



How long is Rudy's shelf-life

By Maureen Donnelly

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- He's Italian.

He's Catholic.

He's pro-abortion.

He's from New York.

He'll blow his cool on the campaign trail.

In short: He's toast.

But former GOP Mayor Rudolph Giuliani continues to lead many polls of Republican primary voters across the country and is holding his own when matched up against top-tier Democrats like U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.).

"Rudy has surprised everybody, even myself to an extent," said former Borough President Guy Molinari, New York state co-chairman of Giuliani's campaign. It was a given earlier in the campaign that conservative Republicans in states like South Carolina wouldn't give Giuliani even a first look.

In addition to his pro-abortion stand, Giuliani's support of gay rights and gun control, as well as his multiple marriages and open estrangement from his two children, Andrew and Caroline, were supposed to be anathema to hard-core "values" voters.

"None of that has hurt him," said Molinari. "What people are seeing in him is strength. They like his decisiveness. That distinguishes him from the others."

Giuliani leads Republicans like Fred Thompson, Mitt Romney and Arizona Sen. John McCain by an average of about 11 points in national polls, according to Chicago-based RealClearPolitics.com, which tracks presidential polling, news coverage and campaign activity.

In South Carolina, a bastion of evangelical and red-meat conservative voters, Giuliani leads by an average of about three points.

The former mayor's GOP opponents are one reason for Giuliani's staying power in the race, said RealClearPolitics managing editor John McIntyre. "There's not the obvious, traditional Republican nominee there," said McIntyre.

And with security being the "defining issue" of the 2008 cycle, Molinari said, other so-called values-based concerns about Giuliani have taken a back seat to the campaign's main selling point: Giuliani's performance in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

"No group in the country would be more concerned about terrorism than conservatives," Molinari said.

Not that there haven't been tribulations for Giuliani along the way.

He flubbed an abortion answer during an early debate, and has made comments that many said improperly linked him to emergency responders who got sick working at Ground Zero.

Giuliani has also seen his son, Andrew, give disparaging interviews describing how the children had grown distant from Giuliani following his divorce from their mother, Donna Hanover, and remarriage to Judith Nathan.

But Giuliani continued to prosper, even when a New Hampshire voter publicly asked him why voters should support him when his own children didn't.

Instead of flashing the well-known temper that many New Yorkers saw during his eight years in City Hall, Giuliani urged people to focus on his public record and "leave my family alone." He later said he would discuss those issues in his own way in order to guard his family's privacy.

With an unpopular war in Iraq and Congress controlled by the Democrats, the Republicans, McIntyre said, "know they're in for a tough election" in 2008, "and they see Rudy as the best chance to win."

"He puts states in play that Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson can't," said McIntyre, including traditionally Democratic-voting New Jersey and Pennsylvania, which account for 36 of the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win.

"With the map so close, the Democrats have to win New Jersey and Pennsylvania," he said.

McIntyre adds that Giuliani also represents a change from GOP President George Bush.

"You have a Southern, born-again Christian from Texas, and you have Rudy from Brooklyn," he said.

"Republicans know they can't have the same menu as eight years ago."

Even so, Giuliani and his supporters may want to keep those inauguration party plans on hold, said Richard Flanagan, a political science professor at the College of Staten Island.

"All this is going to fold like a cheap suit once the primary race heats up," he said. "Those negatives are

going to bubble up."

He said Giuliani's poll numbers are good because voters aren't really paying attention yet, and favorable treatment from "New York-centric" conservative radio hosts like Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh have been "sustaining the Giuliani buzz."

"When the grassroots voters get a look at Giuliani, they won't like him," Flanagan said. "Unless there's been some sea change among hard-core voters in the South, I don't see how he survives."

In other words, Giuliani's still Italian, Catholic, pro-abortion and from New York.

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