



**BY RICHARD A. LEE**  
COMMENTARY

Anyone who believes the outcome of New Jersey's next election for governor is a foregone conclusion has some compelling arguments to support that opinion. But the race is far from over.

To explore the possibilities, let's start with the factors that make incumbent Republican Chris Christie a tough man to beat. Not only has Christie enjoyed high poll numbers since taking office in 2010, but in the aftermath of his performance in response to Hurricane Sandy, those numbers are higher than ever.

In recent polls, respondents gave Christie approval ratings of 73 percent (Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind) and 67 percent (Monmouth University/Asbury Park Press). In addition, a Quinnipiac University poll found that 67 percent of New Jersey voters feel Christie deserves re-election.

What bodes particularly well for the Republican governor is the support Democrats displayed in the polls.

In the Monmouth/Asbury Park Press poll, 57 percent of Democratic respondents approved of the job Christie is doing. The number was even higher in the FDU poll, with a 62 percent approval rating from Democrats. The Quinnipiac poll matched Christie against five potential

Democratic contenders and found him leading all of them by wide margins. The closest contender, Newark Mayor Cory Booker, trailed Christie by 18 percentage points – and Booker has since opted not to enter the race. The FDU poll, taken after Booker bowed out, showed Christie with a 33 point lead over his nearest potential challenger, state Sen. Richard Codey.

Aside from the numbers, New Jersey Democrats have a history of infighting and factions that could once again hurt them at the polls if they fail to unite and rally behind a single candidate. In addition, the kind words and praise that Christie heaped upon President Barack Obama for his response to Hurricane Sandy just a few days before the presidential election may cause the president to think twice before he comes to New Jersey to campaign and/or raise money for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate. More recently, Christie made even more friends across the aisle with a tirade against House Speaker John Boehner for delaying a vote on a Hurricane Sandy relief bill.

So should Democrats throw in the towel? Absolutely not.

Yes, the odds of defeating Chris Christie in November are slim, but no candidate is 100 percent unbeatable.

As those who follow campaigns and elections know, a few months can be a lifetime in politics. After the Persian Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush had an 89 percent approval rating and was considered so “unbeatable” that several high profile Democrats opted not to challenge him. But as the economy faltered, Bush’s approval rating dropped steadily, and he lost the 1992 presidential election to then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton.

Scandals and controversy also can quickly change the odds in an election. U.S. Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) was expected to win re-election comfortably in 2002, but as questions about campaign contributions and other issues tightened the race, he dropped out of the contest, enabling Democrats to keep the seat by replacing him on the ballot with recently retired U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.). More recently, Republican Todd Akin, who was considered the favorite in last year’s campaign for U.S. Senate in Missouri, went down to defeat, largely due to his controversial comments regarding rape and pregnancy.

Elections also can be lost when campaigns are poorly run or when campaign personnel make

miscalculations. In the Democratic stronghold of Massachusetts, Republican Scott Brown won a surprising victory in a 2010 special election for U.S. Senate after Democrats underestimated the strength of his support while their own candidate committed a number of gaffes.

Similar scenarios always are a possibility, but the likelihood of Chris Christie being toppled by the likes of a scandal or a poorly run campaign is slim. If that's what any of his Democratic opponents are banking on, they might as well pack their bags now.

However, the strategies employed against Christie over the past few years have not been effective either. The governor's opponents frequently have characterized him as being arrogant and a bully – or worse, but his poll numbers and his national profile have continued to rise.

Democrats should take note that the art of persuasion involves appealing to both emotion and reason. Christie already is far ahead in the emotion game. There are people who cannot cite a single fact about his record, but nevertheless gush about the Republican from New Jersey based upon impressions they've formed from sound bites, YouTube videos and other snippets.

For Democrats to have any chance of defeating Christie in November, they need to use facts, not emotions. And, of course, those facts will need to support their arguments. If they don't, Chris Christie is likely to spend four more years in the Governor's Office -- or perhaps a little less if national office comes calling in 2016.

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