

The Cuomo and de Blasio Feud: How a Bitter Rivalry Between Two Lawmakers Impacted New York City's Covid-19 Response

Stella Kirschner



¹Description: “After Mayor Bill de Blasio said that the city’s public schools would stay closed through June, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo questioned the mayor’s authority to make that decision.”

In the spring of 2020, New York City was the epicenter of Covid-19 in the United States. There was one week in mid-April when 700 people in New York City died of Covid-19 every single day. Local and state governments scrambled to mitigate this dire situation, but this process was made all the more difficult due to the strained relationship between New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. These two lawmakers have butted heads for years and the Covid-19 pandemic only heightened these tensions. In this paper, I will explain how New York City’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic was hindered due to de Blasio and Cuomo’s infamous feud. This has been true regarding disagreements on how to slow the spread of Covid along with how and when to re-open safely.

¹ Sanders, Dave. Digital Image. New York Times. April 12, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/nyregion/schools-cuomo-de-blasio-nyc-coronavirus.html>

The Origins of The Cuomo and de Blasio Feud

Home to almost 8.5 million people, New York City is the most populated city in the entire country. About 44% of New York State residents reside in New York City, so the power struggle between local and federal government actors is no surprise. But the feud between Andrew Cuomo and Bill de Blasio is especially heated. The two disagree on countless issues. According to the New York Times, Cuomo even has a dartboard with de Blasio's face on it.² So, how did the relationship between the governor and mayor of New York become so intense? The answer to this question requires an examination of the history between these two politicians.

The relationship between Cuomo and de Blasio has been strained since the beginning of de Blasio's first term as mayor in 2014. Governors and mayors frequently disagree, even when they are members of the same party. While Cuomo and de Blasio are both Democrats, they have different political ideologies. Andrew Cuomo is a centrist with a history of opposing progressive legislation. Bill de Blasio, on the other hand, ran a campaign promising significant reforms to improve the lives of New Yorkers such as universal kindergarten. While the Mayor of New York City has access to a large municipal fund, the Governor has the power to overrule almost any policy that the mayor proposes. Cuomo has undoubtedly used this tool to his political advantage. In 2014, Cuomo refused to levy a tax on millionaires that de Blasio requested, instead insisting that the state fund this. Much to Cuomo's chagrin, de Blasio continued to push for the tax and it is generally believed that this was the beginning of their rivalry.³ Not all New York governors and mayors have experienced tensions to this extent. For example, from 1954 to 1965, Democrat Robert F. Wagner was mayor of New York while the governor of the state was Republican

² Jake Lahut. "Gov. Andrew Cuomo kept a dartboard with NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio's face on it, according to report." *Business Insider*. March 19, 2021,

<https://www.businessinsider.com/andrew-cuomo-bill-de-blasio-face-dartboard-feud-report-2021-3>

³ Ross Barkan. "A Brief History of the Cuomo-de Blasio Feud." *The Nation*, April 17, 2020,

<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/cuomo-de-blasio-covid-feud/>

Nelson Rockefeller. These two men certainly disagreed on many issues but were generally able to come to a consensus about state aid and the expansion of taxing powers, decisions that would ultimately benefit both of their interests⁴. This has not been true of Cuomo and de Blasio. The two have been at odds over various issues from public housing to snowstorms, but their disagreements surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic have proven to be especially problematic.

Tensions Early in the Pandemic

⁵ Description: "Mayor Bill de Blasio announced Wednesday the nation's largest school district will close again, as several other states also reimpose restrictions."

