



Stephanie Miner, then the mayor of Syracuse, spoke at City & State's 2017 veterans event. | Ali Garber

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# Why Miner might challenge Cuomo instead of Katko

The former Syracuse mayor is not running for Congress. Can she beat the governor?

By GRACE SEGERS (/author/grace-segers) | JANUARY 26, 2018

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**Why Miner might challenge Cuomo instead of Katko (/articles/politics/new-york-state-articles/why-miner-might-challenge-cuomo-instead-of-katko.html)**

By GRACE SEGERS (/author/grace-segers)

In an interview with the New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/nyregion/stephanie-miner-campaign-governor-cuomo.html>) published on Thursday, former Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner ended one rumor and fueled another, saying that she would not challenge Republican Rep. John Katko in the 2018 election, but that she is considering a primary bid against Gov. Andrew Cuomo. This surprised some New York political observers, who would have assumed that she would rather challenge a swing-district Republican in a likely Democratic wave election year than take on the popular, powerful and notoriously vindictive governor from her own party.

But Miner may see a path to victory against Cuomo, experts say – and at minimum, it could be a way to raise her profile and increase her name recognition for future races.

“She may believe that if she runs to the left of the governor, that she has a higher probability of upsetting him in a primary,” Hank Sheinkopf, a Democratic political consultant, said about Miner’s motivations for potentially launching a bid against Cuomo. After eight years as mayor of Syracuse, Sheinkopf said she could offer an alternative to Cuomo as a woman from upstate. Miner, who also has been critical (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/nyregion/for-syracuse-mayor-stephanie-a-miner-criticism-of-cuomo-raises-profile.html>) of the governor’s economic development policies, could take advantage of voter fatigue with Cuomo as he seeks his third term. Even if

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she loses against Cuomo, Miner could leverage her greater name recognition in a future congressional race.

Gerald Benjamin, associate vice president for regional engagement at SUNY New Paltz, said that Miner could use a run against Cuomo as a way to “raise her profile, create relationships, build a network across the state” for a future campaign. “The race for her could be an end in itself from a career and political perspective,” Benjamin said.

Miner may follow in the footsteps of Zephyr Teachout, a Fordham Law professor who ran against Cuomo in the Democratic primary in 2014 and garnered 34 percent (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/nyregion/cuomo-and-hochul-win-new-york-primary.html>) of the vote. Teachout then ran in a congressional district that has alternated between Democrats and Republicans against former Assembly Minority Leader John Faso. Despite her elevated profile, Teachout lost that election (<https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/new-york-house-district-19-teachout-faso>) by 11 percentage points.

“It is more likely that you will lose twice than you will win once,” said Sheinkopf about running for governor to gear up for a later race. Sheinkopf also said that public memory of previous elections can be very limited, so running for governor to raise name recognition might not be a successful strategy.

Regardless of her intention, if she does choose to challenge Cuomo, Miner will be facing an incumbent with a 76 percent favorability rating among Democrats

(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/n-y-gov-andrew-cuomo-sees-uptick-in-approval-rating-1516143982>) and a campaign war chest of \$31 million. “So what’s the gain?” Sheinkopf asked, when considering what Miner would receive in return for a probable primary defeat. “You’ve got me.”

However, Grant Reeher, a political science professor at Syracuse University, suggested in an email to City & State that a gubernatorial defeat is still less dangerous to her political future than a potential landslide victory by Katko.

“He has taken some high-profile positions and votes against Trump and the Republican leadership that strengthen his bona fides as a moderate and an independent voice – which is a good fit with the district,” Reeher said. “Miner can no doubt see that, and to risk being beaten badly would probably end her elective political career. Taking on a strong governor in a primary doesn’t pose the same downside risk.”

Miner had ruled  
out running  
against Katko in  
October

(<http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2017/10>

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but reconsidered it in late November when Katko voted  
for the Republican federal tax plan.

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BY JON LENTZ (/AUTHOR/JON-LENTZ)

In her interview with the Times, Miner indicated that she wasn't suited to a life in Congress, and did not enjoy

the prospect of “getting on a plane on a Sunday night and coming back on a Thursday and having to raise money five hours a day, every day.”

