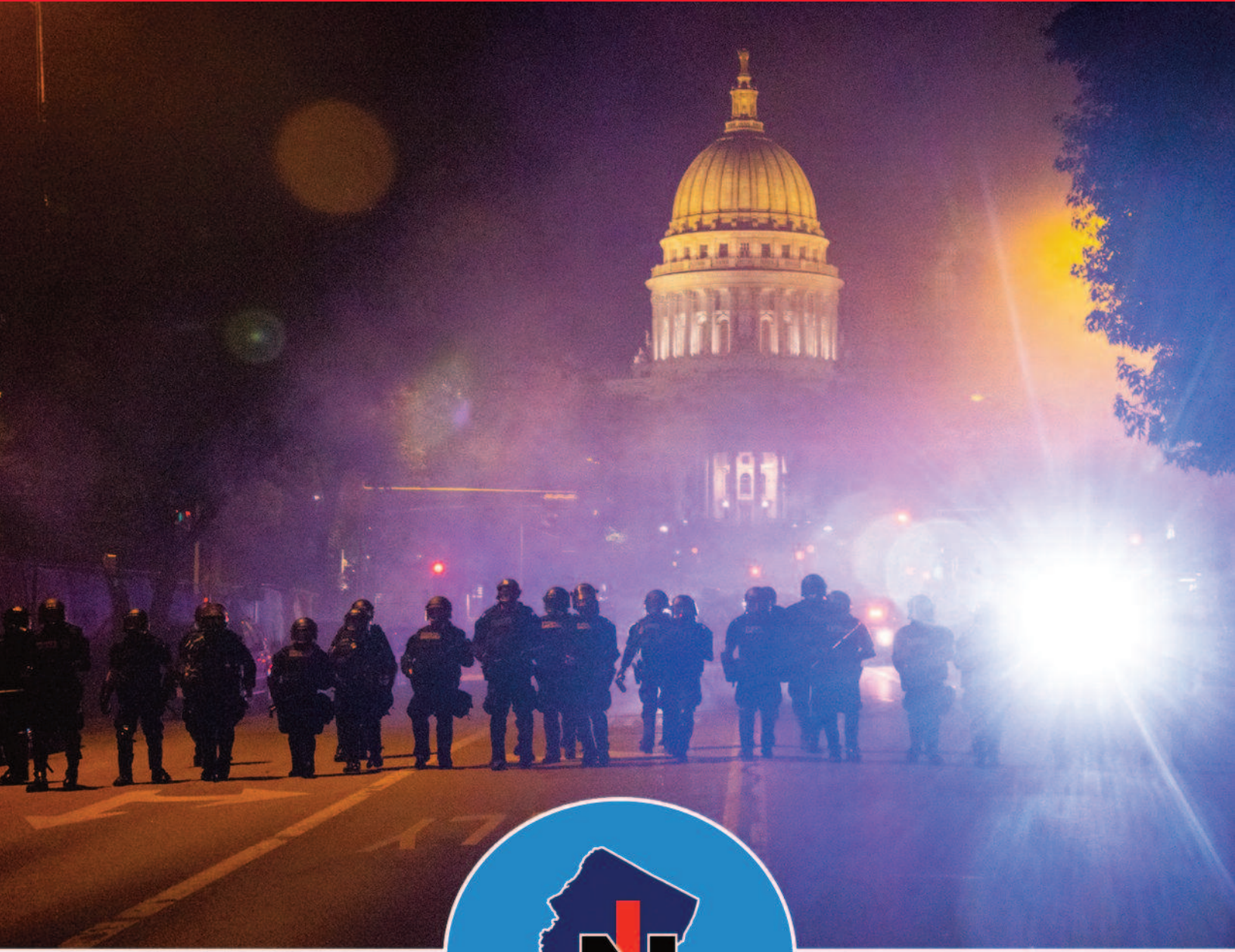


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State government does so much damage that as a coping mechanism one can at least hope for good theater. The trouble is that in addition to bad government, courtesy of the Democrats, we get bad theater, courtesy of the Republicans. Take that little early December display by Assemblyman Erik Peterson outside the Assembly chamber, when he tried to turn his angst over having to display proof of vaccination into a *West Side Story* showstopper. “This is America,” Peterson railed in a stentorian voice, suggesting that he and Assemblyman Brian Bergen would burst into a George Chakaris-Rita Moreno rendition of “America” while transforming the statehouse into a New York City rooftop.

It never happened.

Peterson at best presented all the inspiration of Officer Krupke without a soundtrack, left to choreograph a YouTube temper tantrum, undistinguished by rhetoric, let alone singing and dancing. At least Democrats abandoned most of the board list that same day, sparing the state another avalanche of things it neither wants nor needs.

