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2021 YEAR IN ADVANCE



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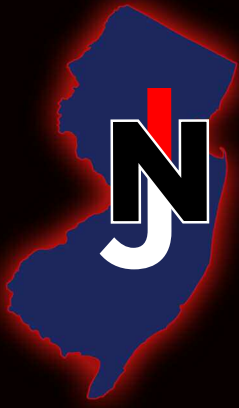
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Message from the Editor
YEAR IN ADVANCE 2021



Republicans used to be those bankably bow-tied guys who could absorb a pink belly, and then earnestly glaze-over the eyeballs of their guilt-tripped tormentors with lectures about Nixon and Reagan. Now they wear minotaur headdresses and storm the U.S. Capitol. That's an overload of nerdly karma gone miserably haywire, but such are the trippy times in which we live.

Every year we put together a run-down on what to expect in the months ahead in New Jersey politics, and we usually manage to get it out a little earlier than February, but the ongoing issuance of real-time – sometimes nutjob – news made the future seem farther away than usual and the present all the more urgent.

Amid all the crazy political sparks, including the most unorthodox – and certainly most obnoxious – transition of power by a departing executive in U.S. presidential history – we finally found that little crosscurrent between now and then to comment on our coming current events.

Herein find assessments of the main collisions at hand, minus some of the local ones that will no doubt provide their own special parochial flavor.

Edison comes to mind.

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The ongoing rift between Senate President Steve Sweeney and Governor Phil Murphy – smoothed over for the cameras in an election year – means other districts could become battlegrounds before the 2021 primary filing deadline. Given the extent to which Democrats have consolidated power in this state during the Trump years, however, it seems likely that more backroom deals and contract dolling than muzzle-flashing firefights at the ballot box will settle those differences among the state's enduring power players.

For after all, as Calvin Coolidge once drably said: "The business of America is business."

It's a line ready made for those former supposedly undisciplined and unkempt hellraisers otherwise known as New Jersey Democrats in the *Animal Farm* year of 2021.

Max Pizarro

Max Pizarro

Editor, InsiderNJ

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MIDDLESEX COUNTY AND THE 2021 PORTENTS OF POWER

By Max Pizarro



Swamps by definition are actually biospheres of life diversity and change, and hardly that habitat of congealed corruption, as advertised. Establishment power in New Jersey, conversely, depends on a certain overwhelming static quality – almost close to stasis or even sepsis. In the ongoing uproar for change, amid lack of opportunity, and unlivable and untenable conditions, statewide Democratic Party personnel invariably depend on the same monolithic building blocks to ensure igloo-like snugness – and next to no daylight. If politics is an imprecise science, New Jersey politics aims at undoing those basic principles that create life, opting instead for a formula that includes the following checkpoints: empower someone from the financial industry with progressive credentials (or at least super progressive ideals), who assures the machines that they won't need to do – or at least pay – anything; and

advance a back bencher whose dependence on machine politics for oxygen make him an unthreatening game manager of pro-machine and anti-public interest policy, an individual who will usually sour on the structure, perhaps convince himself that he advanced on his personal merits, go rogue, and get replaced by someone recalibrated with less (or no) aggressive tendencies. Inevitably, too, someone with organizational skills that dovetail with party interests (often labor people, for example) squiggles through and becomes part of the bloodstream of the party machine.

Anything more usually creates too much risk of creating precisely that reality that struggling real people clamor for, otherwise known as change.

The power in front of the power usually consists of all men. They're usually white, and if they're not they

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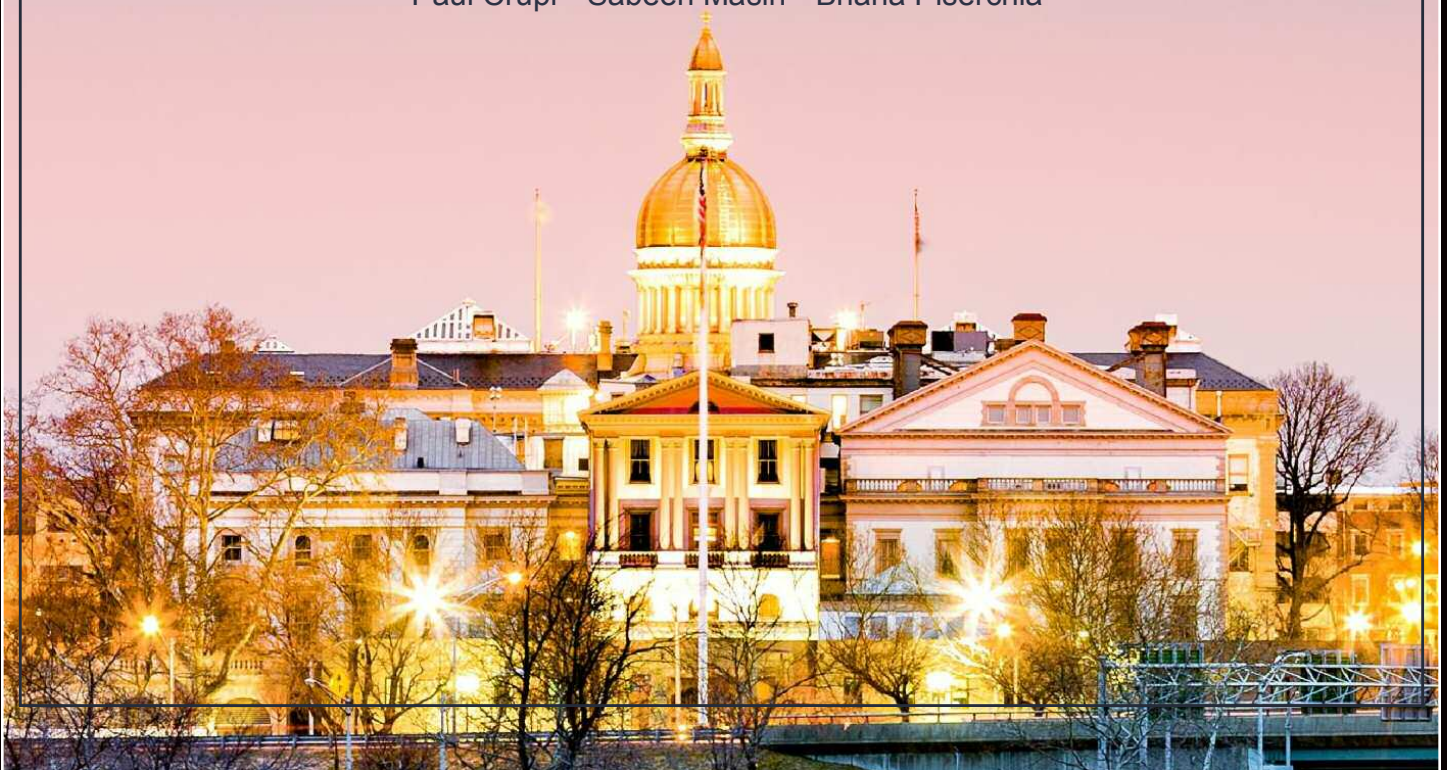


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generally can be seen with sagging shoulders and faces of profound vexation, even despair, as those who profess to be their bosses make sure to get noticed in the background, along with their always looming shadows.

In and of itself, 2021 radiates little difference from other years. The same raging central committee of narrow interests, races, ethnic backgrounds and financial priorities will attempt again to project the opposite of itself in the name of the least offensive cliché; generally something along the lines of “a big tent for a lot of folks,” while Republicans in the hinterlands of power engage in more and more intimate phone booth warfare with one another while railing interminably about the workings of the Trenton “swamp.”

