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## POLITICAL MISSTEP OF THE YEAR

Fearful of Republican Primary weather, Jack Ciattarelli headlined a Donald Trump-supporting “Stop the Steal” Rally, giving Phil Murphy’s team the ammunition they needed to mangle the Republican’s winning property tax message and paint him as an extremist.



## SHAME OF THE YEAR AWARD THE ENTRENCHING OF CAMDEN’S FOOD DESERT

The Camden County Democratic Committee-backed candidate for Camden Mayor won without any trouble in another downbeat cycle. But the fact that the city lacks a full-service supermarket – the consequence of supposed “market forces” – continues to speak to the chasm of a divide in New Jersey between the haves and have nots. To date, the state has been largely unresponsive to the situation as

poverty-stricken Camden plunged into a COVID-19 era nightmare. This is the same place where, on a nod from the state legislature and Governor Chris Christie, the powerful business contacts of boss George Norcross received tax breaks to maintain their corporate businesses here as poverty ravages the \$27K median household income city. “Our current local leadership has neglected this,” said upstart mayoral candidate Elton Custis, who stood in the parking lot outside the soon-to-close PriceRite, less than two months removed from the June 8th Democratic Primary. Custis lost to Victor Carstarphen – but his courage in standing up to political forces that have too often ill-served the people established the groundwork for future critical forays.



## **SALUTE OF THE YEAR**

### **MIKIE SHERRILL**

When President Joe Biden visited New Jersey ahead of the 2021 general election to promote his infrastructure package, he gave the congresswoman from the 11th District a shoutout from the stage, prompting Navy veteran Sherrill to stand and deliver a salute to the commander-in-chief.



## **GOOD GUY AWARD**

### **WAYNE DEANGELO**

New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association President Patrick Colligan in November announced that the 14th Legislative District Assemblyman received the prestigious Civilian Gold Medal Award at the PBA's 124th Annual Valor Awards Banquet at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City. This year's Awards Banquet also saw 2020's honorees publicly recognized. DeAngelo received his Civilian Gold Medal Award in acknowledgement of his saving one

of his table mate's lives at the last Awards banquet. The Assemblyman had been sitting next to an individual who began to choke on his meal and, upon noticing this individual in distress, provided the life-saving Heimlich Maneuver.



## **STATEMENT OF THE YEAR AWARD**

### **THE NEW JERSEY TAXPAYER**

We've learned time and again that as much as politicians become comfortable invoking bogeymen and buzzwords to emotionally arouse voters, very little supplants authentic plain talk about core New Jersey issues. This year, a Democratic Party incumbent whose campaign persisted in trying to make 2021 about Donald Trump, squeaked back into office by three percentage points in the face of a challenger who prioritized the state's ongoing property tax crisis.

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## CAMPAIGN AD OF THE YEAR “WE’RE PROBABLY NOT YOUR STATE”: CIATTARELLI FOR GOVERNOR

When he ran for governor in 2017, Ciattarelli found himself on the losing end of a particularly cruelly effective ad by the Guadagno Campaign, ironically on the issue of taxes, which made the claim that if there was a tax to be had, Ciattarelli had an answer: “Jack it up.” Perhaps tired of getting kicked around or maybe just sensing a juicy target, Ciattarelli essentially

formed the messaging basis of his 2021 campaign for governor around a statement made by Murphy that if tax rate is a given voter’s issue, “we’re probably not your state.” Running into the ground a grainy clip of Murphy uttering those words on stage juxtaposed by Ciattarelli saying, “Fix the damn state,” gave the Republican challenger a rallying cry that almost propelled him to victory.



## CAMPAIGN AD OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP LD-16’S “ONE DAY MORE”

Actually more of an internal campaign message than an overt ad, against the grim backdrop of the past two years and the negative energy of contemporary politics, Senator-elect Andrew Zwicker opted to go all-out with a positive theme when he, his running mates, and numerous volunteers, led a rousing chorus of “One day More” from *Les Miserables*. Blitzed by a battery off lurid

mail-pieces, the two-and-a-half minute counteroffensive vid even featured Assemblyman Roy Freiman cuddling a pair of puppies.



## THE MAKING IT ABOUT THE COUNTRY AND NOT HIMSELF AWARD

### CHRIS CHRISTIE

If you couldn't get enough of Christie on television, he wrote a book this year. Needless to say, it did not sell well. Next up for the former Governor of New Jersey? Another pitiful, unsuccessful run for the presidency.



## THE KITCHEN TABLE AWARD

In their first debate, Governor Phil Murphy zinged his opponent hard when Jack 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.



## THE DUMB STATEHOUSE THEATER AWARD

### BRIAN BERGEN AND ERIK PETERSON

The mask-less statehouse antics of Assemblyman Brian Bergen, Assemblyman Erik Peterson and other Republican lawmakers might have served the purpose of generating some sycophantic Fox News-style attention. But their supposedly Tom Paine YouTube crisis chamber moment proved to be more grandstanding than taking an actual substantive stand, while putting others in their midst at risk.

If Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll were still in Trenton, he at least would have offered some authentically fiery and memorable Patrick Henry rhetoric, unlike Peterson's enfeebled, “This is America.”

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## **SINGER TAKES THE STING OUT OF STINGER**

Thirtieth District Republican Senator Bob Singer had little trouble with his Democratic opponent this year, despite the fact that Democratic challenger Dan Stinger offered a potentially confusing option to voters. Singer Beat Stinger, 53,130 to 21,506.



## **THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE AWARD FORMER ASSEMBLY MAJORITY OFFICE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SKIP CIMINO**

Once an assemblyman representing Hamilton, Cimino staged a comeback in 2017 to run the office of Speaker Coughlin. The veteran insider Cimino distinguished himself as one of the more pragmatic players in Trenton. He retired this year, and he will be missed.



