

As Hochul Pushes Cuomo Agenda, Williams Takes on Both in Primary Challenge

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Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul (photo: The Governor's Office)

“That’s what we do in New York -- that’s what we need in our nation!” declared Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul from a church lectern Sunday, sounding not unlike her boss, Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Hochul, whose remarks were at times drowned out by applause, was highlighting Cuomo’s progressive accomplishments -- paid family leave, equal pay provisions, and criminal justice reform -- before a congregation of elected officials, aides, and others attending the New York State Association of Black and Puerto Rican Legislators’ annual gathering in Albany. And, as she has done across the state in recent weeks, Hochul outlined signature planks of Cuomo’s 2018 agenda, like bail and speedy trial reforms.

At Wilborn Temple First Church, Hochul agily made scriptural references, and like Cuomo [during his 2018 State of the State address](#), invoked the heartbreaking story of

Kalief Browder, a young man who committed suicide after being held for three years in Rikers Island jails without ever being given a trial date.

“A young man accused of stealing a backpack, and spends three years of his life, languishing in a jail, and finally he couldn’t take it anymore. They crushed his spirit and he took his life,” said Hochul. “If only he had had enough money for the bail, he could have been out there, perhaps on his way to a good job or career or family.”

Despite Hochul’s warm reception, a number of black and Latino elected officials attending the conference -- including New York City Council Members Antonio Reynoso and Daneek Miller, Assembly Member Rodneyse Bichotte, and State Senator Kevin Parker -- had already declared their intentions to back her Democratic primary challenger, Brooklyn Council Member Jumaane Williams, who officially announced his bid for Lieutenant Governor at New York City Hall on Friday, February 16.

“He is a man of integrity and he is a man who brings with him the voice of the people. I am so excited and I hope that you are as well,” said Miller, at Williams’ announcement, where Williams also announced support from other elected officials, like Council Member Brad Lander, and several community groups.

Like Hochul, Williams also attended “Caucus Weekend” events, participating in two panels, one on criminal justice reform and another on gun violence, before traveling around the state Monday to promote his message.

On one stop, Williams sat with a gaggle of SUNY New Paltz students and New Paltz town officials at Cafeteria, a low-key coffee shop with mural-coated walls and mismatched upholstery. Striking a decidedly different tone than Hochul, Williams lead a discussion that ranged from the flaws with the governor’s Excelsior Scholarship to the arbitrariness of how grants are awarded by New York’s Regional Economic Development Councils, a Cuomo creation that Hochul chairs.

Aside from presiding over the state Senate and acting as gubernatorial successor, the Lieutenant Governor position is largely undefined by statute, and the 41-year-old Williams said he aspires to be “the people’s” lieutenant governor, using the position as a “megaphone” to pressure the governor to deliver on his promises to progressives.

“I hope to use the bully pulpit,” said Williams, adding that he is willing to support and work with the governor on things they are aligned on. “I don’t want to be opposition for its own sake.”

Of Cuomo's 2018 agenda, Williams said, "A lot of it sounds good, but a lot of it is mirrors. You talk about 'Raise the Age,' which is awesome, but you don't actually have the funding for the city to get it accomplished," he said, referring to the criminal justice reform measure passed last year and the lack of funding for implementation in the governor's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year.

"I haven't seen sincere leadership on a whole host of issues," Williams said [on a recent episode of the Max & Murphy Podcast](#) from Gotham Gazette and City Limits, discussing the rationale for his campaign and why he is taking on Hochul and Cuomo. "Somebody needs to say 'the emperor has no clothes,'" he explained of his plans for the position and what's lacking now.

A child of Brooklyn public schools, Williams overcame ADHD and Tourette's Syndrome to become a rising star in the City Council. In the city, he has made a name for himself as both an effective councilman and activist, leading protests and passing legislation on criminal justice reform and becoming a fierce advocate for housing affordability. Now the councilman must flesh out his platform to appeal to voters around the state.

"The learning curve is not as steep as I thought I would be," Williams said in New Paltz of his exploration of upstate concerns. "The reason we did listening tours is to make sure that we were on the right trajectory, and we learned quickly that we are, so now it's about being fine-tuned, making sure we are covering all of the local issues."

He has noted that upstate farmers, many of whom employ undocumented immigrants, are concerned about the federal immigration crackdown, and that housing issues, similarly, transcend regional divides.

While Williams has spoken to three potential Democratic gubernatorial contenders -- actress and advocate Cynthia Nixon, former Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, and former state Senator Terry Gipson -- he says he is running independently and would stay independent from the governor, whomever it is. Gibson is the only Democrat currently campaigning against Cuomo for the nomination.