During the height of the first outbreak in New York City, Cuomo and de Blasio maintained their feud as opposed to



finding common ground. In early April of 2020, the two lawmakers had their first of many public disagreements regarding New York City's response to the pandemic. The first topic up for debate: closing public schools. New York City has the largest public school system in the United States and the decision to close schools had the potential to impact over one million students. As cases began to rise, the state government started to seriously consider school closures. Mayor de Blasio voiced concern over the financial impacts this would have on families. After pressure from health experts and other public officials, de Blasio finally announced that schools in New

⁴ Bruce Dearstyne. "The Mayor and the Governor: A History of Tension and Cooperation." *Gotham Gazette*. August 13, 2015. <https://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/opinion/5846-the-mayor-and-the-governor-a-history-of-tension-and-cooperation>

⁵Weiss, Angela. Digital Image. AFP via Getty Images. November 19, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/york-city-public-schools-close-perplexing-public-health/story?id=74283676>

York City would remain closed through the end of the summer. In a news conference, Cuomo referred to this statement as “the mayor’s opinion” and argued that this decision was out of de Blasio’s hands.⁶ However, the state government later adapted school closures anyways, showing how pointless this argument was. The only thing that this power struggle achieved was confusing families at a time when the government needed to convey confidence and clarity.

The next source of tension came when de Blasio suggested that New Yorkers be put under a shelter-in-place order, similar to what had been achieved in the Bay Area of California. Governor Cuomo claimed that this was premature and that New York should embrace a more gradual approach to closures. In fact, Cuomo even suggested that he may use his preemption powers and issue an executive order that "no locality or political subdivision shall issue any local emergency order⁷." However, he quickly changed his mind when California’s Governor Gavin Newsom instituted a state-wide order for residents to stay home.⁸ If Cuomo had prioritized the health of New Yorkers over his own ego, life-saving restrictions could have been imposed earlier.

Disagreements Over Rising Cases and Reopenings

By the summer of 2020, case numbers and hospitalizations had fallen dramatically and the city was able to momentarily breathe a sigh of relief. But this was short-lived. New York City experienced another spike of Covid cases in the fall, reigniting old disagreements between the state and local governments. This outbreak was largely concentrated in Orthodox Jewish

⁶ Dan Merica. “Cuomo and de Blasio can’t put their feud aside -- even for coronavirus.” *CNN*. April 13, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/13/politics/cuomo-vs-de-blasio-feud/index.html>

⁷ Randy Mastro. “Cuomo and de Blasio: Who Has the Last Word on Reopening in New York City?” *Gotham Gazette*. May 5, 2020. <https://www.gothamgazette.com/citizens-union-speakers/9365-cuomo-de-blasio-who-has-last-word-on-reopening-new-york-city-coronavirus>

⁸ J. David Goodman. “How Delays and Unheeded Warnings Hindered New York’s Virus Fight.” *New York Times*. July 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>

communities. Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo bickered once again, this time about whether or not to allow religious communities to gather during the pandemic.⁹

In November, after some schools had briefly opened, discussions about new school closures emerged. As rumors around school closures spread, Cuomo quickly held a press conference and avoided the subject entirely. Mayor de Blasio on the other hand is infamous for his inability to stick to a schedule, and his press conference was postponed for several days. By the time that round of public school closures was finalized, parents had less than 24 hours to prepare.¹⁰ Cuomo and de Blasio once again showed that they would rather confuse and inconvenience New Yorkers during an extremely trying time, than work together to communicate a clear and unified message.

As New York City embarked on a long journey to normalcy, Cuomo and de Blasio maintained their feud. On the topic of vaccinations, the mayor and governor each had their own plans for distribution. Cuomo wanted to incentivize hospitals to use every single dose provided to them by either fining hospitals with leftover vaccines or organizing a re-allocation plan. De Blasio fired back at this idea, arguing that this plan would limit the freedom of hospitals and that “what they don’t need is to be shamed.”¹¹ Every minute Cuomo and de Blasio spent bickering hindered the efficiency of New York’s vaccination program.

