October 1, 2009

A preliminary look back at 2009 election

By JOHN WEINGART

Nov. 4, 2009: Yesterday's victory by (Jon Corzine or Chris Christie) in New Jersey's gubernatorial election was never really in doubt. The historic political patterns and economic forces within the state were just too powerful for the other candidate to have a chance.

Analysis (for use if Corzine wins):

It has been clear for many years that New Jersey is now a solidly Democratic state in which Republicans simply shouldn't expect to win. The state has supported every Democratic candidate for president since 1992 and in 2008 gave Barack Obama 57 percent of the vote. No Republican has been elected to the U.S. Senate since 1972 and, with the exception of two very narrow wins by Christine Todd Whitman, the state has not elected a Republican governor since 1985. Eight of the state's 13 congressional representatives are Democrats, as are 71 members of the 120-seat state Legislature.

Moreover, history shows that New Jersey Republicans this year were doomed once they selected a pro-life, conservative candidate. The party's only statewide successes in modern times — Sen. Clifford Case and Govs. William Cahill, Tom Kean and Christine Todd Whitman — all came from the liberal wing of their party, enabling them to attract votes from Democrats and independents.

This year's nominee would have been New Jersey's first Republican governor in more than 50 years to be in the mainstream of the national party, but the views that would have made him acceptable in that arena were obviously out of step with the New Jersey electorate.

One other historic factor favoring the Democrats was that the Republican candidate was making his first run for statewide office. New Jersey voters don't mind selecting a U.S. senator who, like Bob Torricelli and Bob Menendez, were previously known only in their Congressional district or, like Bill Bradley, Frank Lautenberg and Jon Corzine, had never before sought any political office. But the criteria are different for filling the state's chief executive post. Thus, no candidate for governor over the past 35 years, from Tom Kean through Corzine four years ago, has been victorious without having at least one previous run for governor or U.S. senator under his or her belt.

Analysis (for use if Christie wins):

From the start, it was obvious that an incumbent governor could not win. The last time a New Jersey governor was re-elected by more than 1 percent of the vote was almost a quarter-century ago when Tom Kean won a second term in 1985. And this year, New Jersey voters were in a bad mood, worried about the economy, depressed by discord in Washington and disgusted by the arrest of politicians and rabbis at home.

While many characterize New Jersey as a reliable Democratic state, that is a misperception when it comes to choosing a governor. A Republican has won four of the nine most recent races and, looking further back, served as governor for 20 of the past 40 years. In fact, had there been a Democratic victory this year, it would have been the first time since 1962, when Richard Hughes was elected to succeed his fellow Democrat Robert Meyner, that New Jersey voters chose to elect a governor of the same party for more than eight consecutive years.
One other historical factor favoring the Republicans was New Jersey's practice, after the last five presidential elections, of issuing a cautionary note to the winner by selecting a governor from the party not occupying the White House. Thus, the first chance Garden State's voters got to go to the polls after the victories of Republicans George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush in 1988, 2000 and 2004, they gave the governorship to Democrats Jim Florio, Jim McGreevey and Corzine respectively. Similarly, New Jersey elected and re-lected Republican Whitman in 1993 and 1997 right after the nation did the same for Democrat Bill Clinton. Why would anyone think this year was going to be different?

Conclusion: Three final factors can't be ignored.

First, President Obama's (renewed or diminishing) popularity in New Jersey combined with Corzine's extensive campaigning (for or against) him in the (fall or spring) of 2008 made it obvious that the White House was going to be of (great or little) assistance.

Second, independent Chris Daggett, whose candidacy could have hurt (Corzine or Christie) wound up (doing exactly the opposite or having no effect).

Finally and of most significance in determining the outcome, the winning party picked the perfect candidate with extensive background and experience addressing (corruption or finance), which everyone knew would be the deciding issue in the 2009 election.