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5 Questions: Montclair State expert on Christie's 'tame' speech, savvy N.J. voters

Brigid Callahan Harrison is Professor of Political Science and Law at Montclair State University. She is a frequent commentator on national and local politics for NJTV, NPR and Fox News. She spent yesterday on NJTV discussing Governor Chris Christie's State of the State address, which she called "safe," and will spend the next year keeping an eye on the political machinations — from the governor's race to the Sandy recovery.

Harrison is president of the National Women's Caucus for Political Science, section chair of the Northeast Political Science Association, President-Elect of the New Jersey Political Science Association, also has written "American Democracy Now," "A More Perfect Union," "Power and Society" and "Women in American Politics" (Wadsworth, 2003), and various journal articles. Harrison shares some views on the year ahead:

1. Do you expect that the federal money will come from Washington, giving the state sense that it can catch its collective breath while dealing with other economic realities?

Yes, some federal money will come, though probably not the entire package right away. Right now, it looks like portions of the allocation will be passed, and it is likely that the Congress will follow the Katrina model and dole out allocations over a period of months.

2. You called Christie's speech "safe." Do you believe that the bipartisan cooperation will continue to flourish on items not pertaining to Sandy? What did Christie not cover that most needs to be addressed?

I think that the rhetoric of bipartisan [cooperation] will continue to flourish, especially by the Governor, because it is a political necessity in order for win to win re-election. I think the Democrats have a tougher time with both the rhetoric and the reality of "bipartisan cooperation," because for them, that means kowtowing to Gov. Christie's agenda.

3. How do we get residents to understand the difference between what each side says and what the reality is?

I think that voters in the state are smarter than many politicians give them credit for. They realize that politicians — everyone from their own mayor, state legislators, the governor, and the president are all attempting to use the political circumstances surrounding the storm to their political advantage. And so far — with the exception of Congress whose approval rating just dipped to 9 percent — I think that most New Jerseyans think that the politicians have done well, and are all making the right noises.

4. It seems particularly distressing when referring to Sandy will be swapped out for discussions of the state's pre-Sandy economic challenges?

Right now, we're dealing with the low-hanging fruit. Opinions can change, especially in shore towns, where emergency expenditures will not be subject to the 2 percent property-tax cap. Voters are perfectly capable of using new information or changing circumstances to reassess their views.

5. Why isn't the Democratic party rallying around Barbara Buono? Pre- and post-speech, the discussion is still about who the Democrats will run?

The Democrats aren't rallying around Sen. Buono because she does not have the support of the Democratic party bosses — George Norcross, Joe DiVincenzo, and Steve Aduato, Sr. — whose support is crucial if a Democratic nominee is to be successful, especially against Chris Christie. In 2009, the party bosses sat out the gubernatorial election, and an incumbent Democrat who outspent his opponent 10-to-1 lost.

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