

Only in Newsday

Kathy Hochul seeks a new term after long rise to become first female NYS governor



Kathy Hochul became governor after the resignation of her predecessor, Andrew Cuomo, in 2021. Credit: TNS/Susan Watts

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ALBANY — Kathy Hochul never saw herself running for office. "I didn't have the confidence," she told Newsday. "I think a lot of women didn't have, because you didn't have role models."

But Hochul had gone to law school and already gotten her dream job, as an aide to the four-term New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan on Capitol Hill — all before the age of 30.

Then in 1994, at age 35, she decided there was no more holding back. She had just helped a recent college graduate more than a decade her junior win a seat on the Hamburg town board, outside of Buffalo. When a vacancy occurred on the same board, Hochul went for it.

Kathy Hohul

Party: Democrat

About: Hochul, 67, born in Hamburg, outside Buffalo, grew up in an Irish Catholic family as one of six children. She is married to William Hochul Jr. They have two children and two grandchildren.

Education: She earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Syracuse University and a law degree from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Background: She worked as a staffer and legal counsel to Rep. John Joseph LaFalce and then Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, both Democrats from New York. In 1994 she was appointed and then later elected to the Hamburg Town Board, which she served on for 13 years. She served as Erie County deputy

clerk and then clerk. She served in Congress from 2011 to 2013. Hochul did strategic relations for M & T Bank. She served as lieutenant governor from 2015 to 2021 when she became governor.

It was that decision that set off a three-decade run in elective politics during which she ascended to become New York's first woman governor.

Now, at 67, Hochul is running for her second full term in office, being challenged by Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, a Republican and close ally of President Donald Trump.

Both will face a similar test: appealing to their own constituencies while not alienating potential swing voters at a time when the country is politically fractured.

New York's 57th governor, Hochul stands 5-3 and greets people with a polished smile. She's high energy but doesn't drink coffee and would rather be traveling — a trait she carries over from her lieutenant governor days, when she visited all of the state's 62 counties at least once each year.

As governor, she oversees a more than \$260 billion budget, more than 183,900 state employees across 20 departments and more than 70 agencies and authorities, and is commander in chief of the state's naval and military forces.

She must constantly navigate the political crosscurrents of 213 state lawmakers while standing up to a former New Yorker in the White House who

appears fixated on upending everything from the state's fiscal outlook to infrastructure projects, health insurance system to political and cultural institutions.

Hochul, who said her confidence has been "steeled by so many challenges," is showcasing her experiences as a mother and grandmother who came from humble beginnings, with campaign slogans such as "Your family is my fight" and buttons that say, "One tough mother."

During an Easter celebration in April, Hochul posed for a family photo with the Easter bunny and didn't hesitate when a baby reached up to be held. Later in the day she spoke with reporters about a nearly blind refugee who was found dead in Buffalo after being released by U.S. Border Patrol agents, saying his family should have a cause of action to "sue the bastards."



Hochul announces plans for this year's America 250 celebrations. Credit: Newsday/Howard Schnapp

It's a stark contrast to the Hochul of 2021, political analysts and Democrats told Newsday. Just five years ago, she was an "accidental governor" who came into the role after Gov. Andrew Cuomo, [facing likely impeachment, resigned](#) over allegations of sexual harassment that he denies. Hochul was [elected in her own right in 2022](#).

Hochul has come a long way "from a tentative politician, unsure of what her political skin was, much less comfortable in it, to a leader more confident in everything from the policies she promotes to even the salty language she seems to love," said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.

If reelected, Hochul told Newsday she plans to build on her efforts to increase access to affordable childcare statewide, continue clean energy and renewable policies and projects and build more housing. "I am so energized about the next term because a lot of what we did was foundational," she said. "It's all about making New York more affordable and more desirable for families and businesses. So do I have a lot to do? Sure do, but I'm ready for it."

Early years

Much of Hochul's political career was shaped by her family and early experiences.

Born Kathleen Courtney in Hamburg in 1958, Hochul was one of six kids in an Irish Catholic household. The family went through hard financial times when she was younger as her father, who worked for Bethlehem Steel, went back to school and then joined a budding technology company.

The family often had foreign exchange students or inner city residents visiting or living with the them, and they collected food and clothing for those in need, according to news articles.

"My parents weren't political, but they instilled in us that sense of responsibility to others to improve your community," Hochul said.

