

# 2021 RETROSPECTIVE



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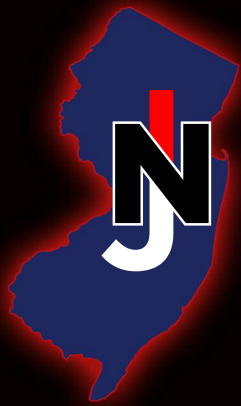
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# INSIDER NJ

Message from the Editor

RETROSPECTIVE 2021



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

It never happened.

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

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

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

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

From InsiderNJ on Sept. 28th:

Seldom does substance align with politics in today’s era of anonymous Facebook posting and virtual anger, where ugliness prevails as constituencies dissolve into complacency and elected officials run from real rhetoric, or run to concocted slogans in the 11th hour to spare themselves a defining and well-considered stance. But after a quietly nasty, empty season of YouTube ads and TV mudslinging, substance and politics strangely merged tonight against the backdrop of enduring crisis as the 2021 Gubernatorial Contest came alive in a hard-hitting, raucous first debate on ABC News. The debate showed two candidates equally possessed of a tough and educated New Jersey style, clearly delineating their views in unsparing fashion, clashing throughout but in a civil, thoughtful and well-spoken vein.

Max Pizarro

*Max Pizarro*

Editor, InsiderNJ



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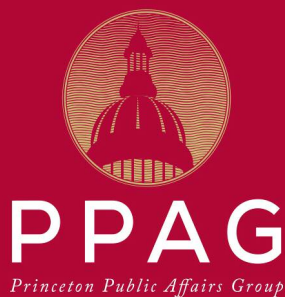
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# CO-WINNERS OF THE YEAR: Ed Durr, Sadaf Jaffer and Shama Haider



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time will tell Durr’s sincerity.

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

Assemblywoman-elect Sadaf Jaffer of Montgomery.

And

Assemblywoman-elect Shama Haider of Tenafly.

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

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

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

Jaffer is a scholar.

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

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





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# WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP

## Nick Scutari



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



## **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP Jean Stanfield**



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



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# **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP**

## **Vince Polistina**



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

# **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP**

## **Andrew Zwicker**



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



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# **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP**

## **Phil Sellinger**



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



# **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP**

## **Gordon Johnson**



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

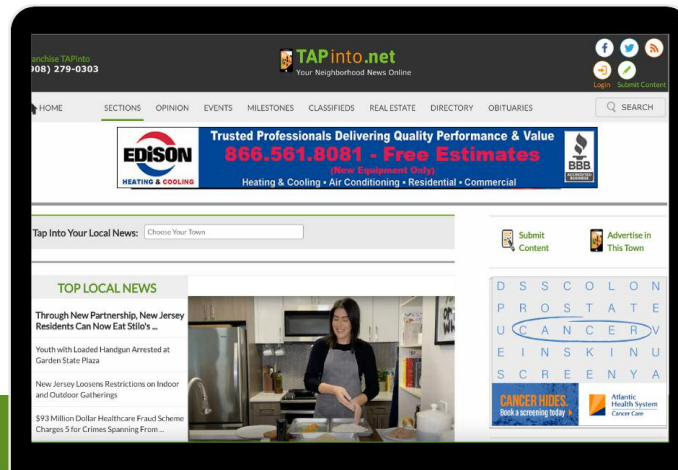


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## **WINNER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER-UP**

### **Holly Schepisi**



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

# **LUCKIEST GUY OF THE YEAR AWARD**

## **Phil Murphy**



“Luck is a superpower.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

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



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

The source looked back, bug-eyed.

"That's a great question."

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

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

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# COUNTY CHAIRMAN OF THE YEAR

