The path to victory for Cynthia Nixon, however unlikely, relies on eager volunteers who've already signed up by the hundreds and a digital strategy. And it runs directly through New York City and upstate urban areas like Buffalo and Syracuse, where Andrew Cuomo found significant support four years ago. | Getty

No easy path to victory for Cynthia Nixon

By LAURA NAHMIAS and JIMMY VIELKIND | 04/04/2018 05:03 AM EDT

Cynthia Nixon’s campaign advisers aren’t running a protest candidacy against two-term Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo. They are in it to win, and their plan doesn't rely on getting the nomination of a third party. It's beat Cuomo in the Democratic primary, or bust.

Nixon’s advisers concede it's an uphill battle, but in New York's typically low-turnout primaries, it's also a game of arithmetic.
Of the state's 5.9 million Democrats in 2014, fewer than 600,000 — less than 10 percent — cast ballots in the primary between Cuomo and law professor Zephyr Teachout.

Will New Yorkers dissatisfied with Cuomo turn out in significant numbers on primary day this time around? And will the traditionally powerful get-out-the-vote operation of New York's labor unions, who are increasingly siding with Cuomo, overpower Nixon's nimble digital team?

The path to victory, however unlikely, relies on eager volunteers who've already signed up by the hundreds and a digital strategy. And it runs directly through New York City and upstate urban areas like Buffalo and Syracuse, where Cuomo found significant support four years ago. In 2014, about 56 percent of Cuomo's votes came from New York City.

Political observers already are speculating about how well Nixon, a well-known actor who can command media attention, might do, given that Teachout won 35 percent of the primary vote four years ago even though she was an unknown before the race began.

While Democrats are hoping that higher voter turnout and anti-Donald Trump sentiment will lead to big gains in House and Senate races this year, it's unlikely that any such enthusiasm will bolster turnout in the state's primaries. They are held in September, at a time when voters supposedly are only beginning to pay attention, and, what's more, the primary will be on Thursday, Sept. 13, rather than the traditional Tuesday, Sept. 11. The date was changed because it fell on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and Rosh Hashanah.

If turnout is as low as it was in 2014 and Nixon is able to capture all of the voters Teachout won as well as those won by a third candidate in the primary, Randy Credico, she would need to woo away only 75,000 Cuomo voters in order to win, said Steve Romalewski, head of the Graduate Mapping Center at CUNY.

"In a way, 75,000 votes is not a lot on a statewide basis; it's more do-able than I would've thought," Romalewski told POLITICO in an email.

"And the greatest potential for switching votes, just looking at the numbers, is in New York City, where presumably Cynthia Nixon has great name recognition (but also where Governor Cuomo is a proven vote-getter). It's early, and still many unknowns. But mathematically it doesn't look as bad for a challenger as I had assumed," Romalewski said.

In New York City, she would need to win over a substantial number of voters in the Bronx and Queens, where Cuomo got more than 70 percent of the vote in the 2014 primary. He got between 50 percent and 70 percent of the vote in the rest of New York City. And he won his
largest share of the vote in the election districts where turnout was lowest. That makes Nixon’s challenge all the more difficult — Cuomo still won much of New York City even with minimal voter enthusiasm, so if he can motivate supporters to turn out for him, he’ll perform even better.

Teachout performed best in areas with higher voter turnout, in the affluent, liberal and mostly white strongholds of Chelsea, Brooklyn Heights, the Upper West Side and Williamsburg. But Nixon will need more than that to win. She’s unlikely to pick up support from voters in the Orthodox and Conservative Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn where Cuomo performed well in 2014 and where he still enjoys significant support.

“The Orthodox and the Hasidic communities generally and historically favor relationships and accomplishments over celebrity, and I don’t see that changing in this upcoming primary,” said Michael Tobman, a Brooklyn political consultant and longtime observer of Jewish politics in the city.

Nixon already is pitching herself to black voters — she held her kickoff event at a church in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and she’s made racial and economic justice an early plank of her stump speech. “Too many of the majority black and brown schools in our very segregated system are under-funded and overpoliced,” she told a room filled with African-Americans and Latinos. She went on to criticize a school system that, in her words, pushes “white children toward college, and black children into the criminal justice system.”

