by Susan Reefer
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According to recent surveys (including those by the New York Times) Mayor Michael Bloomberg's approval ratings and popularity among New Yorkers has continued to decline, in a trend that has remained virtually unaltered since he was elected in November, 2001.

Survey research is not an exact science, but it is the tool by which politicians determine their campaign strategy, and measure their effectiveness both as elected officials and as candidates for re-election. In the case of Mayor Bloomberg, the survey results are especially significant. When a politician runs for re-election, the strategy is usually very simple: hold on to the votes he or she got last time around. In most places, in most elections, if you can garner a margin of victory once, you can do it again. The people that voted for you before, at least in theory, could be convinced to do so again.

But Bloomberg was elected in a year in which very little could be counted on to repeat itself. He was a lifelong Democrat, elected on a Republican ticket. He was facing a Democratic opponent who had to endure a costly and fractured Democratic primary. He had the endorsement of outgoing Mayor Rudy Giuliani, at a time when New Yorkers saw Giuliani as a hero.

And so while Bloomberg could, in theory, expect to receive the support of those who voted for him last time, he also must take into consideration the unlikelihood of the same set of circumstances playing out in 2005. This makes the results of ongoing survey research all the more significant.

JOB APPROVAL RATING

For a politician, the number that is often most watched and most widely publicized is the job approval rating. It is the question that asks, simply, "Do you approve or disapprove of the job this person is doing?"

In a recent survey , conducted by Quinnipiac University, Bloomberg had a job approval rating of 32 percent, versus a disapproval rating of 56 percent. This is bad news for the mayor, for a number of reasons.

- First, it represents an ongoing downward spiral. Since he was sworn in on New Year's Day, 2002, Bloomberg has seen his job approval rating drop: from an initial 65 percent approval and six percent disapproval in February 2002, to the all-time low we see today.

- Secondly, the most dramatic drop in approval ratings is also the most recent. The mayor's approval rating in February of this year was 48 percent, with a 41 percent disapproval. This was less than a popular politician would hope to see, but not catastrophic. But the 16 percent drop in approval over the next two months was the sharpest decline so far in Bloomberg's tenure. And just to get some perspective on the value of that drop in support, 16 percent of registered voters is more than all the registered Republicans in New York City.

- Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the intensity of the mayor's disapproval is across the board. No one disgruntled group or dissatisfied political subset is skewing the overall results. Men, women, Democrats, Republicans, everyone is unhappy with the way Mayor Bloomberg is handling his job.

ECONOMY VS. CRIME

In predicting a politician's chances of survival, job approval is an important indicator, but it is not the most important. Job approval tends to reward results, not surprisingly. If the economy is good, the mayor gets high marks for handling the economy. If schools are good, the mayor gets high approval in handling education.

And we see this in the survey results. Bloomberg gets low marks in handling the economy (28 percent approve, 61 percent disapprove) and it's no secret why: when asked how serious the city's budget problems are, 68 percent said very serious, while 24 percent said only somewhat serious. Compare that to July, 2002, when only 46 percent thought the city's budget problems were very serious, and 47 percent approved of the mayor's handling of the budget.

In contrast, the mayor continues to get high marks for handling crime: 57 percent approve, and 31 percent disapprove. Crime is the one area in which the mayor has a positive approval rating, and crime in the city continues to decline.

In the minds of voters, it doesn't really matter which comes first, the effort or the results; voters are quick with both credit and blame.

RIGHT TRACK/WRONG TRACK

And so the other major indicator that pundits look for is more bad news for the mayor. Sometimes called Right track/Wrong track, it is a question that asks voters whether things, overall, are headed in the right direction or not. This question is often a bellwether of voting trends both locally and nationwide.

The question of how things are going in New York City shows most New Yorkers are concerned about the future: a combined 65 percent are dissatisfied with the way things are going, while only 33 percent are satisfied. And among those who are dissatisfied, nearly half, 31 percent, responded "very dissatisfied."

The amount and the intensity of unhappiness among voters is a marked increase from a year ago. In July, 2002, 64 percent were satisfied while only 33 percent were dissatisfied. The rapid reversal in New York's outlook may be in response to the mayor's handling of city issues, or his low numbers may be a direct effect of overall pessimism. Either way, it doesn't bode well.

