

The Costs of Compromise: Andrew Cuomo and the Working Families Party vote in the 2010 elections

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November 5, 2012

Abstract

In the 2010 elections, the Working Families Party provoked controversy among its left-wing base by giving its endorsement and ballot line to Andrew Cuomo and signing on to his conservative policy agenda. In this paper I attempt to assess whether this move was a necessary compromise (as its proponents claimed) or a counter-productive capitulation that alienated left-wing voters (as critics alleged). I find strong evidence that that the Cuomo endorsement cost the WFP votes. Across the state, Cuomo received fewer WFP votes than any of the other four state-wide candidates who had WFP ballot lines. This contrasts with 2006, when the WFP's nominee for governor equalled or exceeded the vote totals of other statewide WFP candidates. In addition, the Green Party greatly increased its vote totals for governor between 2006 and 2010, indicating that some left-wing voters defected from Cuomo while voting for other WFP candidates.

1 Introduction

Since 1998, the Working Families Party of New York (WFP) has employed as strategy of endorsing progressive Democrats and encouraging left-wing voters to support them on the Working Families rather than the Democratic ballot line. In 2010, the party gave its ballot line to the Democratic candidates in all five statewide elections: Andrew Cuomo for governor, Eric Schneiderman for attorney general, Tom DiNapoli for Comptroller, and Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand for the United States Senate. All five candidates won, although only in the Comptroller race was result close enough for the WFP votes to be critical to victory.

For the WFP, the most important and most controversial statewide endorsement was the decision to support Cuomo for governor. Cuomo ran a conservative

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campaign, and did not agree to appear on the WFP line until fairly close to the election. However, leaders of the WFP argued that it was necessary to support Cuomo in order to ensure that the party received at least 50,000 votes, the threshold which ensures that the party retains its ballot line in future elections. In return for accepting the ballot line, Cuomo forced the WFP to endorse his agenda, even though it contradicted WFP priorities such as taxing high earners and protecting unionized workers.

Left critics both inside and outside the WFP argued against the Cuomo endorsement. Some argued that regardless of the electoral implications, the choice to accept Cuomo's platform represented an unacceptable betrayal of the party's values. Others argued that even if a compromise was defensible in theory, the Cuomo endorsement was not necessary to protect the ballot line. These voices contended that the party could have gained the necessary votes by running its own candidate or endorsing a left-wing candidate such as the Green Party's Howie Hawkins. Critics of the Cuomo endorsement also pointed out that the WFP would be very unlikely to play a spoiler role in the race even if they did not endorse the Democrat, since Republican nominee Carl Paladino was widely regarded as unelectable.

In the aftermath of the election, we can attempt to assess which of these arguments was correct. In the next section, I attempt to determine whether the Working Families Party was helped or hurt by having Andrew Cuomo on the ballot. Using county-level totals, I compare the vote for governor on the WFP line in 2010 to the WFP vote in 2006, the WFP vote for other statewide offices in 2010, and the Green Party vote in 2010. I conclude that if anything, having Cuomo on the ballot hurt the WFP by driving away left wing voters. Given this fact, and the overall size of the WFP vote, it is highly unlikely that the party would have lost its ballot line had it run a more progressive candidate.

2 Data Analysis

This analysis uses data from the New York Board of Elections, downloaded from <http://www.elections.ny.gov/index.html>. The data was accessed on November 5, 2012.

Figure 1 compares the total WFP vote for Cuomo in 2010 to two similar races in 2006. The plot on the left compares Cuomo's 2010 vote to the WFP vote for governor in 2006, when the party gave its line to Eliot Spitzer. The right-hand plot compares Cuomo's 2010 vote to the WFP votes he himself received in 2006, when he was running for Attorney General. In the counties for which we have complete data, Cuomo received 154,835 WFP votes in 2010. In 2006, Spitzer received 155,184 WFP votes for governor while Cuomo received 152,502 WFP votes for attorney general. It therefore appears that the WFP vote remained stagnant over these four years.

