

# Is Marc Molinaro the next George Pataki?

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Marc Molinaro | Photo by Sean Pressley

The appealing GOP candidate is strikingly similar to New York's last Republican governor. But Pataki never had to contend with Trump.

**The last time** a Republican beat an incumbent Democratic New York governor, Nelson Mandela was the newly elected president of South Africa, “Pulp Fiction” was quickly becoming a cult classic and Nirvana had just released its soon-to-be legendary “Unplugged” album.

In that flannel-clad year, a largely unknown state senator from Peekskill named George Pataki shocked political observers nationwide by defeating Gov. Mario Cuomo, the Queens-bred three-term incumbent who was considered a top-tier presidential prospect just two years earlier. Pataki, an affable, fresh-faced moderate from New York City's crucial northern suburbs, was handpicked by the GOP establishment as their strongest candidate. Although he was hardly a dazzling stump speaker, Pataki proved that an inoffensive Republican could defeat a Cuomo who had worn out his welcome.

Now, with 1990s nostalgia all the rage everywhere from music and fashion to [TV sitcoms](#), another young, sharp, largely unknown Republican from the Hudson Valley is seeking to knock off Mario's son, Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Like his father, Andrew Cuomo faces the challenge of overcoming the voter fatigue that sometimes dogs longtime incumbents, a weakness that his Republican opponent, Dutchess County Executive Marcus Molinaro, hopes to pounce on. While Cuomo holds a significant lead in polling – a late September Siena College [poll](#) showed Cuomo ahead by more than 20 points – his unfavorability

rating is at an all-time high, the same poll clocking that number at 46 percent.

That's why Molinaro believes he has a path to victory, despite a litany of obstacles to becoming the first Republican to win the governor's office since 2002, when Pataki won his third and final term. During a recent campaign stop in Buffalo, he told City & State that he believes New Yorkers are sick of corruption and high taxes, scourges he attributes to Cuomo. "We're going to win because New Yorkers have had enough," Molinaro said sitting at a large, oak table in the Erie County GOP's downtown headquarters.

He spoke with confidence, attacking Cuomo on myriad fronts, while selling himself as a compassionate public servant, bringing up his family's reliance on public assistance when he was a child. Again and again he has worked to juxtapose his own humble upbringing with that of Cuomo, whom he paints as a son of privilege. "This is a real life," Molinaro said, speaking of his upbringing. "A real, ordinary New York life."

Molinaro's biographical boasts may not make much sense: One wonders if Molinaro, being a Republican, shares his party's enthusiasm for cutting the public assistance his family relied on. And it's worth noting that Andrew Cuomo was an adult before his father ever won elected office and his family was neither rich nor famous when he grew up.

But Molinaro's point is that he's a regular guy, unlike the imperious scion of a political dynasty he's running against, and unlike a certain other Republican from New York who grew up wealthy – whom Molinaro is trying to distance himself from.

And that is the crucial difference between 1994 and 2018. The White House isn't occupied by a Democrat, and this year's midterms aren't expected to be a Republican wave. With politics more polarized, the GOP has moved further right, making the label more toxic in the Empire State. New York Democrats are enraged and engaged. Can Molinaro win under these circumstances? Could any Republican?

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**At 43, Molinaro** has spent his whole adult life in politics. Perhaps that's why he is such a polished candidate, able to move from talking point to talking point without missing a beat. Molinaro was elected mayor of the small town of Tivoli (population 1,100), where he still lives, at the age of 19 after serving a year on the town's board of trustees. He went on to serve in the county Legislature and for a three-term stint in the state Assembly before being elected county executive.

His political path has benefited from the very purple constituency of his hometown and its surroundings. Dutchess County enrollment numbers show a slight advantage for Democrats, but it is a prime example of the type of battleground full of moderates in both parties that he will need to do well in to win. Now, he is trying to win over a very different electorate. New York's registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than 2 to 1. The gulf between registered voters in the two parties has grown by more than 1.5 million people in the years since Pataki's surprise victory.

To have any real chance, Molinaro will have to woo moderate voters from both parties, particularly those in the New York City suburbs and Long Island. Winning New York moderates is harder, however, when an unpopular, far-right president from your party dominates every news cycle.

Cuomo – who continues to be considered a potential presidential contender in 2020 despite [vowing earlier this year that he would not run if re-elected](#) as governor – has seized on that liability. He and his surrogates have been calling Molinaro a "Trump Mini-Me" at every opportunity and tying him to his party's socially conservative positions that play poorly in New York. Attack ads against

Molinaro deploy the phrase, a reference to the diminutive clone of the villain in the “Austin Powers” film series. “Trump mini-me Marc Molinaro – who has an ‘A’ rating from the NRA and is the N.Y. GOP’s handpicked anti-woman, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ candidate – is desperately trying to deflect from the sad state of his campaign,” a Cuomo spokeswoman [wrote to The Buffalo News](#) in May.

