

# New York's Kathy Hochul Vies to Be More Than 'Placeholder Governor' in Tight Race

- Polls show race has narrowed in days before Tuesday election
- Deep-blue state was long considered a shoo-in for Democrats



Kathy Hochul during a Get Out The Vote event in New York, US, on Nov. 3. *Photographer: Anthony Behar/Sipa/Bloomberg*

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In a referendum on Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul's short time in **office**, New Yorkers will vote on Tuesday in a race that's dramatically narrowed as Republican Lee Zeldin has gone after his opponent over crime and inflation.

Just months ago Hochul was considered to have a lock on the governor's mansion in a state that hasn't had a Republican governor in 16 years. But her tendency to avoid conflict, paired with scant campaigning until the final weeks before the election, means many voters may not know enough about her or where she stands on key issues to give her a full term.

Hochul has tried to prove that she's not a "placeholder governor" since assuming **office** in 2021 after former Governor Andrew Cuomo resigned over sexual harassment

allegations, said Christina Greer, associate professor of political science at Fordham University. Cuomo denies the allegations.

Just days after being named New York's first female governor, the Buffalo native declared she'd run for a full term in November. After taking office, she pushed through the state's largest-ever budget. Along with the state Legislature, she helped usher in bills to strengthen gun and abortion laws and spur economic development with investments in areas like chip manufacturing.

But hundreds of bills still remain on her desk unsigned. She's also faced criticism over the \$600 million in taxpayer dollars she committed to keep the Buffalo Bills football team in New York, campaign donations from companies that do business with the state, the resignation of her first lieutenant governor who was arrested on federal corruption charges, and her inaction over controversial topics like a proposed crypto mining ban and the influx of migrants that have flooded into New York.

Meanwhile, both the perception and reality of crime, especially high-profile incidents in New York City, has added to her woes.

"In many ways she's steadied the ship," Greer said. "But as far as outside policy successes, I don't know that she's had enough time to really have those."

## **Tightening Race**

Early on, Hochul enjoyed a double-digit lead against Zeldin, a Long Island Congressman and Donald Trump supporter who voted to overturn the 2020 election results and block the commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Hochul pounced on Trump's unpopularity in many parts of New York. She zeroed in on reproductive rights and social issues like legal recreational pot sales, which Zeldin is against but polls suggest are widely supported by New Yorkers.

Her campaign also handily out-raised Zeldin, who took in \$20 million to Hochul's \$51 million in donations, according to state filings.

But Zeldin hit the campaign trail early and aggressively. He positioned himself as the anti-crime candidate and emphasized economic issues like inflation, which helped him gain momentum. As October approached and ad spending ramped up, Zeldin advanced in the polls -- including in one Oct. 18 survey that showed him just four percentage points behind Hochul.

Hochul failed to shift her messaging fast enough to defend her record on crime, which Zeldin and Republican candidates across the country have seized in the final weeks ahead of the midterm elections. In a last-ditch effort to show she was tough on crime, Hochul released TV ads that highlighted her effort to improve public safety and announced a surge of police officers into the state-run subway system in New York City.

While Zeldin leaned into the brash and blustery, Hochul maintained an even-keeled demeanor that can be relatively unusual in New York politics.

“You’re poorer and less safe because of Kathy Hochul,” Zeldin said in opening remarks at the one debate the candidates participated in late October. “This is your opportunity to save New York.”

Hochul replied, “well nice to see you too.”

The governor also kept a light campaign schedule until the final stretch, when she tapped Vice President Kamala Harris, President Joe Biden and other Democratic heavyweights to stump for her.

“Hochul campaigned like an incumbent, but — having only been in office 14 months — arrived without a concrete record or established profile, and lacking deep ties to communities responsible for electing Democrats — primarily African-American voters in New York City,” wrote Melissa DeRosa, former secretary to Cuomo and a Democrat strategist, in a Nov. 3 editorial in the Daily News.

### **‘I Should Have an Answer’**

New York, where Democrats make up about half of the 12 million active voters, has elected just one Republican governor in nearly half a century. And while the state is known for its progressive politics and agenda-setting policy changes, like legalizing recreational marijuana and same-sex marriage, Hochul’s 14-month tenure has lacked similarly bold accomplishments.

Meanwhile, she irked some fiscal conservatives by increasing the state’s budget to \$224 billion to fund programs pushed by the more progressive arm of the state Legislature largely by relying on ephemeral funding sources like larger-than-anticipated tax collections and some of the \$12.7 billion New York got in federal Covid stimulus aid.

“She spent a lot,” said E.J. McMahon, founding senior fellow at the Empire Center for Public Policy.

Now, McMahon says, the question is what will the state do as federal aid runs out, a possible recession impacts tax revenue, and the \$5 billion Hochul added to the state's reserves isn't enough to cushion New York for long.

Hochul tried to balance the needs of her moderate, upstate base, while also appealing to politically powerful 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.

The problem is, that "if you belong to everyone then you don't belong to anyone and that is a liability in politics," Amaru said.

Some voters say they are casting their ballots for Hochul anyway.

Judy Kleiner, a 65-year-old retiree who used to work on Wall Street and lives in Manhattan said that she opposes Zeldin's stance on abortion and his votes against certifying election results in some states. But when asked about particular policies or issues that drew her to Hochul, Kleiner said she was at a loss.

"I should have an answer for that, but I don't," she said.

Meanwhile, some voters say Zeldin's promise to reign in crime is more important than whether they disagree with his stances on social issues.

"While I may not know or represent every single one of his views on every single issue I think the really important thing right now in New York City is crime," said Anne Yoakam, an artist who lives on the Upper East Side who joined a Zeldin rally in Manhattan on Friday.

"I don't want to say anything negative about the current governor, who has stepped up to the plate," she said. "But I think, at this point, vote Lee Zeldin."

– *With assistance by Christian Richey*