

## “We Should Get Out Because New York Is Shot!” The Staten Island Secession Movement in New York City (1990 to 1993)

The title of this article comes from a quote from an anonymous Staten Island resident from an [August 9, 1993](#) issue of *The New York Times* and summed up a common sentiment felt by many residents of the New York City borough of Staten Island in the summer of 1993. The Staten Island secession crisis of the early 1990s and the response to that crisis by David Dinkins, New York City’s first and to date only African American mayor, are now forgotten chapters in New York City’s history. However, an exploration of the Staten Island secession movement and Dinkins’ response to the demands of the movement provides insight into modern conservatism in the United States, the politics of working class-whites in New York City, the history of the Democratic Party, as well as the problems of governance and coalition-building in an era of identity politics. Furthermore, an exploration of the Staten Island secession movement further sheds light on the contemporary politics of the United States.

### **Racism, Preexisting Grievances, or a Combination of Both?**

After several years of agitation, the voters of Staten Island in a two to one margin on November 2, 1993, cast their ballots in a non-binding referendum to secede from New York City. On that same election day, Dinkins lost his re-election bid by a narrow margin. Commentators in New York quickly linked the two votes, arguing that the high turnout of voters in Staten Island, a borough of New York City that was at the time the only borough in New York City with a white majority, played a significant role in the electoral defeat of Dinkins.

In his 2013 autobiography entitled, [\*A Mayor’s Life: Governing New York’s Gorgeous Mosaic\*](#), Dinkins, in trying to explain his defeat in 1993 in his rematch with Rudolf Giuliani,

pointed to Staten Island and its predominately white electoral. According to Dinkins, a sizeable percentage of whites in the outer boroughs including in Staten Island never accepted the election of the first African American mayor in 1989, and the Staten Island secession movement of the 1990s was, in large part, motivated by overt and latent racism.

No serious commentator can discount the fact that overt and latent racism played some role in why an unmeasurable percentage of ethnic working-class whites in the outer boroughs opposed Dinkins.<sup>i</sup> However, racism alone does not fully explain the Staten Island secession movement. Despite Dinkins' characterization of a polarized electoral divided by race, thousands of ethnic white New Yorkers crossed the color line and cast their vote for Dinkins. While a majority of Staten Island residents voted for secession and against Dinkins in 1993, a sizeable minority of ethnic whites in all of the outer boroughs including on Staten Island voted for Dinkins in both the 1989 and 1993 elections. Dinkins received around 30 to 40 percent of the white ethnic vote in the other boroughs including on Staten Island, and this percentage of support roughly corresponded to his support among all whites throughout the city.

Given the electoral statistics in 1989 and 1993, Dinkins' explanation for the origins of the Staten Island secession movement as a predominately racial backlash by ethnic whites may have overstated the role of race and racism in the secessionist movement. Also, Dinkins' explanation ignored how the secession campaign was sparked by a Supreme Court decision that ignited long-standing grievances of Staten Island residents. Moreover, Dinkins downplayed how the nature of his political coalition, as well as his actions and positions, were often cited by Staten Island secessionists as reasons justifying independence.

## **The Long-Standing Grievances of a Unique Island**

Daniel C. Kramer and Richard M. Flanagan in [\*Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City\*](#) vividly described how the Staten Island secession movement traced its roots to the distinctive history of the island and its unique political culture that 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 one of the nation's largest landfills in Staten Island at Fresh Kills, the call for better social services, lower taxes, and more direct political control over the island.

## **The United States Supreme Court Sparks the Secession Movement**

The Staten Island secession movement sprang directly from a United States Supreme Court decision that overlapped with Dinkins' 1989 election. The United States Supreme Court in [\*Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris\*](#), 489 U.S. 688 (1989) 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. According to the Supreme Court, 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 (the borough with the smallest population of the five boroughs) with too political power while diluting the power of boroughs like Brooklyn and the Bronx that had much larger populations. The Supreme Court's in March 1989 decision, months before the general election of 1989, ignited fears that Staten Island would lose its political power and voice in city politics.

Fears of Staten Island's possible dilution of political power in city government became actualized when voters of New York City in a citywide 1989 referendum overwhelming approved a plan that gave New York City Council (Staten Island only has three votes in a body with over fifty-seats), the powers previously possessed by the defunct Board of Estimates. Having lost a significant voice in city government with the limitation of the Board of Estimates, Staten Islanders began to view independence from the city as the only way to exercise some degree of local control.

### **Dinkins' Coalition Excluded Ethnic Whites**

Dinkins ignored how the nature of his political coalition and how his policies alienated a large segment of the voting population of Staten Island. Dinkins modeled his political coalition on Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition as he sought to unify the city's African American, Hispanics, gay and lesbian community, liberal whites, and labor union members. While Dinkins assembled a broad-based coalition, Dinkins' electoral alliance omitted the city's ethnic and working-class whites for at least two reasons.

