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Home-state endorsements from officials eluding Gillibrand, de Blasio



Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) holds Alex Murphy at a campaign meet-and-greet Friday in Franklin, N.H. Photo Credit: AP / Elise Amendola

By Emily Ngo

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Democratic presidential candidates Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio are low in the polls and lagging in donors, but also lacking when it comes to endorsements, particularly from their home-state politicians.

Gillibrand, three months into her official bid for the White House, so far has the endorsement of only one of the 21 House Democrats in New York's delegation, Rep. Carolyn Maloney of Manhattan.

De Blasio, newer to the race at one month into his candidacy, is endorsed by the New York Hotel and Motel Trades Council and state Assemb. Rodneyse Bichotte of Brooklyn.

Meanwhile, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has voiced support for former Vice President Joe Biden.

And Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said he won't pick a preference because seven senators and de Blasio are in the running.

"I think the overwhelming view of most Democrats and even most independents is: Who's the best candidate to beat Donald Trump?" Schumer told Newsday. "And we have to let it play out. That's more important than geography right now."

By contrast, Sen. Cory Booker early in his bid secured the endorsements of New Jersey's governor, lieutenant governor, Senate president and General Assembly speaker as well as his state's other U.S. senator and all 11 Democratic House members.

Sens. Kamala Harris of California, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota also boast stronger home-state support from federal government colleagues and statewide elected officials.

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Newsday reached out to four dozen prospective prominent Democratic endorsers in New York State, either directly or through their representatives. The pool included the federal elected officials, the statewide elected officials and 20 additional Democratic National Committee members, from former President Bill Clinton to key delegates in the private sector.

Among those who responded, the majority said they weren't ready to make an endorsement.

Some said they did not yet know if they would endorse at all.

Some said Gillibrand and de Blasio had not yet requested their endorsement.

Several cited the sheer size of the Democratic field, the multiple friends and colleagues they have in the mix and the fact that they hold party leadership positions as reasons for delaying their decision or staying neutral.

Like Schumer, some noted that their end goal was to unseat President Donald Trump with the right Democratic nominee.

"We're still looking at all the candidates," state Attorney General Letitia James said. "The bottom line is I want to beat President Trump. Period. End of discussion. Full stop."

Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of Brooklyn, chair of the House Democratic Caucus, said he hasn't decided whether he'll make an endorsement because the primary includes six current or former House colleagues, two Congressional Black Caucus members and Gillibrand.

"So, at this point, I've decided just to let the process play itself out," Jeffries said. "I speak to whatever candidates reach out to me and will continue to do so."

Among New York's other Democratic House members, Rep. Thomas Suozzi of Glen Cove endorsed Biden and Reps. Kathleen Rice of Garden City and Sean Patrick Maloney of Hudson Valley endorsed former Rep. Beto O'Rourke of Texas, both calling him a friend.

Gillibrand, a former House member who has been in the Senate for 10 years, also has friends in the delegation but she doesn't yet have their endorsements.

Rep. Nydia Velazquez of Brooklyn said she hasn't made a decision. "But I'm listening," she added. "I'm listening to all of them."

Rep. Nita Lowey of Westchester County told The New York Times in March that she was sitting out the primary. Lowey's spokeswoman didn't return Newsday's requests for comment.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Gov. Kathy Hochul made the maximum allowable contribution to Gillibrand's bid but her spokeswoman said she has made no formal endorsement.

Gillibrand and de Blasio's teams said more endorsements are forthcoming.

De Blasio's campaign said that despite his short time in the race, "he already has more union endorsements than all but one candidate."

It cited support from local and national leaders, but did not respond to a request for elaboration. It may have been referencing endorsements by a South Carolina mayor and councilman and a statement by feminist icon Gloria Steinem that de Blasio was the "only male" candidate she'd support for president.

A Gillibrand aide said the campaign does not expect Gillibrand to be an establishment candidate and its strategy reflects that. The aide noted that the senator is endorsed not only by Maloney, but two key activists in Iowa, an activist and a state elected official in New Hampshire and a congressional candidate from Illinois.

A national party official from New York speaking on the condition of anonymity said neither candidate has generated much good will among fellow politicians in the state. Another official, also speaking anonymously, noted that Gillibrand and de Blasio rose to their posts more as individuals than as team players.

Others said it was still early in the 2020 election cycle and also said the candidates' standings in the primary may go hand-in-hand with endorsements.

Gillibrand and de Blasio each have been registering at 1 percent or lower in national polls. The senator struggled to secure the 65,000 unique donors necessary to meet the fundraising threshold set by the DNC to help qualify for the debates later this month.

Both had expressed concerns that they wouldn't make it to the debate stage, but both qualified in the end. Gillibrand met both the polling and fundraising thresholds. De Blasio only met the polling threshold. The third New Yorker in the primary, entrepreneur Andrew Yang, also qualified for the debates.

"I think that each of these candidates before reaching out for endorsements has got to establish themselves as a possible, a genuinely possible, contender," said Jay Jacobs, state Democratic Party chairman and Nassau County party leader. "And then, I think they'll get the interest and attention in their own home state. And I think that's a good strategy."

DNC member Gerard Sweeney said endorsements would be "an indication of political support." He noted some politicians such as Gillibrand spend less time on the "political party side of things than on the government side of things."

Another DNC member, Charlie King, commended de Blasio on the hotel workers union nod, calling it "one of the more coveted endorsements in New York, if you're running in New York." But, King said, "it's not translating nationally."

Gerald Benjamin, a SUNY New Paltz professor, said state and county party leaders likely are following Cuomo's lead on endorsements. He noted the "adversarial relations" between Cuomo and de Blasio.

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