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Big Bloomberg lead in exit polls

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Media mogul Michael Bloomberg's expected coronation as the Republican mayoral nominee was still uncertain last night, as most of the Primary Day buzz in the GOP circulated around Mayor Giuliani.

Bloomberg, a billionaire and political novice who has spent more than $20 million of his own money on his campaign, was leading opponent Herman Badillo by a 3-to-1 margin in exit polls yesterday — the same lead he enjoyed in polls conducted before the postponed Sept. 11 primary.

But a last-minute groundswell of support for Giuliani, whose name wasn't even on the ballot, put a damper on Bloomberg's planned celebration.

Giuliani couldn't run again because of term limits, but his handling of the World Trade Center attack sparked a grass-roots write-in campaign.

If no candidate garners at least 40% of the vote, the top two finishers would face each other in an Oct. 11 runoff.

If Giuliani finishes third, but collects enough write-in votes to keep the others from getting 40%, Bloomberg and Badillo would compete in the runoff — with no possibility of write-in ballots.

A Giuliani win or second-place finish could create legal uncertainty over how to proceed, although term-limits law as of now bars Giuliani from appearing on the Election Day ballot.

Yesterday, Bloomberg shrugged off the specter of Giuliani overcoming term limits to win a third term.

"The law is the law, and I don't think at this point it is very likely, but that's up to the Legislature," Bloomberg said.

Badillo said if he wins the Republican nomination and the city's term-limit law is abolished, he would step aside for Giuliani. "He has earned it by his performance," Badillo said. "He has done an outstanding job."

'Don't want an amateur'

Some voters cast ballots for Giuliani, even though the possibility of him serving again remains in serious doubt.

"I don't want an amateur in the role right now," said Mia Smith, 31, a technology consultant whose World Financial Center office was damaged in the Trade Center attack.

Bloomberg, 59, born in Medford, Mass., is the founder and chairman of Bloomberg L.P., a financial information company.

A life-long Democrat, Bloomberg switched to the Republican camp last year to avoid a crowded mayoral field. He has spent more on his bid than any candidate in New York City history.

Bloomberg said his top priority is to continue the downward spiral of crime. He has staked a Bloomberg administration on a pledge to fix city schools, telling voters he should be thrown out of office if the schools don't improve.

As a neophyte politician, Bloomberg endured a bumpy ride on the campaign trail. His headline-making comments included a suggestion that being a sanitation worker is more dangerous job than being a cop or fire-fighter, and a musing that students should recite the Lord's Prayer in school.

Badillo, 72, resigned in June as chairman of City University's board of trustees to launch his sixth bid for mayor since 1969. Becoming mayor has been his life-long dream — and twice he came close.

Badillo, an orphan from Puerto Rico, has spent most of his professional life in public service. He was the nation's first Puerto Rican congressman and the city's first Puerto Rican to be borough president and to hold a commissioner-level job in city government

Badillo's campaign has been plagued by a dearth of campaign contributions and has spent most of the summer struggling to get city matching funds. While other mayoral candidates have peppered the airwaves with ads, the Badillo camp has not aired a single TV or radio commercial.

His top campaign issues center on ending social promotion in city schools and implementing a plan to solve the city's housing crisis.

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