

# THE 10 GREATEST GOVERNORS

## IN NEW YORK STATE HISTORY

The majestic renovation of the Hall of Governors in the Capitol building invites New Yorkers to reflect upon the rich history of our state's executive branch. The 56 governors New York has had since the founding of our country include four men who became president of the United States, six who became vice president, one who was a chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court before assuming office and another who became chief justice two decades after serving in Albany. But who is the greatest of these great leaders? We assembled a panel of distinguished professors and historians from across the state to weigh in on this question. The following pages reveal their selections. We hope this list spurs debate and gets you thinking about our proud past.



**10 THEODORE ROOSEVELT (1899–1900)** Twenty-seven years before his face was carved into Mount Rushmore, Teddy Roosevelt was serving as governor of New York. One of three future presidents in this top 10 list, Roosevelt, a former assemblyman and New York City police commissioner, ran for governor after returning from the Spanish-American War as the “Hero of San Juan Hill.”

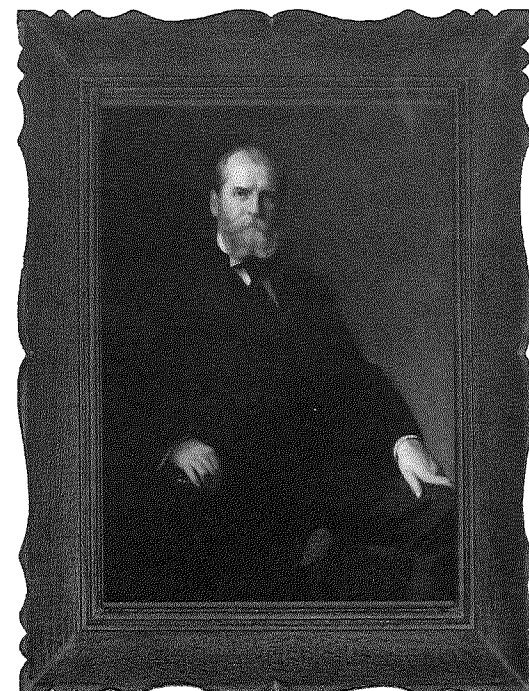
With the Republicans winning straight down the ballot, Roosevelt became New York's 33rd governor. Once in office, Roosevelt sought so stridently to snuff out political corruption in the Capitol that Thomas Platt, the Republican boss of New York, famously foisted him on William McKinley as his running mate in 1900 just to get Roosevelt out of the state, confident that the vice presidency was “not a stepping-stone to anything except oblivion.”

In addition to taking on the “machine,” Roosevelt improved labor laws as governor, banned racial segregation in public schools, and began his revolutionary work as a conservationist, creating park and forestry programs.

**9 CHARLES EVANS HUGHES (1907–10)** Born in Glen Falls to a reverend and a woman whose brother was a state senator, Charles Evans Hughes grew up to become a distinguished attorney and law school professor, and attracted public attention for cleaning up an insurance racket. In 1906 he ran on the Republican line for governor against publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, and prevailed.

As governor, he pursued a progressive platform of social reforms. He instituted campaign finance laws to limit corporate contributions and force candidates to make disclosures. He passed the Moreland Act, which empowered the governorship and was central to the reordering of state government. He got a workers' compensation program written into law and instituted greater protection for child laborers. He initiated a new ordered approach to drafting the state budget.

In the final year of his second term, Hughes was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by President Taft. He resigned in 1916 to run unsuccessfully for president. In 1930 President Hoover returned Hughes to the Court, naming him chief justice.