What explains the failure to grow the WFP vote? Some would point to the scandals and political attacks that have plagued the party in recent years: right wing forces have attempted to stigmatize the party because of its ties to

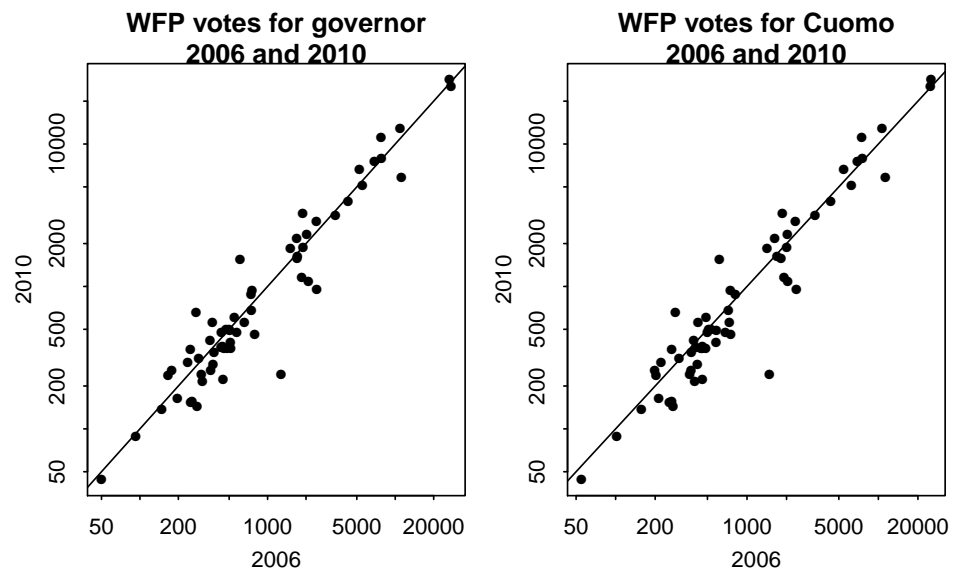


Figure 1: Left: Votes for governor on the WFP line in 2006 and 2010, by county. The party received similar vote totals in each election. Right: Votes for Andrew Cuomo on the WFP line, for Attorney General in 2006 and for Governor in 2010, by county. Cuomo received similar WFP vote totals in both elections. In order to better show the results in small counties, both axes are on a logarithmic scale.

ACORN, and the party has been accused of legal violations related to its for-profit political consulting arm. If this were the explanation for Cuomo's weak performance on the WFP line, we would expect to see similar patterns in the other statewide races where the WFP endorsed a candidate. However, the WFP vote does not look the same in the other elections. Figure 2 compares the WFP vote for Cuomo to the totals the party received for its other endorsed candidates. In each graph, the Cuomo vote is on the vertical axis, while one of the other races is on the horizontal axis. A line is drawn to show where counties would fall if the WFP received an equal number of votes for both candidates.

Note that nearly all of the points fall below the break-even line. This means that in nearly every county, *all four* of the other statewide candidates received more WFP votes than Cuomo. As Figure 3 shows, this is very different from what happened in 2006. In that election, the WFP vote for governor was approximately the same as the vote for attorney general and senator, and considerably higher than the vote for Comptroller. Moreover, the level of the WFP vote in the non-Cuomo races of 2010 does not appear to be related to whether the race is competitive, which we might expect to drive potential third-candidate voters to vote on the WFP line. The 2010 Comptroller's race was expected to be close, while Chuck Schumer's re-election to the Senate was assumed to be a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, the WFP vote was similar in these two elections, and in both cases it was higher than the WFP vote for Cuomo.

What explains Andrew Cuomo's underperformance on the WFP line in 2010? The most likely possibility is that left-wing voters defected from the party because of Cuomo's conservative platform, but it is difficult to confirm this hypothesis without individual-level survey data. However, we can get some indication of the likelihood of this explanation by examining the Green Party vote for governor. Unlike the WFP, the Greens picked up vote share in a large number of counties in this election. In 2006, they received 42,166 votes statewide, compared to 59,906 in 2010. Figure 4 compares the changes in vote totals for the WFP and the Greens in the governor's race. The Greens gained votes almost everywhere, with the important exception of New York City, while the WFP results are mixed. WFP vote losses do appear somewhat worse in areas with large green pickups in terms of absolute votes, which provides some support for the theory that Cuomo drove left-wing voters away from the WFP. The relationship is less clear when the comparison is presented in percentage terms, but in this case the result is strongly influenced by large swings in small counties, which could be random fluctuations.

