

## Race in an election race

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**A promotional picture** for the film 'RACE', which looks at the mayoral election battle in New Orleans after the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin headed to a hotel when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, according to one critic interviewed for RACE.

The commentator says the hotel was right next to the sweltering Louisiana Superbowl, where 1,000 storm refugees sheltered in desperate conditions, yet the Mayor failed to pay them a visit.

Despite this and against all expectations, Nagin was re-elected in 2006, by a very different set of voters than that which put him in power four years before.

The reason, so director Katherine Cecil's documentary would have us believe, had much to do with race.

In this hour-long film, she documents how Nagin entered politics as a black conservative candidate with little support from the city's African Americans.

He was elected to office on a business platform with 86 percent of the white vote and 38 percent of the African-American vote in 2002.

Yet, post-Katrina, Nagin's white supporters deserted him.

He was forced to change tack with his re-election campaign and pitch it to a different segment of society: specifically, those black voters displaced after the storm who feared they'd never return home.

Those fears weren't unfounded. The Bring New Orleans Back Commission set up by Nagin devised a new "green space" vision for the largest city in Louisiana, which would have wiped out most of the devastated African-American neighbourhoods.

Cecil's film shows how some in New Orleans wanted to use the natural disaster to change the racial demographic, making it a majority white town.

The powerful whites who'd previously backed Nagin began to shift away from him and a record

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number of challengers, many of them Caucasian, entered the 2006 mayoral contest.

Nagin rejected the "green space" plan and went on to make a headline-grabbing speech reassuring those in exile: "It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans."

The statement was deemed by many to be electioneering rhetoric, but Cecil's film suggests it was pivotal in helping Nagin beat white liberal candidate Mitch Landrieu in the battle to be Mayor.

When the votes came in on a run-off election between the two on May 20, 2006, Nagin had won 52 percent of the vote and Landrieu 48 percent.

The Mayor was re-elected with 83 percent of the African-American vote and 21 percent of the white vote, a near reversal of his previous support base.

RACE does a good job of exploring the reasons for this turnaround in voting behaviour and showing the political machinations behind Nagin's campaign.

Interviews with two of his (white) campaign strategists are interesting, showing how, behind-the-scenes, it was less about race and more about retaining power by whatever means.

One of them suggests that Landrieu, a candidate who spoke of a racially-unified New Orleans and who avoided overt criticism of Nagin's post-hurricane performance as Mayor, simply didn't have the necessary hunger to win.

The inevitable, and vaguely depressing, conclusion to be drawn from RACE is that the power-hungry, be they white or black, will always seek to exploit people's prejudices.

The film's dramatic punch is somewhat lessened with the knowledge that Landrieu did, in fact, become Mayor of New Orleans in 2010.

Since the film only came out last year, I couldn't help wishing it gave viewers more up-to-date information on how New Orleans has recovered and how both black and white citizens voted in 2010.

I Useful website: [www.racethedocumentary.com](http://www.racethedocumentary.com)

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