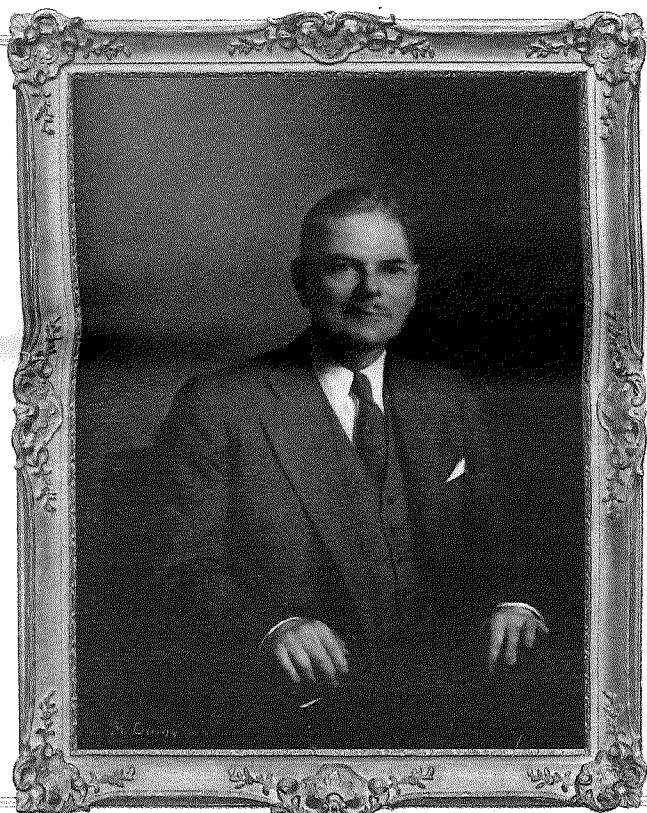


**8 GROVER CLEVELAND (1883–85)** After less than a year as mayor of Buffalo, Grover Cleveland had won a reputation as an honest politician with the audacity to challenge corruption. Taking a chance on Cleveland, the Democrats nominated him for governor in 1882, and he won by what was then the largest margin in state history.

Though he ended up serving only one term as governor, one of our jurors describes his tenure as “blunt and honest. He might have been the ‘steamroller’ of his day in Albany.”

He stood up to the bosses in the Capitol. He famously vetoed a slew of bills he felt were wasteful. He took strides toward cleaning up the civil service to eliminate patronage and cut down on the spoils system. He demonstrated the ability to govern the state efficiently and effectively.

Cleveland stepped down as governor after being elected president in 1884. He again won the popular vote in 1888, but Benjamin Harris defeated him in the Electoral College. Four years later Cleveland won the popular vote for a record third time, becoming the only U.S. president elected to nonconsecutive terms.

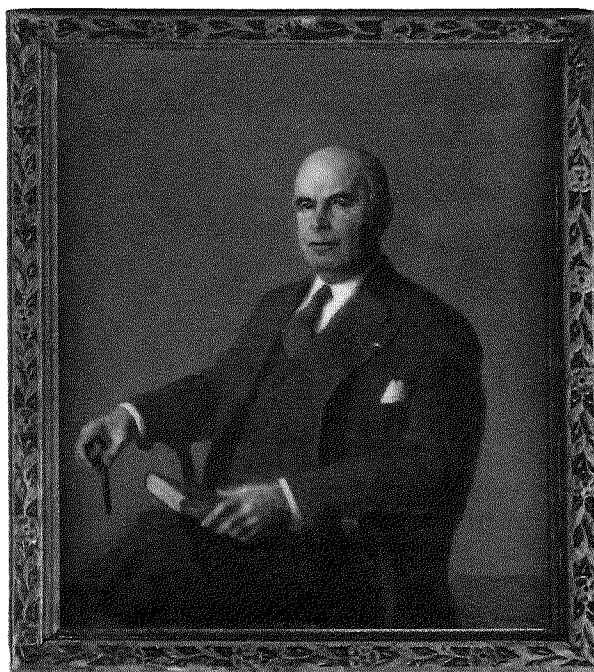


**7 THOMAS DEWEY (1943–54)** Thomas Dewey rocketed to fame as a superstar prosecutor. He brought down corrupt Tammany Hall politicians, convicted the former president of the New York Stock Exchange of embezzlement and—the biggest catch of all—nailed Lucky Luciano with a sentence of 30–50 years.

After being elected Manhattan district attorney in 1937, Dewey was quickly embraced as the Republican nominee for governor in 1938. Coming surprisingly close to knocking off the longtime incumbent, Herbert Lehman, made Dewey an instant sensation in his party.

When Lehman declined to run again four years later, Dewey won the seat by more than 600,000 votes. Over his 12 years as governor, Dewey presided over the creation of the state university system and the State Thruway, which now bears his name. He doubled spending on education, increased unemployment and disability benefits, cut the debt and signed the first bill in the nation outlawing racial and religious discrimination in the workplace.

In 1944 and 1948, Dewey was the GOP nominee for president, and both times he was defeated. At the end of his third term as governor he retired from public service.