It amounts to the obvious insufferable attachments of one party in steep decline (its name need not be mentioned) creating an opportunity for the other party, fat-

tened with power, to undo itself in a hundred small ways, with overreach and gluttony of a sort once reserved in the old country for small kingdoms, while still maintaining a firm upper-hand by virtue of the essentially impenetrable power structure.



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POLITICAL ORIGINS

When Governor Chris Christie left George Norcross upright amid the wreckage of other bosses brought down by his prosecutorial priorities, he helped inflate a secular star of Bethlehem over South Jersey for the remains of a Democratic Party otherwise left to wriggle in a statewide desert. Part of the Christie era iconography included the discharging of state Senate President Dick Codey of Essex County, home to New Jersey's largest Democratic Party pluralities; and the ascension of Norcross field hand Steve Sweeney to the senate presidency.

This was a significant moment, for Codey – whatever his shortcomings – had climbed to the chair of power based on his own interpersonal relationships and not as a consequence of a boss behind him nudging him ever onward like a cartoon character in a video game.

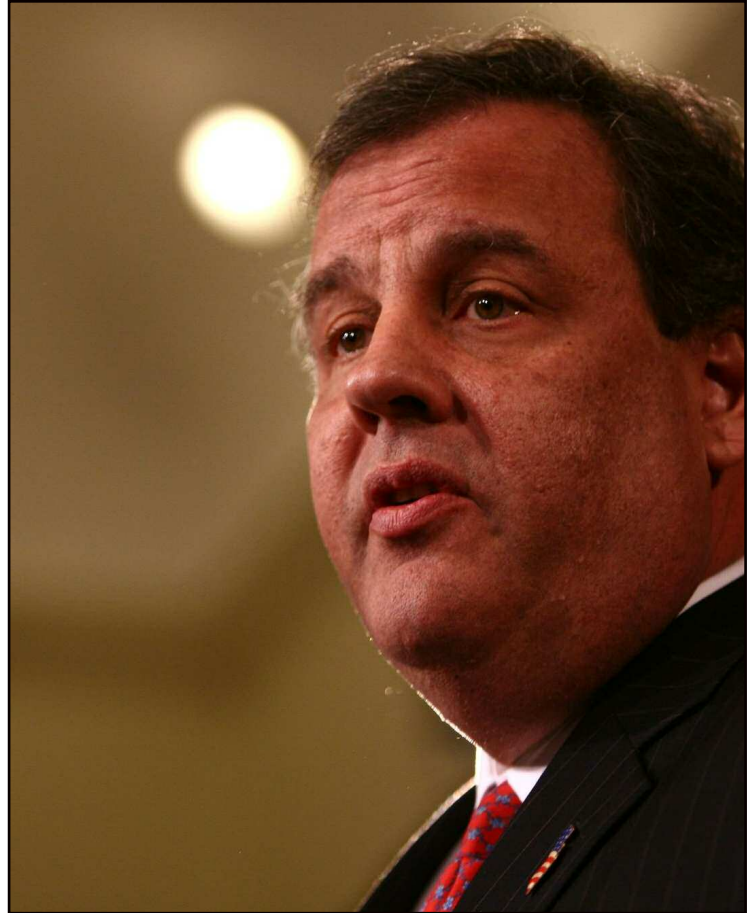
The image of Christie and Sweeney earnestly pledging bipartisanship onstage at the War Memorial in 2010 could qualify as high comic theater if it didn't automatically descend into eight years of snuggly power-sharing and cutesy footsy-playing while Christie nursed his own ties to Norcross and tore around the country running for president complaining about the incompetency of Democrats.

Codey felt particularly humiliated.

A former governor who had rushed to the state's aid's after the sulfuric implosion of James McGreevey, he had commanded a unique platform forged of his own homespun personality, private business acumen, and a legitimate North Jersey power base that went back to his days as the neighbor of Two Ton Tony Galento in Orange. It all proved too much for the ego-rattled

bosses in his own county, umbilical corded to Norcross and themselves close to Christie, who hit the eject button on him, condemning Codey to nearly a decade of wilderness-roaming, until 2017, when he began obviously somewhat reversing the seesaw of statewide political power.

In 2018, Christie was gone, supplanted by Democrat Phil Murphy, Codey's choice for governor in the pre-primary. But Sweeney remained behind, left to gnash and grind his teeth in public from the tall perch of senate power, irritated that the party had opted for another golden goose from Goldman Sachs rather than himself as the post-Christie occupant of Drumthwacket, and bothered by Murphy's inability to bring the warpaint-wearing New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) to heel.



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In the years since he had participated in the programmed dumping of Codey, Sweeney – with Norcross in the Phil Spector control booth behind him – remained on the rostrum through respective power-sharing agreements with Essex, Hudson and Middlesex, giving South Jersey the top legislative spot in exchange for the aforementioned counties supplying a warm body for the consolation prize of speakership. Sheila Oliver (Essex) and Vincent Prieto (Hudson) did okay at first but decided they didn't enjoy trying to fit their somewhat expanded vision of the world into a confining structure called South Jersey.

So the South went to Middlesex County and a mostly unknown – but then part of the power-sharing agreement includes the proviso that they mostly (or completely) be unknown (remember, the “known” Codey, was a problem) – quantity named Craig Coughlin of Woodbridge. Undertaken in the waning days of Christie's lame-duck governorship, the move contained its own delectable irony, for Middlesex, after all, had been the base of former Middlesex County Democratic Committee Chairman John Lynch, the broker and chief influencer behind McGreevey, flushed out of power as part of then-U.S. Attorney Christie's Napoleonic romp to Trenton.

Middlesex had given the state McGreevey, who basked at the zenith of power, just before a spectacular fall.

Middlesex also supplied Christie with his chief patronage-plump target.

By the time he had finished squeezing the life out of the place, a beating that extended into his years as governor and included the takedowns of Joe Vas (former Mayor of Perth Amboy) and Middlesex County Democratic Committee Chairman Joe Spicuzzo, Middlesex literally became that ravaged suburban backwater

where they bragged about being the county that actually had a staff of park rangers, who helped direct traffic in green and tan uniforms with matching utility belts. In his role as legislative prosecutor during the Bridgegate scandal, John Wisniewski of Sayreville somewhat atoned for the ignominy of Middlesex brokers sacrificing Barbara Buono to a 2013 beat-down by Christie, whose reelection strategy consisted mostly of bragging about those Democrats who backed him. Coincidentally, they were the same Democrats who had tried to bury Codey.

But after eight to 12 years of getting kicked around, Middlesex appears to have finally weathered every political indignity, including occupying the pup tent of South Jersey, and found a way back to relevance – and even potential political dominance – as that sturdy ally not only of another Goldman-grounded governor (the other one, Jon Corzine, had run afoul of Middlesex) but Essex County, the place that executed their own considerably competent senate president to empower Christie-friendly South Jersey.

Now it's Sweeney all these years later, not Codey, who appears to be dancing on the plank, and Middlesex, drably re-appareled with power. A shift would hardly be revolutionary. It would merely supplant another leader ultimately subservient to the same superstructure in which county party leaders double as corporate lobbyists while publicly professing to be the earnest offspring of FDR. If 2021 marks a pre-decided gubernatorial election year and a possible re-amination from within of the senate presidency and speakership, it also marks a year in which all 120 legislators go before the public or go before their party organizations reinforcing the mostly monolithic interests of a two-party duopoly, in the inimitable words of Ralph Nader.

There are a few factors of mild note.