## **THE WORST STORYLINE HEADING INTO REDISTRICTING AND THE 2022 ELECTION CYCLE TOM MALINOWSKI**

The CD-7 Congressman barely beat Tom Kean, Jr. in 2020, and subsequently found himself saddled with a *Business Insider* story about stock-profiting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In a highly competitive environment with a lot of backroom pushing and shoving going on, Malinowski materialized early in the year as New Jersey's most vulnerable incumbent congressperson. Would he even end up running for reelection next year? Only time would tell.





## TRENTON INSIDER PROMOTION OF THE YEAR AWARD

### SETH HAHN

A Princeton University graduate, and formerly Deputy Executive Director of the Assembly Majority Office, Hahn post-2021 election succeeded veteran Skip Cimino as the office's Executive Director. Experienced, Hahn worked for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) for ten years as its Political Director and Treasurer of the CWA PAC. He was the National Field Director for the National Association of Letter Carriers before joining the CWA in 2009.



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# KEY 2021 NUMBERS

- 2,553,714:** The number of registered Democrats in New Jersey
- 1,464,221:** The number of registered Republicans in New Jersey
- 1,089,493:** The difference
- 1,339,471:** The number of New Jersey votes tallied by Democrat Phil Murphy
- 1,255,185:** The number of New Jersey votes tallied by Republican Jack Ciattarelli
- 84,286:** The difference between them
- 145,150:** The number of votes recorded for Murphy in Bergen County
- 129,644:** The number of votes recorded for Ciattarelli in Bergen
- 15,506:** The difference between them in Bergen
- 132,520:** Murphy’s vote tally in heavily Democratic Essex County
- 45,542:** Ciattarelli’s vote tally in heavily Democratic Essex County
- 86,978:** The difference in Essex
- 68,615:** Murphy’s vote tally in heavily Republican Ocean County
- 145,756:** Ciattarelli’s vote total in heavily Republican Ocean County
- 77,141:** The difference in Ocean
- 62,201:** The number of votes received by Senator Chris Connors of Ocean County, the highest among state senators
- 33,761:** The vote tally of Senator-elect Ed Durr
- 31,562:** The vote tally of Senator Steve Sweeney
- 2,199:** The Difference The differenc

## FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE’S DIVISION OF ELECTIONS:

5/18/2021 Statewide Voter Registration Summary

CONGRESSIONAL VOTING DISTRICT	UNA	DEM	REP	CNV	CON	GRE	LIB	NAT	RFP	SSP	Total
1	199,575	259,411	100,584	1,560	1,552	1,119	1,846	650	183	779	567,259
2	198,691	175,797	158,511	1,601	1,728	1,078	1,962	696	205	850	541,119
3	217,165	188,390	172,678	1,493	1,465	1,116	1,999	569	139	697	585,711
4	232,319	155,930	179,476	1,395	1,291	996	1,773	579	140	567	574,466
5	222,200	186,957	168,211	1,227	1,100	952	1,779	435	108	437	583,406
6	202,981	206,786	89,069	1,457	1,648	999	1,681	634	172	730	506,157
7	222,627	188,292	175,272	1,029	957	846	1,846	367	82	398	591,716
8	150,014	236,401	44,657	1,302	1,518	867	1,473	562	212	667	437,673
9	186,133	217,457	75,587	1,641	1,526	1,023	1,514	659	222	718	486,480
10	171,697	304,398	31,657	1,354	1,730	906	1,141	685	235	809	514,612
11	224,856	193,073	182,442	1,045	927	832	1,690	361	92	404	605,722
12	204,540	240,822	86,077	1,417	1,541	1,060	1,562	624	164	710	538,517
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,432,798</b>	<b>2,553,714</b>	<b>1,464,221</b>	<b>16,521</b>	<b>16,983</b>	<b>11,794</b>	<b>20,266</b>	<b>6,821</b>	<b>1,954</b>	<b>7,766</b>	<b>6,532,838</b>

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# “FAREWELL TO SOME”



*Somerset said goodbye to Bateman, the stately  
Force who saw the numbers on the wall, and lately  
Tom Kean, Jr. too bowed out of Trenton, but look  
For him next year, as he undertakes a federal nook.  
Some others decided to leave the Gold Dome, though Brown  
Got a job with Murphy, so didn't exactly leave town.  
Addiego changed party affiliation and plummeted.  
Since the Dawn of creation, chameleons summoned red  
For blue and blue for red, but didn't run on a party line  
In New Jersey. Weinberg did, and found a way to define  
A pragmatic progressive point of view, though perhaps ironically  
Sweeney also departed, not of his own accord, and no less iconically.*

## IN MEMORIAM



### *Gerald Cardinale*

LD39 State Senator Cardinale died this year at the age of 86. He was the longest-serving member of the Senate Republican caucus, and one of the longest-serving Senators, having first been elected to the Assembly in 1980, and then the Senate in 1982.

Cardinale's obituary can be found [here](#); Insider NJ editor Max Pizarro's tribute to the Senator can be found [here](#).

'It is with deepest sadness and grief that we share the heartbreaking news that long-serving State Senator Gerry Cardinale (R-39), passed away this morning at Pascack Valley Hospital after a brief illness (not Covid-related).

He was 86 years old.

Senator Cardinale faithfully served the 39th district for 42 years. He is the second longest serving Senator in New Jersey history.

He will be remembered for his wit, political acumen, devotion to family and friends, and a deep and abiding love for his state and country. He celebrated his Italian heritage in many ways with his love of Italian food and the occasional grappa.’

Said longtime associate and State Assemblyman Robert Auth:

“Gerry was one of the best politicians I’ve ever seen. There was never a hand he did not want to shake, a door he did not want to knock on, or a train station where he did not want to greet commuters with a smile. He was my mentor and close friend. It will be a long time before we see another public servant like Gerry Cardinale who had guts, commitment and passion for his constituents. He worked hard every day to earn the trust of the residents of the 39th district and maintain his connection to the people of New Jersey.”

Born in New York City in 1934, Gerald Cardinale received a B.S. Degree in Chemistry from St. John’s University and earned a DDS from New York University College of Dentistry in 1959. Aside from his long political career, Senator Cardinale was a Dentist by profession. He served as Mayor of Demarest, NJ from 1975 – 1979, before his career in the NJ State Senate, he spent one term in the NJ Assembly from 1980 – 1981.

