

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### BLACK CANDIDATES, BLACK MEDIA: MAKING COVERAGE COMPLEX—AND BETTER

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Hi, I'm Laura, welcome to the show. This week, our monthly "Meet the BIPOC Press", with Sara Lomax-Reese and Mitra Kalita co-founders of URL Media, they're our monthly partners for this segment that looks at how BIPOC media cover things and people differently. This time, how do black candidates running for office get covered in more complex and better ways when the reporters reporting on them share their background? Sara over to you.

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** Thanks Laura. Hi, I'm Sara Lomax-Reese, and I'm the president and CEO of WURD Radio, and co-founder of URL Media, a network of black and brown owned media organizations, and we are really happy to be a part of "The Laura Flanders Show" and doing our monthly URL Round Table. Today we're going to talk about the New York mayoral election. Eric Adams is currently the Brooklyn Borough president, he was declared the winner of the Democratic Primary in July. He's the most moderate of the large slate of candidates who ran, and he's also a former police officer who was beaten by cops at age 15, so he's not easily categorized. This historic election comes in the midst of a nationwide crisis around surging gun violence, efforts to limit voting access which disproportionately impacts black and brown communities, and there's a battle to maintain a balance of power in our nation which is increasingly polarized. So we're gonna talk about the New York results today, and the national implications, and how we cover this increasing racial polarization in the political landscape. Mitra why don't you get us started.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** Thanks Sara. Indeed this was such an important election, and for the first time URL Media actually had a shared reporter to cover this race, because so many of the issues that New Yorkers decided in the primary, are certainly resonating nationally as well. So, I'm gonna start with Felipe, who was the URL Media's reporter for the elections. Felipe I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about your approach to coverage of the race, as well as what surprised you.

**FELIPE DE LA HOZ:** What surprised me really is in my conversations with voters that I had on early voting days and I had on election day itself, the new rank-choice voting system really seemed to be something that people grasp intuitively, it's something that hasn't really been much of a part of American elections, was the biggest municipality by far to have instituted rank-choice voting system, and I think people kind of understood innately why it helped them express their preferences a little bit better, why it was a good thing, a good experiment, even though it's being hotly debated now post-election, I think most people kind of grasped the idea behind it in first place.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** I wonder if it's possible to just zoom out a little bit on the issue of rank-choice voting to just explain it, and also you talked about the number of candidates who ran in New York City, which follows the national trend of a record number of candidates running for office, in some cases dozens of candidates for one seat. Is it because of rank-choice voting, and does that make the field more diverse?

**FELIPE DE LA HOZ:** Yeah, sure. So rank-choice voting for those who sort of won our way with it it's essentially a system where instead of you having a slate of candidates, candidate A, B, C, and you go for one of them and your vote goes only to that one person, you essentially rank them by preference, so your first choice will be candidate A, your second choice could be candidate B, your third choice be candidate C, and you're essentially voting for all of them in layers. So if one of those candidates is eliminated because they did not get enough votes in one round, the votes, your votes go to the next candidate that you ranked, so that your votes aren't sort of "wasted" if you're voting for someone who doesn't ultimately win the election, or doesn't have much of a chance, and that's the idea is kind of to be able to express your voter preferences better through that. And so, in this particular election cycle it was fascinating that we had frankly hundreds of candidates, because we had vast majority of the city council was actually open, there were no incumbents because most of them had been term-limited out, and so we had sometimes a dozen or more candidates in one particular city council election. And I think that did enhance the ability of the election to feature diversity, to sort of have communities better represented, because it was sort of a once in a decade almost opportunity. Because it's very difficult to defeat incumbents, so once you have somebody in, you're probably gonna have them in for eight years or so, and so this was sort of an opportunity for everyone to throw their hat in the ring.

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** Charles, I wanted to go to you, to kind of zoom out even more in terms of looking at what Eric Adams's election in New York City, a very progressive city, and a progressive state, blue city, blue state, but Eric Adams is a pretty law and order, he's a complex character, but he's not the most progressive of the slate that ran.