Erie and Suffolk counties are two places which have large populations and show contrasting patterns. In Erie county, the Greens picked up 2,005 votes while the WFP lost 5,372. Erie county, which contains Buffalo, is the home county of Republican candidate Carl Paladino, and it gave him a very large number of votes. Thus it is possible that at least in this one area, some voters who would normally be drawn to the WFP voted for Paladino instead. Suffolk county, meanwhile, is one clear bright spot for the WFP: they gained 3,464 votes for governor there.

It is also noteworthy that the WFP picked up votes in the four of the five

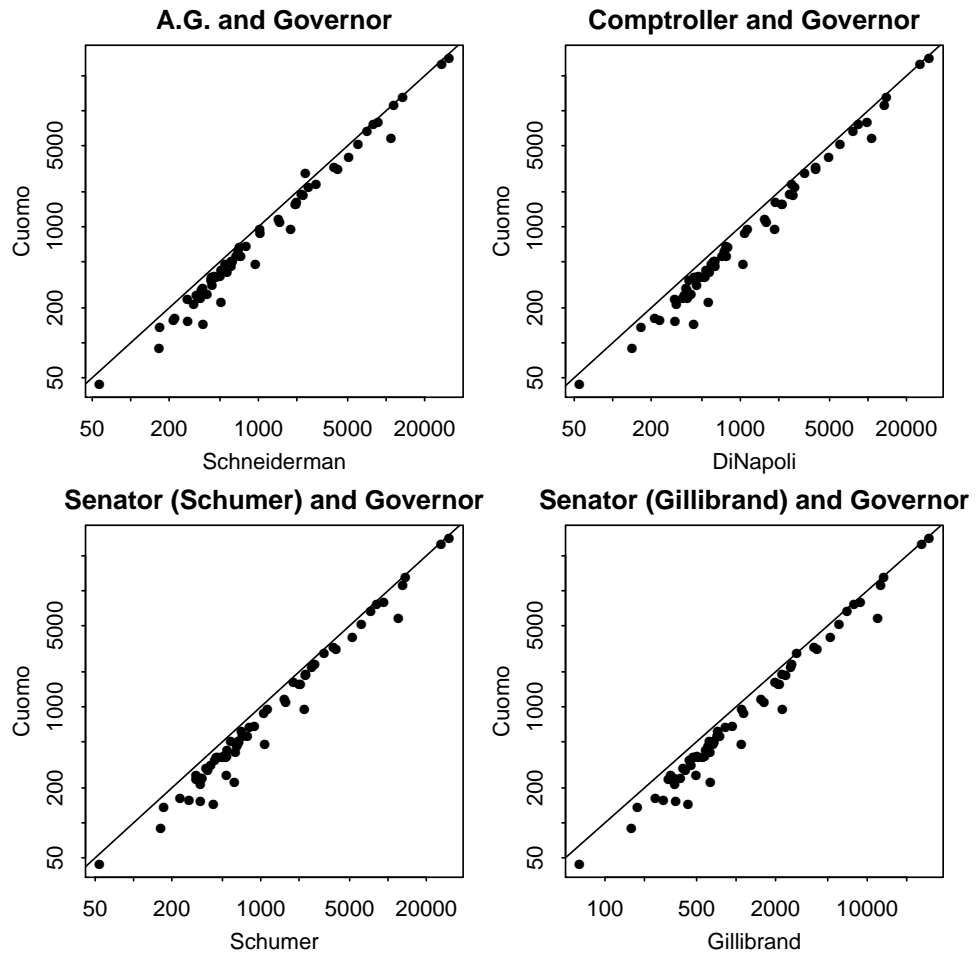


Figure 2: A comparison of votes for Governor on the WFP line with WFP votes for the other statewide offices in 2010, by county. Across counties and races, Cuomo consistently received fewer votes than the other candidates on the WFP line. In order to better show the results in small counties, both axes are on a logarithmic scale.