A lifelong Republican (as a child he was a Wendell Willkie backer against FDR; and was so heartbroken by Barry Goldwater’s 1964 loss that he removed himself from political matters for three years) he won his first race for mayor of Demarest by 27 votes. He ran for an assembly seat in 1977 and lost, then won in 1979.

He ran unsuccessfully for governor in the 1980s.

“I learned a lot about New Jersey,” Senator Cardinale said, in reference to his statewide run. “I learned about what it’s like to be on a back road in Salem County at 1 a.m. when you have to get up for a 6 a.m. breakfast in Bergen County. I learned to sleep in the car. I learned that New Jersey is too small for airplane travel, and simultaneously a place where you might need three and half to four hours to get somewhere.”

When he considered what happened to the reputations of those governors with whom he served over the last number of years, among them Christie Todd Whitman and Chris Christie, veteran state Senator Cardinale said he couldn’t help but feel that the governors of New Jersey bear a curse. “I’m lucky I lost that Republican Primary,” Cardinale cracked in 2017, referring to the 1989 Republican contest, when he came in fifth in a statewide contest of eight Republicans. U.S. Rep. Jim Courter won that year, and went on to lose the general election to U.S. Rep. Jim Florio. Senator Cardinale received eight percent off the vote to Courter’s winning 29% in the GOP Primary, but it’s just as well, he told InsiderNJ.

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**IN MEMORIAM**

*George Richardson*

The State of New Jersey, Essex County and the City of Newark lost a giant with the death of former Assemblyman George Richardson on September 24th of this year.

A politician, an agitator, organizer, civil rights leader, and a military veteran who served with the occupational forces in Japan after WWII, Assemblyman Richardson was 91.



From his obituary:

Former NJ Assemblyman, lifelong advocate for civil rights It is with sadness that we announce the death of former State Assemblyman George Richardson on Sept. 24, 2021. Assemblyman George Richardson was a lifelong fighter for civil rights and the dignity of all people. He played an important role in the history of Newark and was essential to rise of African American political representation in the city. Throughout his long career in politics he was always a champion of building coalitions of diversity and always working to understand the needs and urgencies of even those who opposed him. He never faltered in his commitment to a strong politics of inclusion and compassion. As a father and a grandfather George was the embodiment of kindness and good humor. His family remembers him for his “militant optimism” and his boundless energy in the effort to offer help and encouragement.

He was a standout, remembered Carl Golden, former spokesman for Governor Tom Kean.

“In 1971, I returned to New Jersey from a four-year stint on the staff of U. S. Rep. Peter H.B. Frelinghuysen, lured back by a job offer from Assemblyman Tom Kean to join the very small Assembly Republican staff,” Golden told InsiderNJ. “I met Richardson at that time. He was a fascinating personality and a delight to be around. His relationship and interaction with Kean, majority leader at the time, was of a kind seldom seen anymore. They were of two exceedingly different backgrounds as well as different political parties and histories. But, they got along well and respected one another immensely. Richardson was one of those people who sticks in my mind, even after nearly 50 years in this business.”





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## IN MEMORIAM



### *Nicholas Felice*

The former Fair Lawn Mayor, long-term state assemblyman and veteran of WWII died this year at 94.

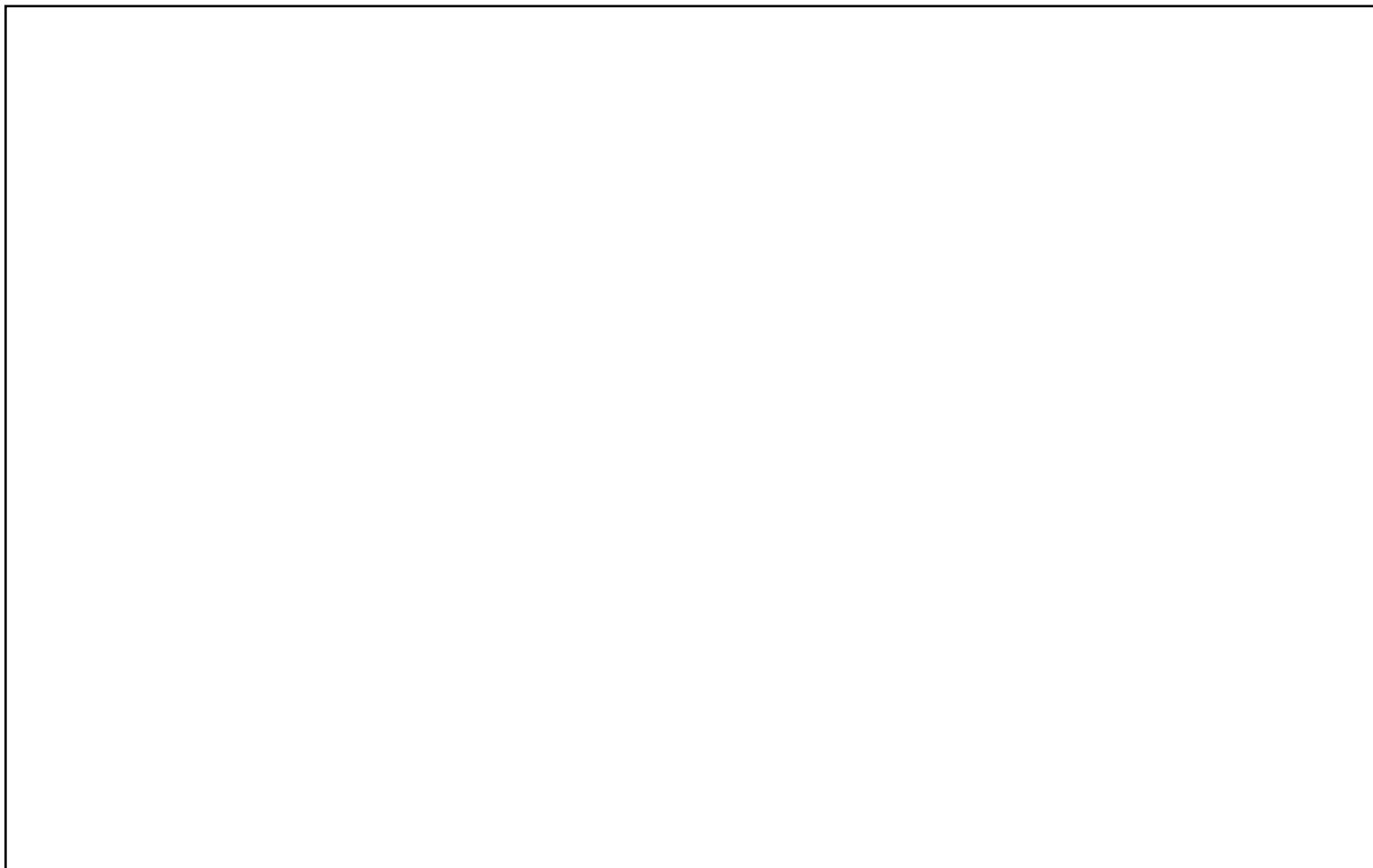
Assemblyman Felice served on multiple municipal boards and committees before he was elected mayor, where he served from 1972 to 1974. His run as an assemblyman began in 1982, and he eventually went on to serve for 10 terms in total, including a time as the Assembly Speaker Pro-Tempore.

