and the relationship between the boycott and the alleged actions of a specific Korean grocer.

The boycotts came in the early days of the Dinkins administration and presented the new mayor with one of his first tests. Dinkins confronted a situation that was not of his making. The players in the drama, including the protesters, were not under his control. Despite this evident fact, Dinkins’s failure to bring the boycotts to a quick end called into question one of the central themes of the 1989 campaign. Throughout the 1989 primary and general election, he claimed to possess the ability to reconcile the racial tensions that characterized the Koch years discussed in a prior chapter of this week. In the press, Dinkins stated that he believed that people had the right to protest, and he avoided any direct criticism of Carson and the protesters. While Dinkins tried not to intervene in what he perceived as a minor local matter, the presence of a protest with racial dynamics damaged Dinkins’s image.

In the early days of the boycotts, the mainstream press labeled the boycotts as racially motivated, prompting Carson to respond. In an op-ed published in the New York Amsterdam News on May 12, 1990, Carson described how the protest was not racially motivated against Koreans. He also refuted several rumors about the boycott, including

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60 “Bklyn Group.”

61 “Bklyn Group.”
that it was funded by outside forces to harm Dinkins and that he was trying to extort money from the Korean grocers. Rather than motivated by hate of Koreans, the boycotts, according to Carson, were essentially about protecting black women from disrespect at the “hands of outsiders” and that black men had an obligation to protect and defend not only “black women” but also their “communities. Carson concluded that blacks did not have meaningful access to the courts and political processes and must take direct political action on the streets to influence change. 62

While the press and Dinkins’s political opponents continued to demand that Dinkins repudiate the boycott, an incident that occurred in May 1990 provided Dinkins with a warning regarding the political peril that he faced, if he directly confronted the protesters or crossed Carson. In May 1990, an African American teacher from Erasmus High School in Flatbush took a group of students to patronize the Family Red Apple, arguing that the protests were “racist.” In response, Carson vilified the teacher in the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News*, calling him a “misguided Negro” and an “intellectual masturbator.”63 The article then described how Dinkins recently criticized Carson in a speech and how Carson in response issued a stern warning to Dinkins. Specifically, Carson stated that “I think there will be trouble ahead if Dinkins does not change his attempts to label the Black community as being the culprit in the four-month-old conflict.”64

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64 Browne, “Erasmus Teacher.”
This threat indicates that Carson believed that Dinkins had criticized the protesters in May 1990, despite the mainstream media’s depictions to the contrary. Moreover, the article demonstrates that confronting Carson and the protesters was not without significant personal and political risk, as it could alienate some portion of the African American community. The teacher cited multiple death threats and potential violence as reasons justifying his request for a transfer to a new school.65

During the summer of 1990, the press put pressure on Dinkins. In one press conference, reporters repeatedly pressed Dinkins to repudiate Carson and the protesters. However, Dinkins did not do so. In fact, Dinkins grew angry at the media’s repeated demands, arguing that the demands reflected the media’s racism as they were seeking to hold him accountable or responsible for the actions of other black people. Dinkins, typically mild-mannered and calm, got physically angry in the face of repeated questions about the boycott and stated, “I don't know that one has to in every instance speak out instantaneously.”66 Dinkins stated that he opposed racially motivated boycotts, but he refrained from describing the boycotts in question as racially motivated.67

As protests intensified outside of the grocery, the Korean grocers obtained an injunction, barring protesters from engaging in activities within fifty feet of the store. Court filings alleged that protesters were intimidating and threatening customers. However, obtaining an injunction had negligible effect as police, fearing a confrontation


67 Purdum, “Angry Dinkins.”
with the African American protesters, did not enforce it.\textsuperscript{68} In July 1990, police charged the Korean store manager from the original Family Red Apple grocer with simple assault of the young Haitian.\textsuperscript{69} However, the manager’s arrest for a misdemeanor criminal offense did little to satisfy the protesters.

The boycott spread to another Korean-owned business, following allegations that a Korean employee of a grocery assaulted an African American mother who was with her child. The African American woman alleged that a Korean employee spit in her face and threw her to the ground, while the grocer alleged that the woman was eating cherries from a display without paying for them.\textsuperscript{70} The allegation of shoplifting and the violent response paralleled the situation from the original Family Red Apple incident. However, unlike the Family Red Apple boycott, Dinkins distanced himself from the second boycott upon learning that the owners of the second Korean grocer quickly sold their business to an unrelated Korean family after the alleged incident. Dinkins argued that a boycott against the owners of a family-owned business solely because the owners shared the same nationality as the prior owners made no sense.\textsuperscript{71} In fact, Dinkins warned the protesters of the second grocery that the city did not tolerate discrimination based on race or national origin.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{71} Terry, “Dinkins Responds.”

\textsuperscript{72} Terry, “Dinkins Responds.”
Despite his criticism of the proposed boycott of the second Korean-owned grocery, Dinkins also continued support the right of people to engage in lawful protests. He said that the African American community had legitimate grievances about its treatment by some merchants in New York City. As the boycott extended against the Family Red Apple into the summer of 1990 and as pressure from the press mounted, Dinkins tasked his trusted advisor William Lynch to negotiate an end to the boycott. However, the media of the era lampooned Dinkins’s efforts, arguing that the mayor should not negotiate with Carson, who was labeled as a violent race-baiter.

After behind-the-scenes attempts to end the boycotts failed, Dinkins tasked a committee to provide him with a report on the origins of the boycott and recommendations on how to proceed. The decision to establish a commission to investigate the Korean boycott earned him additional scorn in the mainstream press. A *New York Times* op-ed stated:

> While the facts may be in dispute, there is nothing ambiguous about the behavior of Robert (Sonny) Carson, the convicted kidnapper and racial provocateur who is leading the boycott. Picketers shout threats and spit at would-be customers. Their leaflets exhort people to "boycott all Korean stores" and avoid shopping "with people who do not look like us."
>
> Sonny Carson proclaims himself "anti-white." The boycott, which has all but shut down this and nearby stores, recalls inflammatory efforts

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73 A *New York Times* article dated July 16, 1990, noted that the commission had an exceedingly difficult time resolving the dispute and providing recommendations because the boycotts were "leaderless" and appeared to grow organically from several grass-roots organizations in the community that did not have unified demands. See Don Terry, “Diplomacy Fails to End Store Boycott in Flatbush,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1990, A1.
by Mr. Carson and others against Korean merchants in Harlem, the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn and Jamaica, Queens.\textsuperscript{74} “In the future,” Mr. Carson says crudely, “there'll be funerals, not boycotts.”\textsuperscript{75}

The op-ed concluded that Dinkins, who was in office for less than six months at the time, failed to fulfill his central campaign promise of healing the city’s racial divide because he failed to confront Carson.

The \textit{Times} argued that the boycotts were racist, and that Dinkins’s weak leadership had extended their duration. Another op-ed stated:

Regrettably, the report seeks to shift responsibility for the racial trouble from the boycotters and Mr. Dinkins to the Brooklyn District Attorney. The findings thereby miss the point, as does Mr. Dinkins: the longer racism is appeased by weak leadership, the more embattled will be New York’s already ragged race relations. And make no mistake. The Flatbush boycott, which the report deals with, and a second boycott now under way in the Brownsville neighborhood, are racist.\textsuperscript{76}

The reference to Brownsville in the op-ed was a reference to the incident at a second Korean grocer who sold the grocery after the incident to an unrelated Korean. In


August 1990, Dinkins denounced the protesters arguing that the sale of the grocery undermined the legitimacy of that boycott. 77

After months of criticism, Dinkins met with the owner of Family Red Apple in September 1990, breaking the line of what the New York Times described as a small but “angry” group of protesters. 78 As Dinkins crossed the protest line, the African American protesters cursed and jeered Dinkins. 79 Unimpressed, the Times reporter detailed how Dinkins’s purchase of ten dollars in fruit that included several bananas and apples seemed “anticlimactic” because Dinkins had done so little previously to confront a racially motivated protest. 80

Crossing the protest line was fraught with personal and political risk, including alienating at least some segment of the African American community. But the Times, in an op-ed, described Dinkins’s prior actions as “reticence” and not “leadership” and his response as “painfully slow.” 81 In the view of the newspaper’s editorial board the blame for the boycotts lay squarely on the protesters. Dinkins had extended the boycotts by his failure to act decisively. 82 The same op-ed rejected the findings of the commission

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79 Purdum, “Dinkins Supports.”
80 Terry, “Dinkins Responds.”
82 “Mayor Visits the Red Apple.”
established by Dinkins, which found that the boycotts were essentially instance-based and not racially motivated.\textsuperscript{83}

In contrast to the coverage of the \textit{New York Times}, the \textit{New York Amsterdam News} came to Dinkins’s defense, arguing that the white press made Carson the primary focus of the boycotts as a means of damaging Dinkins.\textsuperscript{84} An op-ed noted that the report into the origins of the boycotts cited a widespread feeling of “disrespect” of African Americans by Korean grocers and feelings of “exploitation,” but that the boycotts were focused against stores where specific events took place.\textsuperscript{85} A few days later, the \textit{Amsterdam News} accused the \textit{New York Post} and other newspapers for unfairly vilifying Carson and Dinkins to sell papers by appealing to white racial fears.\textsuperscript{86} The article noted that Carson and his group stood up to crack dealers when no one else would do so and that Dinkins was being blamed for problems outside of his control, in a cynical attempt to gin up racial tension in the city.\textsuperscript{87}

While the black and white press in New York City debated Dinkins’s response and the origins of the boycotts, Korean voices were, for the most part, drowned out in battle of competing narratives. This occurred for several reasons, ranging from language barriers to their desire to remain out of the spotlight. However, several stories in the \textit{New York Times} reported that Koreans viewed Dinkins’s response as ineffective and that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} “Mayor Visits the Red Apple.”
\item \textsuperscript{84} “Korean Boycott Report Just Right,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, September 8, 1990
\item \textsuperscript{85} “Korean Boycott Report.”
\item \textsuperscript{86} Abiola Sinclair, “Post 'Hate and Fear' Campaign,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, September 15, 1990.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Sinclair, “Post ‘Hate.’"
\end{itemize}
Koreans looked to each other for help during the crisis. Koreans had little political power but the crisis sparked many Koreans to view the incident as a warning about the need to obtain political power in the future. Another *New York Times* article noted that the boycotts sparked the Korean community to engage in fundraising for the boycotted store, evidencing emergence of unity and political resolve. These articles contained a latent notion that the Korean community, in general, had been the target of an unjustified boycott.

While Dinkins faced down an angry crowd when he crossed the picket-line to meet the Korean grocer, the press at the time described Dinkins’s decision to cross the boycott as too little, too late. Andrew Hacker, a white political scientist, characterized the coverage in the mainstream media, arguing that Dinkins had done the “barest of minimum” to end the boycotts and that his failure to condemn the likes of Carson and Sharpton, while “understandable, was inexcusable.” Hacker concluded, “The boycotters’ real target is white America, which has found yet another way of avoiding their share of the blame for the plight of black Americans.” Such commentary not only minimized Dinkins’s behind-the-scenes efforts for months to end the crisis, but also ignored his public statements and bold decision to cross the picket-line.

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89 Gonzalez, “Koreans See.”


92 Hacker, “Blacks’ Silence.”
Hacker discounted the stated grievances of the protesters and instead viewed the protests as a misguided proxy war against whites. Such commentary delegitimized the articulated grievances of the protesters, who repeatedly cited that their protests derived not from racism against Koreans, but from poor treatment and disrespect by specific Korean grocers.

The press also drew provocative parallels between anti-Semitism and the anti-Asian rhetoric of some of the protesters. Specifically, an op-ed in the *New York Times* written by Fred Hechinger, who grew up in Nazi Germany and witnessed the after effects of Kristallnacht, compared the widespread violence against Jews and the arrest of thousands of Jewish people in Nazi Germany with the disorganized protests against a single grocer in Brooklyn. The author described how the boycotts in Brooklyn were “racially motivated” and how the Brooklyn protests pointed to “broken glass or worse.” Like much of the coverage in the mainstream press, the op-ed omits the critically important fact that Korean-owned businesses in close proximity were not boycotted. The mainstream press tended to indicate that a generalized animus against all Koreans fueled the boycott, while showing empathy to the protesters who repeatedly argued that African Americans were the victims of discrimination by specific Korean grocers who used rough tactics and violence when dealing with customers.

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94 Hechinger, “Racial Boycotts.”
Days after Dinkins visited the grocery, police found nineteen “unexploded gasoline bombs” on the roof of the grocery store.95 The facts surrounding these “gasoline bombs” remain murky. The police never reported whether the “gasoline bombs” were planted by an angry protester, the owners of the grocery, or third parties or whether there was a benign explanation for gasoline storage on the roof. The threat of violence resulted in increased police presence and ultimately led to a de-escalation of the protests, as the Family Red Apple became a crime scene. As police began to question the protesters looking for suspects, the boycotters started to believe that they were under close police surveillance, resulting in lower participation in the protesters outside of the Korean groceries. Ultimately, the media never followed up on the story regarding the “unexploded bombs” and a police investigation never resulted in charges against anyone related to the incident.

In early 1991, the acquittal of Pong Ok Jang, the Korean worker who was charged for assaulting the Haitian female, led Dinkins to call for an end to the protests.96 Dinkins said, “Pong Ok Jang and all New Yorkers who have been affected by this tragic boycott have endured more than enough and want the healing process to begin. I believe the court’s decision is a major step toward this important end.”97 However, Carson said that the verdict demonstrated that black women could not obtain justice in the courts and that

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the fights would continue in the streets. The *Amsterdam News* surveyed the coverage in the tabloid press and described how it had largely, and unfairly, depicted the boycott as “racist” or “anti-Asian.”

The boycotts finally ended when the owners of the Family Red Apple grocery vacated their property in 1991. Ultimately, Carson and the boycott achieved its goal of putting the Family Red Apple out of business. However, Carson’s victory proved Pyrrhic, as the brand of black nationalism that he promoted for more than a generation would have few other victories in the years following the boycotts. While Carson would dispute that he had sought to harm Dinkins, the white press used him as a tool against Dinkins, damaging an African American liberal who had little in common with Carson. After the Korean grocer crisis, the press and Giuliani would largely ignore Carson, as he had served their purposes. Thus, despite his best efforts to involve himself in the fight against police brutality and police abuses, Carson largely became a political irrelevancy during the Giuliani years, overshadowed by the rise of his son, a hip-hop artist who went by the name of Professor X The Overseer.

Carson, who engaged in activism from the 1960s until his death in 2002, may have spoken only for a small segment of the black community in Brooklyn that he alleged to represent. This may explain why scholars have not given his post-1970s activism much consideration. By 1989, Carson may have been little more than a gadfly, used by both black and mainstream presses to articulate the most extreme views found within the African American community. Rather than a true spokesperson for the views

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98 Harris, “Sonny Carson Calls.”

99 Harris, “Sonny Carson Calls.”
of significant portions of New York City’s diverse black community both the white and black press boosted Carson’s profile because he gave sensational quotes. Yet Carson’s critique of Dinkins undoubtedly resonated with some the African American voters, who felt that Dinkins had not done enough for the black community.

Despite Dinkins’s best efforts to resolve the dispute in a manner that avoided taking sides, Dinkins’s performance was criticized by both whites and blacks. An unfair theme emerged in the aftermath of the Korean grocery boycott that would plague Dinkins for the remainder of his time in office. Dinkins’s opponents accused him of favoring African Americans at the expense of other New Yorkers. Those in the press often cited Dinkins’s perceived quickness to condemn the racism of New York City’s whites while excusing or ignoring racism from within the African American community. At the same time, Dinkins’s actions during the boycott angered some in the African American community who argued that Dinkins had caved to white pressure by denouncing the boycotts.

In internal polling conducted prior to the 1993 election, more than two thousand five hundred New Yorkers were asked whether Dinkins had been too slow to respond to the boycotts of Korean grocers. More than 53% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Ethnic whites, including Italians, Irish, and Jewish residents, responded most unfavorably to Dinkins’s response to the boycotts, as nearly

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101 “Johnson’s Poll Results.”
75% of ethnic whites stated that his response had been too slow. However, an analysis of the data reveals that a majority of the blacks polled on that question disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, reflecting how race shaped perspectives on Dinkins’s job performance. Interestingly, Dinkins did not poll Asians on the question. In that same polling, respondents were asked whether Dinkins favored blacks over other groups in the city. While 65% of respondents stated that Dinkins treated all groups equally, 20% of respondents stated that Dinkins favored blacks over other groups and 7% of respondents stated that Dinkins did not do enough to help blacks during his time in office. Again, perspectives about Dinkins’s favoritism largely broke along racial lines; a vast majority of those who believed that Dinkins favored blacks over other groups were white. While a majority of black voters continued to view Dinkins favorably, the development of some discontent among a minority of black voters dampened enthusiasm for Dinkins’s reelection bid.

In August 1991, the New York Amsterdam News described how the press and Dinkins’s political opponents had used both Sharpton and Carson to scare white readers and sell papers. The op-ed describes how the press cynically sought to weaken Dinkins by continually demanding that he denounce the two men when they knew that he was politically unable to do so. Rather than assign blame, the newspaper described how men like Carson and Sharpton had saved the city from the type of unrest found in other

102 “Johnson’s Poll Results.”
103 “Johnson’s Poll Results.”
105 “Johnson’s Poll Results.”
large cities like Los Angeles, because they had access to political power and used their influence in the community to ease tensions. Thus, rather than causing the tension in the city, the *New York Amsterdam News* presented a compelling argument that men like Carson and Sharpton provided black voices that could be heard by politicians like Dinkins, acting as a safety-valve.

In the short-term, the Korean grocer boycott politically weakened Dinkins as it lasted more than one year and undermined Dinkins’s central campaign promise to bridge racial differences. Dinkins’s inability to quickly resolve the boycott as well as his eventual decision to break the picket line pleased no one and contributed to a drop in Dinkins’s popularity among all demographics in the city, including African Americans. While the African American press rallied to his side during the boycotts, it would eventually grow tired of Dinkins’s careful moderation as Dinkins faced repeated crises in the years following the boycott of the Family Red Apple. Moreover, Dinkins’s response alienated many Asians, New York City’s fastest grouping demographic, preventing the mayor from expanding his political coalition. In other words, he alienated both his existing and his potential supporters.

New York City during the Dinkins years could have erupted in race violence similar to Los Angles as it had all of the necessary components including a long history of allegations of police brutality, tensions between African Americans and other groups, and as well as a history of unrest. However, as noted by the *New York Amsterdam News*, Dinkins played an unappreciated role in avoiding the large-scale violence and civil

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106 “Johnson’s Poll Results.”

unrest. While Los Angeles burned in the aftermath of the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King, New York largely escaped such turmoil for two reasons. First, Dinkins had a network of grassroots support in the African American community, including Carson. Those connections played an unsung role in saving New York City from the type of violence and civil unrest that occurred in Los Angeles. Second, Dinkins’s non-confrontational rhetoric, while appearing weak at the time, tended to deescalate racial tension in the city. While New Yorkers had grown accustomed to the abrasiveness of former mayor Ed Koch, Dinkins’s calm demeanor and soft-spoken nature cooled tensions down eventually, even if his style did not placate the press of the era who sought to portray a city in conflict needing a “strong man.”

After Carson’s death, a Brooklyn Councilman in 2007 supported a proposal that would have named a street in Brooklyn for Carson, citing his long civil rights activism. However, even in death, Carson’s name and legacy proved toxic. Both the New York Post and Daily News lambasted the idea, citing Carson’s behavior during the boycott of Korean grocers in 1990 and 1991. The Daily News proclaimed that Carson “Deserves No Honor,” while the New York Post similarly declared that “Thugs Don’t Deserve Honors.” Both newspapers argued that a “thug,” “racist,” and “kidnapper” should not be honored by the city. Then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg piled on and stated that he would never give Carson any honor. In what was described as one of the most contentious City Council meetings in years, the City Council voted down the motion in a

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vote split largely across racial lines.\textsuperscript{111} Even in death, Carson remained a controversial figure in the history of New York City politics.

In his memoir entitled \textit{A Mayor’s Life: Governing New York’s Gorgeous Mosaic},\textsuperscript{112} Dinkins mentions Carson in only a few passages. The Korean boycott, which was a major media story for almost a year and remained a subject of questioning during Dinkins’s reelection bid, occupies only a handful of pages. One can only speculate that Dinkins downplayed the boycott and his response because the incident undermined the image that he sought to project in his autobiography as a peacemaker who promoted racial harmony. Also, the story exposed racism against Asians within the African American community. In retrospect, Dinkins argued that he took steps to end the boycott and confront Carson but concludes that he did respond too slowly to the boycott.\textsuperscript{113} He struggled to make sense of the incident. He recalled how at times there were only one or two protesters at a time in front of the Family Red Apple store, but that the organizers of the boycott rallied large crowds when they were informed of the media’s presence, hinting that the protests were partially the product of media coverage. While casting doubt on the widespread support for the boycott, Dinkins readily admitted that he had a negative impact on him. The media narrative hampered his ability to govern and his reelection chances. Dinkins concluded that he waited too long to visit the grocery, “but I

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\textsuperscript{113} Dinkins, \textit{A Mayor’s Life}, 228–230.
\end{flushright}
had faith in the court system and in the rational ability of people to come to satisfactory conclusions among themselves. I may have been wrong on both counts.”

In his 1993 reelection bid, Dinkins was constantly dogged by questions about the boycotts and his failure to denounce black radicalism. In June 1993, one voter provocatively asked why Dinkins did not opt to display courage and leadership by confronting Carson and other black activists, including Sharpton. Dinkins responded:

I don't need to demonstrate political or moral courage—I think I've done that throughout my life. . .. So, you say I haven't done as much as you think I should have with respect to black radicals. Let me tell you: I haven't been able to do too much about certain other radicals either.

The white liberal establishment failed to appreciate how Dinkins sought to resolve a series of racially charged events, including the boycotts of Korean grocers, which had the potential to spiral out of control. Dinkins’s half-hearted defense of his actions reinforced the media’s depiction of him as a weak leader. Ultimately, his inability to combat the image of him created by the media seriously damaged his standing among central parts of his coalition, including white liberals and some African American voters, thereby harming his chances at reelection.

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114 Dinkins, A Mayor’s Life, 230.

Chapter 3

The Politics of Crack, Crime, and the “Ghettoization”
of the Outer Boroughs

On a summer night in July 1992, a police officer shot and killed a Dominican immigrant suspected of dealing drugs under circumstances that remain in dispute, sparking several days of unrest in the Washington Heights neighborhood, an area in the northwest portion of Manhattan, north of Harlem and south of Inwood. For several days, Dominicans and other Latino residents of the Washington Heights area vented their anger at Mayor David Dinkins and the New York City Police Department, calling for an end to heavy-handed policing of minority neighborhoods, police corruption, and profiling of minority men. Those days of unrest in the midst of the crack and crime epidemics that plagued New York City in the mid-1980s and early 1990s provide insight into the complex nature of the politics of crime and drugs in New York City during the Dinkins era.

During the 1989 election, Dinkins promised to hire thousands of new police and “get tough” on crime. Dinkins also argued that the police force should reflect the city’s racial diversity. These policies had broad support in minority neighborhoods as the crack epidemic devastated many communities in upper Manhattan, Bronx, and Brooklyn. At the time, many whites opposed Dinkins’ initiatives, viewing his policies via the racialized and zero-sum view of the era. Many ethnic whites viewed Dinkins’s policies as benefiting minorities at the expense of their interests and neighborhoods. Once in office, Dinkins, in large part, made good on his election promises. However, increased policing
of minority communities, while resulting in a decrease in crime rates, alienated many young black and Hispanic men, who increasingly came in contact with the police. The Washington Heights unrest of 1992, discussed in detail in this chapter, provides an example of the backlash to increased policing of minority neighborhoods. Moreover, Dinkins’s focus on hiring more minority police officers and his focus on increased police presence in minority neighborhoods angered many rank-and-file police officers and ethnic whites who feared that allocating increased police presence in minority neighborhoods rendered other neighborhoods vulnerable. Thus, the implementation of Dinkins’s crime initiatives, initially embraced by several components of Dinkins’s coalition, exposed cleavages within his political coalition.

The crime and crack epidemics of the 1980s and 1990s were the subject of numerous books in the late 2010s and early 2020s in the genre of true crime stories detailing the violence of the era as well as the battles between New York City Police and drug gangs for control of the streets.¹ A 2021 Netflix movie entitled *Crack: Cocaine, Corruption, and Conspiracy* described the impact of crack cocaine on the urban landscape, including in New York City, arguing that the drug laws imposed to deal with the crack epidemic had a devastating impact on African American communities.

nationwide. Historians have started to explore the relationship between crime, race, and politics in twentieth-century New York City.

By focusing on the politics of race, crime, and drugs in New York City during 1989 to 1993, a period that overlapped with the apex of the crack epidemic in New York City, this exploration of the short-and long-term effects of the 1992 Washington Heights unrest weighs in on a debate over the origins of the decline in New York City’s crime rate and contemporary debate over Dinkins’s legacy. Dinkins promised to get “tough on crime” during the election of 1989 and then enacted a series of measures during his administration (1989–1993) that resulted in a sharp decrease in crime in New York. Complicating scholarly arguments that the war on drugs had a pure racial animus,

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activism from within certain segments of the African American community in favor of “get tough” on crime measures influenced Dinkins’s rhetoric and actions.  

Dinkins’s tough stance on crime alienated young African Americans and Latinos as well as conservative ethnic whites in the outer boroughs. As several historically white neighborhoods in the outer boroughs underwent a demographic change during Dinkins’s tenure, ethnic whites used the terms “crime” and “ghettoization” as code words to voice opposition to changing racial demographics in the outer boroughs. Dinkins further alienated ethnic whites during several high-profile controversies involving allegations of police abuse and brutality, including during and in the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest. An examination of the police riot of 1992 outside City Hall illustrates that many whites, including a sizable percentage of police officers, unfairly viewed Dinkins as anti-police and soft on crime.

Dinkins was trapped between political forces in New York City and doomed as a liberal because there was an assumption among ethnic whites that he was biased against the police and favored African Americans. At the same time, Dinkins’s quest to meet the demands of African Americans and other minorities who called for increased policing and stricter drug laws brought him into conflict with various parts of his own coalition when he implemented those proposals.

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6 See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), which argues that the war on drugs had a racial animus. This chapter adds to the recent scholarship that has challenged the central premise of Alexander’s work. For example, James Forman Jr. in *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017) explored how in Washington D.C. that there was a great deal of support within the black community for increased policing and get strict laws against drugs and guns. Other historians have taken an even broader viewer and have argued that the war on drugs derived from the emergence of a bourgeois liberalism in the 18th and 19th centuries that focused on the control over the bodies of the poor. See Toby Seddon, *A History of Drugs: Drugs and Freedom in the Liberal Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).
Washington Heights had personal significance for Dinkins because he was a long-time resident before being elected mayor. Dinkins witnessed the demographic changes over a generation as he grew up. Washington Heights’ large and growing Hispanic population reflected demographic trends in New York City, as Hispanics made up around a quarter of New York City’s population in 1990. Also, as a long-time resident of the neighborhood, Dinkins viewed first-hand the effect of the crack and crime epidemics of the mid-1980s and early 1990s. By that era, the Washington Heights neighborhood was often depicted in the media as the “capital of crack,” a cheap free base cocaine, in New York City. Dinkins often highlighted the neighborhood in speeches as one of a handful of “under siege” communities from a wave of crack and crime.7

An exploration of Washington Heights, a multiracial neighborhood composed of predominately Jewish and Irish ethnic whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, also provides insight into the complexities of policing a multiracial city. The schisms that existed among New Yorkers divided by race, class, language, and religion were in full display in Washington Heights. The unrest of the summer of 1992 provides insight into how increased police presence and the adoption of more aggressive policing practices led to a backlash against policies initially demanded by some in the community. The changes in policing policies and changes in criminal law were more than a product of racial animus against minority communities. To the contrary, New York City whites, at the time, often viewed increased policing of minority neighborhoods as depriving them and their neighborhoods of needed protection.