**6 HERBERT H. LEHMAN (1933–1942)** One of the three founders of Lehman Brothers, Herbert Lehman became finance chair of the state Democratic Party and was rewarded for his support by being put on the ticket as Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate for lieutenant governor in both 1928 and 1930. After F.D.R. became president, Lehman was easily elected as his successor, making him New York's first Jewish governor. He was re-elected three times, including, in 1938, to the state's first four-year gubernatorial term.

Lehman was governor both through the depths of the Depression and the first half of World War II. An avid supporter of the New Deal, Lehman created an unemployment insurance program, provided mortgage relief, increased public housing, lowered utility rates and enacted a minimum wage bill for women and children while reducing their work hours.

Intent to give his all to the war effort, Lehman refused to run for re-election in 1942, and left his last term early to lead the U.S. State Department's newly created office to assist refugees. After the war, Lehman was elected to the U.S. Senate.

## OUR JURY

**Myra Young Armstead**  
Professor of history, Bard College

**Gerald Benjamin**  
Associate vice president for regional engagement and director of the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, SUNY New Paltz

**David Birdsell**  
Dean of the School of Public Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York

**Bill Cunningham**  
Managing director, DKC; senior staff member for Govs. Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo

**Bruce Gyory**  
Political consultant at Corning Place Communications; adjunct professor of political science, University at Albany, State University of New York

**Kenneth Jackson**  
Barzun Professor of History, Columbia University; editor, *Encyclopedia of New York City*

**Lisa Keller**  
Professor of history, Purchase College, State University of New York; executive editor, *Encyclopedia of New York City* (2nd Ed.)

**Seymour Lachman**  
Director of the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform and professor of government, Wagner College

**Lawrence Levy**  
Executive dean, National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University

**Matthew Lifflander**  
Managing partner of Lifflander & Reich; assistant counsel to Gov. Averell W. Harriman and author of *The Impeachment of Governor Sulzer*

**Doug Muzzio**  
Professor, School of Public Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York

**Kenneth Sherrill**  
Professor emeritus of political science, Hunter College, City University of New York

**Andrew White**  
Director of the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School and lecturer at the Milano School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy





**4 NELSON ROCKEFELLER (1959–73)** Several of the SUNY professors among our panel of experts admit a certain bias in favor of Nelson Rockefeller, the great architect of the state university system.

Universities were not all Rockefeller built. Parks, highways, housing, the Empire State Plaza, Lincoln Center, the World Trade Center—though as several of our jurors note, the limitless desire of this man with an unlimited personal fortune to build was perhaps also Gov. Rockefeller's "tragic flaw"—and led New York into the disastrous fiscal bind Hugh Carey would disentangle. Nevertheless, Rockefeller's achievements reshaped the landscape of New York State and restructured its government into its modern form.

A liberal Republican, Rockefeller was immensely popular, winning his first bid for office—his 1958 campaign against incumbent Gov. W. Averell Harriman. He easily won re-election three more times, making him the second-longest-serving governor in state history.

With a year remaining in his fourth term, Rockefeller vacated the seat for his lieutenant governor, Malcolm Wilson. The following year Gerald Ford appointed him vice president.



**5 FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT (1929–32)** Explaining his rationale for selecting New York's second Gov. Roosevelt for this list, one of our experts writes simply, "Because he's F.D.R."

It's hard to argue with that logic. In 1910 Roosevelt, a fifth cousin of Theodore, was elected to represent Dutchess County in the state Senate as a reformer opposed to Tammany Hall. After a short but substantive time in the Legislature, he resigned to become assistant secretary of the Navy. After World War I, Roosevelt was able to rekindle his political career by mending fences with Tammany. When Al Smith left the governorship to seek the presidency, Roosevelt ran for his seat, eking out a 1-point victory against his Republican opponent, Albert Ottinger.

Re-elected in 1930, Roosevelt was governor from the outset of the Great Depression. As the country's situation quickly declined, he undertook public works projects to stimulate the economy and created the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. His administration also instituted the Public Service Commission and made sweeping reforms to the state's prison system and labor laws before Roosevelt was elected president in 1932.



**3 HUGH CAREY (1975–82)** As our juror Bruce Gyory puts it, "Carey is New York's Winston Churchill—he saved us at our darkest hour."

