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ELECTIONS

Third-term curse haunts Cuomo

If Gov. Andrew Cuomo is serious about running for president in 2020, would he be better off not running for a third term of his own next year?

By JIMMY VIELKIND | 08/06/2017 06:54 AM EDT



If Gov. Andrew Cuomo is serious about running for president in 2020, would he be better off not running for a third term of his own next year? | Mary Altaffer/AP Photo

ALBANY, N.Y. — Andrew Cuomo watched as a third term dragged down his father Mario, scuttling his national aspirations and ultimately leading to an embarrassing defeat in 1994.

Now, a quarter-century later, he faces a similar dilemma. If Cuomo is serious about running for president in 2020, as many in New York political circles think, would he be better off not running for a third term of his own next year?

Cuomo answers this unambiguously: he's running for reelection. He said as much last

month after a flurry of Cuomo 2020 articles in national outlets — including POLITICO Magazine — and as he reported raising \$5 million for his reelection campaign over the past six months.

Even ignoring the demands of balancing a national campaign with running one of the nation's largest states, the road through the next year includes several potholes for Cuomo: a corruption trial of his closest political allies, deteriorating service in New York City's subways that can't easily be improved, a restive legislature, and looming budget deficits. To say nothing of the third-term doldrums that have dragged down New York politicians from Mayor Ed Koch to Sen. Alfonse D'Amato to, well, Mario Cuomo.

"One can certainly make the argument that if he's interested in running for president, staying as governor through 2018 and then freeing yourself up to campaign starting in 2019 is a smart and good idea," said Steve Greenberg, a pollster for the Siena Research Institute.

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The case against a third term has its roots here: Walk away while you can talk about accomplishments and before the problems accrued over eight years in office catch up.

Cuomo would enter his reelection year as a strong front-runner for governor, but there are already signs he would face a substantial challenge on his left flank — in addition to whichever candidate the Republicans field. Polls show that the governor's job approval has slipped this summer — which Greenberg attributed to persistent delays on the subways and commuter trains managed by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. There are no easy solutions, and recent attempts by Cuomo to deflect blame and responsibility have been met skeptically by voters and officials.

That's a problem for a governor whose core political narrative is steady competence — that he makes the trains run on time and can wring accomplishments from a legislature split along party lines. Even that's becoming more difficult: Cuomo openly complained about his negotiating partners when the state budget was adopted later this year than any time since he took office. Frustrated, he largely ignored the Capitol for the remaining half of the

legislative session and had to call a special session to close down the state's business.

The situation could get worse, particularly as Republicans in Washington begin to treat Cuomo as more of a threat. Back in the 1990s, it was Ralph Marino, the Republican majority leader of the state Senate from Long Island, who hamstrung Mario Cuomo. His heir, John Flanagan, could start doing the same thing — as budget deficits of \$4 billion next year rise to a projected \$7.5 billion in 2020.

Third terms are “a rough ride,” according to George Arzt, a one-time aide to Ed Koch. Greenberg referred to them as “difficult” because the economy could go south. Or, as Bill Cunningham — a former adviser to Mario Cuomo, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Mayor Michael Bloomberg put it — “a challenge for anybody” because aides, most of whom have already turned over since Cuomo took office in 2011, begin to atrophy.

“If I were advising him, I would say don't run,” said a Democratic political consultant, who, like many interviewed for this article, declined to be quoted by name because “I like my knees” — a nod to Cuomo's penchant for rough-and-tumble politics.

“We all remember the story of Mario,” the consultant added. “Andrew has a Republican state Senate that could hold him up for two years. Also, third terms are when problems come home to roost. His numbers are going south already.”

Next year will also feature two federal corruption trials involving some of Cuomo's top allies: Alain Kaloyeros, the former president of State University of New York Polytechnic Institute, and Joe Percoco, who managed Cuomo's past two campaigns and has been likened to a brother.

Prosecutors say Percoco helped the developers of a Hudson Valley power plant in exchange for consulting payments to his wife, and assisted developers in Syracuse in exchange for sham consulting fees. Kaloyeros is accused of rigging the bids for high-tech facilities that SUNY Poly built in Buffalo and Syracuse. Both men have pleaded not guilty.



POLITICS

Memo to Mark Zuckerberg: So You Want to Be President ...

By BILL SCHER

While Cuomo was not charged, the criminal complaints noted that all the developers and executives had one thing in common: they donated to the governor's campaign, at the direction of a cooperating witness — and longtime Percoco friend — named Todd Howe.