7 Politicians in the 1980s and 1990s, including Dinkins, often described the battle against drugs and crime using militaristic terminology, indicating that certain neighborhoods were “under siege” and that a “war” against crime and drugs was needed to “reclaim” certain neighborhoods.
New York City in the post-World War II era underwent a massive demographic transformation as millions of whites left New York City. In 1940, there were nearly seven million white New Yorkers, foreign or native born.\textsuperscript{8} By the time Dinkins was sworn in in 1990, there were three million non-Hispanic white New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{9} In 1940, there were around five hundred thousand blacks in New York.\textsuperscript{10} In 1990, there were over two million African Americans, composing almost 30% of the population.\textsuperscript{11} The exodus of white New Yorkers and corresponding inflow of African Americans from the southern states and immigrants from the Caribbean transformed numerous previously white working-class neighborhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx into neighborhoods that whites labeled in the racially tainted vernacular of the time as “ghettos,” despite that most black neighborhoods had rather large populations of working and middle-class black residents. In the period from 1940 to 1990, New York City’s population decreased by approximately five hundred thousand people. The depopulation was most pronounced in neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Bronx, leaving thousands of abandoned houses and creating urban blight.


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Along with demographic changes, New York City underwent a generation-long increase in crime from the late 1960s to the early-1990s. In the minds of many whites, there was a link between the changing demographics, increases in crime, and the deterioration of previously white neighborhoods, reinforcing racist notions that linked blackness with disorder and criminality.\textsuperscript{12} Those whites that remained in New York’s outer boroughs often found themselves relocated into new neighborhoods where they lamented the state of their old neighborhood, simultaneously living in anxiety and fear of the transformation of their newfound neighborhoods. Those whites left behind in previously majority white neighborhoods transformed into predominately African American neighborhoods often lived in tension with their new neighbors. Spike Lee’s 1989 movie \textit{Do the Right Thing} dramatized white anxiety, fear, and racism amidst the changing racial landscape.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1988, New York City recorded 1,905 murders.\textsuperscript{14} The majority of the 1988 murders occurred in African American and Hispanic neighborhoods in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Bronx, and Manhattan, and nearly one-third of those murders were directly related to the drug trade as an epidemic of crack cocaine plagued numerous cities.

\textsuperscript{12} For a deeper discussion of the linkages between criminality and blackness and how the linkages shaped the urban landscape, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, \textit{The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America} (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011).


neighborhoods across New York City. A 2012 study identified the top ten neighborhoods with the most gun-related homicides in 1990. All of the top-ten neighborhoods were where African Americans were in the majority (Mott Haven, Harlem, West Hamilton Heights, East Bronx, Bruckner/Bridgewater Street, Ocean Hill/Brownsville, East New York, Morrisanna, Bushwick, and North Crown Heights).

Crack cocaine played a significant role in the rise in crime in all categories. In large part, the introduction of crack cocaine into minority neighborhoods in the mid-1980s explains the high number of homicides in African American neighborhoods, as the crack cocaine trade fueled brutal turf battles between gangs to control the lucrative drug trade. The introduction of crack cocaine also played a role in increased rates of violent crime, including forcible robbery and rape. Nearly 40% of the homicides in 1988 were drug related.

The introduction of crack into New York City in the mid-1980s made many previously working-class African American neighborhoods dangerous for residents. A 1989 article in the New York Times on the East New York, Brooklyn neighborhood described how crack cocaine and the resulting violence “brought the neighborhood to its knees” and how the previous working class African American neighborhood was


17 Ibid. Chauhan and Kois, “Homicides.”

“fighting to survive.” Similarly, a 1988 *New York Times* article detailed a weekend that featured multiple shootings in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The same article described how long-time residents felt like “prisoners in their own homes” where “drug dealers were selling drugs like they had a license to do so.” These articles described how rising crime also led to an exodus of middle class and working-class blacks who had the means to exit, leaving behind only those without the means to flee.

New York City has a long history of crime. However, the crack epidemic and corresponding increase in murder rates was viewed differently in many respects from the type of crime that many ethnic whites had long accepted as part of the city landscape. First, images of young black men and youth wielding firearms and the corresponding stories of drive-by shootings and the death of innocent victims became popularized by the tabloid press and local news coverage of the era, playing into already existing racial fears. Second, the popular reality-television show *Cops* that made its debut in 1989 reinforced existing racist stereotypes about African Americans. Images of perp-walks and the arrest of black, brown, and poor whites paraded on television fueled white anxiety and fear. Finally, the emergence of rap music as the dominant genre among both black and ethnic white youth in the outer boroughs further fueled white anxiety about the future, as its glorification of street life clashed with the middle-and-working class values of older ethnic whites.

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The fear of crime and the changing demographic nature of traditionally ethnic white neighborhoods accelerated the exodus of ethnic whites in the 1980s and early 1990s. They left New York City for Long Island, New Jersey, and South Florida in record numbers. Those ethnic whites in the outer boroughs who remained in previously predominately white neighborhoods often linked the changing demographics with crime and used racialized language about the need to protect their neighborhoods from “those people” who “destroyed other good neighborhoods.”21 Increases in crime, especially in areas viewed as traditionally “safe” or “good” neighborhoods, terms used to refer to predominately white neighborhoods, further fueled anxiety among many whites.22

In addition to the violence associated with the crack trade, New Yorkers further had to deal with an epidemic of property crimes. New York City had one of the highest rates of car theft in the nation, as well as a generalized feeling of lawlessness. A New York Times article in 1988 noted that the police reported one car was reported stolen every four minutes, although the police contended that many of those reports were either false or done by the owners of the cars to collect the insurance proceeds.23 In some neighborhoods, drug dealers as well as prostitutes engaged in their trades in broad daylight in the streets, while underground in the subways, passengers faced the threat of

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pick-pocketing and other violent crime. New Yorkers in the late 1980s started drawing comparisons between the period and the “bad old days of the 1970s.”

Some commentators such as Michelle Alexander argued that a “false narrative” based on racial antagonism created an irrational fear of crime that served as a justification for tough drug laws in the late 1980s, culminating in the passage of The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. This analysis ignores not only the violent crime statistics of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, but also the public polling of the era among all racial groups. In polling in 1989, crime and drugs ranked as the top issues facing New York City for New Yorkers of all races, classes, and political parties.

Moreover, the liberal consensus of the 1980s and 1990s viewed violent crime and drugs as linked problems requiring stricter criminal laws and increased policing of minority communities. For example, politicians like Dinkins linked the drug and crime problems and called for increased policing of minority communities as an essential part of a much-needed “war on drugs.” Dinkins repeatedly proclaimed during the 1989 election that if elected he would be “toughest mayor on crime that this city has ever seen.” In 1989 the New York Times noted that nearly every speech Dinkins gave during the primary and general election emphasized the impact that crime and crack had on minority communities and how he pledged to return police to the streets. While some skeptical commentators suggested that Dinkins’s “get tough on crime” message was an


26 “Mayoral Candidates.”

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attempt to curry favor with white voters, Dinkins’s message also derived from political pressure from within the African American community, which sought government action to address the lawlessness within their community. During his time as Manhattan Borough President from 1985 to 1989, Dinkins spoke out against the rising rates of crime in several upper Manhattan neighborhoods, including in his own neighborhood of Washington Heights. In an op-ed in the *New York Times* on June 27, 1987, Dinkins lamented the demonization of black men and the linkage between blackness and crime in New York City that he professed created an environment that allowed the modern-day lynching that occurred in Howard Beach and widespread discrimination against black men.\(^\text{27}\) At the same time, Dinkins called for comprehensive criminal justice reform that punished so-called “black on black crime,” that is, crime committed by African Americans that impacted other African Americans.

Crime rates increased most dramatically in African American neighborhoods in the period from 1985 to 1991, but New York City whites were not immune, as crime spilled into the subways and into white neighborhoods. The rape and brutal assault of a wealthy white female jogger in Central Park in the summer of 1989, which was commonly believed at the time to have been committed by a group of African American and Hispanic youths, was labeled by Mayor Edward Koch as the “crime of the century.” The incident impacted the tone and tenor of the 1989 election.\(^\text{28}\) The idea that teens


\(^{28}\) See Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch: The Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), which describes how the public perceived that New York City was dangerous during Mayor Koch’s tenure in office and the Central Park rape incident of 1989 served as an example of the dangerousness of the city for many whites.
traveled from their predominately minority neighborhoods to engage in “wilding” in
toney Central Park played into the racial fears and anxiety of the era. Politicians and
public figures, including real estate developer and media celebrity Donald Trump,
described how the rape of the Central Park jogger reflected the “ghettoization” of New
York City. In a full-page advertisement published in the New York Daily News, Trump,
who at the time self-identified as a liberal Democrat, called for the reestablishment of the
death penalty, the hiring of more police, and stricter criminal penalties for violent
criminals. While critics during the 2016 Presidential election would disparage Trump
for inciting racial hatred by demonizing the young African American and Hispanic men
who were falsely convicted for the rape of the Central Park jogger, Trump’s
advertisement and his accompanying media tour in the aftermath of the Central Park rape
embodied the anxiety felt by many New Yorkers of rising crime, as well as the liberal
embrace of stricter criminal law and increased policing in 1989.

When Dinkins announced his run to challenge Koch in 1989, crime was a central
issue, and many New Yorkers concluded that after three terms Koch had run out of ideas
to address the crime and drug problems. Repeatedly in speeches during both 1989
campaigns and during his early days in office, Dinkins compared the fight against crime
as a “war” and pledged to advocate for stricter laws against dealing drugs. To the

29 Charles Bremner, “Central Park Rape Stirs Liberals to Join the Retribution Lobby,” The Times
(London), May 3 1989, https://advance-lexis-
com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:41BC-0V00-00YK-01HY-
00000-00&context=1516831.

return-of-the-death-penalty.html
approval of most New Yorkers of all races, Dinkins promised that his “Safe Streets, Safe City” program would require New York State to build at least five new state prisons to house the thousands of drug dealers that Dinkins expected would be arrested when his “Safe Streets, Safe City” program was fully implemented.  

Dinkins, like other liberal politicians of the era, viewed the presence of high levels of crime in minority neighborhoods and the absence of police presence as violations of the civil rights of African Americans and other minorities who were held hostage in their homes as criminals ruled the streets. Thus, in addressing the problem of drugs and crime, Dinkins emphasized government action to solve the problems that he viewed as linked, arguing for increased and different policing methods and amendments in criminal laws. In a 1989 speech to a group of African American police executives, Dinkins cited the need for more minority police officers in minority neighborhoods to combat both the impact of racism in law enforcement and rising crime.

Dinkins’s crime policies were popular among many African American supporters, including church leaders and thought leaders. For example, a July 13, 1985, op-ed in the New Amsterdam News illustrated a sentiment felt by many African Americans at the time. Roscoe C. Brown, Jr., who was one of the Tuskegee Airman during World War II and

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32 Recently historians have started to explore how “get tough on crime” policies had widespread support within the African American community. See James Forman Jr., Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

was then serving as the President of 100 Black Men of America, argued that the black community had been victimized by both racist police and criminal elements from within the black community. He called for punishment of both the racist cop and the black criminal. A 1987 *New York Times* article described a large vigil at a black church in the Bushwick neighborhood where dozens of speakers and more than three thousand attendees focused their fury on the impact of crack and crime on their communities. Admittedly, dissenting voices in the African American community existed, like that of Reverend Al Sharpton and Sonny Carson who focused on the actions of police. However, polling of African American voters reflected staunch support for a tough-on-crime approach.

In the 1989 election, Republican Rudolph Giuliani, a former United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, touted his years of prosecutorial experience and argued that the city’s crime problem derived, in large part, from the city’s failure to police high crime areas. Some commentators argued that Giuliani sought to exploit the racial cleavages of the era as he emphasized the increased danger of the city in a manner that had racial undertones. While Giuliani tried to paint Dinkins as a liberal who was “soft on crime,” Dinkins, in numerous campaign speeches in front of both white

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34 The 100 Black Men in America was a civic organization founded in the 1960s to advocate for the advancement of African American children with the focus on the improvement of educational opportunity.


and African American audiences, called for increased policing of minority neighborhoods to combat what he characterized as an “invasion of drugs and crime” caused by “thugs” and “punks” who terrorized neighborhoods long abandoned by police. Dinkins proposed the hiring of nearly ten thousand new police officers and the use of community policing as well as aggressive enforcement of drug laws in minority neighborhoods. Thus, while Dinkins and Giuliani disagreed on many things, both men agreed that the city’s crime problem derived, in part, from the failure to adequately police minority neighborhoods.

During the 1989 campaign, Dinkins sought to address the concerns of whites who feared the election of an African American. He employed a slogan that emphasized that he was “strong and caring” but not a “tough man.” This slogan sought to draw a contrast between himself and Mayor Koch, as well as Giuliani, who emphasized their New York “toughness.” Despite that Dinkins avoided depicting himself as a “tough guy,” he repeatedly stated that he would “wage war” on drugs.

Dinkins’s “tough-on-crime” rhetoric during the 1989 campaign found receptive audiences within at least some portion of the African American and Hispanic communities in New York City, including among the residents of his own neighborhood,

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39 Murphy, “He Has Promises.”

In the 1989 election, over 90% of African American voters and nearly 70% of Hispanic voters voted for Dinkins. The support of both demographic groups, in both the primary and general elections of 1989, were instrumental to Dinkins’s electoral victories.

While political rivals like Giuliani argued that Dinkins’s campaign promises on crime were merely a political ploy to placate the fears of whites or an attempt to increase his percentage of the white vote, Dinkins remained committed to his crime message even after he was elected. In his inauguration speech, Dinkins promised that he would make

41 Scholars have argued that African American and Hispanic communities in the 1980s and 1990s sought to solve the problems of drugs and violence without additional policing. However, such scholarship tends to downplay the advocacy within African American and Hispanic communities for increased policing to address the violence associated with the drug trade. See Maureen Mahoney, “Fighting ‘Addiction’: African-American and Hispanic Activism and New York City’s Illegal Drug Policies, 1946–1999” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2011), which argues that African American and Hispanic church leaders sought to address the problems associated with drugs by developing community-based solutions.

In the late 2010s and early 2020s scholars have explored how leaders in the African American community in New York, including those in the African American churches, called for police action to deal with the violence associated with drugs. See Noel K. Wolfe, “A Community at War: The Bronx and Crack Cocaine” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2015), https://fordham.bepress.com/dissertations/AAI3719490/, which describes the activism of African American and Hispanic church groups in the 1980s and 1990s who advocated for increased policing of minority communities to combat the violence associated with drug trade. Likewise, according to Wolfe, community leaders in the Hispanic communities argued that the police’s abandonment of minority communities created a vacuum filled by criminals.

In Washington Heights, African American and Hispanic community activists, many of whom were middle-class church members, argued that the violence associated with the drug trade made the neighborhood unlivable, and these community activists advocated for not only increased policing but also the creation of a separate police precinct for the neighborhood. James Dao, “Police Accelerate Efforts to Expand Their Presence in Washington Heights,” New York Times, July 12, 1992, https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SC4-8270-000P-238D-00000-00&context=1516831.

good on his campaign promises. Dinkins rejected any notion that legalization of drugs was a solution to the city’s drug or crime problems. He argued that drugs were a plague on minority communities.

As a liberal, Dinkins viewed crime and drug abuse in minority communities as a product of poverty and racism. At a drug and alcohol prevention conference in 1987, Dinkins, then serving as Manhattan Borough President, described how many black youth and men entered the drug trade because selling drugs is “the only economic opportunity they know.” In that same speech, Dinkins described how additional police were only part of the solution to crime and drugs in African American communities, arguing for massive investment in minority communities to improve job and education opportunities. He described the crime and drug problems as “epidemics of despair” that could not be allowed to “destroy the promise of this city’s future.” Therefore, Dinkins viewed additional governmental action in the form of more police as the first step in making minority communities safe for residents as well as desirable investment locations.

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43 Dinkins, “Pledge to All.”


45 Dinkins, “Community School Board.”

However, Dinkins also emphasized how transformation of minority communities was only possible with investment from businesses and government spending.

Once in office, Dinkins continued to promise an aggressive response to crime and crack in a series of speeches. In 1990, Dinkins traveled to East New York, a Brooklyn neighborhood plagued by crime, and promised more police. In his speech before an enthusiastic African American audience, Dinkins asked the East New York community for their help in waging the fight against crime. The audience embraced Dinkins’s promise for more police and stricter drug laws, though some in the audience also demanded more jobs and investment in their community.47

In a 1991 speech at Albert Einstein High School in the Bronx before another predominately African American audience, Dinkins again called for a “war on crime and drugs” that featured increased policing and stricter drug and gun laws. He stated,

Some say that New York’s best days are behind us—that our streets, our parks, our neighborhoods, and our school can never be made safe again. But I say that we have nearly eight million decent, law-abiding, peace-loving people in this city who are ready to do whatever it takes to live without rampant crime, random violence, drug dealers and constant fear. We just have to act together and stick together. Together we can reaffirm the rule of law, and reclaim our streets, our subways and our communities from the pushers and the muggers—and we can do it by night as well as day. We can have a city where neighbors sit on their stoops and talk to one another, and their children go to school to learn in safety.

It means that you will soon see more police officers on patrol in your neighborhoods, in your streets, and in your parks than ever before. And, for the first time in many a year, they will be patrolling in the community—not just riding through it.  

Dinkins’s advocacy for aggressive community policing reflected a prevailing sentiment at the time that crime in minority communities derived, in part, from a lack of police presence in communities of color. According to the logic of the era, passive policing created a power vacuum filled by drug dealers and gangs. While contemporary commentators like Alexander depict the police as foreign interlopers in minority communities, Dinkins’s speeches to minority audiences, which were met with cheers, illustrate how more police presence was welcomed during the height of the crime and crack epidemics.

Dinkins won the 1989 primary and general elections, in part, because he promised in nearly every campaign speech to be the “toughest mayor on crime.” In what many characterize as the most iconic newspaper cover of the Dinkins era, the New York Post on September 7, 1990, demanded that “Dave, Do Something!”  

The cover was published in response to an especially violent summer of 1990. The tabloid paper acknowledged that Dinkins had spoken out against crime but needed to “do something” because “a crime-

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49 New York Post, September 7, 1990, cover
ridden city cries out for help.”\textsuperscript{50} The cover contained quotes from the former mayor Koch, who stated that “it was time to take the white gloves off,” and other quotes from New Yorkers who described how “New York’s streets are awash in blood” and New Yorkers “were captives in their own homes.”\textsuperscript{51} The cover highlighted a latently racist narrative that depicted Dinkins as not prioritizing the crack epidemic, while the crime rate increased dramatically during his years in office.

New York City operates within a federalist system where many of its actions require state or federal approval and funding. While many New York City mayors view themselves as “kings,” New York City depends upon state and federal funding to enact its policy goals.\textsuperscript{52} In 1990 and 1991, a host of factors, including budgetary constraints as well as a recession, complicated Dinkins’s efforts to fulfill his campaign promises on crime. Moreover, Dinkins would often cite the presence of Republican President George H.W. Bush as an obstacle that prevented the implementation of his anti-crime measures.\textsuperscript{53} Dinkins argued that the massive scale of his plan required contribution and coordination with the federal government and this took time.

Despite budgetary constraints and other barriers, Dinkins was able to implement his “Safe Streets, Safe City” agenda in late 1991, resulting in the hiring of six thousand

\textsuperscript{50} New York Post, cover.

\textsuperscript{51} New York Post, cover.


\textsuperscript{53} See Julie Johnson, “Dinkins, at Senate Hearing, Says Drugs Are Overrunning New York,” New York Times, December 13, 1989, B10 (citing Dinkins’s testimony before the Senate where he heavily criticized the effectiveness of President Bush’s war on drugs).
new police officers and the redeployment of thousands of other police officers into various high crime minority neighborhoods, including Washington Heights. Under the leadership of Police Commissioner Lee P. Brown, an African American criminologist and the former Police Chief of Houston, the New York Police Department implemented a community policing approach. Brown’s approach emphasized the aggressive policing of high crime areas to provide ordinary citizens with the opportunity to live their lives as well as the insertion of police that reflected the racial and ethnic background of the neighborhood policed. Thus, in addition to hiring more police, Dinkins sought to hire more minority police officers to address the racial imbalance in the police force. While whites in New York City made up less than 50% of the city’s population, minorities made up less than 20% of the police force in 1990. Commissioner Brown advocated for a more proactive approach to policing that emphasized preventing crime rather than responding to 911 calls. Therefore, Dinkins and Brown sought to transform not only the racial composition of the police force, but also the nature of policing. These demands


57 Blumenthal, “Dinkins Proposes Record Expansion.”

brought Dinkins and Brown into conflict with the police unions, dominated by whites, who feared a loss of status.

While Dinkins repeatedly cited decreases in all crime categories in 1991 as evidence of the immediate success of his “Safe Streets, Safe City” agenda, critics cynically argued that the decreases in crime derived from the fact that Dinkins directed the police not to make arrests.\(^{59}\) Giuliani argued that the redeployment of thousands of police officers from traditionally ethnic white neighborhoods of the city to minority neighborhoods left traditionally white neighborhoods “vulnerable” to crime.\(^{60}\) Much of the criticism of Dinkins’s policing policies had racial undertones as the debates over crime, policing, and drugs operated with a zero-sum view of the world. Many whites viewed increased policing of minority neighborhoods as harming traditionally white neighborhoods because such increases often required the removal of police officers from white neighborhoods and the redeployment of such officers to minority areas.

This discourse set the stage for the events of July 1992 in Washington Heights.\(^{61}\)

In the earlier half of the twentieth century, the neighborhood was predominately Jewish. However, starting in the 1960s, mass immigration from the Dominican Republic and

\(^{59}\) See Patrick Sharkey, *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2018, which describes how crime in the United States has been on the decline since the 1990s for a host of reasons, including increased policing of inner-city neighborhoods).


\(^{61}\) See Robert W. Snyder, *Crossing Broadway: Washington Heights and the Promise of New York City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2014, which explores the demographic changes in Washington Heights in the 1970s and 1980s from white enclave to the largest Hispanic neighborhood in New York City with one of the highest crime rates in the city.)
large-scale migration from Puerto Rico, as well as the exodus of aging Jewish residents, transformed the neighborhood into one of New York City’s largest Hispanic neighborhoods. A 1989 *New York Times* article highlighted the presence of different races, ethnicities, and religions in what was once an ethnic white enclave.  

The deindustrialization of the neighborhood in the 1970s left the neighborhood’s largely working-class residents dependent upon work in lower Manhattan.  

African Americans made up a small percentage of the neighborhood’s population, yet whites labeled Washington Heights as a “ghetto,” reflecting how the term was used by many whites to identify non-white neighborhoods.

In the period from 1940 to 1990, the Hispanic population of New York City exploded from around one hundred thousand in 1940 to nearly two million in 1990.  

New York City’s Hispanic population was largely concentrated in upper Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens.

The crack cocaine trade of the 1980s led to the emergence of warring gangs who sought to control the drug trade, resulting in hundreds of murders in the 1980s. By the

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65 Gonzalez, “Dominican.”
mid-1980s, Washington Heights had one of the highest crime rates in New York City. The 1988 high-profile murder of a police officer by members of a drug gang highlighted the dangers of the neighborhood and increased tensions between residents and the police. Washington Heights was nearing a crisis point.

In the 1989 election, Dinkins, who lived in a three-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights, promised an increased police presence in his neighborhood. Additionally, Dinkins listed the neighborhood as one of those neighborhoods needing increased policing as part of the “Safe Streets, Safe City” agenda. In 1991, Dinkins, in response to the demands of many community activists, deployed additional police into the neighborhood and ordered the aggressive policing of the neighborhood to address the spike in the homicide rate.

The police shooting of Dominican immigrant Jose Garcia in July 1992 led to several days of what the press of the era described as nights of “rioting” and “aimless violence.” The facts of the shooting remain in dispute. Eyewitnesses describe how Garcia was beaten and shot by a “dirty cop” who robbed drug dealers, while the police officer who shot Garcia stated that Garcia had an unregistered, loaded handgun and refused to comply with a direct order to surrender the weapon. Ultimately, a grand jury in

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September 1992 found the eyewitnesses to the shooting lacked credibility, as their testimony contained contradictions and inconsistencies.69

At the time, several police precincts in New York City, including the 34th precinct in charge of policing Washington Heights, were under investigation for police corruption and police brutality. Before García’s shooting, several neighborhood activists alleged that “dirty cops” engaged in a host of illegal activities ranging from selling drugs, robbing drug dealers, and receiving bribes from drug dealers.70 Therefore, García’s shooting took place in an existing atmosphere of tension between the neighborhood and the police. The mistrust of the government by a community that contained a large population of undocumented, non-English speaking immigrants played a part in explaining why some residents of Washington Heights viewed the police’s version of the events with suspicion.

While the protest against García’s shooting initially began as a peaceful protest led by a Dominican city council member who represented the area, the peaceful protest descended into several days of disorganized violence. When the police prevented protesters from gathering outside of the headquarters of the 34th police precinct, violence erupted.71 The unrest that followed resulted in at least one death and nearly a dozen


arrests as young Dominican men set fires to garage pails, threw rocks and bottles at the police, and cursed at the police. In Spanish, young Dominican men called the police “murderers” and “assassins” and called for “riots,” if the court system failed to provide justice for Garcia. Dozens of cars and abandoned properties were damaged or burnt. In September 1992, when a grand jury decided not to indict the police officer, many feared another outbreak of violence. However, such violence never materialized as protesters against the grand jury’s decision remained peaceful.

During the unrest, Dinkins took a number of actions that he believed would quell the community’s anger. These same actions exacerbated tensions with the New York Police Department. Dinkins personally paid his respects to Garcia’s family. Many police officers viewed Dinkins’s actions as a reflection of his bias against the police. That he was “wrong for comforting” Garcia’s family left a “sour taste in the mouths” of the police who were “risking their lives in a dangerous neighborhood.”

In July 1993, the New York Times attempted to explain the causes of the Washington Heights unrest from the previous summer. The author noted, “crowding, a traditional distrust toward the police among some immigrants and a sizable drug trade.”

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put the police constantly on guard, resulting in occasional outbreaks of violence between
the police and drug dealers. The article also described how many Dominican youths fell
into the drug trade and that aggressive policing potentially harmed the trade. Thus, the
article argued that the unrest may have been explained, at least partially, as a reaction to
successful policing instituted by Dinkins. For example, many Dominicans, separated by
linguistic barriers to assimilation and whose primary ties lay overseas rather than in the
United States, viewed themselves as “outsiders” in New York City and viewed the
profitable drug trade as a means for survival and monetary success. Policing was an
obstacle to their dreams.

A 1993 letter to the editor to the *New York Times* penned by leaders of the Union
of Dominican Youth described how the unrest of the prior year had been the product of a
long history of police abuse. The letter stated it might seem far-fetched to some that the
police can abuse their power. But in communities like Washington Heights, harassment,
corruption, prejudgment of residents, and unwarranted beating of suspects are common.
The local precinct, the 34th, was one of the two in the city under investigation for
corruption. Thus, rather than a spontaneous uprising related to the Garcia shooting, the

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75 David Gonzalez, “Unmasking Roots of Washington Heights Violence; Residents Point to
Overcrowding, Distrust of Police, Poverty and Thriving Drug Trade,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1993,
https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/17/nyregion/unmasking-roots-washington-heights-violence-residents-
point-overcrowding.html

76 Gonzalez, “Unmasking Roots.”

77 Gonzalez, “Unmasking Roots.”
authors claimed that years of police abuse and corruption in Washington Heights were the central causes of the 1992 unrest.  