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THE TRUMP INCUBUS

Certainly the White House meltdown of Donald Trump placed the NJGOP in an unenviable position. That's the most generous way of writing it, and an overcorrection to avoid hurting anyone's feelings bordering on loss of objectivity and yet one can still hear the trolling howls of liberal media bias in its wake. It was bad enough when Trump eliminated the SALT tax deduction, failed to fund the Gateway Tunnel, and routinely went on nativist rants that not only lacked literacy but lacked fundamental human decency – not to mention dignity. "I think he ought to leave his tweets at home," U.S. Rep. Rodney Frelinguysen (R-11) told InsiderNJ, shortly before those tweets morphed into a maelstrom that unhorsed Frelinghuy-sen's entire moderate congressional career.

Then the temper tantrum-throwing Trump, beaten by Joe Biden, incited a riot, urging forth his followers, who desecrated the United States Capitol, and underscored an American capacity, despite all the individual posturing and professions of Jeffersonian freedom and agrarianism, to be made a vessel of celebrity, as a substitute for civil responsibility.

After having appeared to be running for governor for at least a year and running as the leader of Trump's band of Garden State loyalists, Doug Steinhardt – former NJ Republican Committee chairman – announced that he would not be a candidate for governor after all, leaving former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli – he of the "now I don't like Donald, now I do" public gyrations – to contend with a primary field of mostly Trump-friendly contenders and a newly formed splinter of the GOP that calls itself the Patriot Party.

State Senator Kip Bateman (R-16) had seen enough.

First elected to the state senate in 2007 the moderate Republican with a history of working across the aisle and treating people with respect, a fiscal conservative with a strong pro-environment record and a strong penchant for tolerance, the son of Somerset County decided to not pursue reelection.

"I've been doing it for 38 years and my family thought you've dedicated half your life to public service, maybe it's time to take care of yourself," explained the senator. "I thought I could have won again. It was not an easy decision. I have a lot of friends in Trenton. I love being a senator. I'll really miss it.

"I was never a Trumper," he made a point of adding. "I didn't vote for him. I didn't believe in his style and



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I think he's hurt the Republican Party. I'm proud to be a Republican, but the Republican Party in New Jersey and around the country really needs to redefine ourselves. What happened in Washington was a disgrace. It's going to be a tough year for Republicans, for a while. Donald Trump doesn't speak for all of us."

On the same week that Bateman opted out, state Senator Chris Brown (R-2), another independent Republican with pro-casino worker sympathies, told Harry Hurley that he doesn't know if he will pursue reelection.

The New Jersey political world also continued to monitor the movements of state Senator Tom Kean, Jr. (R-21), whose 2020 in-a-bubble, press-unfriendly, shock and awe misinformation campaign against

incumbent U.S. Rep. Tom Malinowski apparently bucked up his spirits for a possible 2022 go at Malinowski. It might be said – at least based on his timid interview with NJ Spotlight pro Briana Vannozzi, that if they merely succeed in completely separating Kean from the media next time and heaping newly refashioned vats of Trump tweets into the atmosphere, the scion of the proud Kean political family might actually win his fourth shot at federal elected office.

So much for the family legacy.

Most Americans (71%), of course, would rather see Republicans in Congress find ways to work together with Biden than to focus on keeping Biden in check (25%), according to a Monmouth University Poll issued in January The desire for bipartisan cooperation



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is higher than it was just after the November election (62%), and includes 41% of Republicans (up from 28% in November) as well as 70% of independents (68%) and 94% of Democrats (92%). The poll finds that 6 in 10 Americans have at least some confidence that Biden will be able to get Washington to be more cooperative, although just 21% are very confident while 39% are somewhat confident. Still, this is slightly better than in November (13% very and 38% somewhat confident).

“Bipartisanship is certainly an aspiration for the Biden era, but public optimism about achieving it is a bit muted,” said pollster Patrick Murray.

Indeed, on Jan. 28th, Politico reported that House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy was on his way to lunch with former President Trump at Mar-a-Lago. “A face-to-face we’re told McCarthy requested after their relationship took a tumble in the wake of Jan. 6,” according to Politico. “McCarthy initially floated censuring Trump, angering the then-president. It’s their first in-person talk since the riot, and McCarthy hasn’t been shy about promoting it. ‘Kevin can’t shut up about it,’ joked one top Trump adviser when we asked about the meeting. ... The McCarthy-Trump relationship has been quite the soap opera lately, as we and a million other reporters have written. First, McCarthy said Trump was to blame for Jan. 6. Then Trump called McCarthy a ‘pussy.’ Then McCarthy backtracked to say Trump didn’t ‘provoke’ the riot.

Kean decided that appearing concerned and mildly civilized as senate minority leader wouldn’t help him with the likes of McCarthy and the regathering forces of Trump world and opted out of running again. Presumably, this would give him a year of uninterrupted opportunity to practice saying the words “working across the aisle” while his allies concocted social media

posts tying Malinowski to the activities of the late Klaus Barbie.

But the accumulated reality was that conditions on the ground for the Republican Party in New Jersey resembled a Donner Party-style horror movie about the landing of the Mayflower, where one by one the stalwart first settlers find themselves unceremoniously gobbled up by a hostile new world.

You know the names.

Frelinghuysen?

Done.

Lance.

Done.

Bateman.

Surely Kip will stick it out and...

No.

He’s done.

Kean?

Done in the state senate, left to stand upon the 2022 bridge like a very youngish, miscast and confused Captain Ahab, trying to replot a course for Congress without the encumbrance of a Clifford Case conscience, while dragging a white, all CAPS-spouting whale otherwise known as former President Trump.

Assemblyman Ryan Peters (R-8) likewise opted out of running for reelection, leaving more opportunity for a chorus of people on the outskirts of the incubator screaming RINO at those willing to remain behind to prop up what remained of the depleted GOP establishment.

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What it finally means in the broader statewide context, of course, is that Democrats here have considerably augmented power, perhaps more than ever, as the combined scandalous toll of the Christie years and then the Trump debacle have those sagacious-sounding historians who point to the pendulum swings of past federal and state elections sounding ever more like pre-social media era intellectual residue.

It also means the most significant wars the Democrats have to fight are the ones they fight with themselves, for if the Trump era finally prodded that little insane alien life form out of the GOP's collective chest, Democrats must contend with their own inner predator versus alien power struggle.



Retiring veteran LD16 GOP Senator Bateman

THE POWER SURGE

It was a bad couple of years for George Norcross III, who shaped his immediate public image in the post-Christie era by demeaning a picture of Phil Murphy, and surfaced briefly, via a relative's twitter account, to announce the canceling of his Mar-a-Lago club membership.

According a 2019 WNYC-ProPublica report, "a law firm linked to New Jersey political boss Norcross III

enjoyed extraordinary influence over the state's tax break program, crafting new rules and regulations in hundreds of calls, meetings and messages with top officials in Trenton, according to released emails."

Norcross and aligned entities subsequently filed a lawsuit against the Murphy administration and a Murphy-formed task force investigating the tax incentive program, but the boss absorbed political damage. While the long-suffering residents of Camden lacked a supermarket, Norcross received tax incentives to build a helicopter pad.

Inevitably, the boss' fall boomeranged on Sweeney, who nonetheless had managed over the years to bulk himself into enough of a credible public presence to withstand utter implosion in the aftermath of GN3's disintegration. Sweeney's decision to release a list of caucus names supporting him for another term either radiated desperate measures undertaken to escape looking like an obvious 2021 lame duck, or some senate street cred and evidence of an unpunctured presence even on a post-Norcross landscape.

Still, he showed signs of wear and tear.

