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ELECTION WATCH 02/10 4:49 P.M.

‘Earth-Shaking’ Election in NoLa

The election of Mitch Landrieu as the next mayor of New Orleans is a true post-racial moment.

► ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu is the next mayor of New Orleans. The city is two-thirds black, and he will be the first white elected to the office since 1970, when his father, Moon Landrieu, won the seat.

The election was a true post-racial moment. Four and a half years after Katrina, black voters decided competence trumped race. The prospect of a white mayor would be “an earth-shaking event,” a politically active black lawyer told a *New York Times* reporter before the election.

In January 2006, when the first post-Katrina election was held, Mayor C. Ray Nagin took the occasion of Martin Luther King Day to declare, the city should stay "chocolate." God wants the city to be a majority black, he went on. "You can't have New Orleans no other way. It wouldn't be New Orleans."

Is New Orleans still New Orleans? Landrieu, who had run unsuccessfully for mayor before, got 70 percent of the white vote, and an amazing 63 percent of the black vote, winning all but one of the city's 366 precincts. His total was roughly twice the total of the ten other candidates combined. He needed more than 50 percent to avoid a runoff; the second place finisher came in at 14 percent.

Not only is the mayor-elect white; the city council will have a 5-2 white majority. Name recognition and political connections helped Landrieu. His father had desegregated city agencies and is still a legendary figure. His sister, Mary, is a U.S. Senator. But Nagin's incompetence persuaded black voters that racial solidarity wouldn't repair the still broken city.

About a third of the city's homes are still empty; the murder rate is among the highest in the nation; and the police department is scandal plagued.

The city has long been culturally and socially integrated, but politics had remained racially divided. Elections are “always about race,” Lambert C. Boissiere Jr., a former state senator and currently the city constable recently remarked.

No longer. Blacks voted with their heads, not their hearts. It's morning in New Orleans.

— Abigail Thernstrom is the author, most recently, of *Voting Rights — and Wrongs: The Elusive Quest for Racially Fair Elections*. She is an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.