

# Names abound for who might run for governor in 2013

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Opinion

Nationally, speculation is rampant among Republicans about Chris Christie running for president or vice president next year.

But here in New Jersey, advance speculation is centered as much on the office Christie currently occupies as it is on the White House.

Who will New Jersey Democrats put up to face Christie in 2013 when he runs for re-election, assuming he's still in Trenton to run and not in Washington?

We asked a handful of experts who closely follow state politics to give us their take -- who they think might vie for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, and what advice they would give the candidates. The advice they offered was wide ranging. Their guesses for who would be in the mix were also varied, but centered on three names -- state Senate President Stephen Sweeney of West Deptford, state Sen. Barbara Buono of Middlesex County and Newark Mayor Cory Booker.

Here's what they had to say:

Raymond Bateman

The Republican gubernatorial nominee in 1977, former state senator from Somerset County and father of current Republican state Sen. Christopher Bateman offered four potential names.

"Because Gov. Chris Christie (at this moment) has more significant support from male voters, I believe the New Jersey Democrats would be well advised to lean toward a female candidate for governor. State Sen. Barbara Buono, a regular Christie basher, could lead that group. She has the same problem I had when running against Gov. Brendan Byrne -- I had to give up the Senate seat.

"Because they could run without giving up their offices, Democrat Congressmen Frank Pallone Jr., Robert Andrews and Bill Pascrell, Jr. could (if interested) be potentially strong opponents."

His advice to the candidates:

"Bring your boxing gloves and brass knuckles and prepare for a fight -- Gov. Christie is no longer known for taking political prisoners! And be ready to debate state issues, the governor is always ready."

John Weingart

The associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University offered what he says are the three names most mentioned -- Sweeney, Buono and Booker. But he also said a wealthy, self-funded candidate could emerge as a contender.

His advice to the potential candidates: Look to history as a guide.

"The last three governors to seek re-election have not fared so

well; Jim Florio and Jon Corzine were defeated and Christie Whitman won by little more than 1 percent of the vote.

"Second, even running and losing can leave a candidate well-positioned to succeed in another year. Govs. (Tom) Kean, (Jim) Florio, Whitman and (Jim) McGreevey had all lost statewide races before they won one, and, before his winning race for governor, Jon Corzine had introduced himself to the voters with his Senate campaign. In fact, before Chris Christie's victory in 2009, the last time a New Jersey governor was elected in his first statewide race was when Brendan Byrne won in 1973."

Ben Dworkin

The director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics offered three names of Dems he says are known to have ambitions for higher office -- Sweeney, Buono and Assemblyman Louis Greenwald of Camden County.

But he also noted that congressional redistricting will leave one of New Jersey's 13 congressman without a job when the state is left with just 12 seats. Whoever is left out could run. Like Weingart, he also said an independently wealthy Democrat could challenge for the gubernatorial nod.

His advice: "New Jersey's political geography requires any statewide campaign to buy network television ads in New York and Philadelphia just to get one's message out to the entire state. This is a tremendously expensive proposition, especially for a non-incumbent. So the first piece of general advice is to raise a lot of money.

"A second piece of advice is to pick a strategy and to rally the party to it. Some Democrats say the best way to combat the governor is to accept many of the goals and objectives of the governor but promote a change in temperament, style and willingness to compromise. Others argue that a Democratic candidate should strike a more oppositional tone, excite the party's base, and pick off those independent voters upset with Christie's decisions and/or his style. This party strategy question must eventually be answered.

"All of this having been said, the ebb and flow of political waters is constant in New Jersey, and so advice given one day may prove to be irrelevant the next. Clearly, given the governor's strong public standing, his tremendous political skills, and the remarkable discipline among his team, he is going to prove to be very formidable candidate."

