Don’t Believe the Media Hype. Progressives Are Struggling in New York Races.

Posted to Politics August 09, 2018 by Andrew Solender

There’s a fierce battle being waged nationwide for the soul of the Democratic Party. Is it the the party of Andrea Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders; self-styled Democratic Socialists fighting to reverse income inequality, proliferate the tenets of social justice, and empower workers? Or is it the party of Hillary Clinton and, say, Dianne Feinstein: pragmatic moderates and liberals tacking to the center—business friendly, socially liberal but inoffensive—in an effort to create a big tent party and attract moderates and independents to their cause?

This dynamic was on full display in June, when Rep. Joe Crowley, the fourth ranking Democrat in the House, was unseated by Andrea Ocasio-Cortez. Cortez, a Democratic Socialist and a political neophyte, alleged that Crowley failed to adequately represent his constituents as an establishment liberal and a party power broker. The voters agreed, handing Ocasio-Cortez the nomination with a surprisingly strong 15-point margin of victory, though in a low turnout primary.

Now, a slate of progressive candidates are trying to recreate Ocasio-Cortez’s success on the state level in the primary on September 13th. But, despite how it may appear, and despite how progressives may frame it, that same ideological clash just doesn’t seem to have materialized in the state primary.

In the gubernatorial primary, Cynthia Nixon, an actress of Sex and the City fame is, like Ocasio-Cortez, making her first run at public office. She is challenging two-term incumbent Andrew Cuomo. Nixon is trying to flank Cuomo from the left and, in somewhat similar form to Ocasio-Cortez, making the race a referendum on what she claims is his relatively moderate governing style as she also points to the corruption scandals surrounding his administration.

“The Nixon campaign has been arguing that Cuomo has been Johnny come-lately on a lot of issues,” says SUNY New Paltz government professor Gerald Benjamin. One prominent example of this is Cuomo’s opposition to Donald Trump.

In 2017, Cuomo was seen as something of a relative soft-liner on opposing the Trump administration. But as election season has heated up, so to have Cuomo’s excoriation of the president. Now he is widely seen as one of Trump’s fiercest critics. But that, it seems, was more a product of opportunism than ideology.
Benjamin posits that, at first, Cuomo may have seen Trump as something of a political asset, if not an outright ally. “A Governor [of New York] might think, even though they’re from different parties, ‘it might be useful to have a President from New York,’” he says. This is in line with the attitudes of many who saw Trump as something of a moderate in the 2016 election. But like those voters, Cuomo sees that Trump is governing hyper-conservatively. Now, Benjamin says, “It’s almost as if he’s running against the president for governor.”

Jim Battista, a professor of political science at SUNY Buffalo and an expert on New York State politics, notes that while resistance to Trump could explain a lot of Cuomo’s recent policy shifts, it could also be attributed to Nixon’s influence. “The past year or so has seen Cuomo adopting some more liberal positions on a raft of issues,” he says, but “it’s more-or-less impossible to know how much of that is to counterpressure Nixon and how much is just that he’s been taking a more combative and clearly liberal or progressive attitude since Trump’s election.”

Nixon has taken firmly progressive stances on everything from education to housing to drug laws. She has made transportation a cornerstone of her campaign, hammering Cuomo on recent MTA calamities. But Cuomo was already widely seen as not only one of the most liberal governors in the United States, but also a pretty good ideological representative of New York voters. The New York electorate is liberal, no doubt, but they’re not quite Vermont liberal. Progressivism in the vein of Bernie Sanders doesn’t tend to play well in New York City, the heart of New York’s Democratic population. Many of those voters are black and Hispanic: demographic groups which tend to be more moderate than progressive. Battista points out that “Democratic Socialists seem to be a substantially whiter party than the Democrats overall.” For that reason, Sanders-style progressivism and Democratic Socialism only really plays in the sparsely populated rural, and predominantly white, areas of upstate New York.

Nixon is also a pretty weak candidate, and probably isn’t the best standard-bearer for progressivism in New York. She has been bashed for a lack of substantial experience in government or management of any kind. Those criticisms, the ideological makeup of New York and the difficulty of unseating an incumbent, especially one as powerful as Cuomo, have made it difficult for her to make a dent in the polls.