Bad government and bad theater. It would be a great slogan for New Jersey, if not for the painful fact that the same condition appears to assail the country. Confronted with corroded systems, the best we can do, apparently, is summon fits of ego and rage.

To their credit (and notwithstanding some real misfires, such as the profanity ad and Stop the Steal rally, and inevitable demagogic moments from both of them; not to mention the real problems of real people) Governor Phil Murphy and challenger former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli bucked the times somewhat and attempted to elevate the political discussion, especially in their first debate. Whatever their differences – and they made sure to spell them out – Murphy and Ciattarelli share a sense of decorum and an underlying pragmatism (yes, even the progressive Murphy possesses pragmatism) that in their 2021 clash mostly served the state well. I don’t want to suggest that good manners alone will solve the considerable ills and resolve the just anger of these times. But in an era marked by meanness and ignorance and poor government maintenance

augmented by our inability apparently to go beyond ad hominem headlines and partisan flares of emotion, Murphy and Ciattarelli showed at least traces of that elusive – especially in New Jersey – alchemy called civility, which resides not far from civilization – and not far, after all, even with Peterson, from Paterson, which provided the streets and storefronts and its own magical foundation in Steven Spielberg’s celebrated 2021 version of *West Side Story*.

From InsiderNJ on Sept. 28th:

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 tonight 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.

Max Pizarro

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CO-WINNERS OF THE YEAR: Ed Durr, Sadaf Jaffer and Shama Haider



Gloucester County has a street named after Steve Sweeney, and Durr – a truck driver by trade – not only drove over that, but skid marked Sweeney’s 2021 campaign on his way to a stunning Republican victory in LD3. No one paid attention to Durr prior to the 2021 general election. Sweeney’s internal polls showed the longtime senate president winning by double digits. But Durr quietly occupied an advantageous position and snuck up on Sweeney while the Democrat focused his attention on protecting or winning seats in other districts. In retrospect, Durr’s win shouldn’t have been so surprising. Consider the fact that South Jersey grew a deeper shade of red in the Trump era, and that while northern

counties made Democratic Party gains, Mike Testa and his GOP team knocked off the Democratic incumbents in LD1 in 2019, and U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew switched parties from D to R in 2020 to remain in sync with the times. Given the atmospheric, Durr didn’t need to run much of a campaign. He merely needed to let the momentum gathering red wave lift him over his powerful rival. In the end, the blue-collar trucker beat the blue-collar senate president: 51.8-48.2% (or 32,742 to 30,444 votes).

That said, no outcome in any district in this vital and diverse state ever occupies a vacuum. Intolerance or ignorance in one sphere

ultimately coexists with yet another strata of tolerance and religious freedom – the core of the country – in another.

In this particular 2021 cycle, the media focused on Durr’s stunning victory over the iconic Steve Sweeney in LD3, and as part of the coverage subsequent to the election outcome revealed Durr’s unsettling past tweeted comments disparaging to Muslims and the Muslim faith. One post in particular from his Twitter account in September 2019 labeled Islam “a false religion” and its prophet, Muhammad, a “pedophile.”

It was a horrible revelation, which immediately put Durr on defense.

“I’m a passionate guy,” he said, “and I sometimes say things in the heat of the moment. If I said things in the past that hurt anybody’s feelings, I sincerely apologize.”

Time will tell Durr’s sincerity.

But what should not be forgotten this year is the fact that during the same cycle that propelled Durr, two people made history of their own as the first Muslim women and first Asian American women elected to the New Jersey Legislature:

Assemblywoman-elect Sadaf Jaffer of Montgomery.

And

Assemblywoman-elect Shama Haider of Tenafly.

Chair of the Democratic Party in her hometown, Haider serves on the Bergen County (New Jersey) Commission on the Status of Women and Bergen County Human Services Advisory Council, and she is Chair of the Tenafly Business Development Committee. She is a Trustee of LRBT America, a non-profit that raises funds to fight blindness and provide free medical services to the poor. Prior to emigrating to the US, Haider was Secretary to the First Lady of Pakistan, where she was responsible for the implementation and execution of policy for the office of the first lady at the national and international levels.

For her part, Jaffer made history in 2019 as the first Muslim woman to serve as the mayor of a town in the United States, and – along with Haider - broke another glass ceiling this year by winning an assembly seat in LD16.

The Democrat from Montgomery has a unique background for New Jersey politics, where brass knuckles and suspenders are more pervasive than caps and gowns, and bosses touting headline skimming more common than books.

Jaffer is a scholar.

She teaches South Asian studies and Asian American studies at Princeton University.