Ever the Christie-Sweeney serviceable U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew (R-2) had changed parties sooner than buck Donald Trump, leaving insiders to speculate about the depths of Mar-a-Lago love in South Jersey. The fact that Van Drew defeated Amy Kennedy in Gloucester County once again renewed general election vulnerability discussions. If Sweeney and Norcross had spent millions to get the senate prez reelected in 2017 over the bloodthirsty intentions of the NJEA (the most expensive legislative contest in United States history, estimated at well over \$18.9 million), surely they would have to shovel more dollars into the breach,

short of an armistice with state Senator Michael Testa (R-1), the newly emergent GOP power broker in South Jersey.

Then again, Sweeney had appeased the NJEA earlier this year by getting their coveted Chapter 78 legislation done this year, turning a one-time enemy into a friend and leaving him fairly sure-footed in his own party. But the election year stop Sweeney strategy of 2017 had become a cloakroom political elimination game in 2021.

Democrats had their first piece of real evidence that the tax incentive helicopter pad headlines had taken a toll on Norcross when South Jersey attempted to exert its influence on the fight for the chairmanship of the party. Sweeney and Norcross wanted to look like the engineers of change, and as they sought to relive Democratic State Committee Chairman John Currie of power appeared well on their way to another sneering, high-five moment with their functionaries in the north.

But Essex County Democratic Committee Chairman LeRoy Jones had other plans.

Trusting in the relationships he built with Middlesex County and with the insiders affiliated with Governor Murphy, Jones cut his own deal with Currie without the South's intervention, then read them the riot act in the aftermath when they tried to bully him.

It proved how times had (somewhat) changed.

By the time Democrats had spent a year shuffling papers and holding committee hearings on diversity and lowballing the social justice concerns of marijuana legalization and ramming a millionaire's tax (with Sweeney sheepishly showing up to the press conference in a support role) Middlesex, Murphy world and Essex (probably in that order), with Bergen thrown in, too, for good measure, engineered the Horizon restructuring bill.

If Norcross came to the deal with the promise of some form of payoff, it seemed like touch-up work on a





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contract with the ink already dry, the consequence of back deck negotiating undertaken at the home of Bergen County Democratic Committee Chairman Paul Juliano in which principles from the other counties, including Middlesex and Essex, and the governor, came together to parcel out power.

Sweeney wasn't there, of course.

Norcross?

They didn't even have his picture there to kick around.

So appeared the new order of lobbyist and law contract-protected party power, going back to those undercurrent efforts between Essex and Middlesex, when operatives made sure reporters knew that Jones had surfaced in Middlesex and Middlesex County

Democratic Committee Chairman Kevin McCabe subsequently appeared in Essex.

No amount of Sweeney tire wearing-out could keep pace with the Alfred E. Driscoll Bridge bromance between Jones and McCabe.

Murphy's profound irritation with Sweeney going back to the beginning made it easy for him to glob on and, as Horizon restructured with plenty of ditch-digging by Essex and Middlesex, the party refashioned itself without much input from South Jersey.

Against that backdrop, and with that always powerful seat of the state senate giving Sweeney fits as he tried to hold on with both hands, Democrats assessed the implications of the coming primary elections.





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IT STARTED IN SOMERSET

Confronted with 15,000 more registered Democrats than Republicans in LD16, Bateman opting out of reelection this year put Middlesex in overdrive.

One of the least likely instruments of conventional machine power, Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker (D-16), who works in the Princeton plasma physics lab (in other words not in some municipal government capacity with McCabe looking over his shoulder), ironically occupies the 2021 position of Middlesex replicant – albeit with shiny progressive credentials and a brain. If he were to win, he would overload the sprawling Middlesex with five Democratic senators. Sources say in a fistfight for senate power he would obviously correct to the Middlesex machine,

which would presumably oust Sweeney on the strength of not only its own bench, but alliances forged statewide and with the governor's office. In the event of a full Sweeney power deoxygenation, state Senator Joe Vitale (D-19) of Woodbridge would likely take his place. Sources still kick around the name of state senator Joe Cryan (D-20) too as a potential Middlesex-worthy Sweeney successor.

With Zwicker firmly in the Middlesex camp, Sweeney – to the extent that he still sees a shot for himself, needs chess pieces on the board, and after years of mild pushing and shoving with a Somerset County Democratic Committee that leaned in everyone else's direction except Sweeney, a Somerset-based alternative to Zwicker could keep his senate presidency hopes alive.

A photograph of a modern, multi-story office building with a grid-like facade. The building is orange-brown in color. Large, dark, three-dimensional letters spelling "MWW+" are mounted on the upper part of the building. To the right of the "MWW+" letters, the words "PUBLIC RELATIONS" are also mounted in a similar style. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

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Never outright enemies, Sweeney and Somerset County Democratic Committee Chair Peg Schaffer both now have the immediate shared interest of seeing Middlesex contained. Schaffer wants to keep the jaws of the neighboring beast at bay, while Sweeney presumably sees a Zwicker alternative (Laurie Poppe of Hillsborough or Vice Chair Zenon Christodoulou) as a career extender.



Somerset County Democratic Chair Schaffer with Governor Murphy

Schaffer has a play in her own right, as 41% of all registered LD16 Democrats reside in the Somerset portion of the district. Zwicker and Middlesex claim just 23% of the district's Democrats. Mercer (10K and change) and Hunterdon (10K and change) claim the rest.

Does she really want Middlesex to swallow her leafy, usually bullied county and her best play for a two-year senator?

The short answer is no.

The longer answer is she lacks a redistricting seat, and could hardly be convinced that Sweeney, already imperiled himself in Republican Gloucester, could fend

off a diabolically Middlesex-grounded Gary Taffet in a legislative redistricting duel to reshape the district for the next scheduled elections in 2023.

Here's the other problem for Schaffer. Maybe she wants to buck Middlesex, but to what extent would she align with Sweeney against Murphy? Remember, Schaffer moved in to help prop up the Sweeney-as-sailed Democratic State Chairman John Currie in that aforementioned duel, primarily at the behest of Murphy, who wanted Currie as party chairman.

For Sweeney's part, he may really at last be running out of bodies to keep himself installed on the throne. The South does indeed usually find a way to rise again, however. He lost Bob Andrezjczak in 2019, but replaced him by flipping Senator Dawn Addiego from R to D.

So he starts with his usual South Jersey bench of support: Sweeney, Madden, Beach, Cruz-Perez, Singleton.

Let's say, for argument's sake, that he throws in with Schaffer and Poppe, for example, defeats Zwicker.

So he has six people.



LD37 Assemblyman and Senate candidate Gordon Johnson with First Lady Tammy Murphy

Retiring Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg won't pick a side in the developing Democratic Primary for her seat but Assemblyman Gordon Johnson (D-37) appears favored for the backing of the machine, which, if we examine the players in place for the Horizon deal, leans Middlesex. So let's say for argument's sake that Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttel (D-37) loses the battle for the county line but hangs around anyway – a big question mark right now – for a primary fight with Johnson and, in part as the beneficiary of some South Jersey money, wins off the line.

Now Sweeney has seven people in his column.

Okay.

Brown said he might not run again.

So maybe the sitting senate president and Amy



Kennedy can forge an uneasy peace and he can bring her onto the team.

A longshot?

Yes.

In fact, not happening. Kennedy just told InsiderNJ she has no interest in the seat.

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Therefore expect a war in that district, with Sweeney seeing an opportunity for a senate pickup, but up against that corner of New Jersey where Republicans present not only hunger but organization and some local star power – even if Brown decides not to run again.

Elsewhere, if longtime Sweeney ally Senator Linda Greenstein (D-14) can't part ways with Middlesex, might Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-14) a labor brother from the electrical workers who can supply another Sweeney vote – enter the fray?

