

Bloomberg versus Berlusconi

Jerry Krase (November 04, 2009)



As one looks closely at the behavior and battles of Bloomberg and Berlusconi it seems that, besides being big buck billionaires, they have a great deal more in common than lots of money.

For many decades I have observed New York City politicians up close as well as, from a much greater distance, those of the Italian kind. During that time, La Grande Mela and La Bella Italia have shared much in the way of political corruption, fiscal crises, and intergroup conflict. The politics of both places, at least at the top of the food chain, has also shifted distinctively rightward over the decades while polarization and resentment by locality, ethnicity, and class have become more evident.



Today, Tuesday, November 3, 2009 I got up early and went for a run in the park with my friend Michael the Lawyer. After getting up a little sweat, we took our regular posts at Dizzy's (A Finer Diner) where we downed a few cups of coffee and, with my other morning friends - Wayne the Accountant, and Bob the Musician we solved most of the world's problems. It was Election Day, so later in the afternoon I will go with my wife Suzanne to our local polling place at John Jay High School and cast our ballots for our choice of candidates that are running for election. Sadly, experts predict that we will be among the fewest voters (proportionally) ever to go to the Gotham polls. The American and NYC trend in elections has been for fewer and fewer eligible voters to cast their ballots. Since a viable electoral democracy is dependent on voter participation, this is troubling. The recent trend in Italy is also downward but Italians are still far more likely to go to the polls than are Americans. One source estimates that almost 90 % of Italians turn out to vote. For this New York City election, I doubt whether even a third of eligible voters who take the trouble. People don't exercise their right to vote for many reasons. The number one excuse I hear is the all too often well-founded belief that it "really doesn't really matter" who is elected.

The top prize in the New York City contest is the job of Mayor. Even though Bloomberg doesn't take his salary for the job, I will most certainly vote for the current Comptroller of the City of New York, William C. Thompson Jr. He is a "candidate of color" and is running on the Democratic and the quirky Working Families Party lines. He almost certainly will be the loser as he currently is a dozen points behind in the polls. The person most likely to win is the current incumbent - Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg - who has the backing of both the Republican and the quirky Independence Parties. Racially speaking, White voters back Bloomberg 66-24 percent and therefore I would estimate that Italian American voters, especially those in La Bella Isola di Staten (Staten Island), will give him more than three-quarters of their cast ballots. Monetarily speaking, Billionaire Bloomberg has spent almost \$100 million of his own money in the race, outspending Thompson's other peoples' money by 14 to 1.

Bloomberg seeks a third consecutive term even though, in 1993, New Yorkers voted to "limit all elected officials in New York City to two consecutive terms in office" by a 59-41 % margin. In 2008, Bloomberg, bull-dozed through the City Council (29-22) a new law allowing him, and them, to run for another term. As to small "d" democracy, at the time, a Quinnipiac poll found that 89 percent of New Yorkers felt that term limits should be decided by voters in a referendum, not the self-interested Council. The poll also found that 51 percent opposed extending the term limits for Bloomberg. In comparison, to Bloomberg's success against the will of the people, after the horrors of 9/11/2001, outgoing Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's lost his appeal to remain in office a few months longer that because of the turmoil. His appeal went to Albany, which meant nowhere, as Democrats wanted him out of office.

Giuliani's failure and Bloomberg's success at overcoming term limits is most ironic since the NYC Council that voted in Bloomberg's interest is almost 100% Democratic. 'America's Mayor' Giuliani has also endorsed Mike. According to [David W. Chen, in The New York Times](#) [2]: "Raising the specter of a return to higher crime and greater anxiety, former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani warned on Sunday that New York could become a more dangerous city if Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is not re-elected in November."

Bloomberg's behavior beckons me toward another busy Billionaire with whom he has much in common -- Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Besides being balding billionaires with surnames beginning with "B," Bloomberg and Berlusconi both are, "boils and all," also likely to win re-election. Bloomberg balloting is today but Berlusconi has some time to wait

Both Bloomberg and Berlusconi are media bigs, but Silvio is bigger because he is the boss not only of his own but the government's broadcasting as well. In contrast to Berlusconi, Bloomberg, who recently bought BusinessWeek, seems to have the New York City press, in his pocket. Bloomberg



has been endorsed by all the major and minor dailies, weeklies, and monthlies. Even Rupert Murdoch's New York Post has endorsed Bloomberg while Murdoch is one of the biggest thorns in Silvio's side in Italy; not ideologically but competitively.

Berlusconi is so bothered by the "bad news" about him that he is creating a "media task force" to stamp it out. By chance, one of Berlusconi's television stations broadcast some [unflattering video](#) [3] of a judge who ruled against him in a bribery case.

Berlusconi has also floated a balloon about reforming the Italian Constitution to allow a law granting him immunity from prosecution. [Bloomberg has little need](#) [4], as opposed to Berlusconi, to try to reduce the power of the independent judiciary.

Bloomberg has also on occasion bullied journalists, but in general he has had an eight-year honeymoon with the press. Two of those who felt his wrath are friends of mine; [Rafael Alequin Martinez](#) [5] the editor of the small city-wide The Free Press/Prensa Libre paper I used to write for, and [Azi Paybara](#) [6] of The New York Observer.

Whereas the anti-Berlusconi stories are found in almost everything he doesn't control, for Bloomberg they lurk only on the edges of the media world such as "The Bloomberg Watch: Above the Rules? Above the People?" and in the stories of investigative reporters like [Tom Robbins \(in the Village Voice](#) [7]).

On balance, Berlusconi and Bloomberg have a great deal in common based on their personal wealth and influence, but they differ significantly on their approaches to governing. Ironically, despite being media moguls, the biggest difference between them seems to be stylistic. Watching the two "performing" on the television screen it is clear that Bloomberg is boring and Berlusconi bombastic, but when you're a big bucks billionaire, style seems not to matter much.

Postscript Headline: "Big Bucks Billionaire Bloomberg Barely Beats Bill at Ballot Box"

I felt I just had to write that. In any case, just as I predicted Bloomberg won (51%-46%), the turnout was low (about 25% of eligible voters) , and Staten Island voters overwhelmingly didn't vote for Thompson (29% for him versus 66% for Bloomberg).

Even my daughter Kathryn has gotten into the political commentator act, being quoted on page 22 of [The New York Times story "Bloomberg Wins 3rd Term as Mayor in Unexpectedly Close Race.](#) [8]"

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