

Albany's Gulliver

By Robert B. Ward
February 26, 2010

Among the most powerful elected executives in the country – arguably second only to the president, given the governor's unusually broad budgetary and appointment authority and the context of a large, activist state government.

Yet even with all that formal authority, any governor can become a Gulliver rendered powerless by countless strands of lobbying influence, political opposition and public apathy.

For example, four successive governors have criticized the Medicaid program -- the largest element of the state budget and a health-care lifeline for four million individuals. All sought to reshape the program to benefit both patients and taxpayers; in large part, all failed. The reasons vary but include the ease with which modern, million-dollar advertising campaigns can portray any political figure in a harsh and dangerous light.

Conversely, governors tend to succeed when they effectively use their own power to shape public opinion. In the mid-1980s, Mario Cuomo battled the Legislature over a new ethics law. Scandals both in New York City and in Albany filled the newspapers.

After the Legislature ignored his first proposal, Governor Cuomo undertook a series of public attacks while criminal investigations of

several political figures kept the issue on the front burner. The Legislature reluctantly approved its own bill, which he vetoed as insufficient. Weeks of further acrimony followed, but lawmakers eventually gave the governor the much tougher law he wanted.

Nearly a century ago, the Progressive movement led campaigns in New York and other states to give governors more power, seeking to overcome legislative inertia. A series of major reforms created new executive authority to initiate budgets, longer gubernatorial terms, and power to appoint department heads who previously reported to legislators.

Alfred E. Smith, a Democrat who served both as speaker of the New York State Assembly and then as governor, said it was essential to give the executive more power if the state was to reduce "expense, logrolling and waste." But in recent decades, Albany has seen continual expansion of powerful interest groups whose goals can be described charitably as distributing power more widely, or critically as blocking essential change.

The central challenge for the next governor will be to renew the power to persuade the public, and thus restore the ability to drive change in Albany.

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