

The rise and fall of John Flanagan

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State Senate Minority Leader John Flanagan. | Sarah Blesener

The Republican leader lost the state Senate. Can he win it back?

On May 13, state Senate Minority Leader John Flanagan did something he rarely does: He sat with his conference during that day's Senate session. Typically he spends a "tremendous amount of time on the phone," as he puts it, but there were two reasons to be out on the Senate floor that Monday. The first was a bipartisan resolution before the chamber recognizing the life and work of [Leonard Spano](#), a prominent Republican politician in Westchester County who died this year. A resolution on the floor in Spano's honor presented an occasion for Flanagan to speak about his own outlook toward public life.

"My mother a number of years ago gave me a picture of my father, when my father first started in the Legislature, and the poem is about your name," said Flanagan, referring to a poem printed below a framed photo of his father, former Assemblyman John J. Flanagan. "It's basically how a father in this case passes his name to his son and the name was in good stead and it was intact at the time it was given to you and that the best thing you could do is continue that legacy."

As that day's session wound down, the Republican conference attempted a parliamentary maneuver with a [bill](#) on the floor that would require that death certificates list any specific opioids responsible for fatal overdoses. Republicans supported the uncontroversial legislation, but they wanted to make a political statement.

The GOP senators tried to tack on the [Born Alive Abortion Survivors' Protection Act](#), which has no chance of passing the Democratic-controlled chamber. After an attempt to attach it to the opioid legislation was rejected, Deputy Minority Leader Joseph Griffo requested that state Sen. Pamela Helming have a chance to speak. If the bill on the floor required more reporting on opioid deaths, Helming said, why not about babies who died soon after being born alive during an abortion? "The goal with both bills is to sustain life," Helming said. Helming's amendment was swiftly voted down on a party line vote and the unamended opioid legislation passed 60-0. "Not a single member of the @NYSenDems voted to protect a baby born alive during abortion," GOP Senate spokeswoman Candice Giove [tweeted](#).

In past years, when Republicans controlled the chamber, they could have used such an amendment as leverage in negotiations with the Democratic-controlled Assembly and Gov. Andrew Cuomo. But the balance of power shifted dramatically after the 2018 elections, when Republicans lost the state Senate, their last hold on statewide power in New York. That it happened on Flanagan's watch was a blow to his legacy, and it was compounded by a string of political and personal challenges, including the embarrassing intraparty effort to oust him from the leadership and his personal battle with alcohol.

While he ultimately held on to his post as conference leader, it's not clear how he can return his party to power in Albany. Democrats are becoming increasingly dominant in state politics, and the Republicans' downstate political base has shrunk. Interviews with a dozen GOP senators and party insiders suggest that Flanagan's position as leader remains secure. But the prospects of him ever becoming majority leader again appear remote. The presidential race will likely boost turnout in 2020, and higher turnout historically benefits Democratic candidates. President Donald Trump could energize some Republican voters, but anti-Trump backlash is likely to spur Democrats to show up at the polls as well. And if the state Senate GOP falls short next year, they'll have little say in the next round of redistricting – and could be gerrymandered into minority status for years, if not decades.

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Democrats already have a massive statewide [voter registration](#) advantage and the long-term demographic trends are in their favor, according to Gerald Benjamin, a political science professor at SUNY New Paltz. “Flanagan is not situated to rebuild the Republican strength in New York in the current environment,” Benjamin said. “The best he can do is hold on where he's at ... then there's going to be a battle to the death in the year 2020. It's the so-called battle to the death for the future of a Republican Senate. But it's occurring in a presidential year with higher turnout in a mobilized anti-Trump constituency.”

Flanagan has not given up, despite the odds against him. “I believe we are in a situation that’s not going to be much different than it was in 2009 and 2010,” he said, “when the Democrats took over the state Senate and ran the state into fiscal ruin within less than two years.”

Following their shellacking in 2018, Republicans have ruminated over their losses and reflected on how to win again in New York, a state where they have not won a statewide election since 2002. Incoming state Republican Party Chairman Nicholas Langworthy has talked about [garnering more small-dollar donations](#), winning local races, [recruiting more female candidates](#), attracting younger voters and, eventually, [electing a Republican governor](#). “What hasn’t happened in the past is take a game plan to our contributors,” Langworthy told the [New York Post](#). “We’ll reengage, reinvest to find a way forward and have a plan and change the culture in the state of New York.”

While the state party is altering its approach, the most visible efforts by GOP senators to regain the majority have largely consisted of opposing what the Democrats are doing. Does the Senate Republican conference’s chances hinge on the other party screwing up? “We should never assume a position that they’re bad, or they’re not doing things right or properly,” Flanagan said. “We’re different than the people who are in the majority now. ... We stand for things that are different than the majority stands for now.”

