

Will the Democratic Base Turn Out in November?

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I lead a nonpartisan charity, fighting for the working poor of New York City. So I rarely comment directly on partisan politics. I know when to duck, and I need both parties for my work. But the political winds are reshaping the landscape across the country, and the outcome will have a significant impact on everything from unemployment insurance, welfare and unionization to health care for the poor and the near poor. The "Tea Party" movement has the real potential of not only sweeping away moderate Republicans, but also driving the Democratic Party in a direction which could leave the urban poor high and dry.

Plainly the Democratic Party, both nationally and locally, has got a serious problem. Many of the reforms it has instituted from health care reform, to providing economic stimulus for jobs, and direct cash support for the poor have made a real difference. But I think virtually everyone I've talked to in New York and Washington agrees that getting the message out to the electorate has been horrendous. Even people who will be the principal beneficiaries of expanded health coverage haven't been given a real understanding of what's at stake.

This failure to talk to the base is starting to pose real problems for the upcoming election in terms of possible low turnout and anger at the Democratic Party among the working poor of color in urban areas. A recent case in point was the surprise in the Democratic primary in Washington, D.C., where the incumbent Adrian Fenty was upset by Vincent Gray, chair of D.C.'s City Council. While the *New York Post* asserted that this was a direct product of Mr. Fenty's fight with the teachers union, it was the *Economist* which seemed to report on the real story ("[Out on His Ear](#)"), which was that Fenty lost because of unemployment rates in the African-American community that have never been seen before, as well as his failure to say what, if anything, he could do about it.

New York State could well be in for a similar dose of reality. Voters across the state have been appalled with the total dysfunction in Albany. It has led to Carl Paladino heading the Republican ticket that once was led by Jake Javits and Nelson Rockefeller, and to my former boss Ed Koch leading a powerful movement for reform aimed at ending dysfunctional government in Albany.

On the Democratic side, real worries are emerging as to whether traditional Democratic constituencies, particularly blacks and Latinos, will turn out in sufficient numbers to offset

an energized group of largely white voters who feel that the Tea Bag movement is the way to send a message that they're not happy with what's happening in the state. Republicans have some work to do as well before they can finally speak to the concerns of urban America, and in doing so may find another way to distance themselves from the Tea Baggers.

Andrew Cuomo, running for governor, his easy win only a few short weeks ago seemingly a foregone conclusion, is suddenly in a serious campaign and is having to explain what he's done and will do in the future for black and Latino voters. Those voters have a real beef. The latest national unemployment numbers for blacks is 16.3 percent, for Latinos 12.0 percent. In our recent poll of 1,400 poor and near poor New Yorkers, "[The Unheard Third](#)," 21 percent of both groups reported having lost their jobs in the last year and another one in four reported having their hours and wages reduced. The Democrats and Republicans will have to explain to the New York State electorate just what they intend to do about it, particularly in light of the budgetary mess in Albany, if they intend to get voters to the polls.