In the years prior to the Washington Heights violence, politicians and commentators like Congressman Charles Rangel identified some budding tension between African Americans and Hispanics over political power in the city. According to Rangel, the changed demographics in the city and the growing Latino population had changed the political dynamics in some neighborhoods in upper Manhattan and the Bronx, causing friction between the two groups. While issues of power politics may have preoccupied politicians like Rangel, it is highly unlikely that the young men and youth that vented their rage for several days in Washington Heights considered such matters. It is more likely that the young Dominican men and youths were reacting to a year of extensive policing of the neighborhood that resulted in hundreds of arrests and created a hostile environment between the police and young Dominicans who felt increasingly profiled by the police.

In the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest, Dinkins was praised by his supporters in the African American press, as well as by his frequent critic Cardinal O’Connor, for his handling of the crisis and for localizing the unrest to a few blocks. O’Connor noted that Dinkins had unfairly been accused of being “disloyal to the police”

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80 Rangel, “Latinos.”
and that his repeated visits to the community “quelled the violence.” An article in the New York Voice, a small African American newspaper published in Harlem, noted that the criticism of Dinkins in the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest was a cynical attempt to discredit Dinkins. It stated,

[...] through heading off what could have been a full-scale riot like that in Los Angeles, Mayor Dinkins protected the interests of all that were involved, while also promising a full and honest investigation into the matter. The reason that rioting did not escalate into a near civil war in this town is solely due to the fact that New York City knows it can trust its Mayor.

In the aftermath of the large-scale violence that occurred in Los Angeles in 1991 after the acquittal of police officers in the beating of Rodney King, civic leaders recognized the fragility of peace in multiracial cities like New York City. However, praise of Dinkins was short-lived and did not extend to all corners of New York. Some police officers continued to allege that Dinkins’s actions and policies sparked the unrest. In opinion polls, nearly half of New Yorkers stated that Dinkins poorly handled the Washington Heights unrest.

In the aftermath, Dinkins’s political opponents tried to profit from Dinkins’s perceived weaknesses. Giuliani argued that Dinkins not only ignited the unrest, but also

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sought to vilify the police as a means of justifying the creation of a civilian complaint review board that would oversee allegations of police misconduct.\textsuperscript{84} In the view of Giuliani, who represented the views held by many police officers, Dinkins had cynically politicized the shooting to advance his own political agenda.\textsuperscript{85} While Dinkins argued that he was attempting to prevent an outbreak of violence by visiting Garcia’s family, critics argued that Dinkins demonstrated his animus to the police and his tendency “to side with his own kind.”\textsuperscript{86} Such comments had a racialized element. Dinkins, an African American man with no criminal past, was grouped with accused drug dealers, reflecting a tendency among many whites to link blackness with crime. Other commentators echoed this sentiment articulated by Giuliani.\textsuperscript{87}

Dinkins’s tense relationship with the police emerged as one of the most prominent issues in his 1993 reelection campaign. The leaders of the New York Police Department’s union regularly accused Dinkins of being biased against the police.\textsuperscript{88} Citing Dinkins’s comments about the need for a full investigation of the shooting, the New York Police


\textsuperscript{85} Giuliani, “Rumor.”


Department union argued that Dinkins believed that there were many racist or bad police officers and this belief lend Dinkins to jump quickly to the wrong conclusions about the motivations and actions of the police.

The events of the summer of 1992 in Washington Heights, while localized, had a significant long-term impact on New York City politics. First, the tabloid press linked the events with the days of unrest that occurred in Crown Heights in the summer of 1991 following the accidental killing of an African American child by a Jewish motorist. The press described how the Washington Heights unrest of 1992 represented yet another example of “racial tension” in a city with a long history of racial violence, deeply undercutting Dinkins’s 1989 campaign promise to bring racial reconciliation to a racially divided city.

Second, the events were used by critics of Dinkins, including Giuliani, who never completely stopped running for office, to argue that he had not been able to combat the “crime” and “lawlessness” of the city and that the “lawlessness” threatened to spread into the traditionally white neighborhoods. Newspaper articles covering the unrest typically described how Washington Heights, a once middle-class Jewish neighborhood, became one of the most dangerous and crime-ridden neighborhoods. Thus, despite the decreases

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in almost all types of crime in 1991, many New Yorkers believed that that the city had failed to address its crime problem, linking it to changes in the city’s demographics.\(^\text{92}\)

According to Dinkins’s critics, he was unable to get a handle on crime, because he was not only biased against the police, but also favored the demographic changes that benefited him politically.\(^\text{93}\)

Third, the unrest illustrated a generational divide in the Hispanic community. Older community leaders demanded increased policing and the younger generation of Hispanics were often on the receiving end of the aggressive policing that characterized the “Safe Streets, Safe City” program, which created a cleavage between young and older Hispanics.\(^\text{94}\) This cleavage between young and older Hispanic voters as well as between long-time residents and more recent arrivals to New York City resulted in lower turnout among Hispanic voters for Dinkins in the 1993 election. The lower turnout of Hispanic voters played at least some role in his electoral defeat, weakening the fragile alliance that Dinkins had attempted to forge in his initial campaign.\(^\text{95}\)

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\(^\text{95}\) See Fredrick Douglas Opie, \textit{Upsetting the Apple Cart: Black-Latino Coalitions in New York City from Protests to Public Office} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), which describes how Latinos were an essential component of Dinkins’s electoral coalition in 1989.
Additionally, the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest led to a dispute between Police Commissioner Brown and Dinkins over the proposed reforms to the Civilian Complaint Review Board. The reformed board would allow increased civilian oversight of the police to investigate allegations of police brutality and abuse like those alleged by Garcia’s family and the protesters. Police Commissioner Brown argued that the Civilian Complaint Review Board would stymie his aggressive policing reforms, while Dinkins argued that the police had shown themselves incapable of policing themselves. Brown’s views also reflected the sentiment of many rank-and-file police officers who feared that complete citizen control over the Civilian Complaint Review Board would subject police officers to a political process in a city undergoing demographic changes. The dispute between Brown and Dinkins sparked by the Washington Heights unrest resulted in Brown’s resignation which, in time, further altered policing in New York City.

In the wake of Brown’s resignation, many African American and Hispanic leaders, including Sharpton, encouraged Dinkins to appoint a minority candidate for the open position. Despite the demands of African American and Hispanic leaders, Dinkins in October 1992 hired Ray Kelly, an Irish-American native New Yorker, from within the

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ranks of New York Police Department.\footnote{Alan Finder, “Top Deputy Named New York Police Commissioner,” \textit{New York Times}, October 17, 1992, https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SC4-7B00-000P-21CF-00000-00&context=1516831.} While many African American and Hispanic leaders criticized the appointment, Kelly continued Brown’s community policing approach. Additionally, Kelly also called for increased hiring of minority police officers and the increased presence of police in minority communities, so a degree of continuity existed between the Kelly and Brown regimes. However, Kelly advocated for increased use of special vice units of police officers and the implementation of the aggressive use of \textit{Terry} stops to search for guns and drugs, commonly referred to as “stop-and-frisk searches” by the media.\footnote{Stephen Handelman, “Kinder, Gentler Way Works for N.Y. Police,” \textit{Toronto Star}, May 22, 1995, https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3WFV-48K0-00H1-P2YR-00000-00&context=1516831.} \textit{Terry} stops, named after the Supreme Court case of \textit{Terry v. Ohio}, allow police to engage in a brief investigation of an individual, if the police have a reasonable suspicion that an individual committed a crime.\footnote{See \textit{Terry v. Ohio}, 392 U.S. 1 (1968).}

The extensive use of \textit{Terry} stops of minority youths implemented by Kelly in the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest intensified under Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg and continued until Mayor Bill de Blasio discontinued the practice during his administration. While a federal district court in 2013 found a discriminatory pattern in the use of \textit{Terry} stops by the New York Police Department during Mayor Bloomberg’s term in office, the Department continued to use \textit{Terry} stops.\footnote{Floyd v. City of New York, 959 F. Supp. 2d 540 (2013), which holds that while \textit{Terry} searches are constitutional, the New York Police Department had discriminated against African American and Hispanic youth in the application of such searches.} The increased use of stop-and-frisk searches...
frisk searches, which began under Dinkins and intensified under subsequent mayors, led to increased tension between the police and the minority communities, resulting in allegations that the practice discriminatorily targeted young African American and Hispanic males.

Dinkins’s actions after the Garcia shooting, widely perceived as criticism of the police officer in the Garcia case, as well as his call for reforms to the Civilian Complaint Review Board and his commencement of a commission to investigate police corruption, also sparked the so-called “police riot of 1992.” This incident in September 1992 on the steps of City Hall was one of the most controversial and racially charged events of the Dinkins era. The protest of at least ten thousand ununiformed police officers, many of whom were white and wearing t-shirts bearing a “Dinkins Must Go!” slogan, illustrated in vivid detail the tension between Dinkins and the police force, which was largely composed of ethnic whites.

While the protest began as a peaceful assembly on the streets outside of City Hall Park, a small segment of off-duty police officers turned over the barricades that blocked the entrance to the park. They occupied the steps of City Hall. Hundreds of other off-duty police officers, allegedly fueled by alcohol, blocked streets, walked on parked cars, and allegedly used racial slurs to describe Dinkins, demanding that the mayor resign immediately. From the steps of City Hall, several leaders of the police union, Giuliani,

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and the police officer that had shot Garcia all launched diatribes against Dinkins, alleging that the mayor sided with the criminals over the police.

In the days after the police protest, Dinkins labeled the police protest as a “riot,” and Dinkins labeled the police protesters as “racists” and “bigots” whose opposition to his agenda derived, largely, from racism.\(^{105}\) Dinkins considered Giuliani a race baiter who had stirred up the crowd with highly vulgar and racialized language.\(^{106\ 107}\) The press sided with Dinkins and characterized the police as out of control.\(^{108}\) A September 19, 1992 *New York Times* article detailed how Dinkins confronted racism and rage from within the New York City Police Department. The article claimed that Dinkins had been the target of racial slurs by numerous police and this racism was on full display during the so-called police riots that occurred.\(^{109}\)

While the elite press sided with Dinkins, New Yorkers largely viewed the police protest of 1992 via racial lenses.\(^{110}\) Most African Americans and Hispanics approached


\(^{106}\) McKinley, Jr., “Dinkins Denounces.”


\(^{110}\) Pamela Newkirk, “Black, White and Blue; Rowdy Police Rally Puts Focus on Strained Minority Relations,” *Newsday (New York)*, October 13, 1992, https://advance-lexis-
the police protest very negatively, while the majority of whites polled stated that the police expressed “legitimate criticism” of Dinkins’s policies, even if the police behaved inappropriately during the protest.\footnote{See also Paul Moses, “Poll: Dave Did Right at Rally; Some Rap Rudy; Most Say Both Took Race Issue Too Far,” \textit{Newsday} (New York), October 1, 1992, \url{https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SKM-YV80-005H-B1KB-00000-00&context=1516831}.} In the aftermath, polling reflected that Dinkins support among all demographics in the city decreased as Dinkins entered the last year of his term in office.\footnote{Sylvia Moreno, “A Dead Heat; Poll: Dinkins, Giuliani Virtually Even,” \textit{Newsday} (New York), October 4, 1992, \url{https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SKM-YX80-005H-B3JX-00000-00&context=1516831}.}

the police.\textsuperscript{115} In turn, Dinkins labeled his former ally as someone who personally profited from racial hatred.\textsuperscript{116} Despite those criticisms, Dinkins viewed nearly universal support among African Americans as an essential component of his electoral coalition. To address his erosion of support after the Washington Heights controversy, Dinkins entertained a proposal by Sharpton and other African American leaders to place issues of race and police brutality as the central issues of Dinkins’s 1993 reelection campaign. In 1993, Dinkins did repair his relationship with Sharpton, but in doing so he further alienated many ethnic whites in the outer boroughs who vilified Sharpton.\textsuperscript{117}

The Washington Heights unrest of 1992 and its aftermath sheds light on conflicts within the liberalism of the era. Dinkins, like his liberal contemporaries, viewed crime and drugs as linked social problems best addressed by stricter criminal penalties and increased policing of minority communities. These policies had the support of a vast majority of New Yorkers, including among large segments of the African American and Hispanic communities. However, the increased policing demanded by Dinkins led to a series of confrontations between the police and those minority communities like that occurred in the summer of 1992 in Washington Heights. As a result, Dinkins’s support among minority voters, especially younger African American and Hispanics, eroded. At


\textsuperscript{116} Jordan and Perez-Rivas, “Dinkins Speaks.”


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the same time, ethnic whites residing in the outer borough neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx feared that the increased policing of minority neighborhoods would result in the under-policing of white neighborhoods that would leave their neighborhoods vulnerable to crime and “ghettoization.” The fear that crime would spread into traditionally white neighborhoods exacerbated already existing cleavages between white and African Americans in New York City.

Dinkins’s impulse for reform to address allegations of police abuse and corruption, as exemplified by his proposal to obtain complete civilian control over the Civilian Complaint Review Board and his eventual establishment of a commission to look into police abuse, caused further tension with a police force that failed to reflect the racial demographics of the city that it served. Viewed from the racial prism of the era, many ethnic whites in the outer boroughs viewed Dinkins’s reform methods as an attempt to politicize policing to advantage minorities and their communities at the expense of white communities. Likewise, Dinkins’s apparent embrace of Sharpton and other controversial African Americans in the aftermath of the Washington Heights unrest led to a further alienation of ethnic whites who viewed Sharpton very negatively due to his agitation and protests during the last years of the Koch era.

Yet, in 1991 and 1992, crime in New York City declined. While a host of factors explain this decline, including a drop in the use of crack cocaine, the measures started by New York Police Commissioners during the Dinkins era played at least some role in this downward trend.118 Despite decreases in all crime categories in the period from 1991 to

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1993, Dinkins would not reap the political benefits in his 1993 reelection effort, in large part because he was unable to navigate the complex politics over crime and drugs during the era of “identity politics.”

In his later years, Dinkins regretted the part he played in the “war on drugs,” conceding that his “tough on crime” policies of the 1980s and 1990s were an error because they had a devastating effect on minority communities. In a 2016 documentary entitled 13th, Dinkins noted that his policies had unintended consequences, accelerating trends toward mass incarceration.119 Dinkins had believed erroneously that such policies would benefit the minority communities by clearing the streets of criminals, thereby allowing ordinary African Americans to go about their lives in safety.120 Moreover, he lamented his inability to make good on other promises, like attracting investment in minority communities, due to factors largely outside of his control, as New York City was hit with a recession in the second part of his term.121

Scholars such as Michelle Alexander have focused on the long effects of the drug laws and the changes in policing on African Americans. However, this analysis tends to downplay, in large part, how these laws and community policing were, at least partially and initially, the product of political agitation from within minority communities for such measures. Rather than a conspiracy to harm black communities, men and women like


119 13th, directed by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2016).

120 13th.

121 13th.
Dinkins did what they believed at the time was in the best interest of the minority communities.

Paradoxically, his drug and crime policies were labeled weak by his detractors in the police and by many whites, who viewed his policies as somehow favoring African Americans. Simultaneously, Dinkins’s policies resulted in a backlash from many minority communities like Washington Heights that he sought to help, illustrating the complexities of satisfying his constituents and the power of unintended consequences.
Chapter 4

The Politics of HIV and Gay Rights

On June 25, 1989, more than one hundred and fifty thousand people marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots.¹ During the AIDS crisis, AIDS activists and gay and lesbian activists used the march also to highlight the impact AIDS had on the community and the need for increased funding for AIDS treatment and research. The march occurred during a contentious Democratic primary between Mayor Ed Koch and David Dinkins as well as at a time when HIV diagnoses and AIDS deaths were on an upward trend. Many of the march’s participants expressed their discontent with the Koch administration for its failure to address the AIDS crisis and for the mayor’s inaction on gay and lesbian rights. The march demonstrated the emerging political strength of the gay and lesbian community in New York City. It also represented the community’s diversity as the march included people from all walks of life, from closeted bankers, brokers, and lawyers on Wall Street to Hispanic and African American LGBT men and women from Harlem and the Bronx. The march also featured numerous family members of those who succumbed to AIDS, reflecting the emergence of allies to the gay and lesbian community.

While largely peaceful, the marchers confronted numerous Catholic counter-protesters positioned in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.² These counter-protesters, many

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of whom were praying the rosary and singing hymns, demanded that the marchers turn away from their “life-style” and “return to God.” Shouting matches broke out between the marchers and the counter-protesters. A counter-protester was arrested after throwing a bottle of holy water, striking one marcher. The scene provided a preview into the conflict between many Catholics, who made up the largest Christian denomination in New York City, and the gay and lesbian community during Dinkins’s time in office. Dinkins, a well-meaning liberal but a man of an older generation, found himself in the middle of these two clashing and influential groups, unable to satisfy the conflicting demands of either group.

Dinkins’s time in office overlapped with the apex of the AIDS crisis in New York City. Thousands of HIV-positive men and women died due to complications from opportunistic infections and diseases due to compromised immune systems. The death, dying, and suffering caused by AIDS resulted in heightened activism and focused on issues dealing with AIDS, including gay and lesbian rights. Recent historical scholarship has provided valuable insight into people with AIDS and also has shed light on communities long marginalized and ignored. This chapter seeks to shed light on how the political realities of the era constrained the actions of liberal politicians like Dinkins.  

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Dinkins made increased funding for the care of people with AIDS and combatting
discrimination against the gay and lesbian community as top priorities during his
administration. While he often argued that financial constraints imposed by a recession
slowed his response to the AIDS epidemic, sizeable opposition to the political demands
of the gay and lesbian community further hampered Dinkins’s ability to fulfill his
campaign promises. Dinkins genuinely sought to prioritize the demands of AIDS
activists, but the political realities of the era, largely outside Dinkins’s control, stymied
his best efforts. These realities included the presence of a vocal and active opposition
from the Catholic Church and the unpopularity of his public health policies among large
segments of Dinkins’s political coalition.6

As Manhattan Borough President, Dinkins advocated for increased spending for
AIDS care and advocated for the rights of the gay and lesbian community during height
of the AIDS pandemic. In the 1989 election, the gay and lesbian community, reluctantly
embraced Dinkins, providing Dinkins with critical electoral support in that election.
However, the gay and lesbian community quickly soured on Dinkins viewing his actions
as mayor as mere symbolism or tokenism. Critics in the gay and lesbian community

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6 The now-dated term *gay and lesbian community* appears in this chapter because this term was
used by the LGBT community as well as by Dinkins when referring to the LGBT community in the period
from 1989 to 1993. The more recent and inclusive term *LGBTQ+* and other variations were not used in this
chapter because they were deemed anachronistic. These terms were not used in the period discussed.
argued that Dinkins ignored the main demands of the community that included equal treatment under the law and benefits for same-sex couples and increased funding for AIDS treatment and care. Such criticism reflected the perspective of a community fighting against generations of homophobic discrimination as well as the AIDS pandemic. However, such criticism downplayed the political realities of the era.

As discussed in prior chapters, Dinkins forged a complex political coalition that not only included gay and lesbian votes but also a sizeable portion of Catholic ethnic whites in the outer boroughs and African American votes. Fully embracing the demands of the gay and lesbian community came with high political risks. Dinkins risked alienating two critically blocs of voters if he fully embraced the agenda of the gay and lesbian community and AIDS activists. Dinkins, while an earnest supporter of gay and lesbian rights and critics of the governmental response to the AIDS crisis, was a politician who sought reelection. At the same time, Dinkins faced a collection of limitations beyond his control, discounted by his critics. For example, Dinkins faced existing state and federal law that constrained his range of movement. New York City operated within a complex system of federalism whose budgets depended upon state and federal sources. Dinkins, a trained lawyer taught him respect for existing legal precedent and cautiousness, wanted to satisfy the demands of the gay and lesbian community but a host of factors prevented him from doing so. Despite these limitations, Dinkins’s actions discussed more deeply in this chapter cost Dinkins politically, reflecting the tensions within his fragile coalition and shedding light on liberalism during a transition.
The New Deal Democratic coalition suffered in the late 20th century. Steve Kornacki, a historian, described as an era of political tribalism.\(^7\) Ethnic working-class whites abandoned the Democratic Party in large numbers.\(^8\) The New Deal Democratic coalition—composed of ethnic working-class whites, union and public service workers, white liberals, and African Americans—had largely dominated New York City politics for several generations, but it collapsed during the Dinkins era. Dinkins’s embrace of LGBT issues alienated some traditionally Democratic voters both in the African American and white communities, and the alienation of these voters opened the door for the electoral victory of Rudy Giuliani in 1993. This development reflected broader national trends, as liberalism faced the tension between focusing on traditionally bread-and-butter economic issues and emerging social issues such as LGBT rights. Dinkins’s simultaneous embrace of LGBT issues and working-class concerns reflected tensions within liberalism, as the Democratic Party struggled to define its identity in the Reagan and Bush years. Dinkins’s skillful attempt to straddle the liberal fence resulted in his electoral success in 1989, but ultimately his perceived embrace of “identity politics,” as illustrated by his support of LGBT rights, played some role in his undoing in 1993.\(^9\)

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Two men—Cardinal O’Connor, the leader of New York City’s Catholic Church, and Larry Kramer, an outspoken author and playwright who helped found the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (“ACT UP”) —played a prominent role in the conflict over gay rights and AIDS. These two men represented two clashing worldviews that shaped New York City’s political landscape and the debates over AIDS and gay rights during the period from 1989 to 1993. AIDS activism in the period reflected the desperate attempts of the LGBT community, which faced a plague in the form of AIDS that took the lives of thousands of New Yorkers each year. AIDS activists often presented Dinkins, a traditional liberal who sought to address the demands of the gay and lesbian community, with politically unachievable demands given the political realities of the era. At the same time, opposition to gay rights often derived from deep cultural and historical origins. While gay and lesbian activists labeled opposition to gay rights as little more than homophobia, the religious views of New York Catholics and of Protestant African Americans played a significant role in shaping the debate over gay rights. Many Catholics defended their faith against the criticism levied by the gay and lesbian community. Dinkins had a genuine interest in changing New York City’s approach to combatting AIDS and improving the lives of those suffering from the disease, but he confronted a complex political landscape.

Cardinal O’Connor, the son of an Irish father and convert to Catholicism, grew up in working-class Philadelphia. While his critics labeled him as conservative, O’Connor embodied the Catholic Church’s complex views on same-sex activity, which held that discrimination against same-sex activity was morally wrong but that gay sex acts were

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sinful. While dogma in the 1960s and 1970s did not change, the cultural permissiveness of the era on issues of sexuality impacted the Catholic Church. In 1969, priests founded DignityUSA, a means of ministering to gay and lesbian Catholics. However, the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 represented a return to more socially conservative views on same-sex activity, as the pope decided to sever the church’s ties to such organizations as DignityUSA. As a representative of the Catholic Church in New York City who was elevated to the status of Cardinal by Pope John Paul II, O’Connor had a contentious relationship with the gay and lesbian community dating back to the early 1980s. While O’Connor encouraged Catholic institutions, including its hospitals, to provide healthcare and spiritual counseling to those suffering from AIDS, gay and lesbian activists cited his steadfast opposition to the distribution of condoms to gay men, his decision to oust DignityUSA from New York City churches, and his opposition to laws to protect the rights of gays and lesbians to justify their vilification of O’Connor and the Catholic Church. AIDS activists argued that O’Connor’s opposition to the distribution of condoms and education on their use, viewed at the time as the most effective ways of combatting AIDS, resulted in unnecessary deaths.\(^{11}\)

O’Connor emerged as a major media presence in the Dinkins era. He constantly weighed in on the political debates of the period.\(^{12}\) O’Connor’s presence on the political scene and his claim to represent the views of many Catholic New Yorkers—including


ethnic whites, Hispanics, and immigrants—would shape New York City politics during the height of the AIDS crisis.

In this same period, Kramer represented the uncompromising activism of the gay and lesbian community. Kramer, who witnessed the AIDS crisis firsthand and was himself diagnosed with HIV in 1988, argued that the AIDS crisis was similar to a plague caused by inaction from government and drug companies. Growing impatient with the government’s response to AIDS, which took the lives of nearly thirty-thousand New Yorkers in 1989, Kramer advocated for direct action, including protests and publicity, to shed light on the crisis. Kramer argued that the gay and lesbian community’s failure to confront big pharmaceutical companies and government worsened the AIDS crisis.

Kramer, like O’Connor, understood the importance of the media and public opinion. He believed that the media, even in liberal New York City, failed to sufficiently cover the AIDS crisis. This lack of coverage shaped the government’s inaction in preventing and limiting the spread of AIDS. Kramer, who had a reputation as a cantankerous man, found himself in constant conflict not only with men like O’Connor, but also with many in the gay and lesbian community who opposed Kramer’s use of direct action, arguing that such measures tended to alienate many people. However, ACT UP, in conjunction with other small but highly vocal gay and lesbian groups, shaped the debate over gay and lesbian rights in the period from 1989 to 1993, as the group’s high-profile direct actions gathered media attention.

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14 For an exploration of the early years of the AIDS crisis in New York that occurred prior to the formation of ACT UP, see Jean Ashton, AIDS in New York: The First Five Years (New York: Scala Arts Publishers Inc., 2015).
Historian Charles Kaiser described New York City as the “gay metropolis.” The 1980s and early 1990s were a critical time in the history of LGBT activism in the United States.\textsuperscript{15} Not only did the period overlap with the apex of the HIV-AIDS epidemic in the United States, but also featured the emergence of various LGBT groups that demanded state, local, and federal governments do more to address the health crisis. In recent years, historians of sexuality, gender studies, and social history have explored the activities of various LGBT groups active during the AIDS crisis.\textsuperscript{16}

With both the largest population of gay men and lesbians in the United States as well as the largest number of cases of HIV-AIDS in the United States at the time, New York City was one of the epicenters of the HIV-AIDS crisis. To face this crisis, numerous gay and lesbian groups emerged, including ACT UP, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Queer Nation, People with AIDS Coalition, Lesbian Avengers, and the Women’s Action Coalition. These groups and nearly every other gay and lesbian organization active during the era demanded action from the state, local, and federal authorities to address the HIV-AIDS crisis and called for equality under the law and the end of discriminatory treatment based on sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{17} AIDS activists highlighted how AIDS exposed how people with AIDS confronted discrimination as existing law barred partners in same-


\textsuperscript{17} The People with AIDS Coalition’s directory of groups active during the period from 1989 to 1993 listed more than one hundred organizations that represented groups large and small from every borough of New York City. Only a handful of groups are addressed in this chapter because the New York City tabloid press of the era focused on the activities of a small handful of LGBT groups, and Dinkins often formed his policy decisions in reaction to the press coverage.
sex relationships from receiving similar benefits received by their heterosexual counterparts. Same-sex couples, under then-existing law, were often deprived of visitations rights, rendering medical decisions on behalf of their same-sex partners, and often lacked survivor benefits if their partner succumbed to AIDS. Issues related to HIV-AIDS and gay rights thus played a prominent role in the politics of New York City of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The AIDS crisis and activism of gay and lesbian groups impacted the political career of Dinkins, first as Manhattan Borough president from 1986 to 1989 and then as mayor from 1989 to 1993. AIDS activists demanded Dinkins prioritize their concerns, which included increased funding for AIDS care, legal protections for gay and lesbians, and government initiatives to promote the public’s tolerance and acceptance of same-sex activity. However, the adoption of such proposals, as mayor, was politically threatening to Dinkins because of the opposition of the Catholic Church, which represented millions of New Yorkers. Further complicating the landscape, many African Americans opposed the demands of the gay and lesbian community and often balked at arguments that compared homophobia and racism.18 Thus, while Dinkins earnestly cared about the gay and lesbian community, he not only failed to completely satisfy the demands of AIDS activists, but also damaged his standing among the broader voting population in New York City due to his vocal support for issues related to AIDS and gay and lesbian rights.

