



STATE: Christie leading Lonegan as GOP primary approaches

By Lauren Otis, Staff Writer

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Former U.S. Attorney Chris Christie appears to have a substantial lead over former Bogota Mayor Steve Lonegan as the Republican New Jersey gubernatorial primary election approaches, but many factors will shape the outcome of the election and the subsequent challenge to Gov. Jon Corzine in the general election, say several New Jersey political experts.

"It really is Christie's race to lose," said Ingrid Reed, New Jersey project director with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

Mr. Christie has received endorsements from every New Jersey Republican County chairperson, and whether he prevails in the primary is a test of the state Republican leadership's ability to convince party voters to line up behind its candidate, Ms. Reed said.

Mr. Christie is well ahead of Mr. Lonegan in the polls — May 20, a Quinnipiac University poll gave him a 23 point lead over Mr. Lonegan. Assemblyman Rick Merkt is also on the Republican primary ballot, but trails far behind.

"The latest polls have shown that Chris Christie has really started to pull away; he has never been behind," said Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University.

In May pre-election filings with the state Election Law Enforcement Commission, Mr. Lonegan reported net contributions of \$1,293,922.72 and public matching funds of \$1,566,009.90. For the same filing period, Mr. Christie reported net contributions of \$2,251,039.10 and public matching funds of \$3,100,000.

Both Mr. Christie and Mr. Lonegan are participating in New Jersey's public campaign financing program, which provides 2-1 matching funds for candidates who agree to spending limits.

Unsurprisingly, the poor economy and the state budget crisis have dominated the primary, Mr. Dworkin and Ms. Reed said.

"Taxes, the economy, the state budget crisis — they are the most dominant issues for voters, whether they are in Central, South or Northern New Jersey," Mr. Dworkin said.

Mr. Lonegan has proposed a 2.9 percent flat tax for state taxpayers while Mr. Christie has pledged to reduce taxes but still would keep a progressive taxation system, Mr. Dworkin said.

How each candidate's tax policy would be introduced at a time when the immediate problem of balancing the budget looms has not been clarified, Ms. Reed said.

"Both candidates have talked a lot about taxes and have never really been able to come across with a convincing argument in this perilous economic time, how they would really solve this problem in the short term," she said.

At this point, the candidates have only generally backed a policy of "less taxes, less government" without providing details of how they would actually shape fiscal policy as governor, Ms. Reed said.

Mr. Christie has had to stake out conservative positions on social and other issues in the primary, both because of Mr. Lonegan's strong conservatism and because he first must appeal to Republican primary voters before he can get to the general election, Mr. Dworkin said.

As a result, Mr. Christie has stated he is strongly pro-life, against gay marriage, in favor of cell-phone monitoring without warrants and in favor of school vouchers, Mr. Dworkin said.

"He has staked out conservative positions and not provided much detail," he said.

Ms. Reed said the primary election has centered around ideological differences rather than the electability of the candidates.

Republican voters in the greater Princeton area are likely to back Mr. Christie, she said.

"I think it is probably safe to assume that Christie might do better in Mercer County than Lonegan," she said.

She said Mr. Lonegan may not have endeared himself with more moderate Republicans in the region with comments like one he made in a debate describing his belief the state was wasting money on public transportation and a new rail tunnel to New York shouldn't be built.

"That's not what I think the people in the region where I live think about public transit," said Ms. Reed, a Princeton resident.

Although ideology has dominated the Republican primary, personal integrity will enter the general election, Ms. Reed said. Republican groups have been going after Gov. Corzine's integrity, linking him to failed state pension and health-care policies of his predecessor, Jim McGreevey, and saying he broke promises to voters in his budget decisions, she said.

"The Corzine campaign is going to have to help voters understand what Corzine did that helped straighten out a lot of the mess that McGreevey made," Ms. Reed said.

Democrats already have gone after Mr. Christie's ethical demeanor, attacking his appointment of people close to him, including his former boss, former Attorney General John Ashcroft, to be corporate monitors under a U.S. Justice Department program for corporate violators, Ms. Reed said.

Mr. Dworkin said it would be illegal for the Corzine campaign to attempt to directly sway the Republican primary results although "national Democrats have apparently put together a fund to attack Chris Christie, who most people assume will win the election. They are planning to spend close to \$900,000 on TV ads. It remains to be seen whether it will have any effect on the outcome" of the primary.

"Then it all starts over" in the general election, he said.

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