

## Rockville Centre Democratic Club

### *Talking Points*

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# What we learned from the Democratic primary

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ALBANY – New York’s political primary Thursday rightly focused on Democrats and the measure of what some have called a national progressive insurgency pushing the party to the left.

If it is, it’s still got a ways to go here, as Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo fended off actress Cynthia Nixon in a Democratic primary.

Cuomo-backed candidates also won the two down-ballot, statewide races over more progressive challengers. But the left scored significant wins in smaller-scale races in the State Senate.

Here are five takeaways from Thursday’s results:

### **Cuomo took this race seriously, unlike his 2014 Democratic primary.**

Four years ago, the governor barely campaigned in the primary. He held no rallies, spent little of his campaign cash. As a result, Fordham University law professor Zephyr Teachout garnered 34 percent of the vote, or about twice what Cuomo allies had predicted.

This time, facing a celebrity challenger who had the focus of considerable national attention, the governor was active. He spent \$16 million from July onward — including a three-week stretch in August where he spent an average \$400,000 per day.

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He held rallies with unions, upstate and downstate. His campaign paid for a TV ad blitz.

The increased campaigning and media attention helped drive turnout to 26.6 percent of enrolled Democrats — almost thrice the 10.7 percent that went to the polls in the 2014 primary.

Incumbency, money and a strong “ground game” — a network of allies working to turn out voters — all were part of the advantages the governor put to use, said Jeanne Zaino, an Iona College political scientist.

Cuomo now will be a heavy favorite to win a third term over Republican Marc Molinaro in November.

### **Unions remain perhaps the most potent force in New York Democratic primaries.**

Four years ago, Cuomo was at war with the public-employee unions and many private-sector ones and it hurt his results. This time, the governor had made peace with labor and the unions helped drive a spike in turnout.

Without unions’ help, Nixon was not able to pose a serious threat to Cuomo.

Further, in a crowded contest, union support can be the decisive factor. That’s what helped Tish James emerge as the winner in a four-way contest for the Democratic nomination for attorney general.

James’ result echoed 2010 when Eric Schneiderman won a five-way contest for the same office because he had the strongest union support.

And unions played a role in ousting six Democratic senators who had been part of a renegade coalition that had worked with Senate Republicans since 2013. 32BJ, an influential property-services union, said it deployed hundreds of get-out-the-vote volunteers to defeat Sen. Jeff Klein (D-Bronx), the leader of the breakaway Democrats.

“This victory proves that principled, committed, real Democrats can beat disloyal incumbents, matching up people power against money,” the union said on Twitter in congratulating Alessandro Biaggi’s win over Klein.

**Maybe there is a ceiling on what share of votes a progressive challenger can win in a statewide election.**

In a low-key, low-turnout primary, Teachout took 34 percent of the vote in 2014. In a high-profile, better-turnout primary, Nixon garnered 35 percent.

More attention, more social networking didn't budge the needle at all for a progressive challenger to Cuomo.

Conversely, maybe the results show about one-third of the Democrats who vote in primaries will vote for anyone but Cuomo. And the rest of the Democrats are, by and large, with the governor.

Jumaane Williams, Nixon's running mate, fared better in his attempt to oust Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, Cuomo's running mate. Williams, who had the backing of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, scored 47 percent in a low-profile contest.

**Maybe the dynamics of a discreet, district-based race are more primed for progressive upsets than statewide contests.**

In contrast to their statewide losses, progressives accomplished six upsets in State Senate primaries — somewhat mirroring their success in the June congressional primaries. Biaggi's win over Klein shares at least some broad qualities with the victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez over U.S. Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-Queens) in June: A first-time candidate defeated an entrenched politician whom activists deemed insufficiently progressive.

The case against Klein and the other renegade senators was, to be sure, different from the argument progressives made against Crowley because it involved the history of the State Senate.

But like the Crowley race, the Senate contests were small-numbers affairs requiring smaller waves of activists to make a difference.

**The fate of the Working Families Party, which for years has had some success in influencing Democratic politics in New York, now hangs in the balance.**

A political party must get at least 50,000 votes in the gubernatorial election to automatically earn a place on the ballot every four years. The labor-backed WFP

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spurned Cuomo this year in favor of Nixon, giving her a place on the November ballot despite Thursday's loss.

She likely won't campaign much, but Nixon and WFP members will have to hustle to make sure she makes the 50,000 threshold.

The WFP, along with Conservative Party, has been the most influential of New York's scattered minor parties. By owning a ballot line that candidates desire, it's been able to get politicians to back progressive initiatives. If the WFP loses that line, it loses most or all of its power.