Fearing backlash from the broader voting public, New York City politicians, especially in the outer boroughs, avoided issues related to gay rights and HIV-AIDS

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during the period. Based in Harlem, Dinkins embraced his role as a champion for the gay and lesbian community, as he saw links between racism and homophobia. As Manhattan Borough president from 1986 to 1989, Dinkins agreed with the assessment of many AIDS activists who argued then Mayor Koch did not adequately address the AIDS crisis. Manhattan had the most AIDS deaths and diagnoses in New York City in the period from 1981 to 1990. In numerous speeches as Manhattan Borough president, Dinkins demanded further funding for HIV-AIDS treatment and safe sex education as well as legal protections for those suffering from HIV-AIDS. Additionally, Dinkins embraced policies such as civil unions, legal protections for gays and lesbians, and safe-sex and alternative lifestyle educational programs in the public schools. In 1984 and 1988, Dinkins also supported Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns, which emphasized the centrality of gays and lesbians as part of the Rainbow Coalition. Then, during both the primary and general elections in 1989, Dinkins made his support for gay rights and AIDS initiatives prominent campaign issues at a host of rallies.

In his victory speech on election night in 1989, Dinkins specifically mentioned the need to combat the AIDS crisis as well as thanked the gay and lesbian community for


its support during both the primary and general election.\textsuperscript{23} During his tenure in office, Dinkins would try not only to deliver on his campaign promises, but also attempt to forge a strong relationship with the gay and lesbian community. In the view of Dinkins, both African Americans and the gay and lesbian community suffered from generations of discrimination, and he believed that government action and policies could aid both communities. Dinkins was also an experienced and skilled politician who viewed LGBT voters as an essential part of his electoral coalition.\textsuperscript{24} Estimating the electoral power of the LGBT community in New York City at the time was difficult because the majority of gay and lesbian voters were not open about their sexuality. Still, politicians like Dinkins recognized that New York City was the site of the largest gay and lesbian population in the United States. Dinkins operated under the widespread notion that gays and lesbians, influenced by the work by Alfred Kinsey, constituted around ten percent of the population.\textsuperscript{25} Given the belief that there were a large number of gays and lesbians,

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\item \textsuperscript{24} For an examination of the ethnic politics of New York during the 1980s and early 1990s, see Chris McNickle, \textit{To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City}. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
\item \textsuperscript{25} The idea that ten percent of the male population was “gay” derived in part from a misreading of the analysis of Kinsey’s statistics in his 1948 work on human sexuality. In that work, Kinsey noted that up to ten percent of males experienced a homosexual experience in their lifetime and created a complex scale on human sexuality. See Alfred C. Kinsey, \textit{Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, Reprint Edition} (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998). In the 1980s and 1990s, an era before mass outing and public disclosure of sexuality, commentators loosely discussed how ten percent of the male population was “gay” based on a very prevalent misunderstanding of Kinsey’s work.
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Dinkins believed that gays and lesbians potentially offset any loss of white ethnic voters who had abandoned him.\textsuperscript{26}

While Dinkins was a genuine supporter of gay and lesbian causes, he was also a politician who recognized the realities of the era. African Americans in New York City in the era from 1989 to 1993 never topped 30\% of the population of the city.\textsuperscript{27} African Americans did not constitute a majority in any of the five boroughs.\textsuperscript{28} Given the city’s demographics, Dinkins needed to build a multiracial coalition, and Dinkins believed that gays and lesbians, which he believed constituted roughly 10\% of the city’s population, offset any unpersuadable whites.\textsuperscript{29}

By 1989, AIDS claimed more than twelve thousand New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{30} AIDS activists argued that the response by all levels of government was inadequate and demanded not only increased funding for research into cures and treatments but for the care of people with AIDS. While New York City allocated nearly two hundred million dollars for issues related to AIDS in 1989 and Koch argued that New York City spent

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\item \textsuperscript{26} In his autobiography, Dinkins argued that racism was the reason most ethnic whites, including Irish and Italians, crossed party lines and voted for Giuliani in the 1989 and 1993 elections and why a majority of whites opposed his administration. See David Dinkins, \textit{A Mayor’s Life: Governing New York’s Gorgeous Mosaic} (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).
\item \textsuperscript{27} “1990 U.S. Census,” \textit{U.S. Census Bureau}, \url{https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-34-1.pdf#}
\item \textsuperscript{28} “1990 U.S. Census.”
\item \textsuperscript{29} In the primary sources, estimates of the gay and lesbian population in New York City during the era varied wildly from 1\% to 20\% of the population. According to the primary sources, Dinkins operated under the assumption that the gay and lesbian population in New York City was around 10\%. Dinkins seemed to have reached this conclusion based on a figure provided by gay and lesbian groups as well as a misunderstanding of Kinsey’s work discussed in another footnote.
\end{itemize}
more per capita on AIDS than any other city in the United States including San Francisco, AIDS activists called for “more money, expansion of overcrowded hospitals, and housing for homeless people with AIDS.”

In reaction to the demands of the AIDS activists, Dinkins promised to do better than Koch. Dinkins, true to his word, supported a series of policies and often adopted controversial positions that catered to the needs of the gay and lesbian community, including increased funding for AIDS treatment, domestic partnerships with associated benefits, and laws to address violence based on sexual orientation. However, Dinkins faced harsh and constant criticism from AIDS activists and the gay and lesbian community due to the pace of implementing his policies. Dinkins often cited the limited financial resources available to him to address the many problems that the city faced. For example, on December 13, 1989, days after being elected, Dinkins recognized the seriousness of the AIDS crisis but also recognized that his ability to solve the crisis was limited when he stated, “I'd want to expand the assistance for persons with AIDS and on and on and on. We don't have the ability to do that.” Activists viewed Dinkins’s realistic appraisal of his abilities with backtracking and lack of commitment.

Regardless of what Dinkins did, the gay and lesbian community never fully embraced Dinkins. Racism within the gay and lesbian community may have played some

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unmeasurable role.\textsuperscript{33} Other factors that help explain the tense relationship between Dinkins and the gay community include genuine policy disagreements over AIDS as well as the perceived slow speed of reform. These policy differences received robust coverage from both the mainstream and gay press, which often amplified the differences. For example, \textit{OutWeek}, an activist magazine that launched in this era to address the AIDS crisis, described how Dinkins, within weeks of being elected, reneged upon his central campaign promises, including his promise to maintain the prominent position of the Office of Gay and Lesbian Community within New York City’s governmental structure and to appoint a health commissioner favorable to the demands of the gay and lesbian community.\textsuperscript{34} While Dinkins received harsh criticism from AIDS activists, Dinkins’s public support for gay rights resulted in a backlash from a sizeable portion of both ethnic whites in the outer boroughs and socially conservative African Americans and Hispanics.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, Dinkins’s support for gay rights alienated some voters on both sides of this political question.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} As stated in other chapters, a racialized views of the era impacted all levels of society in New York. Thus, while statistics regarding racism within the gay and lesbian are not available, racism, recent scholarship has explored the existence of racism in LGBT. See C. Winter Han, \textit{Racial Erotics: Gay Men of Color, Sexual Racism, and the Politics of Desire} (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2021).


\textsuperscript{35} Avril McDonald, “NYC Poll: Gay=Abnormal,” \textit{Outweek}, May 21, 1991, http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_100.pdf noted that nearly 70% of New Yorkers believed that homosexuality was abnormal, 48% of New Yorkers opposed Dinkins’s decision to march in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, and most were opposed to same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by gays and lesbians.

\textsuperscript{36} Numerous factors played a role in why Dinkins’s support decreased among ethnic whites and African Americans from 1989 to 1993. Some unmeasurable decrease in support in these two communities can be attributed to Dinkins’s gay and lesbian policies.
Even before the Stonewall riots of 1969, the gay and lesbian community was a presence on the New York City political scene.\(^{37}\) In the early 1980s, a collection of activist groups were created that sought to bring attention to the AIDS crisis.\(^{38}\) While employing differing tactics, the activist groups that emerged in the aftermath of the AIDS outbreak used the New York media to advocate for the humane treatment of people with AIDS and increased funding for HIV-AIDS research as well as to oppose discriminatory measures such as quarantining of people with AIDS and forced testing and reporting of HIV-AIDS status.\(^{39}\) For example, a provocative 1988 ACT UP advertisement entitled “Read My Lips,” a play on George H.W. Bush’s pledge not to raise any new taxes, featured two men kissing. The advertisement argued that the gay and lesbian community and those suffering from AIDS deserved dignity and that the interests of the community should not be ignored.\(^{40}\) The advertisement ended with a demand for more funding for HIV treatment and research into a cure for AIDS.

During Dinkins’s tenure as Manhattan Borough president from 1986 to 1989, AIDS featured prominently in the news as Manhattan emerged as the epicenter of the AIDS crisis in the United States. While the media at the time often portrayed AIDS as a “gay man’s disease,” AIDS during the tenure of Mayor Koch hit all demographic

\(^{37}\) For a recent examination of the gay and lesbian movement from the 1950s to the 2020s, see Lillian Faderman, The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).


\(^{40}\) “Read My Lips: Why We Kiss,” ACT UP New York City Historical Archives, https://actupny.tumblr.com/image/173434157389.
categories. A sizeable percentage of new cases in New York City derived from intravenous drug use, with the highest concentration of AIDS cases in Manhattan and the Bronx among straight African Americans and Hispanics.\textsuperscript{41}

As Manhattan Borough president, Dinkins argued that the Republican president’s failure to address the AIDS crisis reflected the GOP’s racism against African Americans and Hispanics as well as homophobia and hostility to the gay and lesbian community. Unlike other New York City Democrats, Dinkins also strongly criticized Mayor Koch, a fellow Democrat, arguing that Koch’s decision to clamp down on gay bathhouses and unregulated bars may have made good headlines, but that such policies did little either to stop the spread of AIDS or to treat those living with AIDS. The closure of the gay spaces divided the gay community as these measures were viewed as discriminatory by some gay and lesbians and strong activists, while others viewed the closures as necessary during a public health crisis.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, when Dinkins spoke about issues related to AIDS, he weighed into heavily contentious matters that divided the gay and lesbian community.

During his time as Manhattan Borough President, Dinkins called for robust government action to address the crisis, including increasing funding for housing for those living with AIDS, who increasingly found themselves subject to discrimination, poverty, and homelessness. At various events throughout his tenure as Manhattan Borough president, Dinkins spotlighted AIDS as a public health crisis and as one of the


top threats facing New York City. Moreover, Dinkins called for increased spending on educational materials in both the public schools and as part of the city’s public health agenda about the need for safe sex. Dinkins’s proposals sparked criticism from both Catholic leaders like Cardinal O’Connor, who objected to condom education, and gay and lesbian activists, who demanded for an even more aggressive approach.

By 1989, some in the gay and lesbian community lost faith in Mayor Koch. They felt his response to the AIDS crisis, including the closure of gay bathhouses, clubs, and bars as well as pilot needle exchange program to control the spread of AIDS, had done little actually to stop the spread of the disease. Randy Shilts, a San Francisco Chronicle reporter, famously described the apathy of the broader public regarding the AIDS crisis due to the fact that the disease largely impacted marginalized communities, including intravenous drug users, gay men, and the minority community. AIDS activists depicted Koch as insensitive to the plight of those living with AIDS because of his slow response to the crisis and because he failed to provide robust funding for treatment and housing.

Despite this strong and vocal criticism of Koch, the gay and lesbian community did not enthusiastically support Dinkins in the Democratic primary when he challenged Koch. Only a few groups were willing initially to throw their support behind Dinkins,

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46 Shilts, And the Band Played.
fearing that such support would alienate Koch if he defeated his primary challengers. Established groups within the gay and lesbian community initially aligned with Koch due to loyalty to the incumbent and due to fear of losing political patronage. For example, the Stonewall Democrats, the largest Democratic Club for gay and lesbians based in Manhattan, overwhelmingly voted to endorse Koch over Dinkins, with 73% in favor of Koch and 13% in favor of Dinkins.47

When Dinkins won the primary against Koch and failed to mention the support he received from some gay and lesbian groups, it sparked a crisis. Gay and lesbian supporters of Dinkins felt slighted.48 In a series of letters to Dinkins dating from the night of the primary until the general election, gay and lesbian supporters expressed that they felt that Dinkins had overlooked or failed to appreciate the critical role of gay and lesbian voters in the electoral coalition that defeated Koch. For example, Bernard Lennon, a Dinkins supporter and gay activist, stated,

I must go on the record and tell you how troubled I am by your inconsistency regarding gay rights and AIDS. In your speech, you talk about your commitment against drugs and crime, educational excellence and affordable housing, and I hope it is out of ignorance and not prejudice that you do not think gay rights and


the AIDS crisis should be a priority. I hope that you will educate yourself about these two issues.\textsuperscript{49}

Similarly, another gay supporter of Dinkins wrote,

I am dismayed by your failure to acknowledge lesbian and gay voters or mention lesbian/gay concerns, most particularly the AIDS crisis, in last night’s victory speech. You cited over a dozen issues, including some (such as support for Soviet Jewry and the state of Israel) over which the Mayor’s Office has absolutely no jurisdiction; yet you failed to mention an epidemic that has killed 12,000 New Yorkers and has infected an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 New Yorkers. Nor did you speak out against the current wave of anti-gay violence or mention spousal rights for unmarried couples.\textsuperscript{50}

Other gay and lesbian groups in the aftermath of Dinkins’s primary victory sought to get Dinkins to pledge his support for gay and lesbian causes on the record. For example, a coalition of gay and lesbian groups demanded that Dinkins and Giuliani commit to continuing and expanding Koch-era programs such as a pilot needle exchange program and housing for people with AIDS started in the last years of his administration.

Specifically, in a September 1989 newsletter, this coalition stated,

Of the survivors of the September 12 primaries, Manhattan Borough President and Democratic nominee for Mayor David Dinkins has a solid record of accomplishments in the areas of AIDS and gay and lesbian rights and is strongly

\textsuperscript{49} Letter from Bernard Lennon to David Dinkins dated October 5, 1989, Box 22, Folder 22, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{50} Letter from Alydn McKean to David Dinkins dated September 13, 1989, Box 22, Folder 22, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
committed to securing the rights of gay and lesbian domestic partners. The Republican nominee said he supports the gay and lesbian rights law (although he does not know how he would have voted on it), opposes anti-gay legislation, yet does not support rights for domestic partners. One of these people will be the Mayor of New York City on January 1. Ed Koch, for all his obvious faults, when it came to fully supporting gay rights and dealing with the AIDS crisis, did take a number of pro-gay initiatives as Mayor that most of us want to see continued. Now is the time to secure commitments from Dinkins and Giuliani that they will continue these initiatives.

Some of the key institutions that we want to preserve are: 1) Mayor’s Office of Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 2) the Department of Health Office of Lesbian and Gay health, and 3) the Mayor’s Police Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues that meets regularly with the NYPD Chief. It goes without saying that we want more—openly gay people appointed to key positions, a say in naming the new Health Commissioner, gay and lesbian Human Rights Commissioners and a whole range of innovations in City AIDS policy.  

This newsletter demonstrates that the gay and lesbian community believed it had the emerging political influence to make political demands on Dinkins and Giuliani. Also, the newsletter reflects that many viewed Dinkins, while not the first choice of many in the community, as better than Giuliani on the issues that mattered to the community.

To meet these political demands, Dinkins, throughout the general election in 1989, promised that he would make AIDS a top health care priority and focus on an agenda favorable to the gay and lesbian community. For example, in a Q&A with the New York Times, Dinkins described the Koch Administration’s failings in the following manner:

[Koch] has done too little too late in addressing the many problems presented by the AIDS crisis. In each instance, the administration’s actions have been taken in response to intense public, political, or legal pressure. There has been little or no planning in a timely manner. Only long after the AIDS crisis had become a tragedy of the most profound nature were steps taken.52

Dinkins’s sharp criticism of Koch not only sought to curry favor with the gay and lesbian community, but also represented his genuine displeasure at Koch’s handling of AIDS. By arguing that Koch’s inaction worsened the crisis in New York City, Dinkins aligned himself with activists like Kramer who regularly blamed Koch’s inaction in the early 1980s for the spread of AIDS.

In his campaign materials, Dinkins depicted Rudy Giuliani, who attempted to make overtures to the gay and lesbian community, as an unreliable ally. Dinkins argued that Giuliani’s recent support was an opportunistic attempt to curry favor with gay and lesbian voters. Dinkins linked Giuliani to the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, which the gay and lesbian community saw as hotbeds of homophobia and racism.53

52 Q&A for NY Times article to be included in the AIDS and Gay Rights issue dated August 3, 1989, Box 22, Folder 2, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
Furthermore, Dinkins often attempted to link Giuliani, an Italian American Catholic, with O’Connor, labeled by ACT UP as the most prominent critic of gay and lesbian rights in New York City. The adoption of anti-Catholic rhetoric by Dinkins during the 1989 campaign did not go unnoticed. In a letter from Sister Mary Cephas Byrnes, the nun stated that Dinkins “may be a good man,” but “his embrace of a LGBT concerns disqualified him from consideration based on my religious beliefs.”

Support from the gay and lesbian community ultimately played a critical role in Dinkins’ victory in 1989. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact electoral support for Dinkins during the general election of 1989, support by a sizeable percentage of the LGBT community was one of the decisive factors in a very tight election.

However, Dinkins soon found himself engulfed in a controversy. It started after the election, but before he took office, on New Year’s Day in 1990. His reaction to a December 1989 protest conducted by ACT UP at St. Patrick’s Cathedral strained his relationship with the gay and lesbian community and some Catholics in New York.

With the onset of AIDS crisis, groups such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis had advocated for increased funding for AIDS treatment and educational programs to promote safe sex practices. But many bemoaned the perceived lack of progress made by

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54 Undated letter from 1989 from Sister Mary Cephas Byrnes to David Dinkins, Box 22, Folder 2, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.

55 According to exiting polling, 4% of voters in 1989 self-identified as gay or lesbian. Of those who self-identified as gay or lesbian, more than 60% voted for Dinkins. Ascertaining Dinkins’s exact electoral support among gay and lesbians in New York City remains elusive because some gay men and lesbians were reluctant to self-identify in 1989. See Thomas Kean, “The Margin of Victory,” *Outweek*, November 19, 1989, [http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_22.pdf](http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_22.pdf).
such groups. Several groups formed in the late 1980s that advocated for direct political action. One, ACT UP, split off from the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Though the group totaled no more than a few hundred members during the height of its activism in the late 1980s, ACT UP would play a sizeable role in the politics of the Dinkins era.

Co-founded by Kramer, ACT UP sought to use high-profile protests to dramatize the plight of people with AIDS.\textsuperscript{56} Founded in 1987 after Kramer had a falling out with the other founders of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, ACT UP in its early years focused its attacks on drug companies and the federal government to highlight their inaction in developing drugs to treat HIV. ACT UP argued that the federal government’s process of regulating and approving drugs was extremely slow, and that people should be allowed to take experimental drugs. Moreover, ACT UP argued that the Food and Drug Administration’s use of placebos during drug tests deprived HIV positive individuals of the benefits of any tested drugs.

In 1989, ACT UP turned its attention to the Catholic Church, whose opposition to condom use and views on same-sex activity outraged AIDS activists. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, ACT UP in its “Stop the Church” campaign used posters and materials that targeted the Catholic Church in New York City. In the most controversial materials, ACT UP controversially labeled the Catholic Church as a “cult” or a “hate group,” even linking the Catholic Church to Nazi symbolism.\textsuperscript{57} In other materials, ACT UP depicted the pope and O’Connor alongside words such as “hate” or “homophobe.”


Spanish language materials, ACT UP labeled O’Connor as an “AIDS Criminal” and a “mass murderer.” The anti-Catholic rhetoric of ACT UP also featured prominently in the gay press, as cartoons and commentary mocked O’Connor and the Catholic Church. Even though ACT UP was a relatively small group, its activities made headlines throughout 1989 as its “Stop the Church” campaign intensified.

In December 1989, ACT UP engaged in one of its most controversial protests at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. While several facts surrounding the December 1989 protest remain in dispute, thousands of AIDS activists gathered outside of the famous church and chanted anti-Catholic messages. Several members of ACT UP entered the cathedral during a mass and yelled, threw condoms at parishioners, and refused to leave the church, resulting in the arrest of more than one hundred protesters. It was one of the largest protests inside of a Catholic Church before or since. Lori Cohen, an attorney for ACT UP protesters, argued that O’Connor had “used the pulpit to disseminate religious and political information and has so opened himself to the same kinds of demonstrations political people must be ready to cope with.”

While ACT UP attracted worldview media, it did little to change the Catholic Church’s positions. O’Connor stated that he

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58 See various ACT UP posters from the era available at https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=ACT-UP#/?scroll=100.


60 “Stop the Church Redux: Activists at St. Pat’s Ready to Stand Trial: Will O’Connor Take the Stand?” PWA Coalition Newsline, November 1990, Issue 60, Box 47, Folder 1, People with AIDS Coalition Collection, New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts.
would continue to preach the Catholic Church’s official position on condoms and sexuality and would only stop doing so over “my dead body.”"\(^{61}\)

In the days after the event, the tabloid presses in New York highlighted the most salacious allegations, including that one of the demonstrators had desecrated a communion wafer. Reaction to the protest reached a fever pitch. Governor Mario Cuomo, out-going Mayor Koch, and recently defeated candidate Giuliani all criticized ACT UP. Throughout December 1989, political pressure mounted for Dinkins also to criticize the St. Patrick’s Cathedral protest. While Dinkins initially sought to avoid giving his opinion, he eventually expressed his disapproval in a manner that alienated both sides. Around the New Year, Dinkins “denounced” the protest as “disrespectful.”\(^{62}\)

His initial hesitation—he waited for several weeks to criticize the protestors—alienated at least some Catholics. O’Connor viewed the hesitation as a tacit approval of the protests. Conversely, commentators in the gay and lesbian community viewed Dinkins’s statement against the protest as a sign that Dinkins was an unreliable ally who would succumb to political pressure.\(^{63}\)

The controversy over the St. Patrick’s protest played out in the mainstream press for more than a month, while the incoming mayor’s relationship with the gay and lesbian community suffered additional setbacks. Dinkins made a series of decisions that

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irrevocably damaged his relationship with the gay and lesbian community. First, he appointed Dr. Woodrow A. Myers, Jr., an African American who previously served as a health commissioner in Indiana, as New York health commissioner. Gay and lesbian activists from various groups criticized Myers’s prior support for mandatory testing of gay men and reporting of a person’s HIV-AIDS status as well as his advocacy of what they labeled as quarantine measures like segregating people with AIDS from other patients. Second, Dinkins failed to attend the funerals of several gay men killed in Staten Island in apparent hate crimes. Third, Dinkins advocated for housing men with HIV-AIDS in city shelters, invoking sharp criticism from activists who alleged that such a policy amounted to quarantine. Fourth, Dinkins jettisoned Koch’s needle exchange program in his early days in office, frustrating AIDS activists who argued that intravenous drug use played a pivotal role in the spread of HIV-AIDS. While Dinkins argued that his decision to eliminate the needle exchange program derived from his belief that the program constituted support for drug use, which sent the wrong message to

64 Statement of Jeffrey Braff, Executive Director, and Timothy Sweeney, Deputy Executive Director for Policy, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, on Dr. Woodrow Myers’s Candidacy for Health Commissioner dated January 18, 1990, Box 60, Folder 9, Archives of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts.


children, critics of Dinkins argued that his decision reflected an attempt to pander to conservative voters in the African American community who opposed the needle program.\textsuperscript{69} Fifth, Dinkins’s first budget only marginally increased funding to frontline AIDS providers.\textsuperscript{70} Finally, Dinkins, acting on the advice of the New York City Corporate Counsel, continued to defend a city law that prevented gay and lesbian partners of city employees from receiving health care and other benefits. In defending this decision, Dinkins argued that the extension of such benefits strained an already tight city budget. He noted that any settlement of the lawsuit by the city potentially conflicted with state and federal law that at the time did not extend benefits to same-sex couples. In combination, the decisions made in the early days of the Dinkins Administration resulted in an atmosphere of mistrust and skepticism within LGBT circles.

To address the growing criticism about his perceived missteps during the first months of his administration, Dinkins sought to repair his relationship with the gay and lesbian community. In one of his most prominent moves, Dinkins appointed an openly lesbian woman, Dr. Marjorie J. Hill, as the director of the Mayor’s Office for the Lesbian and Gay Community.\textsuperscript{71} During her tenure, Dr. Hill advocated for a host of measures to address the AIDS crisis and recommended that Dinkins weigh in on issues of national and international importance impacting the gay and lesbian community. Most

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Duncan Osborne, “Front Liners Tense over Mayor’s Proposed AIDS Budget,” \textit{Outweek}, June 13, 1990, \url{http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_50.pdf}.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Jacquie Bishop, “Marjorie Hill Heads to City Hall in June, Gearing up for the Honors, the Challenges and the Headaches of Becoming New York’s New Director of the Office of Gay and Lesbian Community,” \textit{Outweek}, June 6, 1990, \url{http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_49.pdf}.
\end{itemize}
prominently, Hill advocated for increased spending on AIDS treatment and for the adoption of a school curriculum known in the press as the “Rainbow Curriculum” that advocated for safe sex practices and introduced the acceptance of same-sex attraction. Additionally, Hill proposed the reintroduction of the needle exchange, the hiring of more AIDS caseworkers, and the appointment of more openly gay and lesbian officials in city government. Dinkins would adopt most of the measures proposed by Dr. Hill slowly over the course of his administration.\(^\text{72}\)

The tabloid press of the era sensationalized controversies about gay and lesbian politics, helping to spark a backlash against Dinkins from some Catholics. Led by O’Connor, the Archdiocese of New York opposed several of Dinkins’s policies, including the proposal to adopt the Rainbow Curriculum in the public schools.\(^\text{73}\) Despite the generally cordial personal relationship between Dinkins and the cardinal, O’Connor argued that the Rainbow Curriculum sought to normalize homosexuality.\(^\text{74}\) The cardinal argued that Dinkins dismissed the legitimate religious concerns of the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality and pre-marital sex.\(^\text{75}\) Opposition to the Rainbow Curriculum was strongest in the predominately Catholic areas of Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten


\(^{75}\) Osborne, “Gays Win.”
Island. Dinkins responded that he would not succumb to “bullying by the religious right.” Dinkins also accused O’Connor of inviting the “moral majority” to intervene in New York City politics.

The public war of words between O’Connor and Dinkins intensified in 1991, when a small group of activists who called themselves The Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO) sought to march with a banner during the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade. Organized by The Ancient Order of Hibernians, the parade attracted thousands of participants and millions of spectators on television and in person. The Ancient Order of Hibernians stated that all Irish groups, including gays and lesbians, could march in the parade but could not carry signs identifying themselves as gay and lesbians because to do so would constitute an endorsement of same-sex activity in violation of the religious teachings of the Catholic Church. In response, ILGO argued that the St. Patrick’s Day parade had become an annual civic event and that excluding openly gay men and lesbians violated their civil rights. This debate played out in the press and courts for months prior to the parade, resurrecting tensions between Dinkins and O’Connor. Dinkins supported the right of the gay and lesbian marchers to participate openly in the parade. He even wanted to march alongside the members of the group for a portion of the parade to lend his moral support.