New York City began distributing vaccinations in late December of 2020, but the rollout was slow and New Yorkers began to grow impatient. After three weeks of vaccinations, only 31% of the vaccines in New York City’s supply had been distributed, and Cuomo was quick to

⁹ David Giambusso, Sally Goldenberg, and Amanda Eisenberg. “‘It is not acceptable’: Cuomo, de Blasio at odds as Covid surges in New York.” *Politico*. October, 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2020/10/05/it-is-not-acceptable-cuomo-de-blasio-at-odds-as-Covid-surges-in-new-york-1321450>

¹⁰ Dan Adler, “The Bill de Blasio-Andrew Cuomo Drama Has Exploded Once Again.” *Vanity Fair*. November 18, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/11/cuomo-de-blasio-school-closings>

¹¹ Gloria Pazmino. “Cuomo and de Blasio at Odds Again, This Time Over Vaccination Plans.” *NY1*. January 5, 2021. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2021/01/06/cuomo-and-de-blasio-at-odds-again>

blame this issue on de Blasio. In a press conference, the governor responded to rollout criticism by arguing that “some mayors are better than others¹².” However, it was the miscommunications between these two men that really impacted the vaccine rollout rate. The CEO of the city-run Health+Hospitals system, Mitchell Katz explained that New York City actually received more doses than they initially needed, which skewed the numbers.¹³ In fact, Cuomo’s decision to limit the first round of vaccinations strictly to healthcare workers was the reason for this mishap.



¹⁴ Description: “A nurse in New York was among the first to receive the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine shot Monday morning.”

While many New Yorkers would have jumped at the opportunity to be vaccinated in early January, the governor’s regulations prohibited the distribution of any extra doses. So even though 31% appears to be a

very disappointing number, it was instead an indication that New York City had the capacity to vaccinate more people but eligibility was too limited.

In the past few months, reopenings have become another sore subject. Governor Cuomo is much more eager to reopen the city than de Blasio, who would prefer to take a more patient approach. Last week, Cuomo announced that outdoor stadiums and performing arts venues would be open at limited capacity starting April 1st. De Blasio was especially outraged by Cuomo’s decision to lift New York’s domestic travel restrictions, which require proof of a

¹² Marcia Kramer. “Mayor de Blasio Says He Takes ‘Full Responsibility’ For New York City’s Slow Vaccine Rollout to Health Care Workers.” *CBS New York*. January 5, 2021. <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2021/01/05/cuomo-de-blasio-demand-faster-vaccinations-call-on-hospitals-and-federal-government-to-pick-up-the-pace/>

¹³ Nolan Hicks, Natalie Musumeci, Aaron Feis, and Bernadette Hogan. “De Blasio Accepts Responsibility for NYC’s Slow Vaccine Rollout.” *New York Post*. January 5, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/01/05/de-blasio-accepts-responsibility-for-slow-nyc-vaccine-rollout/>

¹⁴ Lennihan, Mark. Digital Image. Associated Press. December, 14, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/queens-nurse-gets-first-vaccine-shot-in-new-york-city-11607958012>

negative test upon entering the state.¹⁵ Although imposing travel restrictions is the job of the state government, over 3000 flights pass through New York City every single day.¹⁶ This means that although he was unable to make this decision, the repercussions of lifting these restrictions will greatly impact Mayor de Blasio and the residents of New York City.

Looking Forward Post-Covid

Cuomo and de Blasio's feud has been one of the only constants throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only do the governor and mayor of New York each have a sizable amount of power, but the current occupants have the egos to match. They have disagreed every single step of the way while New York suffered. New York City is resilient and has already begun to recover from this crisis. But this has been despite the mixed messages from local and state governments. Future success in responding to crises will require elected officials like de Blasio and Cuomo to put their differences aside and do what is best for their constituents.

¹⁵ Jennifer Millman, "Cuomo Sets More Major Reopening Dates; NYC Mayor Seethes, 'It Sure as Hell' Looks Political." *4 New York*. March 18, 2021. <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/public-health-decisions-with-no-public-health-rationale-city-hall-blasts-cuomo-on-reopening/2950809/>

¹⁶ Graham Rapier, "This is why New York City is a Nightmare for air travelers." *Business Insider*. August 5, 2015. <https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-why-new-york-city-air-traffic-is-so-congested-2015-7#:~:text=Over%203%2C000%20commercial%20flights%20pass,according%20to%20Port%20Authority%20statistics.>