Hugh Carey's leadership amid the fiscal crisis of the late 1970s, during which New York City was pulled back from the brink of bankruptcy, has rightfully earned him the appellation "The Man Who Saved New York."

The Brooklyn Democrat, who served seven terms in the House before being elected governor in 1974, took the helm in Albany at a time of dire crisis. Enlisting the state's most brilliant fiscal problem solvers, and navigating a series of do-or-die negotiations, he accomplished what had appeared impossible: not only rescuing New York from destruction but starting it back along a path to greatness.

Carey also spearheaded the rebuilding of the MTA system, took on environmental abuse, helped the developmentally disabled, accomplished massive development projects like Battery Park City and the Carrier Dome, ran the Lake Placid Olympics without a hitch and cut taxes.

In 1982 he declined to seek a third term as governor and never again ran for office.



**2 AL SMITH (1919–20, 1923–28)** Just missing out on the top spot, Al Smith received the most first-place votes from our panel—six—though two of our jurors left him off their lists altogether.

Franklin Roosevelt once said of the New Deal, "Practically all the things we've done in the federal government are the things Al Smith did as governor of New York."

An unabashed populist who grew up on the hardscrabble Lower East Side and never moved out, Smith used his wits and charm to rise out of poverty and climb the rungs of Tammany Hall. Serving 12 years in the Assembly, including a term as speaker, Smith gained prominence in the aftermath of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire as vice chairman of the investigating commission, which led to landmark labor reforms.

After leaving the Legislature to become sheriff of New York County and then president of the Board of Aldermen, Smith upset the incumbent governor, Charles Whitman, in 1918. Despite owing his position to Tammany, Smith was, as one of his critics put it, "the best representative of the worst element of the Democratic Party." During his first term Smith enacted legislation to curtail rent profiteering, improve workers' compensation, increase teacher salaries and help the mentally disabled, and he supported the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. He also created the state income tax.

Smith was defeated for re-election in 1920 amid a landslide for Republican President Harding, but he ran again in 1922 and was elected for the first of three more terms. During that tenure he continued his progressive reforms and teamed with a young Robert Moses to create the nation's first state park system and remake the structure of state government.

Despite his popularity, Smith was never able to achieve his goal of becoming president, in part because of intolerance toward his Catholicism. As the Democratic nominee in 1928, he was defeated badly by Herbert Hoover—even losing New York by more than 100,000 votes.

After his defeat he became president of a construction company formed to build a project it ultimately took 13 full months to complete: the Empire State Building.





**DEWITT CLINTON (1817-22, 1825-28)** The only governor to appear on all 13 jurors' ballots, DeWitt Clinton received four first place votes and the highest aggregate score from our experts.

Clinton is most commonly known as the "Father of the Erie Canal"—a Herculean achievement difficult to grasp today. As our juror Bill Cunningham explains, "We forget that was the greatest engineering and economic project up to that time in world history ... [It] would transform New York City into a first class trading harbor. It opened up the Midwest to international markets ... The entire county benefited and New York became, for the first time, the Empire State ... [The canal] is perhaps the first example of American exceptionalism in the sense that it was a success and showed many that dreaming big and pursuing those dreams is the American character."

Clinton didn't dream any smaller in his political ambitions. A nephew of New York's first governor, George Clinton, DeWitt served briefly in the Assembly and then for several terms in the state Senate before being elected a U.S. senator. After less than two years in Washington he resigned to become mayor of New York City, a position he would hold over three nonconsecutive terms for all but two years between the end of 1803 and 1815.

In 1812, as the Federalist nominee for president, Clinton fared respectably against James Madison, losing 128 to 89 in the electoral count—the difference of a state or two. In 1817 he ran unopposed(!) in the special election to replace Gov. Daniel Tompkins, who had given up the seat to become vice president.

Clinton served as governor through 1822. After leaving office he kept his post as president of the Erie Canal Commission, but his enemies in the Legislature voted him off the body two years later. The resulting public outrage was so intense, Clinton was renominated for the governorship and won, serving another three years until he died in office.

