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N.J. shift precedes Christie

Economic and other forces have already changed the landscape.

By Jonathan Tamari

Inquirer Trenton Bureau

Christopher J. Christie will officially replace Jon Corzine as governor Tuesday.

But even before the Republican, who campaigned as a fiscal conservative, replaces a Democrat who favored progressive social programs, it has become clear the state's political winds have shifted.

In traditionally liberal New Jersey, where lawmakers in recent years have barred the death penalty, taken steps toward universal health coverage, and approved a paid family-leave program, the recent failure of bills that would have allowed same-sex marriage and provided in-state tuition for illegal immigrants marked a sharp change.

Members of both parties attributed the results to the November election, which sent a resounding message of rising anxiety over New Jersey's economy and taxes. The election gave Republicans a statewide winner, and singular party voice, for the first time in a decade.

Democrats, Christie said in an interview Friday, expected to win. When they lost, "I think that makes everyone sit up and take notice."

Added Republican state chairman Jay Webber, an assemblyman from Morris County, "People realize that we had gone way too far to the left on many of our fiscal and social policies, and the election in November was in part a recognition that we need to correct that and give Republicans an opportunity to lead for a while."

Democrats dispute the idea that voters want GOP leadership, noting that every Democrat in the Assembly won reelection, but they don't argue with the notion that the economy and taxes trump all other issues as Christie enters office.

"The message for us is: If we aren't talking about the economy, we aren't talking about the right thing," said Democratic state chairman Joseph Cryan, who became Assembly majority leader, the No. 2 spot in that chamber. Added Cryan, of Union County, "When you're worried about keeping your job, or getting one, nothing else matters."

Rutgers University political science professor Ingrid Reed said the changing attitudes in New Jersey

reflected a national trend.

Early in 2009, she said, independent voters identified far more strongly with Democrats than with Republicans. But as the economic recovery moved slowly and partisan bickering in Washington continued, the gap nearly evened. Reed said that shift could be seen even in a traditionally blue state like New Jersey.

"The world really had changed by the time we got to having an election in New Jersey in terms of the way people are leaning," said Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Lawmakers saw that almost immediately after the votes were tallied. Shortly after the election, Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney (D., Gloucester), then the majority leader, said it wasn't the right time to consider same-sex marriage because there was so much worry about jobs.

Though the vote proceeded, support from both parties faded. The in-state tuition bill was rejected out of political fear that it could be seen as aiding illegal immigrants while New Jerseyans worried about their own future.

Webber said Republicans were galvanized in their opposition by Christie, who spoke out against each bill.

"There's no question that Chris Christie's leadership helped defeat both of those measures," Webber said. "Chris' leadership is respected, it's crystal clear, and people respond to it."

Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D., Union) also attributed the votes to Christie's influence, but he chastised state Republicans.

"They're repeating what the Republicans are doing in Washington, which is just opposing everything, which may be good politics but isn't good for the state," Lesniak said.

Democrats have jumped on the fiscal message, stressing it as their top priority when their new legislative leaders took office last week.

In that broad sense, they are in line with Christie, who will focus on economic concerns in his first days as governor.

"My focus in the beginning is going to be about . . . bringing irresponsible budgets back into responsible balance," he said.

One of his first acts, he said, will be to sign an executive order freezing pending regulations that may hamper business or add costs to local governments and contribute to property-tax hikes.

He plans soon to take an ax to the state's affordable-housing regulations, which Democrats have championed and tried to strengthen in recent years. And he said he hoped to return to the 2006 proposals to reduce property taxes, many of which were watered down or left on the shelf.

Democrats, too, said they hoped to revisit those ideas, and so far both sides are stressing cooperation.

But there is likely to be a clear difference on social issues. Christie campaigned on the economy, but did not hide his conservative views on subjects such as abortion. Asked about the issue Friday, he emphasized that the economy would be his primary focus, especially at the outset, but he reiterated his support for parental-notification laws.

Asked whether it was an issue he might press in his first term, Christie said, "Well, sure."

"I don't think that my 14-year-old daughter, who I have to sign a permission slip for to be able to take

Claritin . . . on the same day should be able to walk eight or nine blocks from her school to the Planned Parenthood clinic to get an abortion without me knowing about it."

An attempt to change abortion laws would surely draw objections from Democrats, who, while pledging to work to create jobs, have said they would not sacrifice "core values."

"Social issues, there's going to be a big divide, we know that," Sweeney said. "Do we advance social issues even though we know he's not going to support them? Yeah, because we have a responsibility as a Democrat Party to be true to our core beliefs, which, as I said, is looking out for the most vulnerable, looking out for working men and women."

Democrats continued to advance some of those ideas even while same-sex marriage and the in-state tuition bills failed.

A package to reduce prison recidivism by providing more programs to inmates was approved over Christie's public objections, and both houses passed a bill to allow medical marijuana. Christie had provided qualified support for that measure.

Sweeney rejected the idea that Democrats would be on the defensive when Christie takes office.

"He gets all the attention, as he should. He's the governor, but we don't feel we're at a disadvantage at all," Sweeney said.

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