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Additionally, Dinkins supported the lawsuit filed by the gay and lesbian marchers against the organizers of the parade. The gay and lesbian group was successful in its lawsuit and won the right to march, which infuriated some parade spectators, who booed and chanted anti-gay slogans at Dinkins and those marchers. After the event, Dinkins alleged that several spectators attempted to spit on him, directed racist and homophobic language towards him, and threw bottles of beer at him. During a press conference after the parade, Dinkins stated that the incident reminded him of the behavior of opponents of desegregation in the South during the 1960s.79

While the gay press lauded Dinkins’s action, many Catholics were offended by his decision to march.80 After the 1991 parade, Dinkins increasingly viewed a segment of the Catholic population as unpersuadable and permanent enemies of his administration. In subsequent speeches, Dinkins argued that opposition to his administration and agenda derived, in large part, from racism, homophobia, and the ignorance of those who cited religious objections to same-sex activity.81 Dinkins appeared to call into question the genuineness of religious beliefs among many Catholic voters. In the months after the parade, the mayor’s poll numbers decreased significantly, in large part because a significant percentage of ethnic whites that supported him in the 1989 general election


80 See Duncan Osborne, “The Cardinal, the Mayor and the Balance of Power, Outweek, April 3, 1991, http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_92.pdf, which cites how Dinkins’s decision to march represented a defeat for Cardinal O’Connor who had to greet Dinkins and allow gays and lesbians to march.

began to abandon him. In the tabloid press, commentators alleged that Dinkins’s embrace of social and cultural issues reflected that he was out of touch with the concerns of ordinary New Yorkers, which included the economy, quality of life, the drug epidemic, and crime.

While Dinkins sought to advance an agenda in support of gay and lesbian rights, a series of structural barriers prevented him from fully achieving his policy goals. Dinkins faced the same budget realities that had stymied all New York City mayors since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s; New York City operated under a series of long-term austerity measures imposed by creditors to resolve the fiscal crisis. Under the austerity measures imposed on the city by the state and federal government in the 1970s, New York City was heavily dependent upon a state government in Albany reluctant to cover health-care costs associated with the AIDS crisis.

Additionally, the recession that began in 1990 worsened in 1991, further limiting the ability of Dinkins to fund a host of AIDS projects. Dinkins also argued that the presidential administration of George H.W. Bush abandoned New York City as it confronted the brunt of the health crisis. While the federal government increased funding

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82 See “Dinkins’s Ratings Plummet: According to Observer Poll: If Election Held New, He’d Lose to Giuliani, Stein and Even Koch,” December 2, 1992, New York Observer, which notes that Dinkins had lost 20% of his white vote since the election.

83 See “Dinkins’s Fractured Mosaic,” Newsweek, October 10, 1993, https://www.newsweek.com/dinkins-fractured-mosaic-194316, which notes how Dinkins’s liberalism was out-of-step with the current challenges that New York City faced and how his proposed solutions, most of which were viewed as predominately symbolic, made Dinkins appear out of touch with the realities of New York City.


for AIDS via the Ryan White grant program, Dinkins maintained that these funds could not adequately address New York City’s AIDS problem.\textsuperscript{86} Moreover, legal barriers prevented Dinkins from fulfilling the promises he made during the 1989 campaign. While Dinkins may have wanted to create domestic partnerships that extended benefits to same-sex couples, New York State and federal law limited the impact of any city policy. For example, federal law prevented same-sex couples from receiving a host of benefits, including Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, disability, and veterans’ benefits.\textsuperscript{87} Critics of Dinkins argued that he could have at least extended city-wide benefits like liberal enclaves like Berkeley, California.\textsuperscript{88} However, the extension of such benefits would have been largely symbolic as only a small percent of people with AIDS were city workers.

During the last years of the Presidency Bush, Dinkins again found himself a target of criticism from the gay and lesbian community at a time when, in his mind, his options were limited by factors beyond his control. Dinkins often cited fiscal limitations and opposition from the Bush Administration as the central reasons for his inability to provide more robust benefits for people with AIDS.\textsuperscript{89} However, many in the gay and

\textsuperscript{86} See Cliff O’Neil, “Funding Picture Bleak for ’91, Federal AIDS Budget,” Outweek, October 10, 1990, \url{http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_67.pdf}, which cites Dinkins who stated that the federal budget did not provide New York City with enough of funding to meet the massive need posed by nearly 30,000 cases of AIDS.

\textsuperscript{87} For a discussion of how federal and state law created a host of legal structures that favored different-sex couples, see Margot Caradog, The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizen in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).


\textsuperscript{89} See Duncan Osborne, “Will Dinkins Slash City AIDS Services,” Outweek, May 15, 1991, \url{http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_98.pdf}, which cites Dinkins stating that limited federal and state funds prevented him from extending funding to certain groups.
lesbian community found the excuses provided by Dinkins as unpersuasive and demanded that Dinkins provide more substantive support for people with AIDS. The most vocal critics like ACT UP argued Dinkins was offering symbolic gestures when massive government action was necessary to address a crisis that took the lives of more than forty thousand people in the United States in 1991 and 1992.

While losing the ability to robustly expand social services due to the worsening of the recession, Dinkins weighed in on national issues related to gay rights and AIDS. For example, Colorado passed a statute in 1992 that sought to nullify a series of laws enacted by Denver and Aspen to extend housing, healthcare, and other benefits to gays and lesbians.\textsuperscript{90} In response to the Colorado law, Dinkins barred any New York City employees from traveling to Colorado for business. His criticism of Colorado’s law, for some gay and lesbian critics, exposed the failings of the Dinkins administration because it exposed how little he had done to extend benefits to same-sex couples in New York City.\textsuperscript{91} According to this line of argument, the experience of Denver and Aspen revealed how localities had the power to extend benefits to same-sex couples and that Dinkins’s inability to do so revealed that he was not a true ally to the community. While the Colorado law in question would eventually be struck down by the United States Supreme Court in 1996, many liberal politicians like Dinkins believed that extending benefits to

\textsuperscript{90} The Colorado law in question was challenged, and the Supreme Court in \textit{Romer v. Evans}, 517 U.S. 620 (1996) struck down the Colorado law. Specifically, the Supreme Court in \textit{Romer} held that animus against gay and lesbians played a role in the enactment of the law in question that barred the state and localities from designating gays and lesbians as a protected class.

\textsuperscript{91} Internal memorandum from Andy Humm to Bill Lynch, Chair, Dinkins for Mayor, dated July 16, 1993, “Getting Out the Gay Vote in 1993,” Box 42, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
same-sex couples at the local level would result in a conservative backlash at the national level, setting back the gay rights movement.\textsuperscript{92}

In 1992, Dinkins’s critics, even within his administration, argued that his policies amounted to little more than symbolism.\textsuperscript{93} In response, Dinkins began discussing the creation of a registry of domestic partnerships that would provide domestic partners, straight and gay, with legal protections under New York City law. While Dinkins would eventually sign an executive order that created such a registry in 1993, critics within the gay and lesbian community again argued that the order was an eleventh-hour symbolic gesture because the creation of a domestic partnership did not extend governmental or workplace benefits to same-sex couples.\textsuperscript{94} According to Dinkins, couples who registered would entitle couples to some of the non-monetary benefits that many activists have called for including visitation rights at hospitals and prisons, the ability to receive survivorship rights in public housing, and the ability to take unpaid leave to care for children and spouses.\textsuperscript{95} These arguments, in large part, did not convince many in the gay and lesbian community.

\textsuperscript{92} A series of positive developments for the LGBT movement including Hawaii’s willingness to entertain challenges to state laws that defined marriage as between a man and woman did result in a backlash and the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (“DOMA”) in 1996 that defined marriage a union between a man and a woman and barred states from recognizing out-of-state same-sex marriage. 1 U.S.C. § 7 and 28 U.S.C. § 1738C.

\textsuperscript{93} Internal memorandum from Any Humm.

\textsuperscript{94} See Arthur Leonard, “Domestic Partnership: The NYC Debate Begins,” Outweek, January 23, 1990, http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_82.pdf, which describes how New York City’s domestic partnership proposal was a good start but that the proposal did not extend benefits to domestic partners.

In the first year of Dinkins’s administration, African American leaders demanded the end of the experimental needle exchange program started by Koch, arguing that the needle exchange program sent the wrong message about drug use. However, several of the same African American leaders who had once demanded an end to the needle exchange program soon started to criticize Dinkins in 1991 and 1992 for ignoring the plight of those living with HIV-AIDS in the African American and Hispanic community, while appearing to cater to the demands of the AIDS activists who were largely white and middle class. Dinkins’s embrace of gay rights and his efforts to combat AIDS, while deemed insufficient by many LGBT and AIDS activists, conflicted with the teachings and preaching of most black churches at the time. Some conservative African Americans argued that Dinkins’s support for gay rights illustrated that he was out of touch with the African American community.  

Many black churches had avoided confronting the AIDS crisis because there was a series of false beliefs associated with the disease, including that the disease was a white gay man’s disease or that it was a “hoax.” New York City’s black churches also avoided confronting the AIDS crisis and advocating for gay rights because, for many preachers, homosexuality was a “sin” and AIDS was the product of “sinful” behavior. Thus, Dinkins’s embrace of the gay community and efforts to address

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98 Harris, “Sex, Stigma,” 21–43.
AIDS ran afoul of the then-prevailing views espoused by the majority of black churches.\textsuperscript{99}

An October 4, 1993, \textit{New York Times} article described African American disillusionment because Dinkins had not prioritized issues viewed as central to the city’s black community.\textsuperscript{100} An African American manager at a financial services company stated, “He's trying to please one group in the city at the expense of his core constituency: the African-Americans.” Black critics argued that he was squandering his limited political capital by investing political capital related to gay rights and AIDS while ignoring the priorities of the African American community, which included economic issues, crime, and drugs. While it is difficult to assess precisely how Dinkins’s positions on gay rights impacted his support among African Americans, one can safely state that his positions did not increase his support in any measurable way and may have harmed his standing with African Americans. Few within the African American community viewed the issues of gay rights as a top priority, as reflected by opinion polls.\textsuperscript{101} For example, polls indicated that crime, the economy, poverty and drugs, not gay rights and AIDS, were the key issues facing New York City.

\textsuperscript{99} New York City has had a long presence of African American Muslims or Islamic-influenced religions making up a small but very vocal minority, and these African American Muslims or Islamic-influenced religions also were quite critical of gay rights during the period discussed in this chapter.


\textsuperscript{101} “New Yorkers Assess: The Quality of City Life Poll Conducted by Marist Polling, February 1992,” Box 65, Folder1, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
Confronted by decreasing poll numbers, Dinkins decided not to participate in 1992’s St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Instead of marching alongside ILGO, Dinkins challenged the exclusion of ILGO via various legal measures. His administration sought to compel the organizers to allow ILGO to march openly by bringing a civil rights case against the organizers of the parade. This decision to fight the exclusion of gays and lesbians using legal action unexpectedly resulted in further tension between Dinkins and gay and lesbian community.

Prior to the 1992 parade, Dinkins supported the legal efforts of ILGO to force the organizers of the parade to allow the group to march in the parade openly. However, these legal efforts failed, and Dinkins was unable to broker a deal between the organizers of the parade and ILGO. He then stated that he could not participate in an event that excluded gays and lesbians from openly marching because to do so would represent a government endorsement of discrimination. Conservative critics viewed his decision as a political calculation intended to curry favor with the gay and lesbian community. For Irish Catholics, this action represented another example of Dinkins’s hostility to their faith and their people.

Excluded from the official parade, leaders of ILGO decided to organize their own parade on St. Patrick’s Day. Dinkins did not endorse this rival event, angering the leaders of ILGO. The arrest of dozens of members of ILGO who participated in the unauthorized St. Patrick’s Day parade caused a flurry of negative press in gay and lesbian publications.

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102 The Dinkins administration battled the organizers of the parade for several years. In 1995, the United States Supreme Court decided Hurley v. Irish American Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Group of Boston, 515 U.S. 557 (1995), wherein the Supreme Court held that organizers of a St. Patrick’s Day parade could not be forced to allow gay and lesbian marchers to participate.
To many activists, the mass arrests of these protest marchers—and Dinkins’s failure to condemn the arrests—represented more evidence of Dinkins’s superficial support.\textsuperscript{103}

By 1993, Dinkins and his advisors recognized that a sizeable portion of the gay and lesbian community might abandon him if he faced a primary challenge because Dinkins had not “put his money where his mouth was.”\textsuperscript{104} Despite the strain caused by the controversy over the 1992 St. Patrick’s Day parade, Dinkins continuously sought to remedy his relationship with the gay and lesbian community in anticipation of his re-election campaign.

In a series of fundraisers and events in 1992 and 1993, Dinkins reaffirmed his support for gay and lesbian rights and highlighted a list of accomplishments of his administration that included his increased spending on AIDS care, creation of a same-sex registry, Rainbow curriculum, and his march in the St. Patrick’s Day parade. However, in internal memos, advisors warned Dinkins that he needed to provide more tangible benefits rather than promises of future symbolic action.\textsuperscript{105} His advisers recommended that he direct the New York City Corporate Counsel to drop the city’s opposition to the lawsuit brought by the gay and lesbian teachers who sought healthcare benefits for their partners.\textsuperscript{106} The internal advisers noted that the gay and lesbian community was diverse.


\textsuperscript{104} Rotello, “Instead of Gays.”

\textsuperscript{105} Letter from Andy Humm, Executive Committee, Lesbians and Gays for Dinkins, to Bill Lynch, Chair of Dinkins for Mayor, dated July 16, 1993, Box 42, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{106} Letter from Andy Humm.
and as concerned about the economy, crime, and taxes as any other group in the city. Finally, the advisers warned Dinkins of hostility among some portion of the gay press to his administration’s policies and the possibility that Democratic challengers might appeal to a large segment of the Manhattan gay and lesbian community. These challengers included Andrew Stein, an old political rival who beat Dinkins in several Manhattan Borough president races in the late 1970s and early 1980 and whom Dinkins beat in a race in 1985.

In repeated memos, advisers warned of a lack of enthusiasm for Dinkins. They noted that a majority of the gay and lesbian community wanted to support him, but needed to see something substantive to prove his commitment, such as the extension of benefits for the partners of gay and lesbian city workers or the settlement of the lawsuit brought by city workers for such benefits. Fearing that these voters would boycott the 1993 election out of frustration with unfulfilled promises, Dinkins’s advisors warned him that Giuliani might win. In an internal memo to Bill Lynch, who served as Dinkins’s Campaign Chair, Andrew Humm, a member of the Executive Committee of the Lesbians and Gays for Dinkins, summed up the “general feeling” about Dinkins: “The average gay and lesbian voter knows that David Dinkins is better on gay issues than Rudolph Giuliani. But, given the fact that Giuliani is not rabidly anti-gay and did himself march in

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107 Letter from Andy Humm.
108 Internal memorandum from Andrew Bernstein to Leah Johnson regarding appealing to gay and lesbian community dated March 26, 1993, Box 42, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
109 Internal memorandum prepared to prepare David Dinkins before a fundraiser before gay and lesbian Community in 1993, Box 42, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
this year’s gay pride march, Giuliani has made himself ‘acceptable’ to the gay voter who is fed up with David Dinkins because of other issues.” These other issues alluded to in the memo included the perception that Dinkins was not acting quickly enough to make good on his 1989 campaign promises, including his promise to address crime and heal racial tension.

In 1993, Andrew Stein announced that he would challenge Dinkins in the Democratic primary. He directly sought the support of the gay and lesbian community. In a series of flyers, Stein argued that Dinkins had not delivered on his promises. Stein echoed several of the familiar criticisms of Dinkins from the gay and lesbian press, including that Dinkins had failed to substantially fund various AIDS projects and that

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110 Internal memorandum from Andy Humm to Bill Lynch, Chair, Dinkins for Mayor, dated July 16, 1993, “Getting Out the Gay Vote in 1993,” Box 42, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.

111 Stein, a long-political rival of Dinkins, was linked to a controversy that occurred in October 1992. While Dinkins struggled to address the demands of the gay and lesbian community and AIDS activists, an unexpected controversy erupted in the fall of 1992 that exposed riffs in other parts of Dinkins’s coalition. This unexpected controversy erupted when Randy Daniels, an African American nominee to Deputy Mayor for Communications and Public Relations, was accused of sexually harassing a former coworker. The accuser, Barbara Wood, who was a prominent reporter at the time working for NY1, a twenty-four-news network launched in September 1992 to cover local news, alleged that Daniels made a series of unwelcome sexual advances when both were working in the office of City Council President Andrew Stein’s office in the late 1980s. See Sam Robert, “Metro Matters: Innocent or Not, Daniels Is Snared by Larger Issue.” New York Times, October 26, 1992, B3. Initially, Dinkins and other prominent African American leaders including Reverend Calvin Butts, the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, defended Daniels, who was viewed by some as a rising star in African American politics. Dinkins’s initial response may have been shaped not only by the racial politics of the era but also by his belief that the disclosure of the allegations may have been a “dirty trick” by Stein given the timing of the disclosure and the ties both the accuser and accused shared with Stein. However, after a week of largely negative press from the liberal press, Dinkins accepted Daniel’s decision to withdraw his nomination. Dinkins’s apparent abandonment of Daniels angered some African American leaders like Reverend Butts, who grew increasingly critical of Dinkins. For some African American leaders, the allegations against Daniels represented another attack on a successful African American man who rose to prominence and a position of political power. Reverend Butts argued that Dinkins’ abandonment represented a form of surrender in the face of a “smear.” See Robert D. McFadden, “Rally for Dinkins Aide Halted As He Feels Pressure to Quit,” New York Times, October 26, 1992. https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/26/nyregion/rally-for-dinkins-aide-halted-as-he-feels-pressure-to-quit.html When this dissertation is converted into a monograph in the future, I will more fully explore how this episode and others exposed cleavages in Dinkins’s coalition as Dinkins’s actions often simultaneously angered white liberals and African Americans.
Dinkins’s policies often displayed an insensitivity to the diversity of the gay and lesbian community. In the initial polling of the primary, Stein garnered around 30% to 40% of the vote, with strong support among Jewish and self-identified liberal voters. However, Stein failed to make any inroads into Dinkins’s support among African Americans and Hispanics. While Stein’s campaign threatened to appeal to the weakest elements of Dinkins’s coalition, it imploded after Dinkins accused Stein of using a racist whisper campaigns and dirty tricks during prior races in the early 1980s. After Stein’s numbers dropped in Democratic primary polling, Stein, a lifelong liberal Democrat, threatened to run as either a Republican or a Conservative candidate. When Giuliani formally entered the race, Stein lost hope that he could unseat Dinkins, as Jewish voters, in large numbers, moved their support to Giuliani, leaving Stein with no base of support. At the time, it was believed that Dinkins’s handling of the unrest in Crown Heights in 1991, alienated a large minority of Jewish voters who were expected to cross party lines and vote for Dinkins.

Dinkins again faced Giuliani in the 1993 general election. He sought to reach out to the gay and lesbian groups in his attempt to edge out Giuliani in a close race. As in 1989, issues related to gay and lesbian rights played a leading role in 1993. While Giuliani never took an openly hostile position to the gay and lesbian community, Dinkins sought to portray himself as the only pro-gay candidate in the race by highlighting his accomplishments, including the creation of domestic partnership registry, the expansion

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112 Dinkins and Stein had a long and contentious history as they faced each other in several campaigns dating back to the 1970s and Stein repeatedly argued that Dinkins’s sole qualification was that he was black. See Maurice Carroll, “Stein-Dinkins Quarrel on Bias Erupts on Radio Talk Show,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1981, B8. When Stein began to discuss challenging Dinkins in 1992 and 1993, Dinkins accused Stein of being behind an anonymous flyer to the gay and lesbian community in 1993 that was similar to an anonymous flyer allegedly sent out by Stein campaign in 1981 that contained racist smears. James C. McKinley Jr., “Dinkins Criticizes Stein Over Campaign Mailing,” *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1993, B3. Whether Stein sent out the flyers remains a subject of dispute, however, Dinkins believed that Stein was behind both flyers.
of funding for various AIDS programs, and lobbying efforts on behalf of gay and lesbian rights.\textsuperscript{113} In campaign materials, Dinkins sought to link Giuliani to the Catholic Church and to what Dinkins referred to as the “religious right” of the Republican Party.\textsuperscript{114} In campaign materials, Dinkins argued that Giuliani joined the 1993 St. Patrick’s Day parade even though the organizers excluded gays and lesbians from marching openly. He also noted that the Republican candidate attended a fundraiser by a Colorado investment bank, despite the fact that Colorado had passed an anti-gay law and supported a measure that would have allowed public school parents to opt out of the Rainbow Curriculum.\textsuperscript{115}

In 1993, Dinkins weighed in on the national debate over gay people in the military sparked by President Bill Clinton’s decision to adopt the controversial “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. He argued that Giuliani shared the views of the national Republicans who opposed gay people in the military. Despite Dinkins’s attempts to bait him, Giuliani carefully avoided a direct confrontation with Dinkins over the issue of gay rights. Dinkins kept labeling Giuliani as “anti-gay” and “homophobic.”\textsuperscript{116} To counter those attacks, a “Gays and Lesbians for Giuliani” group, whose legitimacy was questioned by Dinkins, emphasized how Giuliani’s economic and criminal law policies would improve their living conditions in New York City.\textsuperscript{117} According to Giuliani,

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{113}] Flyer in support of Dinkins, “Gays and Lesbians Come Out! For David Dinkins for Mayor Rally,” Box 47, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
\item[\textsuperscript{114}] Flyer.
\item[\textsuperscript{115}] “Giuliani: On Gay and Lesbian Issues,” Box 47, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
\item[\textsuperscript{116}] Remarks by Mayor David N. Dinkins for Empire State Pride Agenda Second Annual Award Dinner on September 30, 1993, Box 42, Folder 6, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.
\end{itemize}
Dinkins repeatedly argued that he supported gay rights but failed to produce any concrete results during his tenure in office. This was an argument that some in the gay and lesbian community found persuasive. Most LGBT organizations endorsed Dinkins, but in the closing months of the 1993 election, press accounts described how liberal whites who had grown disillusioned with Dinkins would play the decisive role in the election. It is difficult to determine exactly the number of disillusioned liberals who were also gay and lesbian, but at least some portion of those voters had grown tired of Dinkins’s failure to deliver on his promises by 1993.

The issues of gay and lesbian rights barely registered in the polls during the 1993 campaign. For example, when asked to label their main motivations for choosing a candidate, most voters repeatedly cited the economy, crime, and quality of life as main motivating factors. When directly asked about their support for key demands of the gay and lesbian community, a sizeable portion of New Yorkers expressed disapproval; for instance, 63% of New Yorkers opposed teaching children about gays and lesbians in the


118 Letter from Ed Sedarbaum of Queens Gays and Lesbians United to Mr. Bill Lynch, Box 7, Folder 8, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.


122 “Analysis of Trends.”
Although his advisers told Dinkins to reach out to the community in the final months of the 1993 election, such efforts may have actually motivated the opponents of gay rights. Thus, Dinkins’s efforts to use his support of gay rights to rally his base may have alienated a portion of Democratic voters who did not view the issue as a top priority, reinforcing a common stereotype of Dinkins as an out-of-touch politician. In fact, polling suggested that Dinkins lost support among whites from 1989 to 1993 in all areas and categories of New York, including those who self-identified as liberal. Dinkins’s policies on gay rights partially explained the erosion of Dinkins’s support among some whites, especially white liberals, which occurred after he took office. Commentators at the time noted that Dinkins’s attempts to placate the various parts of his coalition alienated the wider public.

Dinkins took a series of concrete steps to address the AIDS crisis including increasing funding for the care of people with AIDS in a time of austerity. He also played an unsung role in the LGBT movement’s quest for equality. Dinkins’s actions included his decision to introduce an educational curriculum that focused on tolerance into the public schools, his decision to march with gays and lesbians in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, his public campaign to promote safe sex, and his decision to create a registry for same-sex civil unions. Often unfairly categorized as half-measures or merely symbolic

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123 “Polling Conducted by NY 1 on February 2, 1993,” Box 64, Folder 7, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.


gestures, Dinkins’s support for gay and lesbian rights played a part in ending his political career as it alienated many Catholics and black voters who vigorously opposed his policies. Dinkins’s critics, who dismissed his actions as more spectacle over substance or half-measures to avoid alienating conservative Democrats, often overlooked the political costs that Dinkins incurred due to his policies and the legal and political barriers he faced that limited his ability to do more than he did.

AIDS activists faced a disease that killed and infected tens of thousands of people who had faced long-standing discrimination. A collection of forces, including a demand for equality, outrage against the broader community that discriminated against gay people, and failure to take action to cure, stop the spread of HIV or give meaningful assistance to those dying from it, provide the fuel for the movement. His critics argued that providing domestic partner health benefits to city employees was absolutely within his control. Extending such benefits would probably have won him almost universal support within the gay community, according to these critics.

The movement was not focused on the constrictions and compromises of electoral politics. Thus, the gay and lesbian community often presented Dinkins with demands for changes in laws, increased research into AIDS treatments, and changes in societal views on sexuality and HIV status that were largely outside of the mayor's control. These groups sought to expose the plight of those with AIDS and the inaction or apathy of institutions and governmental entities. It is unlikely that any New York City politician could have completely satisfied the disparate demands of the LGBT community of the era. Moreover, Dinkins's critics ignore that extending benefits to same-sex couples city-workers, a central demand of AIDS activists, would have only impacted a small portion
of the gay and lesbian community. He was without power to change state and federal laws that barred same-sex couples' health benefits from the state and federal government. Moreover, the criticisms of Dinkins's actions did not factor in the political costs that he incurred due to the actions that he took as he alienated at least some portion of conservative African Americans and ethnic whites.

While Dinkins often blamed factors outside of his control, including a limited budget and political resistance to his proposals, Dinkins also bears some blame. His failure derived, in part, from his flawed understanding of the nature of the gay and lesbian community and of the demands of the AIDS activists. As his advisers noted in their internal memos in 1992 and 1993, gay and lesbian voters in New York did not have unified demands. Instead, they reflected the diversity of New York City’s population, which Dinkins may have never fully appreciated. Gay and lesbian voters in New York City may have been motivated by issues related to gay rights, AIDS funding, or Dinkins’s support of gay and lesbian marchers during St. Patrick’s Day. However, the same issues that motivated other voters in New York during Dinkins’s tenure—such as crime, the economy, and quality of life—motivated gay and lesbian voters. By 1993, at least some portion of the gay and lesbian community may have concluded that Dinkins’s performance did not pass muster on these bread-and-butter issues despite his symbolic support for gay and lesbian rights.

Dinkins also failed to be reelected because it often appeared that he acted in response to negative coverage of his policies rather than seeking to enact a coherent
His policy decisions appeared in large part to be influenced by the tabloid press in New York City. That press included the *New York Post*, *Village Voice*, *Daily News*, and gay-oriented publications, which highlighted a series of controversies between Dinkins and some of the most outspoken voices in the gay and lesbian community like ACT UP and ILGO. The tabloid coverage often focused on the criticism of some of the most radical voices within the gay and lesbian community. Even though these activists represented small groups composed of no more than a few thousand active supporters, Dinkins not only closely reviewed the local news coverage of these groups, but often changed his policies in reaction to the press coverage. When groups like ACT UP and ILGO made headlines, they shaped Dinkins’s agenda. By attempting to satisfy the demands of the most radical voices with the gay and lesbian community, Dinkins often found himself advocating for policies that alienated a substantial portion of traditionally Democratic New Yorkers in the white and African American community, who did not typically embrace gay rights.