Nine, if he would do it, and beat Greenstein.

LD20?

Back Assemblyman Jamel Holley (D-20) against incumbent state Senator Joe Cryan (D-20).

Ten.

But that's a real longshot, too, let's face it.

LD21.

Eliminating Kean would have been rich for Sweeney.

The kid had gone hard after Sweeney in 2013, appearing not to understand the deal the senate prez cut with Christie. Sweeney wouldn't go hard after Christie if Christie didn't go after Sweeney. And there was Junior, swinging for the fences in LD3 with a carefully recruited opposition candidate named Nikki Trunk.

Christie was so disgruntled by Kean's earnestness that he attempted to throw him under the bus in the aftermath of the election, but the caucus rewarded him. But Kean got out, leaving Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick (R-21) to run for the Republican-lean-

ing seat and Firefighters Labor Leader Eddie Donnelly sniffing the wind for a possible bid for the Democrats.



If it all just seemed like desperation mode for the sitting senate president, his Southern-based allies could also steer people in his direction with JIF contract work and business.

All was not lost.

But accumulated punishment made South Jersey look a little like what Essex was in 2013, and what Hudson became in 2017.

Middlesex dealt the hand that Hudson and Essex on their own could not deal.

South Jersey looked scorned.

There was some time.

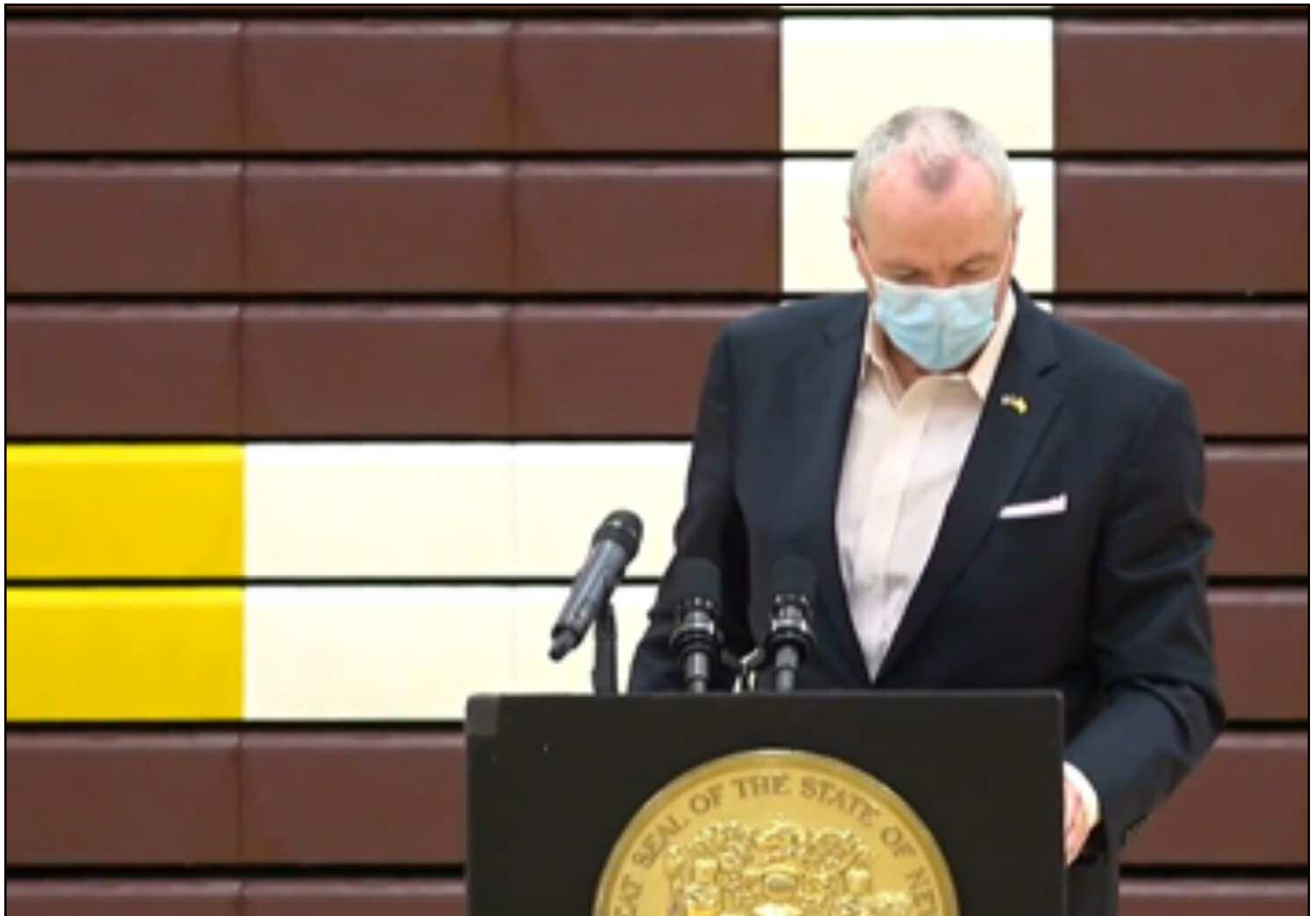
There were moves to be made, but then again maybe too many.

People were bearing gifts, like the Horizon deal, to Middlesex, and the governor – all but certain to run over Ciattarelli in the 2021 general election – ever the

lively, effervescent personality – probably disliked Sweeney (not to mention Norcross) just enough to stick around and lend his political capital to burying them both as merely those decrepit occupants of that next entity lacking meaningful buttressing alliances, which mostly befall those new to the game, as Murphy was in 2017 when he couldn't tacitly couldn't retire Sweeney with the NJEA, and those around a long time, maybe too long, like the South.

In any event, Middlesex with a senator seemingly on the way barring an eviscerating primary, looked as muscular now as they had been defanged and all but helpless when Lynch's toppling gave another region of

the state a prime power-sharing opportunity. While Democrats figured out how to reconfigure the center of the universe in Central Jersey, while retaining most of the power players from the last two decades, Kean raised the white flag even higher over a forlorn-looking senate minority office. If Sweeney, intent on remaining stationary above the crowd of 40, had a shot to stop the onslaught of Middlesex, the implosion of the post Trump GOP gave him a chance to harvest more bodies eager for the identification of a D beside their names in districts once Republican turned subservient to a static power structure with smaller-sized bosses maneuvering to protect the overall unchanged monolith, or the unsullied face of shame.





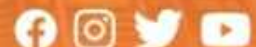
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MURPHY'S ELECTION TO LOSE

By Fred Snowflack



We all know New Jersey is different and the fact that this year, 2021, is an election year proves it. Not many states have major elections in odd years.

That said, Phil Murphy goes into his reelection campaign with high approval ratings, although that is subject to change.

Republicans will point out a quirk of sorts in the state's recent political history. That being that no Democratic governor has won a second term since Brendan Byrne in 1977. Governors Jim Florio, Jim McGreevey and Jon Corzine all failed to do that for various reasons.

The past is out there, but what does it mean relative to 2021? Perhaps nothing.

Murphy starts as the clear favorite, simply because as of now, there are about 1.1 million more registered

Democrats in the state than Republicans. And the Dems' advantage has been growing; the party's lead was less than 900,000 in 2017 when Murphy was first elected.

Anyone who saw the State of the State address knows what the governor is going to campaign on.

He talked in 2017 about enacting a bunch of liberal initiatives and he has done so, despite friction at times between him and Democratic leaders in the Legislature.

The minimum wage is on its way to \$15 an hour.