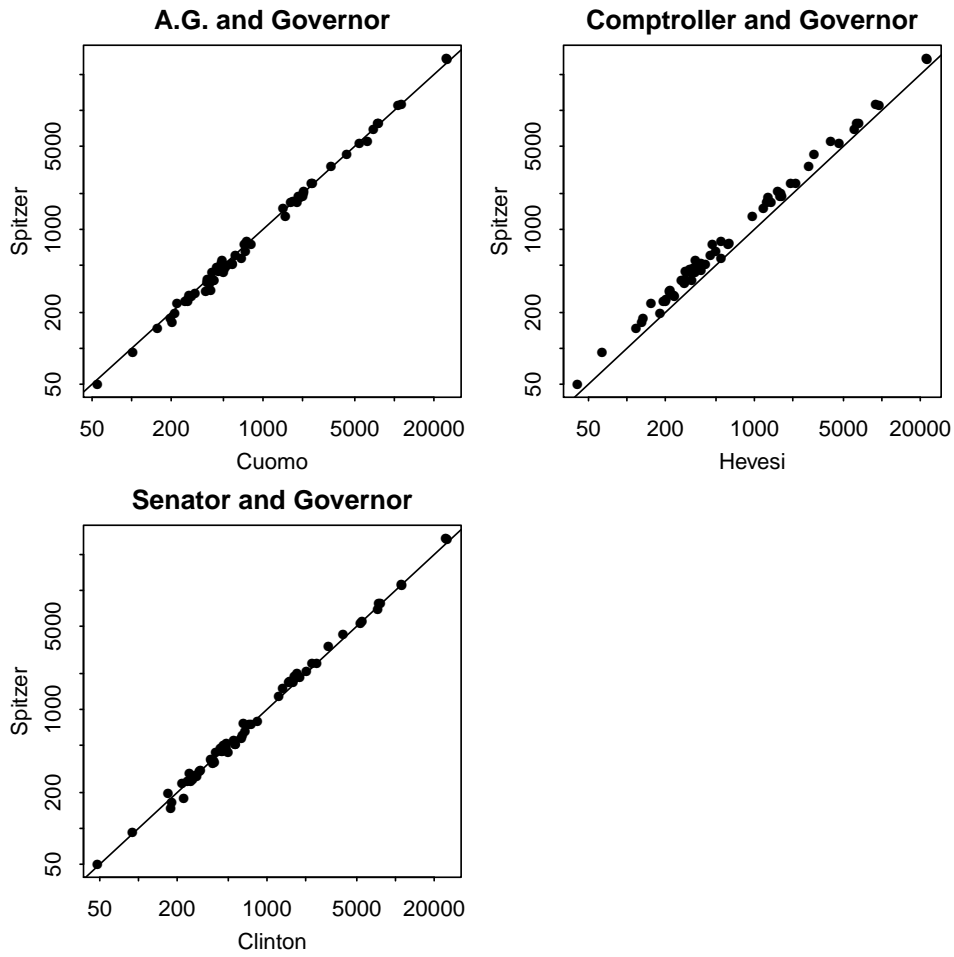


Figure 3: A comparison of votes for Governor on the WFP line with WFP votes for the other statewide offices in 2006, by county. In contrast to 2010, the WFP vote for governor in 2006 was not lower than the WFP vote in other statewide races. In order to better show the results in small counties, both axes are on a logarithmic scale.

