

INSIDER NJ



GENERAL ELECTION 2021



STORMY TIMES & STATIC POLITICS

Tempestuous times that include a fatal pandemic, the storming of the U.S. Capitol by right-wing insurrectionists, and a tropical storm that killed 30 New Jerseyans have contributed little apparently in the end to galvanize the 2021 election cycle.

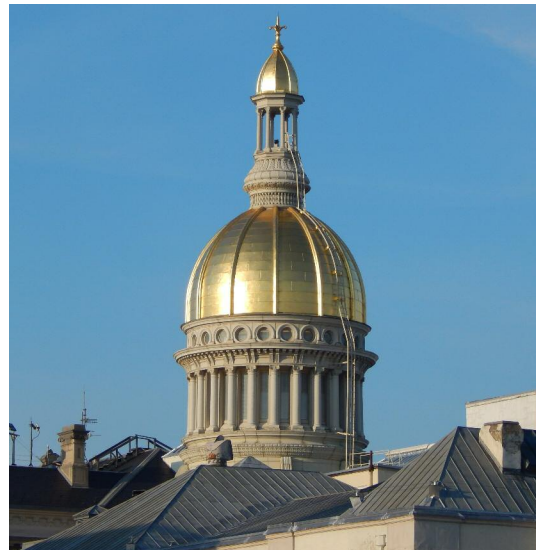
On one level it feels odd, this disconnect between real terrors on the ground and a languid political environment, but people truly seem exhausted by it all.

It's understandable.

The back-to-back demagogic eras of Chris Christie and Donald Trump contributed to a weakening of the NJGOP, culminating this year with the retirement from state government of Senator Tom Kean, Jr., Senator Kip Bateman, and Senator Chris Brown. The last report from the state Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) shows incumbent Democratic Governor Phil Murphy with a 7-1 cash advantage over Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli (\$7.3 million to \$1.2 million).

We have gone through so much lately that the typically lurid and petty strains of politics fail to penetrate with any kind of motivating meaning.

Incumbents and their highly paid consultants will say the mood has to do with a job well done – nothing need change with so much going right. Such a statement seems preposterous until one examines those pandering forces on the opposing side, seldom able to move with-



out placating extremist devotees of former President Donald J. Trump.

It adds up to a kind of perfect storm of cynicism and complacency, assisted by a substantially depleted media in this state since the last highly contested gubernatorial contest in 2009, which starkly threatens our representative democracy. Regardless of whom you support in this election cycle, Democrat or Republican, or a third-party candidate, the time has come to take our primary documents in hand as citizens, and ensure, each in his own way, a contribution of substance and thoughtfulness.

Let us commit to restoring our civic discourse; only then can we ensure an intellectual rigor in our public square now absent, and a future now so gravely uncertain.

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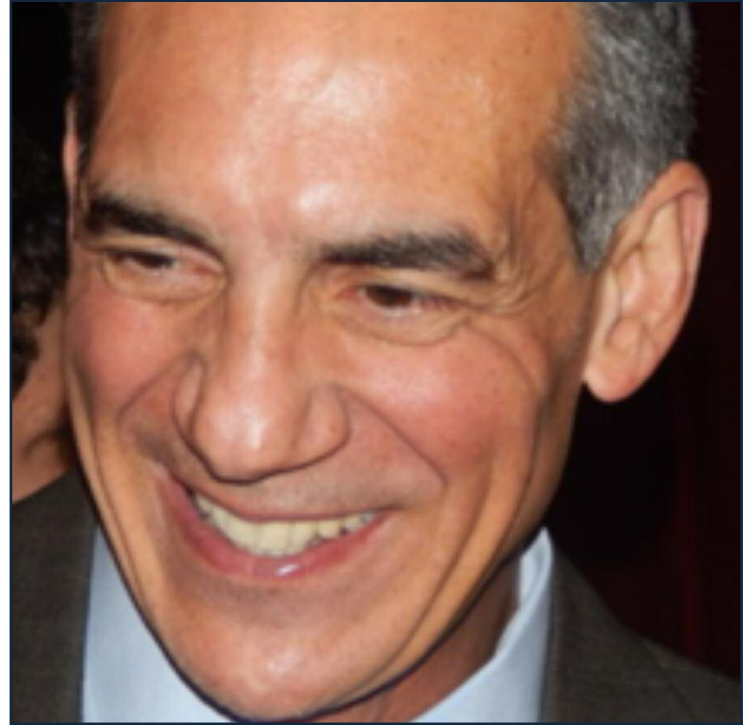
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Ten Main 2021 Torque Points

LD8

Confident of two more years on the leadership throne, state Senate President Steve Sweeney wants to protect state Senator Dawn Addiego in battleground LD8 (57K registered Democrats to 48K registered Republicans) as a way of ensuring the appearance of South Jersey robustness. Of course, if she loses, he will also have the assurance of being able to blame incumbent Governor Phil Murphy, who occupies the top of the Democratic ticket this year. Still, battleground senate contests ultimately fall on Sweeney's shoulders.

LD2

If Sweeney loses Addiego, he can save face by picking up Democratic

Party ally Vince Mazzeo as the replacement for retired Republican Senator Chris Brown. Mazzeo's rival Vince Polistina, an engineer with public contracts, presents a bigger target for Sweeney and company than Addiego's opponent, former BurlCo Sheriff Jean Stanfield. Moreover, Democrats comprise a bigger share of registered voters than Republicans (57,280 to 39,745).


LD16

The retirement this year of incumbent Republican state Senator Kip Bateman and trending demographics (LD16 now has nearly 20K more registered Democrats than Republicans – 60K to 41K) give Democrats a shot at picking up another seat

here. Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker (D-16) faces former U.S. Rep. Mike Pappas (R) in the battle to succeed Bateman. Zwicker has already gone on record in support of reupping Senate President Sweeney, but if a future regional caucus fight develops he will side with home county Middlesex.

Statewide

Significant turbulence in the lives of regular New Jerseyans contributes to a sense of the unknown heading toward the Nov. 2nd general election, but most polls show Governor Phil Murphy winning reelection without too much trouble (just look at the cash on hand advantage for the duration, not to mention the registra-

A photograph of a man and a woman smiling and embracing each other. The man is on the left, wearing a maroon polo shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. They are outdoors near a body of water with trees in the background.

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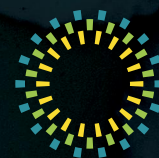
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tion advantage for Democrats). Certainly, it comes down to turnout, and Democrats shudder (only slightly) at the prospect of voters falling asleep and giving Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli a chance to claw some votes. If Murphy wins, as most suspect he will, the margin of victory will say a lot about the condition of the minority party in this state. While he occupies the unenviable position of trying to negotiate a party split by Republicans who back Trump and those of Bateman-Bramnick disgusted by the former President, the former Assemblyman has mostly tried to package himself as a pragmatic moderate. To date, he has spent \$8.9 million to Murphy's \$5.6 million, according to

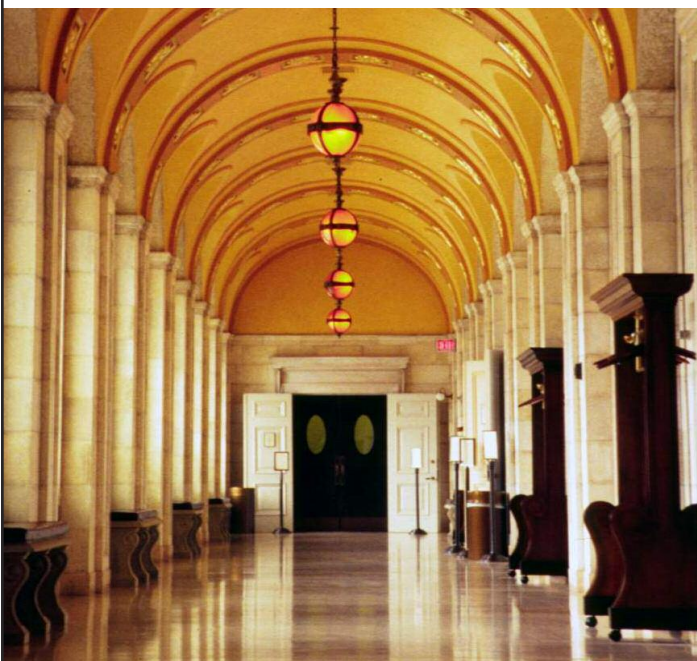
the state Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC). His selection of former Senator Diane Allen – herself a raging moderate – said as much. If Murphy buries Ciattarelli, the Republican will animate those Republican allies of Trump who will find a way to say he wasn't tough enough and lacked the capacity to provide sufficient contrast with the incumbent. A double-digit lose by Ciattarelli will no doubt reawaken the backers of Phil Rizzo and Hirsh Singh (both defeated in the GOP Primary). Depending on how redistricting goes for Republicans, look for a potential return too by former Republicans State Committee Chairman Doug Steinhardt, who made the redistricting picks for his

party and aborted his own Trump-flavored run for governor.

Somerset

Over a decade ago, Somerset County Democratic Committee Chairman Zenon Christodoulou put his car in gear in a Manville parking lot and said, "We need a freeholder seat." They didn't have one back then. Now, Christodoulou and Chair Peg Schaffer and their party have all five of them, though we no longer call them "freeholder" seats. In 2021, Democratic Party running mates Commissioner Shanel Robinson and Sarah Sooy will attempt to defend against Republican challengers Mike Kirsh (a Bridgewater Councilman)

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and Amber Murad (a Watchung Board of Education member). If both or one were to lose, Democrats would still maintain a 3-2 or 4-1 edge on the commission. But times have changed since Schaffer and Christodoulou initially occupied leadership positions in the county once dominated by the Batemans and Frelinghuysens. They enjoy an 85.5K to 60K registration advantage over their Republican rivals in a county where liberal Phil Murphy defeated Kim Guadagno in 2017 by two percentage points, and where Democrat Tom Malinowski in 2018 beat incumbent Republican U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance 55K to 46K and then, as the incumbent in 2020, beat Republican challenger Tom Kean 73K to 65K. In 2016, Lance had beaten challenger Peter Jacob, who lacked Malinowski's resources and the runway provided by the Trump midterm by 59K to 50K in Somerset, and Janice Kovach by a margin of 34K to 22K). Daunting territory for Dems as recently as 2009, when GOP challenger Chris Christie beat incumbent Democratic Governor Jon Corzine 57K to 35K in Somerset, those numbers have been vigorously sliding in the Democrats' direction going back at least to Christie's second term, the Bridgegate scandal, and Trump's demagogic tour of the White House. This is the first true test of the party's defensive strength here, with Republicans downcast by recent years and de-

pleted, but intent on taking advantage of missteps at the federal level, some buyers' remorse over the Murphy Administration, by Kirsh's reckoning, and the home county candidacy of former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli. Will it be enough for

the GOP to get back in gear here? It will be tough. The trendlines, numbers and overall energy remain on the Democrats' side in a county where Democrats now dominate – enough to send a force like Bateman into 2021 retirement.