Millionaires are paying income taxes at a higher rate.

Undocumented residents are in line (eventually) to get driver's licenses.

The business-incentive program has been revamped.

Marijuana has been legalized, although the actual implementation is unknown.

The state has taken steps toward offshore wind and other “green energy” endeavors.

All these initiatives are going to excite the Democratic base.

Republicans, in turn, will use them to argue that New Jersey is getting too costly and that the governor has done little to control property taxes. That’s a valid point, but then we come back around to the voter registration rolls.

So, here are the unknowns that can appeal to independents and turn things in the GOP’s favor.

Murphy’s high marks at the moment would seem to have a lot to do with how he is handling the pandemic. But things can go south quickly if, say, the public concludes the administration is botching the vaccine roll-out.

Then, there’s the “Trump factor.”

Republican Doug Steinhardt began a gubernatorial campaign that seemed to last 72 hours by expressing strong support for Trump. He pulled out of the race a short time after the Trump-inspired riots in Washington.

That’s a good thing. Republicans in New Jersey likely would be better off getting beyond the Trump era as soon as possible.

The current front-runner for the GOP nomination is Jack Ciattarelli, but others may jump in.

Still, it will be fascinating to see how Ciattarelli treats Trump.

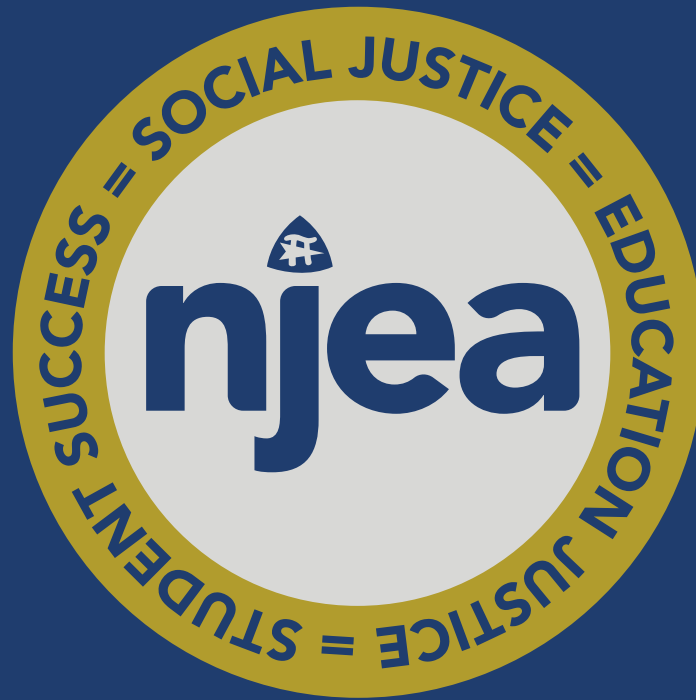
Will he sensibly try to move the party past a president who was just impeached for promoting insurrection?

Or will he feel the need to cater to the Trump cult, which is still considerable among New Jersey Republicans?

His decision may help determine how competitive this race is going to be.



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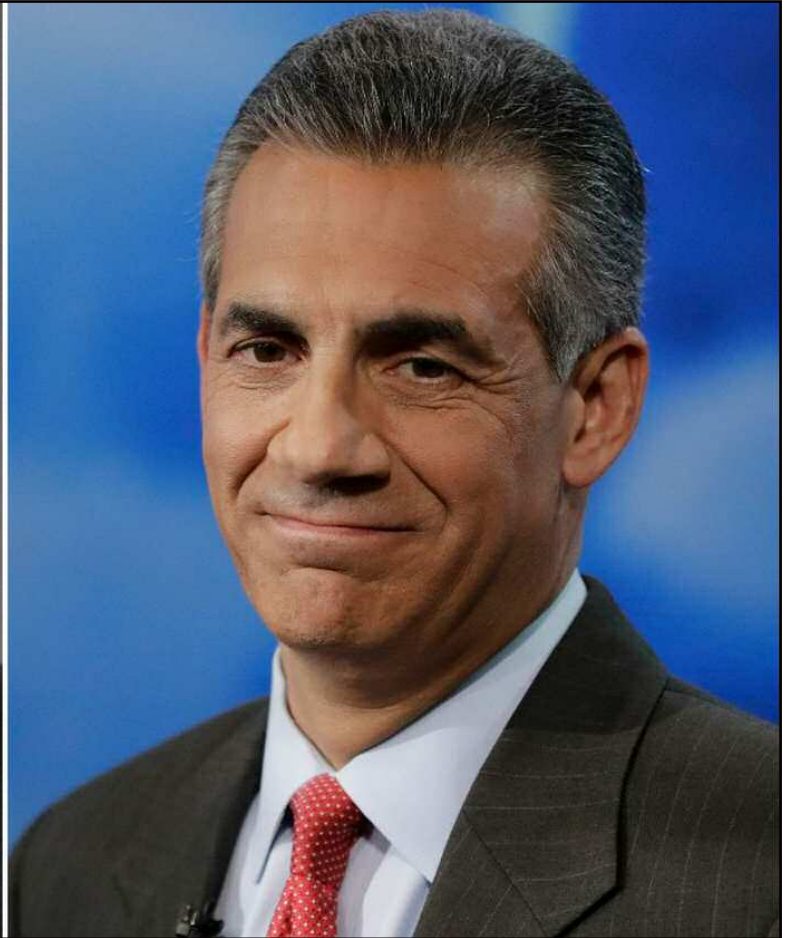
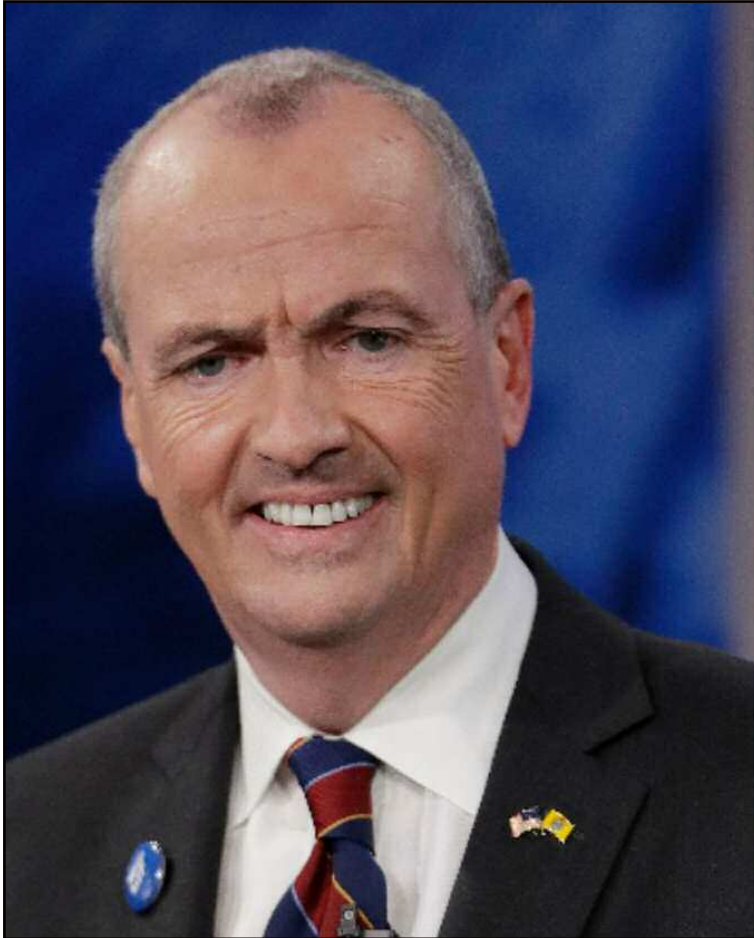


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THE REMAINS OF THE GOP AWAIT REANIMATION

By John Van Vliet



Governor Phil Murphy will be defending his seat headed into the next election and it looks like Jack Ciattarelli is the man for the incumbent to beat. Ciattarelli has been campaigning for governor officially and unofficially longer than any of the other Republican candidates. Contenders both actual and potential included Assemblyman Jon Bramnick, former NJ GOP Chairman Doug Steinhardt, and there was early chatter of Assemblywoman Holly Schepisi making a run. In the end, only one of those three put his hat in the ring against Ciattarelli, but with the sudden collapse Doug Steinhardt, Ciattarelli will be

running in the primary with the majority of county endorsements and support.

