The City's Losing Clout

By Gerald Benjamin
and Gary King

New York City is a modern "rotten borough," not because of population decline, but because of its massive and continuing fall-off in voter participation. New York City's political base is now more apparent than real.

If support of the city by state and national leaders is based as much upon calculations of electoral advantage as it is upon altruism and good will, New York's political decline may become as serious a problem for it as the fragility of its economy.

In 1946, New York City provided more than half the votes cast for Governor in the state. In the 1978 gubernatorial election, less than a third of the statewide vote was recorded in the city. Over this period, the five boroughs suffered an absolute loss of one million voters.

The decline in the city's electoral clout occured in two phases. During the period between 1946 and 1958 the problem was not so much the loss of urban voters as it was the rapid growth of the upstate electorate. The numbers voting in the city fell off only slightly.

During the period of the Rockefeller governorship, the metropolis provided a relatively stable 40 percent of the votes in the state. Since 1970, both the city and upstate electorates have gotten smaller, but the rate of decline in the city has been much more precipitous.

Until 1958, turnout of 90 percent or better in New York City in elections for governor was common. In 1978, the turnout was 56.2 percent.

In contrast, many suburban and rural counties actually now enjoy higher levels of voters participation than they did in the immediate post World War II era. Whereas New York City enjoyed a 19 percent advantage in voter turnout over its neighboring upstate counties in 1946, it suffered a 14 percent disadvantage in 1978.

One result of these changes has been a perceptible shift of the main political battleground in the state. Formerly, the idea of an "upstate-downstate split" had some meaning. Democrats sought to run up large urban totals; Republicans worked for overwhelming majorities in suburban and rural counties.

With smaller numbers to rely on in New York City, however, Governor Carey's 1974 and 1978 victories required a much stronger performance in the rest of the state.

The implications for New York state's third parties are also important. The shift of the focal point of state politics outside New York City cannot help but contribute to the decline of the city-based Liberal Party. Closely contested elections upstate will tend to drive the Republican Party more than before into alliances with the Conservative Party and the newly emergent Right to Life Party.

Generally, with city voters less and less consequential, the ideological tone of New York politics will become increasingly conservative.

The long Rockefeller era prevented Republicans from perceiving emerging treats in their former political bastions, threats that now are becoming realities as the result of social and political change. The Rockefeller incumbency kept Democrats from seeing opportunities upstate, opportunities that are now being seized to establish an alternative base of power in the state.

The consequences of this decline are disquieting. Political relationships not based on reciprocity tend to be extremely precarious. Surely, the mayor is better off, when bargaining with the Governor or the President, if, at the very minimum, he can promise that aid to the city will lead to a substantial electoral payoff.

But this is now a promise he cannot make: the votes simply are no longer there.

Gerald Benjamin, associate professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is co-author of the forthcoming book, "Rockefeller of New York: Executive Power in the Statehouse." Gary King is an undergraduate political science major at SUNY, New Paltz.