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LD25

Past recent close contests and shifting demographics in Morris County (the GOP still maintains an edge on paper: 53K to 50K) during the Trump era make this contest one to watch as state Senator Tony Bucco (R-25) expects to stare down Democratic challenger Jeff Grayzel. The trend suggests LD26 could be the new LD16, as long as the specter of Trump threatens to hijack utterly the Republican brand. But Bucco is a strong name in LD25.

LD11

Democrat Vin Gopal retired Republican incumbent Senator Jen Beck in 2017, and now looks to hold onto his seat here to maintain the Democrats' grip on a Monmouth senate seat. A party builder and former Monmouth County Democratic Party chairman, Gopal is also viewed as a future statewide candidate. If he can hold onto his battleground seat (he and his running mates made the 11th a Democratic-leaning district – 53K to 38K) – and do it in style – he strengthens the case for future deployment in tougher, bigger contests.

LD39

Having assumed the seat this year of the late Gerald Cardinale, Senator Holly Schepisi (R-39) looks to galvanize Republicans in a district always eyeballed as undiscovered country by Democrats. Democrats

have a slight edge in registration here (50K to 48K) but unaffiliated and independent voters lean R. Like Gopal, Shepisi is seen as a star in her party and a future candidate for statewide office.

LD21

The retirement of state Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean, Jr., creates an opening in the district for long-serving Assembly Republican Leader Jon Bramnick (R-21) to go to the senate, while opening the possibility of new leadership in both the senate and assembly Republican caucuses (see Players). This is not a cakewalk for Bramnick, where damage during the Trump years could put the 21st in play (the GOP lags 45K to 50K to Democrats in raw registered voters) for Democratic Party challenger Roselle Park Mayor Joe Signorello. But the incumbent fairly inoculated himself from splash by opposing the president during Trump's tenure, and – based on his 2019 reelection performance – seems to have scared away more seasoned challengers this year.

MURPHY VERSUS MCAULIFFE

The statewide races in New Jersey and Virginia provide a gauge for President Joe Biden heading toward the 2022 midterm election. Both Democratic governors in those states are also auditioning for national office, thereby unavoidably generating

friendly rivalry buzz.

Consider this from InsiderNJ columnist Carl Golden:

“Murphy appears better positioned than McAuliffe, holding a lead ranging from nine points to 13 points over Republican Jack Ciattarelli, a narrowing of his margin but, at the moment, a fairly comfortable edge.

“While a McAuliffe loss would deliver a body blow to Democrats, a Murphy defeat would be seismic, irrefutable proof that Biden's perceived missteps, blunders and faulty messaging runs so deep that voters took out their displeasure and frustrations on the closest Democratic target.

“Even a split outcome — a McAuliffe defeat and a Murphy victory — bodes ill for Democrats.

“Republicans will blame a Democratic loss in Virginia as an unmistakable sign that the Biden Administration has lost the trust and confidence of the American people. It is, they'll argue, a repudiation of the Biden record of the debacle of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan, its stunning inept handling of the unprecedented immigrant surge at the southern border, and most recently his surrendering to the far-left progressives in Congress in the dispute over his \$4.5 trillion infrastructure package.”



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Sweeney's Main Battlefronts

Diving into LD2 & LD8

A lack of drama pervades the legislative races, where Republicans occupy too distant a position behind their Democratic rivals to do anything relevant let alone significant. The gaps in both houses – 25-15 in the state senate and 52-28 in the assembly – put majority Democrats out of danger.

As much as Republicans want to believe incumbent Democratic Governor Phil Murphy will drag on down-ballot allies, no evidence jumps out to confirm this. In fact, all polling of the top-of-the-ticket contest between Murphy and his opponent, former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, shows a double-digit lead for the Democrat.

So, what does it mean for legislative contests this year?

There are really only two of them on the senate side (there are arguably a few others, LD16 among them, see **Torque Points**, but in terms of true, go-for-broke competitiveness, there are two).

Two out of 40 districts.

The third or fourth represent head fakes by one party to get the other to commit resources and thereby distract the opponent from the main theater of operations.

Legislative districts 2 and 8 represent the main battlegrounds this year, both of them seats that fall within the domain of state Senate President

Steve Sweeney (D-3), who does not want to appear to lose ground in South Jersey, the key to his statewide power.

Republicans want to rattle LD11 enough to make Democrats there nervous enough to prevail on Sweeney if it begins to look rough; while Republicans maintain an eye on LD39 in the event of a Democratic sneak attack.

But these theaters represent dummy parachute landings behind enemy lines.

The real contests fall within 2 and 8, and between the two of them right now, eight carries the most competitive weight.

LD2

The contest features a fight for the open seat created by the retirement of state Senator Chris Brown (R-2), and pits Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo (D-2) against former Assemblyman Vince Polistina (R-2).

Polistina ran for the senate seat once before, back in 2011, against the late state Senator Jim Whelan (D-2), who beat him 53-47%. Mobilizing substantial amounts of money behind Whelan, Democrats painted Polistina, of Egg Harbor Township, as a public dime engineer with few distinguishing marks on his public service record. So far, in their effort to elect Mazzeo, Democrats have employed the same messaging against their perennial foe.

Polistina, for his part, objected to Sweeney's decision not to seat him in the vacant senate seat, arguing that constituents in the 2nd should have the benefit of a seated replacement for Brown. Critics in his own party say he spent too much time irritated by the senate president's Machiavelian moves at the statehouse, and not enough early precision aggression on rival Mazzeo.

Long seen as a GOP star, book smart Polistina may find a tougher and slipperier foe in Mazzeo than a single appalling debate performance by the Democrat suggests. Mazzeo, say sources, shouldn't be underesti-

mated. Not the most articulate politician, he nonetheless built significant goodwill as an authentic Atlantic County character: as the mayor of Northfield, and as a grocer and routine deliverer of fruit baskets.

Republicans see him as a tool of the Camden County Democratic Organization, and no doubt before the end of the contest, Polistina will find a way to level the same charge against his Democratic opponent. The engineer's allies want him to riff more steadily on the plight of out-of-work casino workers in Atlantic City.

Perhaps he will as the race tightens in the closing days, but right now sources in both parties say Mazzeo leads his rival, in part on the strength of incumbent Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small's local effort, and owing to the absence from the contest of opportunistic organizer Craig Callaway, who last year helped Republican Congressman Jeff Van Drew (R-2) defeat Democrat Amy Kennedy with a pinpointed GOTV effort.

The dynamic could change if Polistina animates his campaign, but given the paucity of real contests anywhere else, and the significance of the outcome for Sweeney, Democrats will likely deploy a cyclone of negative ads to swamp the Republican before he can make himself heard.

Mazzeo, of course, could always open his mouth at the wrong moment and emit another disastrous "white out" comment, but remember: he survived the year he made that stumbling gaffe, and his allies will all but bubble-wrap him for the duration of this cycle.

Advantage: Mazzeo.

LD8

This contest represents Sweeney's other priority this campaign season.

State Senator Dawn Addiego (D-8) wants to win reelection against Republican challenger Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield (R-8).

Despite the fact that Sweeney and company will drop substantial resources in here to protect her and insulate the organization from the humiliation of a loss, Addiego has significant trouble here.

A former sheriff, Stanfield also offers voters the consistency of serving her career in the same party.

Addiego is a former Republican who changed from "R" to "D" around the time Van Drew changed from "D" to "R".

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Republicans know their best shot of picking up a seat this year rides on the candidacy of Stanfield.

They are in the middle of an effort to depict the incumbent as a flip-flopper with no principles.

“Who is the real Dawn Addiego?” reads a piece of mail that hit the district last week.

“Switched political parties and sold out to the Camden power bosses funding her campaign; accepted over 350 lavish gifts and meals from lobbyists seeking to influence her vote. It’s time for Dawn to Addie-Go.”

Democrats will just as vigorously and viciously attempt to brand Stanfield a tool of former President Donald Trump.

But Stanfield, who has countywide bonafides, stood up to that campaign two years ago when she secured her assembly seat.

Former LD7 Senator Diane Allen offers another weapon to the campaign.

Democrats could never beat Allen.

When she retired, they finally picked up her senate seat.

But this year she returned as the running mate of Republican gubernatorial nominee Jack Ciattarelli, and if the establishment anticipates little to no disturbance in the formation of

legislative power, Allen’s BurlCo presence on the ballot this year could help Stanfield down ballot.

The bottom line is Republicans will be motivated to seek revenge on Addiego for abandoning them, while Democrats don’t enjoy any deep loyalty from the senator.

Against a candidate of the quality of Stanfield, who weathered the worst attacks in 2019, it adds up to trouble for Democrats here.

Advantage: Stanfield.

LD11 and LD39

The Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) last week announced a new six-figure paid media campaign in what it described as “key legislative races ahead of New Jersey’s November elections.”

According to a press release, the new ads highlight “the stark contrast” between radical Democrats who will keep New Jersey the most taxed state in the nation by following the failed playbook of the extreme liberals in Washington, and the common-sense conservatives running against them to put families first once again. The committee’s total investment in the Garden State in 2021, inclusive of this new advertising blitz, is now nearly \$700,000.

“New Jerseyans are tired of seeing extreme liberal politicians go to Trenton election after election to hike their taxes, kill their jobs, and make

their families less safe — all to try to appease their national party bosses,” said RSLC Deputy Director Edith Jorge-Tuñón. “The hardworking people of New Jersey know they deserve better, and will vote this November to reject the failed policies of the Democrat-controlled Trenton and instead choose commonsense-conservative leadership being offered by the strong Republican candidates in these key districts.”

