

How to defeat Chris Christie: Opinion

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Unlikely voters, along with newly registered voters, are the secret weapon that could lift Buono from an also-ran to a contender in November.



Gov. Chris Christie will be easier to defeat in November if

Democrats can rally voters to the polls to approve the referendum increasing the state's minimum wage. John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger

By Peter Dreier and John Atlas

Most pundits predict Gov. Chris Christie will win re-election by a landslide. But they have not factored in the election's sleeping giant: a ballot measure to raise the state's minimum wage.

If progressives and Democrats want to defeat Christie, their best bet is to focus resources on targeting "infrequent" voters who would be eager to vote to increase jobs and give themselves a raise. Those "infrequent" voters are disproportionately low-income, minority and young people and don't think that most elections make any difference, but will have a big stake in raising the minimum wage by a dollar an hour to \$8.25. If citizen groups and Democrats can get them to the polls to vote "yes" to raise the minimum wage, they are likely to vote for Barbara Buono, the Democrats' invisible candidate for governor.

Christie's outsized personality, pro-business agenda and high visibility (especially after his Hurricane Sandy embrace of President Obama), have helped him raise a huge war chest. His current **20 percent lead** over Buono in the polls has made many Democratic donors reluctant to support Buono, the former state Senate majority leader and first woman to hold that position.

But these polls, like many others, do not distinguish between “likely” voters and “unlikely” (or “infrequent”). This latter group, along with newly registered voters, is the secret weapon that could lift Buono from an also-ran to a contender in November.

Because inflation has eroded the \$7.25 federal minimum wage, the Legislature passed a bill to raise it to \$8.50 per hour and include annual cost-of-living adjustments based on the Consumer Price Index. After Christie vetoed it, Democrats countered by putting a \$1 minimum wage hike, to \$8.25, on the November ballot.

Raising the minimum wage is extremely popular not only among Democrats, but also independents and Republicans – nationwide and in New Jersey. A recent national poll found that most Americans think people who work full time should not be mired in poverty. In fact, **73 percent of voters** – including 50 percent of Republicans – want to see the minimum wage raised to \$10 an hour by 2014.

A Rutgers-Eagleton Institute **poll** in June found that 77 percent of registered New Jersey voters support a dollar-an-hour minimum wage increase, while only 18% oppose it.

Its popularity is not surprising. Common sense and the overwhelming evidence show an increase in the minimum wage benefits workers, **boosts the economy** and increases jobs.

Except for a small group of modern-day Ebenezer Scrooges, it’s obvious that mothers and fathers working 40 hours a week 52 weeks a year earning \$7.25 an hour in an expensive state can’t put food on the table and a roof over their children’s heads, and still have enough left for clothing and doctors’ bills. It translates into an annual salary of \$15,080, far below the **federal poverty threshold** of \$19,530 for a family of three, much less \$23,550 for a family of four.

Obama has proposed raising the federal minimum wage to \$9 an hour – and Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. George Miller (D-California) have proposed raising it to \$10.10 an hour – but neither hike is likely to pass so long as Republicans control the House.

In response to Congress’ intransigence, 19 states now have their own **minimum wage laws** set above the federal level. The highest is Washington state, where the minimum wage is \$9.19 an hour. In some states, voters have approved the wage increases, often by wide margins. In other states, the legislatures – responding to public opinion and grassroots lobbying – have passed the minimum wage boosts that include automatic cost-of-living escalators.

About 11 percent of New Jersey’s workforce – 429,000 people – would **benefit** from Jersey’s ballot measure.

Echoing the Chamber of Commerce line, Christie has come out against the wage hike for the working poor. He knows that it is popular, but he’s betting that some voters who vote for the wage hike will also vote for him.

That might be true of some “likely” voters (particularly Republicans and independents who support the wage increase but also support Christie), but it certainly isn’t true of most “unlikely” (or “infrequent”) voters, if they could be lured to the polls by the opportunity to vote to raise their own incomes.

In 2009, Christie beat incumbent Gov. Jon Corzine, 47.9 percent to 44.3 percent. (Independent Chris Daggett received 5.7 percent of the vote). Christie garnered 1,174,445 votes to 1,087,731 for Corzine. (Daggett got 139,579 votes). Voter turnout was a record low for a New Jersey governor’s race. Altogether 2,451,704 New Jerseyans out of 5,223,047 registered voters went to the polls – a turnout rate of only 47 percent, according to the Department of State. That means 2,771,343 people – 53 percent of all registered voters – stayed home that day rather than go to the **polls**.

The demographics of voters who are registered but don’t often vote – except in presidential elections – are well-known by political consultants and activists. They tend to be low-income, minority and young people. When they do vote, they tend to vote for Democratic candidates. The hard part is motivating them to vote, because many of them are alienated from mainstream politics and believe that most politicians don’t care about what they think.

So far, Buono has had a hard time getting visibility in her campaign to beat Christie. When she announced that Milly Silva – a veteran union activist who has spent her career improving conditions for low-wage health care employees – would be her lieutenant governor running mate, few daily papers gave it much ink (the New York Times didn’t even cover it) and few TV stations devoted camera crews to the news conference.