Yet Flanagan argued that it’s just a matter of time before the Democratic majority falls apart. “You see the infighting and the rift within the Democratic conference,” he said. Flanagan argued that disorder will break out among the rank-and-file Democrats, and progressive policies will turn off swing voters on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley who have largely decided control of the Senate in recent years. Republicans are depending on Democratic overreach and division to once again bring the GOP back into the majority, as happened in 2010 when [Democrats](#) last ran the Senate. Democrats had won a narrow margin in the 2008 election, but their brief time in power was marked by a chaotic Senate [coup](#) and the passage of controversial legislation that ultimately doomed the party’s chances of keeping the majority in 2010. “I’ve seen this movie before,” Flanagan said.

Today, it’s the Senate GOP that is in disarray. Veteran senators like John DeFrancisco, William Larkin and John Bonacic retired in 2018, a year when opposition to Trump propelled Democrats to victory. Republicans Kemp Hannon, Elaine Phillips and Carl Marcellino were ousted, decimating the once vaunted “[Long Island Nine](#)” that had dominated the state Senate. More defections appear likely. State Sen. Chris Jacobs launched a primary campaign against Rep. Chris Collins, who narrowly won reelection last year despite being charged with [securities fraud](#), and another Republican senator, Robert Ort, is also among those [rumored to be potential primary challengers](#) to Collins. There have also been calls for state Sen. [Fred Akshar](#) to resign following a sex scandal, though Flanagan has said that he stands behind him.

“We’re actively recruiting candidates right now,” Flanagan said. Though he did not offer any new names of who might run for the state Senate, he confirmed at least one potential comeback candidate – former state Sen. Martin Golden of Brooklyn. “Our options are open,” said Golden, who has not made a final decision about seeking his old seat. “We’ll see what happens.”

The elephant in the room is Trump, who could bolster some down-ballot Republicans

in New York while hurting others. Flanagan has had an uneasy relationship with the president, whom he [endorsed in 2016](#) only after Trump became the Republican nominee. Flanagan praises Trump for a good economy but distances himself from other parts of Trump's record. "The stock market is essentially at an all-time high; unemployment, that's essentially an all-time low," Flanagan said. "I get the things that are being said about the president. I don't have to agree with them."

In early May, the Republican leader staged a press conference in the hallway outside his office to go on the attack over two high-profile bills that Democrats planned to pass. One was an effort to allow [convicted felons](#) to serve on juries, which gave Flanagan a pretext to talk about Judith Clark, the recently paroled 69-year-old driver in a deadly 1981 robbery of a Brink's armored truck. Law enforcement groups and the families of people killed in the robbery had protested her parole, and Senate Republicans were eager to channel the frustration by touting their "[victims' justice agenda](#)," a package of bills that Republicans released in response to Democrats criminal justice reforms, such as ending cash bail.

"We're doing more pro-criminal bill of rights bills that are out there," Flanagan told City & State separately in an interview. "It's day after day after day after day. I could give you chapter and verse on things that were wrong with the budget."

The second piece of legislation on the agenda that day aimed to change state law so that individual tax returns could be sent to congressional committees that requested them – essentially an effort to obtain Trump's tax returns. "It's interesting that the only discussion about taxes by the Democratic majority is to try and get the president's taxes," Flanagan told reporters gathered outside his office. "We should be spending our time worrying about what we can do for New Yorkers." With just 22 seats in the 63-seat Senate, GOP senators could not stop the bills, but they did make some noise.

The walls of Flanagan's office pay tribute to his father, a genial and physically imposing assemblyman who represented Long Island in the 1970s and 1980s. One photo on the wall shows a middle-aged father and a preteen son sitting next to each other in the Assembly chamber. On the opposite wall is a frame filled with campaign literature, including a pamphlet where the elder Flanagan's name reads proudly next to the name of President Richard Nixon.

The older Flanagan, a former high school biology teacher, was first elected to the Assembly in 1972, in part on a platform touting his commitment to environmental issues. He earned a reputation as a policy wonk on issues like education. His brand of politics placed him more toward the political center at a time when the GOP was moving in a more conservative direction nationwide. "I don't like this term per se, but my father was very forward-thinking," the younger Flanagan said. "He would have been considered progressive in what I consider a good sense."

Flanagan, who would tag along on trips to the state Capitol, said that his father was one of the most formidable debaters in the Republican conference at that time. "People would tell me when I got here, 'Your father's a legendary debater, my God, he always knew his stuff,'" Flanagan recalled. "I would joke around like, 'Listen, I was on the receiving end on that.'"

A 1979 [battle](#) over funding for what would become the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan was one of many times where Flanagan used his intelligence and wit against the Democrats. "He was someone you would never welcome having

to debate because he could be very effective and very sharp,” said Assemblyman Richard Gottfried, who was first elected in 1970. While the bill passed the Assembly by a comfortable margin, Republicans scored political points by asserting that the convention center would place undue burdens on residents outside New York City because state money would be used to fund it.

