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Year of change in N.J. beginning at the top

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Inquirer Trenton Bureau

This promises to be a year of change in New Jersey government and politics.

By the end of January, the state will have a new governor, a new Senate president, and a new Assembly speaker - the first time since 2002 that the three most powerful positions in state government all will have changed hands.

The newcomers bring different backgrounds, policy leanings, and political alliances, and a new dynamic. Gov.-elect Christopher J. Christie has promised to cut taxes and spending, in sharp contrast to Gov. Corzine, who focused on preserving social programs for the needy.

When Christie takes office Jan. 19, Republicans will control a branch of the state's government for the first time since early 2002, while Democrats will still hold the Senate and Assembly. Not since the early '90s have opposing parties controlled the governor's office and Legislature.

As the Legislature wraps up its session, Christie will be down State Street, plotting the course for an administration with new cabinet officers who will make decisions affecting the environment, hospitals, state police, and business.

The team's most immediate challenge is the state's woeful finances. By March 16, Christie will deliver his first budget proposal, providing the clearest statement of his priorities as he decides how to allocate the state's limited resources.

Fresh from an election victory that signaled widespread anger at the state's economy, Christie has vowed to rein in spending even if it means slashing government services. Some Democrats already have criticized his plan to roll back taxes on the wealthy while service cuts loom. The debate over the budget will be the first test of strength for Christie and the new legislative leaders.

"It is my belief this is going to be one of the nastiest political showdowns we've seen in state politics," said Brigid Harrison, a political scientist at Montclair State University.

Fueling such speculation is Christie's hard-charging, unrestrained brand of politics, a stark change from Corzine's inclination toward compromise.

Christie's plans will require approval from a Legislature led by new Democratic officers.

In the Senate, Stephen M. Sweeney, a blunt-talking ironworker from rural Gloucester County, will replace longtime Senate President Richard J. Codey, a wisecracking fill-in governor who represents Essex County suburbs and a slice of Newark.

Sweeney, more socially and fiscally conservative than many fellow Democrats, has displayed a hardheaded, combative style - particularly in taking on state unions over benefits - while Codey has been conciliatory during policy debates. Sweeney will be the first South Jersey lawmaker since 1968 to hold the Senate gavel, making him the party's top voice in state government.

Sweeney is also the Gloucester County freeholder director and a close ally of South Jersey power broker George Norcross, and he has held a prominent role in state politics as Senate majority leader the last two years.

Less known is Essex County's Sheila Y. Oliver, who is set to become Assembly speaker after six years as a background player in the Legislature. She will replace Joseph Roberts Jr., a Camden County Democrat who had nearly two decades of Assembly experience before becoming speaker in 2006.

Democrats hope Oliver's tenure will mirror the success of Albio Sires, a Hudson County Democrat who became speaker in 2002 after two years in office and grew into the post. Sires, now a U.S. representative, was the first Hispanic to lead the lower chamber.

Also a trailblazer, Oliver will be the first African American woman to lead the Assembly. She will sit at the negotiating table with Sweeney and Christie and have influence over nearly every major decision in state government.

Navigating that three-pronged relationship will be a key to each new leader.

As U.S. attorney, Christie could set his own agenda, but in Trenton he will have to work skillfully with others to advance his programs, said Ingrid Reed, a political scientist at Rutgers University.

Like the newly inaugurated President Obama in 2009, Christie will have to turn campaign promises into tangible victories in 2010.

Making "it happen quickly enough and visibly enough so that people really realize the change is occurring" will be a central challenge, said Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

The public, she said, is expecting not just budget cuts, but also a more accountable and efficient government.

Another difference in the new year will be the presence of a lieutenant governor. Monmouth County Sheriff Kim Guadagno, elected with Christie, will be the first person to hold the post in New Jersey.

Of course, 2010 could be shaped by unforeseen events. In the last decade, New Jersey was jolted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Gov. Jim McGreevey's resignation, Corzine's auto accident, and the national recession. Still, much about the state's political scene should seem familiar.

In 2002, when new leaders moved into the offices of the governor, Senate president, and Assembly speaker, they faced an economy in recession and vowed to tackle property taxes and a looming budget deficit. The same two issues helped propel Christie to victory.

Progress in those areas in 2010 might be the most significant change of all.

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