From Patch:

Though surely not his most important contribution to New Jersey politics, a lasting memory of Felice came in the winter of 1983, when his legislative office fielded calls from children seeking the “Santa Hot Line,” a phone number that only differed by one digit from his office.

The late assemblyman, a graduate of Passaic High School, served as an Army radioman in the Pacific theater of WWII.

“I’m thinking about those kids, they were so young,” Mr. Felice told Patch in an interview on the 75th anniversary of D-Day. “They had 65-pound packs on their backs. Many of them drowned in the water and never touched land. The Nazis set traps and bombs in the water. Ninety percent of the first wave was killed or wounded. It took two or three waves before they never reached the shore. It’s amazing what was accomplished that day, but it had to happen.”

**IN MEMORIAM***Leonard Kaiser*

Leonard R. “Lenny” Kaiser, the former mayor of North Arlington, and a fixture in Bergen County politics and government for 34 years died this year on September 11 after a short illness. He was 73 years old.

Mr. Kaiser was elected to the North Arlington Borough Council in 1977 and won election as Mayor in 1983. He went on to win four more consecutive terms; becoming the longest serving mayor in the borough’s history (1983-2002).

In 1985 he won election to the Bergen County Freeholder Board (now Board of County Commissioners). He ran and won again in 1986 because voters approved a change to the county’s form of government the previous year. In 1987, Kaiser found himself running yet again for freeholder, but lost by a narrow margin.

## IN MEMORIAM



### *Abigail Fair*

The late Abigail “Abbie” Fair of the Green Village section of Chatham Township, a former Mayor, worked during her life to preserve the mighty natural resources of North Jersey.

As co-founder off the Great Swamp Watershed Association and as a longtime member of the local township committee, Ms. Fair carried on the work of Helen Fenske, who saved the Great Swamp – the origin of the Passaic and Raritan rivers – from development.

An advocate on water-related issues for the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) for more than two decades. Ms. Fair died on May 17 at the age of 81 in Massachusetts.

Appointed to the Township Planning Board in 1977, Ms. Fair retired from the Township Committee at the end of 2004, having served five, three-year terms in elected office. She spent her public career identifying and seeking to preserve the connection between residents and natural resources, seeing quality of life... as fundamentally tied to the Great Swamp Watershed. Whether it was a proposed four-lane highway on Shunpike Road, the original Sterling Properties project of more than 125 units at Shunpike and Green Village Road, or residential housing units in Green Village, from her earliest days on the Planning Board, Ms. Fair confronted development projects that would have substantially changed the character of the township and the region.

Friendly with the press, eager to educate, and always substantive, Pennsylvania native Abigail Fair left behind the legacy of a policymaker so strong in her chosen area – so intellectually unbeatable – that she continually won reelection against the odds.

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## JACK CIATTARELLI AND THE ART OF THE TANGIBLE, LIKEABLE – AND VISIBLE



*By Fred Snowflack*

So much about politics these days revolves around analytics.

Both political parties try to break down voter preference through a growing number of groupings – race, religion, gender, age, occupation are just a few.

There are other indicators of political alignment as well. If long-time football fans stopped watching the NFL a few years ago because players knelt during the National Anthem, it's a good bet they were, or are, Republicans.

Talk to even local political organizations about the future and they'll likely tell you about plans to expand their technological footprint.

Identifying voters likely to swing your way is only part of the challenge.

The next step is to get them to vote.

And to be sure, technology is used to remind and to persuade the quasi-apathetic to go to the polls, or more likely, fill out a ballot by mail.

Amid all this we must confront the just-concluded gubernatorial election.

Phil Murphy won, of course, but by a bit less than 85,000 votes, a shocking development in a state where Dems have a registration advantage of almost 1.1 million.

Republican Jack Ciattarelli obviously employed modern technical know-how to identify voters.

But he did more than that. “Jack,” as his campaign signs put it, also campaigned the way candidates did a generation ago.

He made himself visible.

Beginning months before Nov. 2, Ciattarelli trekked all over New Jersey – “eight days a week,” he joked – meeting voters, or at least, people who could be voters.

There was nothing unique about this. In fact, it was very traditional.

He spent hours visiting diners, pizza joints, coffee shops, street fairs, carnivals and the like – literally in all 21 counties. He walked around, asked people their names, what they do, and said he wanted “to fix New Jersey.” People questioned him. Sometimes, the questions were relevant to state government,

sometimes they were not. No matter. He was spending time with the people.

