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2011 Legislative Elections approach with mixed attention after redistricting



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For all the excitement and apparent passion, at least from those who came to the legislative redistricting hearings; it seems like one of the more crucial elections in the state's recent history is almost going unnoticed or under the radar by the majority of New Jerseyans. Yes, there are few and far between true competitive races overall. But, that does not change the fact that this election will largely impact the second half of Governor Chris Christie's term. He has gotten parts of his agenda passed during roughly the first half of his term. However, Christie will tell anyone at a town hall or public forum; there is still more he wants to see done. And, much of what he will view as a success will sway one way or another based on which party controls the State Legislature after November 8th.

Many of those competitive races have begun to heat up in the last month as the final countdown began to start. All 120 seats are up for grabs and after legislative redistricting, Democrats seem to be poised to maintain their majority. That will not stop Christie and top Republicans in counties around the state from trying to not just take a few seats, but hopefully the majority in one or both state houses. If Christie and Republicans can at least take a couple state Senate seats and half dozen Assembly seats, that would still assist them somewhat in votes in Trenton. As has been the case during some heated votes like the one in June over public employees' pensions and benefits; every vote could become crucial.

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Next Tuesday, many New Jerseyans will be heading to the polls to vote on their legislative representatives in the State Legislature.
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Democrats, in their own right, would like to see a couple gains in both houses to strengthen their power against Christie and his agenda when they view him and it negatively. Those very small gains for Democrats would essentially give them power over Christie to pass constitutional amendments and other constituent issues and matters. Among those issues would be reimplementing a millionaire's tax, school budget cuts, and funding for clinics and centers intended for women.

As the election nears, typical party responses could be heard from both sides. Democrats firmly believe they like their odds of maintaining control of both houses while Republicans are cautiously optimistic and aware of the challenges ahead of trying to gain either house.

Some races that could swing the mood of the night for either party are taking place in New Jersey Legislative Districts 2, 14, and 38. They feature either a weak incumbent, a tough challenger, or an incumbent dealing with the fallout from redistricting.

In LD-2, state Senator Jim Whelan (D-2) is looking to fend off Assemblyman Vince Polistina (R-2). While in LD-14, state Senator Linda Greenstein (D-14) is facing a tough challenge from upstart candidate Richard Kanka, the father of the 7 year old Megan Kanka who is the namesake of Megan's Law. Lastly, state Senator Robert Gordon (D-38) is running in a slightly reconfigured district and being challenged by Republican Bergen County freeholder chairman John Driscoll, who is getting a major push by his party.

Those three races and many more could be gauged as either a test and referendum on Christie's term thus far or simply a local race with local issues featuring two candidates. The popular and more publicized choice is the former and will likely be the topic of local conversations in the week leading up to elections and in the days after. However, as was the case with some national elections in the last three years; they were more an outcome of the race and the candidates as opposed to it being largely a result of voters having a major positive or negative opinion of President Obama and his administration.

Most times a governor can poll well and still not see large gains. Likewise, a governor can be unpopular and still see their party pick up seats. Nonetheless, whether it is through his physical or verbal involvement in a race(s) or by candidates mentioning his name and policies; Chris Christie will somehow play a role and be included in the election fray. Even though it looks like Democrats hold an edge as the elections near; people who debate Christie's national future will likely overreact one way or another based on the outcome of the races; especially the close ones. Christie, himself, is far aware of the current climate when he stated,

"The Democrats have been in control for 10 years. We're not going to turn it around in two years. If we did, that would be a story."

The electoral season and campaigns are looking to take up a different tone; a tone of phrases and words and not results and answers to problems. That almost seems hard to do in terms of the level of partisanship in the state's politics and after much difficulty between both parties coming together on complex and pressing issues in the state. The budget disputes and partisan discussions were not the healthiest for a state that consistently faces budget problems for key programs and areas. Patrick Murray, a Monmouth University political science professor, put the campaign cycle's current phase into some context with;

"If they are not talking about the issues that are really important to voters, namely property taxes, there must be an election coming up."

The Carl Lewis drama that gripped the state and 8th Legislative District was essentially the only major story about this year's elections that was in the news for the better part of the last five months. Now, that Lewis has been disqualified from running; those who are running are looking to garner their own share of the headlines and press.

As part of those headlines, Democrats will likely link any Republican to Governor Christie. While in a bit a stretch considering the elections being locally to New Jersey, Republicans will likely link any Democrat to President Obama. Despite not being on any ballot this November, the governor and president will become talking points and in Christie's case; he will likely be on the campaign trail generating his share of the headlines. The two in some dream scenarios could have been pitted against each other next year and each one's popularity could trigger the non-base voters in the state to vote one way or another; if they vote at all.

