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Buffalo's Passion for Paladino Wanes

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

BUFFALO — On a patch of grass in West Seneca, a town just south of Buffalo, a yard sign announces in bold black and orange that this is “Carl Country.” The same sign sprouted like crabgrass on lawns all over the area after [Carl P. Paladino](#), a wealthy Buffalo real estate developer, scored an unexpected and lopsided victory in the Sept. 14 primary to become the Republican nominee for governor.

After all, here was a native son, from a place that often feels ignored by the state’s political establishment, threatening to roll over the establishment in his quest to become the chief executive of New York.

Many in Buffalo lustily cheered for someone who delivered blunt tirades about taking out the trash in Albany. But then another side of Mr. Paladino came to the fore: someone who had forwarded racist and pornographic e-mails, who got into a violent argument with a reporter and who called gay pride parades “disgusting.”

Suddenly, many people here said, Mr. Paladino’s candor crossed the line from refreshing to repulsive.

“Absolutely I was thinking of voting for him,” said Jacqueline DiMarco, 46, who works for the federal Home Energy Assistance Program in Buffalo. “But then he’s making gay slurs, he’s threatening to beat up that guy on camera, and people see all that. You don’t want a mobster as governor.”

The feeling of being turned off by Mr. Paladino was expressed in dozens of interviews here in recent days.

“They were interested in Paladino as a concept and didn’t know much about him, except that he was mad as hell,” said James Coleman Battista, an assistant professor of political science at the [State University at Buffalo](#). “But at this point, he’s said something to annoy almost anyone.”

Like Ms. DiMarco, many other people cited the confrontation between Mr. Paladino and a reporter for The New York Post, Fredric U. Dicker, as the moment when they started souring on Mr. Paladino.

"He blew it," said John Slisz, 47, who works at Erie Community College. "That's no way for a governor to act."

That is a far cry from the sentiments in the days after Mr. Paladino thumped [Rick A. Lazio](#) in the Republican primary. At that time, even the chairman of the Erie County Democratic Committee, Leonard R. Lenihan, acknowledges, Mr. Paladino was riding high.

"The home team always has a little advantage, and Carl Paladino is a major factor in the business life of Buffalo and Erie County," Mr. Lenihan said in a recent interview. "But he's veered off message and shot himself in the foot."

Indeed, a recent New York [Times poll](#) showed that in counties in central and western New York, including Erie County where Buffalo is, Mr. Paladino is far less popular than his Democratic opponent, [Andrew M. Cuomo](#).

Though registered Democratic voters outnumber Republican voters by about 140,000 in Erie County, Mr. Lenihan said voters regularly crossed party lines in local and statewide elections. In interviews, many voters said that Mr. Paladino's promises of fiscal conservatism, including lowering taxes and slashing government spending, resonated strongly, but that he had turned out to be the wrong messenger.

And they were particularly enamored at the possibility of sending someone from western New York to Albany to balance what many here said was a political scale that is often tilted toward New York City.

"A lot of people here think that on the state level, the voices of people from New York City are a little bit louder," said Jeffrey White, a 25-year-old cook who lives in Buffalo. "So if there's someone from western New York who's elected to office, maybe the issues that are most relevant to western New Yorkers will be heard a little more."

But now, even some people who said they planned to vote for Mr. Paladino said they lacked enthusiasm.

"I'm going to hold my nose and vote for Carl Paladino," said Cal Champlin, 57, a lawyer and former town clerk in Tonawanda, a suburb of Buffalo.

Still, while Mr. Paladino may not inspire the kind of passion he did just a few weeks ago, he still has plenty of supporters. "He's a little rough around the edges," said Al Grabowski, 64, who works for a development company. "But I'd rather have that than have somebody that's polished and means we deal with the status quo."

Mr. Paladino's campaign manager, Michael R. Caputo, said the Times poll this week, suggesting that Mr. Paladino's popularity was waning, was the result of the "media elite's wishful premise — that the electorate has gone to sleep over the media's portrayal of one of Buffalo's favorite sons."

The leader of the Erie County Republican Committee, Nicholas A. Langworthy, admitted to a "rough few weeks for the campaign" but said he was still confident that Mr. Paladino would carry his home county.

Yet feeling of disillusionment about Mr. Paladino's performance is palpable.

"I think people are disappointed by his faux pas," Dorothy Ginate, a retired hospital manager here, said. "Remember that old adage? Think all you say, but don't say all you think."

Marjorie Connelly contributed reporting from New York.