“I believe having a background in global studies and history and literature helps you make better decisions,” said the LD16 candidate, who doesn’t see a contradiction between academics and politics.



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WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Nick Scutari



Ramrodded without a public process, the senator from Union County presented unique credentials as Sweeney's successor: no senate delegation of consequence in his home county, the unsettling specter of an investigation, the comforts of a Crocodile Dundee-style limousine, and the habit of trying to bully – on the virtual floor of the senate, no less – a fellow senator who routinely bucked the system. As the party tried to slowly edge away from loose cannon Murphy, Scutari's core characteristics made for the perfect New Jersey leadership resume in these times: no real power base, a partnership of bosses from neighboring Middlesex and South Jersey to prop him up, a willingness to snap at a renegade Vietnam War veteran who dared to challenge shadowy party strongmen, and avid establishment business ties. For Scutari's fellow Democrats, it all added up to one thing: public service. All that said, Scutari possessed some qualities that have long made him a statehouse standout: a superior intellect and go-getter energy. If they thought they could control him, the Senate President-elect presented a subtly discernible dynamic: he could conceivably end up outhustling and controlling *them*.

WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Jean Stanfield



The Republican Sheriff of Burlington County turned Assemblywoman from the 8th District survived an avalanche of South Jersey money to defeat incumbent Senator Dawn Addiego (D-8). When you consider the fact that Addiego changed parties in 2019 sooner than have to scrap with George Norcross, and that Assemblyman Ryan Peters retired from the Legislature this year instead of going toe-to-toe again with the machine, LD-8 diehard Stanfield's go-it-alone stare down of the crumbling South Jersey Democratic behemoth showed even more guts.



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WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Vince Polistina



Senate President Sweeney's decision not to seat the former LD2 Assemblyman bothered Polistina enough to take advantage of shifting South Jersey tides to defeat Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo 52-48% for the vacant LD2 senate seat. The win carried even more significance for Polistina, who had failed in his 2011 attempt by 3,000 votes against the late Senator Jim Whelan.

WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP

Andrew Zwicker



The presence of popular Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli (a former LD16 Assemblyman) at the top of the opposing ticket presented a difficult challenge for the Democratic Assemblyman from the 16th District in his bid for the LD16 senate seat. But Zwicker – a Princeton plasma physicist who won a battleground contest to claim his assembly seat and held it through two subsequent battleground election cycles – bucked the tide, to change the seat occupied by retiring Republican Senator Kip Bateman to defeat former Congressman Mike Pappas 52-48% (37,951 to 35,058) and give Democrats – amid strife and loss in other districts – a key 2021 win.

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WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Phil Sellinger



Nominated this year by President Joe Biden and cleared by the U.S. Senate for the position of U.S. Attorney of New Jersey, Sellinger is a respected veteran lawyer, the co-managing partner in the New Jersey office of Greenberg Traurig LLP and former assistant U.S. attorney in the New Jersey district office from 1981-1984.

WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Gordon Johnson



The long-serving Assemblyman from Englewood outdueled his counterpart to secure the support of the Bergen County Democratic Committee in the primary and the eventual general election victory to succeed retiring Senator Loretta Weinberg.



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WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP
Holly Schepisi



The 39th District Republican successfully made the move from the Assembly to the state senate following the death of Gerald Cardinale.

LUCKIEST GUY OF THE YEAR AWARD

Phil Murphy



“Luck is a superpower.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

Running for reelection, Murphy became the first Democratic incumbent governor since Brendan Byrne in 1977 to win a second term in office and did it in a manner that suggested either brilliant political strategy or sheer dumb luck. The campaign that opted for profanity instead of argument as a way of connecting with New Jersey voters propelled Murphy to become governor again, as well as the Domino of the 2021 general election cycle. It wasn’t just Murphy’s ugly three-percentage point win over Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli that netted him this award this year, but the fact that he won while disentangling himself from Statehouse tormentor Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-3).

InsiderNJ asked a source this month if the Murphy Campaign had intentionally invoked Donald Trump in Sweeney’s district to bury Sweeney.

The source looked back, bug-eyed.

“That’s a great question.”

Trump did well in South Jersey. The Murphy Campaign message of inflating Trump over the cycle as a perennial bogeyman apparently caused little impact other than to propel Trump’s South Jersey base to run over Sweeney as it stopped short of punishing the real object of its ire, namely Murphy.

No disrespect to Murphy and his minions, but his ability to survive an angry taxpayer onslaught by cashing in on North Jersey relationships, while the red masses essentially devoured Sweeney down in South Jersey amounted – if not to political genius – at least to a kind of childlike comic book superpower.

