

December 20, 2009

## A Christmas wish: Better political campaigns

By *INGRID W. REED*

Have you noticed that people express some of their deepest hopes to Santa Claus? Their wishes go much beyond the toys requested from Jolly Old St. Nick — a ball, a whip and a doll.

The appeals to Santa express real yearnings for what can't be bought, such as two front teeth, or, in "Miracle on 34th Street," little Maggie's hope for a family house in the suburbs with a play set, or Mariah Carey plaintively singing "all I want for Christmas is — you." Obviously, if you can't get what you long for in any other way, maybe Santa can produce it.

So here is my policy wonk wish to Santa: Please bring us better political campaigns in New Jersey. Since even I think that is a big order, I am amending it to wish for a watchdog group that will work for better campaigns.

New Jerseyans still lament the most recent campaign no one liked — the race for governor. And then there were the campaigns no one knew about — the races in the 40 Assembly districts. We spent most of the fall complaining about what supposedly was the most negative campaign the state had endured. Polls showed that voters blamed the candidates equally.

It is easy to speculate that the nature of the campaigns had something to do with the lowest turnout ever — 46 percent — in a gubernatorial campaign. But, it doesn't have to be that way. The time to start getting better campaigns in 2011 and 2013 is right now — after the holidays.

First, let's be clear about the negative campaigns problem. An expert on campaign communication, Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania, explains that candidates do three things. One is advocate for themselves, explaining why you should vote for them. The second is to attack the challengers, saying why they should not be elected. The third is to provide a contrast by comparing the candidate with the opponents. Whatever the candidates have to say, they should say themselves and not depend on murky pictures, menacing anonymous voices and creepy music.

Alas, New Jersey voters mostly got attack ads perceived as disrespectful, nasty and irrelevant in which candidates rarely spoke for themselves. Plus, voters did not know what to believe about the attacks. Were they accurate, partially true or simply misleading?

Obviously, respect for free speech means that candidates can say what they want. But that doesn't mean voters can't get some help by holding the candidates accountable for their campaigns. Here is what a civic group can do and publicize:

1. Maintain a record of ads produced by the campaigns and categorize them as to whether they advocate for the candidate, attack the opponents or provide a contrast. A balance of the three is useful to voters. (In 1997, the Leadership New Jersey alumni group used this strategy following an Eagleton Institute of Politics forum in 1997 to explore how to get better campaigns.)
2. Fact check the ads, commonly known as an ad watch. In the past, newspapers performed this service. More recently, in the presidential election, it was done very effectively by university-based non-partisan groups posting results on the Internet and discussing them on television.
3. Keep track of whether candidates speak directly to the voters. Did they say it themselves in their ads, as opposed to anonymous announcers, menacing mini-dramas and splashy headlines and dramatic images.

The watchdog group would also make sure debates happen. The gubernatorial candidates debated because it was required by the public funding rules. Alas, the three debates were not well publicized and voters complained — too late to matter — but at least the debates happened. Without public funding, they might not have.

While the campaigns for governor were very visible, the contests for the 80 seats involving more than 160 candidates for the state Assembly seemed to be non-existent. The preliminary count of newspaper stories about Assembly races was disappointingly low. Without public funding requiring Assembly candidates to debate, it appears that about 10 debates took place and few of them were televised.

Voters had little information about candidates for the Assembly, the place where our state budget is initiated. So the watchdog group could propose and encourage the Legislature to do what the State of Virginia does. Candidates are required to provide information about themselves and how to contact their campaigns in addition to the mandated campaign finance information.

So, Santa, the watchdog group you bring would have lots to do. You are coming to town (could it be Trenton?) and making a list. We hope we are on it, because it is the only way we are likely to get better campaigns.

## Additional Facts

So here is my policy wonk wish to Santa: Please bring us better political campaigns in New Jersey. Since even I think that is a big order, I am amending it to wish for a watchdog group that will work for better campaigns.

---