# A Tale of Two Cities: The 1999 Philadelphia Mayoral Election

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Race was the defining issue of the 1999 Philadelphia mayoral election. In an overwhelmingly Democratic city, the Democratic candidate, an African-American with two decades of experience in local government, narrowly defeated the white Republican candidate with little experience in Philadelphia government. Examining the results of the primary and general elections, the author finds that the vote was sharply divided along racial lines, even though the candidates in the general election refrained from racial appeals and ran issue-oriented campaigns. In big city politics, race thus still matters.

The Philadelphia mayoral election of 1999 represented a crossroads for the "City of Brotherly Love." For eight years, Philadelphia had been led by Edward Rendell, who had been elected Mayor of a city on the verge of financial collapse. During his tenure, Rendell stabilized the city's finances, encouraged the rebuilding of Philadelphia's "Center City" (Philadelphia's downtown), and convinced the Republicans to hold their 2000 National Convention in the new "First Union Center." Despite these successes, Philadelphia in many ways was still a city in decline. The city's population had continued to fall and the new prosperity of Center City stood in stark contrast to the city's poor neighborhoods, where jobs continued to disappear, the public education system was in crisis, and violent death was still the norm.<sup>2</sup> The continued existence of these two Philadelphias, and Rendell's inability to bring new prosperity to them was chronicled by H.G. Bissinger (1997).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most telling illustration of Rendell's failure was that a major issue during the 1999 campaign was the large number of abandoned cars on streets in the city's neighborhoods.4

Philadelphia would not only be electing a new mayor in 1999, but there was also a strong possibility that the city would again elect an African-American mayor. W. Wilson Goode (1984-1992) had preceded Rendell. Goode's mayoralty had begun with high hopes, as he had come to office after defeating the controversial Frank Rizzo. Rizzo, who described himself as the "toughest cop in America," parlayed his law and order image into two terms as mayor (1972-1980). Supported by white ethnics, Rizzo's tactics had been denounced by civil rights advocates who accused him of polarizing the city along racial lines. Many hoped that the election of Goode, a well-regarded bureaucrat, would restore the coalition of white liberals, blacks, and white elements of the Democratic Party

that had ended six decades of Republican domination of the city with the election in 1951 of Joseph P. Clark.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Goode's mayoralty never recovered from his ill-fated decision to bomb the headquarters of an allegedly radical group known as MOVE. This action destroyed not just MOVE's building but also 61 neighboring homes in West Philadelphia.<sup>7</sup> The later years of Goode's administration were marked by the fiscal crisis inherited by Rendell.

While some cities (notably Atlanta, Detroit, Newark, and, Washington, D.C.) had elected more than one African-American chief executive, Philadelphia was one of a number of cities (Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles among them) where whites had replaced African-American mayors. The question remained as to whether the Philadelphia electorate would be as racially polarized in 1999 as it had been at the time of Goode's first election.

Did race matter to the Philadelphia electorate in 1999? To answer this question, the political landscape, the candidates, the primary election, and the general election will be reviewed. Particular attention will be paid to the voting behavior of Philadelphians in the general election.

### Philadelphia's Political Landscape in 1999

Philadelphia is one of the nation's most heavily Democratic cities. Of the 980,768 voters registered in 1999, 75% were Democrats and just 19% were Republicans.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, Democrats dominated Philadelphia. Bill Lloyd, the party's unsuccessful U.S. Senate candidate, defeated incumbent Republican Senator Arlen Specter by more than 60,000 votes in the city while losing statewide by almost 800,000 votes. Gubernatorial candidate Ivan Itkin did even better, winning the city by more than 75,000 votes. Itkin lost the election to incumbent Republican Governor Tom Ridge by more than 750,000 votes. Democrats swept the three state senate seats and won 22 of the 27 state representative contests (Committee of Seventy 1998). Bill Clinton defeated George Bush in Philadelphia by 301,000 votes in 1992, and he beat Bob Dole by 327,000 votes in 1996 (Infield 1999). Finally, Philadelphia had not elected a Republican mayor since 1947. All things being equal, it would be a safe bet that Philadelphians would elect a Democrat to succeed Ed Rendell in 1999.