Then there were the “town halls.” These were more formal settings. Ciattarelli gave his stump speech, complete with some humorous anecdotes about his upbringing and his family. Then, he took questions unfiltered. People raised their hands and asked whatever they wanted. He answered every one. Sure, there was some political spin, but he often connected.

The argument against this type of campaigning would be that it looks good, but in a state with more than 6 million registered voters, you simply can’t meet that many people even if you visit a thousand delis – and you won’t visit that many.

Fair point, but watching Ciattarelli in action over

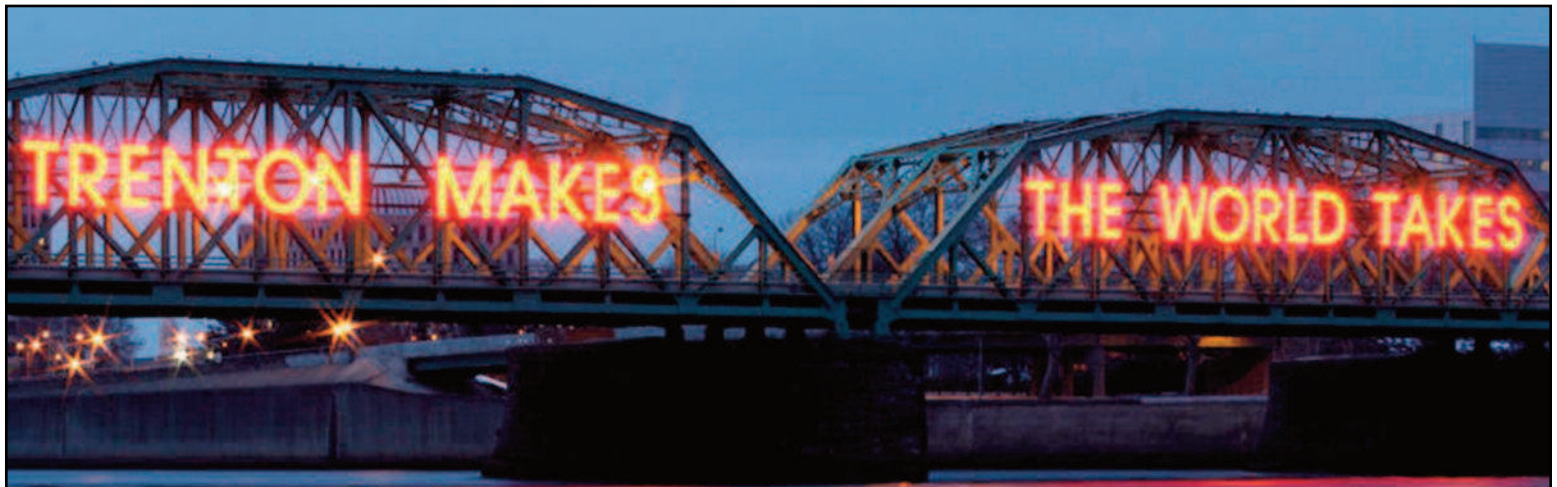
the campaign, something else came to mind. Many voters are not ideologically connected to one party or the other. Many are not ideological at all.

But if they like someone, they may vote for him. And Ciattarelli certainly passed the likeability test. That’s something that can’t be judged on a computer printout.

He lost simply because the registration disadvantage was too much to overcome no matter what he did.

But that doesn’t change the lesson we saw in November – no matter how complex and thorough technology becomes, candidates should never overlook actually meeting voters.

What a concept.



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# 2021: A TRANSFORMATIVE YEAR



*by John Van Vliet*



With December upon us, and a comfortable distance now from Election Day, there is space to reflect and analyze how the year delivered a demonstration of “an egg, larva, pupa, and adult” cycle of change, conceived imperceptibly in 2020, then maturing, and ultimately emerging as a unique creature at the end of the year, having been nurtured in the democratic chrysalis that is the ballot box.

The past year represents a pivot, a potential resurrection in New Jersey in the political and economic sense. For many, 2019 was the last “normal” year

where people went about their lives not too differently than years before. When the pandemic struck, 2020 essentially plunged the state, nation, and the entire world, into a new reality with changes demanded rapidly and dramatically. Hopes that things would “go back to normal” did not materialize. Governor Murphy rose to command emergency powers to control the spread of the coronavirus and clashes over masks, business shut-downs, and restrictions on gatherings had some New Jerseyans saying this was essential while others decried the loss of freedoms.

The arrival of 2021 promised the hope that we would get over the worst of it and have the virus under control. Business restrictions had greatly eased but the threat and spread was continuing. A strange Christmas and low-key New Year's Eve delivered a bundle to the doorstep with a ribbon reading "Baby 2021." No sooner had Americans pulled the blanket aside than the January 6 insurrection took place. New Jerseyans everywhere watched as a frenzied mob carrying Trump signs, fueled by QAnon conspiracies, anarchical hatred, or the false belief that the election had been "stolen" resulted in death and destruction. Immediately, the consequences impacted. The Capitol Hill Police held the line, despite losing officers in the fray. A New Jersey son, 42-year-old Air Force veteran Brian Sicknick of New Brunswick, had been injured during the battle for the Capitol and died the day after from two strokes.

The Republican Primary was still months away and it seemed like Murphy was untouchable. Despite his criticism, the NJ GOP had to contend with monumental forces outside their control, as the nationalization of the political parties dropped anchors around the collars of Republicans. Doug Steinhardt, the former state Republican chairman, aborted his bid to seek the gubernatorial nomination.

From a political perspective, Murphy began 2021 operating with two major factors which solidified his power and ability to operate almost at will. These were the specter of Donald Trump—key to Democratic strategy in almost every sense—and the pandemic. Like an hourglass, however, the sand was running out. As the year went on, discontent and confusion surrounded the matter of schools. In-person or virtual learning? Masks or no masks? Who should decide? The governor reserved the right to make sweeping decisions but knew that the sooner he could relinquish state controls on these matters, the easier it would be for him to avoid the wrath of the anti-mask crowd. Though a minority, it was a vocal one, and Republicans were keen to grasp for whatever political driftwood they could cling to as the smoke from the Capitol receded beyond the horizon. It

was not so difficult—easier for Republicans, perhaps, than Democrats estimated, but Murphy Democrats' consciousness was clouded by the success of a Senate President who had largely been stifled in the midst of the emergency, and a Republican Party which appeared headed towards permanent minority status.

