



Grapevine Analysis: Gov. Guadagno? Or how about Attorney General Christie ... or future President Booker?

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Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno could become governor if Gov. Chris Christie finds a spot in Donald Trump's administration. - (AARON HOUSTON)

The 2016 presidential election is last week's news. At least it is in the how-am-I-doing-in-the-latest-polls world of politicians. So, as President-elect Donald Trump begins transitioning into the White House, three prominent New Jersey politicians are already thinking about the future.

NJBIZ talked with a number of business leaders, political operatives and elected officials about what the election means for Gov. Chris Christie, Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and U.S. Sen. Cory Booker. And while few would speak on the record (we get, it's too early to publicly pick sides), all had plenty to say.

The content of these items came with numerous interviews with business leaders, political insiders, elected officials and political powerbrokers. Due to the nature of the reports, some sources would only speak on condition of anonymity.

GOV. CHRIS CHRISTIE



Gov. Chris Christie is leading Donald Trump's transition team. - (OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR/TIM LARSEN)

Gov. Chris Christie has new life. He is charged with leading Trump's White House transition team, and those decisions in Washington, D.C., are likely to have a major ripple effect in Trenton and beyond.

The loyalty Christie showed to the bombastic and controversial Trump, sticking with him through several campaign low points while other Republicans cut and ran, will be remembered, said Rutgers-Eagleton Poll interim Director Ashley Koning.

"I think that will mean something to Trump in the end, in terms of giving him a place," Koning said.

Months ago, some speculated that support could have been enough to give Christie, a former U.S. Attorney, the chance to be the nation's next attorney general.

While Bridgegate might prove too tough of an obstacle to overcome for that scenario, it is likely, sources say, that Christie will have some role in a Trump administration offered to him.

“In five or six months, Bridgegate will be yesterday's news,” said John Boyd Jr., principal of the Princeton-based Boyd Co. “Trump genuinely likes, respects and trusts Christie. There should be a role for him in a Trump administration.”

Boyd said that, for Christie, the election was a “game-changer,” adding that the governor will also be “uniquely valuable” to Trump, as he understands how to govern in a polarized climate.

“Beyond what role he may have in a Trump administration, Christie will no doubt get a boost in stature with the Trump election,” said Boyd. “Christie was the first national GOP leader to endorse Trump. He was correct to sense where the electorate was and put his confidence in Trump to speak to that at a time when many of his peers in the party and so-called pundits and analysts underestimated him. Christie, unlike many others, was on the right side of that giant political wave.”

Another business source says that, while Christie is a sure bet to leave New Jersey, Bridgegate might still find a way to haunt him in Washington.

“Obviously, he's going to go to Washington,” the source said. “What would you rather do, work for the president for the next four years or be the most unpopular New Jersey governor ever for one? But here's where it gets tricky. With Bridgegate still looming, I think it will be hard to get through the confirmation hearing, even if it's controlled by the Republicans. So he needs to find a key position that doesn't need to be confirmed. What that is, I don't know. But he's not coming back here.”

LT. GOV. KIM GUADAGNO

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno may have a new life soon, too.

If Christie earns a spot in Trump's cabinet, as expected, Guadagno will become governor. Possibly before Trump is inaugurated.

The move would greatly enhance Guadagno's ability to get elected to the post next November.

“(It would) give her a head start for 2017,” Koning said.

Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind Poll Director Krista Jenkins agrees that, with name recognition being one of her challenges going into next year, serving as the state's governor for almost a year could help her chances.

“If she were to be elevated to the governor position, then that could sort of be of some benefit to her,” Jenkins said.

But how much that would actually move the dial is debatable, she added.

New Jersey is still a blue state that is overwhelmingly united in its current disdain for Christie.

"It would help her a little bit," Jenkins said. "I can't imagine it would do that much good."

