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Metamorphosis of a Race

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Michael Bloomberg and his family waited calmly for election night results at the Hilton Times Square as aides frantically crunched vote totals from the Board of Elections.

For two hours after the polls closed, the Republican Bloomberg had been virtually tied with Democrat Mark Green. At 11:14 p.m., the billionaire entrepreneur inched ahead by 1,000 votes.

With such a slim lead and 18,000 uncounted absentee ballots, Bloomberg's strategists briefly discussed which lawyers to hire in the event of a Florida-like vote challenge. But the contingency plans were unnecessary, as a flood of votes from Queens and Staten Island pushed Bloomberg's lead upward.

When the margin reached 20,000 votes, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who was in Bloomberg's suite, said the election would not be challenged, an aide recalled. Soon enough, someone told Bloomberg, "It's Mark Green on the phone. He wants to concede."

No one, not even Bloomberg's strategists, would have confidently predicted this result a few months, or even weeks, ago. In a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans by a 5-to-1 margin, a political neophyte who had been sued for sexual harassment, history that Green resurrected, and who had a talent for damaging off-the-cuff remarks became the first Republican in city history to follow another Republican into office.

"He broke a lot of rules," said Maureen Connelly, a campaign consultant. Anyone who suggested this summer that Bloomberg would split the Latino vote and get more support from black voters than Giuliani did in his mayoral runs would have been told, "Get your head examined," Connelly added.

Bloomberg's once-secretive advisers have been happy to talk about the tenacity of their candidate and the campaign's canny choices. But a review of the final weeks shows that Bloomberg could have been undone by his own mistakes, if only his opponent had been nimble enough to exploit them.

How Bloomberg beat all the odds

For example, Bloomberg said he didn't release his tax returns while his opponents did, saying derisively, "They don't make anything." Green and his wife jointly earned more than $400,000 last year. In another instance, Bloomberg's acceptance of an Amsterdam News endorsement containing anti-Jewish statements led one adviser to fear that Bloomberg had lost the Jewish vote.

But Bloomberg overcame missteps with the help of more than $50 million of his own money and two men: Rudy Giuliani and Mark Green. Giuliani, a heroic figure after the Sept. 11 terror attack on the World Trade Center, filmed a sentimental commercial that drove so-called "Giuliani Democrats" and others into Bloomberg's column.

And Green, wrapped up in failed attempts at unity with other Democrats after a bruising runoff against Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, never acknowledged that Bloomberg was a serious threat and never found an effective message to combat his multimillion-dollar spending.

An Oct. 24 poll gave Green a comfortable lead of 16 percentage points. As the Democratic Party fell to bickering, Green's lead shrank to 4 percentage points by Nov. 2 and to a dead heat on the weekend before Election Day.

Bloomberg's nightly tracking polls gave him the lead once — and by 1 percentage point, easily within the margin of error — less than 36 hours before polls opened on Nov. 6. He won 50 percent to Green's 47 percent, with a margin of 42,000 votes.

The Green Factor

Last year, long before Bloomberg announced he'd be a candidate, his strategists mapped out a long-shot scenario for victory: After a bruising Democratic primary, the less-than-lovable Green would enter the general election without solid party support. Then Bloomberg, with unlimited spending on advertisements, could present himself as a fresh face and slip past Green into City Hall.

"That's exactly what happened, and there was no way of knowing that it would happen better than anyone hoped," said a person familiar with the strategy, who asked not to be named. By Election Day, "Green was a beaten-up guy and half of his party couldn't stand to look at him and hated his guts."

Green never recovered from the Oct. 11 Democratic runoff, which he won with a commercial asking voters if they could "afford to take a chance" on a Ferrer mayoralty. That same weekend, fliers showing Ferrer as a lackey of the Rev. Al Sharpton were distributed in some neighborhoods.

Green stood by his ad and denounced the anti-Sharpton materials, but that weekend haunted him. Within days, Ferrer supporters like U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-Harlem) and SEIU / Local 1199 president Dennis Rivera met with Bloomberg to telegraph to Green that he'd better change his attitude. Seeing trouble, the state's senior Democrats negotiated among themselves and pulled together a "unity meeting" on a Friday, Oct. 19.

Green, perhaps not wanting to appear to cave in to critics, told Ferrer, Rangel, Rivera and others at that meeting: "I don't need your support to win. I need your support to govern."

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