New Yorkers vote for lieutenant governor as a standalone position during the party primaries, but for the general, the lieutenant governor nominee shares a ticket with the gubernatorial nominee of the same party. The position does come with more than \$600,000 in budget funds, typically spent on causes assigned by the governor -- an allowance that could potentially get cut during the following budget cycle for a lieutenant governor that does not fall in line with the executive's agenda.

Hochul, who has not officially launched her reelection campaign, was Cuomo's lieutenant governor running mate in 2014, when he was seeking a second term but his first-term running mate, Robert Duffy, decided against running again. Hochul also has a compelling life story, having lived in a trailer home as a child, becoming Erie County's longtime county clerk, and eventually rising to serve a brief stint in Congress. Despite being a Democrat, Hochul won a 2011 special election for the 26th Congressional District, one of the most Republican districts in the state. Her loss in the general election a year later was chalked up to her vote in favor of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, a progressive stance she touted in her remarks Sunday.

In 2014, still largely unknown to most of the state, she ran a tight race against Tim Wu, a progressive Columbia Law School professor who made a name for himself coining "net neutrality," running with Zephyr Teachout, Cuomo's gubernatorial challenger in the primary. Though Hochul beat Wu, 60 percent to 40 percent, Wu performed better than his running mate on a miniscule budget for a statewide race.

But after four years of diligently representing the governor at events across the state, Hochul is going to be tough to unseat, in part given the female-heavy electorate in New York State, according to Bruce Gyory, a political consultant.

"Hochul was out there defending Planned Parenthood day and night during the assault. She has a strong profile on Planned Parenthood and on gay rights," said Gyory, noting that Williams' previous statements on marriage equality and abortion are likely to haunt him as he tries to scoop up the more progressive Democratic base. "Given how female the electorate is -- you have to wonder if an electorate which is just shy of 60 percent is going to dump their female lieutenant governor."

At the New Paltz cafe, Williams tried to preempt the criticisms, which may have hurt him during his two bids for City Council speaker, which he most recently lost to Council Member Corey Johnson, who is openly gay.

The son of Grenadian immigrants, Williams has referred to his religious upbringing and spirituality for the confusion about his positions on the hot-button issues.

"There are two issues that they are going to try to attack me with that are just plain wrong," he said. "I'm very proud of my religious and spiritual background, it's what guides the justice work that I do. But they always confuse my position on marriage equality and [access] to legal abortion."

Previous attempts to demure on the topics, urging people to look at his legislative

record which includes votes to protect women's health access, have backfired, and past comments have proven hard to shake.

Now Williams is trying to get ahead of the narrative. "I want to see that Roe vs. Wade is codified. Unlike the governor, I don't just talk about it, I want to see it happen, in case the 'orange man' does his thing," he told his New Paltz audience, referring to Cuomo's failed efforts to push abortion protections through the Republican-controlled state Senate and to President Donald Trump. In his short lieutenant governor campaign thus far, which included a month-long exploratory phase, Williams has repeatedly [faced questions](#) on the two issues, as well as slightly couched [criticism from Melissa DeRosa](#), Cuomo's top governmental aide. DeRosa and Hochul have been out front promoting the Cuomo administration's "2018 Women's Agenda for New York," [released in January](#).

Williams has recently demonstrated his commitment to women's health by introducing legislation barring employment discrimination based on reproductive decisions. Other issues he hopes to bring attention to through his candidacy, and potential platform, are education funding, transportation, and gun control.

Hochul, too, will have to answer for previous positions she has taken on immigration and gun control, which again, due to recent tragedies, has become the focus of media attention. As county clerk, she opposed the issuing of driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants and in Congress voted in favor of National Rifle Association-backed legislation.

Jeff Lewis, Hochul's chief of staff, said the lieutenant governor's views have evolved on both issues, noting that the climate surrounding the debate has changed considerably in recent years. He pointed out that fellow Upstate Democrats, like former Senator Hillary Clinton and current Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, at one time took similarly conservative stances.

Hochul did support the New York SAFE Act, gun control legislation championed and signed by Cuomo, and according to Lewis, regrets voting for the 2011 National Right to Carry Reciprocity Act, federal legislation that would allow people with concealed carry permits to carry their guns into other states that don't allow concealed weapons. "Her exposure to gun violence was very different than when she became a statewide elected official," said Lewis, noting the increase in large-scale massacres in the United States in recent years.