The RSLC’s new campaign will target the Assembly seats in LD-2, Assembly seats in LD-11, and the Senate seat in LD-8. It comes as internal statewide polling in New Jersey shows President Biden five points underwater, that the majority of New Jerseyans believe the state is on the wrong track, and that 70 percent of New Jerseyans have thought about moving outside of the state for a lower tax burden.

Sources in both parties describe the GOP move as a way to get Sweeney, and presumably state Senator Vin Gopal (D-11) substantially shaken to spend more money so the GOP can focus everything on LD8.

That said, all these districts in question are competitive on paper, and will require substantial resources, indeed almost the entire concentration of resources in this legislative campaign cycle, to either hold or deny.



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Zwicker v. Pappas: The Fight for Bateman's LD16 Senate Seat

LD-16 in central Jersey is a bit unusual.

It's one of the few split districts in the state. The two assembly members are Democrats and the senator is a Republican.

Whether that breakdown remains will be determined Nov. 2.

The intriguing race is for the Senate, where Republican Kip Bateman is retiring.

Democrat Andrew Zwicker (pictured, top), who is now in the Assembly, wants to "move up" and replace him.

Zwicker brings uncommon credentials to Trenton, he is a physicist at the Princeton Plasma Physics Lab.

The Republican candidate, Michael Pappas, also has an interesting background. He served two years in Congress in the late 1990's. Former members of Congress don't always run for state Legislative seats.

The Bateman name is held in high esteem in the district thanks to both the retiring incumbent, Kip, and his late father, Ray Bateman.

At a Sept. 22 debate, Pappas said his support for a religious exemption to

vaccine mandates is precisely the position of Kip Bateman.

Zwicker is a fan of Kip Bateman as well.

"He showed what thoughtful and bipartisan legislation and politics looked like," he said of the retiring senator.

That type of thinking probably helped Bateman survive in a district that is growing more Democratic. Republicans are now outnumbered by about 21,000 voters in a district that includes parts of Hunterdon and Somerset counties and one town

each in Mercer (Princeton) and Middlesex (South Brunswick).

All things being equal, the Democratic registration seems to make Zwicker the favorite.

And that's probably why the debate between the two unfolded with Zwicker avoiding attacks and Pappas being the aggressor.

Zwicker's opening statement stressed his support for clean air and water and for preserving open space. Nothing controversial about that.

Pappas took a different approach, talking about how the pandemic has devastated New Jersey and how Zwicker by his silence has done nothing to oversee the broad powers of the governor.

As Republicans are wont to do, Pappas brought up the thousands of New Jerseyans who have died in nursing homes. He said an investigation is definitely needed by the state. The federal government, in fact, has an ongoing investigation into nursing home deaths.

Zwicker agreed that an investigation is needed, but stressed that nothing about dealing with a pandemic that last occurred 100 years ago is easy.

"The governor had to make some very difficult decisions," he said.

Property taxes are always a hot topic

in New Jersey and this debate was no exception.

Pappas asserted that Zwicker is responsible for increasing property taxes. This really is a hard argument to make, considering that property taxes are levied by local governments, not the state.

Pappas explained that Zwicker's support for such "unfunded mandates" as body cameras for police officers contribute to rising property taxes. Pappas vowed to support no unfunded mandates.

School taxes make up the biggest chunk of property taxes throughout the state.

So, how about consolidating districts?

Zwicker said he wants to "incentivize" districts to merge.

Pappas didn't disagree, but stressed that any such mergers have to be vol-

untary, not compelled by the state. Time for some cynicism. Without the state forcing the hands of school districts to merge, nothing will happen.

There were no sharp, or passionate, disagreements during the debate. But there was a minor dustup.

Zwicker was stressing the need to respect each other's views when it came to the pandemic.

"We have to do what's right for each other – stop politicizing masks and vaccines," he said.

Pappas quickly responded that Zwicker fails to do that himself. He asserted that Zwicker gave a dismissive gesture to people demonstrating in Trenton because he disagreed with them.

He said Zwicker's "attitude was not one of a leader."

Zwicker let the comment pass.



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LD25 Flashpoint: Trying to Find Drama without a Debate

Scan the events calendar of the New Jersey League of Women Voters these days and you'll see myriad debates scheduled throughout the state.

Over the next two weeks, for example, the league is sponsoring debates for county commissioner in Monmouth, township committee in Chatham Township, school board in Fair Lawn and state legislators in LD-11.

But for the second year in a row, a debate in Morris County involving the league's Mountain Lakes chapter will not occur.

Last year, it was a borough council debate that never happened; this year it's a LD-25 faceoff.

This is a traditionally-Republican district, but voter registration numbers are getting closer, which makes it an intriguing legislative race to watch.

The GOP incumbents are Sen. Anthony M. Bucco and Assembly members Aura Dunn and Brian Bergen.

The Democrats are Jeff Grayzel for senate and Lauren Barnett and Patricia Veres for assembly.

The local league began working on the debate in August, but things never came together.

When I ran into Bucco at a recent event, he said he had no intention of doing a league debate.

He did one last year, and there was a problem. Bucco said he was told his name tag – this was a virtual debate – could not include the title “senator.” That does seem odd. Being a senator is a public position and it's certainly one all voters should be reminded of.

Bucco's reluctance ended any possible senate debate this year.

As for the assembly, Dunn said it was a scheduling issue more than anything else. She said one date suggested by the league, Oct. 5, coincided with the lieutenant governor's debate. Who would want to miss that?

More seriously and more generally, many Republicans see the officially non-partisan League of Women Voters as leaning left. So, it's no real surprise that some Republicans may not be anxious to take part in a league debate.

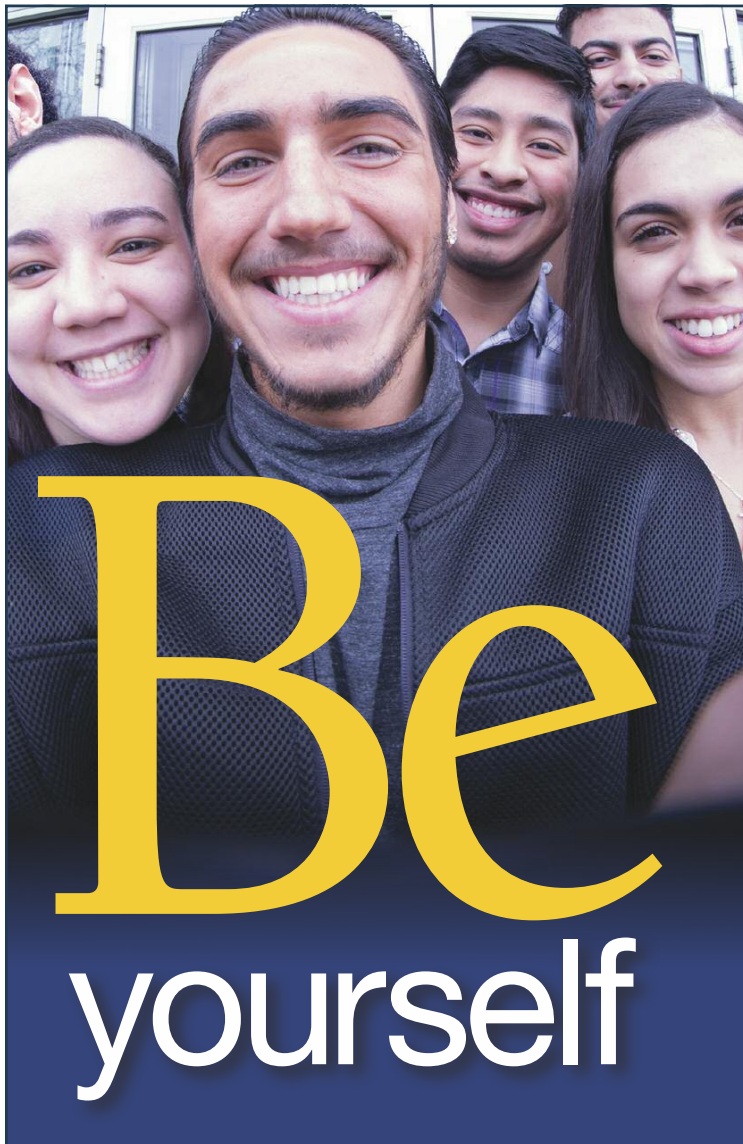
Democrats in the district reacted the way you'd expect.

Sarah Carlson, the campaign manager for the Democrats' LD-25 team, fired off the following.

"It's disappointing to hear that Trump's team in Trenton, Senator Bucco and Assembly Members Bergen and Dunn, can't be bothered to give voters a chance to hear from them before the election. It's clear that they are hiding from the fact that they

can't defend their extreme record of putting children's health and safety at risk by protesting COVID safety measures in schools, failing to condemn Trump for provoking insurrectionists that resulted in the deaths of police officers, and voting to take away a woman's right to choose."

Linking all Republicans to Trump is standard Democratic fare these days, but you wonder if the former president is really going to have any impact on a legislative race.



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The just-concluded weekend brought some traditional campaigning with Bucco and the GOP team visiting street fairs and festivals.

Democrats had an event with Rep. Mikie Sherrill on Saturday and one with fellow Rep. Tom Malinowski on Sunday. Democratic congress members representing the district is a sure sign things have changed.

At the same time, the change is not complete.

Malinowski on Sunday launched a canvassing effort in Roxbury, a town that remains a strong Republican bastion. Two years ago, Republicans won the LD-25 race there by about 1,300 votes. So the Dems have a lot of canvassing to do.

The statement of the combined Leagues of LD 25: Morristown, West Morris, Warren and Mountain Lakes:

REPUBLICAN INCUMBENT CANDIDATES FOR SENATE AND ASSEMBLY DECLINE TO DEBATE CHALLENGERS IN LD 25.

