

# Andrew Cuomo Is One of the Most Progressive Governors. (So Why Don't Liberals Like Him?)

*From education to gay rights, New York's governor has racked up a long list of liberal accomplishments.*

BY: [Alan Greenblatt](#) | July 2017

**In January**, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced his intention to offer New Yorkers free college tuition, Bernie Sanders was by his side. In April, when Cuomo held a ceremonial signing for the bill's passage, Hillary Clinton was there with him. He became the first governor able to deliver on an idea dear to the hearts of Democrats, offering a free ride not just for two years but four years of higher education at a public institution. "College is what high school was 70 years ago," Cuomo said on the day of the signing. "It's not a luxury, it's a necessity."

Cuomo had pulled off a political and policy triumph. Does that mean progressives were happy with him? Hardly. They find fault with much of his tuition plan. It does nothing to help part-time students and offers no help for room and board or books. It requires students to stay in the state for years after college, meaning that what looks like a scholarship could end up more like a loan. It doesn't pump enough money into the state university system to make up for years of budget cuts. In short, Cuomo's critics argue, it was more about achieving a headline and claiming credit on an issue than really resolving it. "Yeah, it's a nice small step, but he doesn't say it's a first step," says Bill Samuels, head of EffectiveNY, a good-government group. "It's an example where even when he does good things, he's not candid."

Samuels and other progressives lodge similar critiques about nearly every liberal victory that Cuomo has racked up. And it's quite a list. Cuomo pushed through a same-sex marriage law long before marriage equality was a given everywhere, or even in New York. After the shootings in Sandy Hook, Cuomo strengthened New York's already strict gun control laws. Last year's budget included a \$15 minimum wage, which is being phased in over a five-year period, as well as paid family leave. This year's budget, which was the vehicle for the tuition plan, also reinstated a tax on the income of millionaires, raised the age at which juvenile offenders can be tried as adults, created a \$10 million legal defense fund for immigrants and provided a tax break for workers who pay union dues.

Despite all these successes, Cuomo gets little credit on the left. On nearly every issue they care about, activists complain, Cuomo has had to be dragged kicking and screaming, coming around only when he realized it might be politically advantageous to do so. The governor can seem to them more like an opponent than a friend. "There's definitely this feeling that he's temperamentally opposed to the left wing," says Sean McElwee, a policy analyst at Demos, a progressive think tank in New York. "When he does pursue a left policy, it very much seems like he's doing it as his last option."

Lots of liberals are complaining that long-established politicians just aren't progressive enough. In Cuomo's case, it's not just that he has been a tax-cutter and a frequent social spending skeptic. It's also that he seems to go out of his way to pick fights with liberals who could be his allies, such as teachers unions and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. By contrast, he often finds common cause with Republicans, whom New York Democrats now invariably refer to as "Trump Republicans."

Democrats have a nominal majority in the state Senate, yet Republicans maintain control thanks to support from a renegade group known as the Independent Democratic Caucus -- a band of outliers that progressives believe Cuomo encourages, rather than squashes. It's not forgotten on the left that Cuomo has accepted campaign contributions in the past from President Trump, as well as other liberal bêtes noires such as the industrialist David Koch. "The governor still seems to feel that the best way to strengthen New York's

economy is the failed trickle-down policies that offer tax breaks to corporations and the wealthiest New Yorkers,” says Karen Scharff, executive director of Citizen Action of New York, a liberal advocacy group.

*New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio was once a top Cuomo aide, but the two have feuded openly in office. (AP)*

The political difficulties caused by liberal disdain for Cuomo shouldn't be overstated. Polls this year have put his approval rating as high as 60 percent, his highwater mark over the past two years. But even voters who give Cuomo due credit for being effective have questions about his personality and character. No one accuses him of being warm and fuzzy. Cuomo, who will turn 60 in December, is often the smartest person in the room and does nothing to conceal that. He's not about putting people at ease. When it comes to politics, he plays hardball and, sometimes, throws at people's heads. He's not just an aggressive negotiator with a long memory, willing to put the full institutional power of his office behind his threats. He's also been accused many times of double-crossing nominal allies. Lots of people in Albany have stories about Cuomo agreeing to change a policy in order to achieve an end, but then failing to deliver on his side of the bargain once he's gotten what he wanted.