As 2021 was a transformative year, so it was in ways few could have expected.

The public good was greatly benefitted with the mass roll-out of vaccines in the beginning of the year. "Megacities" served New Jerseyans in droves. As far as government-backed public health units defined a year, for 2020 it was the testing site. In 2021, it was the vaccination site. By the beginning of the summer, vaccination numbers were looking promising. There were always going to be those who would never get a shot, no matter what, and Murphy touted all kinds of incentives, perhaps most amusingly promoting the "beer and a shot" partnership with certain bars and restaurants that would give a free beer on proof of vaccination.

If a free beer would actually make someone decide one way or another to immunize themselves against a novel virus, well, so be it. Eventually vaccination numbers slowed. Murphy was adamant that 2021 not be a "lost summer" for the Jersey Shore which took a pummeling the year prior. Many businesses, especially those serving food and tourists, had shuttered forever. To impose further lockdowns was politically and economically unthinkable.

At the Democratic Reorganization Meeting held at a poolside hotel party in Asbury Park, Murphy welcomed LeRoy Jones as the new state chairman, heaping praise in signature Murphy-esque style on the outgoing chairman and the governor's staunch ally, John Currie. Murphy himself used the occasion to rally the troops around his banner, vowing that he would run as though he was "ten points" behind the Republican nominee. Nevertheless, it seemed as

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though it would scarcely be necessary. Further, the Democratic power epicenter was still held in the north. With Jones at his side, the governor had a chairman who was above the reach of George Norcross' grappling hooks, and, as long as the pandemic required, the legislature would acquiesce.

With the Republican Primary passed, and MAGA firebrands Singh and Rizzo defeated by the affable and undeniably Jersey-Guy Jack Ciattarelli, a former assemblyman and CPA, Murphy could begin to strategize his re-election campaign. Jack lacked name recognition, it was questionable whether or not he could unite the Republican Party, and Murphy hammered his presence at a "Stop The Steal" rally, which Ciattarelli denied knowing was the nature of the event. Other bumps in the road arose for Jack when he remarked that "sodomy" would not be taught to schoolkids if he was elected, prompting a firestorm from the left and LGBT organizations, trying to paint Ciattarelli as homophobic and out of touch. Jack, in his defense, said that certain conversations belonged at "the dinner table" and not in schools. Murphyworld vastly underestimated the degree by which Ciattarelli's messages were resonating in the meantime.

By degrees, the governor's polls and absolute certainty of re-election were beginning to decline, especially with the summer now behind. A semi "normal" summer, in fact, allowed breathing room (still mostly masked) from endless pandemic discussion and the old problems afflicting New Jersey resurfaced. During the most challenging two years the state has faced in generations, the underlying issues that have plagued New Jersey were never resolved, they were simply put on the backburner. But they could not simply be willed away, allowing for the governor to pursue a "peacetime" progressive agenda as he might have wished. With two aggressive (but not inappropriate) televised debates which had been frequently interrupted by a rowdy—or pent-up—audience, the governor tried to cast Ciattarelli as in the mold of Trump. Trump, the archetype of everything wrong and the antithesis of civilization itself, would, Democrats

figured, continue to cast a dark shadow over the Republicans. Nevermind that Ciattarelli himself had said in 2015 that Trump was "unfit" to be president, and that former Governor Chris Christie had distanced himself from the former president who infected him with COVID, and had dismissed his debate training when he clashed with Joe Biden on stage in 2020.

Ciattarelli was not a Republican cut from the philosophical cloth of DeSantis, Abbott, and Trump. But the polls all gave Murphy a double-digit lead. He could relax and, in 2021 transformative style, try to pivot the New Jersey election into a subject of national attention.

In Virginia, the state could go red or blue. This essential southern state was walking a tightrope between the blue-dominated north and the everywhere-else red landscape. Rudy Giuliani even got into the game, releasing a bizarre video of him in a SnapChat styled Abe Lincoln video filter, speaking as though the nation's 16th president had been kicked in the stomach, railing against the Clintons and touting candidate Youngkin as the choice for Honest Abe.

The governor's campaign wanted to bring some of the national spotlight to the Garden State, a state which has, since Benjamin Franklin's own observations two and a half centuries ago, been split between its neighbors. New Jersey has never been a critical consideration on the national political scene. New Jersey governors have not been presidents with the sole exception of Woodrow Wilson over a century before, although Chris Christie might aspire to try again. Grover Cleveland has been the only New Jersey native to win the White House. Phil Murphy was on track to smash the 40+ year old reality that Democratic governors only served one term. Maybe he could eventually nudge Wilson aside: bring in Bernie Sanders, bring in President Obama, bring in President Biden. This kind of transformation, however, would not produce the kind of dividends expected. Rallying the Bernie wing of the Democratic Party was trying to

preach to the choir—and not a particularly large choir—while the rest of the state was scratching their heads in the pews.

With the election drawing near, the public perception was that Murphy was moving away from the bread and butter issues a New Jersey governor had to keep a lock on. Local Democratic campaigns in the suburbs did not receive significant support from the Murphy campaign—essentially seen as a given. The cities would carry the day. And with a million more registered Democrats than Republican in New Jersey, and with the polls continuing to show a comfortable Murphy lead, 2021 was going to transform Murphy into the first governor since Brendan Byrne to get a double term.