**CHARLES D. ELLISON:** Eric Adams rise in this particular election took a lot of people by surprise because there was just a miscalculation as there always is, thinking of whether it's a state, local, or federal race, there's always this miscalculation or these misguided assumptions about what's on the minds of black voters and even some brown voters as well. Black voters are very pragmatic, practical, 'cause I think that there was this assumption that black voters kind of neatly fixed into this progressive voter box. Now, black voters are very pragmatic and they're about survival, and also black voters live in neighborhoods where there's low income to moderate income, and they want, they deserve a high standard of living and a high quality of life, and they want safe neighborhoods too. They wanna live in the same kind of safe neighborhoods that say like white suburban voters live in. And so, when there are spikes in violent crime, we

need to pay attention to that, and we need to address those concerns and those needs, and not just think that, "Oh, we're just gonna neatly tuck you away, you can go over here with college educated, white liberal progressive voters, or middle income white liberal progressive suburban voters," and you guys are all on the same page about these issues and that may not be the case.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** So, on that complexity, Julissa I wanted to turn to you, as Sara mentioned you made some history yourself as the first Latina elected from Queens, this is pre-AOC, and many people say your election paved the way for about half dozen Latina candidates that now represent that area, you've since left the city council. I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about what Charles is alluding to, this balance of being tough on crime, but still being scrutinous of the police and police brutality, is that balance possible? And I think there's some other dynamics at play as well that I know you've talked about with us on the Epicenter Podcast pretty recently.

**JULISSA FERRERAS-COPELAND:** The reality is that people want to be safe, one of the things that I believe really helped Eric Adam towards the end of the election was the uptick in crime, and the fact that people weren't understanding exactly why this was happening. And when you know, the statements like defund the police, how you explain that to a 65 year old grandmother, who's like, "Wait a minute, I don't wanna defend the police, I want the police in my neighborhood, I just don't want the police to harass my grandson and kill my son." So, we can hold these two thoughts, and I think that is very evident in the results of this election. The other thing that I wanted to touch upon, and this is really interesting, because when I first got elected in 2009, and when I worked for the council member prior to that, and Eric was in office at the time, we were the progressives. So also kind of the progressive line has moved, so it's like you're not progressive enough. Eric was known as part of the progressive movement, I was a progressive, just because I was the first Latina, an Afro Latina, and then as a finance chair everything was like, "Oh, we've never had a progressive." Then AOC comes like a lightning rod, and the entire progressive movement or what we stand for moves, and I think that that is a transition that we're also seeing. And many established Democrats, you know, young people that were breaking barriers and doing things were considered progressive just eight years ago. So, I think that many voters already, especially those that voted for Eric in Brooklyn, already viewed him as someone who had fought against the police while he was a police officer, he wasn't going with kind of the mainstream and going with the movement. And I also think that rank-choice voting helped Eric and helped the other candidates, because it also gave people more flexibility to say, "Okay, I'm not 100% on all his points, but maybe I'll make him my number two," and some of the women in the race which also is really important. And I know Felipe mentioned this, rank-choice voting and where we are now and even in the progressive movement, allowing more women's voices to be heard was very important in this election, I think it's evident when historically we will have, you know, it might look like 30 women out of 51 in the council.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** You mentioned there was a progressive wing and then it moved even further to the left, we know from the last few years that mainstream media doesn't necessarily cover nuance that well, how do you think Eric Adams should be covered? There have been some folks certainly on progressive Twitter that allude to, he's so corrupt, there've been some headlines where there's a photo of Eric Adams, second African-American Mayor of New York City with headlines that kind of allude to the company he keeps, or how does he really work? How should we balance this going forward? And then I'd love the others to jump in as well.

**JULISSA FERRERAS-COPELAND:** Well, as someone who was also often followed by the press, because as finance chair, it's interesting that as people of color we always have to have kind of this filter of you know, watch them, do they really know what they're doing? And I think it's really disheartening. And actually I believe journalists need to be fair, I'm not asking anybody to romanticize this moment, but we must be fair and balanced. The reality is that he's going to be our mayor, and we have to give him an opportunity to do things right. This assumption that he's gonna be corrupt, he hasn't even been sworn in. He was the Borough president, this wasn't an issue when he was Borough president, and he was a state senator, this wasn't an issue when he was a state senator. And it just seems that whenever there's a woman or a person of color, in particular a person of color, in these positions, there's always this filter of, "Oh, they're corrupt." And of course I think politics, politicians in general are viewed, it's very few that are viewed as, "Oh you're gonna come in there and you're gonna make change," but we need to be balanced in our reporting. And I think when you kind of go into really the nitty gritty of how things, for lack of better word, but how the sausage is made, some journalists unfortunately would call me and say, essentially would want me to write the article for them, and I think that that is not something that we're used to. Journalists usually were investigative and put the work in, and unfortunately there's some journalists that don't believe that, so it's easy to tweet and say, "Oh he's gonna be corrupt," because they heard it from somewhere else.