The elder Flanagan’s promising legislative career [ended in tragedy](#) on Sept. 27, 1986, while the 50-year-old was out jogging with his wife and son at the track at Old Field Junior High School in Greenlawn. He collapsed and was pronounced dead at Huntington Hospital. His son was working at International Paper, a paper manufacturer, at the time while finishing his law degree at Touro Law Center. After he gave a eulogy at his father’s funeral, Republican leaders saw his political potential. “It was very eloquent, heartfelt, not a dry eye in the house,” said Gyory, who heard accounts of the funeral from others. “They all felt that if it was him on the ballot, with the feelings towards the father and the family, he’d be almost impossible to beat in a special election – and in fact he was.”

The younger Flanagan entered the Assembly in the 1987 freshman class that included several future leaders in state politics, including Thomas DiNapoli, who went on to become state comptroller, and Joseph Crowley, who rose through the ranks in Congress. Flanagan followed in his father’s footsteps by rising through the state ranks and cultivating a reputation as an education policy wonk. But after his first attempt at leading a conference fell short by [one vote](#) to Assemblyman Charles Nesbitt in 2002, his ambitions turned toward the Senate, where he won a seat later that year.

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At the time, Joseph Bruno was Senate majority leader, but the upstate lawmaker would resign in 2008 after being indicted on federal [corruption charges](#). Though he would eventually be acquitted, Bruno was replaced by then-Sen. Dean Skelos of Long Island, giving the downstate GOP contingent the upper hand in the historical geographical divide within the party. Following the Democrats’ tumultuous, two-year period controlling the chamber in 2009-10, downstate Republicans were further empowered when the party resumed control. Republicans eventually needed the Independent Democratic Conference – a breakaway group of mostly downstate Democrats – to form a majority in 2013.

When [Skelos](#) was hit with federal corruption charges of his own in 2015, Flanagan had the chance that he had been waiting for his whole career: leading a legislative conference. The years he spent cultivating relationships throughout the state as an assemblyman and state senator paid off. “He took his time, rising slowly through the steps until lightning struck,” said Lawrence Levy, the executive dean at the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University. “He had the long relationships that in some cases spanned two generations of Flanagans (and) his positioning to be a consensus choice not just on Long Island but around the state was the result of a long service in the Legislature.”

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Yet once Flanagan finally reached the pinnacle, he wasn't able to hold on for long. “John was around Long Island, and all the politics for a very long time,” said Bruce Gyory, an political science professor at the University at Albany and a Democratic political consultant. “But he only got a chance to make his mark in the last few years – and that was cut short by the loss of the majority.”

Gun control activists were swarming Flanagan's office. He was on their list of elected officials to target on their lobbying visit to the state Capitol on a recent Tuesday afternoon. Yet no one seemed to recognize the lanky Long Islander as he slipped out the front door to his office down the hall from the Senate chamber. It was just minutes until the annual Police Officers Memorial begins across the street, and Flanagan was eager to keep up appearances. “I've got to pay my respects,” he said.

In past years, Flanagan had a prime speaking slot at the annual event, which memorializes law enforcement personnel who died in the past year. Sixty-three names will be etched into a black granite memorial wall in Empire State Plaza. Their names will be read before an audience of elected officials, union leaders and police officers and their families. It is a full house this year as everyone crams into The Egg, an event space on Empire State Plaza.

After Flanagan entered, Griffo, his top lieutenant, nodded from the stairs to the left where he stood alongside other Republican legislators in a room filled with hundreds of local law enforcement officers and their families.

There were 31 chairs at the front for the likes of Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, state Sen. John Brooks – a Long Island Democrat representing Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins – and Patrick Lynch, the president of the New York City Police Benevolent Association. But there was no seat for Flanagan. He heads up the stairs, mingles with members of the police color guard and tried to find a place to stand.

It was another reminder of how things have changed for Flanagan over the course of the past year. There was the loss of the Senate majority. There was the post-election leadership challenge from Catharine Young that revealed dissent among the ranks. And then there was the drinking the led him to check into [rehab](#) a few days before Christmas last year. “I wouldn't isolate it to any one thing,” he told City & State when asked why he decided to seek treatment. Considering that his own father had died young, the 58-year-old Flanagan said it became more obvious after the election that the time had come to take better care of himself. “Somebody finds himself at a point where you're just breathing a little harder, I feel like I put on 15 or 20 pounds,” he said. “Sometimes you may have a colleague or a friend that says, ‘How you feeling. What's going on?’”

Flanagan would miss the first month of the session, and returned to a very different state Senate. New York Republicans had hit [rock bottom](#) as a party and there is no easy path out of the political wilderness. With the menacing prospect of Democratic-led redistricting on the horizon, Flanagan is leaning on the one source of strength that his political rivals could never take away from him: his father. The former

assemblyman continues to be a “role model, hero, all that kind of stuff,” Flanagan said. “That’s never changed.”