No one doubts Cuomo's ability to get deals done. He has a better sense than any lobbyist of how individual legislators can be stroked and persuaded on an issue. "He has advanced political sonar," says Blair Horner, director of the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG). "He can see issues coming. He can plan ahead. He's often steps ahead of his legislative colleagues."

But he also operates in the dark, pushing his agenda in back rooms. That's another reason Cuomo is feared but not liked, and certainly not loved. "Progressives here are simply not in love with Gov. Cuomo, in terms of seeing him as an authentic person they want to represent them," says Jeanne Zaino, a political scientist at Iona College. "When politicians seem like they are not authentically committed to whatever is the cause, they're going to take a hit on that."

**In 2014**, Zephyr Teachout, a little-known and underfunded law professor, ran against Cuomo from the left in the Democratic primary. In the end it wasn't close, but Teachout performed better than any challenger had against a sitting governor since New York first instituted gubernatorial primaries. Cuomo could well face a fresh challenge when he runs again next year. He has increasingly alienated the Working Families Party, whose endorsement he had to push hard to get last time around.

But Cuomo knows his job involves more than appealing to activists on the left. He's well aware that New York state gets less liberal as you head north and west out of New York City. Clinton beat Trump easily in the city in 2016, but her margin in the rest of the state was less than 1,000 votes, out of more than 4 million cast. "The governor has the dubious task of trying to manage the entire state of New York," says Kevin Parker, the Democratic whip in the state Senate. "In that context, he's considering everybody's concerns, not just what the liberals want. You can run [as a purist], but you can't govern that way."

Cuomo's calculated pragmatism and his zigs and zags from left to right, depending on the issue, have been enough to put a lot of policy points on the board. They will almost certainly be enough to win him a third term in 2018. This past April, Cuomo reported \$22 million in his 2018 campaign account.

On paper, he also has a plausible résumé to run for president in 2020, and that seems to be his desire. He has gone up and down the national Democratic checklist and scored wins on many of the major issues. He has also attended to the economic woes of upstate New York, which in many ways resembles the beleaguered industrial areas of the upper Midwest that shifted their allegiance to Trump last November,

costing Democrats the White House.

To swing voters in the Midwest and other parts of the country, however, Cuomo is still likely to come across as a liberal Democrat with a Queens accent. And to progressive true believers, whose support he would need to prevail in a presidential primary, he is likely to seem less pure than senators who can spend the bulk of their time on cable TV shows bad-mouthing the president. “There’s a lot of idealism on the left, particularly when we feel like we’ve lost an election because we weren’t true to our principles and didn’t have the energy to take on Donald Trump,” says Evan Thies, a Democratic consultant who worked for Teachout. “If you feel that way, and many Democrats do, you’re probably going to demand a more liberal version of Andrew Cuomo.”

Cuomo has won far more battles than he’s lost as governor. But on a national stage in a polarized era, governing effectively doesn’t always win points. In 2016, former Maryland Gov. Martin O’Malley ran for president on an impressive record of liberal achievements, including banning the death penalty, enshrining same-sex marriage rights and tightening gun control. He earned half of a percent of the vote in the Iowa caucuses against Clinton and Sanders before dropping out.

**Cuomo’s ambitions** have never been modest. Early in his administration, he gathered officials from various agencies and asked them what he might do to have a big impact. They hemmed and hawed until finally one said, “You can say you’re going to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge.” Cuomo immediately seized on that phrasing. “Why would I say it,” he replied, “if I don’t intend to do it?”

