

Rage is key in NY governor's race

Carl Paladino, Andrew Cuomo spar

By MARTHA T. MOORE • USA TODAY • October 6, 2010

NEW YORK - Everyone in the New York governor's race is mad.

Carl Paladino, the Tea Party-backed Republican candidate, wants to overhaul state government with a "baseball bat," calls his opponent "despicable" and the state Assembly leader "a criminal."

Democrat Andrew Cuomo, the state's attorney general and son of three-term governor Mario Cuomo, says the machinations in Albany, the state capital, are "disgusting."

Even Paladino's dog, a pit bull named Duke, reportedly bit another dog at an outdoor campaign event Saturday.

Pushed by the difficult economy and voter frustration with the state government, a jolt of Tea Party fervor has transformed the governor's race from a stately progression toward Cuomo's inevitable inauguration into something of a rumble.

Paladino, 64, a real estate developer from Buffalo, promises to cut taxes 10 percent, cut state spending 20 percent, eliminate business taxes, shut down state agencies, and "take out" Democratic state Rep. Sheldon Silver, the powerful Assembly speaker who can block or impose state action seemingly at will. In the Sept. 14 primary, Paladino beat the GOP's favored candidate, former congressman Rick Lazio, two to one. His fiery rhetoric, and penchant for personal attacks, have landed him ample television time.

That has pushed frontrunner Cuomo, 52, to sharpen his rhetoric on reform and ramp up the cholera.

"I'm angry, I'm frustrated. Nobody knows the Albany corruption better than I do," he said Tuesday. "I've been staring at the beast for three years."

Cuomo appears to have built in advantages: He has a well-known name, plenty of campaign money, a high-profile victory on reform of student loan practices as Attorney General, and he's running in a

state where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one. His last big gaffe was in 2002: running for the Democratic nomination for governor, he said then-incumbent Republican Gov. George Pataki had merely "held the leader's coat" in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was the most visible public official.

Paladino has forwarded e-mails to friends containing images of bestiality, a racist epithet and showing President Obama dressed as a pimp. He has a young daughter whose mother is not his wife, and last week charged that Cuomo had had "paramours" while married. When a political columnist asked Paladino for the evidence, Paladino accused him of stalking his daughter and told him nose-to-nose, "I'll take you out."

Polls still show Cuomo with a big lead but Paladino is the kind of candidate that makes races unpredictable - and riveting.

"It's entertaining if you don't live in New York," says Grant Reeher, a Syracuse University political scientist. "If you live in New York and you're concerned about politics, it's mortifying."

Beleaguered voters are choosing their third governor in four years. Eliot Spitzer, elected in 2006, resigned in 2008 after patronizing a prostitute. His successor, former lieutenant governor David Paterson, announced in February he wouldn't seek a full term after being tarnished by his apparent intervention in a top aide's domestic violence case.



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In a Siena College poll released Tuesday likely voters supported Cuomo 56 percent-32 percent, with 11 percent undecided and a margin of error of +/-3.9 percentage points. But Paladino pointed out Wednesday in a Fox News interview that polls showed him trailing in the GOP primary.

Cuomo "has to fear that people might put aside those (personal) issues and simply feel that this is a man who is angry like they are, and they're just going to send a message that . . . anyone who's had any connection with the political establishment has got to go," says Carl McCall, the Democratic former state comptroller who beat Cuomo in the 2002 gubernatorial primary and now supports him.

Cuomo is trying to paint Paladino as "extreme" and at odds with the state's moderate Republican voters. Paladino opposes abortion including cases of rape and incest, and opposes same-sex marriage. But as the economy still suffers and voter anger at the state government runs high, social positions are irrelevant, says John Jay LaValle, GOP chairman of Suffolk County on Long Island. "What's pivotal is that you can convince the public that you are better able to deal with the economic situation than your opponent," he says.

Paladino's personal attacks are a mistake, says political scientist James Campbell of the State University of New York at Buffalo. (In a statement, Silver said Paladino's accusation was "insulting and baseless hectoring" and he did not want to "dignify his comments with a response.")

"He has to stay strictly on message that he's not mad at Cuomo for having an (unsubstantiated) affair . . . he's mad at him for being part of the Albany establishment that's gotten the state in a fiscal mess," Campbell says. In the Siena Poll, 61 percent of those surveyed called Paladino a "loose cannon" who didn't have the temperament to run the state.

"A lot of people can feel comfortable with Paladino being mad as hell, because they are too," Campbell says. "But out of control - that does not comfort voters."



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