Singh is a name familiar to New Jersey politicians and he has been eager to stake a claim for himself the last few years. He was most recently campaigning, albeit unsuccessfully, in the 2020 Republican primary for US Senate, defeated by Rik Mehta who later lost against incumbent Senator Cory Booker. Camden County Republican Chairman Rich Ambrosino and Singh traded intra-party volleys with one another during the latter's senate primary race, which climaxed

with Ambrosino declaring Singh's political aspirations as "damned" due to "ridiculous conspiracy theories, ludicrous campaign pronouncements, [and] lack of political ability..." Previously, Singh took 2nd place in the 2018 primary for CD2 to Seth Grossman, who was in turn defeated by Jeff Van Drew. Prior to this, Singh ran unsuccessfully in the 2017 gubernatorial primary coming in a distant third behind Jack Ciattarelli and Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno.

Another name to keep an eye out for would be Joseph "Rudy" Rullo, a businessman who, last summer, excoriated Republican Rik Mehta by describing him as a "pharmaceutical Democratic opiate peddler." In 2017, Rullo picked up an endorsement from the FDU College Republicans who made a veiled swipe at Ciattarelli for the latter's pre-electoral criticism of then-candidate Donald Trump.

Jack Ciattarelli endorsed Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election, as would be expected, serving at that time in his first term as Assemblyman for the 16th district alongside Peter Biondi. In the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, Ciattarelli said that Trump "preys upon our worst instincts and fears" and was "not fit to be president". Apparently disgusted with Trump following the latter's sexist remarks about women, Ciattarelli joined with Lt. Gov. Guadagno in saying that he would not vote for Donald Trump, nor would he vote for Hillary Clinton. Ciattarelli, however, for better or worse, had to assess his position, the increasingly-nationalized Republican party, and come to terms with the Trump reality.

Assemblyman Jon Bramnick, along with Assemblywoman Holly Schepisi, were thought to be likely primary candidates for governor. Schepisi said she would not run rather early on. Bramnick, who would have provided some heavy firepower for the Republican cause, likewise announced that he would not run, doubtless relieving some anxieties from the Ciattarelli

campaign. Bramnick, for his part, has been vocally critical of President Trump, drawing both praise and ire in so doing. Like pre-2016 Jack Ciattarelli, Bramnick found Trump's behavior unacceptable and would not lend him his support. When Bramnick announced he would not run, Democratic State Committee Spokesman Phil Swibinski said that Bramnick, for his part, at least acknowledged Biden's November win and slammed Ciattarelli and Steinhardt, saying, "they're terrified of alienating a New Jersey Republican Party that is hopelessly devoted to President Trump" and that the Republican race was one to "see which candidate can suck up to Donald Trump and his extreme base the most."

Ciattarelli, figuratively or otherwise the Republicans' first champion after Phil Murphy took office, faced his most serious threat from Doug Steinhardt. The former Republican State Chairman was credited with rebuilding and reinvigorating the Republican Party in the post-Christie period. The attorney and political boss flexed his Trump credentials and presented himself as the candidate most aligned with the president. Whether or not this was particularly convincing to Trump-supporting Republicans will never be seen since he announced his departure from the race immediately following the US Capitol Hill siege by a mob of Trump supporters. Some of those rioters, according to Congressman Tom Malinowski, were calling for the murder of Vice President Mike Pence along with other "traitor" Republicans. January 6 changed the conversation nationwide, New Jersey being no exception.

After the blood had been mopped up in the Capitol, Steinhardt cited "professional obligations" which necessitated the "heartbreaking" decision to withdraw from the governor's race and presumably to hang up his MAGA hat. Steinhardt's departure signals that the Republican voters (and the politicians who observe) have been deprived of a meaningful, participatory

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apparatus by which the party can “find itself” going forward in New Jersey.

In the post-Trump, post-insurrection reckoning of the perilously-nationalized GOP, New Jersey Republicans will not have an opportunity to determine whether a New Jersey moderate like Ciattarelli, or whether a seemingly forced, inorganic model of Trump Republicanism—that which touts at-time-bellicose anti-establishment populism allegedly interested in “draining the swamp”—would have coalesced around a powerful minority-party political kingpin and lawyer. Steinhardt had defended his professional association with former Democratic Governor James Florio as a sign that he, the chief non-elected GOP partisan voice in the state, was, in fact, very capable of and interested in bipartisanship. But would the acolytes of President Donald Trump be convinced or appreciative of this? Would that, in turn, have been enough to convince the legions of registered Democrats in the Garden State who are dissatisfied with or indifferent to, Phil Murphy? We will never know but it seems unlikely, a notion Steinhardt of which was assuredly aware by the evening of Wednesday, January 6.

As much as the state arguments are crucial and, indeed, the most relevant to a gubernatorial campaign, Ciattarelli needed to do the seemingly impossible: win the MAGAists and the Old Guard Frelinghuysen-esque Republicans in the primary, and then outshine incumbent Governor Murphy in the general. When Steinhardt dropped out, for all intents and purposes Ciattarelli was unencumbered of the party reckoning for those looking to see Phil Murphy shown the door. The state, therefore, is clear, but the national stage remains problematic for Ciattarelli or, indeed, any other candidate, should the table be flipped over with the arrival of, say, self-financing campaign powerhouse

Bob Hugin. Although money alone can't buy votes in New Jersey (Republican ones, at least) it is worth noting that both New Jersey Congressional Republicans voted against impeaching a Donald Trump the first time around in 2019 as well, Van Drew at that time as a Democrat, and again in 2021. It is likely that the New Jersey Democrats and enraged, civic-minded independents will use this—what could've been a morally as well as politically safe vote—as partisan fuel against Ciattarelli's aspirations. More headaches ahead for Jack to dispel, and headaches not of his own procuring.

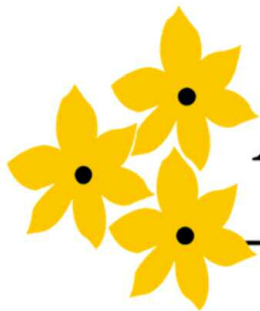


Ciattarelli finds himself in a peculiar crossroads. With a heavily nationalized GOP, he has been robbed of the opportunity to focus the bulk of his campaign message—the brand—on the state level because of the chaos sewn in Washington DC by a Republican administration. There is no escaping it. Ciattarelli, of course, is not seeking a federal office and must navigate tempestuous waters stirred up far upriver from his own starting point. Barring any unforeseen game-changer from Governor Murphy himself, Ciattarelli will need to convincingly pull off one of the greatest political upsets in New Jersey political history to seal

the win on Trenton. He will have to clarify his position on Trump and Trumpism in a state which deeply dislikes the president and reconcile his pre-2016 positions with his later pro-Trump attitudes (a turnaround which Star-Ledger editor Tom Moran lambasted as both insincere and self-demeaning). He will also need to mount an effective argument against a multi-millionaire incumbent governor overseeing the worst public health crisis in a century while also enjoying a 60-62% approval rating, despite expected and inevitable howling voices of dissent in various quarters of the state.

