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OPINION: WANT TO BE GOVERNOR? DON'T MOVE UPSTATE

BY GERALD BENJAMIN | JUL 18, 2015 |

21



In the three-quarters of a century since the start of World War II, all of New York state's governors—all of them—have come from the greater New York City area, with four of five of these from that city itself. In fact, during this time, about of three-quarters of the losing major party's candidates for governor (73 percent), Republican or

Democrat, came from downstate.

The last New York governor who was from north of the Westchester County line—Franklin Delano Roosevelt of Hyde Park—was born in 1882. The last governor who was really an upstater—Nathan Miller of Syracuse—was born almost a century and a half ago, in 1868. Roosevelt served from 1929 to 1932 when, of course, he was voted president. Miller, who was in office in 1921 and 1922, did well for himself too: He became general counsel for U.S. Steel.

It was not always thus. From the nation's founding until the Civil War, almost two-thirds of New York's governors (62 percent) hailed from upstate. Between the end of the Civil War and the start of World War II, down- and upstaters split time holding the governorship about 50-50. To put this in context, on average, New York City's population during the first third of our history was 15 percent of the state's; during the second third it was 44 percent (partly because the city's geographic boundaries were greatly extended in 1898). So even long ago, city-based leaders were disproportionately elected to the state's top job. But disproportion is one thing; total dominance is another.

Political party leaders used to be critically important in determining who got to run for high office in the state. Along with religion and ethnicity—and later race and gender—geographic origin was part of the calculus when they sought to assemble balanced tickets to offer to voters. But lately, and especially since the introduction of the challenge primary for statewide nominations in New York in 1967, geographic balance has taken a distinctly back seat.

We measure the seriousness of candidates for governor by how much money they raise. Most of New York's big money is downstate. Media exposure counts, too, for building name recognition and credibility. Most New Yorkers watch or listen to downstate channels; if they still read, they read downstate papers. (Interestingly however, though DeWitt Clinton and John Hoffman became governor in 1917 and 1869, respectively, after heading New York City, no mayor has been elected governor since the consolidation of Greater New York 1898. Familiarity may still breed contempt.)

Governors and lieutenant governors run in tandem general elections. Candidates for chief executive do seek geographic balance in selecting running mates for lieutenant governor, as demonstrated most recently by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's choice of our current lieutenant governor, Kathy Hochul. She is from Hamburg in Erie County. Also in the 2014 race, Christopher Moss, sheriff of rural Chemung County, was the candidate for lieutenant governor on the Republican ticket headed by Rob Astorino, the Westchester county executive. However, the challenge primary process for nominations removes the certainty that the gubernatorial candidate's pick will actually be his or her running mate. Hugh Carey wanted Mario Cuomo; he got Mary Anne Krupsak. Mario Cuomo wanted Carl McCall; he got Al DelBello.

Upstaters cannot even count on gubernatorial fatigue, human frailty or divine intervention. All

three lieutenant governors who have filled a vacancy in the governorship in the last century were from downstate: Charles Poletti, Malcolm Wilson and David Paterson.

The two other statewide elected offices—comptroller and attorney general—have not traditionally been a path to the governorship in New York. Since World War II, three western New Yorkers served in these posts, though none since 1998: Frank Moore (1943-1950, later lieutenant governor) and Ned Regan (1979-1993) as comptroller and Dennis Vacco (1995-1998) as attorney general. The last of the three comptrollers who became governor was the aforementioned Nathan Miller. William Marcy (1833-1838) and Lucius Robinson (1877-1879) were the others.

Eliot Spitzer was the first attorney general to become governor since Martin Van Buren (1829). Of course, Spitzer was followed in both offices by Andrew Cuomo. Now the incumbent attorney general, Eric Schneiderman, is much discussed as a potential gubernatorial candidate. All are from New York City.

The number of New York's rural residents—those living in counties with a population density under 500 per square mile—was about 4.5 million in 2014. Is it credible to believe that a population this size cannot occasionally produce a qualified candidate for governor? If so, tell it to the voters in the 29 states with populations at or under this total.

Upstate/downstate differences are real. A full-time living wage for an Assembly member from Essex County won't pay the mortgage and buy the groceries in Nassau. Vast disparities in voting turnout between rural and urban areas evidence fundamental differences in political culture. Most New York City politicians know little and care less about villages or towns or counties or school districts. Reactions to the SAFE Act, to choose just one example, show that the geographic divide has very real policy dimensions.

Andrew Cuomo has demonstrated beyond a doubt that a governor with downstate roots can be genuinely committed to the well-being of upstate New York. But that is not the point. We apple-knockers are tired of being utility players, with no chance—no matter how good we are—of being chosen to head the team.

Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist, is associate vice president for regional engagement and director of the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) at SUNY New Paltz. Brian George and Anthony Albanese, student interns at CRREO, assisted with this piece.

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Right on the money Dr. Benjamin!

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I just love this one sided city opinion of governor as Cuomo says he is well rounded to treat people fairly? The upstate economy is in shambles directly caused by Cuomo's policies of chasing thousands of jobs away with his Liberal Legislation! Want details, do some research of what 's really going on in upstate and how much Albany is to blame! We voice our concerns and always falls on deaf ears since Cuomo, as this comment will also!

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