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N.J. arrests hurt governor's re-election

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Last week's unprecedented corruption sweep of New Jersey elected officials has thrown a wrench into the re-election bid of Gov. Jon Corzine, spurring him to pick a self-proclaimed reformer as his running mate as he struggles with a tough challenge from Republican Chris Christie, a former U.S. attorney who leads in polls by more than a dozen points.

The bust on Thursday saw three mayors and two assemblymen - all but one Democrats - nabbed on charges of bribery in a political scandal that fuels the historical image of dirty New Jersey politics. In all, 44 people were arrested as part of a larger probe focused on money laundering and the illegal sale of human organs.

Though Mr. Corzine was not implicated in the sting, observers say it could undermine past efforts by the first-term governor to address corruption, including the appointment of a state comptroller to eliminate waste and fraud, and an executive order against dual officeholding for state legislators.

"One can't imagine that this can be a positive thing," said Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics. "He's there, and he's in charge. So to some extent, he will have to answer for it."

Mr. Corzine already appeared to be losing ground in the campaign over the last several weeks. The latest poll before the probe, conducted from July 17 to 19 by the Republican firm Strategic Vision, had Mr. Christie leading the incumbent by 15 points, at 53 percent to 38 percent. A month earlier, a Quinnipiac University poll measured Mr. Christie's lead at 10 points.

Mr. Christie has shied away from blaming Mr. Corzine for the corruption scandal, instead playing up his law-enforcement background in a new television commercial released Saturday.

"As U.S. attorney, I put corrupt public officials in jail - Republicans and Democrats," Mr. Christie says in the spot.

Like Virginia's gubernatorial contest, also this November, the campaign is being closely watched by observers because it represents a competitive race in a state that went for President Obama in last year's election.

Among the government officials charged with accepting bribes: Mayor Peter J. Cammarano III of Hoboken, Mayor Dennis Elwell of Secaucus, Mayor Anthony R. Suarez of Ridgefield and Assemblyman L. Harvey Smith of Jersey City, all Democrats, and Assemblyman Daniel M. Van Pelt of Ocean County, a Republican.

None of those arrested were members of Mr. Corzine's administration, but the head of the state's Department of Community Affairs, Joseph V. Doria Jr., resigned at Mr. Corzine's request after agents raided his home.

In a brief statement Thursday, Mr. Corzine said: "Any corruption is unacceptable - anywhere, anytime, by anybody. The scale of corruption we're seeing as this unfolds is simply outrageous and cannot be tolerated."

A Corzine campaign spokeswoman sidestepped questions about potential electoral fallout.

"While this tragedy of public corruption unfolds, the governor remains focused on addressing the issues of urgent and immediate concern to New Jersey families: creating new jobs, expanding access to health care, improving education and making investments in New Jersey's future," Elisabeth Smith said.

Mr. Corzine touted his pick of Democratic state Sen. Loretta Weinberg, a liberal 74-year-old grandmother, for lieutenant governor at a rally in Englewood, N.J., on Saturday, saying the duo will focus on rooting out corruption.

"Loretta and I may not always do what is politically correct, but we will always do what we believe is right," he said.

Earlier in the week, Mr. Christie tapped Kimberly M. Guadagno, the first female sheriff of Monmouth County, as his running mate.

Neither the Christie campaign nor the state Republican Party would comment on the possible effect of the corruption scandal. But New Jersey GOP spokesman Kevin Roberts chalked up Mr. Christie's lead to voter distrust of Mr. Corzine's handling of the economy.

"You have somebody who is largely perceived as an insider, someone who hasn't done much for the struggling folks of New Jersey," said Mr. Roberts, noting that the state's unemployment rate has jumped by more than four percentage points over the last year.