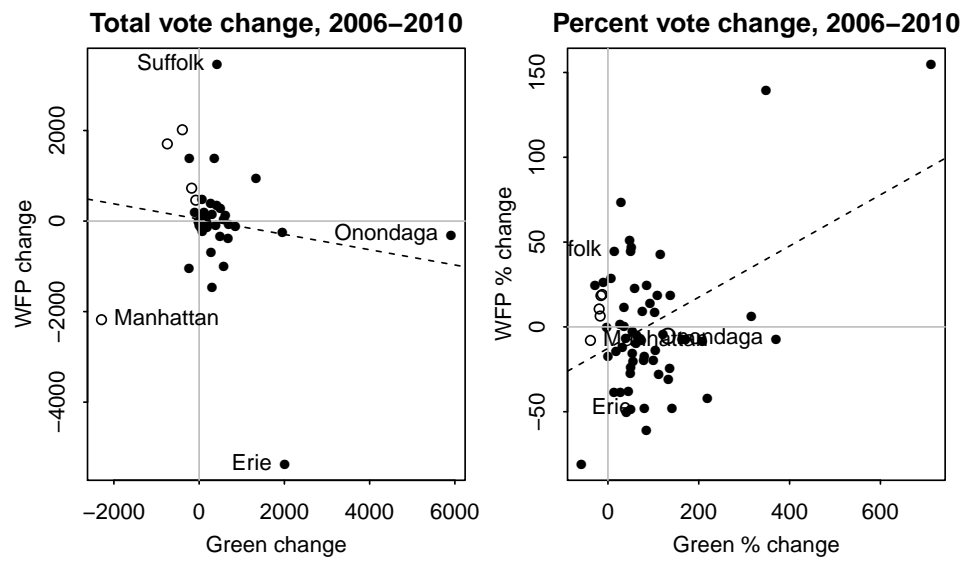


Figure 4: Changes in the WFP vote for governor compared to changes in the Green vote. The Greens gained votes while the WFP stagnated or lost votes, indicating that Cuomo’s politics drove left-wing voters to the Greens. Open circles are counties in New York City. The dashed line indicates the regression of WFP vote change on Green vote change

boroughs of New York City, while the Greens lost votes in all of them. The most probable explanation for this is the presence on the ballot of Charles Barron, an alternative left-wing protest candidate with a base among African-Americans in New York City. Barron received 24,571 votes in total, 81 percent of them in New York City. Other possible explanations for poor Green performance in the city are: voters in NYC were more likely to support Cuomo's politics; voters in NYC were more swayed by the pragmatic argument in favor of voting Cuomo to preserve the ballot line; or the WFP vote in NYC was disproportionately made up of voters mobilized by the WFP's major union affiliates, who were strong supporters of the Cuomo endorsement. The first explanation seems implausible, since NYC voters are generally more left-wing than voters upstate, and thus would be expected to be less attracted to Cuomo. Some combination of the other two factors may have played a role, although it is impossible to say more without a detailed investigation of the way in which the WFP and Green campaigns allocated resources around the state.

Figures 5 and 6 show some of the earlier findings on a map, in order to show geographical patterns. Figure 5 shows the percent change in the WFP vote for governor. The party showed gains in areas near New York City, but losses upstate. Figure 6 expresses the WFP vote for Cuomo in 2010 as a percentage of the average WFP vote for the other statewide candidates: Schneiderman, DiNapoli, Schumer, and Gillibrand. This map shows that Cuomo underperformed throughout the state, although he came closer to matching the other candidates in areas in and around New York City. This last pattern suggests that it was in part higher support for Cuomo, and not just support for Barron, that drew away Green votes in NYC.

3 Conclusions

Did nominating Andrew Cuomo cost the Working Families Party votes? If they had nominated a more left-wing candidate, would they have received enough votes to retain their ballot line? It is impossible to answer either of these counterfactual speculations with certainty. However, the analysis presented in the previous section supports both claims. The Cuomo vote on the WFP line underperformed both the WFP totals from 2006 and the WFP totals of the other statewide candidates. Moreover, the WFP vote stagnated as the Greens improved their standing dramatically, gaining ballot status for themselves.

Even if it were the case that the WFP gained votes by nominating Cuomo, it is highly unlikely that they would have lost their ballot line had they nominated someone else. Overall, the WFP received 154,835 votes for governor, enough to maintain the ballot line. The WFP would have achieved the 50,000 vote threshold even without the vote from New York City, where the WFP received 76,953 votes for governor in 2010. Given that the Greens were able to win over 50,000 votes with an unknown left-wing candidate and far fewer resources than the WFP, it is implausible to think that the WFP could not have done at least as well had it committed to a non-Cuomo candidate.

