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Carl Golden

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If Christie can regain some credibility with Garden State residents, it will help the chances of a GOP candidate for governor -- Guadagno most of all

With three probables and two maybes warily circling one another while eyeing the 2017 Democratic gubernatorial nomination, Republicans have largely been left out of the speculation about who will be selected to succeed Gov. Christ Christie.

The growing sense that the governor's office is the Democrats' to lose has induced three legislators --Senate President Steve Sweeney (Goucester), Sen. Ray Lesniak (Union), and Assemblyman John Wisniewski (Middlesex); an urban mayor, Steve Fulop of Jersey Oty; and a millionaire, former Goldman Sachs executive Philip Murphy -- to move with varying degrees of seriousness toward securing the Democratic nomination.

Sweeney, because of the position he holds; Fulop, because of his strong Hudson County base; and Murphy, because he's reportedly willing to finance much of his campaign on his own, are the frontrunners, while Lesniak and Wisniewski are outside chances.

The absence of similar movement by Republicans suggests that many in the party believe a gubernatorial run next year is a kamikaze mission, that the party has been weakened to a point where mounting a credible, aggressive, and ultimately successful campaign is impossible.

Like vice presidents who nearly always automatically lead the roster of potential presidential candidates as their terms wind down, speculation has settled on Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno as the potential nominee who possesses some level of name re

The Republican brand became the Christie brand, its legitimacy rising or falling based on the governor's performance and popularity.

And, ever since his entrance into and departure from the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination after eight months, Christie has experienced a steep decline in public support as well as a loss of confidence in his ability to deal effectively with the state's problems.

Any potential Republican gubernatorial nominee -- but Guadagno in particular -- will be perceived as the

In all likelihood, the potential Democratic candidates will continue to attract the most attention as they jockey for inside position and play the media for all its worth.

While Democrats spend time and energy sniping at one another, Guadagno will benefit from a lower profile and establishing an image as quietly working on placing effective governance above partisan advantage.

Who knows? Perhaps she'll be the one to eventually snap the "give-the-other-side-a-chance" streak.