

OPINION: PUTTING GUADAGNO'S VERY LONG SHOT IN PERSPECTIVE

CARL GOLDEN | JUNE 27, 2017

A come-from-behind victory for the lieutenant governor isn't mathematically impossible, but it's historically improbable



Carl Golden

Even at this relatively early stage, the consensus among the political cognoscenti – the media, academics, and that amorphous but ubiquitous brotherhood and sisterhood known as observers – is that the outlook for the Republican gubernatorial and legislative ticket falls somewhere between bleak and disastrous.

Weighed down by the most unpopular governor in state history and burdened by a district map that tilts heavily toward Democrats, Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and her legislative running mates face exceedingly long odds in retaining the executive office and preserving their current 16 Senate and 28 Assembly seats.

Compounding the dismal political environment is the partisan voter registration, lopsidedly Democratic.

The most recent voter registration breakdown reveals 2,048,311 Democrats and 1,209,127 Republicans, an 839,000-vote margin. Unaffiliated voters – not surprisingly – outnumbered both at 2,402,244.

In only six counties – Cape May, Hunterdon, Morris, Ocean, Sussex, and Warren – do Republican registrants outnumber Democrats. And of those six, in only two – Morris and Ocean – do Republicans exceed 100,000. The remainder are well below 50,000.

By contrast, in the 15 counties dominated by Democratic registration, Bergen, Essex, and Middlesex each exceed 200,000; Burlington, Camden, Hudson, Mercer, Monmouth, Passaic, and Union each exceed 100,000; Atlantic, Gloucester, and Somerset each exceed 50,000. Only Cumberland and Salem fall below 50,000.

It doesn't get much bluer than that.

If normal voting patterns hold – that is, if voters are guided by partisan affiliation – Republicans face a steep climb, indeed.

Grim outlook

The outlook for legislative gains is so grim that the party will concentrate on maintaining those seats it currently occupies, realizing that any prospect of building on their numbers is unrealistic.

Absent a gubernatorial landslide, the partisan composition of the Legislature to be seated in January of 2018 will differ little from that of today.

The Republicans' minority status will continue at least through 2021 when redrawn legislative districts will be in effect following the 2020 census.

As has been the case historically in New Jersey's statewide elections, the battle will be waged in the middle for the hearts and minds of the 2.4 million voters who have chosen to eschew partisan affiliation but whose support is essential to electoral victory.

These unaffiliated are concentrated in 12 counties, ranging from a high of 258,000 in Bergen County to a low of 102,000 in Mercer County.

The second-highest concentration of unaffiliateds – 208,000 – is in Monmouth County, home to both gubernatorial candidates and where Guadagno has held countywide office.

While the numbers would appear to consign Republicans to perpetual defeat, the party's gubernatorial candidates have achieved some success over the years.

Republican governors

For instance, of the last nine governors, four were Republicans, one of whom – Tom Kean – received 70 percent of the vote in his 1985 re-election, establishing a record that will in all likelihood never be surpassed.

Moreover, of the five Democrats elected in that time span, the last one to serve two full terms was Brendan Byrne, who left office 35 years ago.

The Republican history, though, can be deceptive rather than instructive.

In 2009, for example, Gov. Chris Christie defeated an unpopular Jon Corzine by slightly more than 86,000 votes of more than 2.2 million cast. In his re-election in 2013, Christie amassed 60 percent of the vote, but it came against an underfunded Democrat who was abandoned by a number of party leaders who endorsed or worked on behalf of Christie.

Early polling (not necessarily a reliable measure of the contest by October) places Guadagno nearly 30 points behind Democratic nominee Phil Murphy, largely because of her close association with Christie.

Murphy has consistently referred to the Christie-Guadagno administration and will certainly continue to drive the point that the lieutenant governor was an integral part of an administration that, he argues, failed on virtually all fronts.

Standing up to Trump

Murphy has also portrayed himself as someone who will stand up to President Donald Trump whose policies, he claims, will inflict considerable damage on New Jersey.

In light of Republicans running the table in four special elections for Congress in which the Democratic candidate concentrated on the president, Murphy may opt to soft-pedal the anti-Trump rhetoric and stick to belaboring the Christie-Guadagno record.

Any effort to turn the election into a referendum on Trump will yield little benefit. Voters here have historically viewed the governor almost as a local official, one who is to be relied upon to address and solve everything from aid to local education to why the traffic light at the corner malfunctions whenever the temperature falls below freezing.

All politics is, indeed, local. Especially here.

For her part, the lieutenant governor has struggled to distance herself from the governor and establish herself as an independent thinker and voice well-qualified by experience and knowledge to lead the state.

She's taken on the issue of school funding, calling for changes in the aid formula to bring greater fairness to it and to reduce property taxes by capping what homeowners pay to their school district at 5 percent of household income.

Whether she can overcome Murphy's "car-in-every-garage-and-a-chicken-in-every-pot" promises remains to be seen.

The challenge for Guadagno is considerable. Christie will be a drag on her candidacy and she will receive little help from a state party organization that exists largely on paper.

Those twin burdens will be atop that posed by the overwhelming Democratic Party edge in registration.

Her task will be to make significant inroads into the 2.4 million bloc of unaffiliated voters, convincing them that despite serving in the current administration, she represents a fresh start and new approaches.

Impossible? No. A very heavy lift? You bet.

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