### The Candidates

Six Democrats sought to become Mayor of Philadelphia: John F. Street, Marty Weinberg, Happy Fernandez, Dwight Evans, Queena R. Bass, and John White, Jr. Samuel P. Katz, a one-time Democrat (he had started in politics in 1976 as campaign Manager to Philadelphia Congressman William H. Gray 3<sup>rd</sup>) and former member of the Board of Education, was the sole Republican.<sup>9</sup>

Three of the six Democrats were African-Americans: Street, the Council President during Rendell's first seven years in office (he had resigned the Council Presidency at the end of 1998 in order to campaign for mayor); White, the former head of the Commonwealth Department of Welfare and the Philadelphia Housing Authority (during Rendell's first term); and Evans, a state legislator who had received 22% of the vote in the 1994 Democratic Gubernatorial primary.<sup>10</sup> The presence of three major African-American candidates made victory by a well-financed white candidate, Weinberg (the former City Solicitor and Chairman of the city's Democratic Committee during the Rizzo era), a possibility. In January 1998, a summit of 60 black leaders convened to try to select an African-American candidate (Infield and Cusick 1999). As late as two and a half weeks before the primary, leading members of Philadelphia's black clergy, the NAACP, and other groups were holding meetings with representatives of the candidates in an effort to convince at least one African-American candidate to leave the race. The Reverend Vernal Simms, pastor of North Philadelphia's Morris Brown A.M.E. Church, said, "I think the reality in Philadelphia is we cannot win with three black candidates" (Infield and Cusick 1999). Simms' analysis seemed credible in a primary where it was estimated that African-American voters would account for between 49 and 54 percent of the turnout (Davies 1999).11 The Philadelphia Tribune, the city's leading African-American newspaper, published an editorial urging Dwight Evans to withdraw (Smith 1999).

The other serious candidate was Happy Fernandez, a Temple University professor and former city council member who was founder and leader of the Parents Union for Public Schools and the Children's Coalition of Greater Philadelphia during the 1970s. She was the first woman to launch a major campaign for the office.

Despite the concerns of the city's African-American leadership, the three black candidates remained in the contest and one of them, John Street, prevailed.

About 297,000 of the city's Democrats voted in the primary, a turnout of about 40%. Eight years earlier, when Rendell was nominated, turnout in the Democratic primary was 45.5% (Goldwyn 1999).

Weinberg, the white candidate (who had raised \$5.3 million, more than any of his opponents) aired a number of negative radio and television advertisements that targeted Street, the acknowledged frontrunner in the Democratic field (he had been endorsed by Rendell). One series of ads focused on Street's past financial problems. These problems included having filed twice for bankruptcy protection and having tax liens filed against him on four separate occasions by the Internal Revenue Service. Another ad featured video of Street shoving a television reporter onto his back, an incident that had taken place in Philadelphia's City Hall in

Table 1
1999 Philadelphia Democratic Mayoral Primary

Candidates	Votes	Percent*
John F. Street	107,285	36.0
Marty Weinberg	91,457	31.0
John White, Jr.	64,657	22.0
Happy Fernandez	18,200	6.0
Dwight Evans	13,711	5.0
Queena R. Bass	1,802	1.0

\*Does not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: City Commissioners, Ninety-Fourth Annual Report of the City Commissioners to the People of Philadelphia, 1999 (Phila-

delphia: City of Philadelphia, 2000), p. 25.

1981. The tone of the ads contributed to the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* assessment of Weinberg:

He's a nice man with many friends, but he doesn't belong on this stage. His candidacy is a concoction of big money, veiled power brokers, glitzy sound bites and divisive tactics. That it has worked well enough to place him second in many polls is troubling (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1999).

