



BEYOND THE SOUNDBITE: PUTTING FINAL GUBERNATORIAL DEBATE IN PERSPECTIVE

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We gathered a few of our contributors online last night to gauge their reactions to the second and final debate between Republican Gov. Chris Christie and his Democratic challenger, state Sen. Barbara Buono. Some of them are old hands at statewide politics:

- Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.
- Dick Zimmer served in the New Jersey State Assembly and Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. He was twice the nominee of the New Jersey Republican Party for the U.S. Senate.
- Jim McQueeney is a political analyst and a former reporter and chief of staff and spokesman for U.S. Senator Frank Lautenberg.
- Bill Potter is an attorney in private practice who specializes in representing clean-energy providers.
- Laura Waters is president of the Lawrence Township School Board in Mercer County. She also blogs about New Jersey education policy and politics at NJLeftBehind@blogspot.com.
- Mark Magyar, who moderated this discussion, teaches labor studies at Rutgers University. A veteran Statehouse reporter, he served as deputy policy chief in the Whitman administration and as director of policy for the independent Daggett for Governor campaign.

Mark Magyar: What were your overall impressions of the debate? Were there any game-changing moments or any lines we will see show up in future campaign ads?

Carl Golden: Buono was considerably more forceful than she was last week. It almost seems as though she was goading Christie into having a "Christie moment."

Bill Potter: We heard over and over that Gov. Christie is proud of his first term, but we never heard what he wants to do in a second term.

on display

Carl Golden: I thought Buono's use of the bossism issue was striking. She mentioned the names Norcross and DiVincenzo and suggested these were backroom types with whom Christie had made a grand bargain.

Mark Magyar: This is the second time we've seen a kinder, gentler Christie. In fact, he almost seemed less forceful this week than last week. Would you agree?

Carl Golden: Christie showed again how very adept he is at deflecting questions he doesn't wish to answer. He spends a few second giving something of a response then goes directly back to his messages.

budget blather that left you scratching your head. Christie was simple and definitive, like he was speaking to a jury box, not the panel of reporters

Mark Magyar: Let's talk about Christie's two promises for his second term -- to eliminate sick leave payouts for retirees and reform civil service to make it easier for towns to merge or combine services. Would either of those two changes make much of a difference in property taxes overall?

Carl Golden: Both seem to enjoy considerable support -- outside the Legislature, that is. People get angry, indeed, when they see high-six-figure payouts to police or other municipal officials

Laura Waters: Both probably nonstarters, certainly the latter, but hypothetically consolidation would lower, at least a little, the tax burdens.

Bill Potter: In my view, these were trivial digressions from real reform, which requires substitution of income tax for prop taxes

Laura Waters: Even consolidation? Do you think that's trivial?

Bill Potter: If it's left to local discretion it won't happen except in Princeton after 20 years of trying

Carl Golden: As a practical matter, these "trivial digressions" are about the best you're going to get. The Legislature has made it clear there is no political will to overhaul the system to the extent you'd like. They can't even agree to set up a constitutional convention to deal with it.

Laura Waters: I agree. But it's still the heart of a lot of Jersey's problems.

Carl Golden: It's the heart and every other bodily organ.

Jim McQueeney: Christie's definitive statement (on excessive sick-pay payouts and civil service reform) is why he was winning, and won, this debate (Though Buono was better than in the first debate, which isn't saying much really.) She parsed who is responsible for the local government part vs. the state part vs. the civil service part. Voters and New Jerseyans don't distinguish it that way. Christie said "I will end it." Period. Point. Score.

Bill Potter: It's all trivial as long as property tax is the prime source of funding for public education.

Carl Golden: Shared services has barely gotten off the ground. Consolidation will never occur to the extent that substantial property tax reductions are possible.

Bill Potter: I agree with Carl.

Laura Waters: Back to the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), Buono's pet. I don't think that played out well for her tonight. No one even knows what SFRA is.

Bill Potter: What is it?

Carl Golden: She does suffer somewhat from "Trenton speak."

Laura Waters: It is supposed to direct state aid by child instead of zip code. It's never been fully funded.

Carl Golden: The school funding issue is more than 40 years old. I'm old enough to remember when Bill Cahill was sued over the funding formula. It's never been solved by the Legislature; it's been administered by the courts for four decades. And they won't admit it, but many legislators like it like that -- they're off the hook.

Bill Potter: But she won (this debate) handily on the issues.

Laura Waters: And that's why she is frustrating to watch: She doesn't seem to realize it.

Mark Magyar: When I interviewed Bill Palatucci after last week's debate, he was most pleased that Buono did not say she would take back any of the 154 tax and fee increases Christie pointed to.

She did the same this week. Does her response, "It's a matter of who pays," work or does it reinforce the tax-and-spend Democrat image Christie's ads are trying to create.

Bill Potter: CC raided the clean energy fund for \$900 million, isn't that a tax increase?

Dick Zimmer: If raiding a trust fund counted as a tax increase, Barbara Buono would have a score of more than 154. Every Legislature raids trusts funds -- unless they are protected by the Constitution.

Mark Magyar: So what did you think of Buono's response on Christie's 154 tax question?

Bill Potter: It was more evasion and fluff.

Dick Zimmer: It's an impossible question to answer. That's why Christie asked it twice.

Carl Golden: Her response was fairly weak. Not sure how she could rebut it effectively without becoming bogged down in discussing each one, that's even more dangerous.

Jim McQueeney: Or (getting bogged down as she did when using terms the audience doesn't follow such as) "Reggi" or "ACA" or "David and Richard" or "Market Street and Cooper Street" or the hippy-dippy spiraling about global warming.

Frankly, all the things she referenced were either in isolation or hinged to whatever point she was making. Sorry, but debates (as Christie showed) are not about being the master of detail; its about making points that are simply north or south, up or down, left or right, with the space in between entered into at your own peril. Even the myopic detail of THIS discussion has no bearing on who won or didn't tonight. Detail is the devil of debates like this. Christie crushed in that regard.

Buono gave no cause for pause about Christie. Polls from this point will harden till the end to what they are now pretty much.

Mark Magyar: So did Buono's debate prep fail her?

Laura Waters: She can't compete with the largesse of Christie's personality and connection with the audience. I don't know how debate prep mitigates that.

Mark Magyar: Or is it just that governors are so much better prepared after four years of press conferences and town hall meetings to parry questions?

Bill Potter: She kept it simple on the core point of her campaign; she's for the underdogs, but let's not fault her for being brainy

Carl Golden: Debates are the enemy of coherent policy.

Laura Waters: I don't think she comes off as "brainy."

Bill Potter: It's a compliment.

Mark Magyar: But doesn't Christie have a coherent policy world-view going for him?

Carl Golden: He has a record he can point to and drive his message in 60 seconds or less. In a debate setting, that's really all that matters.

Bill Potter: His world view appears to be limited to pleasing the right wing core without going all out in this blue state.

Jim McQueeney: She was (to me) the classic victim the first time of overprep, freezing a naturalness that came through slightly better this time. She had a few roundhouse comebacks this time, though, but Christie parried them aside pretty much. Except for the women's care budget cut where he got clipped. Mike Schneider called the debate a 15-round prize fight. Buono was more like a guest sparring partner put into Christie's training camp for him.

Carl Golden: (His policy world-view) is a balancing act for him and, I must admit, he's doing pretty damn well at it.

Jim McQueeny: To Mark's point: Christie on Sandy vis a vis Obama would be viewed as sincere yet transactional, good partners in politics. Obama delivered and kept