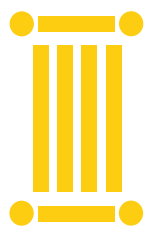
Ciattarelli was able to produce a transformation simply by staying on a simple message. He transformed a Murphy-led chorus into a true referendum by capitalizing on the optical missteps of the incumbent. “He’s not New Jersey,” Jack would often say at his rallies, making quips about the Red Sox, blending his well-practiced town hall speeches with an effective combination of humor and gravity, light on ideology, heavy on the practical, unexciting but crucially important home-front matters that every New Jerseyan deals with: the problems of living in an expensive state. He did not need to go into great detail about his school tax reforms or expound too much on the particulars of freezing property tax rates for seniors—it was enough that he mentioned it. For Democratic voters, there was not enough actually delivered to make the case. The sincerity of Murphy’s policies had to be called into question as well. After all, a year after New Jerseyans decided two-to-one to legalize marijuana, it still could not be legally purchased except for strictly controlled medical marijuana card holders. What other policy point had such a popular mandate and so little governmental execution?

November 2 arrived. When election day did roll around, unlike the year before, in-person voting was the norm, technical issues with new voting machines notwithstanding.

All the major polls were wrong. Murphyworld deflated rapidly as the numbers came in. The governor obviously was re-elected, but not with the strong mandate that had been expected. In the storm, the governor’s arch-rival, naturally a Democrat, Steve Sweeney had been defeated by Ed Durr, a truck driver who had never entered politics before. Republican gains were not enough to completely upend the state’s alignment, but Ciattarelli had been transformed from a past political backbench figure to the man who somehow divorced the NJ GOP brand from the toxins of Trumpism that the Democrats had relied on. And for the Democrats’ showing, still holding a million more registered voters, they had only themselves to blame for the transformation that 2021 ultimately delivered. Whether the fruits borne of the election were germinated in the soil of partisan hubris—taking for granted the rank-and-file Democratic voter—or inexcusable ignorance is the fertile field for debate and honest introspection. Such conversations should serve as a wake-up call to those in power and their trusted assumptions, whether shaken as was Phil Murphy, or ousted, as was Steve Sweeney.



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## 2021: A TRANSFORMATIVE YEAR



*by John Van Vliet*



In many respects, the first half of 2021 was largely a continuation of the struggles of 2020, struggles which have not fully resolved although the political establishment seems to have largely moved on from them. As they have tried to leave the darkest days of 2020 and early 2021 behind them, the NJ Democratic and Republican Parties have also moved on to new leadership, although under different circumstances.

The departure of John Currie, Passaic County Democratic Chairman, from the state's top party

leadership post, meant that Governor Phil Murphy's staunchest ally was gone. Currie had captained his party in Passaic County to oust every red ember from the Board of Chosen Freeholders, subsequently renamed Board of County Commissioners—an apparent middle-of-the-pandemic priority for the governor. Currie's Passaic County total-blue dominion lasted until the 2021 election saw a breach in Currie's fortress, with Totowa Republican Nicolino Gallo the sole survivor of an electoral assault that brought down incumbent Assad Akter and very nearly ousted John Bartlett.

The former state chairman remains a figure of immense influence and respect around Democratic circles. Currie commands this, from Paterson ward councilmembers to Congressman Bill Pascrell and all points in between. Currie came up from segregated North Carolina to make Paterson his home and Passaic County his political kingdom where he has been county party chairman for 31 years. Currie has groomed and mentored political figures in the county and state during his long tenure. He is a successful businessman with Hawthorne Chevrolet, had been a coach, and put in over two decades on the county board of elections. In 2018, he was appointed to the lucrative position of Public Information Officer for the Passaic County Board of Social Services. Passaic County Republican chairman Peter Murphy calls Currie a friend.

Currie's successor LeRoy Jones is, in many respects, a political layer-cake in practice. Politics is encoded into his DNA. A partner with state lobbying firm 1868 Public Affairs, he has taken on his first year as State Democratic Chairman after being brought on at the state Democratic reorganization meeting-as-poolside-soiree at the Asbury Park Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel. Jones has been the Essex County Chairman since 2013—the year Currie became state chair, and also the Municipal Chairman for East Orange since 2002. Jones has served as Essex County freeholder, State Assemblyman, and as City Administrator. Town, county, state, Jones has sat in all the chairs, both as a politician and as a party chairman. Bespectacled and mustachioed, Jones is the embodiment of party politics not in a vulgar sense as one would say “professional” but in a very real sense, as one would say “holistically.”

Jones, as Essex County chairman, was commanding a base strong enough to be independent of the North-


South Machiavellian powerplays which have wrought the state's Democratic Party, culminating in the clash between the Currie-northern-quad coalition and the Sweeney-Norcoss southern hegemony. Jones, occupying a perch high enough with such a large and critical urban constituency, was able to avoid the crosshairs during the Democratic chess game over the map of the Garden State while Team Red looked on, largely ignored, and stamped their feet.

When Jones met with Currie, the two agreed to a transition timetable. Currie would remain chair to deliver New Jersey to Joe Biden while Jones would assume party leadership for the gubernatorial election. Both were successful.

The Republican Party, like the Democrats, also saw a change at the top in 2021. State Chairman Douglas Steinhardt, a partner at Florio Perrucci Steinhardt Cappelli Tipton & Taylor, is an attorney to the core. Steinhardt is a northern Republican power player in his own right with ties from the local to the national level. His Warren County political roots run far and deep, and Steinhardt has professional and personal roots through New Jersey as well as Pennsylvania. He served as Mayor of Lopatcong for 14 years. He has been Chairman of the Warren County Republican Committee for 17 years, serves as the chairman of his county's Heroin and Opioid Addiction Awareness Task Force, and is Vice-Chairman of the NJ Republican County Chairmen's Association. He added the State Chairmanship to his collection four years ago, elected unanimously.

When Steinhardt was in college, he played football, and retains the imposing physical form of someone who can carry the ball to the end. In so far as his law practice and state-level partisan affairs go, this was true. Steinhardt's fortunes changed when he decided



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, with a body of water and trees in the background.

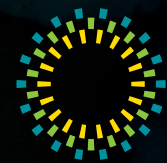
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to throw his hat into the ring and run for governor, running on a MAGA platform which came as no surprise, considering his close ties with the Trump White House and Trump Campaign.