Jay Lassiter

The blogger for the liberal website bluejersey.com offered this:

"My short list includes Sweeney, Buono and Booker at this point. If the election were tomorrow I think a Sweeney/Buono ticket seems most plausible, given the state's machine-driven dynamics which don't favor Booker at the moment. A Rob Andrews/Loretta Weinberg ticket is my fantasy pick." His recommendations for the Democrats who throw their hat in against Christie:

"Re-frame the debates more aggressively. For example: Christie blames public-sector workers for the soaring health care burden on New Jersey taxpayers. Nonsense. The real driver of skyrocketing

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health care costs is treating chronic illnesses that are associated with high obesity rates such as diabetes and heart disease. If you don't think chronic obesity is a fair and legitimate debate, you're not being honest about public policy. By taking the debate off Christie's terms it's pretty easy to show that the governor is not part of the solution; he is the problem. And let's not forget his testy the governor gets when he's out of his comfort zone.

"Be the anti-Christie. The governor likes to remind voters what's wrong with New Jersey to push his policy agenda. To hear him talk you'd think Jersey is a bona fide hellhole with residents running for the exits like their hair is on fire. I totally don't buy that. I think New Jersey is awesome and I'd advise the Democrat to present a counterpoint to our perpetually cranky governor.

"Tips from an old field hand: Focus like a laser beam on women, older voters and Burlington County."

Bruce Caswell

The professor in the political science department at Rowan University says Booker is the front-runner in the race, but that a host of others could challenge.

"Booker, who was asked to run by prominent Democrats in 2009 and who polls have shown to be very competitive with Christie even before the governor's approval ratings began to drop, is probably the favorite to be the next Democratic candidate for governor. His declaration of candidacy would probably clear most of the field."

Caswell says five members of the New Jersey delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives -- Andrews, Frank Pallone, Rush Holt, Albio Sires and Steve Rothman -- are in the mix, as are seven legislators -- Assembly Speaker Sheila Y. Oliver, Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Cryan, Assembly Majority Conference Leader Joan M. Quigley, Assembly Speaker Pro-Tempore Jerry Green, Greenwald, Sweeney and Buono.

"Of these, Sweeney and Bruno are probably the stronger candidates should they run."

"Andrews, Greenwald and Sweeney are all from South Jersey, a relatively small vote base, and depend upon the same county organizations for support. Likely, only one of these would run.

"It is also been speculated that former Gov. Jon Corzine might be interested in a rematch with Christie."

In waging a campaign against Christie, Caswell says Democratic candidates may be able to use the economy, which Christie, as a candidate, promised to revive but is still weak in New Jersey and taxes, which Christie promised to lower while running in 2009.

"Christie has also supported some unpopular cuts in services including education and women's health. A campaign targeted to affected groups could be effective for his opponent. Also, Christie has demonized teachers who remain relatively popular with the public. A campaign targeted to teachers and the families of their students, who combined make up a large portion of the electorate, could be effective."

Murray Sabrin

The 1997 Libertarian Party candidate for New Jersey governor and professor of finance at Ramapo College didn't offer a name, but said the Democrats have to, early on, work to rally around one contender because of the amount of money they'll be spending on congressional races in 2012.

"Democratic power brokers should invite all the gubernatorial wannabes in a room and strike a deal to create a 'balanced' gubernatorial and lieutenant governor ticket, candidates from the southern and northern regions (or vice versa) of the state. This would solidify the regional interests in the party and give the Democrats the best chance of winning back the governor's office.

Beyond that, he advises:

"The Democrats could outflank Gov. Christie on the right -- assuming he runs for re-election or is not in the White House or the next vice president -- by calling for the abolition of the income tax. Democrats could do a mea culpa by admitting that the income tax does not provide property tax relief to the vast majority of suburban voters, who are crucial in any statewide office.

"In addition, Democrats could win the crucial independent vote by outlining a credible plan how to tackle the \$120 billion in unfunded liabilities of the state.

"If the state's economy is in the dumps in 2013, anything is possible politically, including a strong independent candidate for governor."

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