

CUOMO AS NEW YORK SEES HIM

by Lee M. Miringoff and
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One month before his upset victory over then New York City Mayor Ed Koch, in the 1982 Democratic gubernatorial primary, Lieutenant Governor Mario Cuomo was still relatively unknown in New York politics. Asked about Cuomo by a reporter, an upstate dairy farmer replied, "I think she's a strong lady." Cuomo had already held statewide office for eight years. Two years later, Mario Cuomo stood before the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco as a highly acclaimed governor and party leader. His re-election as New York's governor by a record-setting margin in 1986 confirmed his popularity in New York State and fueled speculation about his political future.

What accounts for Mario Cuomo's political appeal in New York and his appearance in the national political spotlight? Marist Institute for Public Opinion (MIPO) surveys on Governor Cuomo's performance in office, on New York State politics, and on the political attitudes of the New York electorate document his rise in popularity in New York and let us analyze the sources of his political appeal.

Cuomo's success as a political leader emerges from his ability to understand and define the substance of political issues, develop positions which are consistent with his general outlook, and communicate those views effectively. As a result, he has broadened his support in New York politics well beyond New York City, to include many groups who have often been outside the reach of Democrats, such as suburbanites and upstate voters. In his 1986 re-election campaign, Cuomo received 59% and 61% support, respectively, among these two groups. He has scored heavily in many of the areas that Ronald Reagan carried in his two winning races for New York's electoral votes.

Analysis of Governor Cuomo often concentrates only on his communication skills, not on the themes he emphasizes. These accounts identify him as "one of the most articulate politicians around;"¹ and as Albany's "Great Communicator, the ethnic Ronald Reagan."² But Cuomo's skillfulness as a communicator should not be separated from the substance of what he is saying. One aspect of his ability to define the political agenda centers around

his successful linking of national issues to state concerns. During the height of the recession in 1982 when President Reagan's economic program was unpopular in New York, Cuomo successfully tied first Koch, and then his general election opponent, Lewis Lehrman, to Reaganomics. Other examples include his efforts to defeat the proposal to eliminate the deduction for state and local taxes, his fight against the opening of the Shoreham nuclear power facility, his position on abortion and his discussion on the role of Church and State, and his advocacy of the needs of the poor. In each instance, Cuomo has defined the political agenda thematically, related national politics to state concerns, attracted media attention, enhanced speculation over his political future — and fueled his statewide popularity.

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Another aspect of Cuomo's appeal in New York is evident in his ability to define Democratic philosophy in a way meaningful to today's voters, especially with regard to the role of government in domestic affairs. His "family of New York" slogan provides a vehicle for what has amounted to an updated version of traditional Democratic values. These themes continue to serve him well. Following the Savings and Loan bailout, Cuomo asked a Los Angeles audience, "Is it there for banks, but not for babies? Do we have \$166 billion to fight fiscal problems but not \$16 billion to fight drugs?"³ Cuomo has often urged as a cornerstone of his message that "We have always believed in *only* the government we need. . . But we must insist on *all* the government we need."⁴ He has maintained that "government also has an obligation to assist those who . . . have been left out by fate: the homeless, the infirm, the destitute."⁵

Mario Cuomo's ability to define the political agenda and effectively communicate his views has gained him high approval from New Yorkers. In the initial MIPO poll on his performance in office, conducted in June 1983, 57% of the state's voters gave him excellent or good marks. Following his speech at the 1984 Democratic convention, his approval rating rose to 66%. It remained high throughout the decade, peaking in January 1988, when speculation about his possible presidential bid was intense.

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MIPO surveys reveal that voters throughout his two terms in office have viewed Cuomo as a good leader for New York, as taking clearly defined positions on issues, as having policies that are fiscally sound, and as being someone who speaks on behalf of traditional family values. On each of these characteristics, more than two-thirds of New Yorkers rate Cuomo positively. Furthermore, the majority of New Yorkers has consistently taken the position that he does *not* spend too much attention on national affairs, at the expense of New York State. Voters see him as someone who believes in active government intervention in housing, health care, and employment, as especially sympathetic to the problems of the poor and the elderly, and as at once progressive and pragmatic.

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The only significant decline in voters' ratings of Cuomo's job performance occurred in the spring of 1989 during the height of a budget battle, when his approval rating fell to 58%. During the intense budget negotiations, Cuomo toed the fiscally pragmatic side of his two-pronged message of progressive pragmatism and aroused concern among state voters. Most noteworthy during the spring of 1989 was his refusal to defer the state tax cut set in motion by the federal tax changes of 1986. MIPO polls during this period documented that voters preferred that the tax cut be delayed in the face of a state budget deficit and, in fact, were willing by wide margins to pay higher state taxes to address housing for the homeless, education of the mentally retarded and people with handicaps, public schools, and the state's roads and bridges. Cuomo's position on the deferral of the state tax cut has since changed.

In his 1990 budget message he called for a freeze in the cut and the use of funds to fight drugs and provide health care.

In MIPO's February 1990 poll, Cuomo's statewide popularity was 64% (excellent or good). He continues to enjoy across-the-board appeal—65% approval among upstate voters, 61% among those residing in the New York City suburbs, and 65% among those who live in New York City. His approval rating is 71% among Democrats, 63% among Independents, and 55% among Republicans. By linking national themes to state politics and by providing a contemporary definition of Democratic philosophy, Cuomo has been able to build a broad coalition in New York.

Entering 1990, the expectation in New York is that Cuomo will seek a third term as governor. As yet, no Republican opponent has emerged. MIPO's February poll places him at better than two to one over his best-known potential rival, Republican Rudolph Giuliani. As for 1992, he faces an unusual situation. Most shows get to open on the road in obscurity before coming to New York. Already a hit on Broadway, Cuomo will have to prove he can play in Des Moines.

Endnotes

¹Albert Hunt, "Mario Cuomo: Star Rising in the East," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 1983, p. 28E.

²David Langdon quoted in Michael Oreskes, "Cuomo's Personal Touch," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 29, 1984, p. 33. Langdon was then counselor to New York State Assembly speaker Stanley Fink.

³*The New York Times*, September 17, 1989, p. 39.

⁴Mario Cuomo, *Diaries of Mario M. Cuomo: The Campaign for Governor* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 3, 457.

⁵Mario Cuomo, "Inaugural Address," Albany, NY, January 1, 1983.

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