

New York City mayor-elect Bill de Blasio's plans for the city show that he is much more Clintonista than Sandinista

In November, Bill de Blasio won the New York Mayoral election and on January 1st, he will become the first Democrat to fill the position in nearly 20 years. **Richard Flanagan** takes a close look at de Blasio's vision for New York, praising his plans to improve police-community relations, implement universal pre-kindergarten for city schools and to settle municipal labor contracts. He also writes that, despite accusations to the contrary, de Blasio is much more of a liberal pragmatist than progressive ideologue.

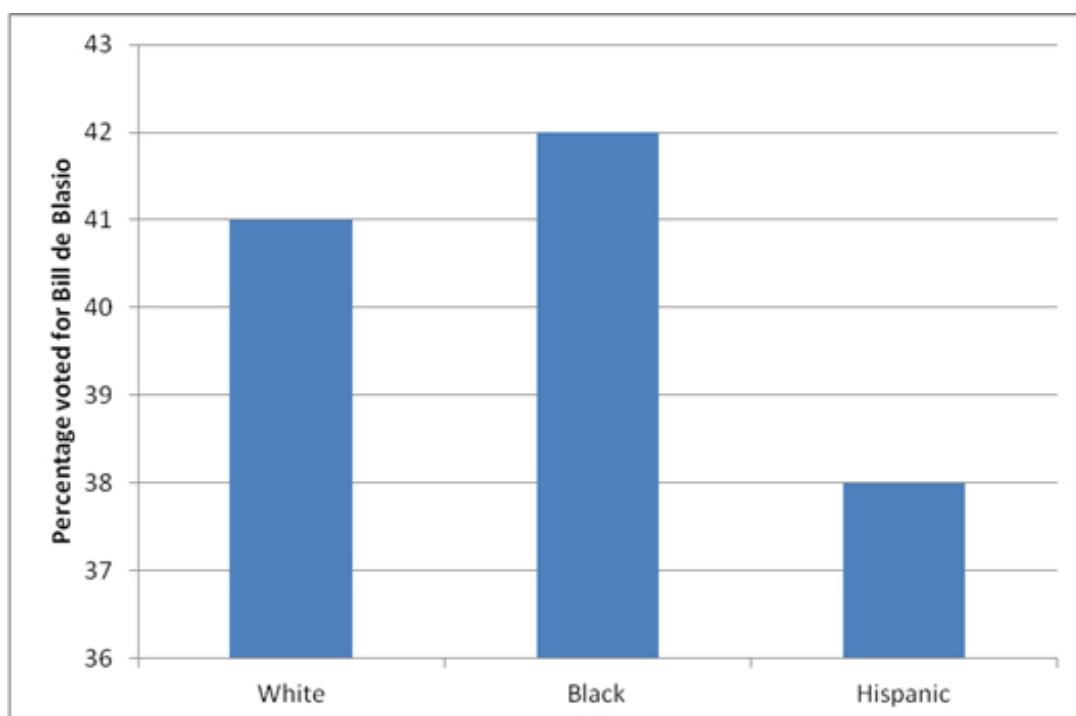


New York City's progressives are elated that Bill de Blasio, the first Democratic and liberal mayor since David Dinkins (1990-94) takes office on New Year's Day. He succeeds three term mayor Michael Bloomberg, the world's thirteenth richest mogul at \$31 Billion, according to *Forbes*.

De Blasio carries to office all of the anger of those that felt excluded and injured in Bloomberg's technocratic regime: racial minorities subjected to street pat downs by police, the poor and working class facing rising rents and falling economic fortunes; teachers and families on the receiving end of imperfect experiments in school reform. For many, Bloomberg's worse sin was to muscle the city council into overturning term limits, setting him up for a third term. The episode troubled many who resented the combination of political and financial power Bloomberg personified. Many New Yorkers suffer from Bloomberg fatigue, and in a crowded field of Democratic candidates, Public Advocate de Blasio sensed it first and exploited it best.

As shown in Figure 1 below, in September's Democratic mayoral primary 42 percent of African-American voters reported voting for de Blasio in a crowded field that including a leading Black politician, former city comptroller Bill Thompson. De Blasio attracted African-American votes because he was a more outspoken opponent of stop and frisk than Thompson, a centrist. Moreover, de Blasio's bi-racial family (his wife is an African-American) figured prominently in the campaign, providing an additional connection to Black voters. In recent mayoral elections in New York, voting along race lines has been quite polarized.

