



New York State Senator

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Publication: Politico NY

Aug

13

2018

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio wants to help his fellow Democrats take back the New York Senate. To close the gap, he's launched a federal leadership political action committee, and he wants to raise money to spend in competitive races around the state.

There's just one problem. Almost nobody wants his help.

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A majority of the 15 Democratic state Senate candidates running in competitive districts who POLITICO surveyed said they wouldn't accept the mayor's aid even if offered. The would-be senators are distancing themselves from the unpopular mayor, who faces criticism from upstate for being a tax-and-spend liberal and complaints from some in New York City that he's not liberal enough and has been too friendly with developers. It doesn't help that the last time de Blasio got involved in helping candidates, it led to an investigation into his fundraising practices.

De Blasio's federal PAC is another stab at national political relevance from a mayor who's struggled over the past five years to be taken seriously by Democratic leaders. A nonprofit he created to advance a national political agenda and move Hillary Clinton to the left before the 2016 presidential race faltered and folded. His new effort to fundraise on a national scale is untested, but one thing has become increasingly clear: Many Democratic candidates in his own state don't want to be tied to him.

De Blasio said in an interview that he was motivated to launch his Fairness PAC by recent Democratic wins around the country.

"The focus here is take back the House, take back the Senate, take back the state Senate — all general election issues," he said in July when he launched the PAC.

Among the state Senate candidates who said they'll say "no thanks" if de Blasio offers them his PAC money: Long Island's James Gaughran, Lou D'Amaro and Anna Kaplan, Aaron Gladd near Albany and Pramilla Malick in Orange County.

While none of those candidates has been offered de Blasio money, they all said they wouldn't take it if it comes their way. They shied away from criticizing one of the state's most powerful politicians, saying they'd rather focus on raising money in their own districts and that associating themselves with New York City wouldn't help their candidacies.

"I don't know the mayor and won't be receiving any contributions from him," Kaplan said.

Michael Lausell, a Democrat running in a Schuyler County primary, said he hasn't been able to find out enough information about de Blasio's Fairness PAC yet to say whether he'd accept its fundraising or campaign help.

"The Fairness PAC proposes an unclear mission at present, though whether for lack of direction or simply for too broad of a mission I am unable to tell," Lausell said in an email.

"There isn't a mayor in America that is popular in every electoral district in their state. Bill de Blasio has won four citywide elections by huge margins," Eric Phillips, a spokesperson for de Blasio, said in a statement. "He looks forward to being one of many people helping to get the state Senate back in Democratic hands and on the side of working people."

Other Democratic candidates sounded vaguely interested.

Blake Morris, who is running against Brooklyn's Simcha Felder, a Democrat who caucuses with Senate Republicans, said if the mayor's PAC wants to write him a check, "I'd be happy to accept it." Morris was one of the few candidates who told POLITICO he'd actually talked to de Blasio about getting help with his race. Those talks haven't progressed.

"We have met people from the mayor's office and talked about this issue and gotten at the best lukewarm encouragement," Morris said. "We have not really pursued it or looked into it."

The PAC hasn't disclosed how much it's raised so far or from whom and doesn't have to file a report on its fundraising until October. So far, the PAC's only spending has been to pay for de Blasio's travel to a political conference earlier this month.

De Blasio's last attempt to wade into the waters of competitive state Senate elections in 2014 went poorly. He was investigated by federal and state officials for his fundraising efforts.

His favorability rating wasn't high to begin with outside the city, and over the past five years, he's become a favorite villain for Senate Republicans. His brand is so toxic that it's contaminated his favored political consulting firms by association.

"The minute this mayor leaves the five boroughs, he's underwater politically," Republican political operative E. O'Brien Murray said.

A Quinnipiac poll conducted in May shows 42 percent of upstate voters disapprove of de Blasio's job performance, with just 28 percent saying they approve. His disapproval rating among suburban voters in Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Orange and Rockland counties is 54 percent. New York City is the only place where a majority of voters approve of his job

performance.

Even there, his backing might not make as much of a difference as it once did.

“There’s no actual value in being associated with him,” one Democrat involved in a competitive state Senate district race told POLITICO.

Amanda Kirchgessner, a Democrat running in western New York, said de Blasio could better use his influence elsewhere.

“Why doesn’t the mayor use his influence to call out the Democrats that are caucusing with the Republicans that have kept really powerful, progressive legislation from passing and helping a lot of New Yorkers?”

Kirchgessner alluded to an argument that’s being made by Democrats chattering behind the mayor’s back — that the mayor is more hindrance than help in most places outside of New York City.

Democrats are grumbling that he’s avoided weighing in on races in New York City, where his seal of approval could actually make a difference. For months, de Blasio has said he is confident that the state Senate will return to Democratic control in the fall, but he’s failed to get involved so far in most races facing incumbent senators who formerly belonged to the IDC — a group of breakaway Democrats that for years has caucused with Republicans, preventing Democrats from holding a true majority.

And unlike dabbling in national races — where there’s little cost to siding with a loser — for de Blasio, backing the wrong horse in local races can have real-world implications, because of the city’s reliance on Albany’s help in the budget.

Democratic operatives who spoke to POLITICO on background expressed surprise at the idea he would weigh in at all, given the high stakes.

“Every campaign, every race is going to be looked at individually. Everything is case by case,” de Blasio said last week when asked whether he would endorse more candidates. “We are going to look at each specific set of candidates and come up with specific ideas about each, but that’s going to be case by case.”

The mayor, not known for his timely endorsements, has also stopped short of getting involved in the gubernatorial primary. He has not voiced support for actress and longtime supporter Cynthia Nixon in her race against fellow Democrat Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a longtime de Blasio nemesis.

One very well-known IDC challenger candidate was downright hostile to the idea of getting de Blasio’s PAC money.

Former City Comptroller John Liu laughed when POLITICO asked whether he was seeking the mayor’s support, describing the mayor as so deeply unpopular in his Queens district that having his backing might work against Liu’s bid.

Liu faced off against de Blasio in the 2013 Democratic mayoral primary and is mounting a second attempt to unseat state Sen. Tony Avella in Queens after unsuccessfully challenging

him in 2014. De Blasio endorsed Avella over Liu that year.

"[De Blasio] mailed and phoned on Avella's behalf in 2014, and I hope he does again this time around," Liu said. "I'll leave it at that."

"What else is there to say? I try not to mention his name when I talk with voters, because it's never a good reaction," Liu said.

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