Additionally, Dinkins may have overestimated the political and electoral power of the gay and lesbian community and underestimated the political costs of embracing controversial positions on LGBT issues. Dinkins believed that the gay and lesbian community constituted around 10% of the population of New York City, but there is little evidence that such a self-aware voting community represented this share of the population or acted as a monolithic voting bloc. Therefore, Dinkins’s embrace of certain positions that he viewed as favorable to the LGBT community, but that did not possess

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widespread support among the majority of New Yorkers, may have cost Dinkins more political support than he gained from the LGBT community.

Most important, voters lost confidence in Dinkins after he abandoned his 1989 message that focused on how he would be the mayor of all New Yorkers by healing the racial tension and divisions of the Koch era. That universalist message had promised a better future for all New Yorkers, in language that harkened back to the liberalism of the 1960s, by promising to address a host of social issues using increased funding. During his mayoral tenure, however, Dinkins increasingly embraced the rhetoric of identity politics and moved away from an emphasis on traditional liberal issues. For example, in the aftermath of the 1991 St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Dinkins appeared to abandon a large segment of the white population by labeling his political rivals and critics as homophobic and racist in his public speeches to rally his own base of support.¹²⁸

Dinkins especially alienated many white Catholics, who viewed Dinkins’s criticism of the Catholic Church as disrespectful of their religious faith. While Dinkins often dismissed the anger felt by some portion of whites as based largely on racism, his interpretation of the motivations of whites who abandoned the Democratic Party during his tenure may have ignored how a collection of complex factors, including religious motivations, played at least some role in the decrease of Dinkins’s white support from 1989 to 1993. Thus, by 1993, at least some portion of ethnic whites may have concluded that Dinkins did not represent them because he did respect their religious views or because they felt that Dinkins did not consider their multifold criticisms of his various

policies, including his positions on LGBT issues, as legitimate. A growing number of whites viewed Dinkins as catering to loudest and most radical voices from within his political coalition, rather than serving as the mayor of all New Yorkers. Alienating a large segment of the voting population, in turn, prevented Dinkins from enacting some of the policies supported by the gay and lesbian community because he lost critical support in Queens and Brooklyn among Catholics and their elected representatives.

In later years, Cardinal O’Connor expressed some regret over his role in New York City’s political scene during the AIDS crisis. He noted that he may have served God better as a “silent servant of the people.” However, O’Connor’s constant presence influenced the debates over gay rights and AIDS and, in turn, impacted New York City politics because he claimed to speak for New York City’s millions of Catholics, many of whom had been lifelong Democrats. Additionally, O’Connor’s criticism of various social policies advanced by LGBT and AIDS activists and supported by liberal politicians like Dinkins provided incentive for people who may have never voted for a Republican to do so in the 1989 and 1993 elections.

Dinkins’s relationship with the gay and lesbian community illustrates the difficulty of crafting policy and maintaining a liberal consensus in an era of robust identity politics. Dinkins sought to create a durable electoral coalition that included peoples from diverse backgrounds. But each constituent of his electoral coalition competed for limited resources in a city plagued by a recession and budget constraints. In such an environment, each part of his coalition advanced conflicting goals and agendas. To make a tricky situation even more challenging, the gay and lesbian community and

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AIDS activists never presented Dinkins, a politician with a reactive nature, with a coherent, unified, or achievable set of demands given the political landscape of the era. In an attempt to unify the disparate parts of his coalition against a perceived common enemy, Dinkins abandoned his universalist message of the 1989 election and started to vilify his political opponents, whom he labeled as racist or homophobic. Rather than unifying his supporters, Dinkins may have paradoxically motivated and mobilized the opponents of gay and lesbian rights, who constituted a majority of voters in New York City.

Dinkins’s failure to project a grand, unifying message that would unite the disparate parts of his coalition in 1993 also provides a cautionary tale for modern-day Democrats who seek to cobble together an electoral coalition by appealing to voters based on their racial, sexual, national origin, or gender identity. As noted by Mark Lillia in *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, the appeals to identity by liberals in the period from the 1980s to the current era resulted in a host of unintended consequences, including the balkanization of the electorate and the development of white identity politics. Lillia identified the emergence of two trends in New York City: First, white ethnic voters, many of whom were Catholic, abandoned the Democratic Party in large numbers during the 1989 and 1993 elections. Second, New York City politicians like Dinkins targeted their message to certain constituents like the gay and lesbian community, alienating the other elements of the broader electoral public.

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Chapter 5

“We Should Get Out Because New York Is Shot!”:
The Staten Island Secession Movement

In March 1989, the United States Supreme Court in *Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris* struck down the New York City’s Board of Estimate, a body composed of eight members including the five Borough Presidents, as unconstitutional because the body's structure violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. The Supreme Court reached this decision because the Board of Estimate gave Staten Island, the borough with the smallest and whitest population in the city, disproportionate political power and diluted the electoral power of African Americans in other boroughs. While talk of secession had long roots on the island, the Supreme Court decision and Dinkins's election in 1989s intensified an already existing secession movement. The secessionists, who were predominately not exclusively white, argued that the movement was not racially motivated but instead cited a laundry list of demands, including the closure of the Fresh Kills landfill, free ferry service, increased public services, and more control over the island's affairs, to justify secession. However, Dinkins refused to negotiate with the secessionists, arguing that secession without a vote from the entire city was unconstitutional and that the stated demands of the movement were pretextual, masking the movement's racist core. An examination of Dinkins’s response to the Staten Island secession movement adds to the already robust scholarship into the backlash of

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whites in the suburbs and city in reaction to changing demographics in the period from the 1970s to the 1990s.²

Understanding the Staten Island secession movement requires an exploration of New York City history and the demographic changes of the 1970s and 1980s. Staten Island voted to join New York City as part of the Great Consolidation of 1898. But culture and space separated the island from the rest of New York City for a large part of the 20th century. As of 2022, the island remains the least populated of the five boroughs in New York City. For nearly a century, it was accessible to the rest of the city only by ferry, slowing down the island’s growth. However, the completion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1964 finally connected the island with the rest of the city and ushered in a three-decade long migration of New Yorkers from Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens, doubling the island’s population from 1960 to 1990. Many of these new migrants to the island were Italian Americans who left Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens not only for suburban homes, but also to flee the rapidly changing demographics of their boroughs. Queens’s African American population increased from 145,000 in 1960 to 423,000 in 1990, while. Brooklyn’s African American population went from 371,000 in 1960 to 872,000 in 1990. In contrast, Staten Island’s African American population, while doubling from 15,000 in 1960 to 30,000 in 1990, made up less than 10% of the island’s population, constituting the smallest population of African Americans of the city’s five

for some residents, this small percentage made it an attractive place to relocate.

The movement of whites from the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens to Westchester, Staten Island, Long Island, New Jersey, and Florida in period from the 1960s to the 1980s was widely viewed as part of a generation of white flight that coincided with the deindustrialization of New York City and similar national trends. Nearly 700,000 whites left the Bronx from 1960 to 1990, while 1.2 million whites left Brooklyn and 500,000 whites departed Queens in the same period. In total, more than 2.5 million whites left the three outer boroughs in a generation.4

The changing demographics of New York City from the 1960s to the 1980s overlapped with increasing crime and racial tension. The 1977 Great Blackout was the nadir of a decade of real and perceived decay in New York City that altered the landscape of dozens of neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens for a generation.5 The election of David Dinkins in 1989 reflected both the rising power of African American voters and New York City’s changing demographics. While not admitted much in public, some whites feared the election of an African American mayor, as Dinkins’s election


represented not only a reminder of their loss of status in the city, but also a great unknown, as few whites knew what to expect from Dinkins.

Staten Island was not a central focus of Dinkins’s campaign in 1989. Dinkins first visited Staten Island during the primary campaign against Mayor Edward Koch. “I don't think the limits of New York City are confined to the borders of Manhattan,” he explained. He continued, “I wanted to show the people of Staten Island that I care about them.” But the voters of Staten Island rejected Dinkins’s overtures both in the primary and general election of 1989.7

After winning the primary, Dinkins focused on consolidating support in the other four boroughs. Given its large Italian American population and his prior negative relations with that community, Dinkins viewed Staten Island as hostile to his run. The Staten Island Advance endorsed Rudolph Giuliani. Opinion polls in the fall of 1989 consistently reflected little support for Dinkins’s run on the island, especially among the island’s Italian Americans. Once in office, as Dinkins sought to maintain his multiracial political coalition from the other boroughs, many Staten Islanders believed that Dinkins cared little about them.

Many Staten Islanders believed that the city was in decline and that Manhattan elites viewed the island as merely a dumping ground for the city’s waste. The New York


*Times* quoted a long-time Staten Island resident who colorfully suggested that Staten Islanders should, as their first act of independence, “tear down the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and let us go back to life the way it used to be.”\(^8\) The title “We Should Get out Because New York Is Shot: The Staten Island Secession Movement, 1990–1993” comes from an anonymous Staten Island resident quoted in an August 9, 1993 issue of *The New York Times*, who summed up a common sentiment felt by many residents of Staten Island in the summer of 1993.\(^9\)

During the period from 1989 to 1993, a group of Staten Islanders called for secession from New York City. The politicians and ordinary Staten Islanders who supported secession listed many reasons to justify separation: City Hall’s lack of concern for the island, inadequate public services, high taxes, and the continued presence of the largest landfill in the world at Fresh Kills. *The Daily News* linked the Staten Island secession movement with movements in the Soviet Union and Canada at the time, stating that the core grievance of the movement dealt with the island’s desire to have local control.\(^10\) Holt Myer, a family court judge at the time, stated that the Staten Island people were concerned about many issues, but the secession movement was sparked by a fundamental desire to control their destiny.\(^11\)

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\(^11\) Adams, “They’ve Been Part.”
The demands raised by the supporters of secession were often obscured by the demographics of the borough’s residents and its political leaders, who were all white. Unlike the other boroughs of New York, where whites found themselves in the minority in the early 1990s, Staten Island remained a majority white borough.\(^\text{12}\) In 1993, more than 80% of the borough’s population was white, while whites in the other four boroughs were in the minority.\(^\text{13}\)

The island was also heavily Italian American, making up 35% of the population of Staten Island in 1990. Moreover, a majority of Staten Islanders, who considered themselves either working- or middle-class, lived-in single-family homes, in contrast to the rest of New York City, where apartment dwellers were the majority.\(^\text{14}\) Staten Island voters, who had tended to vote Democratic in local elections, started to gravitate to the Republican Party at the national level in the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections. The political leaders who championed secession, as well as those Republican representatives in Albany who provided active or tacit support, were white.

Critics of the secession movement often discounted it as driven by white’s loss of status in a rapidly changing city. A desire to separate from African Americans was a key factor in the rise of the secessionist movement. The Staten Island secessionists, many of whom were recent arrivals to the island, often glossed over the fact that they moved to Staten Island, in large part, to escape the changing demographics of Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn. However, other factors must also be considered to achieve a deeper


\(^{13}\) Manegold, “Staten Island,” B6.

understanding of the movement. Staten Island had a unique history and political culture, while Dinkins made some flawed decisions amidst this controversy. A mutual mistrust developed between Dinkins and Staten Island secessionists.

The Staten Island secession movement provides a case study that helps explain why at least some portion of the white working class moved away from the Democratic Party in the 1980s.\(^{15}\) It further illustrates how mutual misunderstanding, as well as competition over limited resources, played central roles in explaining the motivations of political actors. Finally, it sheds light on the complex relationship between African Americans and Italian Americans, who often found themselves in competition over limited resources in urban environments in the late twentieth century.\(^{16}\)

The movement of working-class whites from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party that occurred in New York City in the 1990s overlapped with similar trends across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. The battle over Staten Island’s future also overlapped with a nationwide struggle over the future of the suburbs, as cities sought to annex suburbs to expand the welfare state or to address educational disparities

\(^{15}\) In recent years, historians of New York City have started to explore the relationship between working-class whites and liberals. They have argued that working-class whites started to move away from the Democratic Party in the 1960s as the Democratic Party started to embrace anti-war and counter-cultural views. See David Paul Kuhn, *The Hard Hat Revolt: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working Class Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

\(^{16}\) See John Gennari, *Italian America and Its African Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017), which explores the interplay and sometimes complex relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans in urban spaces and the cultural interactions between the two groups as exemplified by Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*, which are set in New York City in the late 1980s. See also Donald Tricario, *Guido Culture and Italian American Youth: From Bensonhurst to Jersey Shore* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), which describes the interplay between Italian American and African American culture and details several flashpoints in relations between the two groups in New York City history and how these flashpoints shaped “Guido” culture.
caused by white flight. In response to efforts by the cities and larger political entities to exert power over smaller political units, suburbs and smaller political entities often rebelled. The Staten Island movement is an example of the trend towards the decentralization of political power that was spreading across the United States in the early 1990s.

A majority of Staten Island voters were registered Democrats, but they were gradually trending toward the Republican Party in presidential elections since 1980. Still, they had remained dependable Democratic voters in city elections during the Koch years. In the 1989 Democratic primary election, Staten Island Democratic voters in a two to one margin supported Koch, while Dinkins won strong majorities in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Manhattan. In Queens, support among ethnic whites, including Jewish and Italian voters, provided Koch with victories.

The election of Dinkins, in the minds of many ethnic whites, threatened their public service positions in city government. Dinkins characterized his electoral coalition as challenging New York City’s power structure. Some ethnic whites interpreted Dinkins’ rhetoric as an indirect attack on a system of political patronage that largely benefited ethnic whites at the expense of minorities. Thus, the composition of New York City’s city government, including its police and fire departments, became the focus of

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17 Carl Horowitz, “Will American Inner Cities Dismantle Suburban Boundaries,” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 19 (Spring 1994): 45, which notes that the Staten Island secession movement represented an example of resistance to the exercise of power by the inner city over the suburbs.

18 Thomas Hudson, “The Consequences of Political Self-Determination: Diversity and Decentralization” (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 1994).

public debate, since whites made up a disproportionate share of New York City’s civil service in the 1980s.

Dinkins’s failure to reconcile with certain core elements of Koch’s electoral coalition after the heated 1989 primary provided an electoral opening that Republican candidate Rudolph Giuliani would fill in the 1989 and 1993 elections. In fact, Dinkins was so unpopular that then-Staten Island Borough President Ralph J. Lamberti, a Democrat and Koch loyalist, not only distanced himself from Dinkins, but also supported Staten Island secession.

In the 1989 general election, Dinkins won decisive victories in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, while suffering lopsided defeats in Queens and Staten Island. Dinkins’s defeat in Staten Island was especially humiliating, as he received around 20% of the vote in a borough where registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans by a margin of 2 to 1. Around 23,000 Staten Islanders voted for Dinkins out of the nearly 116,677 votes cast in the general election. Giuliani received more than 90,000 votes, and the minor party candidates from the Right to Life and Conservative parties received around 3,000 votes combined. In an extremely close election separated by only 47,000 votes citywide, Giuliani’s margin of victory on Staten Island pointed to Dinkins’s political vulnerability on the island.

When Dinkins took office, a large share of ethnic whites on Staten Island believed that their grievances would be ignored. This sense of abandonment by Dinkins as well as the city’s Democratic Party played a large role in sparking the secession movement. Holding together a coalition of disparate groups required the mobilization of his coalition against a common enemy. In the 1989 election, Dinkins claimed the power to heal the
racial divisions that plagued the Koch administration. Rightfully or wrongfully, a large share of Staten Islanders viewed themselves as the “enemy” of Dinkins’s coalition. In polls conducted in 1993, only 10% of ethnic whites in Staten Island stated that Dinkins represented people like them. In contrast, nearly 40% of ethnic whites in Brooklyn and Queens believed that Dinkins represented people like them. It can be argued that ethnic whites possessed more hardened racist views on Staten Island than in Brooklyn and Queens, where they had more daily contact with African Americans and may have felt that Dinkins had more empathy for their needs.

On November 2, 1993, the voters of Staten Island, in a 2 to 1 margin, approved a proposed city charter for an independent Staten Island, subject to approval from New York’s Assembly in Albany. On that same election day, Dinkins lost his re-election bid by a narrow margin. Historian Wilber C. Rich linked the two votes and viewed Staten Island as embodying racial backlash to Dinkins. Rich argued that the high turnout of voters in Staten Island played a significant role in the electoral defeat of Dinkins. Similarly, in his 2013 autobiography, Dinkins pointed to Staten Island’s predominately white electorate as one of the main reasons for his defeat. In contrast to Rich and Dinkins, other historians have focused on the closure of the Fresh Kills landfill or the island’s...
unique political culture and history to the secessionist movement. These differing perspectives speak to the complexity of New York City politics at the time.

A misunderstanding of each side’s intentions and motivations shaped the actions of Dinkins and the Staten Island secessionists. They viewed each other with a deep distrust, seeing the other’s actions through a racialized lens. To the Staten Island secessionists, Dinkins was just another aloof Manhattan-based politician who did not understand the island and its people. They believed that Dinkins sought to benefit African Americans in the other boroughs at the expense of whites in Staten Island. As for Dinkins, he believed that a sizeable percentage of whites in the outer boroughs, including on Staten Island, could never accept an African American. He also came to view the tacit support for secession expressed by Democratic leaders like Governor Mario Cuomo and Senator Daniel Moynihan through a racial lens. Both Cuomo and Moynihan, who needed to run state-wide campaigns, may have not opposed the Staten Island secession movement because to do so would have alienated upstate and suburban voters who

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23 Daniel C. Kramer, and Richard M. Flanagan, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City* (UPA: New York, 2012). Kramer and Flanagan vividly describe how the Staten Island secession movement traced its roots to the distinctive history of the island and its unique political culture. They claim it has a more suburban rather than urban character. According to Kramer and Flanagan, the failure of Dinkins to address the legitimate and preexisting concerns of the island’s residents fueled the secession movement. These demands included the closure of what was at the time the world’s largest landfill in Staten Island at Fresh Kills, the call for better social services, lower taxes, and more direct political control over the island. In response to these calls, Dinkins argued that these demands masked the movement’s true racial nature. He responded in what many Staten Islanders viewed as a dismissal of their demands. In turn, Staten Island secessionists viewed Dinkins’s dismissal of their demands as a racialized slight by an African American mayor who catered to minority communities in other boroughs. See also Martin V. Melosi, *Fresh Kills: A History of Consuming and Discarding in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
harbored negative views of New York City. The failure of both major political parties to bridge the divide set Dinkins and the Staten Island secessionists on a collision course.\textsuperscript{24}

The secession movement’s origins predated Dinkins’s election. It articulated long-standing grievances of residents on Staten Island that were raised as far back as the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when the population of New York City was more than 90\% white. In fact, many of the grievances articulated as justifications for the 1990s secession effort, including lack of representation in city government, resurfaced during the tenure of Bill de Blasio, a white mayor.\textsuperscript{25} Dismissing the movement as white backlash thus ignores the legitimate grievances of the secessionists, Dinkins’s missteps and misunderstandings, and the island’s unique history and culture.

Whatever their racial attitudes, the Staten Island secessionists were also motivated by a host of issues related to the quality of life on the island, political representation, taxation, the delivery of social services, and a demand for free or low-cost ferry service to the island. The secessionists did not view these issues as linked to race. For example, some of the secessionists focused on how Staten Island’s crime rates were much lower than the high crime rates in the rest of New York City. Similarly, Staten Islanders often talked about how the city “was changing” and how many parts were turning into “ghettos.” Staten Islanders denied that their references to crime and changing neighborhoods had anything to do with race. However, Dinkins and other African

\textsuperscript{24} See “Dinkins Loses Race, Again,” \textit{Daily News} (New York), July 18, 2013, 23, which concludes “[a]ll of these forces, and many others, including racial pride among black voters, came into play as New Yorkers installed and removed Dinkins. Racism by some voters was no doubt a factor as well. The former mayor engages in insulting self-justification by singling it out as decisive.”

Americans viewed the use of terms such as “crime” and “ghettos” as code words to mask racism.26

Rather than seeing an organic movement springing from legitimate concerns, Dinkins often dismissed the movement as the product of the ambitions of the island’s politicians, the machinations of upstate and Long Island Republican interlopers who sought to divide the city, or Governor Mario Cuomo’s attempt to curry favor with upstate and Long Island Republicans. In the view of Dinkins, various politicians had an interest in allowing the Staten Island secession movement to fester, even though secession was of dubious legality and practicality. He described how politicians like Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari, who he claimed knew that Staten Island secession was a fool’s errand, did not actively oppose the movement in the early years of the movement because Molinari had, at the time, higher political aspirations. Likewise, Dinkins argued that upstate and Long Island Republicans encouraged the secession movement, because an independent Staten Island would be as a downstate Republican stronghold. Finally, Dinkins described how Cuomo, a man who had national political aspirations in the early 1990s, sought to curry favor with conservative upstate and Long Island Republicans as a means to moderate his image in preparation for a national run for President in 1992.

These top-down explanations of the movement tend to downplay its broad-based popularity in Staten Island, as reflected by the electoral success of referendums in 1990 and 1993. It also ignores that Dinkins could have taken steps during his tenure that, while unpopular among parts of his political coalition, may have defused the tension with

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Staten Island. But he opted not to do so for a host of legitimate political reasons as the demands of Staten Islanders would have alienated key constituents within Dinkins’ coalition. For example, agreeing to the demands of Staten Island secessionists including closing the Fresh Kills landfill, free ferry service, and increased government services, in the zero-sum view of the era, would come at the expense of other communities. Closing the landfill required using other means to dispose of the city’s trash including burning it and these incinerators were, in large part, in minority neighborhoods. Likewise, providing free ferry service and increased services to Staten Islanders, at time, when millions of working-class New Yorkers had to pay for public transportation and had similar complaints about lack of service, especially in the minority communities of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx was not only viewed as unfair but politically untenable.

If whites in the city rejected an African American mayor, as Dinkins contended in his memoir, one would have expected to see much lower levels of support for his candidacy among ethnic whites city-wide. A sizeable percentage of whites in Staten Island, albeit a minority, voted for Dinkins in 1989 and 1993 and opposed secession. Dinkins received around 30% to 40% of the white ethnic vote in the other outer boroughs, and this percentage of support roughly corresponded to his support among whites throughout the city.

Staten Island secessionists argued that certain actions taken by Dinkins—including his decisions to place homeless shelters in the borough, to support the closure of the naval base on the island, and to refuse to close the Fresh Kills landfill—pacified elements of his political coalition based in other boroughs. While Dinkins argued that these decisions were made in the best interests of New York City, many Staten Islanders
viewed them as political payback to an island that strongly opposed Dinkins in the 1989 race.

In a *Staten Island Advance* article entitled “The Island Has Long Flirted with Secession,” Robert V. Wolf described how the call for secession during the Dinkins era traced its roots back to the consolidation of New York City in the 19th-century.\(^{27}\) According to Wolf, residents of Staten Island had long been frustrated by the other boroughs’ desire to use Staten Island as a dumping ground for the city’s human undesirables, including mentally ill and quarantined immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century.\(^{28}\) Wolf detailed how shortly after Staten Island joined Greater New York City in 1898, there were calls for secession. These calls for secession resurfaced during the 1930s, the 1940s, and then again in the 1960s.\(^{29}\) Staten Islanders grew frustrated with the city’s failure to make good on the promises made during the consolidation process of the 19th-century, including improved ferry service, business investment, and land development.\(^{30}\) In the 1960s the Staten Island Borough president, citing widespread support, proposed an inquiry into the feasibility of the borough’s secession.\(^{31}\) Wolf explained that the prior secession efforts fizzled out when confronted with logistical and legal realities.\(^{32}\)


\(^{28}\) Wolf, “Island.”

\(^{29}\) Wolf, “Island.”

\(^{30}\) Wolf, “Island.”

\(^{31}\) Wolf, “Island.”

\(^{32}\) Wolf, “Island.”
A humorous 1984 *Staten Island Advance* column noted that the 1990s talk of secession was not a new phenomenon, as there had been fierce opposition to consolidation in the 1890s. The article cited how the famous 19th century humorist Edgar Wilson Nye, a resident of the island at the time, noted that he and others “removed to Staten Island to get out of the City of New York and its temptations, and we do not desire to have that noisy town follow us to our lair with its civilization and sewer gas.”

The article also described how citizens of the island burned down the city’s Quarantine Hospital in the 1850s because the locals did not like the fact that the city used the island as a dumping ground for its “undesirables.”

During the Koch years, residents of Staten Island expressed their outrage at City Hall’s proposal to build four homeless shelters on the island that would have housed thousands of people. Councilwoman Susan Molinari argued that it made more sense to shelter the homeless in the borough where they resided rather than “warehousing” them in four massive, but temporary, homeless shelters. Molinari called the idea a “total waste of money,” and one of her constituents described how the planned mega-shelters would “destabilize the whole community.” They viewed the controversy over the city’s homeless shelter plan as further evidence that the island was a “dumping ground” for the city.

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34 Reycraft, “First.”

35 Patrick, “Council.”

36 Patrick, “Council.”
During the Koch years, a small but vocal secession movement began to emerge, predominately in the editorial pages of the island’s hometown daily. A 1985 *Staten Island Advance* op-ed laid out the case for secession, arguing that the island did not receive any benefit from being part of New York City and the island could survive as an independent city.\(^{37}\) The author cited its valuable real estate property, money from the landfill, a relatively wealthy tax base, and income levels much higher than the rest of New York City.\(^{38}\) The article admitted that Staten Island would probably have to raise taxes initially to pay for the creation of new public and social services but that the extra taxes were worth it if the island controlled the newly created institutions.\(^{39}\) The op-ed ended by comparing the consolidation of 1898 to a bad marriage and argued that secession was nothing more than a divorce, where Staten Island needed its own space away from an abusive spouse.\(^{40}\)

Borough President Ralph Lamberti commissioned a study into the feasibility of such a divorce from the city in 1987. The study, chaired by Paul Proske, a bank executive, concluded that separation from New York City was financially feasible as Staten Island had a large tax base.\(^{41}\) In fact, the study found that Staten Island would not

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have to raise property or income tax property rates substantially because it had a relatively large and affluent population.42

Another factor behind the secession movement was, as discussed before, the 1989 Supreme Court decision that overlapped with Dinkins’s 1989 election. In *Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris*, the United States Supreme Court held that New York City’s Board of Estimate, a body that had responsibility for formulating the city’s budget, zoning laws, and land usage, violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause by diluting the electoral power of African American voters.43

The Board of Estimate was a political structure that was created as part of the consolidation process of the 19th century. In large part, it provided each borough in the consolidated city with an equal vote in governmental affairs. The creation of the Board of Estimate was a central demand of the leaders of the various towns on Staten Island at the time of consolidation, as they feared the loss of political power in a consolidated Greater City of New York. Staten Island’s population made up around 1% of the consolidated city population. Thus, Staten Island’s seat on the Board of Estimate provided Staten Island with an outsized role in city government, given its population.

In 1982, three African American voters from Brooklyn challenged the constitutionality of the Board of Estimate, arguing that it diluted the electoral power of African Americans in Brooklyn and other boroughs. Both the federal district court and


the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in 1985\textsuperscript{44} and 1987,\textsuperscript{45} respectively, held that that the Board of Estimate was unconstitutional as the body violated the “one person, one vote” principle of the 14\textsuperscript{th} Amendment. The city appealed both decisions. The Supreme Court in the \textit{Board of Estimate of the City of New York v. Morris} affirmed both lower court decisions. The Supreme Court held that the structure of the Board of Estimate that provided one seat and a corresponding vote for each of the five borough presidents gave Staten Island too much political power while diluting the power of big boroughs like Brooklyn. In reaching its decision, the Supreme Court rejected New York City’s argument that the Board of Estimate was immune from “one person, one vote” analysis because it was a governmental body rather than a legislative body.

