

New York Mayor Bloomberg to spend more than \$100 million to secure third term

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The reelection campaign of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is on course to spend well over \$100 million, setting a new record for any local race.

Bloomberg has already spent \$65 million of his own money on this campaign, according to the *New York Times*. Official financial disclosure data released last week shows that the billionaire mayor has paid out \$22 million for television ads in the last few months, along with \$10 million on campaign mailings, which have been inundating voters' mailboxes for some time now.

There is still a month to go before Election Day. Four years ago Bloomberg spent nearly half of his total during the same period. If he maintains that pace, the sum will be a record-setting \$117 million.

This is only a small fraction—about 0.7 percent to be more precise—of Bloomberg's estimated net worth of \$16 billion. It is 16 times as much, however, as the \$3.8 million spent by Bloomberg's Democratic opponent, City Comptroller William C. Thompson. Thompson, whose party supposedly has the support of four out of every five New York City voters, has only a few million dollars left. In the month of September he raised the grand total of \$114,000, which is about as much as Bloomberg has been spending every two hours.

In 2001, when he first ran for mayor, Bloomberg's spokesmen explained that as a "non-politician" he had to spend generously to become better known. That is obviously not the situation eight years later.

Although he is leading in the polls, Bloomberg has reasons to be concerned. He is running for a third term in the midst of the greatest economic crisis in generations. Millions of working people are angry and anxious over the conditions they face and their future and are increasingly directing their ire at Wall Street, with which the mayor and his fortune are closely identified. There is also the issue of Bloomberg's hypocritical and dishonest maneuvers last year to overturn the city's term limits legislation twice upheld by voters in citywide referendums. While City Hall has done its best to suppress any public discussion on this issue, the move was widely unpopular and seen as politically corrupt.

Bloomberg is taking nothing for granted precisely because he knows that he cannot count upon any genuine enthusiasm among voters. He is trying to give his campaign the aura of inevitability. He seeks to mobilize his wealthy and middle class supporters, who can be counted on to come to the polls in numbers that are far disproportionate to their small percentage of the population, while

discouraging the much larger number of working class voters who are looking for an alternative but see none whatsoever. Depending on turnout, he could wind up spending as much as \$50 or \$100 for each vote.

Above all, Bloomberg is counting on the political bankruptcy of his supposed opposition. The spending juggernaut is aimed at demoralizing any of the Democrats who may have hopes of defeating the incumbent.

William Thompson, who won the Democratic nomination against City Councilman Tony Avella in last month's primary election, is a product of the Brooklyn Democratic Party machine and whose father was a state senator and later an appellate court judge. Thompson was president of the city's Board of Education during the 1990s, and has served as comptroller during both of Bloomberg's terms in office.

For the last eight years, neither Thompson nor any of his fellow Democrats had any fundamental policy differences with Bloomberg. When the mayor announced such policies as forcing homeless families to pay rent for living in shelters, the Democrats said little and did less. During Bloomberg's "business-friendly" two terms in office, there were few complaints because the Democrats, holding 48 out of 51 City Council seats as well as most other local offices, had no differences with the billionaire mayor, a Democrat-turned-Republican-turned-"Independent."

In September 2008, for instance, in the week after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and a month before Bloomberg rammed his term limits repeal through the City Council, the mayor ordered spending cuts of \$1.5 billion over the next two years. Thompson, in his capacity as city comptroller and with an eye toward running to succeed Bloomberg when the mayor left the stage, backed the attacks on jobs and public services.

"It is responsible to take action now to address this problem," Thompson declared, adding, in a plea with which Bloomberg could easily agree, that "it is my hope that any reduction will be managed in a way that minimizes the impact on critical services provided to New Yorkers."

Thompson suddenly discovered that Bloomberg was a scoundrel who was "out of touch" with ordinary New Yorkers only when the mayor double-crossed those who were expecting that he would leave after his allotted two terms in office. When the City Council revised the term limits law to allow for a third term, Thompson, in his own words, "felt betrayed." He had waited his turn and played by the rules, but was now being snubbed.

Another indication of the moribund state of New York's Democrats is the voter turnout in the primary that Thompson won on September 15. Less than 11 percent of the city's enrolled Democrats cast ballots, a record low. Thompson became the party's standard bearer with perhaps 3 percent of the city's eligible voters.