Works Cited

- Adler, Dan. "The Bill De Blasio–Andrew Cuomo Drama Has Exploded Once Again." *Vanity Fair*. November 18, 2020.
<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/11/cuomo-de-blasio-school-closings>.
- Barkan, Ross. "A Brief History of the Cuomo–De Blasio Feud." *The Nation*. April 17, 2020. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/cuomo-deblasio-covid-feud/>.
- Eisenberg, Amanda, David Giambusso, and Sally Goldenberg. "It Is Not Acceptable': Cuomo, De Blasio at Odds as Covid Surges in New York." *Politico*. October 6, 2020.
<https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2020/10/05/it-is-not-acceptable-cuomo-de-blasio-at-odds-as-Covid-surges-in-new-york-1321450>.
- Dearstyne, Bruce. "The Mayor and Governor: A History of Tension and Cooperation" *Gotham Gazette*. August 13, 2015.
<https://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/opinion/5846-the-mayor-and-the-governor-a-history-of-tension-and-cooperation>
- Feis, Aaron, Nolan Hicks, Bernadette Hogan, and Natalie Musumeci. "De Blasio Accepts Responsibility for NYC's Slow Vaccine Rollout." *New York Post*. January 5, 2021.
<https://nypost.com/2021/01/05/de-blasio-accepts-responsibility-for-slow-nyc-vaccine-rollout/>
- Goodman, J. David. "How Delays and Unheeded Warnings Hindered New York's Virus Fight." *The New York Times*. April 8, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>.
- Kramer, Marcia. "Mayor de Blasio Says He Takes 'Full Responsibility' For New York City's

Slow Vaccine Rollout to Health Care Workers.” *CBS New York*. January 5, 2021.

<https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2021/01/05/cuomo-de-blasio-demand-faster-vaccinations-all-on-hospitals-and-federal-government-to-pick-up-the-pace/>

Lahut, Jake. “Gov. Andrew Cuomo Kept a Dartboard with NYC Mayor Bill De Blasio's Face on

It, According to Report.” *Business Insider*. March 19, 2021.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/andrew-cuomo-bill-de-blasio-face-dartboard-feud-report-2021-3>.

Lennihan, Mark. Digital Image. Associated Press. December, 14, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/queens-nurse-gets-first-vaccine-shot-in-new-york-city-11607958012>

Mastro, Randy. “Cuomo and de Blasio: Who Has the Last Word on Reopening in New York

City?” *Gotham Gazette*. May 5, 2020.

<https://www.gothamgazette.com/citizens-union-speakers/9365-cuomo-de-blasio-who-has-last-word-on-reopening-new-york-city-coronavirus>

Merica, Dan. “Cuomo and De Blasio Can't Put Their Feud aside -- Even for Coronavirus.” *CNN*.

April 13, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/13/politics/cuomo-vs-de-blasio-feud/index.html>.

Millman, Jennifer. “Cuomo Sets More Major Reopening Dates; NYC Mayor Seethes, 'It Sure as

Hell' Looks Political.” *NBC New York*. March 18, 2021.

<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/public-health-decisions-with-no-public-health-rationale-city-hall-blasts-cuomo-on-reopening/2950809/>.

Pazmino, Gloria. “Cuomo and De Blasio at Odds Again, This Time Over Vaccination Plans.”

NY1. January 5, 2021.

<https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2021/01/06/cuomo-and-de-blasio-at-odds-again>.

Rapier, Graham. “This Is Why New York City Can Be a Nightmare for Air Travelers.” *Business*

Insider. August 5, 2015.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-why-new-york-city-air-traffic-is-so-congested-2015-7#:~:text=Over%203%2C000%20commercial%20flights%20pass,according%20to%20Port%20Authority%20statistics>.

Sanders, Dave. Digital Image. *New York Times*. April 12, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/nyregion/schools-cuomo-de-blasio-nyc-coronaviruses.html>

Weiss, Angela. Digital Image. AFP via Getty Images. November 19, 2020. Accessed March 29, 2021.

<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/york-city-public-schools-close-perplexing-public-health/story?id=74283676>