

Black Candidates Lead in New York City, Black Socialist Wins Mayor in Buffalo

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A year ago, 15 million people nationally participated in the Black Lives Matter protests against police racism and violence. Out of that movement came the demand to “defund the police,” variously interpreted from abolish police forces to redistribute police funds to other agencies. At the same time, last year American cities saw a 33% rise in homicides and increase as well in other violent crimes as well in the country’s 66 largest police jurisdictions. Both BLM and the rise in violent crime made policing the central issue of the New York City mayoral race, even though New York City has lost more jobs absolutely and proportionally than any other city in the country: 500,000 jobs, an almost 12 percent decline.

In New York City, where thirteen candidates ran for mayor, the two top vote-getters were both Black: the former police captain and Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams and the progressive attorney, legal counsel to Mayor Bill de Blasio, and television news commentator Maya Wiley. Adams won 31.7%, while Wiley got 23.3%. Adams and Wiley won every borough except wealthier, whiter Manhattan. Yet because for the first time New York is using ranked-choice voting the final results may not be available for weeks and it is possible that another candidate with more second, third, fourth, or fifth place votes could end up winning. If that happens, the other most likely possible winner is the moderate Kathryn Garcia, a white woman, who won 19.5%.

Still, it is clear that most New Yorkers voted for a Black mayor as their first choice. New York City has only had one other Black mayor, David Dinkins (1990-93) and it has never had a woman mayor. While these are only primary elections, in New York City 70% of registered voters are Democrats and the winner of the Democratic primary is almost sure to win the election.

Most of the New York mayoral candidates, including both leading Black candidates, avoided using the term “defund the police.” Adams appealed to Black homeowners, promising to improve police protection by getting rid of illegal guns, while Wiley, who has been very critical of the police, says

she will redistribute funds from the police department to other agencies, such as mental health. Surprisingly in the Democratic Party primary, there more debate about policing than there was about the city's economic crisis. While all of the candidates talked about reviving the economy and helping workers, those issues were second to policing.

The big surprise of the New York State election, was the victory of India B. Walton, a Black woman and a self-described socialist in the Democratic mayoral primary in Buffalo, New York, a poor city of 250,000 people, 37% Black. She would be the first socialist mayor of an American City in sixty years. Walton, who is 38 and a registered nurse, had a hard life. She had her first child at age 14 and premature twins at 19, an experience that led her to want to study nursing. She became a community activist, and though she had never run for public office, she defeated four-term incumbent Mayor Byron Brown, a former head of the state Democratic Party and an ally of Governor Andrew Cuomo, by 52 to 45%.

Walton first appealed to progressive white voters and won the backing of the progressive Working Families Party and of the Democratic Socialists of America. Then she took her case to the more conservative Black community and its churches and won their support. She did not talk about defunding the police, but about reallocating police funds for mental health, jobs, education, and housing. Brown, believing he would win, would not debate. Walton won in part because her well organized campaign had an advantage in the low voter turnout primary election—just 20 percent—much like Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's election. In any case, New York State's second biggest city is now likely to elect a socialist mayor in November.