



CORZINE CONNECTS WITH COLLEGE CROWD

By **DAVID REBOVICH**

As if he isn't already busy enough these days, US Senator Jon Corzine found time to visit Rider University last Friday to speak about political participation and the upcoming elections to an excited and appreciative audience of 350 students, faculty and staff. This on top of the already serious responsibilities that New Jersey's senior Senator has. Representing the Garden State and advocating the interests of folks from the northeastern region are not easy tasks when you're a Democrat in a national government dominated by Republicans. As a former CEO of Goldman Sachs and his party's resident expert on financial matters, Sen. Corzine is regularly called upon by the national media to weigh in on economic and tax issues. And, in his position as chair of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, the Senator has traveled the nation recruiting candidates, raising money, and developing strategy for this year's elections.

Nonetheless, Sen. Corzine was willing to embrace yet another challenge, one that lots of politicians would rather avoid because of the perceived limited political payback. That challenge is trying to politically engage young people. Except for the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States was involved in Viet Nam, this has not been an easy task for politicians or political scientists. It entails convincing 18 to 24 year olds, the age cohort least likely to vote, that their political leaders are sincerely interested in what they have to say about the political system and specific policy issues. But to make political participation seem compelling, leaders must also explain the relevance of a variety of policy issues -- not just the obvious ones or those in the headlines - to young people's lives. Politicians can further encourage participation by the young by pointing out the long-term consequences of sitting on the sidelines and letting others decide who will lead the nation.

At Rider, Sen. Corzine was successful on all three counts. Not because he pulled rank, wowed the audience with insider stories, or played the role of policy wonk. Corzine won over the largely student audience by empathizing with their frustrations with politics, by offering a candid, nonpartisan appraisal of issues and leaders, and by explaining how young people can begin to address their concerns about their own lives and the larger society. The first step in the latter

process requires them to recognize that they must start thinking and behaving like stakeholders in America. In making these points and operationalizing them, Sen. Corzine - a relatively newcomer to elected politics himself - demonstrated his own continued development as a representative, a leader, and a political educator.

What exactly is on the minds of college students these days? Not surprisingly, 18 to 24 year olds have political views that are not so different from those of the general public in this region. As such, more college students in New Jersey are likely to identify with the Democrats, not so much because of any strong ties to the party but because of the Democrats' liberal views on such issues as a women's right to choose, gun control, and civil liberties and their historic support for education, a clean environment, and equal opportunity. But there is no evidence that most college students - at Rider or elsewhere - agreed, for example, with the broadside attack of the establishment offered by Howard Dean. After all, for many students a main reason for attending college is to become part of the establishment as professionals and leaders.

This does not mean that today's college students simply mimic their elders. But it does mean that it's naive to assume that young people swallow whole the "political correctness" foisted on them by the media or their liberal professors. Instead, as a group 18-24 year olds are indeed concerned about their own future and the nation's but are conflicted about a number of issues and which party, if either, has the better answers. Today college students are worried about the war in Iraq, how to best battle terrorism in the long and short runs, the need for security and the preservation of civil liberties, how to encourage economic growth and jobs opportunities, and achieving social justice while wondering how to pay the bills.

Sen. Corzine seemed to intuitively understand all this about college students, and this understanding influenced the way he approached his task of engaging them. Many political operatives today recommend that the best way to attract young folks - in fact, anyone - to your party and its candidates is by focusing on the one or two issues that those young folks find most important. This one-or-two issue approach is appealing because of its simplicity and efficiency. Complex platforms often bore people or sound like baloney to the politically disaffected. And communicating complex platforms can be time-consuming and expensive.

This election season it does seem that the Democrats, as the outside party in Washington, can score points with a number of citizens who have one or more complaints about the Bush Administration or the condition of the country. But even if targeting young people based on their views on a few issues does pull some to the polls this November, it will not necessarily connect them to the political process or to one's party in any permanent way. At Rider Sen. Corzine showed himself to be more concerned with the larger, more complicated and noble project of connecting young people to the political process rather than simply getting their support at the polls this fall.

