

November 6, 2002

Pataki Coasts to a 3rd Term in New York

By JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.

Gov. George E. Pataki, a pragmatic Republican who ran a campaign intended to appeal as much to liberals as to conservatives, was elected to a third term yesterday with a solid majority, ending the quest of the Democratic challenger, H. Carl McCall, to become the state's first black governor.

In other New York races, Attorney General Eliot Spitzer obliterated his Republican opponent, Dora Irizarry, to win a second term, firmly establishing himself as one of the brightest young stars in the state Democratic Party and a possible candidate for governor.

The closest statewide race in New York was for comptroller. Alan G. Hevesi, the Democratic nominee and a former city comptroller, squeaked by John J. Faso, the former Republican leader in the State Assembly, winning with 50 percent of the vote to Mr. Faso's 47 percent.

In New Jersey, Frank R. Lautenberg, a Democrat, was elected to the Senate by a comfortable margin, and in Connecticut, the Republican governor, John G. Rowland, was returned to office easily.

Mr. Pataki declared victory at 11:15 p.m. and profusely thanked all 18 million New Yorkers for their confidence in his policies.

"There are no stronger, better people than New Yorkers," Mr. Pataki said, as supporters cheered. "And when we are united, when we stand together, we can accomplish miracles. And it's been my goal as governor not to be the governor of some, but to be the governor of all."

His victory makes him only the third Republican to win more than two terms in New York, putting him in a class with Thomas E. Dewey and Nelson A. Rockefeller.

Mr. McCall went down in defeat after running a campaign that failed to raise enough money to mount a viable challenge to Mr. Pataki and could not hold onto the traditional Democratic base. Mr. McCall also made several pivotal mistakes in the final weeks of campaigning that kept him from cutting Mr. Pataki's lead, political strategists said.

Although Mr. McCall wanted to make history as the first black governor, he came dangerously close last night to making history in another way, as the Democratic candidate who received the smallest percentage of total votes in modern history for a statewide race. That record was held by Peter F. Vallone, who got 33 percent of the vote four years ago in the governor's race. The only major party candidate to do worse in modern times was Pierre Rinfret, the Republican candidate in 1990, who got 21 percent of the vote.

With 98 percent of election districts reporting, Mr. Pataki had 50 percent of the vote, Mr. McCall 33 percent and Tom Golisano, the Independence Party candidate, 14 percent, with minor party candidates

picking up another 3 percent. The Liberal Party failed to get the 50,000 votes it needed to automatically remain on the ballot for future elections.

The race was the most expensive in the state's history, with the major candidates expending more than \$131 million.

Mr. McCall, 67, conceding defeat last night, said that while he wished the governor well, the schools and flagging economy still needed attention. "If we could just put the same effort and the same level of passion and energy and funding into governing as we put into campaigning," he said, "things would be a lot better."

Mr. Golisano, 60, a Rochester billionaire who has run three times for governor, spent more than \$65 million of his own fortune and came in third. He said before the polls closed that he felt he had won a moral victory by attacking what he considers inertia, waste and fraud in state government.

He conceded shortly after 11 p.m., but did not congratulate the governor in his speech. "If we achieved anything," he said, "it's for the next several years, the two-party system in this state has got to keep their eye out on us, because we're going to be watching them."

Mr. Pataki, who is 57, coasted to a third victory by taking credit for cutting income taxes, winnowing the welfare rolls and reducing crime. He talked up several liberal programs that expanded under his watch, among them health insurance for poor children and their parents.

Yet the governor did not offer an agenda for his next term as governor, an office with an annual salary of \$179,000. Nor did he present concrete plans for confronting the deep financial crisis the state faces next year, including a yawning \$5 billion budget gap. He stressed his experience instead, saying he had handled a similar crisis in 1995 and could be trusted to do so again.

It remained unclear whether Mr. Pataki had achieved the kind of crushing victory that could transform him into a contender for national office. He won with 54 percent of the votes in 1998 against Mr. Vallone, but he faced a much more formidable campaign this year by Mr. Golisano.

The election was a defining moment in the career of an adaptable politician who has evolved over his first two terms. He first ran in 1995 as a conservative who promised to slash income taxes, revamp welfare and restore the death penalty. But he has taken on more and more liberal causes over the years, championing tight gun-control laws, an equal-rights bill for homosexuals and expansion of Medicaid benefits to cover indigent children, to name a few.

He won this year in part because of his aggressive pursuit of traditionally Democratic voters, especially Latinos and union members. At the Hilton New York Hotel in Midtown last night, several hundred happy Republican campaign workers and Pataki supporters stood around the ballroom, eagerly awaiting the governor's anticipated victory speech. Some danced to loud rock music or shrieked with pleasure as the returns rolled in. "The bottom line is people know him, they like him, they trust him," Michael McKeon, the governor's chief spokesman, said.

The mood was more subdued at Mr. McCall's headquarters in a union hall downtown, where prominent Democrats were taking some solace in the thought that their candidate had run a good campaign with the resources he had.