

Opinion: Murphy, Guadagno's fate tied to Christie

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(Photo: NorthJersey.com)

If, as every public poll has predicted, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy is victorious on Tuesday, his success will be a testament to the depth of dislike for the Christie administration and a potentially historically low turnout which placed the outcome more firmly in the hands of reliable party organization loyalists.

It will not be a popular affirmation of the platform he offered to voters and taxpayers.

Aside from designating New Jersey a sanctuary state and pledging to raise \$1.3 billion in taxes, Murphy's campaign was a substance-free exercise in promises and clichés.

Recognizing that a low turnout meant party organization and discipline carried greater weight, Murphy stuck doggedly to his left of center base, spoke largely in soaring generalities, and portrayed Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno as a willing partner of Gov. Chris Christie, supportive of his policies and responsible for his record.

The Democratic base detests Christie and virtually everything he stands for. The election was an opportunity to strike back, express their anger and take out their frustration on who they viewed as Christie's stand-in.

Guadagno struggled mightily to free herself from the governor she'd serve with for nearly eight years, but was never able to break the attachment to an administration whose public approval standing hovered around 15 per cent, lowest in state history.

Polling consistently identified her association with Christie as a major negative factor in voters' perception of her.

This environment – deep dissatisfaction with Christie and, by association, Guadagno along with a turnout which could drop to below 40 per cent – gave Murphy a considerable edge and, more to the point, enabled a campaign built on boiler-plate rhetoric and vague commitments to attain and maintain a lead which never fell below double digits.

Grand Canyon of promises

Murphy's promises clearly outstripped his ability to pay for them – even he conceded as much – but it came at little cost in support.

Full funding of the state's formula for aid to local school districts, bailing out the financially beleaguered public pension and benefits system, paid family leave, tuition free county colleges, infrastructure renewal, and increased support for mass transit – Murphy embraced them all while avoiding any discussion of details or how he'd produce the billions of dollars necessary to implement them.

He was the Grand Canyon of campaign promises, breathtaking in its grandeur and sweep. His willingness to accede to the requests or demands of private interests was seemingly unlimited, even when it produced politically awkward moments.

He refused, for instance, to prevail upon the New Jersey Education Association, one of his major supporters, to moderate its multi-million advertising campaign which shredded the reputation and record of Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester.

He consistently dodged questions seeking a more definitive explanation for fully funding school aid or how he intended to return the pension system to solvency.

He refused to endorse renewal of the two per cent cap on interest arbitration awards for police and firefighter salaries, despite warnings that its expiration would lead inevitably to property tax increases.

The Christie ball and chain

Guadagno never strayed far from her Republican base either, dragging behind her the ball and chain that was the governor.

She pointed out the fiscal absurdity of Murphy's promises, warning at every opportunity that the financially distressed middle class would eventually pay the price in the form of higher state taxes or ever more punishing increases in local property taxes.

She stayed with traditional Republican fiscal philosophy – low taxes and reduced spending – and drew a contrast with Murphy by proposing a method to cut property taxes while criticizing him for dancing around the edges of what has consistently and overwhelmingly been the issue most troublesome to New Jerseyans.

In the late stages of the campaign, Guadagno seized on what appeared to be a politically perilous overstep by Murphy when he promised New Jersey would be designated a sanctuary state and limit the ability of law enforcement to deal with illegal immigration. She hoped to capitalize on the issue, drawing a sharp law-and-order distinction with Murphy and energize the Republican base to whom the matter of illegal immigration is crucial.

All to no avail, it seemed. Poll after poll never brought her closer to Murphy than 14 points.

Her campaign fund-raising suffered as well as donors and outside groups showed a reluctance to spend on a race that conventional wisdom held had already been decided.

In politics, money follows movement and momentum. Guadagno seemed unable to generate much of either.

There's always been a direct correlation between a shrinking lead in polling and a rising level of check-writing. Unfortunately for Guadagno, she never quite reached the point at which that connection came into play and exerted a significant impact.

At this late stage and with the consistency of polling data favoring Murphy, it appears Guadagno will come up short. The margin may very well tighten, but overcoming it appears problematic at best.

The next governor of New Jersey will be chosen by a relatively small number of voters and turn on the reputation of someone whose name doesn't appear on the ballot.

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