

Cuomo's Foes Look to Renew Focus on Sexual Harassment Scandal

As Andrew M. Cuomo runs for mayor, political opponents are previewing attack lines regarding the harassment accusations that led to his resignation as governor.



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In the months before he joined New York City's mayoral race, Andrew M. Cuomo sought to create as much distance as possible from the sexual harassment scandal that forced him to resign as governor more than three years ago.

But some of his challengers in the race and the women who accused him are determined to keep the allegations front and center.

Brad Lander, the city comptroller who is running for mayor, drew attention to the allegations at a news conference on Monday with Erica Vladimer, who represents a group that combats sexual harassment in Albany.

Lindsey Boylan, a former aide who accused Mr. Cuomo of an unwanted kiss, has stepped up attacks of him on social media.

A left-leaning coalition released radio ads portraying Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, as a predator. One ad said the former governor “harassed and intimidated the women who dared to speak out” against him.

Mariann Wang, a lawyer for Brittany Commisso, who accused Mr. Cuomo of groping her while she worked in his office, said in a statement: “An unrepentant sexual harasser who resigned in disgrace and who has spent the past four years spending millions in taxpayer money to vindictively litigate against his victims should not be the mayor of New York City.”



Mr. Cuomo has sought to create distance from the harassment scandal that forced him from office in 2021. Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

Mr. Cuomo has denied the allegations, fighting them in court and characterizing them as politically motivated efforts to damage his reputation.

“From Day 1, the governor maintained he never harassed anyone,” said Rich Azzopardi, a spokesman for Mr. Cuomo. “Years later, the facts have borne that out. New Yorkers aren’t naïve and understand that ugly political situation for exactly what it was.”

Mr. Cuomo did not directly address the allegations in his campaign launch video on Saturday but did refer to unspecified mistakes.

“Did I make mistakes, some painfully?” he asked. “Definitely, and I believe I learned from them and that I am a better person for it and I hope to show that every day.”

The power of the #MeToo movement has seemed to wane in recent years, with the re-election of President Trump, a Republican, a visible example. A Manhattan jury had already found him liable for sexually abusing the writer E. Jean Carroll.

Democrats have typically been less accepting of politicians accused of sexual misconduct than Republicans. But some voters might be more worried about issues such as subway crime and immigration.

Mr. Cuomo has regularly led in polls against the embattled incumbent, Eric Adams, showing that many New Yorkers may consider giving him a second chance.

The Democratic mayoral primary in June will pose a test of voter tolerance of sexual misconduct allegations: Mr. Cuomo is one of three mayoral candidates who have faced them. A woman filed a lawsuit last year accusing Mr. Adams of sexually assaulting her in 1993. Scott Stringer, a former city comptroller, was accused of sexual harassment by two women during the 2021 mayoral race. Mr. Adams and Mr. Stringer have denied the allegations.

Charlotte Bennett, the first of Mr. Cuomo’s aides to accuse him of harassment, and Ms. Commisso sued Mr. Cuomo and several of his top aides for sexual harassment, as did an unnamed state trooper who said that Mr. Cuomo touched her inappropriately.

In December, Ms. Bennett dropped her federal suit against him, shortly before she was slated to be deposed; her separate suit against the state remains active. Lawyers for Ms. Bennett and the trooper declined to comment about Mr. Cuomo's candidacy.

The state has spent \$25 million representing the legal interests of Mr. Cuomo and several aides in various investigations, including fighting to clear his name from the 11 sexual harassment accusations that prompted his resignation in 2021. His team often cites how, despite criminal investigations by several district attorneys, none resulted in charges.

In 2021, as pressure built for him to step down, Mr. Cuomo apologized for making "people feel uncomfortable" and said he was embarrassed. He acknowledged in his resignation speech that there were "11 women who I truly offended" and that there were "generational and cultural shifts that I just didn't fully appreciate and I should have."



Charlotte Bennett, a former executive assistant to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, said he made sexual overtures to her when they were in his office. Elizabeth Frantz for The New York Times

But not long after leaving office, Mr. Cuomo began more aggressively defending his legacy. In his legal fight against Ms. Bennett, his lawyers have sought records from her gynecologist, college and family therapist.

Mr. Cuomo's lawyer Rita Glavin said that Ms. Bennett's gynecological records were part of a "pro forma request for medical records, which included a range of doctors." She added that Ms. Wang's statement calling Mr. Cuomo an unrepentant harasser was "demonstrably false and defamatory" and that the civil cases had "actively fallen apart as a result of discovery that gutted the cases."

Some accusers are hesitant to speak out against Mr. Cuomo for fear of reprisal after he filed notice in December of intent to sue Ms. Bennett for defamation.

Ms. Boylan said in an interview that she was comfortable speaking up for those fearful of retaliation. She said the harassment allegations were an important part of Mr. Cuomo's record.

"His abuse of his female staffers is central as an example of his abuse of New York," she said.

Some of Mr. Cuomo's opponents held a women's rally on Sunday to "remind New Yorkers of his history of sexual harassment and abuses of power." The left-leaning Working Families Party posted a video on Saturday featuring women saying "hell no to Cuomo."

Mr. Cuomo plans to hold his own fund-raising event on Friday led by a large group of women, including his daughters, who featured prominently in his campaign announcement.

Several candidates running against Mr. Cuomo have raised concerns over the harassment allegations, his handling of nursing home deaths during the coronavirus pandemic and ethical issues during his time as governor. A pollster working with a left-leaning anti-Cuomo coalition argued in an essay that Mr. Cuomo's support could quickly erode once voters were reminded of his record.



Mr. Cuomo has regularly led in the polls against the embattled incumbent, Eric Adams. Johnny Milano/The New York Times

A new super PAC launched to attack Mr. Cuomo released a memo on Friday criticizing Mr. Cuomo's record. It also hired Lauren Hitt, who has worked as a spokeswoman for former Vice President Kamala Harris and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York.

Mr. Lander released a video criticizing Mr. Cuomo's decision to seek records from Ms. Bennett's gynecologist and questioned the cost of his legal defense for taxpayers. Other candidates have criticized Mr. Cuomo, including Whitney Tilson, a former hedge fund executive who was asked recently on CNN if the harassment allegations disqualified Mr. Cuomo from being mayor.

"Well, the women I've talked to in New York sure seem to think so," Mr. Tilson said.

When Mr. Cuomo released a campaign-style video on Valentine's Day showing him holding a rose and hugging women, it struck some as tone deaf. But it also reinforced the idea that many women still like him.

Mr. Cuomo was viewed favorably by about 55 percent of female voters — higher than his standing among men — in a poll by The New York Times in October. Views about sexual harassment vary by age; women younger than 30 were the age group most inclined to support #MeToo, according to a Pew Research survey.

Karen Hinton, a former consultant for Mr. Cuomo who also claimed that he touched her inappropriately, called his approach toward the accusers “horrid” and said he should not be mayor. She added that she was disappointed that the #MeToo movement had grown less powerful.

“It’s a city full of progressive women and men who do not approve of his behavior, but they will likely say, ‘Cuomo is all we’ve got,’” she said.

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