This is arguably an extension of the strategy Cuomo has pursued all year: attacking Trump’s policies and doing what little he can to combat them. Amid the maelstrom following the implementation of Trump’s zero-tolerance immigration policy, Cuomo [sued](#) the Trump administration over the separation of families at the border, sent out a flurry of highly critical press releases, appeared on television to attack the policy and [visited](#) detention centers in New York where minors who had crossed the border illegally were being held. “Andrew Cuomo can base his entire campaign as an antagonist to the president,” said Doug Muzzio, a political science professor at Baruch College in Manhattan.

But portraying Molinaro as a Trump-like hardliner conflicts with how Molinaro presents himself and how he is perceived by many political observers. Muzzio said it’s clear that Molinaro is a “right-of-center Republican.” But, just as vulnerable congressional Republicans claim their challengers are [clones of House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi](#), Cuomo’s strategy of tying Molinaro to Trump could be the surest path to victory in a blue state.

Molinaro has consistently worked to bolster his image as a centrist. He has said that same-sex marriage and protections for members of the LGBTQ community [are basic civil rights](#). He [voted](#) against allowing hydraulic fracturing in New York as a member of the Assembly, though he now [supports a pilot program](#) to allow the controversial practice in the Southern Tier. On the other hand, he supports Trump’s recently passed tax bill, which gave large tax cuts to the wealthy and corporations but will raise taxes on many middle-class New Yorkers due to its provision limiting the state and local tax deduction. He is campaigning for governor on a plan that would cut taxes on New York’s richest residents and also attempt to reduce local property taxes.

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While Cuomo has continued to attack Molinaro as a social conservative who is out of step with the New York electorate, the Republican has taken nuanced positions on hot-button issues. Molinaro said he would protect existing abortion rights but he would not support the expansion of access to late-term abortions. While he has said that the National Rifle Association deserves a seat at the table in coming up with solutions to gun violence problems, [he has refused to take donations from the organization](#). He voted against the bill that legalized same-sex marriage in New York while a member of the Assembly, but says that his position on the matter has evolved.

Despite his standard Republican economic policies, Molinaro often talks about breaking down the barriers between regular people and the wealthy elite, a category in which he puts Cuomo. “The important distinction is I don’t talk about breaking down the gates and empowering people and taking power away from the powerful because I think it’s a good campaign slogan,” Molinaro said. “I say it because I believe it and I’ve lived it.”

Some of Molinaro’s proposals would have benefits for some middle-class and working-class families. But his fellow Republicans on the national stage keep making it harder and harder for him to play a populist. This year, the Trump administration issued [an executive order](#) for agencies to propose new requirements on recipients of anti-poverty programs such as food stamps and Medicaid, [proposed](#) rolling back an Obama-era rule requiring large companies to submit detailed information on workplace injuries to the Department of Labor, and [weakened](#) rules on the storage of coal ash, which environmentalists say risks increasing water pollution.

In addition to Cuomo's partisan advantage, he has the usual benefits of incumbency, such as greater name recognition and stronger fundraising. The most recent filings with the state Board of Elections show that Cuomo, despite spending heavily in the lead-up to his primary victory over challenger Cynthia Nixon, still has more than 11 times the money that Molinaro has on hand. The most recent [Siena College poll](#) showed that 56 percent of New Yorkers either did not know Molinaro or have not formed an opinion of him. Cuomo intends to put that money to work defining Molinaro for the voters who have yet to form an impression of him.

To overcome those disadvantages, Molinaro said he is reaching out to voters directly via social media and on the campaign trail. "I'm doing this the old-fashioned way," Molinaro said. "We're actually getting out to meet voters."

**Republican delegates** to the state convention in May selected Molinaro, in the hopes that he would stand a better chance than more conservative, controversial candidates like 2010 Republican gubernatorial nominee Carl Paladino or a long-serving legislator such as state Senate Deputy Majority Leader John DeFrancisco. Molinaro's almost uncanny similarities to Pataki, who was 49 when first elected governor, were surely on the minds of some.

Tivoli, where Molinaro has lived since he was 14, after living in Yonkers and Beacon, is about 60 miles up the Hudson River from Pataki's native Peekskill, where the former governor, like Molinaro, was once a young mayor. They both spent time in the state Legislature. Both were relatively anonymous at the beginning of their campaigns. The main difference between them is one of degree: Molinaro is more handsome and charming. And, whereas Pataki went to college at Yale and to law school at Columbia, Molinaro – a Dutchess Community College alumnus – is more representative of the working-class white voters who have become the bedrock of the GOP.