The irony, of course, is that ahead of last Tuesday, Guadagno had attempted to publicly distance herself from Christie on matters such as his signing of the state's recent 23-cent-per-gallon gas tax hike and his unwavering support for Trump, whom she said she would not vote for following the leaking of video footage showing Trump making vulgar and inappropriate comments towards women.

Now, in a roundabout way, Trump's election might help her own chances at being elected the state's next governor.

"If there is an opportunity for the lieutenant governor to serve as an interim governor, (then) that can certainly be leveraged to her advantage in her prospects of being elected in 2017," said Boyd.

But Koning said the early odds are still against her, as Democrat Phil Murphy "has already had a very big start on the 2017 race."

"If she's going to really run, she's going to need all the time she can get," Koning said.

And Jenkins notes that the unforeseen wave of conservatism that turned several Democratic states Republican in last week's election is unlikely to resonate in New Jersey next year.

"I can't imagine it's going to do much," Jenkins said about how Trump's election will play in the Garden State. "I've never thought that what was going on at the national level was affecting New Jersey that much."

One political operative said that, strategically, an early promotion allows Guadagno to have an edge in the primary process, where she would likely meet Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli (R-Somerset) and other potential Republican candidates.

"It's a big deal," the source said. "Not only will she not have to run in a primary because she's the incumbent, being the incumbent will increase her power and exposure and will significantly increase her ability to fundraise. And she's going to need that."

But another business source says the pressure will be on Guadagno to hit a home run.

"Here's the deal, if she does get the office, and I think she will, she will have little time to do big things," said the source. "But she has to pull it off. She not only needs to show she has the presence for the office, and I think she does, but that she can be productive. Her expertise is supposed to be business, let's see what she probably has

been itching to do all these years while taking order from the governor. She has an uphill fight and if she stays the course, she'll have no chance."

U.S. SEN. CORY BOOKER



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker is the most popular politician in New Jersey, according to one insider. - (AARON HOUSTON)

In the 24 hours leading up to Election Day, pundits were busy writing obituaries for the Republican Party and opining on its future.

When Trump shocked the American electorate, the attention turned to Democrats, who all of a sudden appeared lost, disenfranchised and disorganized.

If last Tuesday has taught us any lessons, it's that beginning to speculate on 2020 already is a dangerous proposition that lacks any real sense of truth or direction.

"It's probably best if people kind of waited it out and see what shakes out," Jenkins said.

But as the Democratic Party looks for its next leader, New Jerseyans should take note that their own U.S. Sen. Cory Booker is already a name catching fire.

And while Booker campaigned furiously for Clinton, the election of the controversial and divisive Trump might open the door for the message of unity that he often employs.

"Cory Booker is the most influential Democrat in New Jersey," said Boyd.

"He is a fundraising superstar and has an ability to appeal to independents and moderate Republicans. Trump's win and Christie's role in it will surely present a national media platform for Booker to weigh in as a Trump administration and legislative agenda

develops. Booker will have an opportunity to become a new standard-bearer for the Democratic Party nationally.”

Koning agrees, saying his message was well-received as he “played a significant role on the campaign trail” for Clinton.

And polling shows he’s also well-received back home.

“Cory Booker is our most popular politician in the state right now,” Koning said.

While any potential candidacy of his may have to consider the balance of the U.S. Senate at the time, Koning said it’s likely he’s headed for a bigger role within the national party structure.

“His star will only rise from here,” Koning said. “I think the Democratic Party will need to look to figures like Cory Booker.”

One business source is far more bullish on Booker.

“He's not there to be senator for the rest of his life,” the source said. “His brand is so unique, as is his skill set. He's a unicorn, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny: He's a liberal, can reach across the aisle and be positive all at the same time.”

And that’s exactly what the Democrats might need to regroup from last week’s devastating loss.

“He is the fresh face the party needs and he's as well-positioned as anybody,” the source added. “He needs to put his mark on legislation, but that can be done, even though the Republicans control Congress. They need to show they are dealmakers, too.”