

Race for governor: Stakes are high, public interest low

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(Photo: Julio Cortez/AP)

It is a measure of the interest level in Tuesday's gubernatorial primary election that the wagering action on the over/under voter turnout exceeds that of the winning candidates.

Eleven candidates – five Republicans and six Democrats – have spent months trying to convince the 3,257,438 registered Democrats and Republicans eligible to vote that they are the wisest choice to succeed Gov. Chris Christie. Based on a turnout of 20 percent (and that, in the minds of many, is optimistic) the first Republican to surpass 50,000 votes or so and the first Democrat to exceed 65,000 will get the chance.

There will be the usual bemoaning of the low turnout and expressions of dismay that so few votes place a candidate in the position of leading a state of some 9 million souls, but the unfortunate fact of the matter is that apathy has consistently overwhelmed energy in primaries.

Voters, it seems, are increasingly comfortable in ceding their privilege to select their nominees to party organizations and leaders, an acceptance of the political reality that money and troops on the street are the keys to success, rather than ideological or policy differences.

This year, though, the lack of interest has been exacerbated by the daily drama and political theater produced by a president and a White House which careen from one controversy to another, totally dominating headlines and riveting public attention on allegations and revelations of internal intrigue and international misbehavior.

There is just so much political foodstuff voters can digest safely and President Trump's tweets are more palatable than the comparatively boring policy debates among 11 individuals who aspire to the New Jersey governor's office.

Trump hasn't merely cast a shadow over Tuesday's primary election; he's buried it.

From the outset, there has existed the belief that neither the Republican nor Democratic gubernatorial campaigns are competitive, that the leading contenders will run wire to wire while the rest of the field plays a futile game of catchup.

While polling has been sparse – another indication of potentially historic low turnout which introduces volatility and uncertainty into survey outcomes – both Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, the Republican, and former Goldman Sachs executive Phil Murphy, the Democrat, have maintained comfortable leads.

The most recent poll by Stockton University showed Guadagno with a two to one edge over Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, R-Somerset, and a three to one lead by Murphy over his closest rival.

The poll also showed an undecided bloc of upwards of 30 percent, holding out some sliver of hope that there is ground to be gained and an 11th hour turnaround is possible, though remote. An unexpectedly large turnout could make a difference, but indications thus far suggest a late surge in voter participation is unlikely.

What was thought to be vulnerabilities – Guadagno's service as second in command to Christie and Murphy's history with Goldman Sachs – has seemingly had little impact on voters' perceptions of either one.

Guadagno has separated herself from Christie and his historically low public approval standing on a number of issues while Murphy has exorcised the ghost of fellow Goldman alum and former Gov. Jon Corzine, principally through his generosity to county leaders in return for their endorsements and favored ballot position.

While Murphy has consistently outdistanced the Democratic field, there was a point at which Ciattarelli appeared to have made up considerable ground to come within striking distance of Guadagno.

He demonstrated an aggressiveness and a willingness to tie Guadagno to Christie's policies, suggesting that only a candidate who can break clearly from the incumbent stands a chance of maintaining Republican control of the executive office this November.

He's even gone so far as to claim that she shares the views of Hillary Clinton on a number of issues, although the number of primary voters who will be swayed by this argument is problematic.

While his message and his forceful delivery of it appealed to some primary voters, it appears it will fall short. The Stockton University poll, for example, revealed that previously undecided voters had broken toward Guadagno.

To be sure, Christie is deeply unpopular and some of that may rub off on Guadagno. However, party loyalty remains a powerful hold on hardcore voters who feel that punishing Guadagno as an expression of their dislike of Christie is a betrayal of that loyalty.

Her securing endorsements from 14 county organizations testifies to the strength inherent in party identification and its potential to overcome doubts or misgivings about her association with the Christie Administration.

There remains, though, serious reservations about whether the Republican nomination – regardless of who secures it – is worth it.

It may be the quintessential Pyrrhic victory, a prize to be savored and admired for a few months only to be swept away by what is almost universally considered to be a Democratic lock on the governor's office.

Murphy's campaign style of seeming to actually enjoy the necessary hand-shaking and backslapping rituals sets him apart from Corzine and – coupled with his financial resources and willingness to spend whatever is needed – provide a substantial base from which to launch a successful effort this Fall.

So optimistic is the Democratic hierarchy, that they've already begun fighting over legislative leadership positions, confident that Murphy will be of like mind on policy matters and will deal with them to their ultimate benefit.

For those adventurous souls brave enough to gamble a shekel or two on Tuesday's balloting, my suggestion is stick to the over/under on turnout – 20 per cent for the over and 15 per cent for the under. In all likelihood, it will be a longer night than the candidates' contest.

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Kim Guadagno (Photo: Julio Cortez/AP)



John Wisniewski (Photo: Julio Cortez/AP)



Jim Johnson (Photo: Mitsu Yasukawa/NorthJersey.com)



Jack Ciattarelli (Photo: Julio Cortez/AP)



Ray Lesniak (Photo: Julio Cortez/AP)

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