

Carl Golden / Buono had no chance but, still, what a poor campaign

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If there was such a thing as a mercy rule in politics, it would have been invoked this past Election Day to spare Democratic gubernatorial candidate Barbara Buono further pain and embarrassment.

With the outcome never having been in any doubt, Gov. Chris Christie's 22 point margin of victory put a humane end to the most noncompetitive campaign in the record-setting plurality rolled up by Tom Kean in 1985.

Lacking both focus and direction, the Buono campaign often became bogged down in extraneous issues while largely ignoring Christie's vulnerabilities - property taxes, job creation, economic growth.

When more than a third of poll respondents stated their unfamiliarity with Buono was so great they hadn't formed an opinion of her, no further evidence of her campaign's failure to devise and deliver a compelling message was necessary.

She was overmatched, underfunded and outstrategized. Her campaign never settled on a theme and often seemed to simply react to what appeared in the newspapers on any given day.

Challenging Christie was a daunting task in any event, but concentrating on left-of-center social issues rather than everyday pocketbook concerns guaranteed she'd never make up any ground.

Her insistence that Christie was auditioning for a run at the Republican presidential nomination in 2016 was a waste of time and money, neither of which she possessed in abundance. Despite repeated polling that showed voters were uncomfortable with Christie's national ambitions, her campaign seemed obsessed with this issue that could damage him.

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 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 and self-assured - even though it was occasionally difficult to determine the candidate's name was Chris or Sandy.

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

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