Replacing the outmoded bridge had been a white whale in New York government for years. Cuomo’s three predecessors spent a combined \$88 million dollars on studies, coming up with 150 different proposals. Cuomo took one off the shelf, tempered its scope and cost, and made sure the work got started. He didn’t have anything like the full financing needed for the project in hand, but he knew that once work was underway, the money would be found. The bridge will start carrying vehicles across the Hudson River later this year. Cuomo is the first governor to get bridges built in the New York metro area in half a century. “No one thought we could get the Tappan Zee Bridge replaced,” says Gerald Benjamin, a longtime Albany watcher at the State University of New York at New Paltz. “He’s been able to do things no one has been able to accomplish in some cases since Robert Moses,” the powerful city planner whose career extended from the 1920s into the 1960s.

*Cuomo's predecessors had spent decades and millions of dollars trying to figure out how to rebuild the Tappan Zee Bridge. Cuomo will open a new span later this year. (NewNYBridge)*

Cuomo has somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 billion worth of infrastructure projects underway or approved around the state, including major overhauls of Penn Station in Manhattan and JFK and LaGuardia airports. He has also devoted some \$25 billion to various projects and proposals designed to boost the upstate economy. But those efforts have met with mixed success. Despite the state’s heavy investment, job growth outside booming New York City has been anemic on his watch. “Upstate New York is a basket case,” says Daniel DiSalvo, a political scientist at City College of New York. “You can sort of prop it up through all the state subsidies, but population decline and economic decline persist, and that doesn’t look good.”

Cuomo struggled in upstate counties in the 2014 general election, largely due to his liberal positions on guns and gay rights. But he’s been determined not to let the centers of Republican power in the suburbs and upstate unseat him, the way they deprived his father, Mario Cuomo, of a fourth term as governor in 1994. Thanks to his father, Andrew Cuomo has been around politics his entire adult life. He worked on campaigns

as a kid, and managed his father's first run for governor in 1982 while he was still a law student. Andrew Cuomo served his father in Albany as a dollar-a-year adviser, then worked briefly as a prosecutor before becoming a housing advocate. He held top jobs in the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Bill Clinton, serving as secretary during Clinton's second term.

Cuomo returned to New York and launched an ill-advised run for governor in 2002. In his first campaign for office, he was seen as an upstart, interfering with Comptroller Carl McCall's hopes of becoming the state's first African-American governor. Cuomo botched his chances with a gaffe denigrating GOP Gov. George Pataki's role in response to the terror attacks of 2001, suggesting Pataki had done little more than hold New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's coat. Cuomo dropped out of the race before the primary.

He rebuilt his career by winning the more modest office of state attorney general in 2006. In that role, he went after bonuses paid at Wall Street firms and conflicts of interest in student lending. He also collected some \$170 million in fines and clawbacks from pay-to-play investigations into pension funds. When Cuomo decided he was ready to run for governor again, he elbowed aside Democrat David Paterson, who had become governor after Eliot Spitzer resigned in the midst of a prostitution scandal. Cuomo won the governorship easily in 2010.

He inherited a \$10 billion deficit, which he closed without raising taxes. In fact, Cuomo has consistently cut taxes and placed a cap on property tax increases at the local level. The complaints that Cuomo might be a Republican in Democratic clothing began with the austerity budgets of his first term. His primary concern during those years was to bring the state back into fiscal balance while giving progressives things that don't cost much money, like marriage equality and gun control. But he withheld funds from left-of-center priorities in education, housing and health care, and fought with teachers unions not only over spending levels, but expansions of charter schools and methods for evaluating public school teachers.

Cuomo also seemed to turn on Bill de Blasio, a former aide, after de Blasio was elected mayor in 2013. The governor has shown the mayor who's boss in fights over charter schools, funding for pre-kindergarten education and levels of municipal aid. But Cuomo needed de Blasio's help in securing support from the Working Families Party in 2014. He had to agree to a list of demands to receive the party's line on the ballot -- some of which he has not delivered on, including decriminalization of marijuana and public financing of elections.

