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HEADLINE: Everyone wants to be Spitzer; AG office's new celebrity status draws many candidates

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BODY:

Quick, name New York's last three attorneys general.

There's Eliot Spitzer, and ... uh ... uh (Hint: Dennis Vacco and Robert Abrams.)

For a position not known for having a high profile, there's an awful lot of interest in being attorney general these days.

Eight Democrats and four Republicans have either declared that they are running or have leaked their names to news reporters as potential candidates. The race, which will not be decided until 2006, is receiving much more interest and ink than even next year's gubernatorial race, perhaps because it is perceived to be locked up by one very popular Democrat. (Hint: Eliot Spitzer.)

The new appeal is directly the result of Mr. Spitzer's popularity. He has raised the profile of the office like no one else, appearing on the cover of national magazines like Fortune, which called him "The Enforcer," in a reference to his crusading work halting Wall Street's plunder of the little guy.

Because Mr. Spitzer is a national name and has put himself in a position to seek higher office—some say as high as the U.S. presidency—celebrity and career politicians are taking an interest in his office for the first time. Andrew Cuomo and Mark Green are running; Robert Kennedy Jr. very publicly flirted with the idea.

No dumping ground

"It is an unusually large and accomplished early Democratic field," says Douglas Muzzio, a professor of political science at Baruch College. "Spitzer transformed the AG from presiding over a quiet patronage dump whose focus was crooked landlords and real estate agents, nursing homes and auto repair shops."

Mr. Abrams, who served as attorney general from 1978 to 1993, says that attorney general offices nationwide have become more activist over time. One cutting-edge issue in his day was the Love Canal case, which gave rise to new concepts of environmental responsibility.

"It's an office with a great deal of independence and opportunity to protect the public in a wide number of areas," Mr. Abrams says. "There's a great deal of power to impact people's lives."

Mr. Spitzer came along at a historic moment, when the federal government, in Republican control, has been hesitant to regulate business. In the late 1990s, small investors poured money into the stock market, seemingly unable to lose on hot Internet companies. Then the bubble burst, and people realized they had been taken in by the hype.

"It was a crucial moment," says Michael Gianaris, a Democratic assemblyman who is running for attorney general. "Spitzer saw an opening where the federal government was failing to do its job."

Mr. Spitzer has redefined the powers of the office so fundamentally, that during the last election cycle three attorney general candidates around the country asked to meet with him when forming their visions of what they could bring to the office.

In New York, the AG spot has added appeal because ambitious Democrats don't have many other options. With Mr. Spitzer running for governor, Alan Hevesi up for re-election as state comptroller and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton seeking a second term, attorney general and lieutenant governor are the only open seats.

As a result, the candidates are busily working up reform platforms that they hope will propel them into the spotlight. Mr. Green cites his past role as an activist. "The key threshold question is, 'Who has the best record as an advocate to succeed a great attorney general like Eliot Spitzer and serve in his mold?'" Mr. Green says. "It's a great office that Eliot has enhanced by his performance."

Richard Brodsky, a Democratic Assembly member, points to his record of blowing the whistle on a sweetheart deal to hand over Erie Canal development rights, along with a host of public hearings in which he has subpoenaed uncooperative officials. "I'm a working government reformer," Mr. Brodsky says. "I've taken on big forces and beaten them."

Republican state Sen. Michael Balboni says he would fashion himself as the state homeland security czar and focus on civil rights, privacy and surveillance issues.

"There are a lot of things that the office can do," he says. "New York is at the top of the target list for homeland security, yet we don't have one person designated to lead homeland security along the federal model," he says. "New York is looked to as an originator of ideas."

Spitzer model

Charlie King, who runs a nonprofit agency for the homeless, says he would use the Spitzer model of reforming institutions in a profound way and apply it to education. "I would take the model from Wall Street to Sesame Street," he says.

Mr. Gianaris anticipates a role that tightens homeland security and reforms state government.

Some of the candidates have already established fund-raising operations. Others are backed only by hopeful whispers that their admirers are floating to see how the public responds. New candidates could still emerge, but political experts say that serious contenders will need \$5 million to run, and more if they lack name recognition in such a crowded field.