### As Infield and Burton (1999) concluded:

Weinberg never shook off the rap of being the "white guy candidate," who got into the race after former City Controller Thomas Leonard decided not to run. In fact, Weinberg drew criticism early in the campaign for making more appearances in white areas than black areas. The label was reinforced when one of his backers, Richard Costello, president of the Fraternal Order of Police, made an intemperate remark about local NAACP President J. Whyatt Mondesire and another African-American leader, lawyer Charles Bowser.

Weinberg's direct mail also appeared to be divisive. One mailing urged voters to "protect your family" by opposing Street, who was accused of being "soft on crime." A second mailing was a letter signed by the late Frank Rizzo's brother, Joe. While the letter did not mention Street by name, it did state that when Weinberg worked for Frank Rizzo, he protected "people like us" (Bunch 1999a).

The primary turned out to be a "tale of two cities" with Weinberg doing well in the white neighborhoods of South Philadelphia, the "river wards" adjacent to the Schuykill River, Roxborough, and the Northeast. According to the Committee of Seventy, Street received 57% of the vote in the 23 wards that were overwhelmingly African-American. Weinberg received 2.4% of the vote in these wards. In the 21 predominantly white wards, Weinberg polled 72% of the vote, while Street received 8.8% (Committee of Seventy 1999a). The presence of a second white candidate, Fernandez, assured Weinberg's defeat. Her presence in the race siphoned enough votes from Weinberg to allow Street to win the primary despite the presence of two other major African-American candidates.

## The General Election Campaign

The general election became a contest between Katz, the white Republican, and Street, the African-American candidate. It should be emphasized that neither candidate ran a racially polarizing campaign. White, Street's principal African-American rival, endorsed and actively campaigned on Katz's behalf in the general election. White endorsed Katz even though he had been the target of television spots aired by the Republican during the primary that were critical of White's management skills. The ads questioned White's stewardship of the Housing Authority and the state Public Welfare Department. "When he tells you what he managed," the commercial said, "ask him how he managed" (Panaritis and Yant 1999). While White endorsed Katz, Weinberg backed Street.

Both candidates ran issue-oriented campaigns, and they differed sharply on school vouchers and the local wage tax. Katz proposed the introduction of school vouchers as one of several measures to improve the public school system. Street opposed vouchers, contending that Katz's support for them proved that he was a radical Republican, not the moderate that he claimed to be. Katz also called for a reduction in the Philadelphia wage tax, which Street and Mayor Rendell argued would hobble the city's ability to provide services. They also agreed on many issues. Each claimed to be the rightful heir to the popular Rendell. Both released plans to fight gun violence. Both agreed to retain John Timoney as police commissioner.

While Street's campaign message emphasized his party affiliation, the Katz campaign rarely mentioned the Republican Party, basing the campaign on his personal appeal to the voters rather than a party appeal. As State Representative George Kenney (a Republican) explained, "the national GOP agenda certainly doesn't play in the City...we're so outnumbered by Democrats that Sam needs a quiet election to win. Just run a local race and get out the vote" (Baer 1999).

Their campaign strategies were similar to those pursued in New York City ten years earlier. In 1989, Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins (the African-American who had defeated incumbent Mayor Edward I. Koch in the Democratic primary) emphasized his party, whereas Rudolph Giuliani downplayed the fact that he was a Republican (McNickle 1993, 293-314). Yet, like Philadelphia a decade later, race had an impact on this contest as well (Carsey 1995).

While the candidates did not overtly play the "race card," it appears that race was the unspoken issue of the campaign. A Keystone Poll, conducted October 22-24, 1999 concluded that "candidate support is best predicted by race, even when party affiliation is taken into account" (Center for Opinion Research 1999).

Table 2					
1999 Philadelphia Mayoral Election					
Candidates	Party	Votes	Percent		
John F. Street	Democrat	222,823	50.7		
Samuel Katz	Republican	213,376	48.6		
John P. McDermott	Constitutional	2,964	0.7		
Source: City Commissioners, <i>Ninety-Fourth Annual Report of the City Commissioners to the People of Philadelphia</i> , 1999 (Philadelphia: City of Philadelphia, 2000), p. 6.					

