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News Analysis

# Political Pugilists Unusually Calm on 3rd Term

By [MICHAEL BARBARO](#)

New Yorkers relish a brawl — and in a city filled with ambitious politicians, passionate activists and eager lawyers, it has never been hard to start one.

In 1968, the spark was the desegregation of public schools; in 1988, it was the proposal to abolish the all-powerful Board of Estimate; and in 1999, it was eligibility requirements to stay in homeless shelters.

But as Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) tries to rewrite a voter-approved term limits law so he can seek a third term, most of the city's political class has so far responded with a collective shrug — even though the mayor is reversing himself and, arguably, the will of the people.

A handful of City Council members have registered firm but polite disapproval. A candidate for mayor called it a “back-room deal.” And several good-government groups have vigorously wagged their fingers.

However tepid it is now, the opposition could snowball, becoming a meaningful obstacle to the mayor's strategy — which is to quickly pass a law in the Council that allows dozens of elected officials to serve three four-year terms, instead of the current two.

But the absence of serious pushback reveals much about the state of New York City politics under the reign of Mr. Bloomberg.

While his predecessors [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) and [Edward I. Koch](#) became lightning rods who seemed to feed off controversy, Mr. Bloomberg has taken a different approach.

Political analysts and elected officials say that over the last seven years, the mayor's largely nonpartisan, inclusive brand of governance has weakened the influence of the traditional political parties, which had fueled many of the city's major battles.

The mayor's financial standing and willingness to use his own fortune to finance the city's civic, educational and cultural groups have at times discouraged dissent from those who rely on his financing, or may someday need it.

And his personal popularity across racial and class lines — his approval rating hovers around 70 percent — has made the city’s elected leaders think twice about taking him on. Even many who angrily oppose the mayor’s third-term bid acknowledge admiring him and his leadership.

“The fact that he has tremendous good will across many sectors of this city has neutralized some of the outrage that people may have otherwise felt,” said Dick Dadey, the executive director of Citizens Union, a government watchdog group that opposes Mr. Bloomberg’s plan to change term limits in the Council.

Mr. Dadey predicts that the fight over altering the law “will be a civil process.”

There is growing evidence to support that view.

Major unions, a reliable ingredient in any city brawl, are taking a wait-and-see approach to the term limits issue. After Mr. Bloomberg said he would challenge the law, the head of the city’s powerful teachers’ union, [Randi Weingarten](#), offered a carefully worded response, saying: “We have to explore the pros and cons of changing, and of doing it in this kind of way, rather than putting it to the voters.”

At crucial moments in New York’s history, the City Council has served as a check against — and a loud critic of — the mayor’s power. But this time, the self-interest of the mayor and that of many members of the Council are largely aligned: They are looking for a chance to remain in office longer.

The speaker of the City Council, [Christine C. Quinn](#), who could easily block the term limits legislation, has instead hinted that she will shepherd it through, parroting Mr. Bloomberg’s argument that the Council has the legal right to change term limits and that voters can render their verdict during elections.

In a press conference on Thursday notable for its deference to the mayor, Ms. Quinn said that “checks and balances do not have to mean fights and arguments.”

Several members of the Council are putting up a fight, however, like [Bill de Blasio](#), a Brooklyn Democrat who has opposed any legislation that would revise term limits without a voter referendum.

Mr. de Blasio said those opposed to the change “have a decent shot at defeating this.”

But those close to the Council speaker and mayor say they believe they can cobble together the 26 votes needed to prevail in the 51-member Council.

[Mark Green](#), the former public advocate who ran against Mr. Bloomberg for mayor in 2001, is trying to organize unions and civic groups against changing term limits. But even he said Mr. Bloomberg “has the upper hand.”

“He is a popular, financially endowed incumbent,” Mr. Green said. “But he has picked a fight — and there will be a fight.”

Given the quick timetable that Mr. Bloomberg is envisioning — he hopes to have a law changing term limits passed within several weeks — there is little time for opponents to organize.

Their biggest hope was that [Ronald S. Lauder](#), the billionaire cosmetics heir who opened his wallet to help pass the current term limits law in 1993, would fight Mr. Bloomberg’s effort to roll the rule back. But Mr. Lauder now appears to be content to stay on the sidelines, after announcing that he supports a third term for Mr. Bloomberg — despite some confusion about whether he would embrace a permanent extension of the law, as the mayor is envisioning.

Even if several groups do wage a public relations battle against Mr. Bloomberg and the Council, it is unclear whether the public will rally behind it.

The day that Mr. Bloomberg announced his intention to change term limits, he attended a breakfast for small-business people in Queens. Outside the event, a lone protester, Robert Williams, held up a handmade sign that said “Vote No to a Third Term.”

Mr. Williams, 40, said that he had voted for Mr. Bloomberg twice, but supported the current term limits. “No politician,” he said, “should have a job for life.”

But back inside the breakfast gathering, hundreds of people appeared to feel differently. They cheered loudly when the event’s host urged Mr. Bloomberg to seek a third term, and shouted, “Four more years!”

Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy at [New York University](#) and a former adviser to Mr. Bloomberg, said that New Yorkers were, by and large, happy with how the mayor has run the city — and how the city itself runs.

“The city is safe, race relations are even-tempered, and the economy, until very recently, was going strong,” he said. “There is a very different political climate in New York City today than there has been before.”