Sen. Corzine's approach began with coming clean about why most politicians do not pay attention to 18-24 year olds. The latter vote at lower rates than older citizens. Thus, candidates

spend more time on the campaign trail talking about "adult issues" - like Social Security, Medicare, and taxes - that don't seem to directly effect, and rarely excite, young people. But why not follow the advise of those operatives who recommend focusing on one or two "young people's" issues to try to get them on your side? Because college students are not easily duped and regard pandering as one of the big problems with present-day politics. As such Sen. Corzine recognizes the need to talk to young people about several policy issues, to explain the complexity of the federal government's agenda and its important existing commitments, and how many issues - perhaps more than students realize - will effect them today and in the future.

While reminding the audience that he is certainly a partisan Democrat who has some definite views on most policy matters, Sen. Corzine was not concerned about selling his views or those of his party to the students. He was more interested in convincing them of the value and practical necessity of becoming involved in the political process. Sen. Corzine said, "This is as important an election as there has been in your lifetime." While candidates often like to talk about the past, "Elections are really about the future," Corzine noted. Preparing for November's important presidential and congressional elections, Americans need to have "a national debate" on several issues and college students need to participate in that debate.

According to Sen. Corzine, issue areas that deserve the attention of young people are international relations, budget and tax policies, jobs and trade, civil liberties, the make-up of the US Supreme Court, and the use of science in government decision-making. Corzine called for serious debates about the doctrines of preemption and containment, the relationship between means and ends in foreign policy, and the strengths and weaknesses of unilateralism versus multilateralism. On budget and tax policy, he pointed out that mandated expenditures and low revenues made discretionary programs like Pell grants, National Science Foundation grants, urban redevelopment programs and affordable housing programs, as well as investment in infrastructure and education, subject to cuts. Concerned about everyone having a shot at the American dream, Corzine cited the need for discussions about how to make higher education affordable and whether the federal government has enough revenue or should consider changing its tax policies.

On the economy, jobs and trade, the Senator called the current debate in Washington and on the campaign trail "vacuous." He suggests considering government's investment in people - through direct spending and tax credits for education and job training - as components of a long-term economic development strategy. Young people may also want to think about how the Patriot Act affects civil liberties and how to reconcile the tension between the need for security and liberty. In addition, during the next presidential administration three or four Supreme Court justices may retire, leaving the president with the ability to influence the make-up of the high court for years to come. Sen. Corzine noted that in the future the Supreme Court will likely hear cases on women's rights, privacy issues, and worker and product safety, issues important to most Americans.

Sen. Corzine wasn't completely neutral. He warned about how the current presidential

administration "manipulates science" to serve ideology and has otherwise mismanaged information - think about the intelligence on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction - in its decision-making. The result can be bad, irrational and even disastrous public policies. Sen. Corzine insists that candor, information and input from several sources, and careful analysis mark government decision-making. Indeed, the Senator gave candid answers to students' questions, even some delicate political ones, last Friday. While he has endorsed John Kerry for President, Corzine admitted that he is troubled by the Massachusetts Senators' flip-flops on a few issues. When asked about what he would do to keep more American jobs from being outsourced overseas, Sen. Corzine said that he did not have an easy answer to this important question.

Some conventional politicians might think that the Senator should have simply told his audience what they wanted to hear. But Corzine instead told the college students at Rider that he stands for the kind of politics that citizens really want and deserve. That's a politics in which leaders show that they respect citizens' interests and concerns and want people to be included in a rational, fact-based approach to policy-making. To college students who are taught to respect the views of others, to consider multiple sources of information, to use accepted analytical techniques, and to substantiate conclusions with evidence and sound arguments, the Senator's approach to politics and policy making surely was appealing. In essence what Sen. Corzine told these college students is that the American political system today needs people just like them to participate so that the government can be more representative and perform more effectively. That's a nice compliment and a winning argument on any college campus and, one suspects, on any street corner in America these days.

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