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NY POLITICS

## Mario Cuomo, a Liberal Voice and Practical Eye for Progress

A Gifted Orator Whose Accomplishments Never Quite Reached the Heights of His Rhetoric



1 of 14

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By **MIKE VILENSKY** and **JOSH DAWSEY**

Updated Jan. 2, 2015 9:37 p.m. ET

Former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo was considered the Democratic Party's liberal poet, but a look at his three terms in office shows that his governance of New York state was often prosaic.

He swept into office promising to expand the good that he said state government could do even as the state and nation were in the grip of recession. But 12 years later, he left the state's capital in electoral defeat without a major achievement that could sum up his tenure.

Mr. Cuomo, who died at age 82 on Thursday, was remembered by many who knew him, worked with him and fought against him as a gifted orator whose accomplishments never quite reached the heights of his rhetoric.

His speeches transcended the world of Albany, taking aim at the ascendant conservatism of President Ronald Reagan and imploring Democrats to remain true to a vision of helping those in need.



Andrew and Mario Cuomo together at a swearing-in ceremony for the current governor in 2010. ASSOCIATED PRESS

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l-ridden Legislature, a weak economy and entrenched opposition that made basic political tasks like passing a budget onerous.

“He was a victim of the fact that he was so eloquent and magnificent at a podium,” said Harold Holzer, a longtime aide who co-wrote a book with Mr. Cuomo. “People expected it would be as easy to govern as it was to give a great speech.”

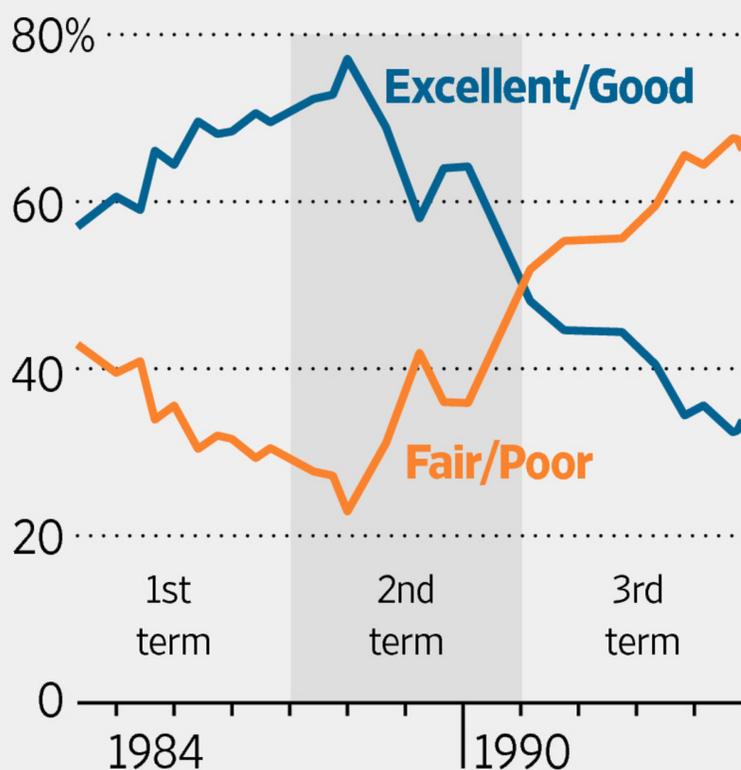
Mr. Cuomo took office in 1983 facing a deep budget deficit and angered some by proposing public-worker layoffs and tax increases. So began a series of brutal fiscal battles that often made the state budget late. The governor cited a particularly nasty budget battle in 1991 as one reason why he made his famous decision not to run for president, though some were skeptical of the rationale.

To conservatives, Mr. Cuomo was a classic tax-and-spend liberal, overseeing a budget that ballooned to more than \$60 billion from about \$30 billion during his tenure.

“He was one of the loudest liberal voices in the nation,” recalled Mike Long, chairman of the state Conservative Party, “and I disagreed with almost every issue Gov. Cuomo championed.”

## Job Performance

Mario Cuomo’s job performance rating started to slip during his second term as governor.



Note: Poll comprised of registered New York state voters

Source: Marist Institute for Public Opinion  
The Wall Street Journal

But, Mr. Long allowed Friday, “he was an honest broker, and a tough fighter.”

The constant fights over money frustrated Mr. Cuomo, who once told an adviser, Mitchell Moss, that “he didn’t get elected to be the chief bookkeeper.” Mr. Holzer said Mr. Cuomo sometimes noted that he couldn’t print money like the federal government.

Mr. Cuomo’s impact on New York state could be felt beyond any policy achievements or failures in Albany. The Queens-born son of Italian immigrants, he became a symbol of New York’s rags-to-riches potential and added a dose of intellectual inquiry to the political process, which made him a popular figure and subject of fascination in New York’s political circles.

