Lively race for state attorney general | Local News

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ALBANY — President Donald Trump and statehouse corruption are subjects that come up with great frequency -- though not in a complimentary way — for the current crop of four Democratic candidates for state attorney general.

Two in the group have emerged as front-runners in the contest for the Sept. 13 Democratic primary. They are: New York City Public Advocate Leticia James, who scored the endorsement of the state's Democratic establishment and has the support of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, and Zephyr Teachout, a Fordham Law School professor. The latter is seen by many as a political outsider, but helped her cause by recently scoring the editorial endorsements of the New York Times and the Daily News.

The other two candidates are: Leecia Eve, a Buffalo area native who is now a corporate counsel for Verizon and who had been a respected member of the Cuomo administration: and Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-Putnam County. The latter has drawn criticism from Teachout for accepting large donations from the New York City real estate industry, and his dual candidacy for both attorney general and for re-election to his congressional seat has sparked concern from some Democratic leaders worried that the House seat could be lost in November should Maloney end up as the attorney general nominee.

The race for the attorney general's office was enlivened this year by the drama triggered by the abrupt resignation earlier this year of then former Attorney General Eric Schneiderman amid allegations of sexual harassment published in the New Yorker magazine. The accusations against Schneiderman came as he was leading an investigation into Trump's personal charity, the Trump Foundation.

All of the candidates say that, if elected, they plan to continue Trump-related investigations and work to counter the federal governments efforts to trim back on environmental and financial industry regulations. Teachout has made her opposition to all things Trump the centerpiece of her campaign.

"As attorney general, there is so much I will do to stop the corruption and lawlessness in the Trump administration," she told CNHI.

She has also shown no reluctance to criticize Cuomo, whom she unsuccessfully challenged in the 2014 Democratic primary for governor. In a four-way Aug. 28 debate with other Democratic attorney general candidates, Teachout vowed to do more to root out corruption in Albany's corridors of power.

"It's very clear that the governor is not taking the corruption scandal seriously," said Teachout, referencing the criminal convictions of Joseph Percoco, a former Cuomo

top aide, and Alain Kaloyeros, the head of SUNY Polytechnic Institute this year on charges stemming from bid-rigging schemes.

But on many issues the candidates have shown agreement, with all suggesting they would counter the Trump administration's crackdown on undocumented immigrants and supporting an end to cash bail.

Over the years, the attorney general's office has been shaped by the individual elected to lead it. Democrat Robert Abrams, who held the job for 14 years, was a consumer advocate. Dennis Vacco, the last Republican to hold the job, cast himself as a crime fighter. Eliot Spitzer, whose political career went off the rails as the result of his involvement in a prostitution scandal while he was governor, wore the mantle of "sheriff of Wall Street," an image encouraged by his publicists.

While the office is called a "down ballot" one because of the dominance of the governor in the state's political landscape, it has taken on increased importance due to the fact that many contentious areas of national policy -- -- immigration, for example -- are now settled in the federal courts, observed Gerald Benjamin a political science professor at the State University at New Paltz.

Spitzer, he noted, showed that the office can play a key role in regulating the behavior of Wall Street companies in ways that protect investors and consumers.

"You're really electing a person who is going to be very important in the unfolding of national policy," as state attorneys general often collectively challenge the federal government, he said. Benjamin added that the office holder also carries the aura of a potential "future governor."

James' alliance with organized labor may help her with the machinery needed to get her voters to the polls on Sept. 13, he added.

However, carrying the mantle of the party-backed candidate has not always ended well. In 1974, Robert Meehan was the state Democratic Party's preferred candidate but was crushed in the primary that year by Abrams, noted Harvey Schantz, a political science professor at SUNY Plattsburgh. That scenario happened again in 1994, when Attorney General Oliver Koppell lost the primary to Karen Burstein, who lost the general election to Vacco.

Eve, like James, also has support within the mainstream of the Democratic establishment. She is also the only candidate who was reared in upstate New York, as the child of the late Assemblyman Arthur Eve, who helped bring calm to the Attica prison riot more than 40 years ago.

Eve, who has the backing of Erie County's Democratic organization, was considered as a running mate in Spitzer's 2007 gubernatorial campaign before an influential cadre of Harlem Democrats pressed to put then Sen. David Paterson on the ticket.

Maloney has touted his ability to prevail in "tough' contests, noting he has defeated Republican challengers in a congressional district won by Trump in 2016. He and other candidates have also refused to cede Trump criticism to Teachout. At a candidate debate hosted by Spectrum News, after the discussion turned to potential

remedies for Albany scandals, Maloney chimed in: "The most serious public corruption in America today is by the president of the United States, Donald Trump."

With all of the candidates holding similar views and none of them enjoying high name recognition among voters statewide, it may be challenging for Democrats headed to the polls on Sept. 13 to sort out the contest, said Lee Miringoff, the Marist College poll director.

The election of Trump, himself a native New York with business ties that remain in the state, has boosted the allure of the state attorney general's office, Miringoff said.

"There is a sense that this all counts more," he said.

Maloney, Miringoff said, may face a "special problem" in the primary because he'll need an explanation for running for the statewide office while keeping alive his re-election effort for Congress.

With the Democratic Party having an enrollment advantage over Republicans statewide, the winner of the Sept. 13 primary willl be seen as the presumptive favorite in the November general election.

The Democratic nominee will then have to contend with Keith Wofford, a Manhattan lawyer who is the GOP nominee and has also been endorsed by the Conservative Party; Green Party nominee Michael Sussman; Independence Party nominee Victor Messina Jr.; perennial Libertarian canidate Christopher Garvey and the winner of a three-way Reform Party primary. The field in the latter contest includes Garvey, Michael Diederich Jr. and Nancy Regula.

Benjamin said he anticipates voter turnout will be light for the primary since it is being held on a Thursday to avoid coinciding with commemorations of the Sept. 11 terror attacks and the Jewish holy day of Rosh Hashana that same week.

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