

Hochul dubbed 'evictor in chief' as tenant advocates push her into tight political spot over rent protections

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Gov. Kathy Hochul earned an unwanted nickname at a recent Manhattan rally held by tenant activists — “Evictor in Chief.”

Attendees also held signs referring to Hochul as the “Governor of Evictions” as they marched to her Midtown offices, protesting the end of New York’s eviction ban earlier this month and pushing for a sweeping bill to expand renter protections. One tenant group had advertised the rally by posting a flier on [social media](#) calling the governor “New York’s new Evictor in Chief.” At the event activists chanted, “Kathy Hochul you can’t hide, we can see your greedy side,” an apparent knock on her campaign donations from real estate.

And one of her main primary opponents, New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, joined the tenant groups to slam Hochul’s handling of the issue, while pledging his support for the activist-backed legislation, known as “good cause” eviction. The measure would prevent certain evictions and effectively limit rent increases across the state — and it’s been seized on by tenant groups as one way to blunt the consequences of the moratorium lifting.

“We have a governor who either doesn’t understand the magnitude of the housing crisis in the state or does not have the capability or courage to address it,” Williams said at the rally. “You cannot allow a moratorium to lapse in the middle of winter, during a Covid surge, and not even pass ‘good cause.’”

For Hochul, who is running for election to a full gubernatorial term, the eviction legislation could prove to be a challenging issue politically as she faces attacks from her left in the Democratic primary, but may very well have to defend stances she takes now against a Republican opponent down the line.

“This is another agenda item pushed by the far left socialist Democrats in New York City,” said Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a business group. “That agenda is generally not well-received on Long Island.”

He noted the red wave on Long Island in last November’s elections, seen by some as a backlash to Democrat-led criminal justice efforts like the state’s bail reform law.

“Should Albany policymakers continue to pass far left legislation, 2022 Long Island election results could very well mimic 2021,” Strober warned.

The bill in question — backed by many leading progressive lawmakers — would give residential tenants the right to a lease renewal and bar landlords from evicting a tenant without just cause, defined as factors such as nonpayment of rent or committing a nuisance.

It would also prevent evictions for nonpayment if a landlord hiked rents beyond 3 percent, or 1.5 times the rate of inflation for a given region, whichever is higher. If a property owner were to raise the rent by more than that amount and take the occupant to housing court, the tenant could use the "good cause" law as a defense against eviction. The law would still give landlords in that situation the ability to try to justify the increase in court.

The legislation was included in a push from tenant advocates to enact sweeping reforms to the state’s rent regulation system in 2019. While several changes for rent-regulated apartments were adopted at the time, the good cause bill was left out of the final package, lacking sufficient support in the state Legislature.

Real estate and landlord advocates have fiercely opposed the measure, calling it an infringement on private property rights and a step toward statewide rent control. Property owners say they too have been cash-strapped by the pandemic, and argue restrictions on their ability to raise rents would leave them unable to keep up with real estate taxes, utility bills and the cost of repairs.

Hochul thus far has not taken a position on the measure, [telling reporters](#) when asked about the bill in November she would work with the Legislature to “come up with the right answers.” The bill would need to go through both the state Assembly and Senate before it reached her desk, and it remains to be seen whether there is enough support in both chambers to approve it.

“I’m not going to be telegraphing my positions early on, because otherwise, it’s not a collaborative process,” Hochul said in November.

While the good cause measure itself would not protect a renter unable to pay due to Covid, proponents say it would give tenants the ability to assert their rights to safe living conditions without fear of retaliation, prevent rent gouging by landlords, and give tenants a modicum of stability in their housing situations.

“This would protect a lot of people from unconscionable rent increases,” said state Sen. Julia Salazar, a prime sponsor of the legislation. For many tenants who are already struggling to keep up with housing costs, a substantial increase is a “de facto eviction, and they could be made homeless,” Salazar said.

The measure would cover roughly 1.6 million renter households in the state, or almost half of New York’s renters, according to an estimate from the nonprofit Community Service Society, which supports the bill. It would exempt owner-occupied buildings with fewer than four units.

Supporters of the legislation have argued it is popular among voters, pointing to polling conducted in January 2020 by the left-leaning think tank Data for Progress, and commissioned by progressive groups, that found nearly half of voters surveyed said they strongly supported a measure to prevent evictions without cause, while another 29 percent said they were “somewhat” supportive.

They also note that local versions of the bill have passed recently in several upstate cities, including Albany, Poughkeepsie and Newburgh. Under state law, New York City is unable to approve rent restrictions that are more restrictive than the state.

“Residential tenants are the single largest constituency in New York state, and that alone should compel any of us in elected office to take the good cause eviction bill, and any proposals that would expand rights and protections for tenants, seriously,” Salazar said. “I think it’s absolutely in [Hochul’s] interests to take this seriously, beyond just taking a position on the bill but working with us to make it a reality.”

Similar measures have been approved in California and Oregon, although with higher caps on what constitutes a reasonable rent increase. Both measures also exempt newer buildings; Salazar’s legislation currently does not include such a carve-out.

Landlord groups say the measure would rob owners of full authority over their properties and severely limit their ability to maintain their buildings — especially smaller landlords who operate with less of a cushion.

“Yes, there’s an affordability problem, our owners don’t want to keep increasing rents, but there is literally no relief on the property tax and mandate side from the government, so where does the money come from?” said Jay Martin, executive director of the Community Housing Improvement Program, a New York City-based landlord group. “A building is not a bank, it doesn’t automatically generate revenue.”

Other critics warn the measure would curb much-needed new development, particularly in economically depressed parts of the state.

“I definitely believe it would suppress investment,” said Lisa Damiani, executive director of the Coalition for Western New York Property Owners, which represents landlords in and around Hochul’s native Buffalo and other parts of the region. “It will suppress

investment in maintaining the current stock that's there, and it would certainly have an effect on continued investment.”

When Hochul took office in August, tenant advocates — who had long viewed former Gov. Andrew Cuomo as an obstacle to progressive housing reforms — expressed some optimism she could set a different tone.

Much of that good will appears to have evaporated.

“It’s not showing to be true that she’s going to do anything different than Cuomo,” said Jonathan Westin, executive director of New York Communities for Change, a progressive advocacy group. “She’s still taking money from all of the same people and doing their bidding in very similar ways.”

The governor’s office defended her record on tenant issues, but did not state a clear position on the good cause bill.

“Governor Hochul has taken decisive action to protect tenants—from breaking the Emergency Rental Assistance logjam, to investing \$25 million in free legal services for tenants, to proposing a series of bold, achievable measures in her Executive Budget that address longstanding housing inequities—including an additional \$35 million to protect tenants facing eviction,” spokesperson Jim Urso said in a statement. “We will continue to work closely with the legislature and members of the advocacy community to protect vulnerable New Yorkers and keep tenants in their homes.”

Spokespeople for Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie did not return requests for comment on their position on the bill.