#### The Outcome

While Street won, his narrow victory highlighted the city's racial divisions. Katz ran well in Northeast Philadelphia and South Philadelphia, carrying 28 of the 33 wards in Philadelphia where whites outnumbered African-Americans. In 27 of the 28 wards carried by Katz, there were more registered Democrats than Republicans. In some of the wards carried by Katz, the Democratic to Republican ratio was four-to-one. Street prevailed in all 33 wards where African-Americans outnumbered whites. The Keystone Poll predicted this outcome, observing, "the greatest problem for John Street is that nearly three in five white voters who are registered as Democrats say they will support Katz" (Center for Opinion Research 1999).

Katz was also helped by the higher turnout among white voters in the general election. According to the City Commissioners, turnout was 50.2% of the almost 345,000 registered white voters, while turnout was 47.2% of the 299,000 black voters registered in Philadelphia (City Commissioners of Philadelphia 2000, 9). Although white turnout was higher than black turnout, it was still not large enough to provide Katz a margin of victory. As Larry Ceisler, a Democratic political consultant, explained, "there wasn't enough turnout in the Northeast, and Street got enough of the Democratic vote" (Bunch 1999c).

Street swept Philadelphia's predominantly black neighborhoods, polling more than 90% of the vote in North and West Philadelphia. Overall, Street took about 94% of the black vote (Macklin 1999). Street's narrow victory was due to his ability to attract the votes of Latinos while holding some white Democrats who responded to partisan appeals made on Street's behalf. White neighborhoods with liberal reputations, such as Mount Airy and Chestnut Hull, provided Street with about 30% of their votes.

Philadelphia was one of three cities (Columbus, Ohio and Indianapolis, Indiana being the other two) targeted by the Democratic National Committee (DNC).<sup>15</sup> A number of well-known Democrats came to Philadelphia to campaign for Street, including President Bill Clinton.<sup>16</sup> More than 5,000 party and union workers staffed Street's get out the vote operation, and the DNC spent almost \$1 million on election day field operations.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Katz could not rely on such an organization, as Republican leaders conceded that there was little or no party presence in as many as 700 of the city's 1,700 election districts (Bunch 1999b).

According to the Committee of Seventy, Street won 15.5% of the vote in the city's 21 overwhelmingly white wards, "better than some expected" (Committee of Seventy 1999b). Even with White's endorsement Katz was unable to make any inroads into the African-American community. Katz failed to receive 10% of the vote in 19 of the 66 wards. In only one of 66 wards did Street not poll 10% of the vote.

#### Conclusion

The Philadelphia mayoral election was the most expensive municipal election (up to that time) in American history, as the candidates in the primary and general election raised and spent more than \$25 million (Bunch 1999c). It was a race where the major candidates in the general election ran issues-oriented campaigns. Yet the Philadelphia mayoral election of 1999 demonstrates that race still matters in American urban politics.

Generally, the first mayoral election in a city featuring a contest between an African-American and white candidate is racially divisive (McNickle 1993; Sonenshein 1993; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997). As Tom Bradley was able to demonstrate in Los Angeles, African-American mayors can attract greater proportions of white support in subse-

quent elections (Judd and Swanstrom 1998, 393-395). In Philadelphia, the question was whether a second African-American, after a period of time during which a white had served as mayor, would face a less racially polarized electorate than the first African-American mayor.

The Democratic primary, with a number of black and white candidates, was contested on the terrain of racial politics. African-American leaders attempted to present a "united front" so that a white candidate would not be able to capitalize on a fragmented black vote. Ed Rendell had been the beneficiary of such a split in 1991, and many in the African-American community were anxious to avoid a repeat in 1999. The three major African-American candidates refused to yield, however, making such an outcome likely.

While African-American leaders were trying to mobilize black voters behind one mayoral candidate, the leading white contender offered a message designed to appeal to Philadelphia's still substantial white electorate. Weinberg's well-tunded candidacy appealed to the same white ethnic voters who had supported his mentor, Frank Rizzo, two decades earlier.