She gave her first interview to the Amsterdam News, one of the country’s oldest newspapers geared toward African-American readers, and she’s giving a major television interview to Wendy Williams, who has a sizable audience of African-Americans and women.

But Cuomo also has made significant inroads among black voters in the eight years he’s been in office. A recent Siena College poll showed 70 percent of black voters and 69 percent of Latino voters hold a favorable opinion of Cuomo. Just 46 percent of white voters approve of him.

Bruce Gyory, a political consultant who works at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, noted that it won’t be easy for Nixon to make inroads in New York City.

“Where’s she going to get that?” asked Gyory, who isn’t working for and hasn’t worked for Cuomo or Nixon. “Is she going to carry the outer borough Jewish vote? The white Catholic vote? Will she be able to break into the Hispanic vote when the governor, probably more than any other elected official in the United States, has been seen as caring about the people of Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria?”
And Gyory said Nixon shouldn’t assume she will see the same levels of upstate support that Teachout received in 2014. Teachout’s voters, he said, were responding to a trio of issues that have since been resolved — teachers upset over Cuomo’s push to tie student test scores to their evaluations, a less-robust minimum wage program and the perception that the governor was on the verge of allowing natural gas hydrofracking in the state. (He banned it, but after the general election.)

Nixon’s campaign staffers think she might be able to pick up some votes in Erie County, where Cuomo won more than 70 percent of roughly 40,000 votes cast in 2014.

On the stump that year, he touted his economic development plans for Buffalo, pointing to the cranes soaring over the city’s skyline as a sign of progress under his watch.

This year, his signature Buffalo economic development program will be in the spotlight in a negative way — it will be at the center of a federal corruption trial starting in August.

"We can’t ignore the fact that this summer, Cuomo’s entire crew is going to be on trial,” Fordham political science professor Christina Greer said.

Teachout did relatively well running on an anti-corruption platform, and Greer said that might augur well for Nixon’s ability to pick up votes upstate.

“If an unknown professor from New York City can get one-third of the vote from New York City, and do well upstate, and now you have someone who is used to the spotlight, who is not going to shy away and has a pretty credible story to tell when it comes to corruption, imagine what could happen?” Greer said.

One obstacle that may prove insurmountable for Nixon, despite her stated support for labor and workers’ rights, is the fact that Cuomo is almost certain to monopolize labor support.

And he’s not taking that support for granted. Even before Nixon announced her candidacy, he’d begun to lock up endorsements from the state’s most powerful unions.

Last week, labor unions with close ties to Cuomo, including the building and construction trades, Teamsters Local 817 and the Transit Workers Union, issued unsolicited statements criticizing Nixon for questioning the costs of building the Second Avenue subway and the value of New York’s film tax credit program. Cuomo jumped into the fray in a labor dispute between the New York State Nurses Association and an upstate hospital, earning a statement of thanks from the union, which declined to back a candidate in 2014.
The two largest affiliates of the Service Employees International Union — 1199 and 32BJ — worked closely with Cuomo when he pushed to raise the minimum wage in 2016. Already, 1199 has offered a formal endorsement, and 32BJ President Hector Figueroa praised Cuomo last week in a statement.

“We are going through our internal endorsement process at 32BJ but we fully expect that the governor’s progressive record of standing with working families — the strongest of any governor in the country — will earn him our members’ support,” Figueroa said.

He and Bob Master, a New York leader of the Communication Workers of America, are both major players in the Working Families Party. Its minor-party line will be a key jump ball in the primary, and already, there are signs it will split between labor leaders like Master and Figueroa and progressive activists.

That includes people like George Albro, a co-chairman of the New York Progressive Action Network, which grew out of Bernie Sanders’ 2016 campaign and is an affiliate of Our Revolution. Nixon met with NYPAN leaders last week on the same day she gave her first speech as a candidate, and she plans to pitch its executive board for a formal endorsement during an April 14 meeting outside Albany.

“Personally, I’m very impressed with her. I think she’s a very solid candidate with a lot of potential in this race,” Albro told POLITICO. NYPAN has 32 chapters around the state, including eight in New York City.