Debate kicks off intense sprint for Cuomo and Nixon, experts say

Both campaigns claim victory in their only debate as they launch their final push toward the Sept. 13 primary.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and activist Cynthia Nixon are entering their sprint to the Democratic primary on Sept. 13, each claiming to have the wind at their backs after a raucous televised debate.

“Cynthia Nixon tried to land a knockout punch tonight, but just showed why she trails the governor by 30 points in the polls and how voters are increasingly turning against her substance-free campaign,” said Cuomo campaign spokeswoman Lis Smith.

"Cynthia is the clear winner of tonight’s debate," Nixon's campaign declared. "Cynthia's policy breadth and confidence knocked the Governor off his game."

The nasty tone of the debate included Nixon calling Cuomo corrupt and Cuomo calling the actress someone who operates in fiction while he governs in reality.
Each have been targeting the same liberal New York City voters who dominate Democratic primary voting.

Although each side claimed they “clearly won,” analyst reviews were mixed.

Nixon began spinning her performance and her plans for breaking out before the primary in interviews on CNN, NY1 and elsewhere. She told MSNBC on Thursday that Cuomo “has governed like a Republican.”

She will need to depend heavily on such “free media” as her campaign fund, dwarfed by Cuomo’s, appears to have little left for a big TV ad campaign. Nixon will head upstate over the Labor Day weekend, then continue “a very energetic field campaign,” spokeswoman Lauren Hitt said Thursday. She said 140 more volunteers joined the campaign after the debate, and $20,000 more was donated.

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A poll of likely primary voters showed Nixon down by 31 points, according to the July 31 Siena College Research Institute poll.

In their financial filings a month before the primary, Cuomo had $24.4 million and Nixon had $441,856.

Traditionally, the final days of a campaign are filled with negative ads, TV ad blitzes, statewide tours and a possible surprise attack that campaigns hold close to their vests. Cuomo will make use of the volunteers and campaign cash from unions and the
work of leaders in the Democratic Party he heads, while Nixon will try to capitalize on any Cuomo fatigue and recent electoral shockers that show no incumbent is safe.

“This is a pure mobilization challenge,” said Gerald Benjamin, distinguished professor of political science at the State University at New Paltz. “This makes the governor’s union support critically important. The relationship has been up and down. How solid is it now? They have the organization in place.”

The liberal Working Families Party, which supports Nixon, has volunteers for phone banks and knocking on voters’ doors, although far fewer than the Democratic establishment.

“The left has had some recent practice, and a big surprise win downstate in the Crowley district,” Benjamin said, referring to the upset of longtime Rep. Joseph Crowley in Queens to Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who was running her first race in the June Democratic primary. “This enters a degree of unpredictability.”

“The debate reflected the rhetoric of the campaign and they are going to do the same thing they have been doing, except they are going to do more of it,” said Doug Muzzio, political science professor at Baruch College.

He said he expects Nixon has a “September surprise” to toss at Cuomo and said many incumbents have faced upset because of a “third-term fatigue” among voters that is hard to quantify before ballots are cast.

“I think both of them have the do-or-die attitude,” he said.

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