

What Can They Do for Us Now?

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Mitchell L. Moss is the Henry Hart Rice Professor of Urban Policy and Planning at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.

Andrew Cuomo and Jerry Brown have much in common, even though they are 3,000 miles apart and 20 years apart in age. Each is the son of a governor who succeeded in an era of big spending and big government but who now faces a dramatically different political and economic climate.

The sons of governors who served in the era of big spending, Cuomo and Brown are comfortable exercising power. But how can they save their discredited state governments?

Each was educated by the Jesuits, and each is comfortable exercising the instruments of power. But, most of all, each faces the challenge of convincing state legislators that in a tough times, state government, as well as individual households, must find ways to function with less, not more money.

Most striking, there is a widespread belief that New York and California are past their prime, states that are living on their pasts, with an uncertain future despite their vast human capital and distinctive economic strengths. Cuomo and Brown must prove the naysayers wrong and transform their states rather than just preside over their decline as their predecessors chose to do.

New York especially cannot afford to drift for another four years. But no governor, not even one with the energy and talent of Andrew Cuomo, can solve the state's problems alone. Cuomo must forge a strategy to work with the state Legislature for one fundamental reason: the state constitution gives the governor enormous powers, but the power to determine how much money the state has to spend is shared with the state Legislature. Fortunately, the state Assembly is housebroken; it is a well-disciplined body in which the members are accustomed to deferring to the speaker, Sheldon Silver, a seasoned pro who has built a coherent majority out of very disparate suburban, inner city, and rural legislators.



Louis Lanzano/Associated Press Andrew Cuomo with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

Andrew Cuomo cannot work around Silver, but by mobilizing him as a partner, together they can outmaneuver the public employee unions and educational and health care interests who treat the state budget as an A.T.M. to cover their growing costs, pensions and health benefits. The State Senate, should it fall under Republican control, may ironically be easier for a governor who is seeking to impose fiscal discipline on state and local spending.

Of course, Cuomo must do more than change the out of control spending habits of Albany. He needs to appoint a commissioner to run the vast state agencies that have grown accustomed to operating under weak governors. The Cuomo team must focus on bringing down the costs of government, especially the costs of large-scale state-financed projects like bridges, tunnels, roads schools and hospitals.

It is a little known fact but the state itself adds enormous costs to construction through the arcane and unnecessary rules it imposes on contractors. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, it is not the cost of labor but the cost of doing business with public authorities and agencies that makes New York such an expensive place to getting anything built.

The public is ready, if not eager, for a governor who gets things done. This governor will be known for what he does, not what he says.