It is interesting to note that two of the African-American candidates, Street and White, attempted (with limited success) to recreate the bi-racial coalition that had carried Wilson Goode into office in 1983. Not-withstanding their efforts, the primary results revealed a city divided in two by Broad Street, Philadelphia's major north-south thoroughfare. Weinberg carried the overwhelmingly white wards that lie east of Broad Street; Street won the black wards west of Broad Street. The general election yielded similar results. Despite the absence of explicit racial appeals by the candidates, the electorate was sharply divided by race. Even when race is not a prominent campaign issue, it often will be the decisive factor in voter choice.

Black voters may have been motivated to support Street because they thought the city's media was treating him unfairly (The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* both endorsed Katz). Temple University Professor Thad Mathis observed that:

People have been berated with this idea that they should stop thinking about race, but when there's an African American candidate who has impeccable qualifications, who has 19 years of experience, the major media in the city endorses a white guy....That just has a bad odor for a lot of people. And so even voters who didn't start with that impression started thinking about it. And that energized people who might not have been enthusiastic about Street (Macklin 1999).

The lesson of Philadelphia is that bi-racial coalitions are difficult to fashion in a racially polarized electorate. Even the best-intentioned

candidates and campaigns cannot escape the divisive force of race. While Street was the second African-American to seek the mayoralty, he faced an electoral environment similar to that which confronted Goode 16 years earlier. In Goode's case, the campaign had been explicitly racial, as he faced a white opponent who made race the paramount issue. In 1999, both Street and Katz refrained from explicitly racial appeals, yet the outcome mirrored Goode's first race. It is clear that, in cities like Philadelphia, race still matters.

### **Notes**

- 1. Among the other developments in Center City were the opening of the Pennsylvania Convention Center; a Marriott Hotel; the Avenue of the Arts, home to many of the City's performing arts and cultural institutions; and new upscale retailers, including Banana Republic, Disney, and Tiffany's.
- 2. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001, 37), Philadelphia's population declined by 4.3% between 1990 and 2000 to 1,517,550. In 1950, the population peaked at 2,071,605. Philadelphia's population continues to decline. The Census Bureau estimates that the population of Philadelphia on July 1, 2001 was 1,491,812 (Ginsberg and Dilanian 2002).
- 3. Buzz Bissinger, a former reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was given significant access to Mayor Rendell during his first term in office. A *Prayer for the City* (New York: Random House, 1997) was the product of that access. A critical view of Rendell's second term is offered by Fred Siegel and Kay S. Hymowitz, "Why Did Ed Rendell Fizzle Out?" *City Journal* 9 (Autumn 1999).
- 4. Both Democratic candidate John Street and his Republican opponent, Sam Katz, released plans for removing abandoned cars from the streets.
- 5. Prior to becoming Mayor, Rizzo was police commissioner from 1967 to 1971. For more on Rizzo, see Joseph R. Daughen and Peter Binzen, *The Cop Who Would Be King: Mayor Frank Rizzo* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977); Fred J. Hamilton, Rizzo (New York: Viking Press, 1973); and S.A. Paolantonio, *Frank Rizzo*: the last big man in big city America (Philadelphia: Camino Books, 1993).
- 6. The last Republican to be elected mayor of Philadelphia was Barney Samuel in 1947. For more on the bi-racial coalition that supported Goode, see Richard A. Keiser, "The Rise of a Biracial Coalition in Philadelphia," in Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H. Tabb, eds., Racial Politics in American Cities (New York: Longman, 1997).
- 7. For more on the bombing of the MOVE headquarters by the Philadelphia Police and Fire Departments, see Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, The Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, Philadelphia, 1986; John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor, Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia (New York: Norton, 1987); Hizkias Assefa, The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia: Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990); Charles W. Bowser, Let the Bunker Burn: the Final Battle With MOVE (Philadelphia: Camino Books, 1989); Michael Boyette with Randi Boyette, "Let it Burn!" The Philadelphia Tragedy (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Margot Harry, Attention, MOVE! This is America! (Chicago: Banner Press, 1987); and Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici,