Miner could also be avoiding a bid against Katko for political reasons. Democrats have a very small voter enrollment advantage ([https://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/congress/congress\\_nov17.pdf](https://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/congress/congress_nov17.pdf)) over Republicans in the 24th Congressional District; as of Nov. 1, 2017, there were almost 159,000 registered Democrats and over 148,000 registered Republicans. There are also more than 116,000 voters registered without a party or with the Independence Party.

The result of the 2017 Syracuse mayoral election demonstrated the area’s independent streak. Democrat Juanita Perez Williams – who was endorsed ([http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2017/09/in\\_brief\\_statement\\_miner\\_announces\\_support\\_for\\_perez\\_williams.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2017/09/in_brief_statement_miner_announces_support_for_perez_williams.html)) by Miner – was defeated ([http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/11/syracuse\\_mayor\\_results\\_winner\\_independent\\_ben\\_walsh\\_democrat\\_juanita\\_to\\_38\\_percent\\_by\\_ben\\_walsh\\_who\\_ran\\_on\\_the\\_independent\\_reform\\_and\\_upstate\\_jobs\\_party\\_lines](http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/11/syracuse_mayor_results_winner_independent_ben_walsh_democrat_juanita_to_38_percent_by_ben_walsh_who_ran_on_the_independent_reform_and_upstate_jobs_party_lines)) by Ben Walsh, who ran on the Independent, Reform and Upstate Jobs party lines.

Walsh’s victory may have been tied to ambivalent feelings in Syracuse about Miner’s time in office, which may also have led her to conclude that her prospects in a race against Katko would be limited. In a Syracuse.com/Spectrum News/Siena College poll on Oct. 10 ([http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/10/syracuse\\_mayors\\_race\\_inside\\_the\\_syracusecomspectrum\\_newssiena\\_college\\_49\\_percent\\_of\\_respondents\\_said\\_that\\_syracuse\\_was\\_on\\_the](http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/10/syracuse_mayors_race_inside_the_syracusecomspectrum_newssiena_college_49_percent_of_respondents_said_that_syracuse_was_on_the)

wrong track. Sixty-three percent said that choosing a mayoral candidate most willing to make changes in Syracuse would be the most important factor in their vote for mayor, possibly signalling a desire for new leadership. Critically, 48 percent of voters said that Miner had done an excellent or good job as mayor, but 49 percent said that she had done only a fair or poor job.

Katko represents New York's 24th Congressional District, a swing seat which has frequently alternated between Republican and Democratic representatives since 2007. The large number of independents in the district actually could have worked in Miner's favor, as Sheinkopf noted that independents in general have been more supportive of Democrats in recent polling.

National polling suggests (<http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/366593-poll-democrats-lead-on-generic-ballot-in-2018>) the 2018 elections will see a wave of Democrats elected to Congress, indicating that Miner could have been well-positioned to launch a potential bid against Katko. The 2017 elections were seen by some as a harbinger of that trend in New York, as Democrats wrested control from Republicans in the Westchester and Nassau county executive races.

However, the Cook Political Report classifies (<https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings>) the 24th Congressional District as "likely Republican," meaning that any Democratic challenger – of which there are currently four

([http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/01/public\\_invited\\_to\\_hear\\_4\\_democrats\\_seeking\\_to\\_challenge\\_katko\\_for\\_congre](http://www.syracuse.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/01/public_invited_to_hear_4_democrats_seeking_to_challenge_katko_for_congre)) would have an uphill battle when attempting to unseat



Katko.

Reeher, the Syracuse professor, noted that Katko's 2016 Democratic opponent, Colleen Deacon (<https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/new-york-house-district-24-katko-deacon>), was a solid candidate who had garnered several endorsements. Hillary Clinton also won the district in the 2016 election.

"Despite all that, he won by over 20 points, and took the city of Syracuse," Reeher said. He explained that a Democratic candidate would somehow have to generate a 20 point-plus swing to win the seat. That's especially hard in a midterm election, as non-presidential years have lower turnout, especially among Democratic-leaning constituencies such as African-Americans, lower-income and younger voters. "For the wave of Democratic resistance in the mid-terms to overwhelm Katko," he said, "it would probably need to be a genuine tsunami."



**Grace Segers** is City & State's digital reporter. She writes daily content on New York City and New York state politics.

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