

Opinion: Races for Congress take a back seat again in N.J.

Times Op-Ed By Times Op-Ed

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on January 12, 2014 at 1:05 PM

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Special to the Times

In non-presidential years, congressional elections become democracy's afterthought.

Rep. Jon Runyan, R-3rd Dist. won't be running for Congress again, but incumbents who do seek re-election have a good shot at returning to Washington.

File photo

Historically, largely non-competitive districts and an absence of a galvanizing, overarching policy issue have combined to depress voter interest and turnout, producing a re-election rate in the upper 90 percent range.

This year, the controversy over the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) may prove to be the exception to the lack-of-issues rule, but if the law achieves greater public acceptance over the coming months, it will lose much of its steam as a throw-the-rascals-out reaction.

Fear not, though. This year holds great promise for the political-media-pundit axis in New Jersey. The potential for soothsaying, tea-leaf reading and catnip for the chattering classes is limitless.

The focus, of course, will be on the Statehouse where, despite no one appearing on the 2014 election ballot, every move, every decision, every pronouncement will be parsed and dissected for hidden meaning.

Every ounce of Gov. Chgrri scandal has now produced multiple law enforcement and legislative committee investigations.

The interplay between a Republican governor widely presumed to be interested in the 2016 presidential nomination and a Democratic state Senate president — Stephen Sweeney — just as widely presumed to be in the early stages of a 2017 gubernatorial run will dominate the political environment and overshadow congressional contests.

While not locked in a forever embrace, Christie and Sweeney are committed dance partners who understand that each needs the other to craft a record of accomplishment and impress their parties of their viability as candidates.

The two have worked together closely throughout Christie's first term, boasting of their bipartisanship and willingness to rise above political bickering in the greater interest of addressing the state's pressing problems.

To be sure, they've unsheathed their rhetorical flame-throwers and turned them on one another on occasion. But the bond established between the two was such that Sweeney essentially abandoned his party's gubernatorial candidate last year while Christie, after his re-election, lent the power of his office to an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to oust Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean Jr. — who had offended Sweeney by recruiting and financing a 2013 Senate candidate against him.

Christie's relationship with Sweeney has quietly annoyed some Republicans, particularly in the aftermath of Christie's landslide victory but a failure to make a net gain of a single legislative seat. The strength of their alliance will be put to the test early in the new legislative session should the governor — as anticipated — propose a tax cut, either as a state income tax reduction or a credit for local property taxes.

The governor has been adamant in his demands for a cut, while Sweeney has offered encouraging comments but has insisted that state revenue must be sufficient to offset the loss a reduction would produce.

There is little doubt that both desire a tax cut. Campaigning as a tax cutter — Republican or Democrat, for president or governor — is an enormous advantage.

While the administration's revenue estimates have consistently been overly optimistic, the gap has narrowed. Should the trend continue and Sweeney detect a sliver of sunshine in that trend, he'll go all in on a tax cut, make an affordability argument, and bring his caucus with him.

Christie faces other difficult issues as well: agonizingly slow economic growth, chronically high unemployment, and an anemic job creation rate which has recovered little more than half those lost in the downturn of four years ago.

The likelihood of budget cuts remains, along with demands for increased state aid to school districts and municipalities to maintain services and hold off property tax increases.

There will be potential political restiveness as well. Resentment over Christie's involvement in the attempt to oust Kean still lingers, and there are questions about whether Senate Republicans will remain united in support of gubernatorial vetoes, particularly as the reality of his lame-duck status becomes embedded in the

The governor managed to keep his distance from the increasingly bitter dispute between Kean and Sweeney, but pressure may grow for him to intervene and broker a truce to knock it off the front pages.

So, while voters across the state will troop to the polls this November to choose who will serve in the House of Representatives, they'll do so with the lion's share of their political news having originated in the Statehouse.

It's just another of democracy's afterthoughts.

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