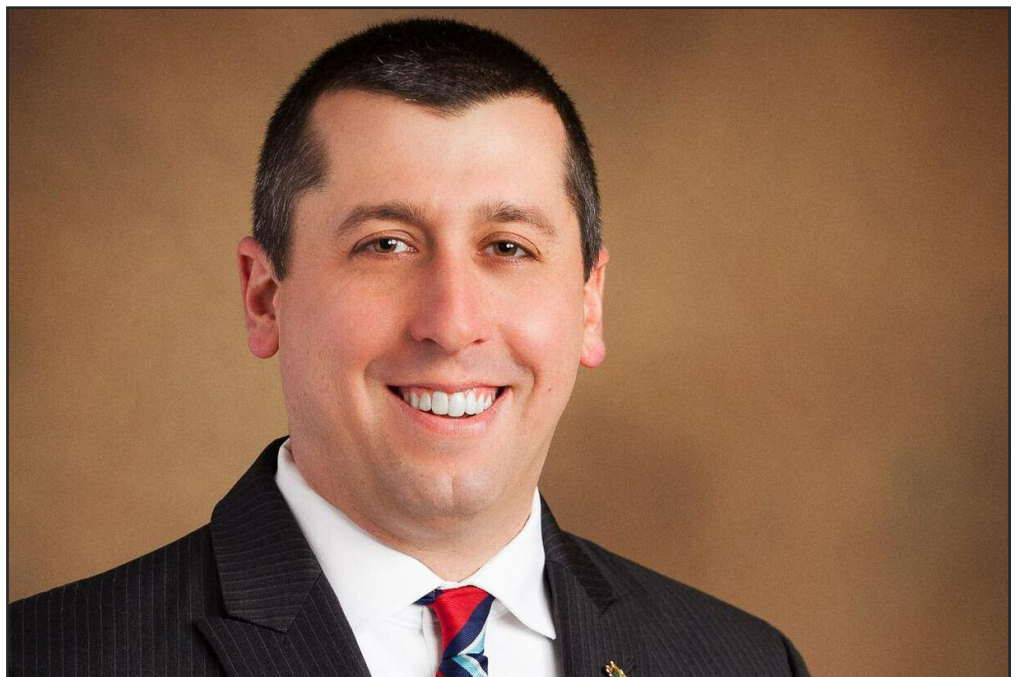
The West Morris, Warren, Morristown and Mountain Lakes League of Women Voters are disappointed to announce that every incumbent Republican candidate in LD 25 has declined to debate this 2021 election season. The reason given was that

they could make “no time” for the debate. Incumbent candidate Anthony Bucco has declined to debate his challenger, Jeffrey Grayzel for the position of Senate in LD 25. Incumbent candidates Aura Dunn and Brian Bergen have declined to debate their challengers Lauren Barnett and Patricia Veres for their positions in the Assembly in LD 25. The candidates and their campaign managers were given an 8-week window in which to choose a date. Republican candidates did not refuse immediately; they gave the condition of having the debate in-person rather than via Zoom. Their Democratic challengers met this condition, however the incumbents then claimed they had no time in their busy calendars for a debate.

Fair and unbiased debates are pivotal to the functioning of our democracy. An essential component to running

for office is providing the public with an opportunity to compare their elected officials to those who are challenging their positions. Voters deserve to see their candidates in action and to hear all sides of an issue before casting a ballot.

Whenever candidates decline an invitation to a debate on the issues, the voters lose and democracy suffers. The League of Women Voters has hosted free and fair, nonpartisan debates in LD 25 for more than 50 years. Incumbent candidates Aura Dunn, Anthony Bucco and Brian Bergen all participated in League of Women Voters debates in LD 25 in the very recent past, yet this year they are declining to debate. The Leagues of LD 25 are imploring the incumbent candidates of LD 25 to reconsider their decision and put their voters first by finding a date to debate.



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ELECTION 2021: Ongoing Troubled Times for the New Jersey Republican Party

When Governor Phil Murphy spoke at the two-hour Asbury Park pool-side speech-fest for the installation of the new Democratic State Chairman, LeRoy Jones, he said that he was going to run his campaign as though he was ten points behind until the polls closed on election day.

A Monmouth poll in May said that the Governor had a 57% approval rating with 35% disapproving, a fall of 14% from 2020 when the pandemic began. The pandemic, too, may well be the key to the entire gubernatorial election.

With businesses struggling to survive

during lockdowns, failures on the state level to get money to those who needed it, whether as small business loans, unemployment funds, and other state services put New Jerseyans in a hard place. Many businesses, especially those in the dining and hospitality industries, simply could not survive. A haphazard and confusing application process often eluded the small businesses in need who were too busy trying to get by week to week than to untangle Trenton's cumbersome machinery. All the while, infection rates soared, parents had to adjust to virtual learning for their children, and refrigerator trucks appeared in funeral home

parking lots. Resistance to mask mandates and misinformation, propaganda, and politicization of vaccinations set New Jersey's recovery process back, and the long hot summer of 2020, marked by protests for racial justice and gym guys kicking down doors to reopen their businesses, Murphy be damned, left a torrent of uncertainty and turmoil.

What Governor Murphy had going for him in 2020, politically, was that he was free of an election year and able to govern as he saw necessary and fit. This earned him the nickname "King Phil" from his detractors, mostly Republicans but

certainly plenty of Democrats, who objected to his extension of emergency powers and endless issuance of executive orders.

It is not the place here to assess the full political impact of 2020, but as numbers began to decline, as vaccination efforts were generally successful, Governor Murphy was able to fight back against what Ciattarelli and Republicans had been picking at: interfering in business, interfering in schools, mandating masks, etc. With the approach of summer in 2021, it became a priority to get New Jersey open and back to business. The 2020 shore season was lost and another year might well seal the fates of those hardy seasonal businesses that did manage to survive. Fortunately for the governor, infection rates began declining and things rapidly began to reopen. The emergency was ended, the executive orders stopped, people could take off their masks if they got their shots. Those who didn't get their shots and would likely never get vaccinated were no longer visually identifiable as non-compliant. New Jerseyans could breathe a sigh of relief and the Murphy-Ciattarelli race would start to take on more traditional forms once again.

That is, of course, until the Delta variant began to roar its ugly microscopic head.

With the COVID infection rates appearing on the Department of Health's blue curve starting to show

signs of a fourth wave, particularly among the unvaccinated, the pandemic will, once again, take center stage in the weeks and months to come leading up to Election Day.

Governor Murphy has been making his rounds and enjoys the advantage of the incumbency and a record to stand on. Historically, Democratic governors have not been re-elected since Governor Brendan Byrne 44 years ago. Republicans can and have made gains in a heavily Democratic state, but the nationalization of party politics in the Trump and post-Trump era has created an ideological minefield for both parties to contend with, but none more so than the GOP.

With former State Democratic Chairman John Currie, Phil Murphy had an unshakable ally. It remains to be seen the extent to which the Essex-county power base, embodied by the new Chairman LeRoy Jones, will play ball with the governor, but leading up to election day, the party leadership has rallied the rank and file behind the incumbent. Few Democrats see a Murphy alignment as a liability in the state, but the Republicans have stormier seas to navigate, and Jack Ciattarelli is faced with charting a navigable course to a safe port as well as captaining a crew which is far from wholly united.

Ciattarelli has put out the message that Murphy will be "one and done in Twenty-One" but has yet to communicate a clear and resonating mes-

sage with the voters as to why he would be a better choice than Murphy. Simply not-being-the-other-guy may have been enough for many voters to cast their ballots for Joe Biden, but in New Jersey messaging is critical.

When InsiderNJ spoke to state-senate hopeful Dan Cruz, a Latino Republican running against Senator Oroho, he said he respected Ciattarelli but, at the time, was backing the more Trumpian Hirsh Singh. One of his key criticisms? He said that he did not see the GOP making efforts in the urban areas and that Democrats were winning the numbers game. Ciattarelli did make a recent stop in Elizabeth, knocking on doors and talking about Republican-safe issues like property taxes, but a city like Elizabeth remains solidly blue, even if residents complain about the status quo. In this case, Ciattarelli demonstrated he was willing to do what men like Cruz said the GOP would not, but the effect was, for insiders, fundamentally optical. The GOP doesn't make strong GOTV efforts in urban areas because they need to focus their resources where it can be viable.

Ciattarelli continues to lack name recognition statewide, which will be problematic for the 37% of New Jersey voters who are unaffiliated. The Democrats have 38% of the voters while just over one-fifth of New Jerseyans are registered Republicans. Singh had encouraged people in his mailers to "join the Republican Civil

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War”—obviously putting himself forward as the most Trump-like candidate while casting Ciattarelli as an “establishment” type. In other words, Ciattarelli actually held office and served the public in the Assembly, whereas Singh, who has never won office, would bring a fresh, outsider perspective.

Trump did not win New Jersey and Singh did not win the GOP primary, this much is evident. But it puts Ciattarelli in the unenviable position of trying to formulate a winning message and he is staring at a Gordian Knot. Unlike Alexander, Ciattarelli has no way of effectually and literally cutting through it (be it huge sums of campaign money, or more importantly, huge numbers of

registered Republicans) and powering along to Election Day. Without a clear and easily communicated message, Ciattarelli’s campaign lacks the ability to focus on being much more than the Not Murphy. Moderate Republicans and conservative Democrats have respected the former Assemblyman as a public servant and also for being a voice of reason and civility in a time of shrill, incoherent chest thumping, tribalism, finger pointing, and name-calling that spread from DC to state capitals to town halls.

The likes of Phil Rizzo (styled “Jersey” Rizzo, to avoid association with the governor) and Hirsh Singh made no secret in exploiting Ciattarelli’s past criticisms of then-candidate

Donald Trump. Ciattarelli himself rarely mentions the former president, which, to be fair, he should not have to, but this demonstrates the influence the former president has over the party, even in New Jersey. Attempting to win the base means shifting to the right, but Ciattarelli and the State GOP know the base isn’t enough. By asking for “wiggle room” from the base so that he can attempt to gain some of the crucial independent voters, Ciattarelli had to admit to abdicating some autonomy in his own campaign’s direction. To the outsider, then, Ciattarelli appears to be a reluctant right-winger.

It is a telling sign of the troubled times for the Republican Party when



former Governor Christine Todd Whitman, the first female governor of New Jersey, endorsed Joe Biden and said the current GOP would be unrecognizable to her parents--she said it had become a cult of personality and lost sight of its core values. Former Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno joined the ranks of the unaffiliated voters as a result of political struggles closer to home in Monmouth County. She is also known to be less than a fan of Ciattarelli who ran against her in the 2017 primary.

With respect to the lieutenant governorship, Phil Murphy has Sheila Oliver, the second person to occupy that post, the second woman to do so, and the first African-American. As of this writing, Ciattarelli has yet to announce who would be his lieutenant governor candidate, a decision which has been put off for weeks. It is likely that whoever Ciattarelli picks would be female (and consequently continuing a New Jersey tradition of having women as lieutenant governors and lieutenant governor candidates) but speculation still swirls. Additionally, whoever Ciattarelli picks is unlikely to bring much star power if simply by virtue of how long it has been taking to choose a running mate.