“Cuomo’s denied he had any knowledge about any of this. But if there’s some hint or innuendo that he knew about some things — even if it doesn’t rise to the level of a criminal charge — it provides an opportunity for an opponent. What did he know, and when did he know it?” said Brendan Quinn, a political operative and former executive director of the New York state Republican Party. “It keeps guys like me entertained.”

On the other hand, Cuomo has a fairly clear rationale for seeking a third term: He has things to build. Arzt noted that much of the governor’s recent focus — an increasingly explicit counterpoint to President Donald Trump — has been infrastructure projects that he will need more time in office to complete.

“He is a person who has built his reputation on being the second coming of Robert Moses: the airports, the Tappan Zee bridge, the 2nd Avenue Subway, and I can’t even list the stuff he’s done upstate,” Arzt said. “He is building a reputation as a great builder, and he needs to stay in office, complete some projects, cut the ribbons for those projects and get some meaningful bills through the legislature and be an active part of the resistance to Trump.”

Beyond the practical, though, there is the soul of the man. And indeed, while the dozens of lawmakers, lobbyists and political operatives who spoke with POLITICO over the past several weeks about this topic were split about the third-term analysis, those closest to the governor predicted he would run.

Andrew Cuomo is a self-described control freak, and he practices politics with the equivalent of a full-court press: push against possible rivals pre-emptively. Win the day, then the week. Tactics matter as much as strategy, and being governor gives you a tremendous tactical advantage for raising money and making news.

“You’re never going to get another, better pulpit than that,” said Hank Sheinkopf, a longtime political consultant who advised Cuomo’s unsuccessful 2002 gubernatorial bid and his 2014 reelection.

But then there’s his father.



OFF MESSAGE

Obama’s Inner Circle Is Urging Deval Patrick to Run

By EDWARD-ISAAC DOVERE

Cuom-ology is an amateur sport in Albany, and gallons of ink and beer have been spilled writing and chatting about the relationship between Mario Cuomo and his eldest son. Andrew worked tirelessly to propel his father’s campaigns, starting as a teenager, and

served during his first term as a dollar-a-year adviser. But Mario would rarely praise his son in public, and there are some who see his shadow in many of Andrew's choices — a relentless drive to surpass the achievements of a father he struggled to please.

Mario Cuomo flirted with running for presidency for nearly a decade but came closest in 1991 — halfway into his third term. His aides went so far as to charter a plane that sat idling on the tarmac of the Albany airport, waiting to take the governor to New Hampshire to file as a candidate. Mario Cuomo never boarded it: He told reporters that he felt obligated to remain in Albany and negotiate with recalcitrant Republicans in the state Senate to try and reach a deal on the state budget.

“His dad made a major point of being unable to run because he had to handle things in Albany,” said Gerald Benjamin, a longtime professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz. “He kept getting called back to the Capitol because he had to deal with the fiscal crisis and other things.”

The same thing could happen to Andrew Cuomo, said Benjamin. But he said he expects Cuomo to run for reelection for a reason mentioned universally by anyone who has ever spent time watching or working for the governor: What the hell else would he do?

He could campaign. Greenberg, the pollster, noted that the pace and length of a modern presidential campaign would mean trips to early primary states that Cuomo has not visited since taking office.

But out of office, he'd still have time, money and friends to help him do so. The governor's campaign had \$25.7 million on hand as of July, which means Cuomo could plausibly have \$30 million by April of next year — probably the latest he could wave off a reelection run given New York's electoral calendar.

Since New York campaign finance restrictions are so lax — the Empire State's individual donor limit is more than 10 times that allowed by the Federal Election Commission — the money can't be transferred to a federal campaign committee. But since New York campaign finance restrictions are so lax, experts say nothing in New York law would prevent Cuomo from transferring all of his cash to a super PAC that would support a presidential run.

He has friends in building trade unions and the Service Employees International Union that he's cultivated with recent policy pushes, and a network of contacts that dates to his time leading the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Bill Clinton's Cabinet.

And Cuomo has covered the political spectrum. He was elected in 2010 as a “new

Democrat” who married centrist economic policies — a cap on property tax increases, business tax cuts, a reduction in pension benefits for new public employees — with liberal social policies like strict gun control and support for same-sex marriage. He turned left after a 2014 Democratic primary against Zephyr Teachout, a law professor, and in his second term has raised the minimum wage, expanded tuition subsidies at public colleges, enacted a system of paid family leave and raised the age of criminal responsibility.

Sheinkopf said the governor is in solid shape for a 2020 run whether he seeks a third term or not.

“The best way to win anything is to have a sufficient enough menu so people from the right will have to hold their noses and vote, people from the center will have to hold their noses and vote, and people on the left the same,” he said.