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Cuomo Looks Poised for a 3rd Term. So Why Won't He Debate His Foes?

By Tyler Pager

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He leads in every poll by double-digit margins. He is a two-term Democrat seeking re-election in a divisive midterm year, in a state filled with blue-wave voters. And his Republican opponent is running out of money.

It would appear then that Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has little to fear as he seeks a third term as New York's governor.

But less than three weeks until the election, Mr. Cuomo has still not committed to debate his rivals.

Despite increasing pressure from his challengers and editorial boards across the state, Mr. Cuomo has demurred when asked if he would participate in a debate.

"I don't know," he said after an event in Buffalo in late September. "It's still an open question."

The Cuomo campaign declined to comment further on the matter.

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"He has raised obscene amounts of money and has been hiding from public scrutiny, and at the end of the day, that's a disservice to taxpayers and voters," he said. "I don't expect any better. I don't think he wants his record scrutinized."

In particular, Mr. Molinaro faulted Mr. Cuomo for making a political calculation in not agreeing to a debate.

“Debates are not about candidates and they’re not about campaigns,” he said.

“Debates are about the public and the public’s right to consider the people seeking their support.”



Marcus Molinaro, the Republican nominee for governor, said Mr. Cuomo’s refusal to hold a debate was “a mockery of democracy.” Bebeto Matthews/Associated Press

He added, “The governor is showing his disrespect to voters and his belief that he is better than the democracy he is supposed to serve.”

Mr. Molinaro said he had accepted NY1’s invitation for a televised debate on Oct. 24. Mr. Cuomo has yet to respond to the invitation, but he is in a protracted battle with NY1’s parent company, Charter Communications, which operates under the brand name Spectrum. Mr. Cuomo has sought to ban the cable company from the state for failing to follow the terms of its merger with Time Warner Cable in 2016.

“I have publicly stated my opposition to and outrage at Charter’s conduct on

numerous occasions,” Mr. Cuomo said on Wednesday, in a statement that was unrelated to the debate. “I applaud Mayor de Blasio for boycotting the network and encourage other officials to do the same,” he continued, referring to Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York.

Other third-party candidates include Stephanie Miner, a former top Democrat running on the fledgling Serve America Movement line; Howie Hawkins, the Green Party candidate; and Larry Sharpe, the Libertarian candidate. Mr. Cuomo has nearly 30 times the amount of money of his opponents combined — including Mr. Molinaro.

If Mr. Cuomo does not agree to a debate, it would “be unusual but not unprecedented,” said Gerald Benjamin, the director of the Benjamin Center at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

In 1994, for example, the Republican challenger, George E. Pataki, was not given a chance to debate the three-time Democratic incumbent. It did not matter: Mr. Pataki defeated the incumbent, Gov. Mario M. Cuomo — the current governor’s father — in an upset.

“No one ever really offered an explanation,” Mike Finnegan, the chairman of Mr. Pataki’s campaign in 1994, said about why Mr. Cuomo did not agree to a debate. “I think the calculus was probably similar to today. If you look at the risk-benefit ratio, it’s not in the incumbent’s interest to have a debate, but it’s in the challenger’s interest.”

Mr. Pataki did not debate his opponents in the 1998 election.

Mr. Cuomo has been reluctant to debate opponents in the past. In the Democratic primary, he agreed to only one debate with the actress Cynthia Nixon, despite her calls for multiple debates. And in the lead-up to the event, which took place just two weeks before the primary, the two camps sparred over the logistics, including the debate’s format and room temperature.

But the political consequences for Mr. Cuomo of not debating his opponent have changed since he moved into the general election, Professor Benjamin said.

“In one, he’s trying to solidify a divided Democratic Party into the general election,” Professor Benjamin said of Mr. Cuomo’s decision to debate Ms. Nixon. “In the other, he’s saying the other guy could only gain from this, not me.”

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