While she was speaking in her elected, not campaign, capacity, Hochul touched on the shootings during her remarks in Albany on Sunday.

“In today’s day we still bury children in high school because nobody else has the courage to do what we have done here in the state of New York and that is to ban those weapons of lethal destruction,” she said. “Please God let our leaders in Washington here those cries.”

Williams, a leading figure in New York City on gun violence prevention, says he gives the governor’s administration credit for passage of the SAFE Act, which may have contributed to an 18 percent decline in shootings in the state, but said it doesn’t go far enough.

“Resting on the laurels of the SAFE Act in the face of a full-on assault, is not a good idea. Every time it’s brought up, you deserve some credit, but what have you done since then?” [Williams said on the Max & Murphy Podcast](#). “I always want to make sure we parse out, when it comes to gun violence, supply and demand...I don’t think what is coming out of the governor’s mansion goes nearly as far on the demand side across the state.”

To reduce “demand” for guns, Williams, who co-chairs the Council’s Task Force to Combat Gun Violence, has taken a holistic approach to gun violence prevention, utilizing government, law enforcement, and community leaders on the ground. He has even looked national with his launch of the National Network to Combat Gun Violence, local elected officials from around the country dedicated to ending gun violence in their communities.

Williams says that if elected, he will model the role after that of New York City’s public advocate, which also acts as the mayor’s successor and fill-in, but is expected to hold the mayor accountable. Historically, lieutenant governors have acted as compliant surrogates for the governor, championing the executive’s agenda, and focusing their energies on causes selected by the governor.

However, there have been cases where the second-in-command crafted his or her own messaging or operated counter to the administration in other ways.

Mary Anne Krupsak, who was lieutenant governor under Governor Hugh Carey, was frustrated that she was not given enough to do in her role. When Carey ran for his second term in 1978, she withdrew from the ticket, ran for governor herself against Carey, and lost.

In 1982, New York City Mayor Ed Koch lost the Democratic gubernatorial primary to Mario Cuomo, but Koch’s running mate, Alfred DelBello, won the lieutenant governor seat, resulting in an awkward match that lasted just one term.

Betsy McCaughey Ross, a conservative policy wonk and New York Post columnist who went on to work for President Donald Trump, flouted expectations with her outspokenness during her short tenure as lieutenant governor to former Republican Governor George Pataki, between 1995 and 1998. [Pataki announced](#) he would not select her as his running mate the following year with a stern rebuke.

"Unfortunately, you have demonstrated through your decisions that you do not share my vision for the state," he wrote. Recounting his record on various issues, Pataki added, "Your unwillingness and, in fact, outright refusal to work as part of our united team to build on these historic achievements has been disappointing."

Lewis, Hochul's chief of staff, continues to dismiss Williams' run as a "political stunt." While he acknowledges that Hochul is running, Lewis said she is currently focused her elected duties, such as delivering an on-time state budget.

When asked if Hochul has ever spoken or acted independently of Cuomo, Lewis said, "I don't think she's had to take any actions thus far, because the governor's been on the right side of every issue."

If Williams is able to win the nomination he would likely do so on the strength of a New York City voting base and despite whatever funds Cuomo is willing to spend from his \$30-plus million war chest to help popularize Hochul, not to mention whatever amount Hochul can raise and spend on her own. It's unclear how much Williams will be able to raise for his lieutenant governor campaign. The Council member did pick up another endorsement this week, from People for Bernie, a grassroots group of Bernie Sanders supporters. Williams endorsed Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary, while Cuomo and Hochul were strong backers of Hillary Clinton. The Brooklyn Council member [told Max & Murphy](#) that he is actively pursuing the backing of the liberal Working Families Party, which will hold its nominating convention this spring and has a contentious relationship with Cuomo after a dramatic 2014 endorsement that did not pan out as the party hoped or Cuomo promised.

Williams said at his kickoff press conference that if he and Cuomo were a joint ticket for the general election, he would campaign with and for the governor, stating that he cannot see any Republican being a better option than Cuomo, even if he has reservations about Cuomo's politics.

According to SUNY New Paltz professor Gerald Benjamin, the governor's lieutenant should ideally be treated as an appointed position and their ideological compatibility is necessary for government to function.

“The gentleman is an ambitious person who wants to increase his visibility,” Benjamin said of Williams. “Ambition is the engine of politics, so it’s not a bad thing, but for politics to work effectively, the governor and lieutenant governor have to be aligned.”

[[Listen to Jumaane Williams on the Max & Murphy Podcast](#)]