According to a recent poll by Siena Research Institute, an Albany research firm, Cuomo leads Nixon by a factor of two-to-one, 60 percent to 29 percent—meaning the election could be more media hype than a genuinely close race. Unsurprisingly, Cuomo’s strongest numbers come from self-identified “moderates,” while Nixon is strongest with liberals. Cuomo also holds a resounding lead in NYC and the NYC suburbs, which tend to favor establishment candidates, and Black and Latino voters. Nixon’s strength is among white voters and those in the more rural upstate areas. At the end of the day, however, Cuomo still holds healthy leads in every category.

The story doesn’t change much when you look down-ballot.

Several candidates have lined up to replace acting Attorney General Barbara Underwood. Underwood stepped
into the top job after the resignation of her predecessor, Eric Schneiderman, following a New Yorker report of his alleged sexual abuse (https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/four-women-accuse-new-yorks-attorney-general-of-physical-abuse) of several women. Three of the four major candidates running to are women. This race, though somewhat more competitive than the gubernatorial race, is still pretty much decided against the candidate furthest to the left.


The Siena poll shows James leading with 25 percent, followed by Maloney with 16 percent, Teachout with 13 percent and Eve with just 4 percent. James, like Cuomo, is strongest amongst moderates and conservatives, NYC residents, and voters of color. Maloney leads narrowly among suburban, upstate and white voters, while Teachout is nearly tied with James among liberals and with Maloney among white voters. 42 percent are still undecided.

Teachout is clearly the most progressive of the three candidates. She is running the most heavily anti-Trump campaign, while advocating strongly for campaign finance reform. She is cross-campaigning with Nixon and Ocasio-Cortez. She is hampered a bit by the fact that a significant portion of her donations have come from outside New York State (http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/ny-pol-teachout-donations-out-of-state-20180805-story.html), as well as the fact that she has run for so many offices in so short a time. As Benjamin puts it: “She seems to want to run for anything that’s available.”

Like Nixon, Teachout suffers from a lack of support outside rural, upstate communities. “You can’t have a win as a Democrat with an upstate-based strategy,” says Benjamin, “You got to hunt where the ducks are.” In this case, the ducks, Democratic voters, are heavily clustered in New York City.

Maloney has run into a similar demographic problem. His moderate reputation and a massive $3 million war chest (https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2018/06/06/in-running-for-ag-maloney-shifts-calcultus-on-congressional-race-452630) have allowed him to make inroads with the affluent communities of Long Island and the lower Hudson Valley, but that’s about as far as a moderate—who has voted with Trump 34% of the time (https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/sean-patrick-maloney/)—can get in New York. Maloney has also failed to get significant in-state endorsements (https://www.cityandstatenyc.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/attorney-general-endorsements-2018.html) due to the fact that he’s been working on the federal level. Both he and Teachout seem to be shut out of the New York City game.

Contrast that with James, who, thanks to Cuomo’s backing, has racked up endorsements from a wide network of powerful politicians, unions, and party organizations (https://www.tishjames2018.com/endorsements/) across the state. Both she and Cuomo were easily nominated to get on the primary ballot (https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-democrats-put-gov-cuomo-letitia-james-on-primary-ballot-1527116823) at the state Democratic convention back in May, winning 85% and 95% of delegates respectively. Also like Cuomo, James has higher name recognition than her opponents and is popular in New York City thanks to her work as a solidly liberal Public Advocate (http://observer.com/2014/10/letitia-james-charting-a-new-path-for-public-advocate-holds-her-fire-at-city-hall/). With pretty solid polling leads, it seems that,
barring any unforeseen events, she and Cuomo will cruise to victory on primary day. While this race could be looked upon with an ideological lens, the takeaway would ultimately be that progressivism isn't ready for prime time in urban states. Perhaps New Yorkers just aren't ready for Vermont-style politics.

About the Author

Andrew Solender (http://www.insidesources.com/author/solender/)

Andrew Solender is a reporter for InsideSources.

More from Inside Sources