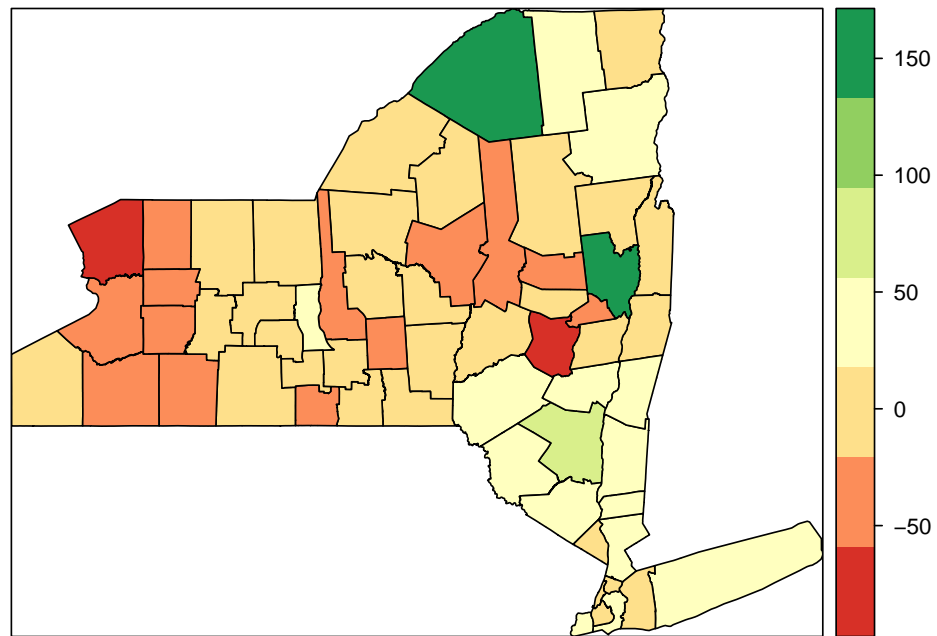


Figure 5: Percent change in the WFP vote for governor from 2006 to 2010.

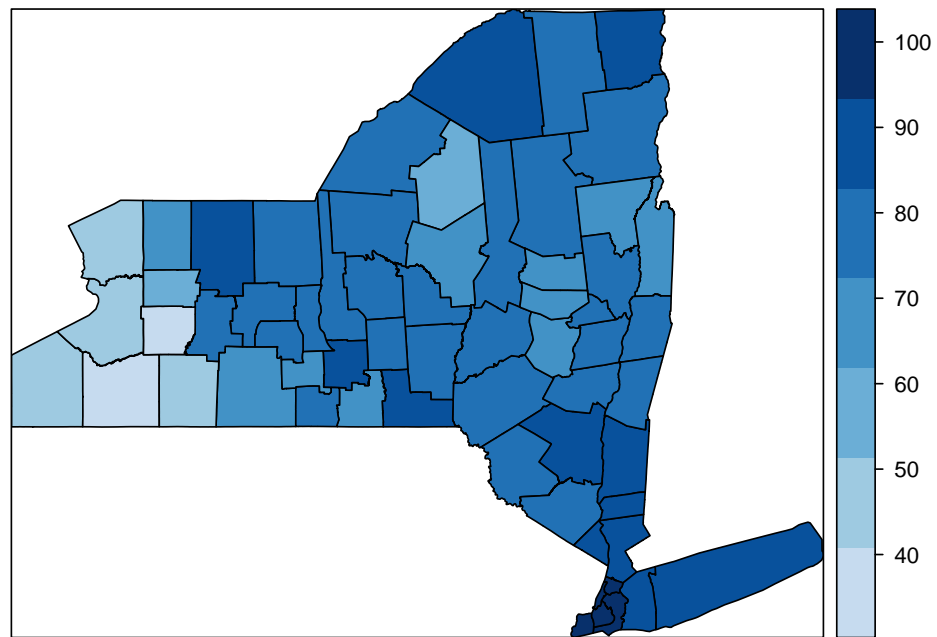


Figure 6: WFP vote for Cuomo as a percentage of the average WFP vote for other statewide candidates. Cuomo appears to have cost the party votes everywhere, but less so in the New York City metropolitan region.

What, then, explains the WFP's willingness to compromise its politics in order to endorse Cuomo? One possibility is that the party's leaders simply overestimated the risk of losing their ballot line, and thus made unnecessary concessions to Cuomo's agenda. In that case, hopefully this study can help to prevent such a mistake in the future. However, we also have to consider the possibility that key stakeholders in the WFP—in particular, major unions—are unwilling to break with the Democrats even when conditions are favorable to do so. Indeed, some have speculated that by endorsing Cuomo and his anti-union agenda, the unions that back the WFP hope to shield their members from the worst of the state's looming austerity plan. To the extent that this is a consideration, future debates over the party's electoral strategy are likely to be highly contentious.