John Sweeney helped lay the groundwork for Pataki's successful run while working on campaigns for the state Republican committee before going on to become a high-ranking political operative in Washington, D.C., and eventually a congressman from the Capital Region. He said that in terms of the candidates themselves, the similarities between Pataki and Molinaro are striking. Unfortunately for Molinaro, the circumstances of the election don't hold the same uncanny parallels.

One element Molinaro lacks that was key to Pataki's victory is a robust Republican network of local politicians and operatives, with an army of engaged and enthusiastic volunteers throughout the state, something he and others in the state Republican Party were able to build in the run-up to the 1994 election, Sweeney said. In the years since Pataki's final victory in 2002, no Republican statewide or presidential candidate has come close to winning New York. That lack of success and the continually growing gap between registered Republicans and Democrats in New York have made it difficult for Republican leadership across the state to keep the base engaged.

"The difference between then and now is that I don't think the state party has done any of that," Sweeney said. "I don't think they have the infrastructure." Having such a local infrastructure would help Molinaro get his message out. "Pataki had quietly built up a formidable organization," Muzzio agreed.

And while rural New York remains clearly conservative, its [population has been slowly eroding](#). "While the climate might be conducive, I'm not so sure the environment is," Sweeney said.

In addition, Pataki had a powerful ally in U.S. Sen. Al D'Amato, who helped to raise funds and stumped for him. Sweeney said D'Amato's role in Pataki's victory is sometimes overstated. But he still believes that the 1994 win would not have been possible without the Republican senator.

As Sweeney tells it, D'Amato was jokingly dismissive when Pataki's name was first presented to him, quipping "What the fuck's a Pataki?" upon hearing the suggestion that he was the best

nominee.

But D'Amato lent his support at the state convention. With four candidates vying for the nomination, Pataki's low profile would have killed his chances without D'Amato's push.

Molinaro has virtually unanimous support from Republican elected officials and party influencers, but no ally with D'Amato's clout and fundraising connections – there simply are no such Republicans left in New York.

And Republican lawmakers in general may soon become an endangered species in New York, as the backlash from Trump's election is expected to bring a reckoning for the GOP this November. Democratic voters are likely to turn out in large numbers, as they did – by New York's low standards – in the September primary. And in many suburban and upstate areas, Democrats will be especially enthusiastic to vote against vulnerable Republican state Senate and congressional incumbents.

That's a very different story than in 1994, during President Bill Clinton's first term, when there was a 54-seat swing from Democrats to Republicans in the House of Representatives. "Pataki had an easier time because you didn't have the blowback against the national Republican Party," Muzzio said.

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**Republicans seeking statewide office** in New York are now in an almost impossible bind: They must appeal to downstate moderates while also motivating, and not alienating, the Republican base, which includes large numbers of staunch conservatives and Trump loyalists. "It doesn't seem that the base wants any moderation at all, so you're talking about 35 to 40 percent of the Republican voters who don't want a moderate," Muzzio said.

So Molinaro is walking a tightrope on many issues. He has built his platform around addressing middle-class concerns without making the wealthy pay for it. To offset lost revenue in his tax cut plan, he suggests cutting spending on economic development projects, which he argues have produced little in the way of jobs or economic benefit under Cuomo. For the New York City subways, plagued with service interruptions and cost overruns, Molinaro suggests that by shying away from grandiose station renovations and making the procurement and oversight processes more efficient, he will be able to make the trains run on time. "I think carving out a very pragmatic approach to problem solving is very powerful and makes a difference to voters," he said.

"I think he's projected a more measured, calmer, thoughtful policy-oriented campaign than Cuomo," Muzzio said. "Cuomo is focusing on Republican, Trump, Molinaro."

In the past, the model for both parties was to pivot away from the base and toward the center in the general election. Even if partisans didn't agree with everything a candidate did in reaching out to swing voters, they would overwhelmingly stick with their party's nominee. That's increasingly difficult, especially for Republicans, in an age when parties have become more ideologically cohesive and extreme. As the tea party movement demonstrated, Republicans who deviate from party orthodoxy face a constant threat of defection or primary challenges from their base. "Right now, building out to the center is more and more problematic because that constituency won't tolerate it," said Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz. "Therefore, in the Republican case where there's, in general, a smaller core, except in a few congressional districts, and a few Assembly and (state) Senate districts, it's an extraordinarily difficult dilemma."

