

Opinion: The campaign that never got off the ground -



Barbara Buono

The highlight (or lowlight) of the campaign's disconnect from the electorate occurred when Buono and her supporters spent days in the closing weeks of the campaign attacking former Gov. Tom Kean for referring to her as "a nice lady who isn't qualified to be governor."

The indignant cries of sexism produced eye-rolling and suggestions that had she pursued with equal vigor the state's property tax burden she could have at least signaled her understanding of what troubled voters the most.

She was hurt by party leaders whose initial antipathy toward her turned to outright hostility and open support for Christie. In her concession speech, Buono attacked the party's cult of bossism, accusing its leaders of striking deals with Christie in pursuit of personal, political and financial gain. There is an element of truth in her allegations, but even had they fallen in line behind her or remained neutral, it's unlikely the result would have been significantly different.

Christie conducted a textbook frontrunner campaign — confident, self-assured and unflappable — even though it was occasionally difficult to determine if the candidate's name was Chris or Sandy.

As anticipated, though, Christie exerted little beneficial influence on Republicans in legislative races. While the top of their ticket failed to break 40 percent of the vote, Democrats retained all their 24 Senate seats and lost but two Assembly seats.

Choreographed effort

Christie's final-week bus tour on behalf of legislative candidates seemed more of a choreographed effort to counter criticism that he'd concentrated on ensuring a landslide victory for himself while overlooking the rest of the ticket. Whatever benefit the tour may have generated was offset by his bear hugs of Democratic Senate President Steve Sweeney and appearances with Democratic Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo and Democratic Hudson County State Sen. Brian Stack.

Christie was unfazed by the prospect of Democrats retaining control of the Legislature, despite some private intra-party grumbling that he secretly preferred that outcome because a landslide victory would solidify his reputation as a bipartisan leader driven to get things done while remaining outwardly unconcerned about who received the credit for it.

While the discontent was understandable, the odds were slim that Republicans could have seized control, even had Christie given full-throated support to candi

dates in specific districts. No more than four or five districts could be considered competitive, and it would have required a major allotment of time and resources along with an overwhelming margin to change hands.

The accommodations he's made and the alliances forged with Democratic leaders like Sweeney, DiVincenzo, Stack and South Jersey power George Norcross will remain in his second term.

While there was little campaign discussion of an agenda for the next four years, Christie can be expected to mount an aggressive effort for a tax cut, along with measures he has argued will provide local governments with additional tools to rein in property taxes.

To enact his program, he'll need support from Democrats who'll be expected to hold up their end of whatever bargain they've made with the governor and give him another opportunity to tout his willingness to compromise and embrace bipartisanship. It's been an effective message for him thus far and there is no reason to believe he'll change it.

It's apt to be overshadowed, though, by a quantum increase in the intensity of speculation over Christie's plans for his future.

Experience

Should, for instance, Republicans incur significant losses in the 2014 midterm Congressional elections, those who support Christie for the presidential nomination will offer it as proof that his experience in New Jersey is what the party needs to break Washington's gridlock and bitter stalemates that have so undermined the faith of the American people in government.

The national media will swarm into New Jersey and scrutinize Christie in a manner brought only on those considered serious contenders for the presidency. The level of examination will be matched by the level of pressure exerted on him to make a definitive move before year's end.

He'll have to govern, of course, in the midst of this environment while pondering his future and reaching what will certainly be the most impactful decision of his life.

Just as the gubernatorial campaign was a study in two remarkably different efforts at winning high office, so, too, are the futures of the two antagonists.

Christie will vault into the national political conversation while Buono — an intelligent, articulate and dedicated individual with an impressive 20-year record in public service — looks forward to private life.

She can find some solace, perhaps, in her courage to step up when others displayed no stomach for it and struggling against overwhelming odds and a party stacked against her by leaders who placed self-interest ahead of party loyalty.

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