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Spirited Showdown

Bloomberg, Green have feisty faceoff

By Dan Janison
STAFF WRITER

Mayoral rivals Mark Green and Michael Bloomberg traded charges of cynicism last night — while vowing to boost education and jobs despite a fiscal crisis — in a debate peppered by cheers and jeers from their fans.

As the Republican nominee, Bloomberg, an ex-Democrat up against a huge Democratic enrollment edge, urged voters to be non-partisan.

In an opening shot, Green told the billionaire, who said he's a liberal but added that he shuns labels: "You switched parties in order to run for mayor and I think that's treating principles rather callously."

"Mark, it has nothing to do with principle," Bloomberg replied, but "how you get to serve."

After Bloomberg said he was invited to run by the GOP, Green sniped that he wasn't "waiting for a printed invitation to run in the Democratic Party."

What proved to be a brisk 90-minute exchange, sponsored by Spanish-language media organizations, came at the New School in Manhattan, its audience packed with partisans from both sides in a heavily Latino audience. The greater backdrop was a series of aggressive ads each has run on TV in recent days.

With Green's defeated runoff foe Fernando Ferrer seated in the front row, Bloomberg demanded to know how he could call Ferrer "borderline irresponsible" in campaign ads but then "go and ask his support."

Green replied, "This from a man who said a week ago he won't be divisive." Green underscored several times in this first debate — another is scheduled for tomorrow — that Ferrer now supports him and he's met with his former opponent's backers.

Green said it didn't matter that the runoff was between a Jew and a Puerto Rican and blamed "freelancers" for racially provocative messages against Ferrer in the final days of the runoff campaign.

Bloomberg sought advantage by expressing some support for Ferrer's "Other New York" theme.

"Clearly a lot of people have been left out," Bloomberg said. "I thought Freddy was right on that one."

And Bloomberg accused Green of inconsistency by touting "merit pay" for teachers — until the United Federation of Teachers endorsed him. He said that if he were a union leader, he'd want Green as a bargaining opponent.

Green lashed back that Bloomberg didn't understand merit pay, was reading from a position paper others prepared for him and noted that Bloomberg sought the endorsement of the health care workers' union but failed.

Beyond such clashes, the candidates found themselves agreeing on some specific and symbolic issues and tilting differently on others.

Both emphasized the urgent need to retain jobs and business, with Green giving what seemed more emphasis to rebuilding in the area of the destroyed World Trade Center.

They expressed different degrees of concern about hiring contractors for city work with labor violations, with Green stating such opposition flatly and Bloomberg hailing the current administration's efforts against corruption.

They agreed most on the need to take care of the most desparately impoverished in the city. On diversifying the city work force, Bloomberg said he'd tell his commissioners, "You get us diversity, or you're not going to work for me."

Green said agencies differ — 93 percent of city firefighters are still white males — and suggested opening high schools of fire sciences to balance that. He also said he preferred tuition assistance for the Police Department over a recruitment campaign.

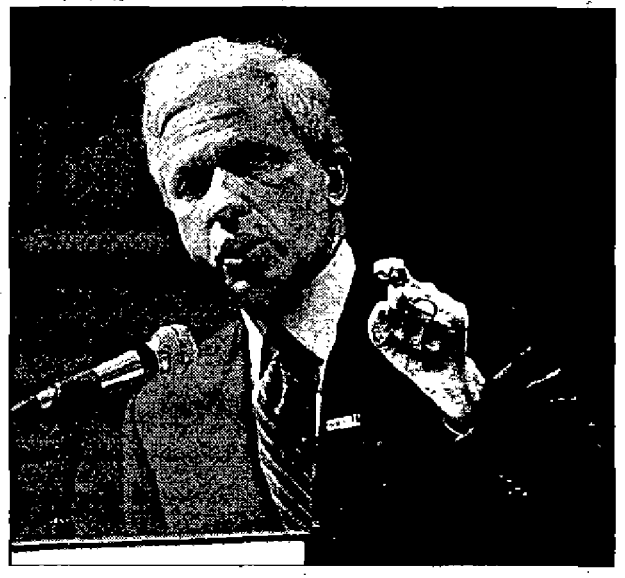
But it was the potshots that got the crowd going. Bloomberg called it a conflict for Green to resist Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's reform plan for the Buildings Department, while taking some $700,000 in contributions from the real estate industry.

Green replied, "It is true that a person who tries to buy City Hall has fewer conflicts of interest." Bloomberg has opted out of campaign-finance limits and spent record millions on a New York mayoral race. Green said he opposed putting building inspections under the authority of the Fire Department because it was a "dumb idea."

Most of the questions were asked in Spanish by three journalists, although a few were passed along from audience members in English. The candidates wore an earphone to listen to a [illegible] tion of the Spanish.

Staff writer [illegible]





Newsday Photos / Mayita Mendez

Mayoral candidates Michael Bloomberg, left, and Mark Green in a brisk 90-minute debate at the New School in Manhattan. The event, which was sponsored by Spanish-language media organizations, was marked by sharp exchanges from both candidates.

COUNTDOWN TO THE ELECTION

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