The unfavorable decisions in lower courts led some to consider whether Staten Island had a place in the city. For example, an independent study cited by attorney Paul Henry concluded that Staten Island could stand alone if the courts struck down the Board of Estimate.\textsuperscript{46} Moreover, Henry noted that without its voice on the Board of Estimate, Staten Island would have “no more political clout than Puerto Rican and Virgin Island representatives to the U.S. Congress.”\textsuperscript{47} This sensibility fueled the desire to secede.

Moreover, a Supreme Court case that held that Staten Island’s predominately white population was the beneficiary of a government structure that diluted the electoral strength of the city’s growing African American population provided the movement with

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\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{Morris v. Board of Estimate of City of New York}, 592 F. Supp. 1462 (E.D.N.Y. 1984).
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris}, 831 F.2d 384 (2\textsuperscript{nd} Cir., 1987).
\item \textsuperscript{47} Mack, “Secession,” B1.
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momentum. The Supreme Court in *Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris* held that the Board of Estimate, a body that made decisions regarding taxation, land use, zoning, and the city’s budget, gave Staten Island, a borough with the smallest population, the same power as Brooklyn, a borough with a much larger population and a sizable African American population, violating the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment.48

The Supreme Court’s March 1989 decision, issued months before the mayoral general election, served as the actualization of long-standing fears that Staten Island would lose its voice in city politics. In the minds of Staten Islanders, the decision overtly sought to weaken the power of Staten Island whites and increase the political power of African Americans in the other boroughs. The decision represented a substantial loss of political power for the island.

Days after the decision, the editors of the *Staten Island Advance* declared that the Supreme Court had transformed Staten Island into a colony of Manhattan and warned about the need to “avoid being swallowed up.”49 The op-ed described how some feared that Staten Island would become “a Devil’s Island, a penal colony, for all of the city’s criminals, the site for building quarters for all of the homeless and the mentally deficient, the place to keep dumping garage forever.”50 A cartoon accompanied the op-ed featuring a massive snake representing Manhattan swallowing Staten Island whole as blood

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dripped from the island. Written six months before Mayor Koch’s surprising primary loss to Dinkins, the op-ed illustrates how strong sentiment existed for secession before Dinkins was elected.

Dinkins viewed Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris as properly limiting a privilege held for a generation by Staten Island residents, who had exercised an oversized influence on New York City politics at the expense of African American voters in the other boroughs. Dinkins viewed the limitation of the power of Staten Island as a necessity because it provided African Americans with their rightful share of political power.

With the Board of Estimate rendered a nullity, New York City needed to replace that entity with a new city government political structure. Many saw this as an opportunity to provide African Americans with more political power via a system that could survive constitutional review. The Supreme Court decision directly resulted in the formation of a commission called the New York City Charter Revision Commission. This body met for several months to formulate a series of proposals to replace the Board of Estimate. It was led by Fredrick A.O. Schwarz, a prominent attorney and great-grandson of the founder of the landmark F.A.O. Schwarz toy store on 5th Avenue. The Commission also featured numerous attorneys and academics. Tasked with responsibility to decide the distribution of the powers of the Board of Estimate, the commission recommended that the mayor and City Commission should assume the powers previously possessed by the Board of Estimate. The Commission also enlarged the size of the City Council from 35 to 51 seats.

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Secessionists claimed that the New York City Charter Revision Commission proposals were a slight to Staten Island. Specifically, Koch voiced some skepticism. He characterized the proposed allocation of certain powers of the Board of Estimate, including those powers related to zoning and taxation, to the City Council as potentially problematic. Koch cautioned that the members of the commission, who were mostly attorneys and academics, drew up a series of proposals that did not reflect the political realities of the city, noting that real life in the city “doesn’t always work like that.” Koch also cautioned that the political consequences of the proposals were “sure to make some people very mad.” According to Koch, the academics ignored the fact how Staten Islanders, who grew accustomed to a large degree of power and influence in city policy derived from the Board of Estimate, would become upset by the loss of that political power as the proposals provided Staten Island with only a few representatives in a larger City Council. Koch’s warnings proved true as transferring power to the City Council angered many Staten Islanders because the island had only a handful of representatives on the enlarged City Council.

The Charter Revision Commission proposed a 1989 ballot question that asked New York City voters whether they supported transferring many of the powers previously possessed by the Board of Estimate, including zoning and taxation powers, to New York City Council. Predicting the approval of the ballot question by the majority of the city in the November 1989 election, Staten Island politicians pressed sympathetic


upstate and Long Island representatives in Albany to approve legislation that set the stage for possible secession. The secession legislation created a multistep process requiring Staten Island voters first to vote on whether New York City should conduct a feasibility study on its viability as an independent city and the impact of secession on the city. Then there could be a formal vote on secession.

While some New Yorkers believed that talk of secession was merely a bargaining ploy to extract concessions from City Hall, State Senator John J. Marchi, who was a leader of the secessionist movement, proclaimed that the legislation “was not a put-on” and he hoped that secession would end the island’s “colonial status.” When asked about the driving force behind secession, Marchi, more than six months before the April 1989 election that put Dinkins in office, stated, “You control the garbage. You got them right where you want them.” For secessionists like Marchi, Staten Island’s viability as an independent entity depended upon the island’s ability to charge New York City and other cities, as well as the State of New York, billions of dollars to continue to use the Fresh Kills landfill. Paradoxically, secessionists also called for the closure of the landfill soon after secession, arguing that money extracted from the landfill’s final years provided much-needed funds as the island transitioned to new industries.

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57 Campanile, “Secession.”

58 In Chapter 15 of Fresh Kills: A History of Consuming and Discarding in New York City, Melosi extensively explores the papers of State Senator Marchi, persuasively arguing that Marchi used secession as a tool to close the Fresh Kills landfill. See also The Senator John J. Marchi Papers, Secession, Subject File, 1983–1996, Box 33, Folder 4, Archives & Special Collections, Department of the Library, College of Staten Island, CUNY.

59 Bethany Kandel, “Secession from NYC on Staten Island Ballot,” New York Times, October 19, 1990, 8A, which notes that a study into the impact of secession found that if an independent Staten Island
Non-Statenn Islanders quickly labelled talk of secession as racially motivated. However, the *Staten Island Advance* described how most Staten Islanders of all races supported secession.60 A March 1989 article quoted fifteen Staten Islanders who provided their ideas on secession. It featured two African Americans who supported secession, arguing that an independent Staten Island would “receive more money from the federal government” and would have “more money for the homeless and poor,” if the taxes didn’t go to the other boroughs.61 While these African Americans who supported secession probably represented a minority of African American sentiment regarding secession, the existence of at least some support for secession among African Americans on the island painted a more complex picture of the secession movement. Additionally, the article cited six white Staten Islanders who strongly opposed the move, challenging the popular narrative of secession as an exclusively white movement.62

In July 1989, Lamberti stated that city officials, including Koch, opposed secession because “Staten Island and Manhattan are the only two boroughs that could be considered revenue generators, and Staten Island is the only borough with some land.”63 Lamberti, a former ally of Koch and lifelong Democrat, stated that the movement was charged New York City usage fees, then Staten Island could operate with a budget surplus, but without the usage fees that Staten Island faced an annual deficit of $59 million.


61 Hughes, “Court,” A1.


“all about representation” and “not about race” as the elimination of the “Board of Estimate stripped Staten Island of its political power.”\(^{64}\)

Fears of Staten Island’s dilution of political power in the city’s governance soon became actualized when the voters of New York City approved the ballot question in 1989, which Dinkins supported. The adoption of the proposal left Staten Island with only three votes in a body that had over fifty seats, stripping the borough of the power it exercised on the Board of Estimate. The approved ballot question gave the New York City Council many, but not all, of the powers previously possessed by the defunct Board of Estimate. Based on Dinkins’s decision to throw his support behind the ballot question, many Staten Islanders began to view independence from the city as the only way to exercise some degree of local control.

The newly formed Staten Island Secession Party endorsed several candidates for City Council seats and supported Borough President Lamberti in the 1989 election. Lamberti, a Democrat, earned the respect of the nascent secession movement because he successfully negotiated a deal with Koch that stopped the building of the four planned homeless shelters in exchange for the promise that Staten Island would be the site of a future city jail.\(^{65}\) Also, Lamberti earned the respect of secessionists because he strongly criticized the Charter Revision Commission’s proposals, arguing that “without more of a voice in budget, land use, and service delivery decisions, the borough would become a

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\(^{64}\) Cocola, “BP: No One,” A3.

\(^{65}\) When Republic Guy Molinari defeated Lamberti in 1989, Molinari rejected Lamberti’s deal and opposed the building of a new jail during the tenure of Dinkins. Such efforts prevented the building of a jail on the island.
dumping ground for unwanted projects” like the landfill, housing for the homeless, or a prison.⁶⁶

Political ads for the upstart Staten Island Secession Party did not address race, instead emphasizing the need for home rule. For example, a 1989 pamphlet focused on the need for local control of the island. It featured a cartoon of a well-dressed man who was wearing a business suit labeled as a Manhattan Power Broker walking over another man identified as Staten Island. The trampled man, who had shoe marks all over his body, was saying, “Enough is Enough!”⁶⁷ The pamphlet also featured quotes from several residents who called for home rule: “Laws would be made by Islanders for Islanders—not by some nebulous, self-serving City Council in Manhattan, most of whom do not have the foggiest notion of what it is like to live on Staten Island.”⁶⁸ These materials reflected the anti-elitist nature of the movement and described the relationship between Staten Island and Manhattan as exploitative. The Staten Island Secession Party did not succeed in the 1989 election, as its endorsed candidates, including Lamberti, all lost. However, the party’s presence on the political scene raised the public’s awareness of the growing support for secession on the island.

To the surprise of some, Governor Cuomo, who previously opposed secession, signed a bill in December 1989 that established a multi-step secession process, noting “that Staten Island residents were justified in wanting to consider separation from the

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⁶⁸ “Staten Island.”
City of New York” and the residents of Staten Island “deserved the chance to be heard.”

Cuomo’s change of heart was criticized by both outgoing Mayor Koch and incoming Mayor Dinkins. Koch described, in his characteristically confrontational manner, how Cuomo’s decision was like “plunging a dagger in the city’s heart.” Koch called it a cynical ploy to curry favor with Staten Island voters in his future run for governor at the expense of New York City’s best interests. Incoming Mayor Dinkins took a different stance, stating that he hoped that Staten Island residents would realize that it made more sense to stay “a part of America’s greatest city.”

Koch attempted to kill the secession movement in its cradle. In one of his last actions as mayor, he filed a lawsuit to attempt to keep the secession question off the ballot. The lawsuit argued that posing the secession question just to Staten Island residents, rather than to citizens of the entire city, violated the “home rule” mandate contained in New York’s constitution. According to New York’s constitution, local governments had some control over local affairs under the “home rule mandate.” However, New York City could not exercise complete autonomy in spheres that impacted a “substantial state interest.” According to Koch, major decisions that impacted the entire city required the consent of all New York City citizens, not just the citizens of one borough. Thus, allowing Staten Island to secede without the consent of the majority of New Yorkers violated the equal protection clause of the United States Constitution and the “home rule” mandate of the New York state constitution.

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Dinkins similarly argued that Staten Islanders’ vote to separate from New York City was unlawful because any separation from the city had to be ratified by a majority of voters in all of the five boroughs in New York City. Echoing the position of ex-Mayor Koch, Leland Jones, a Dinkins press aide, stated that Dinkins and Koch might have disagreed on many issues, but they both agreed that Staten Island’s secession without the approval from a majority of voters from all of New York was unlawful. In 1990, the Court of Appeals, the highest in New York State, opted not to hear the case, holding that the controversy over Staten Island’s future was at its core a political question best resolved by the legislators or voters, not the courts.

Dinkins, who attended little to Staten Island during both the primary race and the general election, was confronted with Staten Island’s push to secede immediately after being sworn into office in 1990. He had inherited the lawsuit filed by Koch that sought to declare efforts to secede unconstitutional. Though he might have benefited politically if he allowed Staten Island to secede, he argued in favor of the city’s unification for several reasons. First, he did not want to be viewed as the mayor who presided over the dismemberment of the city. Second, he considered the secession movement a naked attempt to circumvent the Supreme Court’s decision in *Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris*, exposing Staten Island’s small African American population to discrimination. Moreover, Dinkins viewed the actions of other Democratic leaders like

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Cuomo as a personal affront, as they placed their own short-term political interests over New York City’s unification.

The central demands of the movement, including the closure of the Fresh Kills landfill, presented Dinkins with a political dilemma. During the 1989 campaign, Dinkins promised to build a series of incinerators in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx. While some Staten Islanders viewed his proposal as a mere attempt to curry favor with the island, Dinkins viewed incinerators as both a cost-saving measure and a means to reduce the amount of trash dumped in Staten Island. However, groups in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Bronx argued that the incinerators would cause health problems in largely minority neighborhoods. Additionally, environmentalists maintained that incinerators would worsen air pollution.

In addition to their call for closure of the Fresh Kills landfill, the secessionists also demanded free ferry service for Staten Islanders. But for Dinkins, this demand was a non-starter. In a city where millions of people paid for public transportation, Dinkins viewed the request for free ferry service as preferential, rather than equal, treatment for a small group of New Yorkers. It came at the expense of millions of ordinary New Yorkers.

Sensing that it might be futile to try to persuade Staten Islanders themselves to abandon secession, Dinkins believed that Democrats in Albany could provide New York City with support. Thus, Dinkins tried to lobby Albany to amend the secession legislation so that all New York City voters, rather than just Staten Island voters, would have a say.
in a referendum on Staten Island’s status.\textsuperscript{74} However, Dinkins’s strenuous lobbying efforts failed in the New York Assembly, a Democrat-controlled body.\textsuperscript{75} Rather than supporting Dinkins’s proposal, the New York Assembly voted for an amendment to the Staten Island secession legislation that gave the governor and Albany legislators, rather than New York City voters, the final say on Staten Island’s status.\textsuperscript{76} According to Assembly Speaker Mel Miller, a Brooklyn Democrat, many Democrats in the Assembly rejected Dinkins’s proposal because they viewed it as an imprudent game of “Russian roulette,” hinting that a city-wide vote on Staten Island’s future could have resulted in a vote for secession, as New Yorkers may have allowed Staten Island to leave the city.\textsuperscript{77} Dinkins viewed the actions of the Democratic-controlled Assembly and Governor Cuomo not only as a personal slight, but also as dismissive of the views of millions of New York City voters.\textsuperscript{78} Cuomo responded that the secession process was an experiment in democracy that would allow Staten Island citizens and then the legislators in Albany to evaluate Staten Island’s relationship with the rest of the city.\textsuperscript{79} On November 6, 1990, Staten Islanders approved by a vote of 81\% to 19\% a referendum to study secession, and


\textsuperscript{75} Campanile, “Assembly Approves,” A1.

\textsuperscript{76} Campanile, “Assembly Approves,” A1.

\textsuperscript{77} Campanile, “Assembly Approves,” A1.


\textsuperscript{79} Campanile, “Cuomo Signs,” A1
thereafter a state commission was formed to study the feasibility of establishing an independent Staten Island.\textsuperscript{80}

From 1990 to 1993, Dinkins tried with little success to end the movement. Ironically, his actions fueled the movement’s growth. For example, Dinkins’s critique of the court decisions and political developments occurring in Albany angered many Staten Islanders, who interpreted it as an out-of-hand dismissal of the island’s demands. Dinkins argued that a plan that allowed only Staten Islanders to vote on secession “ignored the interests and trampled on the rights of people from the rest of New York City.”\textsuperscript{81} Many Staten Island residents rejected this line of argument, responding that the rest of New York City never considered Staten Island’s views when crafting city policy. A local Community Board member stated that the actions of Koch and Dinkins fueled secession “because they’re telling us in no uncertain terms to drop dead.”\textsuperscript{82}

Many Staten Islanders resented Dinkins for attempting to stop the referendum from taking place. For example, a February 1990 op-ed from the \textit{Staten Island Advance} rejected Dinkins’s central argument that the rest of New York City should have a voice in Staten Island’s decision to secede:

\begin{quote}
Secession is unchartered territory. It necessarily causes upheaval in the status quo. We think that upheaval has been made necessary by the prior upheaval done to the structure of our city government by the courts and
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\textsuperscript{81} Carl Campanile, “Key Panel Clears Secession Revision,” \textit{Staten Island Advance}, February 2, 1990.
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the Charter Revision Commission. We think it can be accomplished with a minimum of disruption and pain to all parties involved, and the secession law, plus the amendment, provides the perfect blueprint for just that.

The city’s demand that it has a hand in the final outcome is unreasonable and cynical, given its clear presumption of cowardice on the part of the Legislature.

Whoever heard of the seceding entity having to secure permission from the government it’s leaving before secession can be achieved? That kind of unreasonableness, and the city’s blithe unwillingness to allow Staten Island self-determination, makes secession seem even more attractive.83

Staten Islanders, according to the article, needed to exercise self-determination and control their destiny. New Yorkers did not have the best interests of Staten Island at heart.

Dinkins further angered Staten Islanders when he announced that he would form an independent committee to study the viability of Staten Island as an independent city. Dinkins demanded that this committee should be composed of persons that reflected the city’s diversity, providing all New Yorkers with a voice in the process. In early 1991 he stated, “To date, 95 percent of New York City’s residents have been disenfranchised. My commission will ensure that they are re-enfranchised, and that the issue of secession is examined objectively to ensure that full consideration is given to the interests of all New Yorkers, whether they live in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, or Staten

Dinkins went on to describe how Staten Island was nothing more than “a dim light in the sky.” Staten Islanders thought that Dinkins’s committee’s true purpose was to serve as a political tool in the public relations battle over secession. Supporters of secession such as Senator John Marchi argued that Dinkins and his allies sought to scare Staten Islanders into submission with unreliable statistics and doomsday predictions.

Secessionists often compared the status of the island with that of the Baltic republics, which in the early 1990s were advocating for their freedom from the Soviet Union. However, Dinkins’s allies rejected these comparisons out-of-hand. City Corporation Counsel Victor Kovner, who was also was one of Dinkins’s main legal advisors, argued that the comparisons between Staten Island and the Baltic republics were completely inappropriate because “[t]he city didn’t take Staten Island; [the City] didn’t annex Staten Island . . . Staten Island voted to join the city.”

Days later, editors of the *Staten Island Advance* responded to Dinkins’s dismissal of its movement:

“We don’t mean to draw direct parallels between Lithuania’s situation and our own, but there are undeniable similarities. Both secession movements are responses to oppression.”


85 Randall, “Dinkins.”


87 Carl Campanile, “City Might Look to High Court to Stop Island’s ‘Divorce,’” *Staten Island Advance*, March 14, 1990, A1.
Lithuania never bought into the Soviet system, which consumed its resources but provided little in the way of a political voice.

It was the guarantee of a fair political voice that once induced Staten Island to willingly join the coalition that is New York. Islanders, who constitute just five percent of the city’s population, have stuck by that decision even while being outrageously taxed and tolled and dumped-on. Despite being regarded by city leaders as a cash cow, which can be counted on to stand docilely for repeated milkings, we have held up our part of the bargain. Now the U.S. Supreme Court has changed the rules; we are in real danger of becoming a vassal borough, a colony of Manhattan. Our political clout has gone from modest to meager. Under the new system, that gang of four, the big boroughs, can use our Island as the receptacle for any undesirable project they choose.

So, we sympathize with the Lithuanians and recognize why the Kremlin colonialists have worn out their welcome. For many of the same reasons, City Hall, with its money-pit policies and ham-fisted bureaucrats, is rapidly becoming unwelcome here.\

Though Staten Islanders held fast to this comparison, it did not persuade Dinkins.

Dinkins’s handling of the Fresh Kills landfill further illustrates his struggle to appease Staten Island voters. Dinkins’s refusal to negotiate the closure of the Fresh Kills landfill and his repeated statements that the landfill would remain New York City property, even if Staten Island voted to secede, or that an independent Staten Island

would have to compensate New York City for the landfill, inflamed secessionists.\textsuperscript{89} Dinkins’s position on the status of the landfill played into the secessionists’ narrative that Staten Island would always be New York City’s “dumping ground,” “political eunuch,” “stepchild,” and “bastard,” as attendees of a 1990 town hall described.\textsuperscript{90} While secessionists did not have any firm answers about the feasibility of independence, a sizable majority of Staten Islanders in the period from 1990 to 1993 reached the conclusion that divorce from the city was necessary.\textsuperscript{91}

Dinkins and his allies often argued that the secession movement had racist undertones. Secessionists repeatedly rejected any links between racism and secession. In a raucous town hall meeting held before the 1990 referendum, one attendee exclaimed, “The transportation system is horrendous. We’re tired of not having representation. What does it have to do with racism?”\textsuperscript{92}

However, not all Staten Islanders, especially African Americans, were convinced that an independent Staten Island would protect racial minorities. At a town hall meeting in 1990 in the North Shore community, some Staten Island residents, both white and African American, argued that an independent Staten Island, where whites were in the majority, might not be hospitable to minorities.\textsuperscript{93} To address allegations that the


\textsuperscript{91} Campanile, “Unknowns,” A1.


secessionist movement had racist motivations, secessionists hosted a series of meetings in racially diverse communities, such as the North Shore community where African Americans and Hispanics made up a significant percentage of the population. In response to several questions about the status of racial minorities on an independent Staten Island, Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano, a Democrat from Staten Island who voted to allow the 1990 referendum, stated, “in a theoretical City of Staten Island, government districts would probably be much smaller than they are now, making it more likely that minorities would have elected representatives.”

During his first years in office, Dinkins announced that he had no plans to satisfy any of the central demands of the secessionists. He had no intention to close the Fresh Kills dump, supported the federal government’s decision to close Naval Station New York on the island (a decision that cost the island millions of dollars in revenue and hundreds of jobs), sought to move hundreds of homeless people into shelters on the island, and refused to guarantee free ferry service to the island. Staten Islanders viewed these decisions as attempts to placate the demands of Dinkins’s coalition located in other parts of the city at the expense of the island.

While he described Staten Island as an essential part of the city and noted that he cared about the island, Dinkins added that the island received far more services from the city than it contributed in tax revenue. Staten Islanders viewed Dinkins’s speeches as either dismissing the demands of the secessionists or seeking to scare Staten Island voters


into voting against secession by making tax-based arguments. Secessionists argued that Dinkins did not fully understand the central issues that motivated the movement, including the demand for more local control over the island’s affairs and the feeling that Dinkins did not prioritize the island’s interests. In April 1993, *Crain’s New York Business* criticized Dinkins’s response to the demands of the secessionists:

So far, the administration’s response has been, at best, inept—inexperienced staff members producing simplistic analyses and a mayor who can do little more but warn Staten Islanders that their property taxes will triple if they secede (patently untrue). The mayor hasn’t even made an effort to address a basic grievance of the borough’s residents, that they don’t receive their fair share of services.

In the summer of 1991, Staten Islanders grew furious with Dinkins for his unwillingness to allocate an additional one million dollars in a multi-billion-dollar city budget to protect the Staten Island ferry from cuts in service or a fare increase. Allen Cappelli, who campaigned for Dinkins during the 1989 election, described how he was “unhappy with Dinkins’s treatment of Staten Island,” noting that the mayor’s position on the ferry had “heightened secessionist feeling.” Cappelli indicated that he would “like to see the mayor more responsive to Staten Island issues.” He noted, “I don’t think the attention to

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96 Polling statistics are derived from internal polling conducted by Michael X. Delli Carpini of the Dinkins campaign in 1993 as reported in “Racial Issues in 1993 Campaign Poll,” Box 67, Folder 7, David Dinkins Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY.


the middle class, and Staten Islanders, in particular, is what it should be.” While coverage of the ferry issue emphasized how Staten Islanders felt that they were slighted by Dinkins, little attention was given to the fact that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority faced an ongoing budget gap that resulted in a fare increase from $0.90 to $1.00 in the last days of Koch’s term.

The conflict came to a head in 1992 and 1993 when secessionists and Dinkins dueled over the viability of an independent Staten Island. They debated over the findings of two rival committees charged with investigating the feasibility of an independent island. The secessionists relied upon the findings of the state-appointed secession commission that held that Staten Island “had sufficient resources to operate as a separate city with a $955 million tax and revenue base.” Dinkins criticized the composition of the commission, arguing that it had very little minority and female representation and, as such, did not reflect the city’s diversity. Moreover, Dinkins relied upon the findings of the members of a city commission who reached an opposite conclusion, holding that an independent Staten Island faced a future budget shortfall that would require a massive tax hike. His opponents argued that the data lacked credibility because the committee was composed of Dinkins appointees who sought to undermine the secessionist cause.

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100 Campanile, “Ferry,” A3.


In the 1989 campaign, Dinkins promised to make City Hall more accessible to ordinary New Yorkers. As mayor, Dinkins instituted a program where he visited each borough, including Staten Island, for a full week. In July 1992, Dinkins visited Staten Island for a week referred to as “City Hall in Staten Island.” During the week-long visit to the island, Dinkins further stoked the secessionist movement, as he used the week as an opportunity to make his case against secession. Moreover, Dinkins issued his committee’s findings days before his visit.

During his trip, Dinkins sought to demonstrate his concern for Staten Island. He stated, “If nothing else, I hope that I can convey to the people of Staten Island that I deeply care about them.” However, Dinkins received an extremely cool, if not hostile, reception on the island. Borough President Guy V. Molinari blasted Dinkins’s record at a press conference after the cordial welcome ceremony, describing Dinkins’s performance on issues related to Staten Island as “horrendous.” Molinari suggested that, rather than giving more speeches on Staten Island, “If he’s interested in stopping secession from occurring, the best thing the mayor can do is stay home and play tennis.”


107 Finder, “Dinkins,” B3.

During speeches on the island, Dinkins appeared to dismiss the concerns of Staten Islanders related to representation, quality of life, and the Fresh Kills landfill. Instead, he emphasized how secession almost certainly meant higher taxes as an independent Staten Island faced a $170 million dollar budget deficit. Dinkins’s tax-based arguments may have provided food for thought, but few Staten Islanders seemed to have changed their views on secession. Olga Igneri, the Staten Island Republican Party chairperson, stated when describing secession, “It’s like a divorce. At first, you’re angry, and you say that you just can’t live with that person. But then you have to carefully look at dividing the common property.” Dinkins’s trip to Staten Island thus did little to change the political dynamic.

The visit did little to change Dinkins’s opinion as well. Nothing in the welcome reception or his interactions with leaders of the secessionists disabused Dinkins of his notion that the secessionists had little respect for the first African American mayor of New York City. Dinkins felt further slighted when Molinari and his daughter, a Congresswoman representing the island, handed him a large futuristic poster of the closed Fresh Kills landfill renamed the “Molinari Land Fill Lock.” Dinkins blasted the actions of the Molinari and his daughter as “tacky,” “disrespectful,” and “pandering to the worst elements” on the island. Dinkins chided that Molinari should use his

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influence over his daughter to see “how the federal government might assist our cause here in New York.”  

Dinkins further alienated Staten Islanders during his July 1992 trip to the Fresh Kills landfill. Rather than acknowledging that the landfill often created a highly offensive smell that extended for miles, Dinkins took the opportunity to release an air pollution study that held that the “air around the dump contained no dangerous levels of toxic chemicals” and then blamed New Jersey for causing “air pollution.” In a town hall hosted by editors of the *Staten Island Advance* following his tour of the landfill, Dinkins and a resident got into a heated exchange with a local environmental activist, who accused the mayor of failing to build incinerators in Brooklyn and Bronx because it would harm the “people of color” who elected him. Dinkins took offense at the comments and stated that he was elected by a majority of New Yorkers and not just “people of color.”