Her parents, Patricia and John, known as Jack, were active in the civil rights movement. Hochul said she remembers protesting the Vietnam War, but supporting the troops. Patricia was known as a community leader who later in life opened a home for domestic violence victims.

Hochul at 16 was using her lunch period and study halls to intern with the Erie County Democratic Committee, working on the campaigns of everyone from Hugh Carey to Jimmy Carter.

Virginia Grobe Hanley, a high school English teacher who had Hochul in her Greek Mythology and Death and Dying courses, remembers her as an intelligent, self-motivated "young woman of courage" who had high moral values, was very perceptive and extremely thoughtful.

"She came from a solid moral family and I know she took those values to heart," said Hanley, known then as Miss Grobe. "She worked hard to meet academic expectations and also for the goals that she set for herself."



Hochul greets workers at a construction site for the Gateway Program Hudson Tunnel Project in February. Credit: Bloomberg/Michael Nagle

Political beginnings

While attending Syracuse University, Hochul earned the reputation of being tenacious, as she fought for causes such as naming the new domed football stadium after Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis.

After graduating from law school in Washington, D.C., Hochul became a staffer and legal counsel to Rep. John Joseph LaFalce and then Moynihan, both Democrats from New York.

But when she and her husband, William Hochul, Jr., had their first child, her career was put on hold.

"I had to give up a job I loved because I couldn't find childcare," Hochul said.

They moved back to Western New York, where she helped her mom start a flower shop, became involved with the local Chamber of Commerce and attended zoning and planning board meetings to fight urban sprawl.

In 1994 she was appointed to an opening on the Hamburg Town Board and later elected to the position, which she held for 13 years.

During that time she worked to help more women run for office.

"There should be more women who are in their early 20s saying I can do that job just the way a young man would do it. They need to have that confidence because we need their voices," she said.

She gave her support to an African American woman named Crystal Peoples-Stokes, who in 1998 was running for Congress in a predominantly white suburb of Buffalo.

Peoples-Stokes, a Buffalo Democrat, didn't win that year, but now is the majority leader of the State Assembly.

"Kathy has always been supportive of me and I'm going to always support her," said Peoples-Stokes, who later rallied the women of the Assembly to stand by Hochul when Cuomo tried to take her off the 2022 reelection ticket.

Raising a 'quiet base' of support

She rose through the positions of Erie County deputy clerk and then county clerk before running for Congress in 2011, after Republican Christopher Lee resigned amid a scandal. The married congressman allegedly sent emails and a shirtless photo of himself to a woman he met on Craigslist.

She won the seat in one of the state's most conservative districts, largely by leveraging fear over Republicans' plans to overhaul Medicare.



Rep. Kathy Hochul throws out a ceremonial first pitch in 2012 in upstate Batavia. Credit: AP/Mike Janes

In 2014 she was tapped by Cuomo to be his running mate — a role she leaned into, traveling the state and leading regional economic development councils.

"She got to know a lot of people, regional thought leaders and influential business, political and civic people and impressed many of them with her seriousness, her smarts and her willingness to do not the sexiest of political work," Levy said, adding that she was able to create a kind of quiet base in the far corners of the state.

She attended almost every economic development council meeting on Long Island and really cared about the work, said Stuart Rabinowitz, a former president of Hofstra University who was on the council. "The whole council considered her an advocate."

Rabinowitz, who was appointed by Hochul to chair the Nassau Health Care Corporation board of directors and recently stepped down, noted that Hochul is "warmer and welcoming more in smaller settings than some people might think on a big stage."

Assemb. Charles Lavine (D-Glen Cove), who met her in Albany, thought she was refreshing. "Just a regular person, no airs, no pretense, no nonsense," he said.

Gubernatorial growing pains

Then Cuomo resigned.

A report released by state Attorney General Letitia James [found he had sexually harassed multiple women](#) and detailed a toxic workplace culture of fear and harassment. Cuomo has denounced the report as politically

motivated. At the time he also was facing scrutiny for using state staff to help produce his pandemic memoir.

Hochul stepped into the political vacuum and met with immediate challenges as she sought to distance herself from the scandal-plagued administration, build a new team and navigate a steep and very public learning curve — all while gearing up for a 2022 election. The first upstate governor in nearly a century, Hochul also had to find a way to up her name recognition, particularly in New York City.

"She was initially viewed as this transitional figure," Na'ilah Amaru, a Democratic strategist, told Newsday. A man may have been considered an heir apparent, but Hochul wasn't given that grace, she said, adding that Hochul downplayed her gender until after she was elected in her own right.



