

GRAND OLD PUNCHFEST RUDY & ROMNEY GO TOE-TO-TOE ON IMMIG

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Byline: BY CELESTE KATZ and DAVID SALTONSTALL DAILY NEWS POLITICAL CORRESPONDENTS

Body

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - **Rudy** Giuliani and Mitt **Romney** explosively clashed on illegal immigration in last night's Republican presidential debate, accusing each other of providing havens for undocumented aliens - Giuliani as mayor, and **Romney** when he hired landscapers for his home.

A voter from Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, started the slapfest with the night's very first question at the CNN/YouTube debate, asking Giuliani if he would continue to "aid and abet" illegal immigrants as he did as mayor if elected President.

"The reality was, New York was not a sanctuary city," replied Giuliani, saying that - like Democratic mayors before him - he allowed illegal immigrants access to city schools, hospitals and police precincts as a way to ensure the city's broader health and safety.

"If we didn't allow the children of illegal immigrants to **go** to school, we would have had 70,000 children on the streets," said Giuliani.

Romney immediately pounced, saying Giuliani had "absolutely" run a sanctuary city for illegal immigrants, to which Giuliani responded that **Romney** had run a "sanctuary mansion" by allowing illegal immigrants to tend his lawn outside of Boston while governor.

"I think it's really kind of offensive actually," **Romney** retorted. The former Massachusetts governor said he didn't hire the illegal workers - his contractor did - and wondered if Giuliani was suggesting that he should have grilled any laborer with an accent who showed up to do the job.

The exchange provided plenty of heat at the very top of the debate, where voters got to fire questions at the GOP lineup in short homemade videos. More than 5,000 questions flooded in, mostly on immigration, taxes, economic issues and conservative values.

The candidates faced off last night with the Iowa caucuses fast approaching on Jan. 3, and New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary right behind it on Jan. 8. This was the eighth major Republican matchup during the highly accelerated 2008 election cycle.

Florida is fraught with meaning for many voters because of the 2000 dustup between President Bush and former vice president and then-Democratic nominee Al Gore.

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The former mayor has been working hard to lock up Florida, a state loaded with ex-New Yorkers who will vote in a Jan. 29 primary.

While he's spent some time in Iowa and New Hampshire - where he is launching a new TV ad tomorrow - claiming larger, later-voting states is integral to Team Giuliani's strategy.

Romney is leading in early-voting Iowa and New Hampshire, but has been dogged on the campaign trail by a judicial appointment he made last year.

Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Kathe Tuttman released a convict without bail after he did time for killing his mother, despite prosecutors' attempts to keep him locked up for allegedly assaulting prison guards.

The convict, Daniel Tavares, Jr., now stands accused of killing a newlywed couple in Washington state.

Giuliani has seized upon the snafu to attack **Romney**'s gubernatorial record on controlling violent crime, seeking to paint **Romney** as a failure and himself as a successful crimefighter as mayor, U.S. attorney and member of the Reagan Justice Department.

Romney has hit back by questioning Giuliani's judgement in picking top advisers: His former police and corrections commissioner, Bernie Kerik, has been indicted on a raft of corruption charges.

ckatz@nydailynews.com

Graphic

GOP presidential wanna-bes (from left) Mitt **Romney**, **Rudy** Giuliani, Fred Thompson and John McCain make waves at last night's CNN/You Tube debate held in St. Petersburg, Fla. Photo by Getty Images

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