

# Unbeatable? Democrats face a mammoth task in toppling Christie

By David Levinsky Staff writer | Posted: Sunday, December 2, 2012 6:00 am

His is a household name from Cape May to High Point, and his approval ratings are sky-high after his masterful handling of New Jersey's response to Superstorm Sandy.

These days, even Democrats are singing his praises.

So it was no huge surprise last week when Gov. Chris Christie stepped to the podium and announced that he would seek re-election as governor in 2013.

The big questions are: What New Jersey Democrat is crazy enough to run against him, and will the Republican incumbent's current wave of popularity make any challenge realistic?

The answers from state political watchers? Christie may seem unbeatable right now, but with close to a year of campaigning left, he's not a shoo-in next November. Still, whoever runs against him faces a mammoth task.

"It's not over by a long shot, but it will take a really strong candidate to pull it off," Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, said Friday.

Post-Sandy polls show how fast Christie's popularity has ascended and how much ground his rumored rivals must make up.

A poll released Tuesday by Rutgers University's Eagleton Polling Institute found 59 percent of registered voters in New Jersey were in favor of giving Christie a second term, a whopping 15-point swing from a late September survey that found only 44 percent of registered New Jerseyans favored his re-election and 47 percent opposed it.

A Quinnipiac poll released Wednesday found that 67 percent of New Jersey voters now support Christie's re-election, and that he leads his closest potential rival — Newark Mayor Cory Booker — by 53 percent to 35 percent.

"Remember, we have a state election in 2013, and the only Democrat who shows any oomph against Gov. Christopher Christie, the hero of Hurricane Sandy, is Newark Mayor Cory Booker," said Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. "Even he trails the Republican governor by double digits."

No Democrats have announced their candidacy or filed the required paperwork, but several, including Booker, former Gov. Richard Codey, state Sen. Barbara Buono and Assemblyman Lou Greenwald, have expressed an interest or said they are considering gubernatorial campaigns.

Other Democrats reported to be mulling a Christie challenge include Senate President Stephen Sweeney and Assemblyman John Wisniewski, who is also chairman of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee. They have until April's election filing deadline to decide.

Booker, who has served as mayor of Newark since 2006, is easily the best known of any of the possible challengers and, according to party insiders, is likely the only candidate capable of uniting the state Democrats' notoriously fractured political power structure.

But Booker may have his eye on U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg's job, which may be available in 2014. Given Christie's stellar approval ratings, the rising Democrat may decide to pass on a 2013 gubernatorial run.

Booker must run a close race against Christie or risk losing much of his star power among party officials and donors, according to Dan Douglas, director of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

"There's not a lot of value in losing," Douglas said.

A close loss would not be too damaging and could potentially provide Booker a strong launching pad for another statewide race in 2014, Murray said.

Booker has set a mid-December timeline for announcing a decision on a gubernatorial challenge.

Codey, a longtime senator who filled in as governor for just over a year after Jim McGreevey's resignation in November 2004, polls the best after Booker. But his ongoing feud with South Jersey political boss George Norcross could make him a weak statewide candidate, Murray said. Norcross is chairman of Cooper University Hospital's board of trustees, executive chairman of the Conner Strong and Buckelew insurance company in Evesham, and part owner of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Daily News.

"Both Booker and Codey are recognizable. ... The question becomes, will the party organizations support them? Booker, yes; Codey, no," Murray said.

Among the other possible contenders, Sweeney likely has the most name recognition, but because all 120 seats in the New Jersey Legislature are up for re-election, a loss against Christie would also cost him his powerful position as Senate president. That's more than Sweeney or his political ally, Norcross, may want to risk.

Locally, Burlington County Democratic Chairman Joseph Andl said the party would likely meet early next year to formally endorse a candidate. Andl declined to name a preference, but said Booker was likely the only one capable of avoiding a primary.

"If he runs, that'll clear the rest of the field," he said. "I imagine if he doesn't run, it'll be a large field to select from."

Willingboro Democratic Chairwoman Lavonne Bebler-Johnson said Booker is easily the preferred choice among the township's many Democratic voters.

"He has a lot of fans in Willingboro. He's been here many times to speak, and he's always been brilliant," she said.

Bebler-Johnson and Andl disputed the notion that Christie is unbeatable.

"If he vetoes the minimum wage and goes back to his old bullying ways, people will remember. He may have had his shining moment with Sandy, but that doesn't mean he's the right person to be governor," she said.

Boosting the minimum wage is one issue the Democrats will likely use as a wedge against Christie. His repeated vetoes of legislation boosting taxes on millionaires and his veto of a bill to legalize gay marriage will likely be cited during campaign season as well.

The storm recovery could also prove tricky moving forward.

"He's gotten good marks for his leadership during the crisis and benefited from the storm overall. The danger is that people have a tendency to get impatient. Numbers can go down just as quickly," Douglas said. "Eleven months in politics can be like 11 years."