Hochul greets King Charles III and Queen Camilla during a visit to the 9/11 Memorial in April. Credit: Bloomberg/Jeenah Moon

Hochul went from the woman behind the man in a ceremonial role to the center of power, where she had to find her sea legs in the entrenched political culture of the "second floor," long defined by a specific way of operating and never led by a woman, Amaru said.

Hochul portrayed her administration as more transparent than her predecessor and one where sexual harassment would not be tolerated. She pledged to clean house, targeting the toxic workplace culture and getting rid of most Cuomo staffers and department heads as she built her own team.

She also, inadvertently, lost much of the institutional knowledge, making her more susceptible to potential landmines that an Albany insider may have avoided, political analysts said.

Hochul's lieutenant governor, Brian Benjamin, was indicted on corruption charges and resigned. The charges were later dropped. His replacement, Antonio Delgado, would later become estranged from the governor after publicly getting out in front of her several times — including calling for President Joe Biden to drop his 2024 election bid while Hochul supported his candidacy. Delgado had planned to challenge Hochul in the upcoming June primary, but suspended his campaign after failing to receive support from the state Democratic Party and left-leaning Working Families Party.

Hochul's first budget proposal was met with fierce opposition as she proposed a housing plan that threatened to override local zoning boards.

In 2023, even after being elected in her own right, she became the first governor in state history to have her nominee for chief judge, Hector LaSalle, voted down by the Democratic-led State Senate.

Evolution

Hochul now has five years under her belt and higher public approval ratings.

Her legislative accomplishments include middle-class tax cuts, changing the state's bail laws, increasing protections for reproductive rights, strengthening gun safety laws and banning the use of cellphones in schools. She negotiated a \$25 billion five-year plan to build affordable housing and helped bring a \$100 billion Micron chip manufacturing and research facility to Central New York.

"There's definitely been an evolution in terms of her leadership style and also in terms of her own confidence to be the governor," Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins (D-Yonkers) told Newsday. "I think she's a stronger leader and she is aware of the dynamics of the various relationships and the levers of power."



Hochul is showcasing her experiences as a mother and grandmother who came from humble beginnings with campaign buttons that say, "One tough mother." Credit: @Kathyhochulny via Instagram

Still, there are challenges heading into the midterm election as Hochul faces federal funding cuts and threats from the Trump administration.

She also needs to unify Democrats, tiptoeing between her moderate roots and the needs of swing voters and the political left, political analysts said.

She was endorsed by Democratic socialists New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Republicans have criticized her for "kowtowing" to Mamdani, sending money to the city in her budget, while those on her left flank say she's not doing enough, pressuring her to raise taxes on millionaires.

"She lets politics govern what goes on and how she reacts," Sen. Patricia Canzoneri-Fitzpatrick (R-Malverne) told Newsday, adding that Hochul flips on issues to cater to the political left and right. "If you're going to take a position, stick to it and don't let politics govern what's going on."

She pointed to when Hochul in June 2024 paused the congestion pricing toll for vehicles entering Manhattan, citing the high cost of living, and then in November, following the election, pressed start again, announcing plans for a retooled toll to take effect in January 2025.

Mainstream Democrats say Hochul's ability to listen to her constituents and stick to her beliefs but pivot when necessary are part of the reason she's been successful.

In 2007, when Hochul was Erie County Clerk, she pushed back on then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer's plan to give driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants, refusing to enforce it.

Nearly 20 years later, she's vowing to protect immigrant communities from the mass deportation efforts of the Trump administration — efforts Blakeman says he supports.

"You're working with one constituency and then as your constituency broadens, so do your responsibilities, and then as a representative, using that term quite literally, you have to be sure that you're both keeping to your own principles but keeping your finger on the pulse of the electorate," state Democratic chairman Jay Jacobs told Newsday.

Hochul, entering her 16th election cycle, is in some ways going back to her political roots, focusing on everyday issues like affordability and childcare, political analysts and state leaders said.

She travels the state, shares stories from her past, cracks jokes and has embraced saltier language, referring to herself and her running mate, former New York City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams, as "badass women," and saying things like utility costs are "too damn high."

"My entire life has been a learning experience where each challenge or setback has sent me up for the next conflict or challenge that comes my way and makes me better able to handle it," Hochul said.

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