

Runaway Governor's Race Confounds Pollsters and Pundits

Mark J. Magyar | November 5, 2013

Christie's coattails in legislative races hinge on margin of victory, but who votes -- and where -- is anybody's guess

Four years ago, the last five polls in the governor's race varied by just five percentage points -- with GOP challenger Chris Christie leading by no more than 3 percent and Gov. Jon Corzine by no more than 2 percent. Even with the complication of independent Chris Daggett in the race, the polls were basically right on the money: Christie ended up winning by 4.5 percent, within the margin of error for three of the polls.

Tonight, somebody's poll is going to be very wrong -- and that's in a race in which the pollsters have no argument over the winner.

The Monmouth University poll has Christie leading Sen. Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex) by 20 percent; the Quinnipiac poll has Christie winning by 28 percent; and the Rutgers-Eagleton poll shows a whopping 36 percent Christie landslide. For a polling profession that usually quotes margins of error of plus or minus 1.5 to 3.5 percent, those Monmouth and Rutgers-Eagleton polls are an Evel Knievel chasm apart.

For Christie, that 16-point spread is the difference between a Monmouth margin worth bragging about on the Sunday morning talk shows and a Rutgers-Eagleton margin worth plastering on billboards in Iowa and New Hampshire tomorrow morning. "The 2016 presidential race starts at 8:01 p.m.," Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray quipped.

But whether Christie wins by 20 points or 36 points also could be the difference between survival and retirement for Democratic legislators in several districts.

"It's certainly conceivable that the Democratic turnout could be sufficiently low and the Republican turnout sufficiently high that there could be one or two Senate seats that change from Democrat to Republican," said John Weingart, associate director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

"If Republicans have a net win of one or more seats, Christie will claim it as a huge victory, and rightly so," Weingart said. "Because there are already several Democrats in the Legislature whose views tend to lean toward his on critical issues, a small shift could have a big impact on Christie's ability to push through his agenda in his second term."

If Christie and the Republicans do pick up Senate seats, it will truly be a remarkable feat because the governor will have accomplished it with both hands tied behind his back -- one by a Legislative Redistricting Commission that approved what is considered a landslide-proof map for the Democrats, and the other by the decision of Christie himself to not even try to win the marginally competitive seats in South Jersey.

"It certainly seems like the governor drew a firewall across South Jersey," said Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray. "He just wasn't going to participate in any battle down there, and he even gave a wink and a nod to (Senate President Stephen) Sweeney (D-Gloucester) in his battle to be reelected by making so many joint appearances with him down there. Instead, he focused his energies elsewhere in the state -- where George Norcross doesn't care."

While Sweeney and Norcross, the South Jersey Democratic power broker, didn't endorse Christie for reelection -- unlike 50 other Democratic elected officials, including Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo and Sen. Brian Stack (D-Hudson) -- the two were arguably Christie's most important allies in passing the 2 percent spending cap, pension and health benefits, interest arbitration, and tenure legislation that were the governor's major first-term accomplishments.

With the Sweeney-Norcross bastion of South Jersey out of play, Christie has concentrated his efforts -- and his money -- on trying to win seats in Bergen County's traditionally close 38th District, the public employee-dominated 14th District stretching across suburban Mercer and Middlesex counties, and Middlesex's 18th District, where Buono's decision to run for governor created a domino effect in the Democratic delegation and a potential opportunity for the GOP.

Of course, it all depends on who votes and why, and that's why the polls disagree so sharply this time, said Murray.

"We're seeing polling numbers all over the place, and that's not only because of questions about the size of the turnout, but the partisan split of the turnout," acknowledged Murray, director of the Monmouth University Poll, who came within a whisker of predicting Democrat Cory Booker's victory margin in the October 16 special election for U.S. Senate, despite a record-low 24 percent turnout.