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COUNTY CHAIRMAN OF THE YEAR

Kevin McCabe



The Middlesex County Democratic Committee Chairman finished the year as the county party leader with the most statehouse power. Consider this: McCabe helped broker the deal to return Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-19) to the assembly throne for another two years; won an additional senate seat in LD16 with Andrew Zwicker's defeat of Mike Pappas to give him five Middlesex senators – the most of any county; and then positioned his senators behind the candidacy of Nick Scutari to help secure the senate presidency in the aftermath of South Jersey's Steve Sweeney. Keep in mind, too, that McCabe played a significant role in securing Democratic Primary support for Zwicker – a resident of South Brunswick - over the skepticism of neighboring Somerset County. Three more key facets add some muscle mass to McCabe's political frame: the seat he occupies on the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; the fact that Scutari possesses – in truth – a delegation in his home county numbering one (himself) alongside senator Joe Cryan (who works for the *Middlesex* Improvement Authority), and will have to lean on Middlesex for support or scrounge votes in other dislocated pockets; and an optimal Middlesex alliance with the front office of Governor Phil Murphy. One more thing – Edison Mayor-elect Sam Joshi – who had the fierce backing of McCabe and the county party organization and – by extension, the entire Democratic Party establishment of New Jersey – squiggled through a difficult primary and general election season to win the Edison mayoralty. All told, as good a year by a county chair as New Jersey as witnessed in some time.

POLITICIAN OF THE YEAR

Jack Ciattarelli



The former Assemblyman ran one of the best statewide campaigns we have seen in some time. The sad reality in New Jersey – given the disparity of registration between D’s and R’s – is we have come to see candidates cocooned in the numerical safety of their individually gerrymandered comfort zones as evidence of decent campaign strategy. That means fewer interviews. Fewer public appearances. Staged and scripted events absent real people and real voices. And viscerally stupid advertising aimed at destroying opposition. Ciattarelli bucked that dismal trend to create a truly lively and dynamic campaign in the tradition of those good ones we have seen over the years, among them U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell (2012), and U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (2014). Of course, he had to play it that way, given the built-in disadvantages for Republicans in the Garden State, but he played it well. His campaign, of course, did make mistakes. All campaigns do. But Ciattarelli 2021 contained all the ingredients of real political craft: candidacy, messaging, communication, organizing, fundraising, debating, energy, intangibles, instinctive and intellectual synergy, and self-belief by the candidate to will his way through the accumulated cynicism of leaders in his own party more worried about themselves than the Republican cause, and a political establishment convinced the contest presented nothing compelling. Finally, overburdened taxpayer-advocate Ciattarelli ran a people’s campaign. He lost in the end, but gained immeasurably for having performed something with integrity in an age of mediocrity. In a state with a million more Democrats than Republicans, Ciattarelli put up 48.0% (1,255,185 votes) to 51.2% (1,339,471) to make the system sweat all night long, as it should.