Having survived a scare from the left and having more robust budgets to play with, Cuomo now pursues more policies that progressives like, such as the free tuition plan and banning fracking. But in both those instances, Cuomo seemed to oppose the idea for quite a while before embracing it. He punted on the issue of fracking for most of his first term, for example, announcing he would ban it only after winning re-election.

Cuomo's biggest betrayal, in the eyes of the political left, is his failure to secure a true majority for his party in the state Senate. No one doubts Cuomo's skill and chutzpah in getting Republican votes when he needs them. But many Democrats believe he shouldn't need Republican support in the first place. The governor has not campaigned as vigorously as he promised for Democratic state Senate candidates. At the same time, he's offered tacit or overt support to rump members of the renegade Independent Democratic Caucus, who have maintained an alliance with Republicans for half a dozen years now.

The oldest cliché about Albany is that all the major decisions are made by "three men in a room" -- the governor, the Assembly speaker and the Senate majority leader. Nowadays, it's often four men in a room, including state Sen. Jeff Klein, the head of the Independent Democratic Caucus. But it's no less a secretive process. Cuomo once said, "Just because something is done behind closed doors doesn't mean the process isn't transparent."

*Democrats regained a nominal Senate majority in a special election in May, but Jeff Klein and other renegades keep the GOP in power. (AP)*

The fact that Cuomo has fallen short on promises to overhaul ethics and campaign finance rules also leaves a bitter taste on the left. There's been an unending parade of legislative indictments and convictions on his watch, including successful prosecutions of the former top leaders in both the state Senate and Assembly. Those cases were filed after Cuomo had pulled the plug on an ethics commission. "He's empowered the Trump Republicans in the state so he can't get ethics reform, which he has no interest in," says Samuels of EffectiveNY.

Cuomo himself has raised millions through the "LLC loophole," which allows wealthy individuals to set up as many limited liability corporations as they like to give essentially unlimited political donations. Early in his term, a "dark money" organization supporting his agenda was the freest-spending interest group in the state. Although Cuomo has not been tarred directly by scandal, Joseph Percoco, a former top aide who was so close that the governor called him "my father's third son," was charged last fall in a bribery and fraud case. "If the Percoco case goes to trial," says Horner, the NYPIRG director, "even if the governor doesn't come up, it will paint an unsavory picture about how Albany operates."

For Cuomo, results have always been what matters. He's from the school that believes delivering on a deal, however it's arrived at, is far more important than pursuing noble causes or making lofty speeches. Which points to what may be the biggest paradox of Cuomo's career. No one measures the achievements of California Gov. Jerry Brown against those of his father. Perhaps not many people even remember that Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Sr. served as governor of California before his son, back in the 1950s and 1960s. But Andrew Cuomo is constantly compared to his father.

Mario Cuomo became a hero on the left with his stirring speech at the 1984 Democratic convention, which was delivered as if aimed directly at President Ronald Reagan. But the fact is that Mario Cuomo's accomplishments over 12 years as governor were limited. He was diligent and competent, but it's hard to name a signature achievement with which he can be associated. He worked at the budget but never got one done on time, as his son does routinely. He vetoed bills to restore the death penalty every year, but his opposition to the ultimate punishment helped drive a prison building boom -- hardly a favored cause these days among Democrats.

Andrew Cuomo, by contrast, has closed more than a dozen prisons and delivered on many other favorite ideas of progressives. Yet he's not seen as anything like the progressive champion his father was, whether due to the secretive sausage-making he's been willing to engage in, the enemies he's chosen or simply his less inspiring oratorical skills.

Mario Cuomo was a warrior-philosopher, but Andrew Cuomo is just a warrior. "Mario used to say, you campaign in poetry and govern in prose," says Doug Muzzio, a political scientist at Baruch College. "Andrew does both in prose. But in terms of delivery, Andrew's delivered a hell of a lot more."

This article was printed from: <http://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-cuomo-new-york-governor-progressives.html>