New Yorkers Don’t Want To Dine With Mayor Bloomberg

But the mayor does have some good news. While job approval and right track/wrong track are important, they are also closely linked to current events, as we have seen. And events can change, sometimes very quickly. The numbers that are far more stable over time are known as "personal approval": what voters think about a politician personally.

In campaigns, issues matter. They can be of great importance, depending on the nature of the race. But issues tend to be more important in legislative races: Congress, state house, city council. In contrast, personality politics play a major role in executive races: president, governor,

mayor. Voters may not understand all the intricacies of federalism and divided government, but they seem to have internalized the idea that legislators make laws, while executives enact and uphold those laws.

And so for Mayor Bloomberg, what may ultimately be more important than whether he is fixing all of New York's problems is whether anyone is rooting for him to succeed. Do we like this guy? Do we want him to do well? Is he the underdog we secretly hope will emerge triumphant, or is he the cocky titan, ripe for a fall?

The answers are mixed. We believe he is a strong leader, 61 percent overall. He got high marks in leadership across the board, and tested higher among Democrats and Independents than among Republicans, his theoretical base. That's important. We think he's honest and trustworthy, 57 percent. We think he's smart (89 percent), and a hard worker (75 percent). All of those are qualities New Yorkers value in their mayor.

But when asked if Mike Bloomberg cares about people like themselves, only 33 percent responded yes, while 60 percent said no. When asked if the mayor understands the concerns they face in daily life, 29 percent said yes, 66 percent said no. And when asked if he shares their views on issues they care about, 30 percent thought he did, while 62 percent said no he did not. That's a problem for the mayor.

The straightforward question, "Does he have a likable personality?" might seem harmless, but may in fact be deadly: only 39 percent said yes, while 51 percent said no. And so the most creative question in the survey could also be the most telling: when asked if Bloomberg would be fun to dine with, 40 percent said yes, but another 46 percent said no.

Would New Yorkers vote for someone they wouldn't want to share a meal with? Maybe. New York has a long history of electing controversial mayors, many of whom were loved and reviled in nearly equal numbers. But those mayors had intensity of support, and those supporters were intensely loyal. Their numbers came out a little higher on the love side, even if only enough to tip the scale.

Voters can be convinced to overcome their disinclination toward a politician and vote for him or her regardless of their personal feelings. But they need a compelling reason to turn out and do

so.

And that reason may yet present itself. Numbers don't tell the whole story, they only reveal outlines and predict future direction; a direction which can still be headed off at the pass. But Mayor Bloomberg will have to overcome a great many obstacles, not the least of which is history, on his path toward re-election.

COMMITTEE ON VACANCIES

Geoffrey Davis announced a week after the murder of his brother that his name will replace Councilmember James Davis's on the ballot. This is because of a provision in New York State election law.

When Davis was killed, on July 23rd, the deadline for filing a petition to gain a spot on the primary election ballot had already passed. Davis had successfully filed by the July 10th deadline.

In the event of a candidate's death or inability to run after the filing deadline, the process of choosing a replacement candidate falls to that candidate's Committee on Vacancies. The Committee on Vacancies is chosen by the candidate, and the members are designated at the time when he or she files a petition.

A candidate is not required to select a Committee on Vacancies; if they do not designate such a committee at the time of filing, there would be no provision to select a successor to fill that candidate's vacancy on the ballot.

As outlined by New York State election law, the Committee on Vacancies must include at least three members, and there is no limit to number of members that may be designated. The law does require that the number of members be an odd number.

Councilman Davis designated a Committee on Vacancies for the Democratic line which includes five people; the committee is led by his mother, Thelma Davis. Candidates typically choose close supporters or family members to comprise their Committee on Vacancies.

According to Chris Riley, Director of Communications, New York City Board of Elections, a committee has ten days from the time the vacancy occurs to name a successor. The Committee on Vacancies for Councilman Davis had until August 4th. Four of the five members of the committee reportedly chose Geoffrey Davis, who will now run in the Democratic primary in September.

Candidates who file under more than one party line must designate a different Committee on Vacancies for each party.

The Committee on Vacancies is required to choose a candidate who is a registered voter, and who is enrolled in the nominating political party.

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