

Where Bloomberg Fits in Election

Opportunity for Run Could Evolve Based on How Primaries Play Out

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As Democratic and Republican presidential hopefuls stumped in Iowa and New Hampshire Monday, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg was in China talking about entrepreneurship. The setting was different, but the goal may have been the same.

Those close to Mr. Bloomberg said the 65-year-old billionaire is considering a White House bid, despite his repeated denials. Moreover, friends and advisers said, developments make a candidacy more conceivable.

Shifts atop the polls for both parties in early-voting states suggest uncertainty among some voters about the current crop of candidates, while an increasingly nasty campaign could badly bruise whomever comes out on top, Mr. Bloomberg's supporters said. Gridlock in Congress could open the door for Mr. Bloomberg's nonpartisan message. At the same time, national polls show voters worrying more about the economy and less about Iraq -- a trend that plays to Mr. Bloomberg's strengths.

By all accounts, Mr. Bloomberg remains a long-shot. He is an independent -- a longtime Democrat, he ran for mayor as a Republican and then left that party in June -- and no third-party candidate has ever won the presidency. He often jokes about the electoral chances of a 5-foot-7-inch Jewish divorcé. His record of raising taxes, banning smoking in bars and clamping down on guns could hurt him among libertarian Republicans and independents who are among his likely supporters.

And Mr. Bloomberg doesn't want to be a spoiler or a protest candidate, friends said. "I think he likes the challenge," said Mitchell Moss, a New York University professor who has served as an adviser to Mr. Bloomberg. "But he'll only run if he can win."

Mr. Bloomberg and top aides declined to comment. The mayor -- who is barred by term limits from seeking another re-election -- likely won't make up his mind until after the Republican and Democratic nominees are known. But his advisers, led by chief political strategist Kevin Sheekey, are planning for different scenarios, insiders said.

One scenario -- and the one aides are hoping for -- would be a race between fellow New Yorkers Hillary Clinton and former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Sen. Clinton's negative rating is the highest in either party, while Mr. Giuliani's is the highest among Republicans. That match-up could make what supporters see as Mr. Bloomberg's "above the fray" image

more appealing. Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Giuliani are also seen as moderate on social issues, which could mute opposition to Mr. Bloomberg from the religious right. "If the parties nominate polarizing candidates...then there's plenty of room" for Mr. Bloomberg, independent pollster John Zogby said.

Another scenario that would provide an opening would be if both parties nominate candidates from outside the center -- John Edwards on the Democratic side, for example, or Republican Mike Huckabee, who leads polls in Iowa and is surging in national surveys. In such a case, Mr. Bloomberg would seek to appeal to moderates. "The terrain that he would look to run on is dead center of the highway," said William Cunningham, Mr. Bloomberg's first-term communications director.

If both parties nominate less-divisive candidates, a Bloomberg candidacy would be less likely. He might stay on the sidelines if Republicans nominate John McCain -- whom Mr. Bloomberg has praised in the past -- or Mitt Romney, another businessman-turned-politician.

Democrat Barack Obama, whose attempt to portray himself as transcending partisan warfare is similar to Mr. Bloomberg's stance, also could pose problems for the New York mayor. When Mr. Bloomberg ate breakfast with Sen. Obama in New York last month, some interpreted the move as a signal that he won't run against the Illinois Democrat.

But friends and advisers said Mr. Bloomberg hasn't ruled out a run against any of the leading candidates, and such a bid would be more likely if the primaries leave the nominees bloodied and voters looking for other options. Unlike most recent elections, where at least one party had a clear standard-bearer from the start, both 2008 nominees will likely have faced bruising primary battles.

The front-loaded primary season could further open the door for Mr. Bloomberg because voters may grow weary of an unusually long nine-month general election battle. "We're going to see two presumptive nominees from the two major parties in early February," Mr. Zogby said. "What are they going to do except become tiresome?"

Another scenario that could prompt a Bloomberg bid would revolve around how polls frame the nation's mood and priorities early next year. Recent polls have shown voters as more concerned about the economy and health care than Iraq. That could benefit Mr. Bloomberg, who has little foreign policy experience but has won plaudits for his management of New York's economy. "The worse the economy gets, the more the election is up for grabs," Prof. Moss said.

Partisan battles in Congress have already created an "anti-institutional mood" that could provide an opening for an independent candidate, Mr. Zogby said. Those urging Mr. Bloomberg to run draw comparisons to 1992, when an unsettled economy and battles between a Republican president and a Democratic Congress helped billionaire Ross Perot win 19% of the vote. Hamilton Jordan, who briefly ran Mr. Perot's campaign and has met

with Bloomberg strategist Mr. Sheekey, noted that the Texas technology entrepreneur drew nearly 20 million votes despite a disjointed campaign.

Mr. Bloomberg has also shown a greater willingness to spend his own money. Mr. Perot spent an estimated \$65 million nationally in 1992 compared to the \$74 million Mr. Bloomberg spent to get elected mayor in 2001 and the \$84 million he spent on his re-election four years later. Mr. Sheekey has floated the notion of a "billion-dollar campaign," and insiders said he has dedicated much of Mr. Bloomberg's second term to figuring out how to use that money. Mr. Sheekey's first challenge would be getting Mr. Bloomberg on the ballot in as many states as possible.

Mr. Sheekey, who ran both of Mr. Bloomberg's mayoral campaigns, has met with Unity08, a group promoting an independent or bipartisan presidential campaign, and has his own ballot-access team ready to get to work as soon as Mr. Bloomberg decides to run. Mr. Bloomberg's billions would also be instrumental in spreading his name and message.