In addition to the top 10 finishers for this list, 10 of New York State's 56 governors also received votes from our jurors. In order of our jurors' picks, they are:

#### **GEORGE CLINTON (1777-95, 1801-04)**

Despite being the first and longest-serving of New York's governors and one of four to serve nonconsecutive terms, George Clinton, who was vice president under both Presidents Jefferson and Madison, just narrowly missed inclusion in this list. Today Clinton is best known for having been an anti-Federalist who initially opposed the adoption of the United States Constitution, and for his disputed re-election as governor in 1792. Despite John Jay's receiving more votes, the votes of Otsego, Tioga and Clinton counties (the latter named for the governor) were thrown out on a technicality, giving Clinton a margin of victory of 108 votes.

#### **JOHN JAY (1795-1801)**

Another near miss for this list, John Jay was elected governor after having concluded his term as the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. One of the most prominent of the Founding Fathers, and a writer of the Federalist Papers along with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, Jay most distinguished himself as governor as the state's leading opponent of slavery. In 1799 Jay finally accomplished his longtime goal by signing a gradual emancipation act into law, which resulted in the abolition of slavery in New York on July 4, 1827.

#### **MARIO CUOMO (1983-94)**

Before he became the first New York governor to ever sire another governor, Mario Cuomo was the longest-serving Democratic governor in the modern history of the state, and one of its most popular—setting records for his margin of victory in his 1986 and 1990 re-election bids. Praised by one of our jurors for his "integrity," the liberal lion successfully launched large-scale economic development initiatives, encouraged foreign investment in the state and took principled stands on issues like the death penalty, which he opposed.

#### **WILLIAM SEWARD (1839-42)**

The 12th governor of New York began his career in politics as an Anti-Masonic Party member of the state Senate, and later became a U.S. senator and secretary of state under Presidents Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. A progressive, Seward promoted infrastructure improvements, prison reform and increased spending on education as governor.

#### **DANIEL TOMPKINS (1807-17)**

The four-term governor was a wartime leader who valiantly defended the western and northern borders of New York during the War of 1812, going so far as to spend his own money to fortify the state's militia when the Legislature would not approve the necessary expenditure. In 1817 Tompkins resigned as governor to become James Monroe's vice president, though he ran again for

the position in 1820 as the sitting V.P., losing by less than 2,000 votes to the incumbent, DeWitt Clinton.

#### **SAMUEL TILDEN (1875-76)**

After serving for more than 25 years in the Assembly, Tilden became governor on a platform of reform. Having already taken on "Boss" Tweed and Tammany Hall while in the Legislature, Tilden challenged the "Canal Ring" as governor, exposing a host of officials and their cronies for overcharging the state for work done to New York's canal system. On the strength of his record Tilden declined to seek re-election and instead ran for president. In one of the most controversial elections in American history, Tilden won the popular vote against Rutherford B. Hayes but ultimately lost the race after a dispute in the Electoral College.

#### **ANDREW CUOMO (2011-PRESENT)**

While even the jurors who voted for the current governor concede it is premature to judge Andrew Cuomo's place in history, four members of our panel nonetheless thought he was worthy of inclusion in the top 10. Pointing to his tackling of the perennial dysfunction in Albany, his handling of Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy and the passage of pension reform, marriage equality and the property tax cap, one juror writes, "sort of like Derek Jeter two years into his major league career—he has Hall of Fame tools but needs to have a few more seasons to be properly evaluated."

#### **GEORGE PATAKI (1995-2006)**

While each juror who voted for the state's last Republican governor admits that their selection would likely come as a surprise, one member of the panel predicts that Pataki's "accomplishments will grow in stature, not unlike how we see Truman today in presidential rankings." Though Pataki won plaudits from our jurors for his stewardship of the state following 9/11 and his economic development initiatives like the Capital District's nanotechnology sector, above all they cite Pataki's extraordinary record of environmental conservation, including his protection of one million acres of open space across the state.

#### **WILLIAM SULZER (JAN. 1-OCT. 17, 1913)**

Rising through the ranks of Tammany Hall to become Assembly speaker and then one of the most accomplished members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Sulzer accomplished his lifelong goal of becoming governor in 1913. But after Sulzer turned his back on Tammany and waged open war on the "machine," boss Charlie Murphy struck back, orchestrating Sulzer's ouster 10 months into his term in office—making Sulzer the only governor in New York history to be impeached.

#### **MARTIN VAN BUREN (JAN. 1-MARCH 12, 1829)**

The eighth president of the United States and eighth vice president (under Andrew Jackson) received the vote of but one of our jurors. That is probably because Van Buren served a mere 71 days in office before accepting President Jackson's nomination to become his secretary of state.