Molinaro has publicly said that he did not vote for Trump, instead writing in former Rep. Chris Gibson, a relative moderate whose district included much of Dutchess County. But Molinaro has also been reluctant to publicly attack Trump. He came out against the Trump administration's family separation policy, but has largely avoided discussing the president at all.

In the Northeast, "Rockefeller Republicans," named for the former moderate Republican New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, are an endangered species who find their habitat shrinking. "They're becoming extinct both from the right and from the left," Muzzio said. "From the right in terms of primaries and from the left in general elections."

**Andrew Cuomo inspires** passionate, and sometimes conflicting, responses across the state. But everyone knows who he is. Outside of political circles and his home turf, Molinaro elicits a similar response to that of D'Amato being asked about Pataki in 1994: What's a Molinaro?

In recent weeks, Molinaro has begun to define himself by introducing some significant proposals – Cuomo's camp has labeled them gimmicks – suggesting that he would cut income taxes by 30 percent and that he can pay for fixing the New York City subway system solely through cost savings.

"It's offensive that after backing Trump's disastrous tax plan, which raised taxes up to 30 percent on New York's middle class, Trump mini-me Marc Molinaro is trying to pull a fast one on New Yorkers," Abbey Collins, a Cuomo campaign spokeswoman, said in an emailed statement. "His so-called 'plan' to cut taxes is heavy on rhetoric and light on details. Maybe he doesn't want to admit that instead of providing relief to hardworking New Yorkers his 'plan' would slash spending on vital services like education, health care, and public safety."

He has also beat the drum on corruption, highlighting the convictions of Cuomo officials and donors, including Joe Percoco, formerly a top aide and close friend to the governor.

But that may prove a difficult strategy to capitalize on, experts say. Cuomo has been hitting back, highlighting a job that Molinaro's wife held at an architecture firm that received tax breaks and a government contract from Dutchess County, blasting Molinaro in [television ads](#) that state, "You can't clean up Albany with dirty hands."

The two candidates have each tried to have attack ads addressing corruption pulled from the airwaves, and the accusations that Molinaro's wife got the job as a favor to the county executive from donors with business before the county drew a fiery response from the normally even-tempered Molinaro. In [a video](#) uploaded to his campaign's Twitter account, Molinaro spoke directly to Cuomo, saying that his wife is "out of your league."

"You want to pick a fight, stick with me," he said. "She's a class act. You're not."

Molinaro has labeled the claims a distraction, noting that the interactions between the county and the firm that hired his wife were completed before he was married. But Cuomo may have effectively neutralized the ethics issues that Molinaro expected to be an advantage.

And despite Percoco and the other [state officials](#) and [Cuomo donors convicted](#) as a result of the Buffalo Billion investigation, New Yorkers haven't always voted for the cleaner candidate. Whether it's due to decades of scandals or just the distance from what affects their pocketbooks and personal lives, cleaning up corruption at the state Capitol tends to rank low among most voters' priorities.

"New Yorkers have not shown a predisposition to vote on the basis to the reaction to corruption," Benjamin said. "One of the reasons we haven't changed our campaign finance laws or institutional arrangements with that corruption is because people in power understand that those issues are secondary to New York voters."

When Pataki won, the main issue he ran on was taxes, pulling from the New York Republican playbook and painting Mario Cuomo as a high-tax, anti-business liberal. As state Republicans were laying the groundwork for Pataki in the years leading up to his election, they were also beating that drum, continually attacking the governor, even in small local elections. “You could be running for dogcatcher and, if you were a Democrat, we were tying you to Mario Cuomo,” Sweeney said.

If there is one thing Andrew Cuomo clearly learned from his father’s defeat, it’s the political benefits of plotting a moderate course on taxes and spending. Cuomo can point to his [2 percent property tax cap](#), pushed through with the help of Republicans, and he has generally been considered a pro-business, fiscally conservative governor, resistant to calls from downstate Democrats like New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to raise taxes, or even to allow New York City to do so. While the state has trailed the national economy, and some regions of the state have [continued to struggle](#), there has been [job growth](#) and [declining unemployment](#) during Cuomo’s tenure. Many local Republican business elites [have backed](#) Cuomo’s bid for re-election.

Recent polling does not show Molinaro making significant inroads, but the presidential election in 2016 showed that more surprising things than a mild-mannered Hudson Valley Republican beating a Cuomo have happened. “Politics is a strange game, and this environment is strange again,” Muzzio said. “The rules of political physics don’t seem to hold.”

Sweeney, too, pointed to Trump’s victory as proof positive that Molinaro can’t be counted out. “It’s politics,” he said. “There’s always a chance.”