

## OPINION: MURPHY AND GUADAGNO AND THEIR GUBERNATORIAL BAGGAGE

CARL GOLDEN | MARCH 22, 2017

While Murphy is burdened by Corzine's ghost, Guadagno is shadowed by Christie's presence



*Carl Golden*

In just over two months — June 6, to be precise — registered Democrats and Republicans will select their gubernatorial candidates. Or at least about 20 percent of them will.

While both party nominations are contested, the die appears to be cast: The November election to succeed Gov. Chris Christie will pit former Goldman Sachs executive and Democrat Phil Murphy against Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, a part of the Republican administration for the past seven-plus years.

Murphy, armed with endorsements from all 21 county Democratic Party chairs as well as deep pockets, and Guadagno, with 10 county organization endorsements and not-so-deep pockets, have been the decided frontrunners since each entered the race and nothing of consequence has occurred to alter that dynamic. Polls show each well ahead of their competition, a trend expected to continue unabated.

At the same time, both come to the campaigns with baggage. Oddly enough, it's baggage of the same sort.

Both face the task of putting sufficient distance between themselves and their political associates – Murphy from fellow Goldman Sachs alumnus and former Gov. Jon Corzine and Guadagno from Christie, arguably the most unpopular governor since Jim Florio 27 years ago.

The memory of Corzine showering millions of dollars on county parties in 2005 to chase potential competitors out of the race remains reasonably fresh. It surfaced yet again earlier this week with the revelation that Murphy channeled his inner Corzine by contributing \$1.15 million to local and state party organizations while loaning \$10 million of his own funds to his campaign.

To be sure, the issue hasn't damaged his primary candidacy, not so much because he's effectively fought off the accusations of trying to buy the nomination, but because the county chairs – recipients of the Murphy largess – aren't about to abandon him or suddenly decide to withhold the organization ballot line.

Once the money spigot opens and remains open, drinking from it becomes a hard habit to break.

While Murphy is burdened by Corzine's ghost, Guadagno is shadowed by Christie's presence.

While his dismal public approval standing is of his own making, Christie impacts the Guadagno candidacy simply by her visibility as his second in command since 2010.

As with Murphy avoiding any serious damage from comparisons with Corzine, Guadagno's prospects in the primary haven't been undermined by her association with Christie.

While she's slowly but steadily distanced herself from Christie, county chairs and local party leaders are not about to turn their backs on a part of a team that was the first to serve two terms since Gov. Tom Kean left office in 1990.

With nominations in hand, however, it will be crucial for both to hone their messages to appeal to and satisfy a voter universe far greater than the one-in-five expected to vote in June.

Murphy has attempted to explain his generosity differs significantly from Corzine's by attributing it to his desire to strengthen the party and heighten its competitive capabilities at the county and

municipal level.

His assertion that he's been raising money "one dollar at a time" seems jarringly at odds with his personal contribution level and in light of the \$10 million in resources he's already given his own campaign effort.

Assuming his interest in building a stronger party at all levels is sincere, it will not satisfy the skepticism of those who see his actions as transactional.

There are very few individuals with the wherewithal and the willingness to spend at Murphy's level, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it is viewed in the same context as Corzine's generosity; that is, it is given in anticipation of something in return – like county endorsements.

Murphy has demonstrated thus far that he is of a different personality than Corzine and, because of that, will be able to blunt some of the vote-buying criticism. Unlike Corzine, Murphy seems to genuinely enjoy the rigors of campaigning and doesn't shy away from the endless handshaking, small-talk-making it demands.

While he'll probably never fully satisfy those who are offended by his willingness to plumb the depths of his pockets, on balance he will benefit from the wider understanding and acceptance of the reality that success in politics is tied inextricably to money – lots of money.

Just as Murphy must accept the Corzine/money history as an issue to confront and deal with, Guadagno must do the same with respect to her association with Christie and his policies.

She's begun the process of carving out her own philosophy of government and establishing herself as of independent mind, unafraid to speak candidly about her record and her vision for the state's future.

Distancing herself from Christie doesn't mean disavowing the nearly eight years she's spent in the State House, and any attempt to do so would be quickly seen as cynical opportunism and a transparent denial of reality. Rather, she should concentrate on her accomplishments as the state's first lieutenant governor, while speaking frankly and openly about her policy disagreements.

While Murphy and Guadagno have their obvious political crosses to bear, both would serve themselves well to acknowledge it and conduct campaigns on those issues most troubling to voters and taxpayers.

Both would benefit from addressing, among other things, the state's record-high property taxes; need for a more equitable school-aid formula; growing unfunded liability that threatens the solvency of the public pension system – and fostering an environment to encourage steady economic growth and job creation.

For now, though, it's safe for Murphy and Guadagno to book a hotel ballroom for the traditional unity breakfast the morning after the primary.

Carl Golden served as press secretary for Republican Gov. Thomas Kean for eight years and as communications director for Republican Gov. Christie Whitman for three years. He is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.