

Republican Giuliani Forges His Own Identity in Democratic New York

By Lee M. Miringoff and Barbara L. Carvalho

GOP Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is seeking re-election in the Big Apple where Democrats outnumber Republicans five to one. At first glance the odds should be against him, but Giuliani has established an independent political identity that has inoculated him from national Republican conservative directions and has cast him as a fighter for New York City.

Elected by a narrow margin in 1993 in a rematch against Mayor David Dinkins, Giuliani used the successful challengers' strategy of the time—the so-called stealth campaign. Not unlike Bill Clinton's upset over George Bush the year before or George Pataki's dethroning of Mario Cuomo the year after, the strategy banked on a grumpy electorate concerned about a rocky economy. Hit the incumbent, stand out of the way, and let him topple by the weight of the unpopularity of incumbency.

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The downside, however, of a stealth candidacy is that the challenger does not establish him or herself during the campaign. Therefore, s/he enters office with an ill-defined political persona desperately needing development; and there's also a risk that the opposition will connect the dots to draw a harsh picture that may be hard to shake.

Recovering From a Rocky Start

Off to a rocky start in the spring of 1994, Giuliani had to deal with a steady stream of bad budget news coming out of City Hall which was laid, as it inevitably is, at the doorstep of the chief executive. Residents complained that his budgets contained too many fiscal one-shots or cutbacks to a social safety net already badly frayed. New Yorkers felt they had suffered enough during the lingering recession and were in no mood to sacrifice more.

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Giuliani's endorsement for president last year reflected a similar positioning. His meeting with Jack Kemp on the day of the final game of the World Series was crafted to avoid over-identification with the national GOP and to further define himself on his own, more independent terms. In response to whether New York would be better off

with Dole or Clinton as president, Giuliani quipped, “I think New York would be well-served if Jack Kemp is vice president.”

Giuliani's involvement in education and in the recent NYC rent control dispute not only cast him in the role as a fighter for New York, but also addressed his nagging vulnerability in the social program area. Elected with strong credentials as a crime-fighter and with two-thirds of the public giving him good grades for his handling of fiscal matters, Giuliani has chosen to enhance his reputation at the margins by taking the lead on the education and housing fronts. His careful handling of city unions has also allowed him to chip away at any Democratic advantages.

But on a personal level, Giuliani's likeability factor will never allow him to dominate the New York City scene. The city is not now, nor likely ever to become, Giuliani's New York the way it was Ed Koch's New York.

A More Optimistic Electorate

Voters today are in a much different place than four years ago. Not unlike other parts of the nation, New York City residents have a changed outlook. They see the quality of life as having improved dramatically and think their city is moving in the right direction.

When Giuliani assumed office, 4% of city residents thought the previous year had been better for New York compared to 61% who thought the city had gotten worse. A February Marist Poll found that 46% think the city has improved in the past year and only 14% think it has worsened. Similarly, by 55% to 32% they feel New York City is headed in the right direction; a reversal from 34% to 54% two years ago.

Nevertheless, New Yorkers continue to view Giuliani as more conservative politically than they view them-

Question: I'm going to read you several statements about Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each one.

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Mayor Giuliani is a good leader for NYC.	60%	35%	5%
Mayor Giuliani is a new kind of independent politician.	54	43	3
Mayor Giuliani cares about people like you	49	44	7
Mayor Giuliani can unify the city and get it working together.	46	47	7
Rudolph Giuliani's style as mayor is too confrontational.	50	46	4
Mayor Giuliani represents all interests of the city.	43	55	2

Source: Survey by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, February 24-25, 1997

selves, and the city remains highly polarized along racial lines. More than one-third of New Yorkers still believe there is an economic recession, and more than two-thirds say they always or sometimes worry that their income won't meet their monthly expenses.

Incumbency Is No Longer a Dirty Word

But Giuliani has found a way to maintain the coalition of support that first elected him while neutralizing the sentiments of those who would like to see him defeated. The net effect for campaign '97 is that change is no longer an automatic plus and incumbency is no longer a dirty word. Voters have lost some of their grumpiness and are less prone to unseat an incumbent.

Giuliani will likely focus on his successes in crime and fiscal affairs, but do not be surprised if he also talks, in keeping with his efforts to buffer himself in this Democratic town, about education and housing, and attempts to be the mayor for

all of New York City—the so-called five-borough strategy—especially if his Democratic opponent is Manhattan-based Ruth Messinger.

Giuliani enters this campaign as the favorite. However, the city remains divided, largely along racial lines, in its assessment of him. His approval rating is a healthy mid-fifties, but he is only hovering around the magical mid-field stripe of 50% in early tossups against Messinger, the Democratic front-runner.

One last factor is likely to come into play before this election season is over. Namely, term limits. Watch for a not so subtle effort by the Giuliani campaign to make the case that he only has one term left so why take a chance on an untested challenger. This is an argument that incumbent David Dinkins could not have made in 1993 and George Bush would not have dreamed of making during the anti-incumbency period of this decade.



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