



October 17, 2013

Buono and Christie make points in second debate

In a campaign debate that touched on gay marriage, presidential aspirations, and even Wawa, Republican Gov. Christie again cast himself as a bipartisan leader supported by state Democrats, while Democratic State Sen. Barbara Buono argued that she would be an independent governor who bucked party bosses.

Buono appeared feistier and more confident than in the first debate as she sought to frame herself as an independent woman not beholden to Christie's political allies, whom she described as "bosses" straight out of the HBO drama about 1920s New Jersey corruption, *Boardwalk Empire*.

Specifically, she zeroed in on Essex County Executive Joseph "Joe D." DiVincenzo, the highest elected Democrat to endorse Christie. DiVincenzo faces a steep fine from the state Election Law Enforcement Commission for many campaign-finance violations, which Buono said indicated that Christie made "backroom deals" with bosses.

"The political bosses are living in fear that I get elected," she said as DiVincenzo stoically looked on from the front row of the auditorium.

"I'm proud," Christie said, "to have forged relationships with all the folks that I needed to forge relationships with in order to be able to run the government in a way that's more efficient and effective for the people of New Jersey," referring to bipartisan accomplishments such as public employee pension reform.

In blaming both parties for the federal government's partial shutdown, the Republican said he had worked with Democrats in Trenton. "The difference is, unlike in Washington," he said, "we never close down the government here in New Jersey."

Christie accused Buono and former Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine of closing down state government in 2006 "because they couldn't agree on how much to raise taxes."

Buono - who shot back that Christie would "like to be running against Jon Corzine, but I'm no Jon Corzine, and you know it" - responded that Christie and Republicans were to blame for the current shutdown.

Christie's national profile came up often, with Buono saying he had caved on antigun laws and Planned Parenthood funding because he wants to win Republican presidential primaries in 2016.

Pressed on whether he would keep his job as governor if he ran for president, Christie said: "I don't know, because I've never run for president. . . . I have no idea what the next four years will bring me."

The 90-minute debate at Montclair State University, broadcast locally on NJTV and nationally on C-SPAN, was the second and final for the gubernatorial candidates before the Nov. 5 election. The Democrat lags far behind the governor in fund-raising and polls.

Buono sought to press the point that Christie was "consistently on the side of the wealthy" as having repeatedly vetoed a tax hike on those making high incomes, presided over a state with a high unemployment rate, and "left behind" small businesses.

Christie said Buono was "in the pocket" of unions, while he had sought to save property taxpayers untold millions by restricting the amount of unused sick pay that they could cash in.

Asked about the destitute in Camden, Christie said his efforts to appoint a new school superintendent, sign an economic incentive law, and expand Medicaid would help those in need.

Buono returned fire by hitting Christie for stalling the expansion of affordable housing.

Buono also went after Sandy, Christie's greatest political strength, describing it as a "complete bungling." She blamed him for a failure to move NJ Transit rail cars to higher ground, which cost millions, and for signing a no-bid contract with a politically connected storm-cleanup firm.

When Christie asked, Buono would not say she would not increase the sales tax. And she acknowledged that her plans for increasing money for education - for universal pre-K, college aid, and public school districts - might not be realized in just four years.

In an answer with national implications, Christie appeared to soften his opposition to a controversial bill that would allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition for college.

The most dramatic moment, though, may have come when Christie - an opponent of gay marriage - was asked what he would say if one of his children told him he or she was gay.

"I would grab them and hug them, and tell them I love them," he said. He then acknowledged that on gay marriage, there was even a "difference of opinion in our house."

Lighter questions were asked at the end of the debate, including: Wawa or 7-Eleven? Christie went for Wawa, saying that when he dated his wife, Mary Pat, they would go there for late-night snacks. Buono chose 7-Eleven.

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