

Buono: Running Without Backing of Old-Boys Network

New Jersey's party-boss structure keeps women down, political experts say

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Christine Todd Whitman knows what it's like to be Barbara Buono.

Like the Democratic candidate for governor, Whitman knows what it's like to be way down in the polls, to have shaky support from a Senate president of her own party, and to have the national party hold back the money you need for TV ads because it looks like you aren't going to win.

Even more, New Jersey's only woman governor knows what it's like to have her administration dismissed -- by legislators from her own party -- as "the estrogen palace" and "the broads down the hall"; to have the media comment on her dress, hairstyle and femininity; and to try to figure out if her candidacy is being treated dismissively because she's a longshot, because she's a woman, or a combination of the two.

That's why the Republican Whitman, despite being a supporter of Gov. Chris Christie, was the only one on a panel of five former governors -- three Democrats and two Republicans -- brought together for a "Governor's Summit" in late May who had any words of encouragement for Buono.

"When I ran against Bill Bradley, I was given absolutely no chance," Whitman said, recalling her 1990 U.S. Senate race in which she was down 30 points in the polls in late September, about the same amount Buono trails Christie by today.

Whitman managed to turn the race into a referendum on Gov. Jim Florio's tax hikes, but she said "the Republican National Committee took away the last bit of money I needed for TV advertising." She lost by just 2 percent of the vote. Three years later, she came from 21 points down in September to oust Florio.

"You don't give up because the odds look overwhelming," Whitman said insistently.

Six weeks later, Buono still appreciates Whitman's advice, and the deeper into her campaign for governor she gets, the more she admires Whitman's accomplishment.

"Politics is very much an Old Boys Club, and as the first woman Democratic Party nominee to run for governor, some leaders weren't very accepting of my challenging them," said Buono, who jumped into the race for governor in early December while party bosses were still deciding which man to back.

"In the spirit of being brutally honest, I will say this: If you are forceful and a strong leader and you are a woman, they are more likely to see you as an inconvenient nuisance and not embrace your leadership, but if you're a male, they are going to try to take you into the fold and embrace you," Buono concluded.

Gender, Politics, Or Both?

Assessing the state of Buono's campaign and her rocky relationship with key party leaders, it is hard to determine how much of it is due to Buono's gender and how much to her stance as a dissident liberal in a deeply divided Democratic Party whose most important bosses, legislative leaders, and mayors are pragmatic centrists who are not averse to working with -- and even endorsing -- the popular macho governor she is running against, said Ingrid

Reed, a longtime New Jersey political analyst.

But no major party nominee for governor or U.S. Senate in modern New Jersey history has ever had to cope with such a deeply divided party or has been treated more disrespectfully in public by leaders of her own party as Buono, political experts agreed.

"One of the reasons they don't like her is they feel they can't control her," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "She's just too independent."

"It's tough for women in New Jersey. It's partially how our system works where to get elected you have to be beholden to party leaders and they don't want to lose control," Walsh said. Reporters from other states are incredulous when she tells them how much power party bosses still wield in New Jersey, where there are no open primaries, no network television news and TV advertising in the New York and Philadelphia markets is too expensive for candidates to make themselves known.

"If you want to watch what happens to a woman who stands up to them [the party bosses], look at the Buono race," Walsh said. As to muttered complaints that Buono is "too ambitious," Walsh says, "You tell me any person in the public arena who is trying to attain a high-level leadership position who isn't ambitious. Is Chris Christie? Barack Obama? Hillary? Ambition is seen as good in a man, but it's seen as bad in a woman."

Underestimating Women

Whitman said one of the biggest problems women face in trying to break through the glass ceilings of American politics is that "women tend to be underestimated as candidates."

"You're never part of the Old Boys Network, you're never anybody's first choice, and you know you're going to have to deal with a certain amount of sexism every step of the way," Whitman said in an interview -- just minutes after her unexpected words of encouragement for Buono at the May 30 summit at Newark's Performing Art Center had the invitation-only gathering of the state's political cognoscenti craning their heads to stare up at other governors on the dais.

Whitman's remarks came just two weeks after a bombshell Star-Ledger exchange in which former Democratic Gov. Brendan T. Byrne suggested that Buono consider dropping out "in favor of a better-positioned candidate" -- presumably a man, because New Jersey, unlike most states its size, has no woman in its U.S. Senate or House delegation -- and Republican Gov. Thomas H. Kean asserted that Buono got the nomination because "the able candidates in the Democratic Party all decided not to run."

"Barbara is a nice lady and I love her," Byrne had said dismissively of the first woman to serve as Senate majority leader and the first woman to serve as Senate Budget Committee chair. "But this is not the year for her."

That, of course, is what Republican Party leaders told Whitman in 1993, despite her near-upset of Bradley in 1990 that should have made her the party favorite to take on a Florio who looked very beatable, Walsh noted.

But Attorney General Cary Edwards, a popular former state assemblyman and counsel to Gov. Kean, was the choice of the party's Old Boys Network -- until Whitman beat Edwards soundly in the GOP primary and went on to defeat Florio.

During that campaign, then-Senate President Donald DiFrancesco (R-Union) provided little support for the Whitman campaign, which analysts viewed as a cold calculation that he would wield more power as the unchallenged leader of the Republican-controlled Senate with a politically weakened Democratic Florio as a lame-duck governor than he would playing second fiddle to a newly elected Republican Gov. Whitman.