“However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

-Winston Churchill

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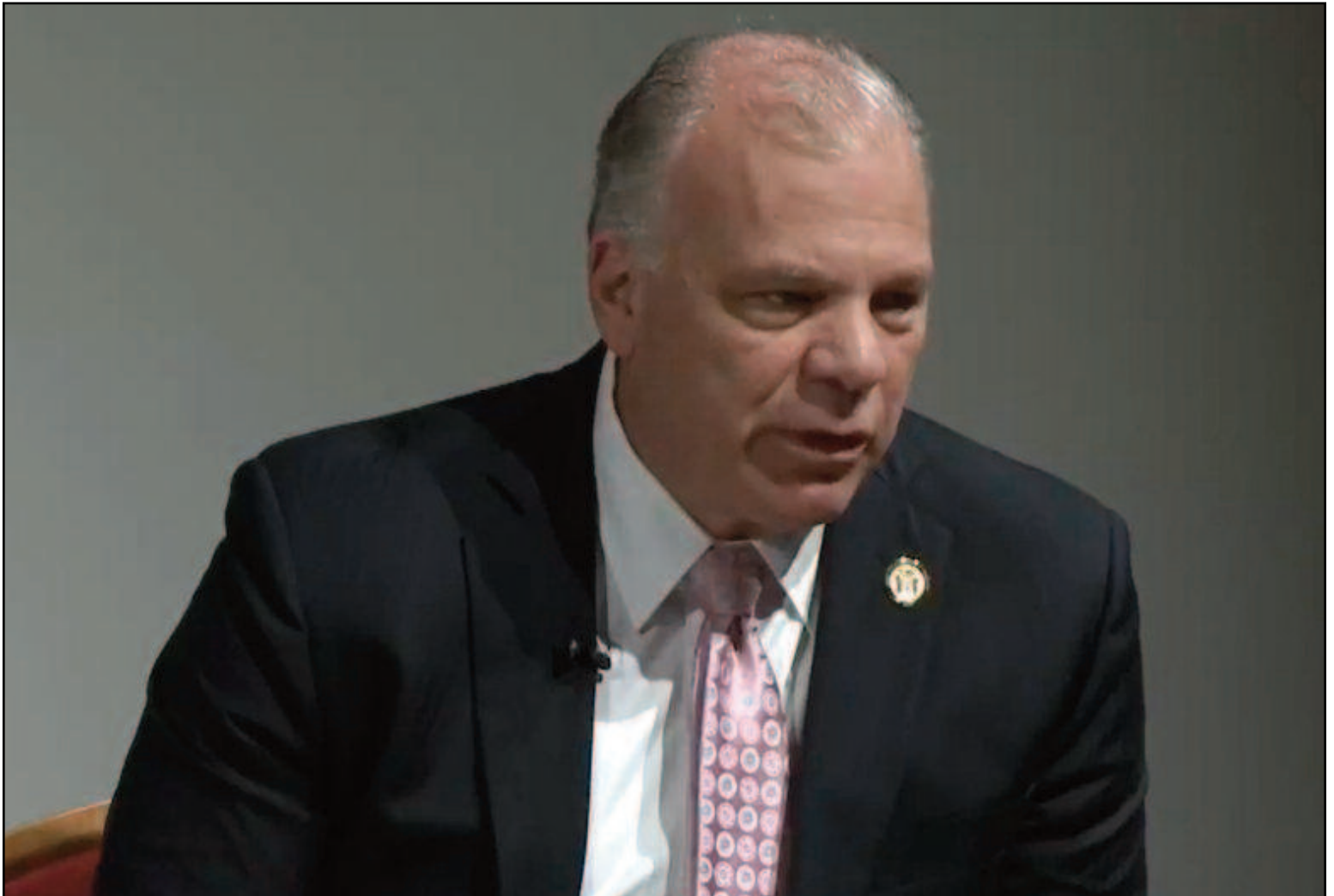


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LOSER OF THE YEAR

Steve Sweeney



A union ironworker by trade, the survivor of the most expensive legislative contest in United States history in 2017 went to sleep on the 2021 cycle in his home district and found himself thrown out of office by a non-union truck driver (see above). The most active statehouse leader of the last 20 years, Sweeney also proved the most politically volatile and the most tragically ironic. He took on public sector labor unions with Chris Christie, later tried to rehabilitate his image with progressives by championing marriage equality, failed in a pre-season gubernatorial bid, took on public sector unions again after the NJEA ran against him in LD3, rehabilitated relations with the teachers' union in time for this year's election cycle, only to get flattened by Ed Durr's infamous \$153.31 campaign and a wholly ungovernable red wave. The senate president who had served in the position since 2010 and attained a kind of iconic stature in Trenton, found himself shockingly yanked from the pedestal and unhorsed – but only for the moment, as he vowed a comeback.

LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP

Vince Mazzeo



Friends of the likeable gift basket store owner feared a return of his “white-out” comments, but the assemblyman from the 2nd District found himself done in on Election Day by the same South Jersey red wave that upended Sweeney.



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LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP

Dawn Addiego



It seldom pays to change party affiliation. South Jersey Democrats' loss of Senator Bob Andrzejczyk in 2019 prompted them to nudge Senator Addiego from R to D. Addiego didn't want to represent the party of Trump anymore anyway, but the switch proved her undoing, as the tide of times turned and Republican Stanfield beat the Republican turned Democrat, 51-49% (38,909 to 37,138).

LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP Nick Chiaravalloti



Bayonne Mayor Jimmy Davis exercised his executive privilege to expunge the respected LD31 Assemblyman from the Democratic Party line in favor of labor leader William Sampson IV. A former state director for Bob Menendez, Chiaravalloti took the loss in stride, but soon afterwards a credible challenger to Davis – Council President Sharon Ashe Nadrowski – emerged in the fast-developing 2022 Bayonne mayoral contest.

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LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP

Valerie Vainieri-Huttle



The long-serving Assemblywoman from Englewood failed to secure the backing of the Bergen County Democratic Committee, which proved the difference in the LD-37 Primary to succeed retiring state Senator Loretta Weinberg.



