

Cuomo's Progressive Promises, Reminiscent of Four Years Ago, Received Differently

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Stewart-Cousins, Cuomo, and Klein at unity event (photo: Governor's Office)

In May 2014, Governor Andrew Cuomo attempted to earn the last-minute endorsement of The Working Families Party with a video address at its nominating convention. As Cuomo sought a second term that year, he made a series of promises demanded by WFP members and received the party's backing and ballot line. The deal with frustrated progressive activists and labor union leaders, who make up the WFP, was in part brokered by Mayor Bill de Blasio after the WFP threatened to run Zephyr Teachout to Cuomo's left.

Cuomo, a Democrat, promised to back a series of progressive policies and a Democratic takeover of the state Senate -- including the reunification of mainline Democrats and the Independent Democratic Conference -- where he acknowledged that many of those policies had been blocked.

Nearly four years later and with little he had promised the WFP accomplished, Cuomo made similar pronouncements, this time weeks ahead of the planned WFP convention, while he is facing a challenge from the left by actor and activist Cynthia

Nixon. Nixon won the endorsement of the WFP on Saturday, however, with the party losing union members loyal to Cuomo and being driven by activists disillusioned by the governor, though he has made attempts to win them over. Those activists pushed for an early endorsement vote and got one, with the progressive, activist wing of the party ready to move beyond past support for Cuomo.

Last week, Cuomo announced from his Manhattan government office the end of the IDC, a group of eight breakaway Democrats that has often voted with and empowered Senate Republicans, as a legislative conference. Part of the motivation for his work brokering a deal between the IDC and mainline Democrats, Cuomo said, was to pass a progressive agenda that had not made it through the Legislature, including the Dream Act and campaign finance reform.

The 2014 and 2018 announcements both served as olive branches to the left, where trust of Cuomo has been thin for many years. In 2014, there was much skepticism of his commitment to the WFP agenda and to flipping Republican-held Senate seats, and in 2018, many do not believe in his commitment to fully dissolving the IDC or fighting for a unified Democratic Senate that pushes a sufficiently progressive agenda. Without acknowledging he did not keep any prior promises, Cuomo, again seeking the WFP endorsement until it became clear he would not get it, has said this time will be different.

But the relationship between Cuomo and progressive activists appears beyond repair, and with the WFP nearing a Nixon endorsement, two major unions and Cuomo allies -- 32BJ SEIU and CWA -- announced on Friday they are leaving the WFP, as first [reported](#) by The New York Times.

During his second term, even as he has tacked left on a number of issues, Cuomo has continuously been pilloried by many progressives for not enacting certain components of the Democratic agenda. This disappointment has been channeled by Nixon, who last month announced her gubernatorial bid and has repeatedly and forcefully criticized the governor from the left, outflanking him on issues from taxing the wealthy to marijuana legalization.

Brokering the IDC deal, Cuomo insisted, is not a result of Nixon's run. Instead, it was with the aim of unifying Democrats in the Senate and pursuing other seats to form a majority, which would allow unpassed parts of his agenda to move through the Legislature, he said. Nixon has organized her run around the idea that Cuomo is not a "real Democrat," empowering Republicans and failing to fulfill key policy promises.

The announcement came on the heels of the completion of the 2019 fiscal year budget, which [omitted](#) many of those progressive policy items the governor has said he backs, also including early voting and bail reform. Acknowledging some of those failures, Cuomo has pointed to the Senate Republican majority, a group holding onto power by a thin margin, bolstered by the IDC, and, many on the left believe, Cuomo's tacit consent. The governor also waited to call special elections for two vacant Senate seats previously held by Democrats until after the budget, angering many on the left.

"We finished the budget. We did a lot of good things in the budget, but there are also things that we didn't pass that we need to pass," he said at the unity press conference

last week. “Child Victims Act, more gun safety, bail reform, the Dream Act, banning outside income, campaign finance reform, early voting - these are all progressive principles that were not passed in the budget and which we will not pass until we have a Democratic Senate.”

Speaking to the advantages of a Democratic Senate was among the several parallels between the WFP convention address and last week’s IDC announcement. “We must pass the DREAM Act, because we believe in immigration, and we are not threatened by differences, we are excited by diversity,” he said in 2014. “I told the Senate leadership coalition, the IDCs and the Republicans, that we needed a success in passing the DREAM Act, public finance, Women’s Equality Act this session, or they would’ve failed the people.”

More broadly, the message of unity at last week’s announcement echoed what he said to the WFP convention attendees. “If we are unified, and if we are mobilized, and if we come together, we can take control of our government and we can make our agenda a reality,” he said in 2014. “But we have to do it together. We can seize this opportunity for historic change. I hope we can do it, I hope we can do it together.”

“We have two goals,” Cuomo said at his Democratic unity announcement last week. “Number one, elect a Democratic Congress so we can stop the Washington agenda and stop the Washington agenda from further damaging our state. And secondly, to elect a Democratic Senate so we can protect ourselves with our own state laws here in New York.”

He added, “Now in many elections, Democrats divide and they splinter their efforts and divide resources, time and energy.”

There are key differences between the contexts surrounding the two sets of Cuomo promises.

Teachout launched her 2014 challenge against Cuomo months later in the cycle than Nixon has this year, deciding to stick with a Democratic primary run after she did not get the WFP nomination. With little money or name recognition, she won 34 percent in what has roundly been regarded as an embarrassment for Cuomo that showed his unpopularity with the left.

In recent years, the relationship between the governor and mayor has frayed, as the two have sparred over many issues. And while de Blasio worked to help Cuomo secure the WFP endorsement during the last election cycle, it appears almost impossible he’ll do so in the coming month. [Asked by a reporter from The Observer](#) in March if he would help Cuomo receive the WFP endorsement, he laughed and said, “You are a creative thinker.”

