



De Blasio, left, in Albany. | AP Photo/Mike Groll

De Blasio keeping distance from upcoming Senate elections

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After going all-in to campaign for a Democratic-controlled state Senate in 2014, only to be handed a bruising loss with traumatic effects on his agenda, Mayor Bill de Blasio looks to be sitting out the upcoming legislative election cycle.

The mayor's decision not to campaign for Senate Democratic candidates is partly an acknowledgment of the losses that candidates he stumped for in 2014 suffered throughout the state. It also comes as that effort is under investigation for possible skirting of election law.

"I think it is very safe to say that he will be otherwise engaged, using that time to be out rebuilding his own political standing," said one Democratic source.

"At a moment like this it's about self-preservation more than anything," the source said.

According to a person familiar with de Blasio's plans, the mayor doesn't want to get involved because it's unlikely that he would help Democratic candidates. He's more focused on campaigning for Hillary Clinton and his own re-election in 2017, the source said.

A spokesman for the mayor declined to comment.

De Blasio himself has indicated that he'll likely stay out of the fray this year.

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"I think it comes down to the choices that candidates will make in districts all over this state and, obviously, that the Democratic Senate leadership will make," he told reporters several months ago. "I think it's going to be a very Democratic year in this state. ... But I will take my cues from others as to whether I can be helpful to them."

Another Democratic operative involved with Senate elections agreed that de Blasio isn't expected to do much campaigning for Democrats, given that he's become "politically toxic" to candidates upstate.

Republicans who control the Senate have consistently used de Blasio as a bogeyman in the suburbs.

During the 2014 election cycle, the Senate Republican Campaign Committee linked Democratic candidates with de Blasio in the Hudson Valley and throughout Long Island. Democrats were handed bruising losses despite a push from a coalition of labor unions and high-profile Democrats. Republicans ousted three incumbent Democrats in 2014 and held onto all but one seat using the anti-de Blasio message.

It's likely the party will do the same this year.

"Whether Mayor de Blasio formally campaigns for the Senate Democrats this fall or not, it's clear that he wants them in control so he can expand his reach to Albany, Long Island, the Hudson Valley and even Western New York," Senate GOP spokesman Scott Reif said in an email.

He also wrote, "Allowing these New York City radicals to have unchecked power over our entire state, especially in light of the U.S. Attorney and Manhattan D.A.'s investigations into the fundraising scandal they hatched two years ago, would be a disaster for the hardworking taxpayers and families who call New York home."

Sources familiar with the strategic thinking of the Senate Democrats say that help from de Blasio hasn't been offered or sought, in part because the environment around this year's election is very different from 2014.

The most obvious difference: Gov. Andrew Cuomo won't be at the top of the ticket. In 2014, Democrats did poorly and lost seats in areas where the governor underperformed. Rather than rely on the governor to influence down ballot candidates, it'll be Hillary Clinton. And, perhaps as important for Senate Democrats, her presumed opponent will be Donald Trump.

"This is their moment of highest vulnerability, presidential years, and the demographics have been problematic for a long time," said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz, of the Senate Republicans. "The capacity to redistrict and to retain control is diminished because of shifting demographics. ... They have a very tough presidential environment."

Democrats note that presidential election years have been very good for them. The election in 2012 gave them what might have been an outright Democratic majority, with the formation of the five-member Independent Democratic Conference and Sen. Simcha Felder's defection keeping them from retaking power.

Given the departures of long-serving Republicans such as Sens. Mike Nozzolio and Hugh Farley, the continued fallout over the conviction of former majority leader Dean Skelos, and the steady enrollment and demographic shifts in their favor, Senate Democrats are feeling optimistic about picking up the two seats needed to control the chamber in coalition with the IDC.

De Blasio, in their thinking, isn't a factor.

"Senate Republicans' tired playbook involves creating false enemies to divide New Yorkers and distract voters from their horrible record. It didn't work in the recent special election and it won't work in November," Senate Democratic spokesman Michael Murphy said in a statement.

"For almost 50 years, Republicans have controlled the State Senate, which has brought higher taxes, a stagnant economy and an endless parade of corruption arrests. Senate Democrats are in a better position in 2016 than we have been in many years, and we look forward to watching Republican candidates try to run away from Donald Trump over the next several months."