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For First Time, Minority Vote Was a Majority

By SAM ROBERTS

Much of the focus on the results of last month’s New York City elections was on Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s small victory margin, despite the more than $102 million he spent to secure a third term. But the elections also produced a seismic political shift that so far has gone largely unnoticed: Black, Hispanic and Asian residents made up a majority of voters in a citywide race for the first time.

That turnout is a milestone in a city where minority groups make up both a majority of the population and a majority of those eligible to vote. The transformation of the electorate also signals the growing political importance of the city’s diverse tapestry and the challenges that citywide candidates will face as they strive to stitch together successful voting blocs.

“Legal immigrants are exploding in population and are increasingly registering” once they become citizens “and are now voting,” said Bruce N. Gyory, a political consultant. “All the room for growth in the electorate is amongst Hispanic, Asian, biracial and black New Yorkers.”

The new benchmark has helped minority candidates win prominent offices in larger numbers. Since 2000, William C. Thompson Jr. has been elected the city’s first black comptroller, Helen M. Marshall has been elected the first black borough president of Queens, and John C. Liu, elected last month to succeed Mr. Thompson, has become the first Asian-American to win citywide office. “You’ll see even more diverse candidates in the future,” Mr. Thompson said in an interview last week.

In November’s election, 46 percent of the voters identified themselves as white, 23 percent as black, 21 percent as Hispanic and 7 percent as Asian, according to exit polls by Edison Media Research.

The white vote has “bounced around 50 percent as far back as 2001, but this is the first citywide exit poll showing the white proportion being under 50 percent,” said Joe Lenski, executive vice president of Edison, which is based in New Jersey.

According to exit polls in past elections, non-Hispanic whites made up 56 percent of the city’s electorate in 1989, 55 percent in 1993, 53 percent in 1997 and 52 percent in 2001, all mayoral election years. They might have dipped below 50 percent in 2005, but no independent exit polling was conducted that year.

In a separate indication of the voting shift, a Census Bureau survey found that 45.8 percent of New York City residents who said they voted in the 2008 presidential election were non-Hispanic whites, compared with 50.4 percent in 2004 and in 2000.

“I think people who are not non-Hispanic whites have been a bare majority of the vote for the last few years, but there is no totally reliable way to know,” said John H. Mollenkopf, director of the Center for
Urban Research at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, who analyzed the results of November’s election. “The exit poll is maybe the best, since it asks individual voters their race, which is not directly available any other way.”

Still, exit polls have shortcomings — racial and ethnic results are based on how people identify themselves, and the presence of a black candidate on the ballot (Barack Obama in 2008 and Mr. Thompson in last month’s mayoral election) may have attracted a greater turnout of black voters.

Mr. Mollenkopf found that compared with voter turnout in 2005, the turnout among most ethnic and racial groups in New York City declined in 2009. The biggest decreases were recorded in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods.

Still, Mr. Gyory said, “that Hispanics constituted 21 percent of the electorate with no Hispanic running citywide exploded conventional wisdom that Hispanics only vote with a Hispanic in a race for citywide office.”

As a share of the electorate, Asians showed the greatest increase since 2001, registering in large numbers and galvanized by Mr. Liu’s candidacy. Asians accounted for 7 percent of the voters this year, compared with 3 percent in 2001, exit polls showed.

“This polyglot electorate will demand the jigsaw-puzzle skills of coalition-building and diplomacy,” Mr. Gyory said. “Bloomberg will likely be seen historically as a transition figure who got elected with the old base — Jewish and white Catholic — intact, helped by his ability to win a sizable share of minority votes. But Thompson’s and Liu’s ability to begin reuniting a minority-led coalition around Democrats augurs that the future of New York City is where minority voters are an ever firmer, albeit diverse, majority.”