

Sweeney to focus on Legislature, not challenge Christie at polls



By [Carly Q. Romalino/ South Jersey Times](#)

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It's not the right time for Senate President Stephen Sweeney to chase the governorship.

His work "now needs to be focused on ensuring the legislature remains in Democratic control," the Third District senator said in a statement Monday that announced he would not be a candidate for governor in 2013.

Taking a stab at unseating the well-liked, well-funded governor could have been futile for the Senate President, who would have been forced to give up a re-election run for state Senate to take on Chris Christie.

But an election win for Sweeney, of West Deptford, wouldn't have been impossible, according to politics expert Ruth Mandel.

"Why risk giving up a good position, a good job for a difficult race against a popular incumbent," said Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

Any candidate willing to challenge Christie would have to successfully clear three high campaign hurdles, Mandel said.

It's always tough for a challenger to defeat an incumbent. In fact, Mandel said it's only happened twice in recent history — in 1994 when Christine Todd Whitman defeated Jim Florio, and again in 2009 when Christie ousted one-term governor Jon Corzine.

Even with a leg up over the incumbent hurdle, Christie's 74 percent approval rating could knock a challenger down again.

Christie's handling of Superstorm Sandy and swift response to the state's victims are among the factors that have pushed his approval rating through the roof.

"It's one thing to challenge an incumbent who is very unpopular with people saying 'let's help you get him out of office,'" said Mandel, adding that Whitman had that scenario in her favor in the mid-1990s.

"Here, you have a very popular incumbent ... and someone who is also seen as a national leader," Mandel added.

Then, there's funding.

While Sweeney could raise money and secure public funding, Christie has proven he can raise a ton of money, and do it very quickly.

He's popular, and his war chest is overflowing, Mandel said.

"It doesn't mean you give up and walk away," she added.

The Democrats must field a candidate to battle Christie on Election Day. If Christie's approval ratings wane, which is expected, a Democratic challenger in a blue state could go all the way.

"The entire Legislature is up for re-election. If (voters) are Democrats and they don't vote for their party, they run the chance of losing the Legislature," Mandel said. "The top of the ticket matters."

In other words, if the state's Democrats head to the polls to vote for their Democratic representatives in the Legislature, they could vote right down the line which includes a Democratic governor.

"Gov. Christie, while he's very popular now, has sometimes spoken in ways that have upset people, and they thought of him as a bully," Mandel said.

Plus, the state budget isn't yet finished.

Put it all together, and a Democrat may have a chance.

The chance of losing the gubernatorial race, and having to give up a state Senate seat, however, could have been too much for Sweeney to risk this year.

Sweeney did not return the South Jersey Times' calls for comment Monday.

"He's young, his future lies ahead of him, and he has time," Mandel said. "If he's interested in being governor of New Jersey, that door is not closed."

In fact, the door could be thrust wide open in 2017 when Christie hits his term limit, leaving the race open to Republican and Democrat newcomers on the ballot.

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