

OPINION: WHERE DID NEW JERSEY'S GOP GO WRONG? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 13, 2017

The poisonous memory of Bridgegate, the unshakeable image of Christie basking on the beach, the NJEA's doomed attempt to punish Sweeney – and that's for starters



Carl Golden

The winners have celebrated; the losers have overcome their disappointment; and Republican Party leaders are sifting through the rubble from Election Day in search of bright spots (precious few) and lessons for the future.

All that aside, there are a few inescapable conclusions to be drawn from the 2017 election:

- The most enduring images of the Christie administration's eight years are the George Washington Bridge and a sliver of sand at Island Beach State Park.
- It confirmed the New Jersey Education Association committed the most egregious strategic blunder in modern New Jersey political history by blowing more than \$5 million of its dues-paying members money on a fool's errand to unseat Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester).
- Despite the insistence of some observers and the wishful thinking of others that President Donald Trump was to blame for the dismal Republican outcome, the vote was an anti-Christie expression. Guadagno didn't lose by 14 points because she was associated with Trump; she lost by 14 points because she was associated with Christie and it reverberated down ballot. Trump certainly didn't help, but "all politics is local" still rules.
- South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross emerged a clear winner. Not only did his organization administer a serious beatdown to the NJEA, but also his maneuvering led to the selection of little known Middlesex County Assemblyman Craig Coughlin as the next Speaker of the Assembly, giving him major influence on the presiding officers of both houses.
- The Bridgegate scandal inflicted significant long-term damage on the Republican Party and demolished the Christie administration's insistence that it was a minor annoyance perpetrated by a couple of rogue staffers.
- The Republican Party brand is in such tatters that several election cycles will elapse before the party can even begin to become competitive.
- When legislative district boundaries are drawn following the 2020 census, Democrats will tighten their grip on state government.

Guadagno's burden

Despite striving mightily to concentrate her campaign on issues such as controlling property taxes and revising the state aid to education formula, Guadagno was unable to separate herself from Christie.

His drag on her campaign was evident day in and day out and with the release of public opinion polls that showed voters' negative perception of her was tied directly to the administration.

It was simply too much for her to overcome.

The Bridgegate scandal and its exposure of corrupt abuse of power along with the inexplicable decision by Christie to lounge on the beach with his family in the midst of a state government shutdown will be forever associated with the administration.

While Christie's public approval stagnated in the mid-teens, it was the poll finding that an astonishing 84 percent of respondents believed he had accomplished nothing in his eight years in office that was all the more damning. There was no clearer indication that Bridgegate and the day at the beach overwhelmed any other perception people held.

The NJEA not only shot itself in the foot with its initial effort to defeat Sweeney in a primary election, but also persisted in plinking its toes off one after another, first by recruiting a hapless Republican opponent, second by pouring more than \$5 million into what everyone knew was a hopeless cause, and third by drawing unnecessary attention to the well above average salaries drawn by its officers at the expense of everyday working teachers.

Personal vendetta

The association's leadership undertook a personal vendetta while attempting – and failing – to portray its actions as legitimate policy differences with Sweeney.

The association tossed its \$5 million man into the ring with Sweeney and came away with a bloody nose and an 18-point loss.

The strut and swagger that the association often displayed in the halls of the State House and the air of invincibility and political clout it projected took a serious hit. Recovery will take a long time, if ever.

The state Republican Party is in as weak a condition as it's been in many years.

Christie sapped its resources to aid his 2016 presidential effort and to cover legal expenses associated with the Bridgegate investigation and did little to replenish it financially or strengthen it organizationally.

With Democrats in total control of state government, the Republican Party's ability to raise money, recruit viable candidates, and engage in significant party-building activity has been severely undercut.

The party will struggle along on a shoestring, mindful that a redrawn legislative district map for the 2021 election may push it further into minority status.

Given its inability to influence policy and the prospect of an unfavorable district map, building on its 26 members of the Assembly and 15 Senators is a forlorn hope.

Christie will depart from office in January as the most disliked governor in state history and with the lowest approval rating of any chief executive in the country.

In addition to Bridgegate and his day at the beach, his legacy will include a moribund state party confronting a bleak future.

It will be with a sense of relief for many Republicans when they see the door close behind him.

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