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LEGISLATOR OF THE YEAR

Craig Coughlin



The pragmatic and non-demagogic Coughlin showed leadership on the rostrum in his well-spoken rebuke of those members of the Republican caucus who refused to provide proof of vaccination when they reported to the Statehouse, in violation of rules designed to stem the spread of the COVID-19 virus. “We’re nearly two years into a global pandemic,” said Coughlin. “We’ve lost more people to the pandemic than live in Hudson County. The only thing that was asked was to show they weren’t infected. I’m outraged. Twenty-eight members of the minority caucus could not be bothered. I’m more outraged that this is happening in the midst of a variant, as cases begin to rise. We’re better than that.” The speaker also criticized law enforcement for allowing the breach, resulting in the transfer of key state trooper personnel out of Trenton. Particularly in light of a Trump-exhorted mob desecration of the United States Capitol on Jan. 6th, 2021, Coughlin’s low-key but pointed speech stood as a testament to reason in the face of an onslaught of unreason. It is a proud moment in the history of legislative leadership that should not soon be forgotten.

LEGISLATION OF THE YEAR

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal



The ultimate rail commuter, President Joe Biden came to New Jersey in October to make his final case for the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which prioritizes the country's rail system. As part of the funding for the long-delayed Gateway Tunnel project, scrapped during the Chris Christie years, the act invests \$66 billion in rail, to eliminate the Amtrak maintenance backlog, modernize the Northeast Corridor, and bring world-class rail service to areas outside the northeast and mid-Atlantic. According to the White House, "This is the largest investment in passenger rail since Amtrak's creation, 50 years ago and will create safe, efficient, and climate-friendly alternatives for moving people and freight."



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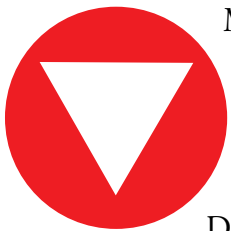
WHO'S UP AND WHO'S DOWN Middlesex Democrats



The restoration of Craig Coughlin to the speakership in the immediate aftermath of Senate President Steve Sweeney's loss secured a veteran on one of two legislative leadership seats. Now, state Senate President-elect Nick Scutari is no newcomer. He is, in fact, one of the shrewder and more energetic elected officials in the state. Still, Coughlin has occupied the speakership for four years, and has developed effective methods for leading the people's house. He has the additional advantage of knowing that his 2021-empowered home county – Middlesex – will control at least five senators in Scutari's caucus. Between Coughlin and a longtime demonstrably disciplined Middlesex delegation in the senate, now augmented by Zwicker, Middlesex had its best year politically since James McGreevey became governor. One can, in fact, chart the county's skid beginning with McGreevey's implosion, and alongside the ascent of then-U.S. attorney (and later Republican Governor) Chris Christie. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that Christie's 2013 challenger emerged from Middlesex, and certainly not an accident that many of Barbara Buono's fellow Middlesex County elected officials sat on their hands with South Jersey Democrats rather than risk Christie's ire. Run over by Christie, Buono on her own statewide Election Night condemned the New Jersey Democratic Party power structure, including South Jersey Power Broker George Norcross and Sweeney. Eight years later, she surfaced to rejoice via Twitter with the news that unknown trucker Ed Durr had defeated Sweeney, who had managed to attend Buono's kickoff event but otherwise stayed out of Christie's way.

WHO'S UP AND WHO'S DOWN

South Jersey Democrats



Maybe Sweeney got complacent during the Christie years, counting on the Republican governor's fierce refusal of beseeching GOP allies in the senate president's region who wanted to challenge him or his pals. But if Middlesex suffered the Christie era for the most part, South Jersey Democrats exulted in his cross-the-aisle Trenton presence, both for what it meant come budget time, and as a way of keeping other Democratic regions of the state off balance. Many of Christie's and South Jersey Democrats' public policy goals – including the overhaul of public pensions and benefits, and their [mostly] mutual disdain for the New Jersey Education Association – overlapped. Christie also famously (or infamously) signed off on the tax incentive plan for Camden, which critics bemoaned as a generous gift to George Norcross' corporate friends more than a genuine bon to a besieged southern city.

Christie’s fall from grace and subsequent long crawl out of office didn’t immediately boomerang on South Jersey, but ultimately, perhaps, it did, even as Middlesex began its slow process of restoration.

Inevitably, even if their party affiliation assumed a kind of symbiosis, Middlesex’s best year would be South Jersey’s worst.

