

Delivering a Landslide—Can New Jersey's Whitman Meet Expectations?

By Janice Ballou

Pundits looking for political sustenance as the '98 elections approach will likely be watching New Jersey's gubernatorial race. Only two states will be electing governors in 1997—New Jersey and Virginia. And only in the former is an incumbent running, namely, Christie Whitman, a nationally-known Republican. The question, then, is what can be expected in this race?

Great Expectations

Ironically, one of Whitman's strengths, her positive notoriety, may also be a weakness if she does not live up to the expectations of a landslide that some political observers have set for her. The 1997 race for New Jersey governor has been compared to the 1985 gubernatorial race in which popular incumbent Republican Tom Kean beat

“ *[Democratic challenger McGreevey] is testing a message that focuses on the Governor's privileged background stressing that he represents “Main Street,” while Whitman represents “Wall Street.”* ”

a young unknown Democratic challenger named Peter Shapiro, with 70% of the vote. However, early signs suggest that Whitman will not meet these expectations. While her positive job performance rating is 52%, Tom Kean had positive ratings of 67% just prior to his second term. Also, polls taken at a similar time during Kean's re-election bid showed more support than Whitman's. Although Whitman leads in the early polls, she may be perceived as a loser because of the Kean comparisons. There is also speculation that a win in a tight race might diminish her opportunities for national office.

Both Candidates Have Strong Records

An overview of the two contenders is useful in understanding this race. Although Democratic challenger Jim McGreevey has been mayor of one of New Jersey's largest communities, served a term in the state assembly, and is now a state senator, 8-in-10 registered voters in New Jersey have no particular impression of him. And while Whitman's favorable (53%) ratings are twice as high as her unfavorable ratings (24%), about 1 in 4 have no opinion of her. McGreevey's low level of recognition provides him an opportunity to define himself for the New Jersey voters. However, it also gives Whitman an opening to stress McGreevey's weaknesses before the voters get to know him.

As an incumbent governor, Whitman has a record that she can and wants to run on. Her campaign has already tested the “are you better off now than you were four years ago” theme. Additionally, she focuses on her ability to keep promises such as the state's 30% income tax cut. McGreevey, however, has an ample political record given the offices he has held. The challenger is testing a message that focuses on the Governor's privileged background stressing that he represents “Main Street,” while Whitman represents “Wall Street.”

Taxes, Insurance, and Education

New Jerseyans identify taxes, automobile insurance, and education as the state's most important issues. While taxes and automobile insurance are perennial New Jersey favorites, education is new for 1997. Whitman's record on these issues could give McGreevey an opening to get voters' attention. Less than 1-in-10 state residents give Whitman positive ratings for holding down the cost of automobile insurance. And, while the Governor gets positive ratings from 48% of the state's residents for holding down the state income taxes, only about half that number—21%—give her positive ratings for holding down property taxes. Also, less than half—38%—rate her ability to improve standards in the public schools as excellent or good. If the battle for votes is waged over automobile insurance, currently Whitman (32%) and McGreevey (31%) are seen as having equal ability to handle the issue.

Whitman has two advantages over McGreevey in addressing her weaknesses on these issues. First, these subjects are complex and don't lend themselves to “bumper-sticker messages.” Second, as an incumbent Whitman can inoculate herself by proactively addressing voters' concerns. She has already done this with automobile insurance by getting the Republican-dominated legislature to pass a freeze on insurance costs.

An issue the Democrats hope to use is the \$2.76 billion dollar pension bond Whitman's Treasurer Brian Clymer introduced to repay the state's pension fund deficit and provide additional income for this year's budget. This bond was passed by the Republican-controlled New Jersey Legislature but not put on the ballot for voter approval. The Democrats hope to make the case that the Governor and Republican legislators are fiscally irresponsible for passing this measure. However, a majority of New Jerseyans do

not know about this issue and 4 in 10 say they have no particular opinion about it. Similar to taxes and automobile insurance, the pension bond issue is complex and does not lend itself to campaign sound bites.

Independents Are Key

Twenty-five percent of New Jerseyans are Democrats, 20% are Republican, and 55% are registered as independents. The winner, then, must gain the support of the independent voters who are generally late deciders. Therefore, candidates are likely to concentrate their resources on the last weekend prior to the election.

As of mid-summer, about 6-in-10 independents say they are undecided on a candidate while about equal percentages support Whitman (22%) and McGreevey (19%). Comparing the two candidates' partisan bases, Whitman (55%) has more support from Republicans than McGreevey (47%) has among Democrats.

A Positive Outlook

While changes can certainly occur before November, New Jerseyans are now generally optimistic, and this outlook typically benefits the incumbent. About half of the residents say the state is headed in the right direction compared to a third who say it is on the wrong track. Additionally, about 3-in-4 residents say their families' financial situation has gotten better (24%) or stayed the same (52%) since Whitman became governor. Also, there is no single burning issue that New Jerseyans can rally around or that Democratic challenger McGreevey can focus on to develop a motivational message.

Overall positive feelings in the state along with an incumbent governor who is rated favorably by about half the residents could produce an apathetic electorate. However, it is encouraging that even early in June, 84% of New Jerseyans said they have

a lot or some interest in this election. This percentage is similar to the 85% interest in 1993 when Jim Florio, portrayed as "the most hated governor" in the state's history because of his \$2.9 billion dollar tax increase, ran for re-election. Moreover, with all 120 seats in the state legislature up for election this year, interest in local races may encourage voter turnout.

An intriguing dynamic emerging in early polls is the support Whitman has from female voters. Generally, New Jersey is similar to the nation in having more female voters who are Democrats, which usually gives their candidates an advantage. However, Whitman (46%) leads McGreevey (33%) among women. McGreevey, then, may have to expend more resources than he counted on to win their support.

Early Soundings for New Jersey Governor

Question: Suppose the election for governor was held today and you had to choose right now... would you vote for Whitman, the Republican, or McGreevey, the Democrat?

	McGreevey	Whitman	Undecided
Total	33%	49%	18%
Male	33	52	15
Female	33	46	20

Source: Survey by the Center for Public Interest Polling, Eagleton Institute of Politics, June 11-15, 1997.

A plus for Whitman is the generally good feelings people have for her personally. In addition, she has history on her side. Only one incumbent New Jersey governor, Jim Florio, has ever been defeated in a re-election. However, there are some weak spots in her fiscal management of the state and in some policy areas such as automobile insurance and property tax relief.

McGreevey starts with a significant gap in name recognition that needs to be closed. On the positive side, New Jersey Democrats have been re-energized after the depression they suffered during the Florio experience. The re-election of Frank Lautenberg as US Senator, the decisive Clinton victory, and Democrat Bob Torrecelli's win for the open US Senate seat when Bill Bradley declined to run for re-election have helped New Jersey Democrats get over their inferiority complex. And McGreevey can expect fundraising assistance from President Clinton and the National Democratic Party who would like to see a Democrat return to the New Jersey statehouse to underscore the 1996 presidential victory and prepare for a strong 1998 effort in returning Congress to the Democrats.



*Janice Ballou is director, the
Center for Public Interest Polling,
Eagleton Institute of Politics,
Rutgers University*