

Politics

# NYC Is Must-Win Prize for Buffalo's Hochul in New York Governor's Race



Kathy Hochul *Photographer: Stephanie Keith/Bloomberg*

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New York City will make or break Gov. Kathy Hochul's first campaign at the top of the ticket.

The Democrat has steered about two-thirds of her general election ad money—\$7 million—to the Big Apple, where more than half of the state's 6 million registered Democrats live. It's a pivot for her, a Buffalo native who spent decades upstate establishing relationships as an Erie County clerk and member of Congress.

“There is no way to statewide office without New York City,” said Na’ilah Amaru, a Democratic strategist and former executive director of the New York City Council’s Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus.

“We are the richest city in terms of votes,” she said. “It goes without saying that when it comes to a statewide electoral strategy, you want a strong turnout in New York City.”

The incumbent’s challenges include focusing her campaign messages in a way that will convince city voters that an upstate moderate deserves a full term while navigating around the things that might tick them off, such as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s congestion pricing and the tax breaks offered to the developers of Penn Station’s \$6 billion makeover.

Despite her long relationship with the Empire State, Hochul has led it for just 13 months—not much time to show her governing style and explain her priorities to the business people, progressives, and communities of color she needs to come out and vote for her.

Abortion rights have been a campaign focus, along with concealed-carry gun legislation, public safety, and jobs. Her campaign also has tried to get voters to think of the Republican nominee, US Rep. Lee Zeldin, as a “far-right extremist”—a phrase that’s been used by her team and the state Democratic Party in at least 32 news releases since June.



Gov. Kathy Hochul (D-N.Y.) and New York City Mayor Eric Adams at a Sept. 6, 2022 press conference.  
*Photographer: Stephanie Keith/Bloomberg*

Of the nearly 12 million active voters statewide, nearly 6 million are Democrats, compared to about 2.8 million Republicans and Conservatives. The rest are either unaffiliated or enrolled with other parties, according to the state Board of Elections.

More than 3.1 million Democrats live in New York City. Most of the Republican and Conservative base (2.3 million voters) is concentrated in the upstate counties.

Her strategy seems to be working. The latest Siena College Research Institute poll shows her at 54%. Zeldin has 37%.

“If you’re Kathy Hochul, your goal is to expand your margin in New York City and, more importantly, goose turnout in New York City,” said Steven Greenberg, a Siena pollster.

### **Opposite Strategies**

The candidates have spent accordingly. Hochul spends in New York City. Zeldin sends his ad dollars upstate.

Zeldin’s campaign steered about 63% of its ad money into the upstate Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester markets, according to the campaign commercial tracking firm AdImpact. The challenger spent \$612,042 on general election ad buys in the New York City market.



US Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.), now a candidate for governor, shown speaking to the Republican Jewish Coalition on Nov. 6, 2021. *Photographer: Bridget Bennett/Bloomberg*

Zeldin's ads criticize Hochul for a "crime crisis" and for changes to the state's bail law that let more defendants await trial at home without having to post cash bail. Congestion pricing, an issue that will hit home with a chunk of the one million workers who live outside New York City, was a "horrible idea that will create new economic pain for hard working New Yorkers," he said in a news release.

Congestion pricing could bring tolls as high as \$23 per vehicle while increasing commuter traffic through the Bronx and Queens.

"I think that if they're smart, they're going to hold off any congestion pricing conversations until after the election," said Amaru, referring to Hochul's campaign.

Gerald Benjamin, a distinguished professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz, agreed. "She wants a calm environment where there's no new and volatile and mobilizing issues that might threaten her candidacy," he said.

Zeldin also has accused the incumbent of "pay to play," following an Albany Times Union report that the state paid \$637 million for at-home Covid tests to New Jersey-based company Digital Gadgets. That company's New York City-based owner donated nearly \$300,000 to Hochul's campaign and threw her a fundraiser.

## **Abortion, Guns**

If Democrats stay energized about the US Supreme Court overturning abortion precedent and a New York law that limited who could carry a handgun in public, that could help motivate turnout of Hochul's natural base.

Hochul in July signed legislation that severely limits where guns can be carried and require background checks to buy ammunition. During the same special session, state lawmakers, with Hochul's blessing, took the first step toward codifying reproductive rights into the state Constitution. Hochul touts New York as a safe haven for reproductive rights, even for those traveling from outside the state.

"Democrats are angry and organizing and they have a purpose, a specific reason to go out and vote, especially in light of the Supreme Court decisions that have recently come out," Amaru said.

One of the unknowns is how much city voters have noticed Hochul's many visits during her first year in office or her amicable relationship with New York City Mayor Eric Adams (D).

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Adams endorsed Hochul for her gubernatorial run and has worked with her on lifting Covid restrictions, boosting the city's post-Covid economy, and financing the Penn Station remodel, though they disagree on a few issues such as changes to the state's bail laws. That's far different than in the past when feuding between then-Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) and then-Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) kept the tabloids fed and at times got in the way of doing business, including during the start of the pandemic.

The mayor is an effective partner in government, but also politically “can very much be your friend because they have a plurality of votes in the city that you want access to,” Amaru said.

## **Diverse Endorsements**

Soon after taking office, Hochul appeared with civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton and got the backing of Hazel Duke, president of New York's chapter of the NAACP.

The strength of those and other relationships will be demonstrated when it comes time to mobilize the vote, said Benjamin. “She needs Democrats to come out and vote for her”, he said. “She needs political community leaders to come out to get that to happen.”

In addition to winning over Adams, Hochul has the endorsement of the Working Families Party. Her attention to the priorities of left-leaning voters included money for rent relief and an extension of an eviction moratorium.

She didn't, however, give that wing of the Democratic Party one of its preferred running mates. Instead of letting every hopeful take a shot in the primary, she chose former US Rep. Antonio Delgado (D), an “Afro-Latino” and native of Schenectady, just outside of Albany.

“I think her strategy has been to successfully balance the tightrope,” said Amaru. “She is a moderate, but she can be progressive on some things.”

“The reality is that moderate and progressive voters have very different ideologies and very different legislative interests and you can't serve two masters.”

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