## Kevin McCabe



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



# **POLITICIAN OF THE YEAR**

## **Jack Ciattarelli**



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

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

-Winston Churchill

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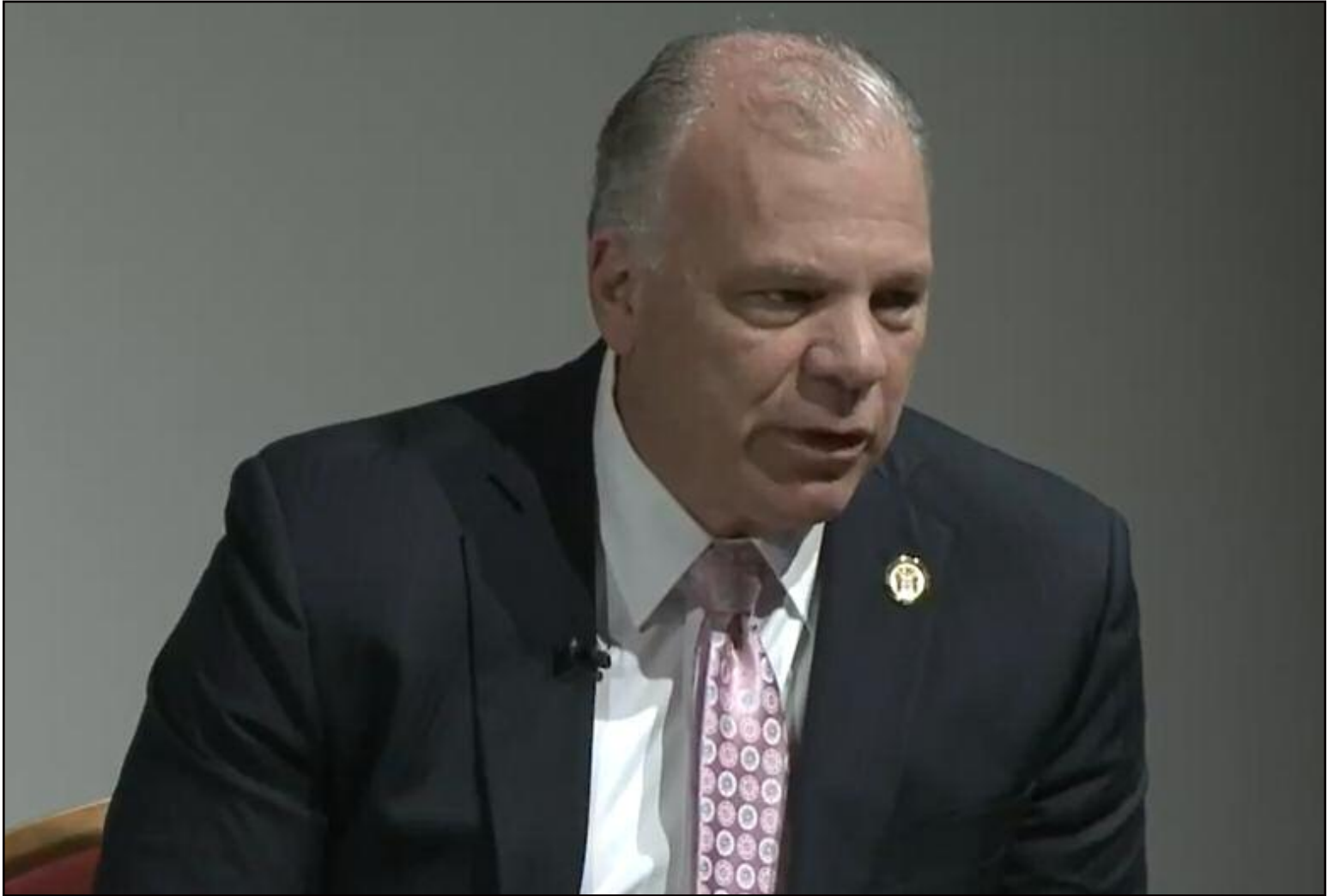


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## **LOSER OF THE YEAR**

### **Steve Sweeney**



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



# **LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP**

## **Vince Mazzeo**



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



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# **LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP**

## **Dawn Addiego**



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



# **LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP**

## **Nick Chiaravalloti**



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

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## **LOSER OF THE YEAR: RUNNER UP** **Valerie Vainieri-Huttle**