Figure 1 – Primary Votes for Bill de Blasio by racial group



Source: *New York Times* Exit Poll

Pop ingénue Lorde's summer hit *Royals* played when de Blasio took the stage on election night. *And we'll never be royals. /It don't run in our blood /That kind of luxe just ain't for us./We crave a different kind of buzz.* In the context of the election, the song was a community activist's jibe at the corporate smugness and exclusivity of the Bloomberg regime. In the campaign, de Blasio was often stiff and awkward in debate, although he always carried a sincerity and conviction that compensated for these deficiencies. But he was at his best, and his campaign came alive, when he relived the activism of his youth and spoke at rallies and demonstrations. Over the summer, many hospitals in Brooklyn were under threat of shutdown. De Blasio chanted and shouted with the minimum wage workers, nurses, technicians and community leaders in threat of losing their jobs and accessible health care. It was impossible to imagine Bloomberg engaged in such work, and from that fact springs de Blasio's confidence.

De Blasio's vision of a more inclusive city is expressed in a series of policy reforms of varying ambitions and realizability. The signature issues of his mayoralty will be improving police-community relations, funding and implementing universal pre-kindergarten for city schools, settling municipal labor contracts, and, most ambitiously, reversing economic inequality in his city. The first three are within his grasp; as to the fourth – closing the gap between the rich and poor — the reach of the policy exceeds the grasp of the office he holds.



Bill de Blasio Credit: Kevin Case (Creative Commons BY)

During the mayoral campaign, de Blasio was a harsh critic of Bloomberg's "stop and frisk" policing strategy. In recent years, police have stopped over 500,000 citizens annually, focusing their attention on young men of color even as nearly 90 percent of those stopped were innocent. Bloomberg stubbornly defended the practice even as crime rates fell. It was a brilliant stroke when de Blasio named [William Bratton](#) his commissioner of police. Bratton earned a reputation as a policing innovator as a commissioner under New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani (1994-2000). By picking a commissioner closely associated with conservatives, de Blasio is inoculated against charges of being soft on crime. Bratton has argued that stop and frisk is but one tool to use to fight crime, and the focus will be on building community trust. It is likely that stop and frisk will continue, but as a much more restrained policy that will not leave minority communities irate.

De Blasio pledged to provide universal pre-kindergarten for children in New York City public schools. The consensus view among policy experts is that early intervention in education is the best way to close the achievement gap between underprivileged students and the middle class, and President Obama floated it as a national goal in his State of the Union address in 2013. This seemingly dramatic proposal may be easier to achieve than it sounds. New York already offers part-time pre-K; de Blasio hopes to convert the part-time slots to full-time in addition to expanding seats in the program by 25 percent. His proposal only includes four year-olds, not three. He suggests paying for it with a tax increase on the city's top earners. Financing this \$500 million initiative will depend on cooperation from the state government, since most tax increases need to be approved by the State Legislature. But the pressure from the new mayor in support of his popular proposal will likely yield a tax package to pay for it, although perhaps less transparent and progressive than de Blasio might like. By closing the cognition and learning gap between rich and poor children in New York, universal pre-kindergarten is the most

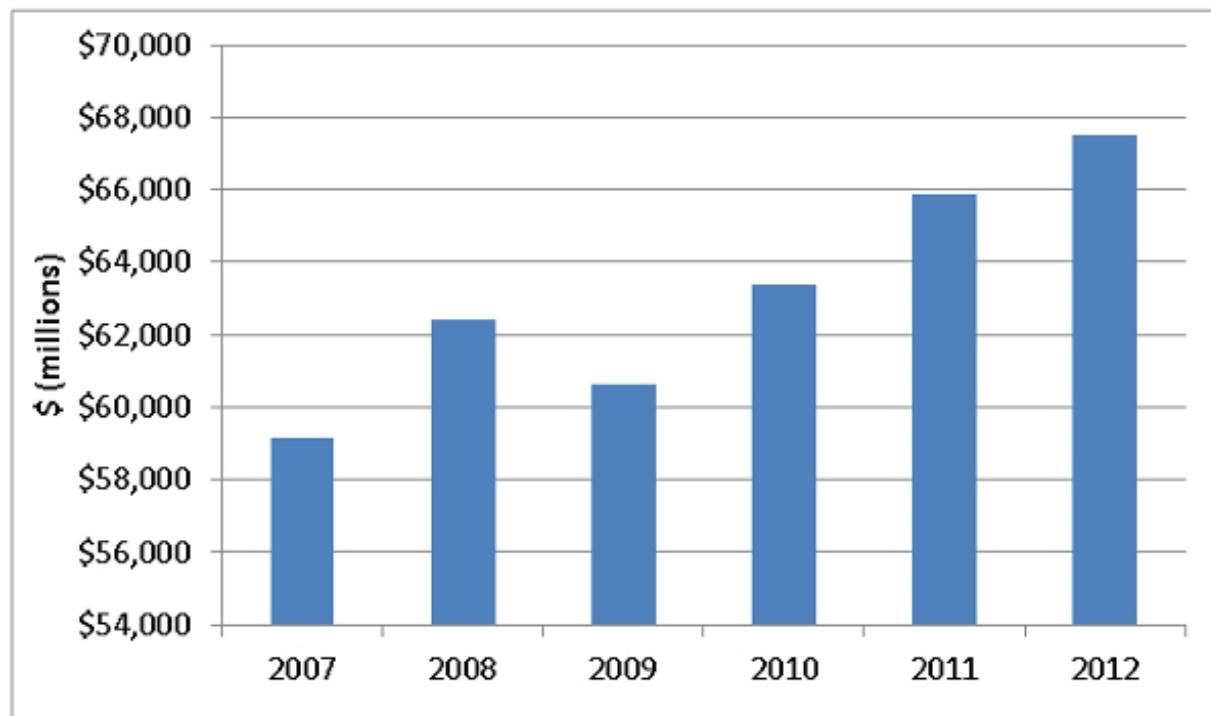
effective way for de Blasio to lessen inequality over the long haul.