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** I wanna throw this to Charles and then Felipe, could talk about this question around accountability and journalism, and how we hold our electeds whether they're black and brown or not accountable to the communities that they serve.

**CHARLES D. ELLISON:** Journalism has this very irksome irritating habit of being sort of political gossip platforms, and so I think we have an opportunity here, and I think black media could be leaders in this, 'cause if you notice one thing that I try not to do like with my program everyday on WURD Sara is, I try not to get too much into political gossip like, "Oh, did you hear what they said? Did you see what scandal they were caught up in or what they did?" I wanna know about the policy making, so I think we need to pivot from sort of getting caught up in the melee of what someone said or some scandal, or what they were caught doing red handed, and I think we need to get into more reporting that's focused on the governance, and saying, "Okay, what bill are they working on that's going to my quality of life? Did this legislation that they

passed or did this appropriation that they made, or that they were able to finally push through, did this substantially improve socioeconomic conditions in my neighborhood?" Voters, and constituents, residents, all of us, we wanna know, hey, are these elected officials working? I think we're way past the stage where it's like, "Oh, a new black elected official, okay, so he's the second black mayor of New York City?" It's not a novelty anymore to have black mayors. So on another level too, while you're holding them accountable, or black communities, black media holding them accountable as black elected officials, don't look at this as novel, don't look at them as historic celebrities anymore, No, they're public servants, they're there to serve, are they governing well? How are they responding to navigating, and fixing, and solving these crises?

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** Yeah, I was just gonna turn to Felipe, I wanted to just ask you as you covered this mayoral election for URL, and had to navigate all of these candidates, all of these complexities, how were you able to approach these issues in ways that were both interesting and compelling, but also very much about outcomes and impact for the people on the ground?

**FELIPE DE LA HOZ:** There was a time not that long ago where DNA info was at every community board and the New York Daily News had twice as many reporters as it does now and whatnot, and so, unfortunately, a by-product of that too is that, you have fewer people stretched more thin, and it's just easier to do kind of trend pieces about what people are saying about a particular politician on Twitter. And so far as kind of the coverage of Adams going forward, I think there are a couple things too to just to sort of consider, I think that there are layers here that are involved with questioning him because he is a black elected official, a person of color, but I also think that his campaign on occasion kind of took that as a way to try to squirrel out of some legitimate questions. I mean, the whole thing about whether he lived or did not live in New York, really like frankly, a bit of a ridiculous premise in the first place, and then I don't think that they were necessarily able to engage with that question in a way that many reporters found satisfying, the tour of his apartment, where, I mean, it really seemed to be his son's apartment and things like that, I mean, I'm not gonna say that definitely that was the case or whatnot, but I think that there were some things here where he did try to kind of pivot and say that, oh, you know, you wouldn't be asking these questions of white elected official or something, and I don't necessarily think that's true, and I hope that they'll avoid some of that you know, some that even when he's mayor, he's gotta win the general, but I don't think Curtis Sliwa is gonna defeat him frankly. I think a big open question is how he's gonna handle public safety, he's both a former police officer and a former police, former, right? So, he kind of has his foot in both sides here. We have to remember that the last black mayor and the first one David Dinkins, was defeated by Rudy Giuliani in part on a campaign of claiming that he was basically anti-police and that he was letting the city slide into anarchy, and that was extremely racially tinged campaign. And so, I think we have to be keeping an eye out for similar things happening going forward if mayor Eric Adams does try to institute police reforms and tries to kind of reign in some NYPD abuses and whatnot, I think we really have to be sensitive to whether certain outlets or other political figures

start to kind of go down that same track and claim that, "Oh, he just hates the police," and there's a very racial dimension to that, so that's something I do think that we as reporters also have to be very wary of kind of.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** And I just wanted to get your thoughts Sara on where some of these stories run matters as much as the story itself. So, you've said to me, when WURD, for example, holds a black politician accountable, or has a discussion around crime and let's say black neighborhoods, it's a very different tone than say The Philadelphia Inquirer or The New York Times, tell me a little bit about what you mean.

