

# Andrew Cuomo's rocky road on path to power

October 23, 2010 by JENNIFER SMITH / jennifer.smith@newsday.com



Attorney General Andrew Cuomo has been called many things in his three decades of public life: a shrewd tactician, a backroom bully and a pragmatic progressive whose ambition may be equaled by his dedication to public service.

But Albany insider or no, few could accuse the son of former Gov. Mario Cuomo of having coasted to the place he now stands, with a commanding lead in the race to become New York's next governor.

Observers credit Cuomo's transformation from political dud to front-runner in large part to a strategy that seeks to learn from past mistakes - his and those of others. Time, and discipline, appear to have smoothed the blunt style that earned the younger Cuomo the nickname "the Prince of Darkness" when he was his father's right-hand man in the 1980s.

"To me it's a silly comparison," said Cuomo, 52, in an interview yesterday between upstate campaign stops. "I was totally different at 23 . . . I was an underdog campaign manager and all the powers were against us."

## An analytical approach

William Stern, who worked with Cuomo on his father's 1982 gubernatorial campaign, said the foresight and aptitude he showed then have grown with middle age. "He thinks in terms of a chess game," said Stern, a former adviser to Mario Cuomo. "His approaches are very analytical. . . He's observed Bill Clinton, he's observed his father, and I think he's formed a composite."

Cuomo has made a study of New York governors from Nelson Rockefeller to today, marking their successes and failures, Stern said. Campaign aides said he often references a new biography of Gov. Hugh Carey, who took office at a similarly challenging time in 1975.

Supporters attribute Cuomo's phoenixlike rise from the ashes of a failed 2002 gubernatorial bid to smarts, hard work and lessons learned from the decade's hard knocks, among them an exceedingly public divorce from Kerry Kennedy, the mother of his three daughters. Cuomo himself is somewhat of a sphinx these days, his voice heard mainly at scripted campaign events or channeled through the proxies his camp has deputized to respond to attacks from Republican rival Carl Paladino.

Backers say Cuomo's drive and resume make him uniquely qualified to lead a state in crisis. In addition to his time in state government, Cuomo served as federal housing secretary under president Clinton and founded a nonprofit to provide transitional housing for the homeless.

Cuomo has pledged to clean up state government, reform campaign finance and rein in spending - bitter pills that even he concedes will require every ounce of persuasion he can muster to get past Albany's notoriously dysfunctional legislature.

"It is pushing a boulder uphill, there's no doubt about it," Cuomo said. "I believe it is doable."

### **Politician, and proud of it**

But state Republicans counter that Cuomo is essentially a political creature with no real interest in reforming the system. They point to a campaign war chest filled with money from unions, lobbyists and real-estate magnates. Paladino, a Buffalo businessman, has called him "the ultimate Albany insider."

Cuomo recast that as a virtue during a campaign stop this month in Patchogue. "I also come from a family of career politicians, I'm proud to say," Cuomo said. "People who are dedicated to public service, they are dedicated to helping . . ."

Cuomo grew up in a middle-class part of Holliswood, Queens, earned an undergraduate degree at Fordham University in the Bronx and graduated from Albany Law School in 1982. But his political education began years earlier, when he volunteered as a teenager for Mario Cuomo's unsuccessful 1977 mayoral campaign.

Cuomo deftly masterminded his father's uphill run for governor in 1982, and served as a special assistant to the governor during his first year in office. He also worked on the 1984 New York campaign of presidential candidate Walter Mondale.

Cuomo left Albany in 1984 for a one-year stint in the office of Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau. He then moved on to private practice at Blutrich, Falcone and Miller, a law firm whose partners included Lucille Falcone, a key fundraiser for Mario Cuomo. Cuomo ran his father's 1986 re-election campaign while at the firm.

## **Help for the homeless**

Cuomo left the firm in 1988 to work full-time at a nonprofit called HELP that he founded two years earlier to build shelters for the homeless in New York City and beyond. He married Kennedy in 1990, and in 1993 Clinton named him an assistant secretary at the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

After the 1996 presidential election, Cuomo was selected to lead the agency, then rife with corruption and scandal. Observers said he made substantial improvements during his four years there, though agency audits still found some weak spots ripe for fraud.

Critics have linked his tenure at HUD to the subprime mortgage crisis, in part because Cuomo pressed the government-sponsored Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac programs to buy more mortgage loans held by moderate- and low-income families. A statement from Cuomo's campaign calls such claims baseless, saying he "never encouraged Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to make irresponsible loans or to make mortgages available to people who could not afford them."

In 2002 Cuomo made an ill-fated run for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, alienating party and African-American leaders who had backed Democratic Comptroller H. Carl McCall. Soon after, his marriage publicly dissolved.

Since then, Cuomo has by most accounts labored diligently to re-establish himself with the party's rank and file. He has curbed his tongue, at least in public, and settled into a long-term relationship with Food Network host Sandra Lee.

Cuomo also earned \$2.5 million between 2003 and 2006 as an adviser for Island Capital, a company run by Andrew Farkas, a key campaign contributor who was the target of a HUD probe during Cuomo's time there.

## **Middle-class issues**

In 2006 Cuomo completed his political resurrection, easily winning the race for attorney general. In that post Cuomo continued Eliot Spitzer's legacy to some degree, tackling the financial industry and taking on environmental cases. And he made a name for himself on middle-class issues such as reforming the student loan industry and pension system abuses.

Cuomo's office also investigated scandals during the Spitzer and Paterson administrations. Those included Spitzer's release of State Police records to embarrass the State Senate's then-majority leader, Republican Joseph Bruno, over his use of state aircraft. This spring Spitzer, who left office amid a prostitution scandal, said Cuomo let politics shape his agenda and filed a lopsided report in 2007 that reflected poorly on Spitzer, a likely rival for governor in 2010.

"It was all driven by political expediency and his own needs," said Lloyd Constantine, a former Spitzer adviser and one of few to criticize Cuomo on the record.

"If the report wasn't good, then how come it was affirmed by every law enforcement agency and every agency thereafter?" Cuomo said yesterday. "Either everybody's crazy or the Spitzer people were abusive."

Still, even Constantine said Cuomo has done a mostly creditable job as attorney general. "He's hired good people and done good work," he said. "If he gets to be governor, I pray he does a good job."

ANDREW CUOMO  
Democrat

Age: 52

Home: Mount Kisco

Family: Divorced; three daughters

Education: BA, Fordham University, 1979; Albany Law School, 1982.

Career: New York State attorney general, 2007-present; partner, Island Capital Group, 2003-06; candidate for governor, 2002; U.S. secretary of Housing and Urban Development, 1997-2001; founder, Housing Enterprise for Less Privileged (HELP), 1986; private attorney, Blutrich, Falcone and Miller of Manhattan, 1985-88; assistant district attorney, Manhattan, 1984

## FUNDRAISING

Cash on hand: \$11,987,137

As of Oct. 18

Source: Cuomo campaign