De Blasio ran for mayor as a friend of municipal organized labor. With emotion and conviction, he said at a forum during the Democratic primary campaign in the working class enclave of Canarsie, Brooklyn, that city workers are “the people who take care of my family.” He promises to settle labor contracts that are often five years overdue within the year. Labor leaders want “retroactive” raises that cover the entire period of expired contracts; Bloomberg would only offer modest raises going forward. De Blasio expressed support for the idea of retroactive raises, but with the condition that the workforce make as yet unidentified “productivity increases” to pay for it.

Bloomberg’s relationship with his municipal workforce was initially quite civil, particularly with the teachers, for whom he gave generous raises in his early mayoralty with the hope the extra cash would earn him the trust he needed to make dramatic changes and improvements in the New York City school system. Nothing much came of it except bad blood between City Hall and the teachers. Over the years, Bloomberg rarely had a kind word for public workers. De Blasio has gotten mileage from a kinder, gentler approach toward unions, even though the hospital workers were the only notable, early supporters of his campaign. Right-center U.S. mayors have it easy – tough talk and policy toward municipal unions plays to the business base. Progressive mayors like de Blasio have a difficult balancing act. They need the support of the labor unions, but expensive labor contracts undermine expansion of the signature projects of the local welfare state. A generous labor deal will blow a hole in the budget. The last liberal mayor in New York, David Dinkins, tried hard to walk the line and had the grudging support of labor leaders who feared Rudy Giuliani, the conservative alternative. Liberal mayor John Lindsay (1965- 1973) clashed with his unions in defense of services for minorities and the poor.

As the first avowedly progressive mayor in over twenty years, de Blasio is under significant budgetary pressure in achieving these goals. Mayor Bloomberg’s initiatives, plus the structural expenses such as city worker pensions and intergovernmental mandates, have driven recent budget spending well over the rate of inflation. New programs will require new taxes. In New York City, city expenditures dipped by approximately \$2 billion in 2009 from the previous year in response to revenue declines from the recession. Since 2010, the city budget has increased on average 6 percent year over year, approximately three times the inflation rate.

Figure 2 – New York City Government Expenditures 2007-2012



Source: [New York City Independent Budget Office, Fiscal History, Revenue & Spending Since 1980, Revenue and Expenditure Summary](#)

Can de Blasio pull all of this off? There is reason to think so. In the general election, the Republican candidate, Joseph Lhota, tried to paint de Blasio as an out of touch left winger who would let criminals control the street and drag the city back to the “bad old days” of the 1970s. Lhota’s clumsy campaign made much of fact that as a college student in the 1980s, de Blasio made a trip to Nicaragua in support of the socialist Sandinista regime, the hot cause among left college activists at the time. The voters sensibly ignored this ancient business.

In fact, de Blasio is much more a Clintonista than a *Sandinista*. De Blasio worked at Bill Clinton’s Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1990s, and served as Hillary Clinton’s campaign director in her first run for the U.S. Senate from New York in 2000. De Blasio is a cleared-eyed political operator, more liberal pragmatist than progressive ideologue. He is already making peace with New York’s business and political establishment, all the while tilting policy to the left in New York on some signature issues where his wonkish heart resides. His early administrative appointments are familiar and comforting faces in New York – certainly too familiar to the city’s left – including the most important to date, Anthony Shoris as his first deputy mayor. Shoris is the ultimate insider, having served in budget posts for previous mayors, and as executive director of the massive Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

De Blasio can control stop and frisk policy directly through appointments to the police force and by mayoral decree; negotiations over labor contracts and taxes for universal pre-k depend on a measure of coordination with the state government that he is likely to obtain. As for the overarching goal of lessening inequality in the city, there is little to do other than improving and expanding education. Only Congress and the President control the levers of big ticket fiscal, trade and tax policy to move the needle on that one. It is a national problem.

However, de Blasio is a polished politician with a populist streak who is likely to continue to win over voters with his more modest, yet important, victories.

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