

## **Voter turnout to be key in Tuesday's tight race for governor**

By DEREK HARPER Statehouse Bureau | Posted: Saturday, October 31, 2009 |

*With voter guides for Corzine, Christie and Daggett*

New Jersey voters went to the polls in overwhelming numbers last year, propelled in part by a successful Democratic presidential campaign that emphasized hope.

But as state residents prepare to vote Tuesday after months of mudslinging by candidates for governor, they don't find themselves reaching for that H-word. And some experts wonder if voter turnout will be anywhere near as high as it was last November.

"I don't know what to do," Linwood resident Nancy Swan said last week at the Hamilton Mall in Mays Landing. "I'm not happy, and I don't know (which of the) choices is going to be any better."

Voters go to the polls this year amid the lasting effects of a global recession that has driven up unemployment and cut deeply into state finances. Residents will elect a governor and members of the Assembly as well as county and local representatives on Tuesday.

In this year's gubernatorial race, Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine and Republican challenger Chris Christie have waged an advertising war to the point that recent polls say more New Jersey residents have negative opinions of both of them than positive.

Voters may be skeptical about who, if anyone, can lead, said Ingrid Reed, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

"Are they disappointed in what they have seen and does that turn into not wanting to vote?" Reed asked.

Turnout by party faithful may be a key to Tuesday's election.

On Friday, Secretary of State Nina Mitchell Wells announced that 5.2 million people are registered to vote in Tuesday's election. Democrats, with 1.8 million voters, hold a 704,770-person edge over Republicans, with 1.1 million voters.

But even more people, 2.4 million, are unaffiliated.

Wells also said that by Thursday the state's county clerks had issued 179,142 Vote By Mail ballots, and 100,770 had already been returned.

Mail-in voting has been touted as a potential factor in the race, but just 3.4 percent of registered voters applied for ballots.

A law signed this past summer allows voters to apply for mail ballots for any reason at all. They can either pick to receive ballots for every race over the next year, or for every November election in perpetuity.

There is still time to apply for these ballots, but voters have to apply in person at their county Clerk's Office by 3 p.m. Monday. All ballots must be returned to their county Board of Elections by 8 p.m. Tuesday.

The Democratic edge in registered voters grew last year with 500,000 new names, Reed said. Many joined the party in order to vote in New Jersey's first-ever early presidential primary.

"Those are the voters that Corzine has been trying to motivate," Reed said.

But were they just presidential election voters, Reed wondered, or will they stay with the party?

To get them interested in this year's race, Reed pointed to the recent repeated visits by top Democrats, including President Barack Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden and former President Bill Clinton, in addition to various Cabinet members.

A major campaign in urban districts by Christie and the strong independent candidacy of Christ Daggett could also bring out voters.

But the negative ads aimed at all three candidates appear to have turned off many.

Amy Dimichele, 22, is the type of younger voter sought by the Democrats last year.

But this year, she admits she has not followed the races closely. What she has heard has come through advertising, which she said described only "all the terrible things that Chris Christie has done."

Tony Scoppa calls himself a Republican, but the 54-year-old Mays Landing resident questioned the value of voting for Christie.

"How much could he do in a state with these financial problems?" Scoppa said.

He didn't know enough about Daggett to have an opinion but blamed Corzine for some of the state's problems, saying the governor made promises he couldn't keep.

Swan, 67, said she voted for Corzine in 2005. But has he spent too much money and didn't take the needed steps to cut government, she said, adding that she did not know enough about either Christie or Daggett to have an opinion.

Once again, she said, she is disappointed with her choices in the election. She said none of the candidates seems appealing or up to the challenge.

"You just want somebody to fall out of the sky and save New Jersey," Swan said. "You just really do."

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