De Blasio has repeatedly said he is not ready to weigh in on the 2018 elections yet, but will at some point.

Furthermore, the national political landscape has shifted a good deal since 2014. With a Trump administration hostile to Democratic legislative aims and values, Cuomo has used the president as a way to unite New York’s left behind him. “The State of New York, I don’t think it’s over dramatic to say, it is under attack,” the

governor said last week. “It is under attack by the Trump Administration, working with Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, which are trying to bring an extreme conservative ideology to this country and to this state.”

But the Trump presidency has also energized an activist left, much of which does not like Cuomo, either. So four years after his WFP video address, which many have likened to a hostage tape, will Cuomo earn the Democratic nomination again? And if he does and subsequently wins reelection, will he fulfill his promises he’s made to New York’s left?

Teachout, now Nixon’s campaign treasurer, does not believe that Cuomo can be trusted to do so. On Twitter Thursday, she reminded her supporters of what she regards as the governor’s shortcomings. “Andrew Cuomo has used his power to serve hedge fund and real estate donors and betray kids, working men and women, basic infrastructure, and the promise of New York State,” she wrote. “So, for all the WFP members out there who voted for me four years ago, AND all of you who didn't: vote for Nixon. Remember Cuomo's 2014 promises to you. His word isn't good. His budgets, his tax priorities, and his donors tell you everything you need to know.”

Gerald Benjamin, a longtime SUNY New Paltz political science professor, told Gotham Gazette that the tide would soon turn in the Democrats’ favor. It’s a question of when, not if, the Democrats take control of the Senate, he said. “In my view, a Democratic Senate is inevitable. It’s a question of timing,” he said. “The demographics are what they are.”

When Democrats take the Senate, Benjamin predicted that Cuomo would be maneuvering under different political realities. “The priorities are going to be made different. The balance of outcomes will change, that’s for sure,” he said.

Still, he cautioned against expecting sweeping changes coming in Albany should Cuomo be re-elected, labeling Cuomo a “mainstream New York liberal Democrat.” “He’s a centrist politician. He’s not a left politician,” Benjamin said. “Having said that, he holds many of the values Democrats hold in New York.”

Benjamin added that this dynamic is also due to the responsibilities the governor has that advocates, activists, and other interest groups do not, such as tending to the state’s fiscal health. “Governors can’t responsibly do all those things,” he said, referring to ambitious and often expensive initiatives. “They have considerations the advocates don’t have, and they should.”

In a brief phone interview on Thursday, WFP New York State Director Bill Lipton would not comment directly on what he expected from Cuomo moving forward, but told Gotham Gazette that he was optimistic about accomplishing the goal of a progressive Senate, which he said was “long overdue.”

“I think with the strong WFP-backed candidates challenging IDC incumbents, and the resistance mobilized for November, we feel confident that we’re going to win the progressive majority this fall,” said Lipton.

“We are committed to electing a truly Democratic state Senate that puts New York’s working families first,” said Dom Leon-Davis, WFP’s communications director. With

the departure of the two unions, the WFP appears on the verge of endorsing Nixon on Saturday, Lipton told Gotham Gazette on Friday afternoon.

Though its convention is not scheduled to take place for another month, WFP committee members are gathering in Albany Saturday -- WFP leadership has repeatedly stated that its state committee members will vote this time around without the influences of 2014.

“The 233 members of the WFP state committee have an important decision to make tomorrow, things are certainly heating up,” Lipton said on Friday. On Saturday Nixon received over 90 percent of the WFP vote at its meeting -- a previously scheduled party get-together that became an endorsement meeting when members of the party were itching to get behind Nixon and start campaigning on her behalf.

Heather Stewart, an organizer for Empire State Indivisible, a progressive activist group, said among the many developments that have occurred in the last four years is that frustration among activists with the IDC has grown. “I think things are different now. I think that the public’s opinion on the IDC has changed,” she said. “More people know what it is now.”

The frustration with Cuomo has grown, too, Stewart said. “The activists who are doing the work on the state level are extremely tuned in to what’s happening. So they see the little nuances in how things don’t look right. Even by political standards it doesn’t look like what Cuomo is doing makes any sense,” she explained. “I don’t think people are buying what he’s saying.”

“I think that Cuomo is very good at saying ‘Hey, look at what I’m doing right now.’ And then things don’t actually follow through,” Stewart continued. “He doesn’t follow through.”

Despite Cuomo’s past broken promises or inability or unwillingness to move elements of a progressive agenda, some on the left do see hope for 2018 and beyond, given the circumstances and clear pressure being put on the governor and IDC members. While Cuomo has pointed to policy failures and the Senate Republicans, he has also been far more boastful about what he has accomplished over the past seven-plus years as governor, including marriage equality, gun control, a significant minimum wage increase, paid family leave, and more. He has also increased his standing with organized labor, key in any Democratic primary in New York.

Stewart said activists in New York “want to fortify something legally that are our deepest-held values. We don’t want them threatened by what’s happening on a federal level.” Perhaps nothing signifies this sentiment more than the fact that *Roe v. Wade* abortion protections have not been enacted into state law, despite Cuomo calling it a priority.

“We have a harmful person in the White House right now and activism has engaged citizens on a local, state, and national level,” Stewart said. “People are watching. The threat of primary challenges is more present than it was even in 2014. It’s not just for the governor now; it’s for the slate of IDC senators.”

“In the wake of the Trump election,” Leon-Davis of the WFP said, “people are looking

in their own backyards to see how to make progressive change and people are paying attention now more than ever to what's happening and have been dissatisfied with the actions of the IDC and are looking for real Democratic leadership.”

Note: this story has been updated to reflect the WFP endorsement decision.