“In a lot of ways, his ability to define the state was much less about policy than about the example he set publicly

struggling with ideas and values,” said Richard Brodsky, a former state assemblyman whose tenure overlapped with Mr. Cuomo’s. “He legitimized inquiry, debate and disagreement as part of the Democratic process.”

Mr. Cuomo did manage to oversee the expansion of some social programs, including

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health-care program for children.

He also signed the first law in the country requiring drivers and their passengers to wear seat belts in 1984.

Mr. Cuomo won over environmentalists, along with much of Long Island, when he struck a deal in 1989 to close the Shoreham nuclear power plant, even though electric rates rose on Long Island.

“He was a hero to them,” said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.

Mr. Cuomo forced legislators—after corruption arrests—to pass new ethics laws in 1987. He took a strong stand against the death penalty, which was unpopular among some, and supported abortion rights, even though he was a Catholic and the church opposed them. He also made efforts at bringing development to Queens, his hometown, and investing in the city’s transportation system.

Some of Mr. Cuomo’s work as governor didn’t jibe with his liberal ideologies, including an expansion of the state’s prison system he later was said to regret.

But he failed to produce banner legislation that drew the same headlines as his speeches, analysts said.

By late in his third term, Mr. Cuomo’s governorship was being overtaken by economic realities. A national recession hit hard, especially New York City.

“The recession was so steep in the city at that time that it lost 10% of private sector jobs in 1992,” said James Parrott of the Fiscal Policy Institute, a labor-backed think tank. “It was a while before New York City recovered from that.”

The bad economic news took a toll on Mr. Cuomo's popularity. After hitting a high of 77% in January 1988, his poll numbers began a long slide, dropping to around 32% in 1994, when he lost a re-election bid to a little-known state senator named George Pataki.

Mr. Holzer said Mr. Cuomo's biggest regret was that loss.

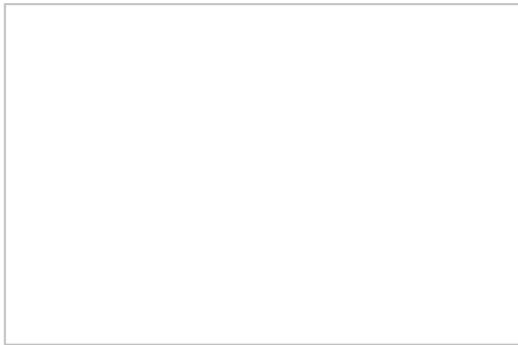
"He thought he was as good a governor as he was an orator," Mr. Holzer said. "He took it hard that he didn't get a fourth term."

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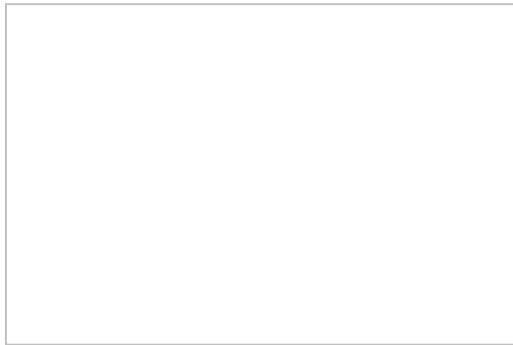
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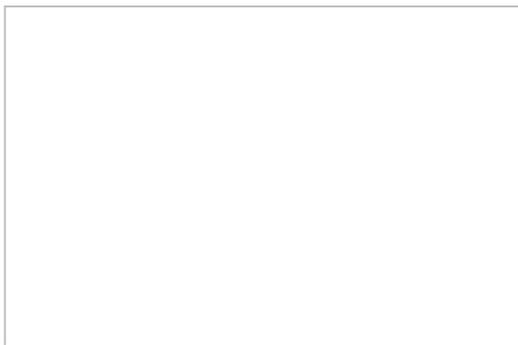
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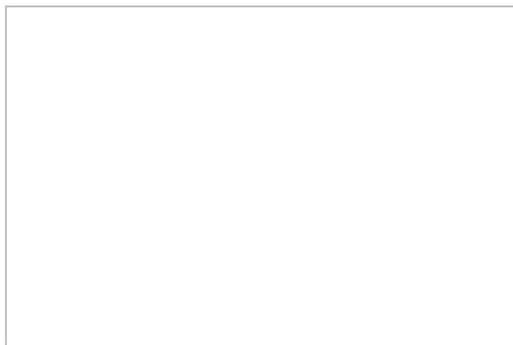
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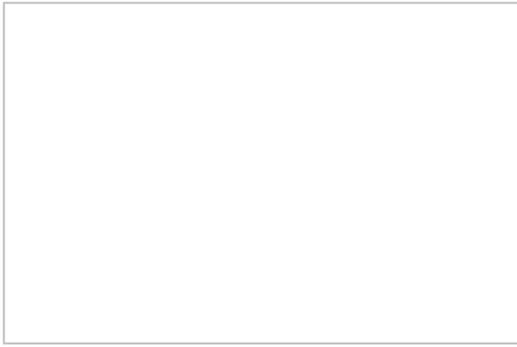
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