

# ‘A Slap in the Face’ : Pick of White Man to Lead Council Draws Fire

Mays, Jeffery C; Goodman, J David . Mays, Jeffery C; Goodman, J David.

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Some leaders railed against a process in a majority-minority city with white men in the roles of mayor, comptroller and three of five district attorneys.

## FULL TEXT

For months, black political leaders watched the bare-knuckled, back-room race to lead the New York City Council with a mix of hope and trepidation. Five of the eight candidates were black or Hispanic —offering the prospect of a first black speaker —but two of the most prominent front-runners were white men.

In the end, one of those white men, Councilman Corey Johnson of Manhattan, emerged victorious . Now black leaders are railing against a process that produced another white face atop the government of a majority-minority city that already has white men in the roles of mayor, comptroller, three of five district attorney’ s offices and at the heads of various city agencies.

Resentment has been barely concealed in the wake of the selection by county bosses of Mr. Johnson, a decision that leaked out unofficially on Wednesday and was publicly endorsed soon after by Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose potential objection was widely seen as the only roadblock.

“I believe that what unites us all is the need for economic change that is fair to working people of all backgrounds,” Mr. de Blasio said during a news conference on Thursday when asked about the selection of Mr. Johnson. “We had eight candidates, they were good candidates,” he added. “And there will be another one in four years.”

But many black leaders expressed frustration, discontent and feelings of being taken for granted as the core of a Democratic base that is propping up the party, both in New York City, where Democrats outnumber Republicans more than 6 to 1, and in places like Alabama, where black voters helped elect a Democratic senator for the first time in decades.

“This is a slap in the face,” said Rev. Jacques Andre DeGraff, associate pastor of Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem. “People feel offended.”

Arva Rice, president of the New York Urban League, said many backed the candidacy of Councilman Robert E. Cornegy Jr. of Brooklyn because of his qualifications and “it was overdue for an African-American male to serve in that role.”

Mr. DeGraff, who also backed Mr. Cornegy, named past speakers who received support from black Democrats, including Peter F. Vallone, Christine C. Quinn and Melissa Mark-Viverito, who leaves office in January. “The black community supported an Italian-American from Astoria, we supported a gay Irish-American and then we supported a progressive Latina from East Harlem to be speaker,” he said. “The mood is we have to do something.” Attention to the race spread beyond the five boroughs with some national groups looking at the City Council race, usually a more internecine contest among local power brokers, as something of a bellwether.

“There’ s a sense that black Democrats are not being supported by the establishment,” said Marc H. Morial, the head of the National Urban League. “The mood of African-American leaders and the electorate is very different now. It’ s very anti-establishment.”

Although the official vote among council members does not occur until Jan. 3, almost all of the other candidates have

conceded to Mr. Johnson. But not Mr. Cornegy, who was widely seen as the front-runner among black candidates.

“I’m trying to keep the black community calm around a process that’s not finished,” said Mr. Cornegy. “I think I can get enough votes to win.”

Behind the scenes, Mr. Cornegy has received support from black political leaders and politicians who believe he should remain in the race to help ensure that he and other minorities land in powerful positions like head of the finance or land use committees.

Councilman Jumaane D. Williams of Brooklyn, who has also not yet conceded to Mr. Johnson, said in a call with reporters about race in the speaker contest that he was glad Mr. Cornegy was staying in.

“There was a historic opportunity missed, no question about that,” said Representative Gregory W. Meeks of Queens. “There’s no way that an African-American should not be in some major leadership positions.”

The Rev. Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network, said he was also disappointed that there would not be a black speaker. He and others said that they believed the number of black candidates divided support.

Mr. Johnson was also a formidable candidate, Mr. Sharpton said. At a recent forum of speaker candidates at the National Action Network’s headquarters in Harlem, Mr. Johnson won over the crowd when he recounted that he worked in New Hampshire on Al Sharpton’s 2004 presidential bid in New Hampshire.

“It all comes down to who can bring communities together; Corey was able to put this together,” said Keith Wright, the Democratic Party head in Manhattan. “Race is always important. I’ve been black all my life,” he added. “But at the end of the day it comes down to who can put it together.”

Charlie King, a former senior campaign adviser to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo who represented Mr. Cornegy in his bid to be speaker, said “there is no black political power in New York City. You cannot call New York City a progressive city when you have no black elected officials in positions of power.”

Powerful black leaders such as Mr. Meeks and Representative Hakeem Jeffries never came out fully in favor of Mr. Cornegy, and Mr. King said he believed it was because they didn’t want to be on a losing side.

“If the game is rigged, what’s the point of putting your reputation on the line?” Mr. King said. “The dirty secret of New York City politics is that race hangs over us like cigar smoke at a poker game but no one wants to talk about it.”

That view was not exactly shared by Councilman Ritchie Torres, who identifies as black Hispanic and who was a candidate for speaker. While “obviously race matters,” he said that Mr. Johnson, 35, who is gay and grew up in Massachusetts in public housing, prevailed because he forged the deepest relationships with his colleagues.

“Expecting to be speaker regardless of whether you have member support is presumptuous,” Mr. Torres said.

“Confidence in one’s leadership matters more to me than common complexion.”

Source URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/nyregion/pick-of-white-man-corey-johnson-for-council-speaker-draws-fire.html?partner=bloomberg>

Credit: JEFFERY C. MAYS and J. DAVID GOODMAN

## DETAILS

Subject:	Men; Hispanic Americans; Mayors; African Americans; Councils; Candidates; Power; Political leadership; Political parties; White people
Identifier / keyword:	Blacks; City Council (NYC); Democratic Party; City Councils; Politics and Government; New York City; Johnson, Corey; Cornegy, Robert E Jr
URL:	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/nyregion/pick-of-white-man-corey-johnson-for-council-speaker-draws-fire.html?partner=bloomberg">https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/nyregion/pick-of-white-man-corey-johnson-for-council-speaker-draws-fire.html?partner=bloomberg</a>
Publication title:	New York Times (Online); New York

Publication year:	2017
Publication date:	Dec 22, 2017
Section:	nyregion
Publisher:	New York Times Company
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
e-ISSN:	15538095
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1979681947
Document URL:	<a href="http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/nytimes/blogs-podcasts-websites/slap-face-pick-white-man-lead-council-draws-fire/docview/1979681947/sem-2?accountid=35635">http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/nytimes/blogs-podcasts-websites/slap-face-pick-white-man-lead-council-draws-fire/docview/1979681947/sem-2?accountid=35635</a>
Copyright:	Copyright 2017 The New York Times Company
Last updated:	2021-12-10
Database:	New York Times

## LINKS

---