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NJ creates lieutenant governor position

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New Jersey voters will elect the state's first lieutenant governor in November, giving the Garden State a number two in command in the executive branch and making it the 45th state to create such a position in the United States.

"For a long time, there has been discussion in New Jersey about whether there is a need for another statewide elected officer and whether a lieutenant governor would be a worthwhile addition to the state," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus.

Things came to head after the state went through two gubernatorial resignations close to one another, she said.

Gov. Christine Todd Whitman stepped down in her second term to join the President George W. Bush administration as the Environmental Protection Agency administrator in 2001 and Gov. Jim McGreevey resigned in 2004 before completing his term.

In both cases, the Senate president assumed the role of acting governor while maintaining his responsibilities in the legislature, Mandel said.

"In effect, New Jersey was acting without separate branches of government for a period of time and so the issue of separation of powers really was of great concern to many people," she said. "If you are the president of the state Senate and at the same time the acting governor, the power is concentrated very heavily and we are no longer operating with an appropriate separation of powers."

The two vacancies and resulting necessity for an acting governor led to a constitutional amendment that was voted on and passed in 2005, establishing the post of lieutenant governor, Mandel said.

The position of lieutenant governor is a weak one and it is up to the governor to decide on responsibilities of the office, Mandel said. It is possible under the constitutional amendment for the lieutenant governor to be in the governor's Cabinet as the head of another agency, she said.

"A visible model with some similarities would be the vice presidency," Mandel said. "The vice president serves at the pleasure of the president and is given a portfolio, large or small, powerful or less powerful depending on the decisions of the chief executive, the president."

Former U.S. Attorney Christopher Christie, a Republican candidate for state governor, has spoken about his proposed responsibilities for his lieutenant governor and has mainly focused that person's efforts on the economic side of Trenton state government, said Bill Stepien, the campaign manager for the potential Republican gubernatorial candidate.

"He has talked about putting the lieutenant governor in charge of Christie's partnership for New Jersey,

which will be a section of the government empowered to bring new business to New Jersey, keep new business in New Jersey, walk businesses through the red tape and regulation that currently exists in New Jersey and really just be a good friend to New Jersey businesses,” said Stepien, a Rutgers College Class of 2000 alumnus.

Robert Angelo, executive director of the New Jersey Democratic Committee, said Corzine’s lieutenant governor would also have real power and will give the position a Cabinet post most suited to their expertise. Richard Lee, a professor at the School of Communication and Information, said although it is a weak position, the lieutenant governor would have more statewide recognition.

“It could be a stepping stone to become governor,” Lee said. “Most of the people that have been elected governor usually have run one statewide election first and lost ... you almost have to do that to get your name out there, so this is a way for someone to get that name recognition without running and losing.”

University students have mixed feelings on the lieutenant governor position.

Livingston College senior Jason Isom said the position gives more visibility to the governor’s office and allows New Jerseyans to see another person who could possibly lead the state.

“You don’t want to be dealing with the unknown,” Isom said.

The lieutenant governor could be used as a scapegoat, allowing the governor to avoid accountability for his actions, said Rutgers College senior Justin Dabrowski. At the same time, the position could help to spread the heavy workload of the governor.

“It’s kind of a double-edged sword,” Dabrowski said.

The position of lieutenant governor will be elected on a ballot with the governor, the only two statewide elected positions, much like the way the vice president is elected, Lee said.

It is very difficult for public officials to attain visibility in the Garden State, Mandel said.

“A person who is lieutenant governor has the opportunity to build a statewide image of leadership, a statewide image of public service and a statewide constituency for future positions,” Mandel said

For the Republicans, Stepien did not disclose any names on who would potentially run for the lieutenant governor, but said Christie would select someone he and the voters of New Jersey would be comfortable with. As for the Democrats, Angelo would not reveal any names either, but said Corzine will focus on getting the most qualified person for the position.

Lee said he would go with any one of the names being discussed in the media.

For Corzine, that is Sen. Barbara Buono, the chair of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee or Assemblywoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, the Senate majority leader. As for Christie, Sen. Jennifer Beck is a name being frequently tossed around for the office, Lee said.

“[I am just going by] what I read and they seem like likely candidates, but there might be someone out there that we haven’t heard about yet,” Lee said.