Bloomberg May See Opening in New Hampshire Primary Results

Victories by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump could boost former NYC mayor’s candidacy

Far from the New Hampshire primary, aides to former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg eyed the solid victories Tuesday by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump as potential boosts to a Bloomberg candidacy.

The results, Bloomberg advisers said, were a fresh sign he may have an opening, as Democrats and Republicans embraced candidates the aides said were unlikely to resonate with voters in a general election.

Steve Schmidt, a Republican strategist who served as a senior adviser to Sen. John McCain during his 2008 campaign, said the field of candidates was weak and that the former mayor could win.

“Any combination of them in a general election would open a path for an independent candidate,” said Mr. Schmidt, who isn’t advising Mr. Bloomberg. “There’s a big opening in the middle of the electorate, and Bloomberg is on point in that space.”

Bloomberg aides say they are looking far more closely at the results of Super Tuesday, on March 1, when more states will vote in the primaries and it will be easier to gauge the strength of Hillary Clinton and others in the race.

Former NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg is seriously considering entering the 2016 race as an Independent, and he's said to be willing to spend $1 billion to finance his campaign. WSJ's Shelby Holliday takes a closer look at the potential impact it may have on an already volatile election year. Photo: AP

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But the biggest hurdle to a Bloomberg bid may not hinge on the shifting fortunes of the other candidates, but on the former mayor’s political brand. Mr. Bloomberg is a fiscally conservative technocrat with Wall Street roots, a liberal on many social issues, and a gun-control advocate. He identified as a Democrat but ran for mayor in 2001 as a Republican, and later as an independent.
“He would have zero chance here,” said Matt Borges, the chairman of the Republican Party in Ohio, a swing state. Mr. Borges said he believed Mr. Bloomberg’s positions on issues like gun control would be insurmountable.

Other obstacles loom. Some conservative voters, particularly in the South, have criticized him for his positions on guns and for a measure in New York City, later turned aside by a court, to curb the sale of large, sugary drinks.

Mr. Bloomberg would also likely face skepticism among Democrats, for his defense of big corporations and his record on race and policing. A police tactic he embraced known as “stop-and-frisk” was seen as unfairly targeting minorities and its use by the city was ruled unconstitutional in 2013 by a federal judge.

Bloomberg aides said those handicaps could be overcome. One aide broke down Mr. Bloomberg’s appeal this way: he is a political outsider unbound by party machinery; he has had private-sector success running Bloomberg LP, his data and media company; and he is a three-term mayor credited with revitalizing the nation’s most populous city and driving down crime.

“There is a degree of polarization, division and I daresay lack of focus on the major issues facing the country that is exemplified by the entire primary process to date. Including but not limited to New Hampshire,” said Douglas E. Schoen, a longtime Bloomberg adviser who has conducted polls for the ex-mayor recently.

Mr. Bloomberg has other potential advantages. He is worth more than $30 billion and has signaled he is ready to spend. One of his top political aides, Howard Wolfson, served as communications director for Mrs. Clinton’s 2008 campaign. He has a stable of loyal aides ready to jump in.

The campaign trail could be awkward for Mr. Bloomberg, who frequently grew irritated with the New York City press corps for asking personal questions about his life, including his weekend travels to his vacation homes. He isn’t a natural campaigner, though his aides said he grew increasingly easy on the trail as the years passed. “He was used to business groups, marketing professionals—the political media was a very different kind of thing,” said Bill Cunningham, a former aide.

A third-party candidate has never succeeded in winning the presidency, though they have shaped contests, Ralph Nader in 2000 being the most recent example. Entering the race late, Mr. Bloomberg would face challenges getting on ballots and building campaign machinery in each state.

James McCann, a political-science professor at Purdue University who studies third-party bids, said Mr. Bloomberg faces an uphill battle. “It still is difficult to come in from out of the blue and get the traction you need, even when things are really seemingly divisive and there’s a great deal of disenchantment, even when you’re a billionaire,” he said.