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### **Catalyst for Change - Voters Will Prompt Reform, Political Observer Says**

THE MCGREEVEY resignation has leaders from both parties preoccupied with two questions: How can they shape the current upheaval to strengthen their own positions? How will the reactions of voters to the continuing revelations of misconduct in office affect their future choices at the polls?

While politicians struggle to make the right moves for themselves, analysts and observers are assessing who wins and who loses, who is up and who is down in the new political environment.

None of this is helpful for the voters.

Of course, New Jersey voters have a reputation for not paying attention to politicians - and probably pundits as well. They don't know who their elected officials are, mostly because until scandals come along, they never see these officials on television. Voters usually don't focus on elections until just several weeks before going to the polls, and they've been turning out in smaller numbers. But when they do show, they have performed in ways that give clues about how they might react to elections in the immediate post-McGreevey era.

Voters seem to know how to pick their way through the ballot. Even though the possibility of a special election for governor is becoming less likely, would such a contest this year have influenced the outcome of the presidential election in New Jersey? Will voters' assessment of McGreevey and the state Democrats have any impact on the presidential election?

For party leaders, a special election for interim governor would have demanded time and money that would otherwise have gone to the presidential campaign. But the voters in New Jersey would likely have separated a vote for a national leader from the vote for a state leader. They have done it before.

Look at the 2000 presidential election when Al Gore overwhelmed George W. Bush with a 16 percent margin in New Jersey, while on the same ballot, Democrat Jon Corzine squeaked through with a 3 percent margin over Republican Bob Franks to become senator. The voters had minds of their own.

As with most of the current scandals, money was an issue - was Corzine buying the election? And Bob Franks had only 10 percent of the amount in Corzine's campaign chest to spend, but he came close. Money matters, but it is not the only ingredient in a successful campaign.

Money would come up again should Corzine run for governor in 2005. The issue won't be the amount of his money he raises and spends, but rather his connections to the fund-raising practices associated with Governor McGreevey and with Charles Kushner, who might have been Corzine's partner if their Nets purchase had worked out.

The voters care about ethics and money. According to the Aug. 12 Star-Ledger Eagleton Rutgers Poll, nearly half of New Jersey thinks that the state is plagued by "a lot" of political corruption, up from a third two years ago.

This concern played out in the 2003 legislative races in the competitive District 14 (located in parts of Mercer, Monmouth, and Middlesex counties).

This election also showed how agile voters can be in moving around the ballot to find who they want to support. In this case, a popular incumbent, Republican State Sen. Peter Inverso, known for supporting reform, was returned to office by nearly 60 percent of the vote even though his Democratic challenger was extremely well-funded and well-connected. The victory was anticipated, but not such an overwhelming one.

The District 12 Senate race is another good example of voter concern with misuse of taxpayers' money as well as how a successful challenger presented an ethics platform. Democrat Ellen Karcher defeated former Senate President John Bennett. He, too, had hired family members in his legislative office. He also was found to have overcharged municipalities for legal work he performed as a private attorney.

However, Karcher not only attacked Bennett, but she laid out an ambitious agenda for correcting pay-to-play practices and instituting modern ethics practices in government - something she has not found easy to champion as a new legislator.

Voters have shown they want to know what candidates will do and not just what they are against. In the fall legislative elections of 2003, the Republican Party did not follow this course and simply focused on the missteps of McGreevey and his associates. When the election was over, they found themselves more deeply in the minority.

Looking ahead to a possible special election or the gubernatorial election in 2005, the Republicans will have the recent scandal to add to the litany of McGreevey shortcomings to attack, but they won't have McGreevey himself to hold responsible.

The challenge to the Republicans remains to put forth a convincing strategy for countering political corruption and not just denouncing it. Raising the money for an aggressive campaign to match the Democrats' fund-raising prowess will depend on persuading their supporters they have a compelling message for change that is much more than criticism of the past.

This may mean that candidates not associated with previous Republican administrations when ethics issues were not confronted would have more success with the voters.

Whether or not there is a special election, political leaders would be wise to use this time when New Jersey's dirty linen is being rehung every day to focus on what is on the minds of the voters. In March of this year, polls revealed that four out of five New Jerseyans responded that at least some corruption is the norm in state politics.

Voters have consistently said they are concerned about property taxes, education, and jobs, but given their assessment of New Jersey politics, they are likely not to have confidence in elected officials to deal with these important issues if their leaders don't first clean up the mess in the state.

While New Jerseyans may not know the details about recent reform legislation, an Eagleton poll conducted after McGreevey signed the pay-to-play reform package found the respondents split on whether he was aggressive enough in reducing corruption.

Given the criticism by major newspapers of the shortcomings of the new pay-to-play law and their revelations of the influence of money in shaping government decisions, it would not be surprising if more serious measures are needed to prevent money from influencing how government is managed at the local, county, and state levels.

While legislators may promote their recently adopted ethics agenda, it will not convince voters that private gain at public expense will stop if there is no easy way to hold officials publicly accountable for living up to the new standards. Implementation of the agenda is sorely missing, and the law has loopholes.

No provisions exist for explaining the new ethics laws in plain English on an easily accessible Web site, for reporting on the record of compliance, and for citizens to ask questions or report ethical lapses they think should be checked.

Voters are likely to be ready to end the confusing arrangement of an acting governor who is also Senate president leading the state in an interim basis. After the resignation of Governor Christie Whitman, Eagleton pollsters asked voters what they thought of the way we solve the succession issue. More than half expressed the desire for change to a lieutenant governor.

A second experience with the dual-role leadership is likely to reinforce the need for change. Voters probably would also be open to addressing the dual office-holding of mayors and legislators, mainly to prevent public officials from earning two salaries, an item that did not get on the ethics agenda.

The voters ultimately expect their elected officials to address and take the lead on the problems they know about - ones they now can't miss because New Jersey's longstanding problems are highlighted nightly in great detail. But voters also want to be able to trust their leaders to deal with the problems they can't even imagine.

When faced with ballot choices, we have some compelling examples that voters chose those who have demonstrated a commitment to ensuring honesty and integrity in conducting the public's business and who have made a detailed, convincing case for specific reforms with vision and conviction.

The current crisis may be the catalyst for reform the voters deserve. Embracing reform may also serve to enhance the stature and success at the polls for politicians who take on the daunting task.