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Could Superstorm Sandy sway the Presidential election?

November 5, 2012

By Tara Nurin for NewsWorks

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(AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

On Sunday, several top Republican pundits said **Hurricane Sandy is likely to help President Obama's** re-election chances. But political analysts in one of the two states most devastated by last week's storm disagree.

The latest national polls show the candidates running dead even, and New Jersey's leading experts suggest that while President Obama may have received a slight bump thanks to his handling of the storm's aftermath and his now-friendly

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relationship with Republican Convention keynote speaker Gov. Chris Christie, both presidential candidates have nearly as much to win or lose from the storm.

Voter Turnout Factor

Although voting in New Jersey is likely to be tumultuous on Tuesday, with 300 polling places closed, according to published reports, and untold numbers of residents currently displaced or still without power, most analysts still place the state solidly in the blue column.

There is already speculation that **voter turnout could be low** in the areas hit hardest by the storm. But New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno has implemented numerous provisions to facilitate voting by alternate means.

But because the Garden State has allocated its 14 electoral votes to Democratic presidential candidates in each of the last five elections, and all major state polls taken throughout the fall show the president leading his opponent by at least ten points, most experts predict a low turnout will merely result in a lower popular vote tally.

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, predicts this will amount to little more than an "historical footnote."

"Unless the popular vote is really close," he elaborates. "If that's the case and the president wins, it could be perceived that he's entering his second term without a strong mandate."

The Chaos Factor

Daniel Douglas, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton College, however, cautions against rushing to complacency. Considering that in modern history, no storm of this magnitude has ever struck so close to a presidential election, an unprecedented number of variables exist that didn't two weeks ago. High rates of displacement and lack of phone service also lend to an inability to conduct a valid poll in the state.

"Nobody really knows how large is the number of people displaced, the polling places that can't open or are moved to different places, the large use of provisional ballots, the large number of people not able to vote," he says. "How do you get out the vote in a neighborhood that doesn't exist anymore?"

In addition, he says, non-traditional balloting methods could lead to chaos in counting. "New Jersey may vote according to pattern. Obama may win by ten points and (Senator Robert) Menendez may win by 15 points but you may not know it for three weeks," he says.

The Christie Factor

After the storm, Christie, an ardent Romney supporter and frequent Obama critic, surprised observers around the nation by hosting the president on a very public tour of the state's destruction and effusively praising his response. But few inside the state were surprised at all.

"The election is very simply not a priority for the vast majority of people in our area anymore," says Steve Aduabato, host of three TV newscasts on New Jersey politics. "The governor made it clear in a press conference he could give a damn about the politics. And I've known the governor long enough to know he meant exactly what he said."

And though nonpartisan analysts acknowledge that the stream of pictures and video from the bipartisan tour could only strengthen Obama's image as a compassionate, decisive leader while relegating Romney to a position where he could do little more than observe (and invite criticism for wavering on Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA] funding and making reported comparisons to his own high-school efforts to clean up football stadium), they don't expect the blossoming camaraderie to influence too many voters.

"I just think there are very few undecided voters out there and I don't think Chris Christie has that much influence over them," says Ben Dworkin, director of The Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University.

Yet despite his widely undisputed commitment to restoring normalcy to his constituents, some speculate that Christie may be hoping to influence party leaders in advance of a possible 2016 presidential run by shoring up political capital at Romney's expense. Over the weekend, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) became one of the latest high-ranking Republicans to praise the governor for his willingness to work with the president.

But the praise came just one day after Politico reported that Romney had, as was rumored by political pundits, intended to name Christie as his choice for vice president until differences in style between the two men convinced the candidate to instead select Paul Ryan just one week before making the official announcement. On Sunday, both Christie and Romney sought to downplay talk of a rift, with Romney telling an audience in Eastern Bucks County that Christie is giving "all of his heart and passion" to the response efforts and Christie affirming to an Israeli TV station that he still plans to vote red.

Lower Down the Ticket

While New Jersey analysts predict the storm not to generate much movement at the top of the ticket or in the state's U.S. Senate race, where Incumbent Democratic Senator Robert Menendez leads his Republican challenger Joseph Kyrillos by almost 20 points, they do believe the battle between Burlington County congressman John Runyan and Democratic challenger Shelley Adler could be impacted.

The 3rd Congressional District race in South Jersey had Runyan leading by ten points in an October Stockton College poll, but some analysts say the heavy storm damage in strongly Republican Ocean County, one of two that form



The latest power outage map for Jersey Central Power & Light shows in red that more than 50,000 customers do not have power in this area. (Image courtesy of JCP&L)

More Info:

- [Official Hurricane Sandy Information Center \(N.J. Governor's Office\)](#)
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the district. could hurt the Congressman Runyan.

"When you have a situation where people can't vote, if one of candidates wins by a small margin, the loser may feel that if not for the storm things would have gone other way," says Weingart, who notes that circumstance is likely to lead to requests for recounts, lawsuits and bitterness on the losing side.

The race has already veered toward bitter, with Adler pulling a radio spot this week that compared her opponent to Hurricane Sandy. The Runyan campaign called the ad "ridiculous and insulting."

Adler could also suffer from a continuing loss of power to the 2,000 customers in the Democratic stronghold of Willingboro, though power is restored to most of Burlington County, which comprises the majority of the district. However, Runyan could feel some ire from the county's storm victims, whose personal residences and businesses are not included in the state's ten counties eligible for individual FEMA assistance.

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