The current state of New York City politics is about far more than the personal pique of Thompson or the report that Bloomberg decided on a third term after his quixotic hope of a campaign as a third-party presidential candidate fizzled. Bloomberg's position in New York politics is a vivid expression of the increasingly hollow character of capitalist democracy in an American political system that is of, for and by a narrow financial elite.

In a recent issue of the weekly *Village Voice* newspaper in New York, reporter Tom Robbins reveals some of the mechanisms by which this social layer exercises a political stranglehold with little concern for democratic sensibilities.

Robbins refers to a new political biography of Bloomberg by *New York Times* reporter Joyce Purnick. Much of the material in the book is already fairly well known. The mayor was apparently thinking of making an end run around term limits as early as February 2008. He commissioned a public opinion poll that spring that suggested that a move to overturn previous ballots in favor of term limits would go down to defeat.

So instead of taking the issue to the voters, Bloomberg bided his time, waiting until the eruption of the financial crisis in September of 2008 to announce that he felt compelled to stay on as mayor because he was uniquely qualified to confront the economic emergency. (Not so coincidentally, Bloomberg's predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, attempted to grab a third term eight years ago, claiming that only he could deal with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.)

Having waited until less than two months before the general election—in which a large turnout would assure the defeat of a ballot initiative overturning term limits—Bloomberg insisted that there was no time to organize such a referendum, and instead turned to the City Council seeking legislation allowing him, as well as other city officials, a one-time pass on term limits. As this gave incumbent City Council members facing the end of their terms a chance to keep their jobs, it was not difficult to pull together a majority vote for the measure.

Robbins's article provides an account of the behind-the-scenes deliberations which solidified Bloomberg's decision to seek a third term. In July 2008, he met with Rupert Murdoch and other billionaires at an annual tycoons' retreat in Sun Valley, Idaho. Bloomberg, Robbins writes, "mingled with Murdoch and other pro-third term chums, including investment mogul Henry Kravis and Time Warner's Richard Parsons. The mayor was apparently treated to a full-court press from those moguls, who were in turn consulting with real estate big Jerry Speyer and investment strategist Steven Rattner, both of whom were aggressively pushing a third term."

While the official Republican or Democratic Party primaries get most of the media attention, the real primary is that described by Purnick and Robbins—the discussions in which the unelected plutocrats confer and bestow their support on their political

representatives. In the case of Bloomberg, it is one of their own, and the discussions are almost not necessary. Of course Bloomberg, the wealthiest man in New York, does not occupy a subordinate position in relation to Murdoch, Kravis and the rest. It would be safe to say, however, that his plans would have been altered if for any reason these figures had told him that they would withhold their support.

In fact, the example of the one billionaire who differed with Bloomberg on the term limits maneuver proves this point in another way. Cosmetics magnate Ronald Lauder told the mayor he would not go along and planned to run ads against the term limits change. Bloomberg then negotiated a deal in which Lauder agreed to make "an exception." In return, the mayor promised a seat on the city Charter revision commission that will be formed next year, a quid pro quo arrangement that many see as a brazen violation of the city's ethics laws.

Bloomberg's quest for a third term exposes a political system in which plutocratic rule is less and less disguised. The super-rich prefer increasingly to hold the reins of power directly rather than through political representatives who must make an attempt to win the support of broader masses of the population.

Bloomberg's status as the overwhelming consensus candidate of the ruling class is also highlighted by the apparent decision of the Obama White House to sit out the New York mayoral race. Under conditions where Obama has shown no hesitation in strongly intervening in both this year's governor's race in New Jersey and next year's in New York, this amounts to a backhanded endorsement of the Republican mayor. Even if Obama eventually endorses Thompson, it will surely be a pro forma gesture. The president is already on record as calling Bloomberg an "outstanding mayor."

The rallying around Bloomberg for an unprecedented third term is a sign of the weakness of the existing political setup, not its strength. Especially in the wake of the worldwide economic collapse and the clear indications that the future is one of deepening unemployment, budget cuts and home foreclosures, the ruling elite is increasingly aware that it is sitting on top of a powder keg. Whether Bloomberg wins a third term or not, these social and class contradictions will continue to grow and will inevitably explode in a new period of mass political struggle.



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