The blame game will unfortunately be part of the shuffle as unemployment in the state hovers around the national rate and

budget concerns still exist. Deep cuts upset Democrats while not enough of them upset Republicans. Despite the fact that Christie runs the state, Obama's record will be compared and contrasted regarding the major issues with the economy and jobs being at the forefront. Time will tell just how much that type of campaign effort will resonate with voters, who tend to focus more on local and state matters before the national climate. That has not stopped the Senate Minority Leader, Tom Kean Jr. (R-21), from making bold statements and using the economic situation to his advantage by stating;

"We lost an entire decade — and 155,000 private sector jobs — in New Jersey because Democrats refused to follow the Republican plan to create a predictable fiscal environment to create jobs and grow the economy."

Equally as fired up about this year's elections has been state Senator Robert Gordon (D-38), who exclaimed;

"We cannot afford to sit idly by and not act while our economy stalls. Now, we hope the governor will join us as well."

The election is much more important for Christie and state Republicans, who want their agenda to be essentially veto free. Sam Raia, the GOP state party chairman, stressed that by linking Obama and Christie with:

"New Jerseyans are turning their back on President Obama and at the same time voters are flocking to Governor Christie."

Raia is hoping that any disinterested and upset conservative Democrats and Independents might be inclined to vote for the Republicans in their district on the ballot.

Raia and the Republicans' bit of an overreach using President Obama on local elections was echoed by Michael Muller, a political operative for the Democrats in their state Senate and Assembly campaigns. According to Muller,

"Barack Obama is holding his own but is obviously struggling compared to what he should be at this point, but by no means is he toxic. Voters are too sophisticated to believe an international global recession is tied to the policies of state legislators. There is a lot less of Chris Christie in these elections directly from us. There are times when we agreed with the governor. Our candidates will stand up and say we agree with him when he's right and opposed when he's wrong."

Those on the fence will likely analyze their opinion of Christie's record before they jump into analyzing President Obama's record. That viewpoint is being backed up in a recent poll by Rutgers University-Eagleton Institute. According to the poll, 54% of likely voters said their November 8th vote will be either in support (28%) or opposition (26%) of Christie's record. That split could leave Christie and Republicans concerned despite the fact that Christie has a two point advantage amongst those that support him and his agenda. The 42% that said their vote will have nothing to do with Christie could just as fast relax the nerves of Republicans as they attempt to lessen the control that Democrats hold in Trenton. Broken down further, 50% of those who support Christie will vote for his preferred candidates while 59% of those who do not support him will do the opposite. 64% of Republicans are prepared to come out and vote to show their support for Christie while 27% will vote based on candidate or party and not because of Christie. 6% are going to vote for candidates opposed to Christie despite being a Republican. That number is the same for Democrats who will actually vote in support of candidates linked to the governor's opinions. 48% of Democratic voters will be out to help elect candidates opposed to Christie while 40% are voting for candidates based on candidate or party choice and not because of their feelings for Christie.

The numbers get a bit worse for Christie and Republicans based on generic polling. Generic Assembly Democratic candidates outpoll Republicans by a 43 to 28 margin. The numbers are not much better for Republicans in a similar scenario for generic polling for the state Senate. 45% of registered voters prefer a Democratic state Senator to 29% viewing a Republican generic candidate favorably. The numbers only shift ever so slightly with likely voters (48 to 33 with Assembly candidates and 49 to 35 with state Senate candidates). Those polled also favor a split or divided government in the state by a 50 to 38 margin. The likely voters polled shift it only to 50% in favor of divided government and 40% in favor of Republican control.

All of this poll data and other feelings expressed by voters is largely up to the discretion of the voting population on

November 8th. As David Redlawsk, the director of the poll and professor of political science at Rutgers, astutely points out;

"Legislative elections usually have low turnout, so it's hard to know who will actually vote. If we think of Christie as a motivator and assume those voters are much more likely to turn out, Republicans may surprise with some upsets. Of course, our results are a statewide overview and can't tell us about individual races that may turn on local dynamics."

At the end of the day, the few competitive races will likely shape Election Day. Christie's two years will impact some of the vote and could turn the competitive races one way or another. However, as it stands; not much will likely change in the state come November 9th. For voters here, it is sort of like more of the same. Legislative redistricting likely lessened some of the excitement once the districts became crystallized and critics were out of options to overturn decisions made by the commission.

The lack of a more competitive map or the likelihood of general disinterest in local elections, a new Monmouth University/NJ Press Media Poll shows that there is much apathy around the state regarding this election. Barely a majority are aware that all 120 seats are up for grabs and even less care that the control of the state's legislative body is at stake. That might be largely due to the fact that 45% of respondents disapprove of the job the State Legislature is doing compared to the 33% that do approve of the job they are doing and the 22% who have no opinion.

The results will potentially provide Christie with a new governing style for the second half of his term or only add to the divided conflict that has produced minimal results over the last two years. Elections often provide a lot of air, but once the dust clears; both sides will need to figure out how to solve the state's problems. If not, then come 2013 Christie will face much more criticism if things are not better. And, his name will likely be on the ballot.



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