

Buono underfunded and overmatched by Christie

By Carl Golden | Posted: Monday, November 18, 2013 1:00 am

If there was such a thing as a mercy rule in politics, it would have been invoked on Election Day to spare Democratic gubernatorial candidate Barbara Buono further pain and embarrassment.

Despite the outcome never having been in any doubt, Gov. Chris Christie's 22-point margin of victory put a humane end to the most noncompetitive campaign in the record-setting plurality rolled up by Tom Kean in 1985.

Lacking both focus and direction, Buono's campaign often became bogged down in extraneous issues while largely ignoring Christie's vulnerabilities: property tax control, job creation, economic growth.

When more than a third of poll respondents stated their unfamiliarity with Buono was so great they hadn't formed an opinion of her, no further evidence of her campaign's failure to devise and deliver a compelling message was necessary.

She was overmatched, underfunded and out-strategized. Her campaign never settled on a theme and often seemed to simply react to whatever appeared in the newspapers on any given day.

Challenging Christie was a daunting task in any event, but concentrating on left-of-center social issues rather than everyday pocketbook concerns guaranteed she'd never make up any ground.

Her insistence that Christie was auditioning for a run at the Republican presidential nomination in 2016 was a waste of time and money, neither of which she possessed in abundance. Despite repeated polling that showed voters were uncomfortable with Christie's national ambitions, her campaign seemed obsessed with this issue that could damage him.

She was hurt by party leaders whose initial antipathy toward her turned to outright hostility and open support for Christie. In her concession speech, Buono attacked the party's cult of bossism, accusing its leaders of striking deals with Christie in pursuit of personal political and financial gain. There is truth in her allegations, but even had they fallen in line behind her or remained neutral, it's unlikely the result would have been significantly different.

Christie conducted a textbook front-runner campaign — confident and self-assured — even though it was occasionally difficult to determine if the candidate's name was Chris or Sandy.

As anticipated, though, Christie exerted little formal influence on Republicans in legislative races. While the top of their ticket failed to break 40 percent of the vote, Democrats retained all 24 Senate seats and lost only two Assembly seats.

Christie was unfazed by the prospect of Democrats retaining control of the Legislature, despite some private intraparty grumbling that he secretly preferred that outcome because a landslide victory would solidify his reputation as a bipartisan leader driven to get things done while remaining outwardly unconcerned about who received the credit for it.

While the discontent was understandable, the odds of Republicans seizing control even had Christie given full-throated support to candidates in specific districts were slim. No more than four or five districts could be considered competitive, and it would have required a major allotment of time and resources along with an overwhelming margin to change hands.

The accommodations he's made and the alliances forged with Democratic leaders like Senate