

# 'Tough as Nails' Hochul Elbows Aside Rivals in N.Y. Governor Run

- First female governor stepped in after Cuomo scandal
- Upstaters rarely prevail in NYC-dominated primaries

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By Keshia Clukey

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul appears to have neutralized her heftiest potential opposition as she prepares to face voters in a state that has never elected a female governor.

Before this year, her name was on statewide ballots only as Andrew Cuomo's running mate.

After Cuomo's resignation in August, the former Upstate congresswoman quickly amped up her fund-raising and showed better-known Democrats, including an ex-mayor of New York City, they'd have an expensive fight on their hands if they went for the gubernatorial nomination.

As a result, Hochul will have little competition in the party endorsement convention that kicks off Wednesday.

"She comes out of a part of the state where politics is like a gun battle every day," said Hank Sheinkopf, a political consultant who has worked in campaigns both aligned with and against Cuomo. "She understands this stuff extraordinarily well. She hasn't stopped."

"When luck presents you with an opportunity you need the skill to exploit it," said Larry Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University. "She was presented with opportunities and she had the skill to exploit it."

Hochul's most formidable opponent, state Attorney General Letitia James (D) who announced in October she'd run for governor, dropped out of the race in December.

Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio (D), who for months flirted with running, stayed on the sidelines. De Blasio's January announcement came days after a Siena College Research Institute Poll showed Hochul with a significant lead over potential competitors, including de Blasio.

Her remaining Democratic opponents include the more left-leaning New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, and a congressman, Tom Suozzi, who may rival Hochul for suburban votes.

"I'm a Buffalo Bills fan. I always have an underdog mentality," Hochul said at a Tuesday press briefing. "That is my approach to all 13 elections I've been in. I've run like an underdog until it's over."

"We're going to continue speaking to New Yorkers, that is basically the strategy, continue speaking to New Yorkers and let them know what our administration has been accomplishing," she said.



Photographer: Angus Mordant/Bloomberg  
Gov. Kathy Hochul (D-N.Y.), shown at a Jan. 24 press conference.

“Some of what people are ascribing as luck, such as top-tier potentially strong candidates not entering or dropping out, is partly a result of her strengths and the perception that she is a strong candidate beyond her upstate base,” Levy said.

The day after Cuomo resigned—nearly two weeks before she took over the governor’s mansion—Hochul told TV reporters she would be running.

“She was letting other candidates know she would not allow herself to be painted as the interim governor,” said Na’ilah Amaru, a Democratic strategist and former executive director of the New York City Council’s Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus.

Declaring her intention fast helped Hochul lock down donors while other Democrats were still thinking about getting into the race, Amaru said. Hochul’s campaign amassed \$21.6 million by January, the most recent campaign filing period, breaking the six-month fund-raising record set by former Gov. George Pataki (R) in 2002.

She locked down the endorsements of major labor unions including the Hotel Trades Council,

New York State AFL-CIO, and New York state Building & Construction Trades Council. And she has support from strong Black and Latino power brokers including NAACP New York State Conference President Hazel Duker and former U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel, a longtime Harlem power broker.

## Downstate Attention

Democratic primaries tend to be won or lost in New York City, which has more than 3.7 million of the state's more than 6.7 million enrolled Democratic voters. Hochul, a native of Buffalo more than 300 miles away in Western New York, has secured support from some New York City leaders and the Brooklyn Democratic Party, which endorsed her on Feb. 13.

Hochul has been very "intentional and very persistent" in showing up in New York City in particular, Amaru said.

Historically, upstate politicians have struggled in governor's races, said Gerald Benjamin, a distinguished professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz. There hasn't been a governor from upstate for nearly a century, he said.

He also noted, "It's not the case that a person who becomes governor by succession always wins." For example, Republican Malcolm Wilson became governor after Nelson Rockefeller resigned in 1973 and lost the election the next year, Benjamin said.

Hochul, 63, had experience running in one of New York's most conservative congressional districts before Cuomo chose her as his lieutenant governor, putting her on the ticket in 2014.

State Democratic Party Chairman Jay Jacobs described Hochul as "extremely loyal" to the party. "She traveled relentlessly and wherever she was asked to go to help raise money or elect a Democratic candidate, she was there, and people don't forget that," he said. "Those points add up."

Hochul is leading her potential Democratic primary opponents by more than 30 points, with the support of 46% of Democrats, according to the most recent [polling](#) from the Siena College Research Institute.

## The Anti-Cuomo

Over the past few months Hochul has managed to tread carefully on controversial topics, remained firm on her approach to handling the coronavirus pandemic, and created a working relationship with state and local lawmakers, Sheinkopf said.

The legislature is run by a supermajority of Democrats. Legislative leaders have called Hochul a

partner. She's also pledged to work alongside New York City Mayor Eric Adams (D). That's a change from the adversarial relationship of Cuomo and de Blasio.

She has replaced Cuomo's leadership team and opened conversations with lawmakers, presenting a contrast without criticizing her predecessor, Benjamin said.

Hochul has managed to take credit for more popular Cuomo initiatives while scuttling other things, Sheinkopf said. For example, she scrapped parts of Cuomo's plan for Penn Station, but praised efforts at LaGuardia.

"She's a killer underneath it all," he said. "Tough as nails, and doesn't use that toughness unnecessarily."

"I anticipate that she will handily win the Democratic primary," Jacobs said. "She's a moderate progressive. I think she's going to have and does have widespread appeal.

"That makes her really hard to beat."

Looking ahead to the general election, U.S. Rep. Lee Zeldin is the presumptive Republican nominee. Other contenders include 2014 gubernatorial nominee Rob Astorino and Andrew Giuliani, son of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

The state GOP's two-day nominating convention starts Feb. 28.

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