Stephanie Miner's goal in governor's race: Disrupt broken, corrupt system

The former mayor of Syracuse, running on the Serve America Movement line, is challenging Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in November.

ALBANY — The wildest card in the governor’s race is former Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner who is walking away from a career in Democratic politics and is using phrases like “the system is completely broken” and “it needs to be disrupted” in her bid to upend the two-party system.

Miner, 48, was once a Democratic rising star. Now, she has taken the mantle of the new and bipartisan Serve America Movement to gain a spot on the ballot and challenge Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and what she calls a "corrupt political culture."

Miner says she's no spoiler — but Democrats fear it's true and Republican nominee Marc Molinaro hopes it is. Short of winning — and her 1 percent showing in this month Siena College poll isn't encouraging — Miner wants to make a point.

“Our campaign is based on a message,” Miner said in an interview. “It’s not based on a geographic strategy, or an ethnic strategy or a gender strategy. It’s based on a message strategy, which can simply be boiled down to: The system is broken, it serves campaign contributors, and I want to end that.”
Miner had already tried to disrupt the status quo from the inside.

She was the first woman mayor of any of New York’s “Big Five” cities and won re-election in 2013 with 68 percent of the vote. She served as co-chairwoman of the state party from 2012 to 2014, appointed by Cuomo.


Headlined "Cuomo to Cities: Just Borrow," Miner's op-ed called on state legislators to reject the governor's just-unveiled budget proposal because it resorted to "accounting gimmicks" rather than "lasting solutions" to upstate's problems — issues, she said, that still haven't been addressed five years later. At the time, few Democrats were bucking the hard-charging governor.

On the campaign trail, Miner says she wants to abolish most of the state's economic development programs that fund specific projects, saying they have failed. Instead, she would direct money into infrastructure and high-speed internet service.

Miner also says New York State should shoulder the full cost of Medicaid, as most states do, which would allow localities to drastically cut property taxes.

“She's honest, she's smart and she's tough,” said Richard Brodsky of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate
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School of Public Service and a former Democratic state assemblyman. “She’s trying to create a kind of discourse that will survive her.”

In a recent interview, Miner said: “What I’m concerned about is a million people have left New York State in the last eight years. What I’m concerned about is I drive by empty factories and see corruption trials every single day ... Our system is broken and it needs to be disrupted.”

Miner says she wants Democrats and Republicans to try to solve problems, not just hurl accusations.

“I always acted in a way that says that integrity is more important than partisanship,” Miner said. “Unfortunately, our system has become so dysfunctional that it’s serving campaign contributors and you are seeing both parties sort of giving a collective shrug to what has become a monthly, if not weekly, deluge of corruption investigations, indictments, trials.”

Miner said she decided to run as federal prosecutors pursued two corruption investigations involving Cuomo’s economic development program and some of his biggest campaign contributors, who received huge tax breaks and state aid.

The probes culminated in multiple convictions of defendants including Joseph Percoco, once Cuomo’s closest confidant and former campaign manager. Cuomo, who made "cleaning up Albany" his top priority in his 2010 gubernatorial run, wasn’t accused of wrongdoing.

Miner is a "very good person, tough-minded, experienced," said Gerald Benjamin, a distinguished professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz.

But despite the spate of convictions, he said: "Corruption is not resonating. All sides are culpable and the issue classically does not play in New York."

Miner remains a long shot. However, she remembers her old boss, the late Gov. Mario Cuomo, whom she worked for when she was 23. His probing questions on policy in briefings en route to events promoted her to give him the nickname front-seat Socrates.

Once, Cuomo asked her what faith was.

“I don’t remember how I answered,” Miner said in an essay after his death in 2015. “But I remember word for word his explanation of it, which ended with, 'It is believing in something with your very being even when you don’t have absolute proof it exists.’"
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