Recent remarks by Ciattarelli about LGBTQ curricula being purged from schools, and that sixth graders would not be taught "sodomy," was red meat for the Murphy campaign. They were quick to sink their teeth

into the Republican while progressive groups like Garden State Equality lost no time in condemning Ciattarelli as dangerous and bigoted. But the move would score points with the Republican base and, perhaps, warm up some apathetic Trumpists who wished someone like Singh or Pastor Phil had won the nomination back in June.

So, where does this leave Ciattarelli? The best thing that can happen to his campaign would also be a catastrophic reversal for the health of New Jersey, and it seems that the course of events might be turning in that direction.

With the rising number of Delta-variant cases and the reduced efficacy of the vaccines against this particular strain, it is likely that further restrictions will need to be reimposed to "crush the curve" as the governor said repeatedly. Masks are now being recommended for both vaccinated and unvaccinated people in indoor settings where there is a potential for high transmission. This is admittedly vague, and also an inevitable consequence of policy trying to catch up to data. During the height of the pandemic, the Republicans could make the case that individuals should choose how to handle their health, and that the government did not have the right to impose mask mandates on schools and businesses. Instead, the average person should be free to decide. When the governor rolled back most restrictions in the Spring, Murphy ef-

fectively took away the most coherent cudgel Ciattarelli had to swing with. With rising case numbers, especially among the unvaccinated who tend to be, although are not by any means universally, right-leaning, Ciattarelli could be given that weapon back once more.

Particularly dire for Murphy is that the will to return to the lockdowns is low among the business community. With the food industry especially suffering—one is hard-pressed to pass a diner, restaurant, or pizzeria without a Help Wanted sign in the window—to step back to 2020 could mean an inescapable fate. The Murphy campaign knows this, and the Ciattarelli campaign knows this as well.

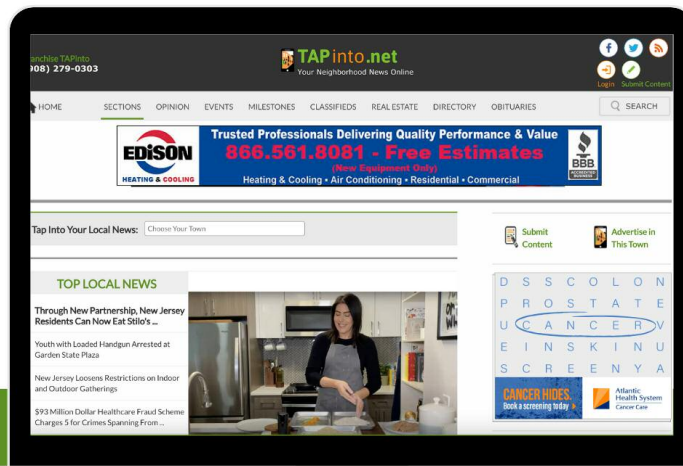
As both the incumbent and the challenger spar over topics that would be conventionally safe for political debate, such as taxation, perhaps to the relief of both, the exceptionally non-partisan coronavirus will force the campaigns to realign and possibly re-fight old battles. In such an instance, Ciattarelli has the best chance to make his case and take some of the wind out of the governor's sails. Depending on how the summer unfolds and the economic effects thereafter will determine whether or not Governor Murphy will be compelled to return to 2020 tactics in a 2021 battlefield. This time, however, without the shielding of a non-election year.



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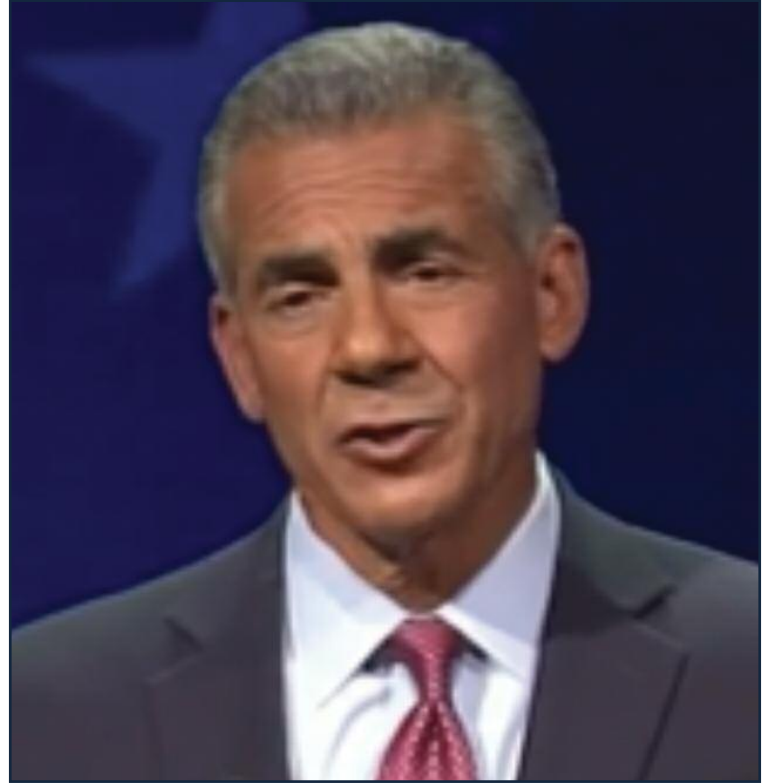
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Debate 2021: Murphy and Ciattarelli Go After Each Other, Jersey Style

Seldom does substance align with politics in today's era of anonymous Facebook posting and virtual anger, where ugliness prevails as constituencies dissolve into complacency and elected officials run from real rhetoric, or run to concocted slogans in the 11th hour to spare themselves a defining and well-considered stance. But after a quietly nasty, empty season of YouTube ads and TV mudslinging, substance and politics strangely merged against the backdrop of enduring crisis as the 2021 Gubernatorial Contest came alive in a hard-hitting, raucous first debate on ABC News.

The debate showed two candidates equally possessed of a tough and educated New Jersey style, clearly delineating their views in unsparing fashion, clashing throughout but in a civil, thoughtful and well-spoken vein.

Each tried to depict the other as an extremist, as Democratic incumbent Governor Phil Murphy seized on Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli's speaking role at a "Stop the Steal" rally to tie his rival to President Donald J. Trump and an insurrectionary right-wing mob. For his part, Ciattarelli hammered at Murphy's

reluctance to talk about property taxes and noted the state's inflated budget, an \$11 billion jump from the years of former Republican Governor Chris Christie.

Both candidates' views or records on New Jersey's most vulnerable populations jumped right to the fore of the discussion, as Ciattarelli criticized Murphy for his handling of the pandemic, specifically pointing to 8,000 nursing home deaths over a third of all COVID-19 casualties, and Murphy objected to the Republican's comments about children not being vulnerable to the virus.

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-Winston Churchill

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Ciattarelli said he didn't quite express himself clearly when he spoke on the topic, and clarified that the delta variant is indeed different from COVID, but Murphy throughout strove to underscore Ciattarelli's propensity to have it both ways on COVID-19: publicly professing support for the vaccine, but also campaigning without a mask at GOP primary events.

On another occasion, as Ciattarelli sought to depict Murphy as anti-women, based in part on the Katie Brennan scandal, Murphy said he had apologized to Brennan and did so again tonight. The subject came up repeatedly during the hour-long debate, as Murphy brought up Ciattarelli votes in the assembly in opposition to Planned Parenthood funding, and Ciattarelli noting Murphy's backing for a bill that would allow legal abortions at seven months.

"This has been the most anti-woman governor we've had," Ciattarelli said.

"A guy who votes to defund planned Parenthood ain't a governor for women, period," Murphy shot back.

The men disagreed on Tropical Storm Ida, which claimed the lives of 30 New Jerseyans last month. Murphy took the occasion to speak about climate change and brand Ciattarelli as late to the game on the subject; while Ciattarelli expressed his dismay over the governor's specific crisis response to Ida.

The men disagreed too on law enforcement, with the challenger using the Police Benevolent Association's decision to forgo a gubernatorial endorsement this year to skewer the incumbent as anti-cop; while Murphy talked about the delicate balance between individual rights and public safety and said Ciattarelli, the self-professed law and order candidate, should have snagged the endorsement. Murphy noted that he had two other police endorsements, even if he lacked backing from the PBA.

"Demoralized cops with curfews at the Jersey Shore," bewailed Ciattarelli.

As an assemblyman in the Christie years, Ciattarelli "rubber stamped Chris Christie's agenda," the governor said.

In a clash on property taxes, Ciattarelli said people would never hear Murphy talk about property taxes and bemoaned an existing schools funding formula that sends Abbot aid to towns like Hoboken at the expense of other hard-working, cash-strapped New Jersey communities.

Murphy – who already secured a millionaire's tax during his tenure – pledged not to raise taxes over the course of the next four years should voters return him to office.

As the sparred over their respective baggage, real and otherwise, Ciattarelli defended his presence at the Stop the Steal rally.

"I didn't see those signs; I can't be held responsible," he said.

When the Republican challenger said he never held Murphy responsible for marching or appearing at rallies where signs like "No Justice, No Peace" appear, Murphy pounced. "When did no justice no peace become controversial?" the governor wanted to know. "Your picture and name were on the invitation."

Tangled up with his rival, Ciattarelli umped on the occasion to pivot to his favorite issue.

Murphy said if taxes are not your issue, "New Jersey's probably not your state," and again dug the incumbent.

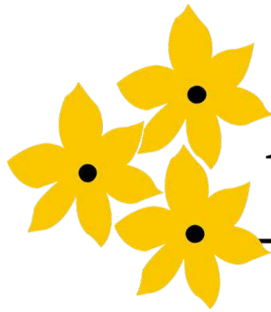
The final stretch of the debate featured some more defining moments for both men as Ciattarelli objected to teaching children that white people perpetuate systemic racism and pressed for more consideration of the golden rule as a core lesson, and Murphy advocating for the whole grim truth in classrooms. Murphy zinged his opponent hard when Ciattarelli tried to explain his campaign trail comments about not wanting "sodomy" taught to children in schools – a subject better left to "kitchen tables."