“We won,” was supposedly the message conveyed by Norcross when Senate Democrats put together the majority necessary to make Nick Scutari the next senate president. Unfortunately for the South Jersey powerbroker, he and his allies had to sustain a lot of loss – including the senate presidency of regional workhorse Sweeney, and join an extra-regional conga line headed by Middlesex County – in order to proclaim victory. Given the amount of incrementally sustained backyard political damage, Norcross’ attempt at a *Braveheart* moment had all the resonance of someone getting run over and chariot-dragged while proclaiming “We won.” That said, Norcross and Sweeney squeezed considerable life out of past losses, including Sweeney holding onto the senate throne even after his doomed 2017 gubernatorial effort, and coping with an LD1 D defeat by flipping the LD8 seat from R to D. Don’t count out the South, and the particular talent Norcross has, notwithstanding his enthusiasm this time – for putting his fingerprints all over public people. Before too long, and without too many adjustments, Scutari – who occupies a kind of political no man’s land in Union – could look more like the southern senate president than the neighbor of Middlesex.

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CONTEST OF THE YEAR

Somerset County Commissioners' Race



Incumbent Democrats Shanel Robinson and Sara Sooy clung to their seats in difficult political weather to defeat Republican challengers Mike Kirsh and Amber Murad in a race that assumed clarity only long after Election Night. Tropical Storm Ida threw an unknown variable into this contest. It hit the county particularly hard, killing five people and ravaging Manville. As mentioned early, Ciattarelli also hails from Somerset and expected to pull voters to the Republican cause. But if the Christie era fractured the GOP, Republicans in Somerset still haven't resolved their own countywide differences. The fact that Robinson comes out of heavily Democratic Franklin Twp. gave her ticket a strong and unflinching base of support, while the GOP's supposed strong point – Bridgewater – also contains the core of Republican fissure. Mayor Matt Moench was a big backer of former Republican Party Chairman Doug Steinhardt, who briefly ran for governor, long enough to pivot Ciattarelli rightward, and infuriate some of the eventual Republican nominee's most avid supporters. That said, Kirsh and Murad proved strong challengers, and Kirsh in particular came very close to jarring Sooy out of her seat. The Democratic incumbents, though, had an organizational advantage of a pretty united party, and the proximity of an LD16 headed by a very convincing Zwicker and two Somerset based running mates – Assemblyman Roy Freiman and Assemblywoman-elect Sadaf Jaffer.

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CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR

Testa, McClellan and Simonsen, LD1



Consider the fact that just two years ago, Democrats occupied LD1 on the heels of the Jeff Van Drew legislative era. In 2021, after a year in which Van Drew changed his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican to win reelection, South Jersey Democrats opted out of opposing Republican Senator Testa and company with any real force, presumably in hopes of securing a soft touch challenge for Sweeney and his team in LD3. When the dust cleared, Sweeney was out of a job, courtesy of the supposedly harmless Ed Dur; while Testa became the tallest standing South Jersey Republican senator on the strength of his landslide 67-33% victory over Yolanda Garcia Balicki— in addition to being an already talked-about 2025 candidate for governor.



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COMEBACK OF THE YEAR **DON GUARDIAN**

This award could have also gone to Guardian’s running mate, Senator Vince Polistina. But after losing his mayoral reelection bid to the later jammed-up Frank Gilliam in 2017, Guardian resurfaced on the LD2 Republican ticket to snag an Assembly seat. When he takes the oath of office in January, he will be the only openly gay member of NJ’s 120-seat General Assembly.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR?

There was considerable speculation as the year wound down about a possible comeback bid for the chairmanship of the Bergen County Democratic Committee by Lou Stellato, the former long-serving chairman.



OPERATIVE OF THE YEAR **RASHEIDA SMITH**

The East Orange-based political consultant from Dunton Consulting – formerly a key player in Menendez 2018 – had a break-out 2021 as the statewide field director for the Murphy Campaign, and as the go-to operative of newly minted Democratic State Committee Chairman LeRoy Jones.



REPUBLICAN CHAIR OF THE YEAR **LAURA ALI**

The Morris County GOP chair created the Republican Party line, which enabled the Republican chair to wield more influence, and resulted in Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce getting pushed under the bus. The GOP won back Parsippany, and returned Chatham Twp. to condition red. Republican assembly people and commissioners won much more comfortably this year than in the Trump era, and a year after Joe Biden won Morris County, Republican gubernatorial nominee Jack Ciattarelli carried it by more than 20,000 votes.



HISTORY-MAKER OF THE YEAR **TERESA RUIZ**

The 29th District Senator from Newark's North Ward became the first Latina to receive the support from the Democratic caucus to undertake the key caucus role of Senate Majority Leader, succeeding retiring senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg.



ACTIVIST OF THE YEAR **SAM PESIN**

The President of the Friends of Liberty State Park led the 2021 local effort to get the attention of Governor Phil Murphy and the state Department of Environmental Protection as the leadership of the New Jersey state Legislature continued to drag its heels on the LSP Protection Act A2189 and A1449, which would once and for all protect Liberty State Park after 45 years of grassroots privatization battles.



