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Buono, Christie trade barbs in final debate

With just three weeks left in the New Jersey gubernatorial campaign, Democrat Barbara Buono went at Gov. Chris Christie with vigor in their final debate Tuesday night, hitting so hard at the state's economic slump that one exchange left the incumbent speechless – hardly a Christie character trait.

But with the state senator trailing by 20-plus points in various polls and facing a severe campaign cash shortfall – Christie has an \$8 million war chest, nearly eight times more money than Buono has – it's uncertain if Buono's performance will help improve the long-shot odds she faces in trying to deny Christie a second four-year term.

The candidates sparred for 90 minutes at Montclair State University over a wide range of topics that included the Affordable Care Act, same-sex marriage, the federal government shutdown, the state's minimum wage, and superstorm Sandy relief.

It wasn't until Buono focused on Christie's economic policy that the governor, for the first time in two debates, was knocked off stride.

Buono sharply criticized Christie's provision of \$2.1 billion in tax credits to corporations, calling it the wrong way to jumpstart the state's economy and reasoning that that the state should redirect some of the credits to small businesses. She lodged the same criticism at last week's meeting but Christie was caught off guard this time.

"Focus on small businesses. They form 95 percent of our businesses in New Jersey. It's this one-trick pony that he has. He's focused on this -- the sum and substance of his economic plan, which has landed us in the bottom of the barrel in economic growth," said Buono, adding that "there's no oversight and no accountability" over the relief program.

At that point moderator Michael Schneider thought Christie wanted to respond.

"Am I correct is saying that you want to say something about that?" Schneider said.

Christie paused slightly, then said, "no," drawing laughter from some in the audience.

Christie was also accused of flip-flopping on the Dream Act after he said he supports the proposal, which would afford in-state tuition rates to students whose parents brought them to the country illegally.

"Be careful. This governor has a history of saying one thing and doing another," said Buono, who also said she supports the program, adding, "Our dreamers should not left behind."

Christie said his position "has been the same all along" on the Dream Act.

"At the time what I said to the people of New Jersey was that we could not afford, given all the budget mess we were left in by Gov. Corzine and Sen. Buono, to be able to put another burden on our state's colleges and universities and have them do this. But what I always have said is that when economic times got better, that it would be one of the things that I would consider," Christie said.

Democratic State Chairman John Currie before the debate greeted close to 100 Buono supporters who rallied outside the auditorium and said he's confident Buono can make it a close race.

Currie scoffed the polls that show Christie is running away with the election.

"The only poll that's important is the one on election night. We have 700,000 more registered Democrats than Republicans. We're working hard to get them out," Currie said. "As Sen. Buono starts to air her commercials in the near future, we're going to turn this thing around."

From the start of the debate Buono was swinging for the fences. She turned a question about why more than 50 elected Democrats have endorsed Christie into an attack on the governor.

"Gov. Christie represents the worst combination of bully and bossism, and that's what has motivated some of these elected Democrats to support him," said Buono, who then referenced questions about recent the closure of entrance lanes to George Washington Bridge and speculation it was political payback because the Fort Lee mayor didn't endorse the governor.

"You're not interested in cleaning up that Boardwalk Empire of New Jersey bossism and that backroom politics. You're just interested in getting their endorsements, getting the backing of their political machines and looking the other way," Buono said.

Christie responded by questioning Buono's relationship with former Middlesex County Sheriff Joseph Spicuzzo, who was sentenced last month to nine years in state prison for accepting bribes from people looking for jobs.

"You have, I think, a significant amount of nerve, senator, after you stood up on the floor of the state Senate in 2009 and said that Joe Spicuzzo was going to bring honor and integrity to the Sports Authority, and now he sits in jail from the corrupt Middlesex Democratic organization for selling jobs and selling promotions," Christie said. "A political ally of yours, a friend of yours who you stood up for and supported. You want to start to start throwing stones tonight, you better get out of your glass house."

Christie was asked later about alliances with powerful Democratic figures such as George Norcross III and Essex County Joseph DiVincenzo Jr. and said he wouldn't change one thing about his governing approach.

"I'm proud to have forged relationships with all of the folks that I need to forge relationships with in order to be able to run the government in a way that's more effective and efficient for the people of New Jersey. You see, in the end, everybody, people talk about bipartisanship but they don't know how to do it. What I've shown over the last four years is how to do it," Christie said.

"The governor is part of the problem," Buono said. "The political bosses are living in fear that I might get elected as governor because I wasn't elected to serve their narrow political and business interests. They're afraid because if I get elected I'm going to answer to one entity, and that's all of you."

Christie stuck by his endorsement of Republican U.S. Senate candidate Steve Lonegan but said they disagreed about the partial shutdown of the federal government shutdown, which Lonegan has urged be extended because he says the political dynamics would change if he wins the election. He later said he did not regret raising campaign funds for some of the political figures involved in the shutdown situation, saying all parties in Washington share the blame.

Christie also drew a distinction between the current crisis in Washington and his 2010 assertion, during a battle with Democrats over the state budget, that he would head to Drumthwacket, order a pizza, open a beer and watch the Mets if they closed the government over an income tax hike – in large part because the state didn't actually close.

"That's called negotiating. And you have to let people know where you're going to draw the line in the sand, and let's see if they're going to do it, too," Christie said, emphasizing that the state government did close for six days in 2006 – when he said Gov. Jon Corzine and Buono, a state senator, were in charge.

"Boy, you listen to Gov. Christie, you'd think I was governor already," Buono said. "He'd like to be running against Jon Corzine, but I'm no Jon Corzine and you know it."

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