



Polls show Daggett's chances in New Jersey governor's race have grown

By DANIEL WALSH Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, October 23, 2009 |

Independent gubernatorial Chris Daggett has further cut the gap between him and the two major party candidates, leaving them in a statistical dead heat with Daggett closing behind them, according to two polls released Thursday.

Polls by Richard Stockton College and Rutgers University put Daggett's support at 18.4 percent and 20 percent, respectively.

Republican challenger Chris Christie led Gov. Jon S. Corzine in the Stockton poll, which included only southern New Jersey residents, by 33.9 percent to 31.2 percent. Corzine led Christie 39 percent to 36 percent in the Rutgers poll. Both were within the statistical margin of error, meaning Corzine and Christie are in a statistical tie.

"Daggett's numbers in general are just blossoming," said Sharon Shulman, director of Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, which commissioned the Stockton poll. "The real question is whether people say this in a poll, and then they go to vote and vote differently."

Shulman said that often happens with independent candidates; and David Redlawsk, a professor of political science and director of Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of New Jersey Politics, concurred. Daggett, a former state environmental commissioner and regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, would have to overcome skepticism that he is a spoiler without a real chance to win.

"At what point does he cross the point where people say, 'Oh, he could win,'" Redlawsk said. "Independents typically do worse in New Jersey (elections) than in polls."

Daggett's relatively high poll figures compare favorably to other successful independent and third party runs. For example, Thursday's polls are almost exactly the same as a poll taken of Minnesota's gubernatorial in mid-October 1998, showing then-underdog Jesse Ventura at 21 percent, with the Republican and Democratic nominees in a statistical tie hovering around 35 percent, according to an Oct. 19, 1998, report in The Star Tribune of Minneapolis. Ventura went on to win that race, despite running as the Reform Party's candidate.

"I think the difference in this race is that everyone knows Chris Daggett can do the job, just not enough people know who Chris Daggett is," said Bill Hillsman, a media strategist for Daggett who also worked on Ventura's campaign.

There are other differences, too.

States such as Maine, Vermont, Connecticut and Minnesota have traditions of backing independent or third party candidates for state office, but New Jersey does not. Part of that is due to systematic barriers they face, Redlawsk said.

"The real challenge for Daggett is the candidates are just different," Redlawsk said. "One reason Ventura pulled it off is that they have same-day registration there, and many young people turned out the day of (the election) to vote for him. We don't have that in New Jersey. The other thing is he's buried on the ballot among other independents."

For its poll, Stockton commissioned Zogby International to poll 800 people in New Jersey's five southernmost legislative districts from Oct. 19 to Oct. 21. The margin of error is 3.5 percent, and 14.6 percent of those polled had not decided their votes.

Rutgers polled 583 people throughout the entire state. Its poll's margin of error is 4.1 percent, and it found under 5 percent were undecided.

Stockton conducted a similar poll last month, and Daggett's support doubled since then, according to Shulman, director of the Hughes Center.

Both polls found Daggett's support came slightly more at Christie's expense. The Christie campaign referred calls to Brittany Bramell, who could not be reached for comment.

Corzine campaign spokeswoman Lis Smith said Christie's flagging support in the polls showed New Jersey residents like him less the more they learn about him, and she felt they are now recognizing Corzine has fought hard for New Jersey families.

"I think the trends are undeniable," Smith said of the poll.

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