ACTIVIST OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP **LARRY HAMM**

The President of the People's Organization for Progress organized and led an historic 67-mile march, from Montclair to Trenton, in an effort to get the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate President to move legislation that would give municipalities the authority to create civilian complaint review boards with full subpoena power in order to keep an eye on the police and stem the likelihood of another George Floyd police murder.



Planned Parenthood Action Fund of New Jersey

Planned Parenthood Action Fund of New Jersey advocates every day for the tens of thousands of patients and community members who turn to a Planned Parenthood health center each year for lifesaving health care services, education, and information. During this season of giving thanks, we wanted to highlight some of the patient experiences that drive us every day. If you are a legislator, an activist, or anyone who supports our mission to keep health center doors open and ensure that all people can get the high-quality care they need and deserve, we say to you: **thank you**. Whether it's abortion access, sex education, maternal health, or more, we know you will be by our side as we work to ensure that access to care doesn't depend on who you are, where you live, or how much money you make.

"I started going to Planned Parenthood right after high school. I had no idea where to go for birth control and annual exams and Planned Parenthood was highly recommended to me by several people. **Planned Parenthood has always been very accommodating to my needs and always makes every visit very easy.** I would recommend Planned Parenthood to anyone and will definitely continue to come for years ahead." - Lorena

"My story begins with me being a 19 year old woman dating my first and only boyfriend. My older sister knew we would be sexually active. So she recommended Planned Parenthood considering we didn't have insurance. Me and my boyfriend do plan on getting married and starting a family eventually. We want to enjoy married life without kids for a while and **Planned Parenthood gives me that choice by providing birth control for an affordable price.** I wouldn't go anywhere else. They have excellent staff who are always there if I have any questions or concerns." - Eryn

"Ever since I became sexually active, Planned Parenthood has been my go-to place for check-ups, testing, and birth control. The services are thorough, reliable, and affordable for me. **I couldn't imagine what life would be like without the help of Planned Parenthood.**" - Charnette

"I rely on Planned Parenthood for regular STD testing. **It's important for me to be responsible about my sexual health and know that I'm keeping myself and my partners safe.**" - Erin



Planned Parenthood Action Fund of New Jersey is a nonprofit, non-partisan group advocating on behalf of the tens of thousands of New Jerseyans who rely on Planned Parenthood health centers for high-quality, affordable reproductive health care.

www.PPActionNJ.org



LOCAL FIGHT OF THE YEAR

JOSHI VERSUS BHAGIA

What a war. The Sam Joshi for Edison Mayor Campaign relied on numerous heavyweights in the closing weeks of the Democratic Primary to underscore the candidate’s party alliances. Most significantly, a grinning, backslapping Governor Phil Murphy – himself on the June 8th ballot – campaigned for Joshi. Of course, Murphy’s fascination with Edison extended beyond merely his own craving for a prescribed power boost from Middlesex County, in the forward constellation of significant political counties in New Jersey – even pre-election. Murphy’s political minders saw Middlesex as part of a larger statewide strategy to potentially relieve the governor – and the party – from the longstanding iron grip of South Jersey dependency. While local Democratic Party Chairman Mahesh Bhagia – his mayoral candidacy infamously bigfooted by Middlesex County Democratic Committee Chairman Kevin McCabe, who relieved him of the local party line - and Joshi grappled over local issues, the most powerful men in the state jockeyed to get behind Joshi so they could brag about being with the winner come June 9th. Power consolidated behind the vice president of the Edison council made for the appearance of an especially frozen-out Bhagia. It also gave him an argument to make about how the establishment in this state could quickly come together to protect itself at the expense of real people otherwise known as Edison taxpayers. In the end, Bhagia couldn’t overcome the machine power amassed against him as Joshi won the primary, and went on to win a general election matchup with Republican Keith Hahn.

in·fra·struc·ture

/ˈɪnfreˌstrʌk(t)ʃHər/

noun

WORD OF THE YEAR

INFRASTRUCTURE

Only time will tell if billions from the feds actually makes it into real brick and mortar projects that benefit people, and not merely the coffers of public relations consultants.



QUOTE OF THE YEAR **GOVERNOR PHIL MURPHY**

“I would say this. If you’re a one-issue voter, and tax rate is your issue, either a family or a business, we’re probably not your state.”



CLUTCH WIN OF THE YEAR **VIN GOPAL**

The Democratic state Senator from Long Branch lost his running mates but defeated Republican challenger Lori Annetta 52-48%.



UPSET OF THE YEAR **NICOLINO GALLO**

The county commission candidate from Totowa took out incumbent Democratic Commissioner Assad Akhter to become the first countywide Republican candidate to win in Passaic since 2009