"There's a lot going on at your kitchen table," Murphy grinned, then grew grim as he chastised the Republican for using "sodomy" as a dog whistle.

Ciattarelli toward the finale criticized the governor's support for recreational marijuana legalization, and reiterated his own support for decriminalization. The way Democrats

rammed legalization through has created buyer's remorse in the state, as evidenced by many municipalities passing ordinances banning the siting of marijuana dispensaries in their

At the end of the clash (they will meet again on Oct. 12th in their second and final on-stage collision), Ciattarelli crossed the stage to shake hands with Murphy, who greeted him warmly.



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Murphy Versus Sweeney

The political establishment in New Jersey awaited the first scheduled debate between incumbent Democratic Governor Phil Murphy and Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli with little anxiety or expectation, and decidedly more parlor room emphasis on relations between Murphy and Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-3) than the incumbent and his GOP rival.

Pressed on operations, Democrats mostly admitted they weren't paying attention and only casually entertained the notion of a Nov. 2nd contest.

It was more to have something to

talk about than an excuse to lace on the gloves.

No one wanted a fight.

More than Murphy versus Ciattarelli, they wanted to talk about the possibility of Murphy conceivably humiliating Sweeney.

Best scenario "for Phil," one source said deviously, harkening to that time – 2013 – when Steve Fulop won the mayoralty in Jersey City while conveniently sustaining the team casualty of Sean Connors. Talked into the fold as repayment for not running against Fulop for mayor, Connors appeared in the

name of making Fulop look sage enough to assemble a team of rivals, only to lose while Fulop won.

The outcome merely intensified the high fives in Fulop's inner circle.

It mirrors how some of Sweeney's allies like the idea of Murphy doing just fine statewide, while losing Vince Mazzeo and Dawn Addiego down ballot, and planting the post Election Day bomb of trouble in South Jersey again – a year after the Jeff Van Drew fiasco.

"Sweeney will look vulnerable if he loses those two seats," said a Democratic Party source.

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What about Murphy versus Ciattarelli on debate night?

There was a clap of static on the other end of the phone, followed, presumably, by regained equilibrium and then the observation, “That’s tonight, yes.”

Another party source grudgingly admitted that Murphy could talk, and is likeable, while Ciattarelli “who I like,” isn’t known and is running behind by double digits, and so will have to spend the evening attacking while also trying to be the likeable newcomer, an impossible task.

Advantage Murphy.

Then talk turned to Craig Coughlin for governor in 2025.

It was like that with Democrats this season.

They had swum in an overabundance of swamp power for so long, that the conversations easily strayed into considerations of the 2025 governor’s race sooner than undertake hard-nosed x’s and o’s assessments about Murphy v. Ciattarelli. The governor’s race, in short, became another opportunity for Democrats – who outnumber Republicans in New Jersey by a million voters – to spar with one another in the great, ongoing common hog wallow of boss politics.

It was the game they played to stay loose and hip and finally relevant; to

remain of the mind that all the time invested in parties and small talk and conformity could result in a true demonstration of power.

Coughlin.

Surely you see that, a source said.

The speaker’s law firm recently hired former Edison Councilwoman Sapana Shah, who once did legal work for the City of Jersey City back when Fulop began building his aborted runway to the governorship.

Shah.

She’s the key to understanding Coughlin’s gubernatorial ambition on the Fulop model, the source insisted.

It was feasible.

It’s a game, and it’s played, and the moves resemble one another.

Or it was merely a coincidence.

In any case, one would have to go back to Jim McGreevey (2001) to find someone elected from the party’s own machine ranks to the governor’s chair.

That’s 20 years ago.

And it would be 24 years ago.

Since that time, Democrats have recruited and gotten behind two Goldman Sachs alumni: Jon Corzine and Phil Murphy, with the goal of

seeming financially responsible while intensifying bar stool talk of eventually installing another supposed spendthrift goodfella from within the family.

Or at least another “good guy” with “government experience,” in other words sufficiently pliable to work with – not against – the power structure.

It always made for good conversation, and made starker implicating lines of a collision that on its own appeared to have little connectivity to the political aspirations of others. If it didn’t look like the trajectory of American politics at this point, it was still – one could argue – the essence of New Jersey politics.

If this very election cycle showed a scintilla of South Jersey weakness (see above), Middlesex and the north conceivably had a strengthened re-districting hand, and a strengthened play for more power, which for Middlesex would either look like the senate presidency or the governorship. Anything less than that – short of a straight up play for more money and business, which was a possibility – would add up to a loss.

They needed senate president or governor.

Coughlin fit the bill as that perfect creation of the furnaces of functionary office: that sedate, unexciting and inoffensive trains-on-time guy whose success in a primary would



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empower the party apparatuses with new vistas of possibility. Coughlin was that elected official who could appear gently sympathetic to any number of progressive causes, while ramrodding Horizon overhaul and staying close to law enforcement. And he did so without talking a lot. If he had his faults, demagoguery was not one of them. He was the ultimate New Jersey Democrat, and what a kind of poetic justice for the state to return to the McGreevey model, after the Corzines and Murphys and Chris Christie jailings (Ciattarelli, it must be noted, lacks the name ID and public record amassed by Christie as U.S. Attorney ahead of his successful 2009 gov run against Corzine) the presidential buzz and bust, then to go back to Woodbridge, to start all over again with erstwhile, lunchbox and thermos amenable Coughlin for governor, with the mighty weight of the machines, northern and central, behind him?

If Sweeney – who had envisioned himself that kind of molded insider on the throne of Drumthwacket – lost Mazzeo and Addiegio, the motion of the 2025 machinery starting with Middlesex and Essex would begin.

And it was more exciting than Murphy v. Ciattarelli.

Murphy had come from the outside, and Ciattarelli had only briefly been inside – and as a *Republican*.

The debate gave the appearance of two harmless interlopers pecking on the perimeter of the incubator.

The real plans lay ahead, or so the operatives said.

Essex, of course, would want something bigger than the excruciating encumbrance of political powerlessness since it tamed with South Jersey

to jettison Dick Codey from the senate presidency. Like Middlesex, they would need governor (U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, and Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver all hailed from Essex and all jockeyed in people's minds as the big county's statewide play) or a triumphant return to the senate presidency. Anything less (perhaps they had already gone the business route) would look absolutely awful.

That's where the conversations were with time ticking down to 7 p.m. and Murphy ("The internal polls aren't looking as good as Patrick Murray's polls," a source grumbled, again with little urgency, as an afterthought.) versus Sweeney... er... Murphy versus Ciattarelli; as the state's political establishment, in all unvarnished honesty and without resistance, probably awaited the next Corzine or Murphy.



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Post-Debate Bar Notes

The bar stools stood near a suspended television set where the Yankees game blurred in the background of an intensified conversation about last night's gubernatorial debate. As luck would have it, a Democrat occupied one of those stools and a Republican the other in the vicinity of InsiderNJ.

The Democrat liked Jack Ciattarelli, but candidly had a hard time unsticking himself from the social issues and the Republican nominee's history of chucking the occasional mindless red meat tidbit (the "sodomy" comment comes to mind) to the right wing base. He also expressed dismay over the candidate's

routine public masklessness before the Republican Primary and said – to his own mild irritation – that the race boils down to Governor Phil Murphy's relatively competent maintenance of the pandemic.

He wants to back Jack, but really can't, he admitted, though he added he thought Murphy backed into undercutting his own credibility (and maybe even needlessly antagonizing progressives) when he promised no new taxes.

The Republican digested the comments, as if he sensed their inevitability. Ciattarelli had to fend off then-GOP rival Doug Steinhardt

when the latter threw in as a Donald Trump primary alternative. Would Ciattarelli be better off if Steinhardt hadn't revved up? Damn right, the Republican acknowledged. Now, he has to stand on a stage and helplessly let Murphy peck away at him like a vulture at Prometheus' liver.

Reveling a chance at frank talk, the Democrat said he wishes Ciattarelli would harp more on the economy, including unemployment. The Republican said he hears it all the time: as long as Ciattarelli stays on the message of restoring the centrality of property taxes as the key issue, members of the rival party see a way to hear the challenger if not back him.

The Democrat grinned back, as if loving the dramatic tension of restraining himself from diving wholeheartedly into the Ciattarelli camp.

“It’s the pandemic,” he said, explaining his support for Murphy.

Otherwise, he can’t see the governor, he admitted.

But again, if the Republican can keep focused on the economy, property taxes and the troubles of man street businesses, he may penetrate.

Then the friends from opposing parties found a true area of agreement.

Ciattarelli needs a little luck, to say the least, to overcome the massive voter registration of Democrats over Republicans in New Jersey.

“Look what’s happening in Washington,” said the Dem, referring to the bifurcated infrastructure and reconciliation bills and the imperiled agenda of President Joe Biden.

The Republican beamed beatifically.

“If that derails for Biden down there in time for November 2nd...” the Dem’s voice trailed off.

The Republican was still grinning. He grabbed at the comment like the one piece of good political luck in Ciattarelli’s favor within the tractor beam of the New Jersey gubernatorial contest.

Democrats could derail in D.C. and reveal party incompetence in a way that mudslides Murphy.

The Democrat changed the subject.

What really intrigued him, he said, is redistricting.

Again, the old friends found fast agreement.

Incumbent U.S. Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-7) looks like the easy casualty, they mutually affirmed, with state Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean the Republican beneficiary and legislative Democrats poised to pick up a senate seat on the back end of state senator Mike Doherty (R-23) getting sawed out of contention by state Senator Steve Oroho (R-24).

“They already tried to get rid of Pascrell,” the Democrat said.

“And look how that turned out,” the Republican said.

It was a shared reference to the 2011 Republican redistricting map, which tried to impale U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-9) and backfired (kind of). The Dems still had to sacrifice a congressman, who turned out to be U.S. Rep. Steve Rothman (D-9).

The candid conversation returned to state politics and campaigns.

Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-3) hadn’t given up on state Senator

Dawn Addiego (D-8). He was still pushing hard to get her to beat challenger Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield (R-8), feverishly working the fundraising phones on the Democratic side, apparently. Was Sweeney bothered when Ciattarelli put Burlington County diehard and former state Senator Diane Allen on the ticket?

The Republican grinned deviously.

“Watch some of that money get yanked out of 8,” he said.

To LD2?

“Y-.”

No.

“LD11,” he said.