During the 1993 campaign, both Dinkins and Giuliani accused each other of using racialized language when talking about the Staten Island secession movement, and each made references to the Civil War. For example, Dinkins filed a complaint with an independent watchdog group called Partnership of Faith in New York, accusing Giuliani of injecting race into the 1993 election in violation of an agreement that the two

115 McKinley, “Dinkins,” B3.
candidates made to avoid “racial politicking.” Dinkins contended that Giuliani often described how Staten Island and other boroughs had been “robbed” and “raped” and promised to “restore” power to the boroughs. According to Dinkins, Giuliani’s use of inflammatory language, especially his use of “restoration,” had racial overtures. Giuliani responded that it was “Dinkins who has depicted the secession battle in racial terms.”

According to Giuliani, Dinkins’s letter to Governor Cuomo started the controversy between the two men because Dinkins provocatively compared the Staten Island secession movement to the Confederate states in the 1860s that sparked the Civil War and then falsely compared himself with Abraham Lincoln.

Polling prior to the 1993 referendum indicated that a majority of Staten Islanders supported leaving New York City, and only 25% opposed secession. Staten Islanders across racial, economic, and residential lines described how they felt “abused,” “neglected,” “overtaxed,” and “dumped on.” As part of a series on the face of secessionists, the Staten Island Advance profiled a family in Staten Island who described themselves as liberals, noting that they were hippies who attended Woodstock in the 1960s. However, they were now professionals who worked in Manhattan and had several

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young daughters. The article detailed how the family moved to Staten Island from Queens to raise their family in a safe and quiet suburban neighborhood while still living in New York City. Rather than mentioning issues of race, the couple argued that Staten Island needed independence to provide Staten Islanders with better services, including more public transit, more accountable government, and a say in the future of the Fresh Kills landfill. Yet the article ignored how the family’s movement to Queens overlapped with a multi-generational movement of whites out of Queens and Brooklyn that coincided with the changing demographics of New York City. Though they may not have realized it, this family and others like them were at least partly motivated by changing racial demographics in New York City.

Dinkins’s negative messaging about secession did little to change minds; instead, his actions emboldened opponents like Marchi. The senator, who was considered a mild-mannered political leader, gave a fiery speech in September 1993 at an event billed as the signing of Staten Island’s Declaration of Independence. Without directly referring to Dinkins, Marchi yelled to the crowd, “Who are the naysayers? They are people who can only say negative things. Shame on them. These people think they can frighten Staten Island into submission.” Marchi, a man who had a long-standing working relationship


125 Bruno, “Around the Table,” A28.


with Dinkins that dated back to the 1970s and who few would label as a racist, illustrated that Dinkins’s messaging convinced few Staten Islanders of the need to remain in the city.

In the run-up to his re-election, Dinkins kept trying to dissuade Staten Islanders from pursuing secession. In an October 1993 forum organized by the Democratic Organization of Richmond County, several of the panelists, who were supporters of Dinkins, argued that Staten Island and the rest of New York City shared the same history, that taxes would go up after secession, and that the secession movement was another example of white flight.¹²⁸ Robert Fodera, a deputy director of Dinkins’s task force on secession, argued that minorities had won hard-earned victories in New York City and that they would lose political power in an independent Staten Island.¹²⁹ However, these arguments did little to persuade the crowd that was overwhelmingly in favor of secession, many of whom stated that secession had “nothing to do with race.”¹³⁰

Other politicians recognized secession was an uphill battle. On the eve of the 1993 election, various politicians, including Governor Cuomo and Borough President Molinari, warned Staten Island voters of the many barriers that secession faced, including a mayor who was not supportive of the movement. Cuomo, who professed neutrality, noted in a Staten Island town hall at Wagner College that the “city will be furious with you if you secede,” and he warned that the mayor and the rest of the city “would come


¹²⁹ Campanile, and Schneider, “Borough’s Differences,” A15.

¹³⁰ Campanile, and Schneider, “Borough’s Differences,” A15.
down on [you] like an absolute ton of coal and say you can’t have anything.”\textsuperscript{131} But a spectator in the crowd, identified as a New York Stock Exchange employee, echoed a popular sentiment on the island when he noted, “Whatever the city doesn’t want gets dumped here; I say let’s dump the city.”\textsuperscript{132} Other attendees warned about how the November 1993 referendum, even if approved, would settle little, as Staten Island faced an “uphill battle” because Dinkins and his Democratic allies in Albany remained steadfastly against secession. Numerous unanswered questions were left unresolved by the secession process, including how social services would be delivered.\textsuperscript{133}

In contrast to the nearly daily coverage of issues related to secession featured in pages of the \textit{Staten Island Advance}, the city’s other papers, including the \textit{New York Times}, sparingly covered the movement. Those articles that did cover the movement often focused on the impact of the secession vote on Dinkins’s reelection chances. They presented the issue from a non-Staten Islanders’ perspective. In contrast, the \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, an African American paper, viewed the secessionist movement as possessing a “racist core.”\textsuperscript{134} The \textit{Amsterdam News} cited a series of articles from the pages of the \textit{Advance} that featured a proposed educational curriculum for Staten Island school children. This curriculum presented the Fresh Kill landfill as metaphor for Staten Island’s history as a “dumping” ground for New York’s homeless, poor, criminals, low-


\textsuperscript{132} Stanley, “Staten Islanders,” B4.


rent housing project tenants, unwed teenagers, and drug addicts. In other words, these people represent human refuse or garbage.” The *Amsterdam News* noted that the proposed educational curriculum implied that the island’s growing African American population “would be happier in a city with a Black mayor and that secession would ‘stop the flow’ of such people to the Island.” The article argued that the secession movement often glossed over the impact of Staten Island secession on its own African American population and how others viewed the movement as motivated by racism because of its rhetoric. These African American critics presented the secessionists as either failing to reflect on their own motivations or seeking to mask their true motivations.

In contrast to Dinkins, Giuliani expressed his willingness to negotiate with the secessionists. He was willing to start discussions about reconsidering the long-term status of the Fresh Kills landfill as well as maintaining Staten Island ferry service at a reasonable cost. Giuliani won the endorsement of the *Staten Island Advance* and the votes of many Staten Islanders in the 1993 election. In the late days of the campaign, Giuliani described how Dinkins dealt with the Staten Island secession movement as “‘Block it! Stop it! Change it! Veto it!’ He declared, ‘This is the U.S., not the U.S.S.R. Let the people vote!’” When the residents of Staten Island eventually did vote, they

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voted overwhelmingly in favor of secession, and many of these same voters also voted for Giuliani.

In an election separated by only around 53,000 votes, Giuliani’s decisive margin of victory on Staten Island played an instrumental part in his victory. On election day in 1993, the majority of Staten Islanders cast their votes against Dinkins and in favor of secession. Giuliani won Staten Island by more than 90,000 votes in an electoral landslide on the island on what otherwise was a close race city-wide. In total, Giuliani improved his vote tally on Staten Island by 26,000 votes from 1989 to 1993.

While a higher turnout of voters on Staten Island played an important role in Dinkins’s defeat, Dinkins had electoral problems across the board. For example, a deep analysis of the 1993 election results also indicates that Giuliani’s margin of loss in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Manhattan narrowed as compared to his 1989 tallies. In the three boroughs that were key to his 1989 election victory, Dinkins underperformed by 56,000 votes in 1993. Dinkins struggled to mobilize key parts of his own coalition, including African Americans, Hispanics, and white liberals. The decrease in his support among several key constituents, along with higher turnout in Staten Island, explains his defeat.

Despite the results of the referendum, Staten Island never seceded from New York City. Secessionists faced a collection of legal barriers that prevented them from achieving their goals. The movement evaporated with the election of Giuliani, who, unlike Dinkins, promised to meet many of the secession movement’s long list of

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demands, including providing free ferry service to the island and committing to closing the Fresh Kills landfill.

In the days after the 1993 election, the *New York Times* indicated that the election of Giuliani may have caused many of the Staten Island secessionists to question whether secession made sense, given that they had a perceived ally in City Hall.\(^\text{142}\) Marchi, the long supporter of secession, remained unconvinced. “We are all frail and mortal,” he said, adding that “Politicians come and go, but Staten Island will always be here, and hopefully, it will be able to govern itself.”\(^\text{143}\) Molinari noted that Giuliani had a chance to “convince the people of Staten Island if treated fairly they may not want to secede.”\(^\text{144}\)

The quotes from Staten Island leaders reflect how they considered issues related to self-determination and fairness at the core of the secession movement.

As reflected by the vote on secession, the movement had widespread support on the island. However, in the days after the vote, commentators’ investigations into the movement’s essential nature revealed a more complex picture.\(^\text{145}\) A reporter from *The Independent* (London) interviewed dozens of people who were commuting on the Staten Island ferry in the days after the 1993 election and reported that he could not find one


\(^{143}\) Myers, “Both Factions,” B1.


person who opposed secession.\textsuperscript{146} Almost all of those interviewed expressed a negative view on the rest of New York City and its treatment of the island.\textsuperscript{147} Many described how the city had become “infected by violence, crime, and drugs, associated in many minds with the city’s racial frictions.”\textsuperscript{148} However, the reporter noted, “No one, however, will concede that race has anything to do with the separatist drive.”\textsuperscript{149} The reporter’s article reflected the widespread inability of white Staten Islanders to recognize the racial undertones of the movement. Such post-election analysis reinforced Dinkins’s analysis of the movement’s essential nature.

Other media outlets concluded that race was a factor in the secession movement, though it derived from many sources. For example, \textit{The Village Voice}, a liberal weekly magazine, persuasively described how racial fears may have played some part in fueling the movement, but it was also driven by “multiple concerns and multiple identities,” including a feeling that decision makers in the other boroughs did not care about the island.\textsuperscript{150} \textit{The Village Voice} described how the non-racial demands of the Staten Island secessionists were outlined daily in the pages of the \textit{Staten Island Advance}, but few in the other boroughs took the time to acknowledge these demands.\textsuperscript{151} According to the newspaper, Giuliani won in 1993 because he demonstrated that he cared about the island.

\textsuperscript{146} David Usborne, “Staten Island Seeks Home Rule: If the Fifth Borough Secedes from New York City, the Republican Victory of Last Week May Well Be the Last,” \textit{The Independent} (London), November 7, 1993, 13.

\textsuperscript{147} Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13.

\textsuperscript{148} Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13

\textsuperscript{149} Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13.


\textsuperscript{151} Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13.
His political survival greatly depended upon keeping the island part of the city.\footnote{Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13.} The article ended with a warning. Unless the legitimate demands of the people of the outer boroughs were met, Staten Island would not be the last borough to leave, dividing New York City into multiple new cities divided by race and class.\footnote{Usborne, “Staten Island,” 13.}

Despite a brief flirtation with a run in 1997 to challenge Giuliani, Dinkins ended his political career on election night in November 1993.\footnote{Frank Lombardi, and Paul Schwartzman, “Rudy to Dave: Let’s Rumble Seems Like Old Times as Opponents Spar in Replay of ’93 Bout,” \textit{Daily News}, January 31, 1997, 5.} In a post-election interview, Dinkins insisted that Staten Island would never separate from the rest of the city, as the vote was an unconstitutional exercise in futility.\footnote{Reginald Patrick, “The Mayor Glances Back and Looks Ahead and for Secession One Parting Shot,” \textit{Staten Island Advance}, December 29, 1993, A1.} Dinkins’s prediction proved accurate. Despite the 1993 referendum, litigation and legislative maneuvering over Staten Island’s future lingered for several years in the courts and in the halls of Albany. Staten Island never seceded. Ultimately, the New York courts opted not to intervene in the matter, deciding that the legality and prudence were questions best resolved by the political process. While upstate and Long Island Republicans continued to support Staten Island secession as late as 1995, the quest to actualize Staten Island’s secession ended without much fanfare when New York Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver used his power to block a vote on the question of secession.\footnote{“No Time for Recriminations,” \textit{Staten Island Advance}, January 24, 1995.}
The legal maneuvering over secession lasted until 1995. However, popular support for the movement collapsed when many prior supporters of secession concluded that New York City had a mayor in office who was willing to address the island’s concerns. Secessionists, including leading Republican politicians like Marchi, cheered Giuliani’s focus on the island. While Giuliani’s embrace of the secessionist demands, including his agreement to work to close the Fresh Kills landfill and his promise to establish free ferry service to the island, may have been politically advantageous and in his self-interest, Giuliani’s decision to prioritize and then meet Staten Island’s demands changed the political landscape. Also, three-term Governor Cuomo’s surprising defeat by Republican George Pataki, along with the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994, provided Staten Islanders with additional allies in Albany and Washington. Some Staten Islanders hoped that these political developments would provide their Republicans with increased influence in the halls of Congress and in Albany.

In later years, Dinkins would argue that Staten Islanders never gave him a fair shot. Regardless of the motivations of the secessionists, Dinkins paid a heavy price. His inability to demonstrate that he genuinely cared about the concerns of Staten Islanders derived, in large part, from the larger inability of all New Yorkers to transcend the racialized and class-based politics that impacted almost every issue of the era. Furthermore, the nature of Dinkins’s political coalition constrained his ability to act.


Caving to the demands of the Staten Island secessionists would have come with a high cost, as it would have damaged support among liberals, African Americans, and Hispanics in the other boroughs. In the zero-sum worldview of the era, liberals, African Americans, and Hispanic voters viewed any concessions to the Staten Islanders as detrimental to their interests. Thus, Dinkins was faced with a no-win situation.

Staten Island secessionists also displayed a lack of introspection, as they failed to appreciate how the roots of their movement sprang from a Supreme Court case that identified them as the long-term beneficiaries of a system that had a discriminatory effect on New York City’s African American population. Moreover, the secessionists failed to recognize why their rhetoric was viewed by others (including Dinkins) as possessing racial overtones. Furthermore, Staten Island secessionists failed to acknowledge how the changing racial demographics of Brooklyn and Queens helped explain why many of them migrated to Staten Island in the first place. Issues of race were inseparable from both the secessionist movement and from Dinkins’s response.
Epilogue

On November 2, 1993, Rudy Giuliani defeated David Dinkins in a rematch election for Mayor of New York City. Despite his narrow loss, Dinkins remained a constant presence in local New York politics from 1994 to 2001, emerging as one of the most vocal critics of Giuliani’s policies.

After leaving office, Dinkins’s rhetoric increasingly focused on racial justice issues and the policing of African American neighborhoods in New York City, contrasting with his prior positions as mayor. As a private citizen in his post-mayoral years, he recognized that the policies on crime and punishment that he had once supported had a host of unintended consequences. These included violent confrontations between police and young African American men, unwarranted police stops of minority men, and the imposition of lengthy sentences against African American men for drug crimes.

In 1999, Dinkins joined forces with Congressman Charles Rangel, Reverend Al Sharpton, and other prominent African Americans to protest the shooting of an unarmed Guinean immigrant, Amadou Diallo, by police officers. During these protests, Dinkins, whose central message during the 1989 election campaign was a call to heal the city’s racial divisions, criticized the police’s heavy-handed tactics and labeled the shooting of Diallo and policing of New York City’s predominately African American neighborhoods as racist. This activism earned Dinkins an arrest.¹

Dinkins’s post-mayoral activism marked a departure from the conciliatory tone that characterized his time as mayor. During Dinkins’s time in office, his critics, especially in the African American community, labeled him as too cautious. Critics like Sharpton and Carson criticized Dinkins for his failure as mayor to directly confront white racism. However, in his post-mayoral years, Dinkins focused on exposing racial injustice and police abuses in predominately African American neighborhoods.

Out of office, he often bickered with Giuliani, and the new mayor promoted a narrative that Dinkins-era New York City had been at a racial boiling point. Admittedly, there were instances of localized racial unrest in New York City, including in Crown Heights and Washington Heights, but New York City never burned. This was not merely good fortune. Instead, Dinkins averted widespread violence in New York City due to his network of connections within the African American community. African American leaders like Sonny Carson, Sharpton, and Reverend Calvin Butts, as discussed in several chapters of this work, may have been frequent critics of Dinkins, but they also had access to Dinkins. Moreover, the presence of Dinkins, whose message focused on racial conciliation, played a role in easing racial tensions, a legacy often ignored.

Dinkins’s defeat marked an end to the Democratic monopoly on the office of New York City Mayor, which had started with Mayor John Lindsay’s second term in 1970. While a series of weak mayoral candidates contributed to the Democratic Party’s lack of electoral success in the post-Dinkins era, other factors explain the failure of the party to
reclaim control of City Hall in the post-Dinkins years, including the inability of Democratic mayoral candidates to rebuild Dinkins’s 1989 coalition.²

Infighting between the constituent parts of Dinkins’s coalition as well as the disengagement of a considerable number of African Americans from the political process provided first Giuliani and then Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire and lifelong Democrat who ran as a Republican in 2000 and then served as an Independent for a significant portion of his time in office, with a political opening. The ability of both Giuliani and Bloomberg to appeal to a sizable number of white liberals and Hispanics who joined forces with ethnic whites provided the two men with a governing coalition. Furthermore, New York City’s increasing real estate prices and the gentrification of previously African American majority neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan marginalized the power of African American voters as white liberals flocked to the city. Many of these white liberals associated New York City’s robust economy with the policies of Giuliani and Bloomberg, who advanced what political commentators have labeled as a neo-liberalist agenda that deemphasized social services and embraced free-market solutions to social problems.³

The Dinkins coalition had always been fragile. Dinkins struggled to meet the demands of ethnic whites, white liberals, Hispanics, ethnic whites, and LGBT and AIDS

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activists. He also had difficulty adjusting to criticism from within the African American community, whose power center moved from Harlem to Brooklyn. The fragility of Dinkins’s coalition mirrored the weaknesses of a national Democratic Party that embraced “politics of identity.”

Most important, Dinkins failed to win reelection due to his inability to incorporate a larger share of ethnic whites into his coalition. Even though a sizeable minority of outer-borough ethnic whites crossed racial lines and cast their votes for Dinkins in 1989 and 1993, a majority of working-class ethnic whites, who were registered Democrats, crossed party lines and voted for Republicans in 1989 and 1993. This shift represented a drastic and a generation-long realignment in New York City politics. The fact that a sizable portion of ethnic whites voted for Giuliani and Bloomberg in elections when the Democratic Party fielded white candidates, in part, undermined Dinkins’s contention that ethnic white voters abandoned the Democratic Party for racial reasons alone.

While race may not have been the sole reason for why many ethnic whites left the Democratic Party in New York City, race played a significant factor in explaining the movement of at least some portion of working-class whites away from the Democratic Party. In New York City, and at the national level, the Democratic Party became associated in the minds of ethnic whites with the fight for civil rights and the political

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4 The terms “identity politics” and “politics of identity” are controversial as critics of the Democratic Party have often used the term. However, in recent years, the term has been embraced by both critics of the Democratic Party and scholars to distinguish a change in priorities in the Democratic Party in the United States. For a discussion of the history of “identity politics” in the United States, see Khalilah L. Brown-Dean, *Identity Politics in the United States* (New York: Polity Press, 2019). For a critique of “identity politics” and for a discussion of how “identity politics” has led to conflict between people who share different “identities,” see Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
home for the vast majority of African Americans. This feeling drove a significant share of working-class whites away from the Democratic Party in New York City.\(^5\)

At the same time, ethnic working-class whites felt abandoned by the Democratic Party, which also drove this political realignment. In New York City, many working-class whites thought that elite white liberals looked down upon them. Thus, intra-racial class and cultural conflict are also significant factors when evaluating the political realignment of a large share of working class-ethnic whites in New York City.

The political coalition forged by Giuliani and Bloomberg, with ethnic whites at its core, allowed Republicans to govern in an overwhelmingly Democratic city for a generation. However, this coalition eventually collapsed due to the massive demographic changes that occurred in the post-Cold War era. This demographic transition featured the departure of ethnic whites from the outer boroughs and an influx of large numbers of young white liberals often labeled as “hipsters,” as well as immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Latin America into the city. These demographic changes decreased the electoral power of the ethnic white voters, providing an opportunity for Mayor Bill de Blasio in 2013 to unite white liberals, African Americans, young voters, Hispanics, and the children of post-Cold War era immigrants into a coalition modeled loosely on Dinkins’s coalition.\(^6\)

In 2017, de Blasio won reelection, marking the first time a Democrat won reelection since Koch did so in 1985. de Blasio’s reelection, and the subsequent election


of Eric Adams, an African American and former police officer and Brooklyn Borough president, provides further evidence of the decreasing power and influence of working-class ethnic whites, once the kingmakers in New York City politics. They remain a majority only in the borough of Staten Island. Politically marginalized in New York City politics in a demographically changed city, Staten Island residents unsurprisingly resuscitated talk of secession in 2019.7

Since President Barack Obama’s time in office from 2008 to 2016, Dinkins’s legacy has been reinterpreted. While there may be a temptation to draw linkages between the Dinkins era and contemporary politics, such comparisons are fraught with danger. For example, there is the tendency to compare Dinkins’s coalition with the coalition that led President Obama to electoral success in 2008. Dinkins and Obama both forged multiracial political alliances composed of a collection of people from diverse identities. Yet New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a unique political landscape that lacked the ideological and geographic divides that shaped national politics during the Obama years.

Similarly, the rise of Donald Trump, who grew up in the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, where his father-built thousands of single-family homes and owned and operated low-income housing buildings, sparked comparisons between New York City during the Dinkins era and national politics during the Trump era. According to this comparison, Trump’s rise in 2016 was comparable to Giuliani’s defeat of Dinkins

in 1993, as both Giuliani in 1993 and Trump in 2016 drew support from working-class white voters. But, again, these comparisons only go so far. During the Dinkins years, Trump courted the media and was a controversial figure who once called for New York State to bring back the death penalty in the aftermath of the Central Park rape case. However, Trump characterized himself as a liberal Democrat who supported both Dinkins and liberal causes. Dinkins presided over Trump’s second marriage and maintained a friendly relationship with the real estate developer. Moreover, Trump supported African American causes, including contributing to Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow-PUSH coalition and Sharpton’s National Action Network. Of course, when Dinkins lost the 1993 election, Trump curried favor with Giuliani. Only during the Giuliani years did Trump criticize the New York City of the Dinkins years. Such criticisms became extremely popular among New Yorkers who lauded the decreasing crime rates and the redevelopment of New York that characterized the Giuliani years. So, if historians are looking for the origins of Trumpism, one could find little evidence of the ideology by examining Trump’s actions during Dinkins’s years as mayor.

Moreover, one should be cautious about comparing the working-class ethnic whites of the Dinkins era with the white working-class supporters of Trump in 2016 and 2020. While racism and angst about loss of status may have motivated a portion of ethnic whites to switch parties and vote for Republicans in New York City in 1989 and 1993, significant differences exist between New York City’s ethnic whites of the Dinkins era and Trump supporters in 2016 and 2020. Specifically, New York City lacks the urban/rural divide and various elements of the conservative ideology that, in large part, explains the rise of Trump as a national candidate. New York City in the late 1980s and
early 1990s differed demographically and ideologically from the national political landscape of the United States of 2016 and 2020.

Instead of comparing New York City of the Dinkins era with contemporary politics, this study provided insight into a critical transition period in Democratic politics. It adds to the scholarship of a period that is ripe for historical research. Dinkins’s inability to govern effectively also provides insight into how the liberalism of the Great Society era was ill-prepared to deal with the issues that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, including activism by the LGBT community, changing views on crime and punishment, and the nationwide transition of working-class whites away from the Democratic Party. Dinkins, a committed Great Society Democrat who emerged from the party machine structure of 1960s and 1970s New York City, ultimately struggled not only to address the conflicting demands of his coalition, but also to make the transition like other Democratic politicians, such as President Bill Clinton, to embrace a collection of ideas that commentators have labeled as “New Democrat” or neo-liberal. Dinkins, a man of an earlier generation, was left behind as the Democratic Party reinvented itself on the national level.

While Dinkins’s political career ended in 1993, he deserves a more prominent role in the story of the black freedom movement. Dinkins’s electoral success in 1989 was

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10 For a discussion of President Clinton’s Presidency, see Patrick J. Maney, Bill Clinton: New Gilded Age President (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016).
a major achievement in a city where African Americans constituted no more than a quarter of the population. His ability to build a coalition that bridged racial lines is an accomplishment that deserves more recognition. His success helped pave the way for the electoral successes of President Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Dinkins also embraced LGBT rights and attempted to help people with AIDS when it was politically unpopular. While AIDS activists dismissed his actions as half-measures, his decisions to march in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, recognize same-sex civil unions, and increase funding for AIDS treatment and care were all politically risky decisions that alienated an unmeasurable portion of voters in New York City. Although many LGBT activists, then and now, dismiss Dinkins’s approach as mere symbolism rather than substance, Dinkins confronted harsh opposition from many corners within his coalition for few actions that he did take. Also, Dinkins confronted existing legal and budgetary limitations, a federal government that did not prioritize the rights of the LGBT and people with AIDS, and national political landscape hostile to the rights of the LGBT community.11

The November 2021 landslide election of Eric Adams, the second African American mayor in New York City’s history, against the colorful character of Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels and a media personality, may mask the intra-

11 Dinkins may have also feared the potential for backlash if he took more aggressive measures with regard to LGBT rights and people with AIDS as he monitored national news and then political landscape. In 1992, there was significant talk about creating laws that would prohibit states from recognizing gay and lesbians as a “protected class” under federal and state law and there was also discussion of outlawing same-sex marriage and legislatively barring same-sex couples from receiving state and federal benefits.
party division within the Democratic Party that once undermined Dinkins.¹² The Democratic Party in New York City in 2022 is, like it was in Dinkins-era New York City, a coalition of disparate parts. What is different now is that New York City is even more diverse. Once in office, Democratic politicians struggle with governance because maintaining a coalition of disparate interest groups poses unique challenges.

Like Dinkins, Adams was the victor in a highly contentious primary that exposed deep divisions within New York City’s Democratic Party. More than a dozen candidates representing various elements of the Democratic coalition contested the election. Adams won New York City’s complex ranking voting system by less than one percent point over Kathryn Garcia, who attempted to build a coalition of Hispanics and white liberals.¹³ To govern, Adams will have to reach out to Democrats that voted for his opponents who represented different elements of the Democratic Party in New York City.

While more than twenty-eight years separate the Dinkins era from the Adams election, history indicates that Adams will struggle to hold his coalition together, complicating his ability to govern. At the same time, the solidification of Democratic control over New York City politics exemplified by two terms of de Blasio and the

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election of Adams may drive more resentment over the weakening electoral power of working-class ethnic whites, such as those in Staten Island. Moreover, an increase in crime and heightened racial tensions, two issues that were dominant themes during the Dinkins era, have emerged again as central issues in the 2021 election. If history is a guide, these issues will likely dominate the media’s coverage of Adams’s first years in office, drawing a potentially unfair comparison with the city’s only other African American mayor.

Adams, like Dinkins, has inherited a city that faces a collection of crises, none of which is his making. While HIV has become manageable with anti-viral medications, Adams faces the aftermath of another pandemic. COVID-19 has led to an exodus of thousands of affluent New Yorkers, damaged New York City’s tourist and service industries, and resulted in a deep local recession. New York City also must deal with long-standing income inequality among its residents and the threats posed by climate change, while adjusting to the economic, social, and political changes of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These challenges will present Adams with an arduous job. Hopefully, the media, and the majority of New Yorkers, will be able to move beyond the racialized lens that shaped perceptions of Dinkins’s performance and time in office. Only then will Adams be able to be judged fairly on the merits of his performance rather than on the prejudices and misperceptions that characterized the tenure of David Dinkins.
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