But the campaign to raise the state’s minimum wage provides Buono – and the Democratic Party activists and the environmental, labor, and community groups who want to see Christie defeated – with an opportunity to change the current dynamic.

Christie’s opposition to the wage hike should make it easy for Buono to highlight his close ties to the state’s business lobby groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey Restaurant Association and Wall Street. Buono could note that the opponents of the wage increase – like Christie and his wealthy corporate pals – who for years have been crying wolf when they claim that raising wages for people who clean our offices, wait on tables, bag our groceries and take care of our aging parents, will hurt the economy.

In fact, the most reliable studies show that raising the minimum wage by a dollar would boost the state’s struggling economy, by pumping \$276.1 million into the pockets of working families – most of which they will immediately spend on necessities such as food, rent, clothing and gas. This will have a significant ripple (or what economists call “multiplier”) effects throughout the economy. It would generate about \$175 million in additional economic activity in the state and add between 1,500 and 2,500 full-time jobs in 2014.

Grocery chains such as A&P, Shop Rite and Pathmark – whose unionized employees already get paid significantly more than the minimum wage – will reap the benefits of

consumers when they have more money to spend on food. Likewise, the tens of thousands of small retail stores around the state will sell more goods to customers with more discretionary income.

While conservative organizations and Republicans are pouring money into Christie's campaign coffers, businesses that pay poverty wages are funneling funds into a campaign to defeat the minimum wage ballot measure. The Employment Policies Institute, a front group for restaurant, hotel, tobacco and alcoholic beverage industries based in Washington, launched a half-million dollar ad buy against the minimum wage. The group specializes in "astroturf lobbying"—phony grassroots organizations for corporate clients.

But no matter how much money they spend on misleading TV and radio ads, it will be hard to convince a Wal-Mart employee, a building janitor or a mother of two children who has been working a McDonald's for five years and is still making \$7.25 an hour to vote against an \$8.25 an hour minimum wage with a cost-of-living adjustment. Even families with two minimum wage earners don't earn enough to pay the bills.

Buono and Silva should be traveling around the state doing media events with families struggling to make ends meet on their low incomes, proclaiming their support for the minimum wage raise.

But more media events aren't enough. The key to beating Christie in November is not what Buono does, but what her supporters do to reach out to many of the more than 2 million registered but "unlikely" voters to get them to vote to raise their own incomes and, by doing so, improving the state's economy. That means mounting a grassroots campaign among legions of union, environmental, community, faith-based and Democratic Party activists that includes door-knocking, phone-banking, rallies, and other activities designed to turn alienated citizens into active voters, not only in cities but also in many working class suburbs.

Many pundits find it difficult to understand why Christie is popular when so many of his public policies have been a disaster for a majority of New Jersey's families.

New Jersey has the seventh-highest unemployment and the second-highest percentage of mortgage loans in foreclosure in America. Property taxes have skyrocketed about 20 percent on his watch.

While New Jersey desperately needs to invest in infrastructure, housing and education, Christie cut taxes for multimillionaires.

He is wasting at least \$25 million in taxpayer money by holding a special U.S. Senate election in October, solely to avoid a large voter turnout by Democrats in the November election. But he siphoned off millions in Hurricane Sandy relief funds intended for storm victims to pay for TV ads that promoted himself, prompting a call for a federal investigation.

He plans to **divert** \$40 million from a recent settlement with Passaic River polluters intended to restore the blighted waterway to balance the state budget.

He declined to renominate Associate Justice John Wallace Jr, the only African-American on the New Jersey Supreme Court, and left vacant more than 50 seats on New Jersey courts, effectively denying the right to a fair and speedy trial. Christie pushed out the state's **public defender**, the only high-ranking African-American policy official in his administration.

He attacked teachers and public sector unions, dismissed concerns over climate change, and defeated a push by 180 environmental organizations to let New Jerseyans vote on a ballot measure to increase parks and other open spaces.

Christie shut down six Planned Parenthood clinics. He has failed to spend a federal grant of \$7.6 million aimed at educating families about the new Affordable Care Act's coverage options and how to access them. He vetoed a bill that would have provided health insurance to hundreds of thousands of the state's poor even though 100 percent of the funds would come from the federal government.

Combine all the above with Christie's out-of-step-with-New Jersey social policies, which attack the rights of women, gays, immigrants and civil rights, and you would think there would be genuine, progressive-led political insurrection.

Democrats should recall that Christie was put into office four years ago by a small slice of the electorate. He garnered only 22.5 percent (1.17 million out of 5.22 million) of all registered voters.

The best strategy likely to close the gap between Buono and Christie is to expand the electorate so that a significant number of those 2.7 million registered voters who stayed home four years ago – and many newly registered New Jerseyans who voted in the 2012 presidential elections but are less enthusiastic about this year's governor's race – show up at the polls on Nov. 5. They are the sleeping giant in this year's election. And the best bet to wake them up is a massive organizing effort around the minimum wage measure.

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