

## Tensions rise as candidates quarrel over budget

By Mary Diduch

Associate News Editor

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The state's top three gubernatorial candidates faced off yesterday in the first of three debates of the election season.

Democratic candidate Gov. Jon S. Corzine, Republican candidate Chris Christie and Independent candidate Chris Daggett debated topics ranging from the state's budget, abortion and medical marijuana live on the New Jersey Now television network.

One of the top issues discussed was closing the state's \$8 billion budget gap. While all three agreed on a need to cut spending and the size of government, they disagreed how this would be accomplished.

Former U.S. Attorney Christie said his administration would work cooperatively with the legislature to consolidate government and encourage shared services to decrease spending.

While Christie claimed the other candidates would not do this, Corzine said he has cut the budget significantly.

"We've cut the budget this year — for the second year in a row for the first time in 60 years — over 60 percent. ... Making tough decisions in a tough environment is what being a governor is about," said Corzine, the incumbent.

He said the government has cut about 8,400 public jobs and would continue to use a hard hiring freeze, furloughs and wage freezes to reduce the size of government and spending.

"We have taken every step to make sure we are controlling the cost of public workers," Corzine said.

Daggett, a former head of the Department of Environmental Protection, said he would ask state employees to work with Trenton to freeze salaries and pensions, ultimately saving jobs by preventing firings to save more money.

Christie said Corzine's plan would raise taxes \$9 billion and Daggett's would raise them \$4 billion.

Corzine and Daggett denied this.

Daggett said he would not raise taxes, but cut them to create a balanced system, which would be more affordable for middle-class homeowners.

Daggett said he would cut property taxes across the board 25 percent, cut both large and small corporate taxes 25 percent and expand the 7 percent sales tax over more services.

"It's not raising taxes \$4 billion — it's levying out the system," he said.

Corzine acknowledged the governor's state constitutional duty to balance the budget and said raising taxes would be a last resort to do this.

"I don't intend to raise taxes but the fact is, you have to balance the budget," he said.

Corzine said his administration has given \$7 million in property tax rebates, but Christie said there have been \$9 billion in new taxes and fees since Corzine became governor and the average median salary has dropped.

"This is the Corzine squeeze — salaries going down, taxes going up," Christie said.

Corzine questioned where Christie was getting his facts, claiming the median salary has not decreased and more jobs have been creating through increasing infrastructure.

Daggett said both parties have borrowed a lot of money from the state, creating debt.

"I'm getting squeezed here in the middle," Daggett joked, as he was positioned between the two.



Brandon Druker

Students watch the first gubernatorial debate yesterday at an event sponsored by the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus. Candidates discussed topics ranging from teenage pregnancy to medical marijuana.

The candidates then debated reducing teenage pregnancy and a woman's right to choose.

All three agreed that increasing education on the matter is important.

Daggett and Corzine said teenagers should be properly educated about prenatal care, safe abortions and responsible sex.

"Certainly we need to give kids and women the opportunity to choose what they want to do," Daggett said, who is pro-abortion rights, along with the governor.

Christie is anti-abortion and said parents need to encourage family values.

"We need to make sure that we do everything we can to teach our children that sexual activity is not something they should be engaged in until they are ready for it," he said.

In regard to the medical marijuana bill currently in the State Assembly's Health Committee, Corzine gave a terse answer.

"I'll sign the bill," he said.

Both Daggett and Christie said they agree, but need to see the details to make sure there are sufficient legal safeguards to prevent the drug from being abused.

Despite the candidates' discourse about their policy plans and goals, the personal attacks were high.

Daggett, Corzine, the moderator and reporters repeatedly asked Christie to specify his plans, and all three fired insults back and forth throughout the debate.

"I'm the only one that's laid out specific plans and specific policies. ... I'm still waiting for the others to do that ... and by the way, my driving record's clean," Daggett said in reference to Corzine's television ad claiming Christie used his legal power to evade a ticket.

While watching the debate broadcast at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus, Lonnie Affrime of the University's Roosevelt Institute said he thought Daggett came out on top.

"The debate has been Christie and Corzine going against each other," said Affrime, a School of Arts and Sciences senior.

Affrime said Christie has no concrete plans, and the statistics he cites are not related to his plans.

He said while Corzine may not be perfect, he did have a plan and record to discuss.

Vice President of the Rutgers Democrats Naomi Michaelis said because of the media's tendency to cover negative news, a lot of Corzine's accomplishments — such as placing a cap on decreased tuition cuts for state universities — have been buried.

"You never hear about the good things the governor has done," said Michaelis, a Douglass College senior.

Vice President of the Rutgers University College Republicans Noah Glyn said both Daggett and Christie did well, but not the governor.

He said both Christie and Daggett gave plans, but he was confused by Corzine's remarks and his attacks on Christie.

Glyn said while Christie was not as specific as possible, he believes Christie's general views are the best for the state.

"Ideology can help guide you in the right direction," said Glyn, a School of Arts and Sciences sophomore.