This winter, current Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) traveled the state trying to find a Democratic alternative to Buono, whom he had pushed out as his Senate majority leader in 2011 after she refused to support his alliance with Christie to pass controversial legislation that not only increased public employee contributions to their pensions and health benefits, but also suspended collective bargaining on health benefits for four years.

Sweeney was so worried about a Buono candidacy that he even tried to recruit Sen. Richard Codey (D-Essex), the former governor whom he had ousted as Senate president in 2009 in a coup engineered with the backing of his

mentor, South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross, and Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo.

But that's where Norcross, who hates Codey bitterly, drew the line, launching a vitriolic attack on Codey and declaring that Buono was "a high-quality candidate and in the absence of anyone else, the party ought to rally around her and move forward."

"I've never seen a quote like that," said Walsh, director of the Center for the American Woman in Politics. "George Norcross's quote came across as 'Short of any other person breathing, she would be deserving of support.' It would be one thing if other candidates were willing to step up, but here nobody else was willing to run against Christie and they still couldn't bring themselves to back her."

Sweeney endorsed Buono and has raised money for her. But Norcross has subsequently made more public appearances with Christie -- with whom he has worked closely on charter schools, Camden police regionalization, and the merger of the state's medical schools into Rutgers and Rowan universities -- than he has with Buono. Meanwhile, DiVincenzo and Sen. Brian Stack, a Hudson County powerbroker, are among the three dozen Democratic Party officials who have broken ranks to endorse Christie.

"All other things being equal, would Joe Di or George Norcross stand up there and diss Barbara Buono if she wasn't a woman?" asked Brigid Harrison, political science professor at Monclair State University. "Maybe they didn't go all out for [former Democratic Gov. Jon] Corzine, but they didn't stand up and endorse the other guy."

Motivating Misogyny?

Harrison said she didn't know enough about the thinking of Democratic Party leaders "to say that misogyny motivated them," but she noted that the Christie administration and campaign "is much more of a machismo Old Boy structure than most," and "the rhetoric the governor uses" is macho and confrontational. "Democratic Party leaders have become very comfortable with that way of operating," she said.

She noted that Corzine had women like Maggie Moran and Deborah Howlett in very prominent roles, while "the Christie administration does not have a lot of women who are active participants, and it's the same in the campaign. Even the lieutenant governor is relegated to a menial role" away from the real action.

For Buono and other women candidates, talking about overcoming gender bias is seen as a sign of weakness, so they are reluctant to discuss it -- even years later. After listening to Whitman and a dozen of her top women aides and Cabinet officers play down the challenges they faced during a Rutgers conference in 2011, it was John Whitman, the former governor's husband, who exploded in exasperation that they did face "a very great gender bias that is tremendous and that basically, because you're women, you don't blame it. But if you were men [in a similar situation], you would."

Reed, former director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, said "what Whitman and other women have learned is that dwelling on gender bias in politics doesn't get you where you want to be. The impact is real, but you just have to move on."

For Buono, the most galling incident -- even more than former Gov. Byrne's comments -- was her demeaning appearance on MSNBC's "Hardball" with host Chris Matthews.

"Before I went on the show, he asked, 'Can I say you're attractive?'" Buono recalled, her voice shaking with anger months after the original incident. "I said, 'No, you can't.' Obviously, he was trying to make me feel marginalized, and it was fairly denigrating considering I was a gubernatorial candidate that he would feel comfortable saying that. It shows how much progress we haven't made."

What is most shocking to Walsh, Reed and Harrison -- and to Buono -- is the lack of progress New Jersey has made in electing women to higher office.

"New Hampshire has a woman governor, two women in the U.S. Senate, and a woman in their congressional seat," Buono noted.

While New Jersey ranks 11th in the nation in the percentage of women serving in its state Legislature, there is still a glass ceiling for higher office: New Jersey has not had a woman in Congress since Rep. Marge Roukema, a Bergen County Republican, retired from her House seat in the face of a challenge by Rep. Scott Garrett (R-N.J.) in

2002, and has never had a woman serve in the U.S. Senate.

"In New Jersey, you have to get in line working with the party leadership, and it's hard to get in line if you're not one of the boys," Reed commented.

The Feminine Minority

In 20 statewide elections dating back to 1982 when U.S. Rep. Millicent Fenwick (R-NJ), the pipe-smoking Somerset Hills reformer, became the first woman to win her party's nomination for statewide office, just six of the 40 major party candidates for governor or U.S. Senate have been women, including Buono.

Fenwick lost her toss-up race for the Senate to Frank Lautenberg, Montclair Mayor Mary Mochary lost her "sacrificial lamb" race to Bradley, and Whitman ran three times, nearly beating Bradley in 1990, edging Florio in 1993, and winning a close reelection contest against Woodbridge Mayor Jim McGreevey four years later.

It was while Whitman was running for governor that Buono met the woman whose success she would like to emulate.

"In New Jersey, we're not used to seeing a woman as a chief executive," Buono noted. "So when Christie Whitman ran, I was very excited. I was working on the Democratic campaign, but I took pride that a woman was running for governor.

"I remember to this day when she came to Metuchen to meet with the League of Women Voters. We're all Democrats, about 20 of us in the room, and she said, 'If you're serious about electing women to higher office and you agree with me on the issues, you should vote for me.'"

Whitman was a Republican moderate who was always good on women's issues, Buono noted. Whitman recently criticized Christie's veto of state funding for women's health planning services. Whitman's book critiquing the takeover of the GOP by the Republican Right was entitled "It's My Party Too."

"Now that I'm going through it, I am more impressed by what she was able to do," Buono said.

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