First, Dinkins came to power by defeating long-serving mayor and fellow Democrat Edward Koch in a hotly contested and bitter primary election. Staten Island voters, a majority of whom were registered Democrats but who were gradually trending toward the Republican Party in Presidential elections since 1980 remained reliable Democratic voters in city elections during the Koch years, played an essential role in then-mayor Edward Koch's electoral coalition as Jonathan Soffer in [\*Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York\*](#) noted. Second, Dinkins characterized his electoral coalition as challenging New York City's power structure that Dinkins argued that largely benefited ethnic whites at the expense of minorities.

Dinkins' failure to reconcile with certain core elements of Koch's electoral coalition after the heated 1989 primary including Staten Island voters, who were predominately Italian and Irish Americans working-class and middle-class voters, provided an electoral opening that Republican Rudolph Giuliani candidate would fill in the 1989 and 1993 elections. Having been left out of the Dinkins coalition, ethnic whites on Staten Island also believed that their grievances would fall on deaf ears, and 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 Dinkins not only to balance the interests of each part of his coalition but also required the mobilization of his coalition against a common enemy. In the 1989 election, Dinkins emphasized how he had the power to deal with the racial divisions that plagued the Koch administration. However, by 1993, many Staten Island residents viewed Dinkins as not only dismissive of their concerns but hostile to their interests. Rightfully or wrongfully, Staten Islanders viewed themselves as the "enemy" of Dinkins' 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.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, while Dinkins tended to lump all ethnic whites in the outer boroughs as being motivated by racism, the polling suggests that Dinkins faced more intense opposition on Staten Island for reasons other than race.

### **Dinkins Gives Staten Island the Cold Shoulder, Staten Island Repays the Favor with Threats of Secession**

The intense opposition of ethnic whites on Staten Island may have derived from the fact that many Staten Islanders viewed Dinkins' policies as hostile to the island's particular interests. During his first years in office, Dinkins announced that he had no plans to satisfy any of the central demands of the secessionists. Specifically, Dinkins announced that 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' coalition located in other parts of the city at the expense of the island.

Moreover, Staten Island secessionists pointed to Dinkins own words to justify their anger. While he described Staten Island as an essential part of the city and that he cared about the island, Dinkins repeatedly in speeches (including several times during his weeklong visit to the island) stated that the island received far more services from the city than it contributed in tax revenue. Thus, rather than promising to meet the demands of the Staten Island secessionists, Staten Islanders viewed Dinkins' 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. Staten Island secessionists who found a home in the editorial pages of *The Staten Island Advance*, the borough's local daily paper, repeatedly 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.<sup>iii</sup> It was Dinkins' failure to understand the true nature of the secession movement and its demands as well as his failure, inability or unwillingness to meet those demands given his own coalition's demands that, in large part, forced a majority Staten Islanders into the secessionist camp.

## **Secession Talk Dies Quickly When A Mayor Addresses the Movement's Demands**

On election day in 1993, the majority of Staten Islanders cast their votes against Dinkins and in favor of secession. Despite the results of the referendum, Staten Island never seceded from New York City. Secessionists not only faced a collection of legal barriers that prevented them from achieving their goals, but the movement quickly evaporated with the election of Rudy Giuliani, the Republican candidate who defeated Dinkins in the 1993 election. Unlike Dinkins, Giuliani promised to meet and did eventually meet many of the secession movement's long list of political demands including providing free ferry service to the island and committing to closing the Fresh Kills landfill.

The firm shift of Staten Islander voters from the Democratic party to the Republican Party in mayoral elections after the 1993 election played a significant role in electing a [generation of Republican mayors](#) in an overwhelmingly Democratic city. The movement of working and ethnic whites from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party that occurred in New York City in the 1990s overlapped with similar trends that happened across the United States.

The Staten Island secession movement quickly collapsed when the residents of the island concluded that New York City had a Mayor in office who was willing to address the island's concerns. Unfortunately, Dinkins never provided the majority of Staten Islanders with the feeling that he genuinely cared about their interests, and he paid the political price for his real or perceived lack of concern for the island and its people.

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<sup>i</sup> The term “ethnic whites” refers to the city’s Irish and Italian Americans and excludes Jewish voters.

<sup>ii</sup> Polling Statistics derived from internal polling conducted by the Dinkins campaign in 1993 conducted by Michael X. Delli Carpini entitled, “Racial Issues in 1993 Campaign Poll.” Box 67, Folder 7. David Dinkins Papers. Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, New York, 10027.

<sup>iii</sup> Issues of *The Staten Island Advance* from 1990 to 1993 are available to researchers at Staten Island Museum.