State Senator Vin Gopal (D-11) is a popular incumbent, but the national climate around those infrastructure-reconciliation bills could plunge that district into a tougher war that it would be in placid political circumstances, if such a condition exists.

Why wouldn’t Sweeney want to make sure he had LD2 nailed down before showering Gopal?

Did he already think he was in good shape in Atlantic County?

The GOP source smiled mischievously.



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There was, of course, that photo of South Jersey Democratic Party power broker George Norcross III sitting with Republican Atlantic County Executive Denny Levinson leaked to Harry Hurley.

Was former Assemblyman Vince Polistina (R-2) already a casualty in that race with Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo (D-2) for the vacant senate seat?

Not necessarily.

It was possible certainly for Sweeney to fight on several fronts, and weigh the advantages of immersion in each theater against late polling: in LD2, LD8 and LD11 – but those seemed like the most intense areas of interest, probably in that order. Those contests always lurked with urgency under the hood of Murphy versus Ciattarelli.

The conversation went deeper into the night, and although the game continued on the screen in the back-

ground, with a wildcard playoff berth at stake, no one wondered about that score with a season of New Jersey politics unsettled. The better metaphor for the cycle, all the undercurrents notwithstanding, remained the sport of the governor's choice, soccer – and he was still up at least 1-0 over Ciattarelli, who was still very visibly active on the field of play.





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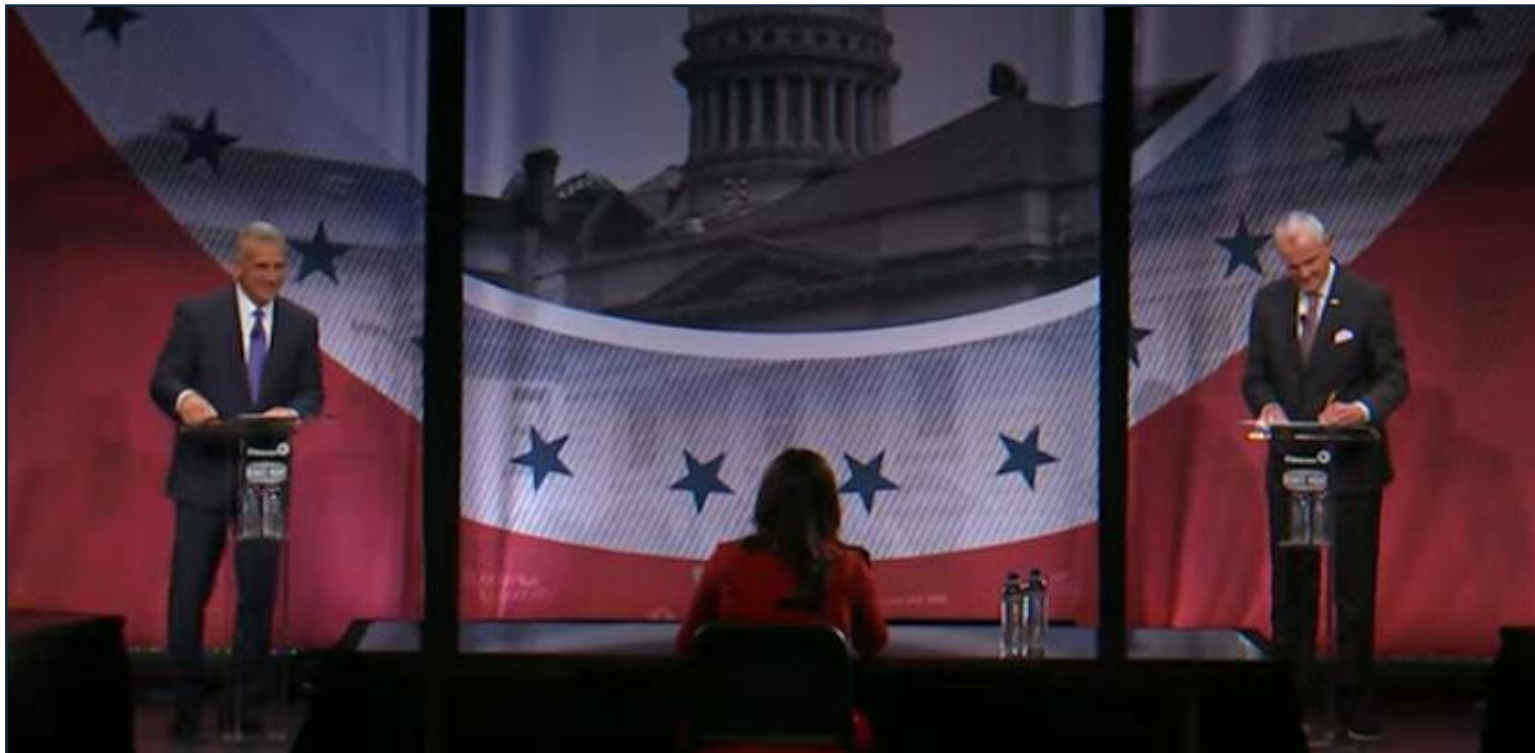


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Murphy Versus Ciattarelli: First Debate Wins and Losses

No, it wasn't a baseball game, although Jack Ciattarelli did make a crack about Phil Murphy rooting for the Red Sox.

Still, in the sporting tradition, let's take a look at some of the wins and losses for each candidate in the first gubernatorial debate, aired on ABC.

A win for Murphy:

"You claim to be Mr. Law and Order. You have no endorsements from law enforcement."

This was a hard right to Ciattarelli's jaw.

A common Republican point these days is that Democrats support "defunding the police," and therefore, are indifferent to public safety.

But as the governor noted, he's been endorsed by two police unions and Ciattarelli has been endorsed by none.

Ciattarelli's comeback was that "local police" are not endorsing Murphy. Fair point, but no police endorsements are no police endorsements.

This issue, however, also led to a **loss for Murphy**.

Reaching back to Ciattarelli's days as a Somerset County freeholder, the governor said the Republican supported actions that led to the elimination of 10 jobs in the county sheriff's office. There was no context offered, so unless you were there, you had no idea what this was about. Not persuasive at all.

A win for Ciattarelli:

"You never hear him talking about property taxes."

The GOP challenger was right about that. Murphy has not talked about, or addressed, property taxes head on.

Nothing about that is easy, but when people in New Jersey complain about high taxes, more times than not, their gripe is a property tax bill of \$12,000 or more. The issue does deserve more attention.

Ciattarelli has spent a good part of the campaign – and has run ads – attacking Murphy for saying that if taxes are your main issue, New Jersey is not your state.

When those comments popped up tonight, Murphy tried to diffuse things by saying that under Ciattarelli, New Jersey won't be a state for you unless you are a corporate CEO. Or something like that. His defense made no sense.

Call that another **loss for Murphy**.

Ciattarelli struggled at times to defend himself from Murphy's attacks. On that score, here are two losses for Ciattarelli.

Early in the debate, the Republican was asked about his comments that children are unlikely to catch COVID. This had to do with Ciattarelli's opposition to a school mask mandate.

Apparently realizing this was an untenable position, he said, "Maybe I could have said that more perfect." Ouch.

And then there was Ciattarelli's attendance at a Donald Trump-in-

spired "Stop the Steal" rally in Bedminster after the election.

Murphy has run TV commercials showing Ciattarelli speaking with a "Stop the Steal" sign behind him.

The Republican a bit lamely defended himself by saying he was told that the rally was about the 2021 election, not the 2020 election. Since it occurred three weeks after the 2020 vote and on Trump's home turf, that explanation seemed a bit dubious.

Other observations.

It's always nice to see humor in debates and Murphy tried to interject some.

Ciattarelli likes saying that such touchy subjects as explicit sex education should be addressed not in the classroom, but around the kitchen table.

That prompted Murphy to say there must be "a lot going on" in Ciattarelli's kitchen.

Not amused, the challenger shot back, "Isn't that the job of the parent?"

As the debate was winding down, Ciattarelli made some news.

It had to do with pot.

Voters endorsed legalizing recre-

ational marijuana last year by about 2-1.

"This did not belong on the ballot," Ciattarelli said, adding that he backs decriminalization, not legalization. Murphy, a bit surprised, pointed out the margin of victory for legalization.

"I think they have buyer's remorse," Ciattarelli speculated.

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Murphy v. Ciattarelli: A Dramatic Sea Change Unlikely, by Carl Golden

When the state Constitution was adopted in 1947, it provided for a four-year term for the governor, beginning with the 1949 election — a clear intention by the document’s framers that New Jersey’s chief executive would be chosen in the off year free from the influence of presidential election politics.

Writing it into the state’s governing charter would guarantee that New Jersey voters would be the ultimate decision-makers for the state’s leader and would not be unduly swayed — either beneficial or detrimental — by a top of the ticket national candidate.

By and large, the decision proved to be a wise one. Presidential landslides have lost momentum by the time New Jersey chooses a governor a year later, effectively clipping the victor’s coattails and foreclosing the potential for a candidate to ride into the Statehouse on the back of a president rather than on his or her own strengths.

It is, of course, impossible to totally isolate a national Administration from state politics, but the off year election does serve to minimize the impact of presidential performance and make success or failure less dependent on outside forces.

Gubernatorial candidates in both parties have historically aligned themselves with or in opposition to a sitting president — partisanship is, after all, alive and well — but victory or defeat rests more often on a potential governor’s outlook on issues closer to home — taxes, education, transportation, environment, economic development and job creation.

This year, though, as Gov. Phil Murphy seeks to become the first Democrat to win re-election since 1977 and Republican nominee Jack Ciattarelli attempts to overcome New Jersey’s Democratic million

voter registration edge, President Biden and his immediate predecessor Donald Trump have been cast as central players in the campaign.

Murphy has portrayed his challenger as a Trump-like figure who shares the ex-president's conspiracy theories and fantasy that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

As governor, Murphy contends, Ciattarelli will bring the Trumpian philosophy to New Jersey and reverse much of the progress the governor boasts has brought enormous benefits to taxpayers.

In 2020, Biden defeated Trump 57 to 41 percent in New Jersey and the ex-President has remained wildly unpopular in the state.

Ciattarelli is hoping to reap the benefit of the precipitous decline in Biden's public approval, a freefall which has driven the president's approval into the low 40 percent range.