Discourse and Destruction: the City of Philadelphia versus MOVE (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- 8. Except where noted , all voter registration data and election results cited herein are from The City Commissioners of Philadelphia, Ninety-Fourth Annual Report of the City Commissioners to the People of Philadelphia, City of Philadelphia, January 2000.
- 9. Another Republican, former State Boxing Commissioner George Bochetto, had aired television commercials during the summer of 1997 in an effort to establish himself as a serious contender for the Republican nomination to succeed Rendell. Bochetto dropped out of the race in October 1998, leaving the field open for Katz.
- 10. White became Executive Director of the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) at the time when Mayor Rendell installed himself as the PHA Chairman. This took place after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) ended its one-year takeover of the PHA. For more on the PHA, see Bissinger (1997, 244-249).
- 11. Whites were estimated to account for between 40% and 45% of the Democratic Party primary turnout; with the majority of the remainder Hispanic.
- 12. Declaring one's race is now optional on voter registration forms in Pennsylvania. Therefore, official registration data can no longer be regarded as entirely accurate with regard to breakdown of voters by race.
- 13. Although Weinberg endorsed Street, many of his major donors crossed over to Katz. One of the first was Jack Wolgin, a developer. Wolgin had donated \$70,000 to Weinberg. On June 1, 1999, Wolgin gave \$100,000 to the Katz campaign (Warner 1999). Many of Weinberg's voters did not join him in moving to Street. According to Pennsylvania's Keystone Poll, 83% of the respondents who had voted for Weinberg in the Democratic primary intended to vote for Katz in the general election. Street faced similar problems with the supporters of at least two other primary opponents. Fernandez' voters supported Katz over Street, 69% to 15%. White's supporters also indicated a preference (albeit less conclusive) for Katz, supporting him over Street, 37% to 24% (Center for Opinion Research 1999). Happy Fernandez also endorsed Katz. After the primary, she had become President of the Moore College of Art and Design, a women's college located in Philadelphia.
- 14. Rendell endorsed Street, donated more than \$100,000 to the Street campaign, and taped television commercials for Street. Katz, the ex-Democrat who helped Rendell develop his financial recovery plan for the City, cited the number of prominent Rendell supporters who were backing his candidacy. Katz's media consultant was Neil Oxman, who had been the architect of Rendell's 1991 and 1995 campaigns. His campaign director was another Democrat, Bob Barnett.
- 15. Exhibiting a new interest in electing Democratic mayors (probably the result of Republicans having been elected mayor in New York City and Los Angeles, the two largest, and usually reliable Democratic, American cities), the DNC created a National Democratic Mayors Campaign Committee. The DNC initially set aside \$250,000 for this initiative. The effort also paid off in Indianapolis, where a Democrat (Bart Peterson) was elected for the first time in over 30 years.
- 16. Other Democrats who came to Philadelphia to campaign with Street were DNC Chair Joe Andrews, Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy, and Detroit

Mayor Dennis Archer. In addition, many voters received pre-recorded phone messages from either President Clinton or First Lady Hillary Clinton.

17. The AFL-CIO Philadelphia Council, which had remained neutral in the primary, endorsed and actively campaigned for Street in the general election. The city's buildings trades unions declared Election Day a holiday, giving their members the opportunity to work and vote for Street.

18. There is also the counter-example of David Dinkins whose white support declined when he sought re-election in 1993. His loss of white support was accompanied by a decline in turnout among black voters, allowing Giuliani to defeat him in a re-match of their 1989 race. For more on the 1993 New York City mayoral election, see Lorraine C. Minnite, David K. Park, and Daniel M. Slotweiner, "White, Black and Latino Voter Turnout in the 1993 New York City Mayoral Election: A Comparison of Ecological Regression Techniques and Exit Poll Data," a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, September 4, 1998.

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