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Amid Talk of a 2020 Run, Cuomo Must First Deal With 2018

By JESSE MCKINLEY AUG. 6, 2017

ALBANY — There was a time — call it March — when Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s plans for re-election next year seemed almost an afterthought.

The governor, a Democrat in his second term, was riding high on handsome approval ratings, and an enhanced national profile born of opposition to the Trump administration. The talk in many quarters about Mr. Cuomo seemingly had more to do with 2020 — when his purported, if oft-denied, presidential ambitions might bloom — rather than 2018, when he seemingly would be swept to a third term.

That was then. Over the last several months, Mr. Cuomo has been politically snakebitten by the New York City subway crisis and dogged by a series of lesser hiccups, including a late budget and an extended legislative fight over mayoral control of the city’s schools.

And now, it seems, potential challengers in both parties are mulling whether the governor’s sudden swoon, as indicated in two recent polls showing middling approval ratings, could mean an opening for them. Last week, the No. 2 Republican in the State Senate, John DeFrancisco, an irascible straight shooter from the Syracuse area, said he was exploring a run. Ditto for that city’s mayor, Stephanie Miner, a Democrat.

The roster of possible opponents is mostly familiar to the governor, including the man he defeated in 2014, Rob Astorino, the Westchester County executive. But Mr. Cuomo may also be facing fire from the left, and not just from Ms. Miner, who has garnered attention for her willingness to criticize the governor. The Wall Street Journal broke the news of a possible run by the actress and activist Cynthia Nixon last week, as well, though her representatives declined to comment on such speculation.

Terry Gipson, a former state senator and another possible Democratic challenger, said he had been particularly troubled by the governor’s willingness to deal with the Independent Democratic Conference in the Senate. The conference is an eight-member coalition that collaborates with Republicans, allowing that party to control the chamber despite being outnumbered by Democrats.

“There’s been a wide variety of progressive legislation that was blocked by the I.D.C. and that seemed to have no real support from the governor,” said Mr. Gipson, who represented a portion of the Hudson Valley before losing his seat in 2014. “Democrats feel that the state needs a real Democrat to move it forward.”

In 2014, the governor’s progressive bona fides were questioned by activists who felt that his often cozy relationship with Republicans in Albany had come at a cost for liberal policies. Members of the Working Families

Party, which sits to the left of most mainstream Democrats and has a tense relationship with Mr. Cuomo, have entertained the idea of a third-party run against the governor next year, either in a primary or general election.

Zephyr Teachout, who used a similar sentiment to mount a surprisingly strong challenge to Mr. Cuomo in 2014, said she believed that a primary was the biggest threat to the governor, as the Democratic base has been fired up “in Trump times.”

“There’s been this massive shift in Democrats in New York, and Andrew Cuomo has no sense of that,” she said.

And while the talking points vary, there are similar themes to each of the potential challengers’ themes, including a perception that Mr. Cuomo — who prides himself as an efficient manager of Albany’s often dysfunctional dynamics — cares more about good press than good government.

“I think people are more interested in long-term solutions than short-term headlines,” said Ms. Miner, who has had several public run-ins with Mr. Cuomo. “People are looking for problem solvers.”

They are also looking at the political problems for Mr. Cuomo, of course, including the looming federal corruption trials of several of his former aides. The most critical of those — and the most painful for the governor — is that of Joseph Percoco, who once functioned as his political enforcer and was referred to as a member of his family. Mr. Percoco’s case is expected to begin in January, something that seems to give Republicans a distinct sense of glee.

“He made some huge mistakes which resulted in indictment of his so-called brother, and all that is coming back to haunt him,” said Ed Cox, chairman of the New York Republican State Committee.

Not all Republicans are as confident, particularly in a state where Democrats hold an enormous edge in registered voters. And few are discounting the governor’s advantages, including his ability to raise money: His campaign fund is flush, with more than \$25 million in the bank.

“It’s not just having the money to use,” said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz. “It’s having the money to scare people off.”

The timing and traditional mood of the electorate during a midterm election are also expected to help Mr. Cuomo. While his approval ratings have slipped below 50 percent in some polls, he is still much more popular than the state’s most famous Republican, President Trump, who is likely to be a topic of any 2018 campaign.

Mr. Cuomo’s campaign pushes back hard on the notion that the governor is in a weakened position, noting approval ratings in the high 60s among Democrats and self-described liberals, as well as polls showing him as one of the nation’s most popular governors. His representatives also point to a record of progressive accomplishments, including an increase in the minimum wage, legalizing gay marriage and paid family leave.

Mr. Cuomo’s main concern can probably be summed up in three letters: M.T.A., the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the state agency that he controls and that oversees the underperforming subway system in New York City. The M.T.A. also affects voters in the city, where Mr. Cuomo has his strongest support, but where he is being blamed for the system’s failings.

The transit woes provided fodder for another potential Republican challenger, Harry Wilson, a corporate turnaround expert who lost a race for state comptroller in 2010. Late last month, a group called Common Sense NYS, of which Mr. Wilson is a part, unveiled a slick video that highlighted several recent subway problems, including derailments. The video, released online, ends with a collection of young activists asking people to “honk if you think it’s Cuomo’s fault.” (A commuter train engineer does just that at the video’s end.)

Mr. Wilson said the M.T.A. exemplified Mr. Cuomo’s approach to governance, which prioritizes “optics over

results.” Mr. Wilson noted the governor’s promotion of the Second Avenue subway but his attempts to deflect blame over system problems.

Still, even those bullish about defeating Mr. Cuomo admit that it would be a difficult task, considering his bankroll and powerful allies in labor and other industries, as well as the state party, which has already taken to battering potential opponents.

On Friday, for instance, Basil A. Smikle Jr., the party’s executive director, called Mr. DeFrancisco a member of the “ultraconservative right wing of the Republican Party,” who prays “at the altar of Trump University.”

Mr. Smikle added that the surge of candidates taking on Mr. Cuomo was “simply the result of the election calendar, not any poll.”

“And it’s starting much later than usual — especially in this politically charged landscape,” he said. “The Governor’s record of accomplishment is unmatched and we looking forward to continuing it in the third term.”

Mr. DeFrancisco said that such an assertion was untrue, and that Mr. Cuomo’s popularity was “paper thin,” citing the M.T.A. and struggling economic development programs as possible lines of attack.

But he also seemed cognizant of the governor’s political skills. “Somebody’s got to do it,” Mr. DeFrancisco said, about running. “The world’s not going to end if I don’t get the nomination.”

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