Steinhardt gave up his post as Republican State Chairman and launched his bid for governor, where his name joined those of former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, former Baptist pastor Phil Rizzo from Middletown, and engineer Hirsh Singh of Linwood who carried the Trump banner.

Not long after Steinhardt began his campaign, bringing on Trump and Christie advisor Bill Stepien, the January 6 insurrection took place. Almost immediately after, Steinhardt withdrew, saying, "...unforeseen professional obligations have made it untenable for me to continue in this race as a candidate for Governor." This saved Steinhardt, the attorney who shares a firm with former Democratic Governor Jim Florio, from having to somehow spin

away the unforgettable scenes of Capitol Hill mayhem, buffalo-horns, and QAnon-frenzied insurrection which led to the deaths of five people.

Succeeding Steinhardt as State Republican Chairman is Bob Hugin. Hugin, CEO of the pharmaceutical company Celgene, first became a name familiar to New Jerseyans at the dinner table when he challenged Senator Bob Menendez for the US Senate seat in 2018. Hugin was able to raise enormous sums of money and brought to bear some \$36 million to pound away at the incumbent senator who was embroiled in a federal ethics trial, which he escaped from legally unharmed but damaged in the polls. Despite this, and attack ads exchanged where the candidates called each other "slimeballs," "liars," "misogynists," etc. Hugin was not able to overcome the anti-Trump sentiment of the 2018 Blue Wave no matter how dim the light on Menendez appeared to be, nor how much money he shoveled into the campaign furnace.

Hugin, now captaining the State Republican Party, has been tasked with reasserting what had been a badly battered brand until Ciattarelli very nearly captured a new residence at Drumthwacket and sent Phil Murphy packing. It was not to be, but the man swept aside as a candidate by the 2018 Blue Wave was able to bask in the fruitful results of the 2021 Red Wave. New Jersey Republicans fared better than Democrats had anticipated—so often fighting among themselves that they forget there is a Republican Party to contend with. While Steinhardt may have had to (at least temporarily) step out of the Republican limelight in the state, the Marines Corps veteran Hugin seems to have caught the party at the right time and is well positioned, given his extensive contacts and financial resources, to harness the latent Republican

electricity and shock the party’s heart back to a new lease on political life.

The year 2021 has, indeed, brought with it curveballs and unexpected twists and turns in the state’s political history: wonks and political junkies can scarf popcorn as the soap opera continues to unfold. For the state’s two dominant parties, their new leadership brings new perspectives and new opportunities. Jones, the consummate political creature, and Hugin, the business-tied comeback-kid operator, will sail their parties through the often-tumultuous New Jersey political seas, be they rocked by Blue Waves or Red Waves, knowing that nothing can be taken for granted.



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## IN FOCUS: MORRIS COUNTY GOP CHAIR LAURA ALI



*By Fred Snowflack*

When 2021 began, the landscape in traditionally Republican Morris County was somewhat troubling for the GOP.

Donald Trump was leaving office - unwillingly, but leaving just the same - and Democratic registration in the county was surging.

A Republican registration advantage of about 40,000 in 2016 had been cut just about in half. In line with the changing numbers, the county was now represented by two Democratic House members, which would have been unfathomable a decade ago.

In response, Laura Ali, the county's Republican chair, came up with a plan, one that seemed drastic to long-time party members.

She wanted a county line.

For decades, Morris Republicans practiced a democratic system with a small "d." Party leaders did not endorse candidates in primaries. Ballot position was determined by the luck of the draw, not by the whims of party poo-bahs. This system occasionally resulted in primaries being won by candidates who were not part

of the political establishment.

That was more a positive than a negative, but Ali and others sensed trouble ahead. Now that Morris was becoming more competitive, Republicans could no longer afford to run gadflies - they needed the "best" candidates possible.

Of course, the belief was that county committee members were the most qualified to select the "best" candidates. There was a bit of arrogance in that stance, but no matter. Ali proposed a "line," meaning the party would make primary endorsements and give the chosen a preferential ballot position - hence, the county line.

There was instant opposition.

Opponents, some of whom went to court, said a line would give party leaders too much influence at the expense of genuine democracy.

In the end, the county committee went with Ali. That was not surprising, given the fact the committee was giving itself more power.





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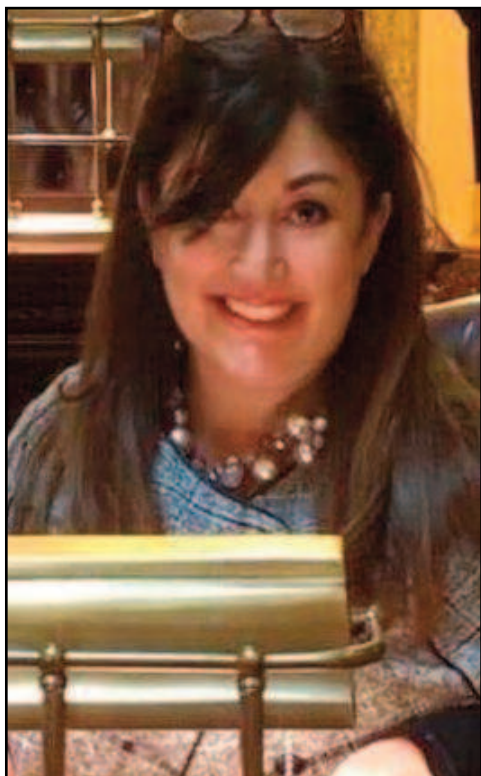
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An immediate casualty of the move was Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroke, who was not endorsed for reelection. She ran in the primary, nonetheless, but lost a close race to Christian Barranco, the party-endorsed candidate.

When we got to the general election, however, the new plan worked.

Morris Republicans won state-wide and county-wide offices by greater margins than they did in the previous election cycle. And the GOP won back the mayor's seat in Parsippany and took political control of Chatham Township.

A cynic might say, "Hey, this was a good year for Republicans."

Yes it was.

But it's certain Ali has no second thoughts about instituting a county line.

What happens in the future, of course, with internal Morris Republican politics remains to be seen.