



New York City Public Advocate Letitia James votes in the race for attorney general. | Jeff Coltin

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Letitia James – and the establishment – win Democratic AG race

Experts predicted a tight election. It wasn't even close.

By JEFF COLTIN (/author/jeff-coltin) | SEPTEMBER 14, 2018

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In the end, being close to the most powerful politician in New York's recent history paid off.

New York City Public Advocate Letitia James fought off criticism that she was too close to Gov. Andrew Cuomo (<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/letitia-james-establishment-defiant-respect.html>) and comfortably won the Democratic primary for state attorney general on Thursday. Now the 59-year-old from Brooklyn will be the heavy favorite in November's general election – and the heavy favorite to be the first woman of color elected to a statewide position in New York.

James won with more than 40 percent of the vote, with 98 percent of precincts reporting as of midnight. She defeated Fordham University law professor Zephyr Teachout, who earned 31 percent of the vote, and Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, who won 25 percent of the vote despite spending more than the other three candidates combined, according to the latest campaign polls. Leecia Eve, a lobbyist for Verizon, came in fourth, with 3 percent of the vote.

It was anyone's race – until it wasn't. All the public polls predicted a close race, with many voters undecided. But James harnessed all the powers of the political establishment to pull off a victory, winning the vast majority (<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/attorney-general-endorsements-2018.html>) of endorsements from elected officials, labor unions and interest groups.

That coalition was in full force at James' victory party at the Milk River Lounge in Crown Heights on Thursday night, as she took the stage surrounded by some of the biggest names in New York politics, from Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie to Rep. Carolyn Maloney.

But the most significant player in that coalition was nowhere to be seen. Reports said Cuomo was in Albany, watching the results in private. The public couldn't see his reactions, but he seemed to have gotten exactly what he wanted, with James' win, his lieutenant governor Kathy Hochul's victory over New York City Councilman Jumaane Williams, and his own vanquishing of progressive actress Cynthia Nixon.

Throughout the campaign, James insisted that she would be independent from the governor, despite their closely linked campaigns and mutual endorsements. Asked earlier in the day what she would do first if elected to the office, James said she would ask the Legislature to grant the office the power to investigate corruption without first getting approval of the governor's office.

In her victory speech, James looked forward to the general election, against Republican Keith Wofford, a bankruptcy attorney running for office for the first time.

“Though tonight was an incredible victory, we cannot lose sight of what is ahead of us. We now face an opponent who voted for Donald Trump,” she said of Wofford. “Who doesn't share our values. And now is not the time for a Trump supporter as attorney general.”

But James also looked to the past, emphasizing her record in public service, as she had done throughout the campaign. A Howard University law grad, James started her career as a legal aid attorney. She served as legal counsel to legislators in Albany, and was an assistant attorney general under Eliot Spitzer. She was elected to the City Council in 2003 on the Working Families Party line – which she declined to pursue in this race – and served there until winning the public advocate's race in 2013.

In a night that saw a number of progressive Democrats winning races, James' establishment candidacy may seem like an outlier. But James ran an unabashedly progressive campaign, calling for marijuana legalization, the abolition of U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement and aggressive reform of bail laws (<http://www.gothamgazette.com/state/7851-running-for-attorney-general-james-outlines-initial-policy-platform>). Though the office has no power over legislation, its past occupants have used the statewide office as a bully pulpit to lobby for change in New York and beyond. And supporters at James' party were eager to highlight her progressive credentials.

“Just because you're a part of the establishment doesn't mean you're not progressive,” said Na'ilah Amaru, a political strategist who volunteered on James' campaign. “It's an unfair binary. And it's simply not the case.”