The badly botched withdrawal of the military from Afghanistan and the deaths of 13 service personnel there, the crisis at the southern border, and the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic have put the White House back on its heels.

Along with the heightened possibility that the president's \$4.5 trillion two bill infrastructure package will fail in Congress over fierce Democratic Party infighting, the past sev-

eral weeks have been a public relations and policy nightmare for the president.

Whether the battering Biden has absorbed will translate into a widespread loss of confidence among independent voters in New Jersey and spill over onto the Murphy campaign is unclear.

Murphy and Biden both continue to enjoy majority public support in the state, but the daily drumbeat of unfavorable news and analysis, accompanied by television images of overflowing hospitals struggling to care for COVID infected individuals or immigrants massed in horrific conditions at the southern border is bound to have an impact.

The Ciattarelli campaign was buoyed by two recent polls showing that he had gained considerable ground on Murphy, closing a double-digit lead once held by the governor and suggesting the contest was much more competitive than in its initial stages.

One of the polls was a Republican campaign survey and, like all campaign commissioned polls, the favorable results should be viewed with some skepticism.

Despite some grumbling and criticism over Murphy's response to the pandemic, he's managed to maintain public support for his mask wearing mandate and vaccination protocol. Ciattarelli's opposition, framed as a

matter of individual rights and liberties, has left him vulnerable and on the wrong side of public opinion.

Moreover, his muddled and dubious explanation for attending a "Stop the Steal" rally in support of Trump's insistence that Biden's election was illegitimate, fell flat and played into Murphy's assertions of his being a Trump captive.

While New Jersey has become one of the most reliable Democratic states in the country, its' voters have demonstrated an independent — if not downright contrary — streak in gubernatorial contests.

Of the nine governors elected since 1969, five have been Democrats and four Republicans. And, since 1977, only incumbent Republicans have won second terms.

The off year gubernatorial election system is largely responsible for the rather competitive nature of the contests, demonstrating that voters can easily put aside their feelings about whoever the president is and concentrate on closer to home issues when making their decision.

While this year has altered the landscape somewhat in terms of presidential influence, a dramatic sea change is unlikely.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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Some of the Main Players of the 2021 Cycle (and its Immediate Aftermath)



1. LEROY JONES

The chair of the Democratic State Committee faces his first election cycle since assuming the oath of office to lead his party's political arm in June.

2. BOB HUGIN

Like Jones, the chair of the Republican State Committee faces his first election cycle since assuming the oath of office to lead his party's political arm in June.



3. MIKE MULLER

The long-serving executive director of the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee (DAAC). Senior strategist at Totten Communications.

4. MICKEY QUINN

Veteran Democratic campaign strategist based in South Jersey, and Muller's right-hand man.



5. AL GABURO

Senior campaign strategist for Ciattarelli for Governor, and the former Somerset County GOP Chairman. He wants to win, of course, but he also wants to mount a sufficiently credible campaign to protect Ciattarelli from harsh criticism from within a volatile party.

6. PEG SCHAFFER

The sitting Democratic Committee Chair for Somerset County and vice chair of the Democratic state Committee, looking to consolidate Democratic control in her home county.



7. STEVE SWEENEY

The state Senate President seeking another two-year term on the senate throne does not want to lose a senate seat in South Jersey.

8. MOLLIE BINOTTO

Murphy for Governor Campaign Manager. She seeks a double-digit Murphy win that will position the incumbent governor for national office.



9. KEVIN MCCABE

The chairman of the Middlesex County Democratic Committee, intent on seeing Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker defeat Republican Mike Pappas in order to carve out a fifth Democratic senate seat in Middlesex.

10. ERIC ARPERT

Campaign Manager for Ciattarelli for Governor.



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11. CHRIS RUSSELL

The longtime GOP consultant who runs Checkmate Strategies occupies a forward position on the main competitive legislative battleground elections and in Jack Ciattarelli's gubernatorial campaign.

12. HARRISON NEELY

The Goldfinch Partners operative and Tom Kean consigliere occupies a key position on behalf of the GOP in legislative battlegrounds.



13. PHIL SWIBINSKI

Hard-hitting Hudson-based communications specialist (chief operating officer at Vision Media) and political strategist has duties this season with the Murphy for Governor Campaign and Steven Fulop for Jersey City Mayor.

14. DAVE BROWN

The Monmouth County Democratic Committee Chairman wants to ensure the reelection of the entire LD11 ticket.



15. SHAUN GOLDEN

A possible 2025 candidate for governor, the Monmouth County GOP Committee Chairman wants to make incumbent state Senator Vin Gopal work for it in LD11.



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16. SEAN EARLEN

The Burlington County GOP Chairman would notch a victory if Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield defeats incumbent state Senator Dawn Addiego (R-8).



17. JOE ANDL

The Burlington County Democratic Committee Chairman wants to get Addiego back to the state senate this year.

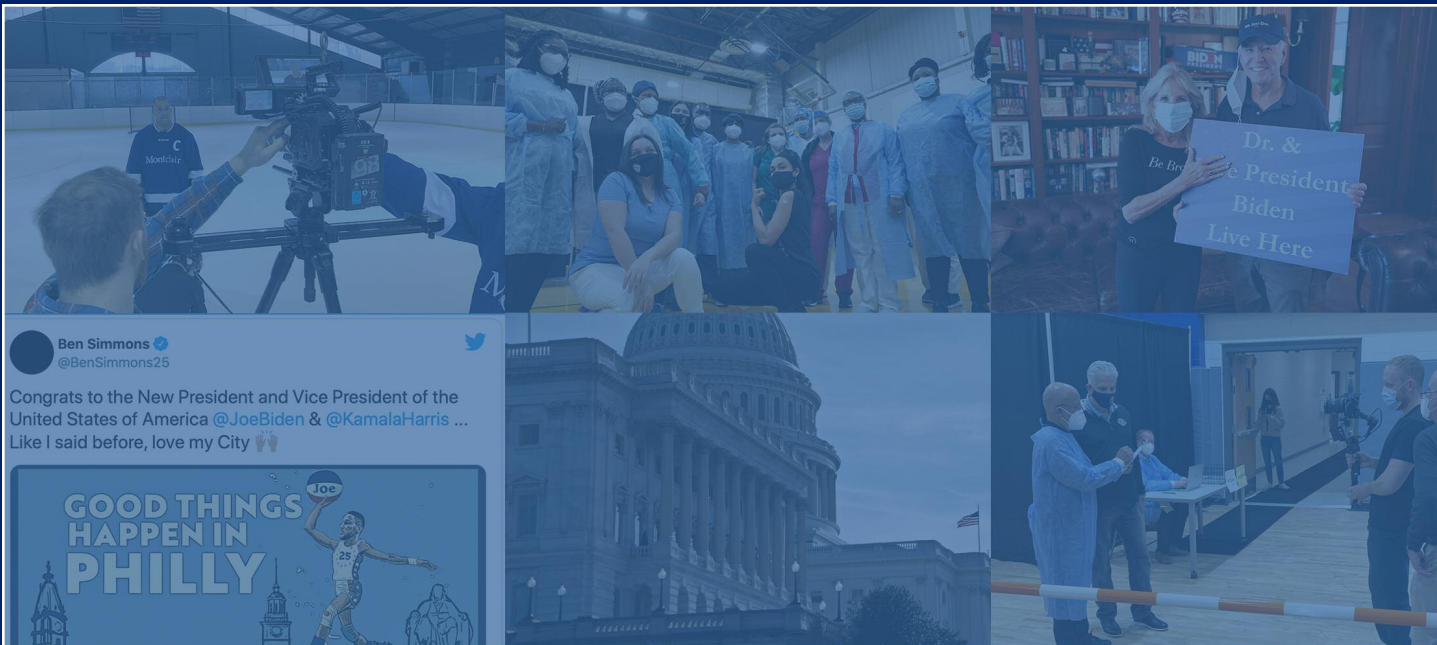
18. MIKE SULEIMAN

The Atlantic County Democratic Committee Chairman has the main responsibility of getting Vince Mazzeo to the senate seat. He also wants to get his assembly candidates in as well as helping to reelect Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small, who this year seeks his first, full-year term. Small won the mayoralty last year after the corruption crackup of his predecessor.



19. KEITH DAVIS

The veteran Atlantic County GOP Chairman has the priority of getting Vince Polistina elected to the state senate. The GOP effort is made interesting in Atlantic by the presence on the Assembly ticket of former Atlantic City Mayor Don Guardian.



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20. MIKE TESTA

The retirement this year of Chris Brown from the state senate and a decision by Democrats not to waste money going after him this year puts Testa – a future Republican candidate for governor – in a strong position on his South Jersey home base.



21. ANTWAN MCELLAN

Sources say the Republican Assemblyman from Ocean City is likely to be part of the new leadership structure in the Assembly Republican Office on the other side of Nov. 2nd.

22. BOB SINGER

The 30th District Republican senator wants to succeed Tom Kean, Jr. as leader of the Senate Republican Office.



23. NANCY MUNOZ

The 21st District Assemblywoman wants to succeed slate mate Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (R-21) as GOP Leader in the Assembly. Bramnick is moving up to succeed Kean as the LD21 state Senator.

24. EDWARD THOMSON

The Republican whip from Wall wants to take a crack at leading the Republicans in the Assembly in the aftermath of Bramnick.





25. JOE PENNACCHIO

The 26th District Republican senator wants to succeed Kean as Senate Minority Leader.

26. BRIAN BERGEN

The 25th District Republican Assemblyman is vying with Munoz, Thompson and DiMaio to succeed Bramnick.



27. JOHN DIMAIO

The Republican Assemblyman from LD23 hopes to succeed Bramnick.

28. STEVE OROHO

The 24th District state senator is vying with Singer and Pennacchio to lead the Republican caucus in the state senate.



29. TIM HOWES

The Republican Party Chairman of Somerset County has the difficult job of holding his party together in the aftermath of the retirement of state Senator Kip Bateman (R-16).



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30. BILL TAMBUSI

The designated agent of the American Majority PAC – the heavy hitting political action committee with ties to South Jersey power broker George Norcross III – plays a significant role this season on the soft fundraising side, particularly when it comes to those aforementioned battleground districts where Norcross ally Sweeney has a stake.



31. AMANDA WOŁOSHEN

Having cut her teeth at the office of former U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance, Wołoszen now works with Russell at Checkmate Strategies. A key Republican campaigns and elections mind.

