



June 3, 2009

Panelists expect heated battle between Corzine, Christie this fall

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Gov. Jon S. Corzine and Republican challenger Chris Christie face a heated political battle rife with obstacles for both of them, according to a panel which discussed this fall's gubernatorial election yesterday at the Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics.

During a program billed as the "The Morning After," offering a day-later analysis of the New Jersey primary, panelists said Corzine will need to energize his base, defend the record of his first term, paint Christie as an unacceptable alternative, and take care not to turn off voters by spending millions of his own money when so many people are out of work.

As for Christie, panelists said he will need to define himself to the electorate, clarify the issues on which he intends to run, and manage the comparative disadvantage of a publicly-funded campaign by making sure his TV exposure doesn't dwindle along with his money down the stretch.

In a discussion moderated by John Weingart, associate director of the institute, analysis was offered by journalists Charles Stile (The Record) and Michael Symons (Gannett) as well as by political analyst Jim McQueeney and former Republican officeholder Hazel Gluck.

"I think this race will be incredibly close," said McQueeney, former chief of staff to Sen. Frank Lautenberg. "It has all the chemical components to be one of the nastiest and most expensive races out there."

McQueeney thinks Christie would be wise to hold off on defining specific issues of his campaign until its later stages while methodically building an acceptable image with the electorate this summer. Putting specific ideas out too early, McQueeney said, would allow the Corzine camp ample time to pick them apart with negative ads.

Stile, a political columnist, said he sees danger for Christie in waiting too long to define himself to the New Jersey electorate. Stile said he sees an opportunity for Christie to sell his image as a tough prosecutor who successfully battled corruption who can bring the same integrity and toughness as a governor.

Symons noted that the poor shape of the state's economy and sky-rocketing property taxes remain at the forefront of the electorate's concerns and that Christie must be careful not to "oversell" ethics as an issue in the race.

Gluck foresees a potential image problem for Corzine — a Wall Street man from Goldman Sachs who would be spending millions of his own money to get elected during hard economic times. She noted that there is widespread sentiment across the state that Corzine has been a disappointment, and she predicted a narrow GOP victory come November.

Christie has accepted public funding of his campaign and is therefore limited to an \$11 million spending cap. However, Gluck said she expected the playing field of campaign finance and advertising to be leveled by so-called "527 groups" — tax-empt organizations created primarily to influence elections.

Weingart noted that no one political party has won three straight gubernatorial races in New Jersey since "the 1960s." Democrats Robert B. Meyner (1954-62) and Richard J. Hughes (1962-1970) held back-to-back tenures as governors.

Given the poor economic conditions and fiscal austerities plaguing the budget, Gluck said that no matter who gets in this fall, "governance will be absolute hell."