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** Sure, yeah, I mean context matters, we saw this when Barack Obama was the president, there was such a tension and such a conflict I think for the black community in general around this question of interrogating and holding Obama accountable for things that we didn't necessarily think were in the best interest of the black community, but also feeling like we needed to protect him because he was the first black president, and he was getting taken apart by so many other places in the media and we didn't wanna pile on. And so I think that having conversations that are contextualized, that are specifically within a media community that is serving a specific community, like WURD we have a black audience, and so we can talk about things whether it's about police brutality and community violence in ways that are nuanced, that do hold both of those things at the same time, and don't sacrifice. You can't be against police brutality and against community violence, a lot of times there are these false narratives that if you talk about one you're dismissing the other, but in spaces that are specifically culturally targeted like WURD, like the media outlets like URL is serving. And if you're able to have authentic culturally relevant, culturally specific conversations within, it's almost like a family conversation as opposed to if The Inquirer, like you said Mitra, if The Inquirer, the New York Times, or the Washington Post had probably the identical conversation, it would be seen, and viewed, and consumed very differently by communities of color, by the black community, because it would be perceived as we are being looked at from the outside as opposed to having a conversation that's organic, and within, and for, and about.

**S. MITRA KALITA:** We've gone from pretty much all white male electeds to Latinas, and we're about to have our first South Asian elected, and so, Julissa, COVID was supposed to be in some ways like this was going to be the COVID election, it ended up being much more on law and order and crime, I just wondered if you could bridge those two themes a little bit for us, because your family like mine is in the epicenter as well, but you've also talked a lot about law and order not being a monolith in terms of voting issue for the Latino community.

**JULISSA FERRERAS-COPELAND:** Yeah, as a product of Corona, it just happens to be called Corona, Queens, which was the epicenter of the Coronavirus. Our communities were devastated, and what the virus did, was it not only, you know, unfortunately many people died of

this virus, but the reality is that it created these food insecurities like we had never experienced ever. So people are trying to live and eat, and have access to food, and also many of the people that live in my former district are also essential workers, so it was layer upon layer, upon layer of just crisis at a level that we had never seen in particular. The reality is that traditionally voters, the electorate or the politicians or the elected officials never paid attention to us, because it is an undocumented population. We wanna have access to food, we want to have a hospital that's gonna provide services when needed, we want to protect our neighbors, the diversity, there's about 133 languages spoken in between the two zip codes of Jackson Heights and Corona, so, you talk about diversity, that is what, you know we live that. So, I think the immigrant influence also is important, because many people didn't believe that Latinos would come out to vote, and people forget we've been doing a lot of work on US citizenship and helping people become United States citizens, so the Latino vote is a very different vote from those that have lived in the community 50 plus years, the Latino votes, you know, you have to find that thousand dollars, and take that test, and learn a little bit of English, and do all these steps to even have that right to vote, so a Latino voter will vote very thoughtfully because they've been fighting and waiting for this opportunity for five plus years.

**SARA LOMAX-REESE:** So, we are gonna get ready to kind of wrap things up, it's been such a wonderful conversation that we've examined a lot of different areas. Mitra, do you wanna close us out?

**S. MITRA KALITA:** I would love to. I think one area that we've kind of talked around is the diversity of the electorate, but one thing to look for in 2022 is the diversity of the electeds, so, I think certainly in the swing states, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, we've written a lot about the immigrant vote, but I think seeing people of color in office in 2022 is another trend to look out for, which as in the case of New York City we will have most likely our second African-American mayor elected in November and Eric Adams. It's been a really, really smart, thoughtful discussion, I'm so grateful to all of you for being with us.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Who we hear from matters. It sounds obvious, but the truth of that was brought home to me again as I watched the first day of Congress's select committee investigation into the events of January 6th. We have heard for months that enough has been done, there's been a congressional investigation, hundreds of the participants have been prosecuted for riot, they've also been those who's that it wasn't a riot at all but simply a peaceful protest. Well, I believe that hearing from the four officers who addressed the commission will make a difference. It may not change everybody's mind, but hearing Harry Dunn talk about how hard it was to be there, and ask directly why is it so hard to tell the truth in America, I think that will make a difference, I think it will be heard. My only question now is, will it be remembered what else he said? That he asked, "Does my vote count?" For "The Laura Flanders Show", thanks for joining me, stay kind, stay curious till the next time, thanks.

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