With the Republican field largely clear, at least at the time of this writing, and seeing no threats from the

likes of Bramnick or Steinhardt, Ciattarelli is handily rolling up Republican endorsements left and right. But there remains the shadow of the violated Capitol rotunda and an unprecedented doubly-impeached Republican president on his way out. The state Republican party needs to find its message and find it fast, appealing to New Jerseyans about New Jersey issues, and somehow crawl out of the nationalized party quagmire. With Governor Murphy waiting ahead for him with boxing gloves, the former assemblyman will need to rise above the storm that surged over the nation, then define, validate, and prove himself as a trusted, critically-needed alternative with the broader state electorate.



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**GARDEN STATE
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A LOOK AT SOME KEY DEVELOPING 2021 LEGISLATIVE RACES

By Jay Lassiter



There's a big election in New Jersey this year and Governor Phil Murphy and all 120 members of the General Assembly are on the ballot. Most races are predictable thanks to partisan redistricting and/or an overwhelming emocratic voter edge. A small handful of races, however, could be quite close.

We'll preview those potential nail-biters below, starting with a couple primary races before highlighting a few of November's most-anticipated showdowns.

LD20

New Jersey's 20th legislative district is Elizabeth, Roselle, Union Township, and Hillside in Union County.

In June's primary election, incumbent Senator Joe Cryan will try to repel two off-the-line challengers: a relative unknown called Jason Krychiw and Cryan's own running-mate Assemblyman Jamel Holley. Assemblyman Holley frittered away his state house credibility by trafficking COVID myths and anti-vaccine lunacy with some of the same folks who ransacked the US Capitol earlier this month. At an anti-vaccine rally in September, Stephanie Hazelton called Assemblyman Holley a "superstar."

"Everyone here has love and appreciation for Assemblyman Jamel Holley!" Ms. Hazelton told the crowd who chanted Holley's name as he approached the podium and fell into Ms. Hazelton's welcoming embrace.

This week, Ms. Hazelton was arrested for her role in the Capitol Hill riot.

Because of the company he keeps and for the dangerous conspiracies he nurtures, Jamel Holley knew he'd never get the Union County party line in November. And so he's challenging the establishment in June's primary instead.

Go big or go home, right?

Off-the-line candidates in NJ are usually the longest of long shots. But thanks to support from true believers like Stephanie Hazelton, Jamel Holley will have plenty of money to get his message out.

We're already previewed who might replace Jamel Holley in the Assembly. That'll be decided by Union County potentates.

LD37



LD37 Assemblywoman and Senate candidate Valerie Vainieri Huttle

NJ's 37th legislative districts includes Englewood, Hackensack, and Teaneck in Bergen County.

The retirement of NJ Senator Loretta Weinberg created an opening in the Senate and Valerie Huttle and Gordon Johnson, Sen. Weinberg's longtime running mates, both want the seat. The Bergen County committee will vote to award the line, prob-



2020 was a year like no other. We rejoice in the blessings bestowed upon us, including the health of our families, but we acknowledge and feel the departure of many close friends and colleagues who left us too soon.

Looking forward to seeing many of our friends in-person in 2021!

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Best wishes for a Happy New Year



ably to Mr Johnson, in next month's county convention.

Valerie Huttie is a rare example of a NJ politician to win off-the-line (2007) and she's got support from Garden State Equality, CWA, and NJ Working Families to bolster her chances to snatch victory in June's primary election.

Sue Altman is state director for NJ Working Families an organization dedicated to electing progressive champions.

"Huttie's record is demonstrably more progressive," Ms. Altman told InsiderNJ. "Loretta's legacy is one that carried a torch for progressive causes for decades. It is critical that seat go to a progressive- one with a reliable and strong voice for labor, for women's issues, economic issues (which ARE the same as all of these), LGBTQ issues, workers rights, gun safety, and for democracy."

LD2

Comprised of 15 town in Atlantic County, the 2nd legislative district is one of the few in NJ with mixed, bipartisan representation in Trenton. The incumbents are NJ Senator Chris Brown (R) and Democratic assemblymen Vince Mazzeo and John Armato. This will, I believe, be the most competitive district in the 2021 election cycle. Even though registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in the district by about 10 percentage points, unaffiliated voters are still a plurality.

Senator Brown, a military vet from the not-crazy wing of the GOP, is mulling running for his second term in the Senate. He served the district for 4 years in the

Assembly before that. Democrats, who hold both Assembly seats, don't yet have a senate candidate so Senator Brown's opponent is remains TBD.

Micah Rasmussen runs the Rebovich Institute for NJ Politics at Rider University.

"It all comes down to recruitment," Mr. Rasmussen told InsiderNJ. "Atlantic Democrats may feel emboldened by backlash against the GOP over the insurrection, but will that translate into convincing the strongest possible candidate to run against Brown?"

The plurality of unaffiliated voters is also a factor.

"Nowhere else are you going to find unaffiliated still ahead," Rasmussen told InsiderNJ. "Maybe that's why Atlantic County is so swingy."

Redistricting, that once-a-decade opportunity for politicians in NJ to redraw their own district, won't affect the race this year but may be a factor in subsequent years.

"There are potential redistricting considerations for 2023," Mr. Rasmussen added. "So whomever runs in the current district may see some changes in the next cycle. It's been common over the last several maps for LD2 and LD1 to swap towns with each other— the Buenas, Somers Point— some have even speculated that Ocean City might be on the table."

LD8

This Burlington-county based district is the NJGOP's best, and perhaps only, chance to flip a Senate seat in the 2021 cycle. Incumbent Senator Dawn Addiego will be running as a Democrat for the first time *in her*

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life after a decades-long career as a GOP loyalist. It could be a very rude awakening for Addiego who, before her surprising political lobotomy, spent her entire career voting against things like LGBTQ and abortion rights. A darling of the NRA, Addiego's party switch came shortly after spending 8 years as a Chris Christie loyalist.

Senator Addiego is now the Democratic Party's standard bearer in the district, a not-so-subtle reminder that South Jersey Democrats prize power over principle.

"This is going to be a competitive race," Maria Rodriguez-Gregg told InsiderNJ. She represented the district for 2 terms before stepping down.

"Senator Addiego is going to really need the Democrats to turn out for her in this race and that may be difficult because her record when it comes to Democratic policies is pretty terrible, so it's going to take a lot more than an influx of Norcross cash to win," Ms. Rodriguez-Gregg added.

Addiego's Republican opponent is Jean Stanfield who, after a long and distinguished career as BurlCo sheriff, won a competitive race for the Assembly in 2019.

"Jean Stansfield has a strong chance to win, if anyone does it would be her," Ms. Rodriguez-Gregg said. "She's fairly independent and likable. I think she can galvanize the base but really turn out unaffiliated voters which is going to be important in this district."

And since Hammonton more or less provided the GOP's margin of victory last time around, redistricting will impact LD8 more than most.

"If the district lines remain as they are, Hammonton, like in the previous assembly race, will make a difference," Ms. Rodriguez-Gregg added.

GOP efforts in the district will be hampered by the retirement of Assemblyman Ryan Peters, a dogged campaigner and proven vote-getter. Peter's departure (plus Stansfield's run against Addiego) up the stakes for BurlCo GOP to field new Assembly candidates which won't be easy in a County that's bluer and bluer all the time.



Jay Lassiter is the part-time court jester of NJ politics.