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





# **BLACK *TRANS* LIVES MATTER**



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# LEGISLATOR OF THE YEAR

## Craig Coughlin



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

# **LEGISLATION OF THE YEAR**

## **The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal**



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





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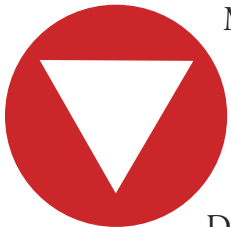
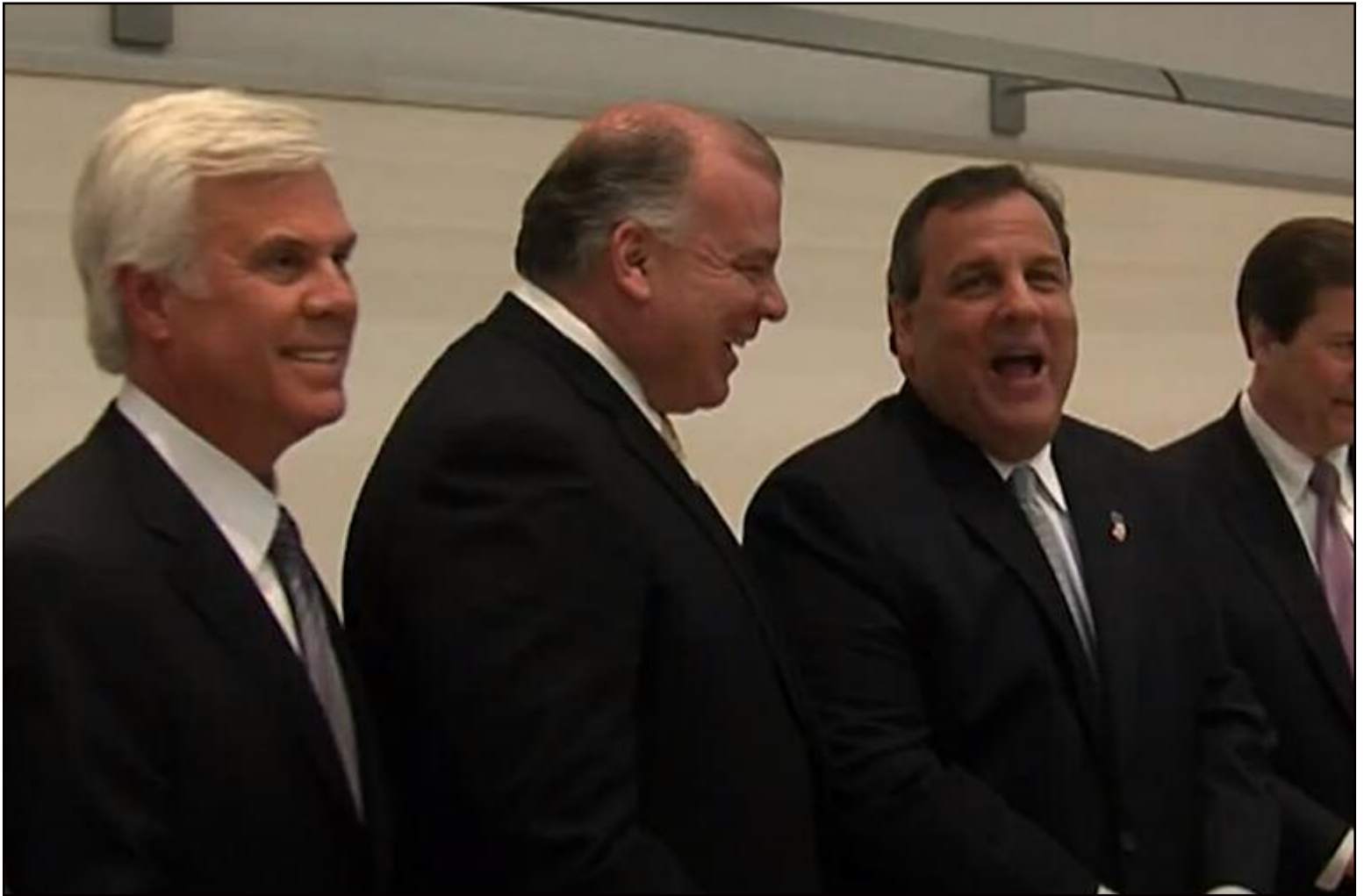
## Middlesex Democrats



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

# WHO'S UP AND WHO'S DOWN

## South Jersey Democrats



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



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

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

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



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## **CONTEST OF THE YEAR**

### **Somerset County Commissioners' Race**



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



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## **CAMPAIGN OF THE YEAR**

### **Testa, McClellan and Simonsen, LD1**



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



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## COMEBACK OF THE YEAR DON GUARDIAN

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

## COMEBACK OF THE YEAR?

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



## OPERATIVE OF THE YEAR RASHEIDA SMITH

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



## REPUBLICAN CHAIR OF THE YEAR LAURA ALI

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





## **HISTORY-MAKER OF THE YEAR**

### **TERESA RUIZ**

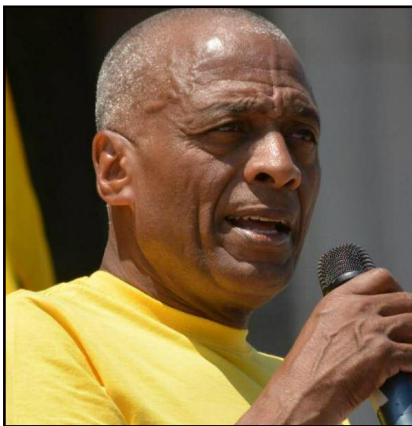
The 29th District Senator from Newark's North Ward became the first Latina to receive the support from the Democratic caucus to undertake the key caucus role of Senate Majority Leader, succeeding retiring senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg.



## **ACTIVIST OF THE YEAR**

### **SAM PESIN**

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



## **ACTIVIST OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP**

### **LARRY HAMM**

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



## Planned Parenthood Action Fund of New Jersey

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

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

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

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

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



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

[www.PPActionNJ.org](http://www.PPActionNJ.org)



## LOCAL FIGHT OF THE YEAR JOSHI VERSUS BHAGIA

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

## in·fra·struc·ture

/ˈɪnfɹəˌstrək(t)ʃHər/

*noun*

## WORD OF THE YEAR INFRASTRUCTURE

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





## QUOTE OF THE YEAR GOVERNOR PHIL MURPHY

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



## CLUTCH WIN OF THE YEAR VIN GOPAL

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



## UPSET OF THE YEAR NICOLINO GALLO

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



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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 Misérables*. 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.”





## 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

## 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>	2,432,798	2,553,714	1,464,221	16,521	16,983	11,794	20,266	6,821	1,954	7,766	6,532,838

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## 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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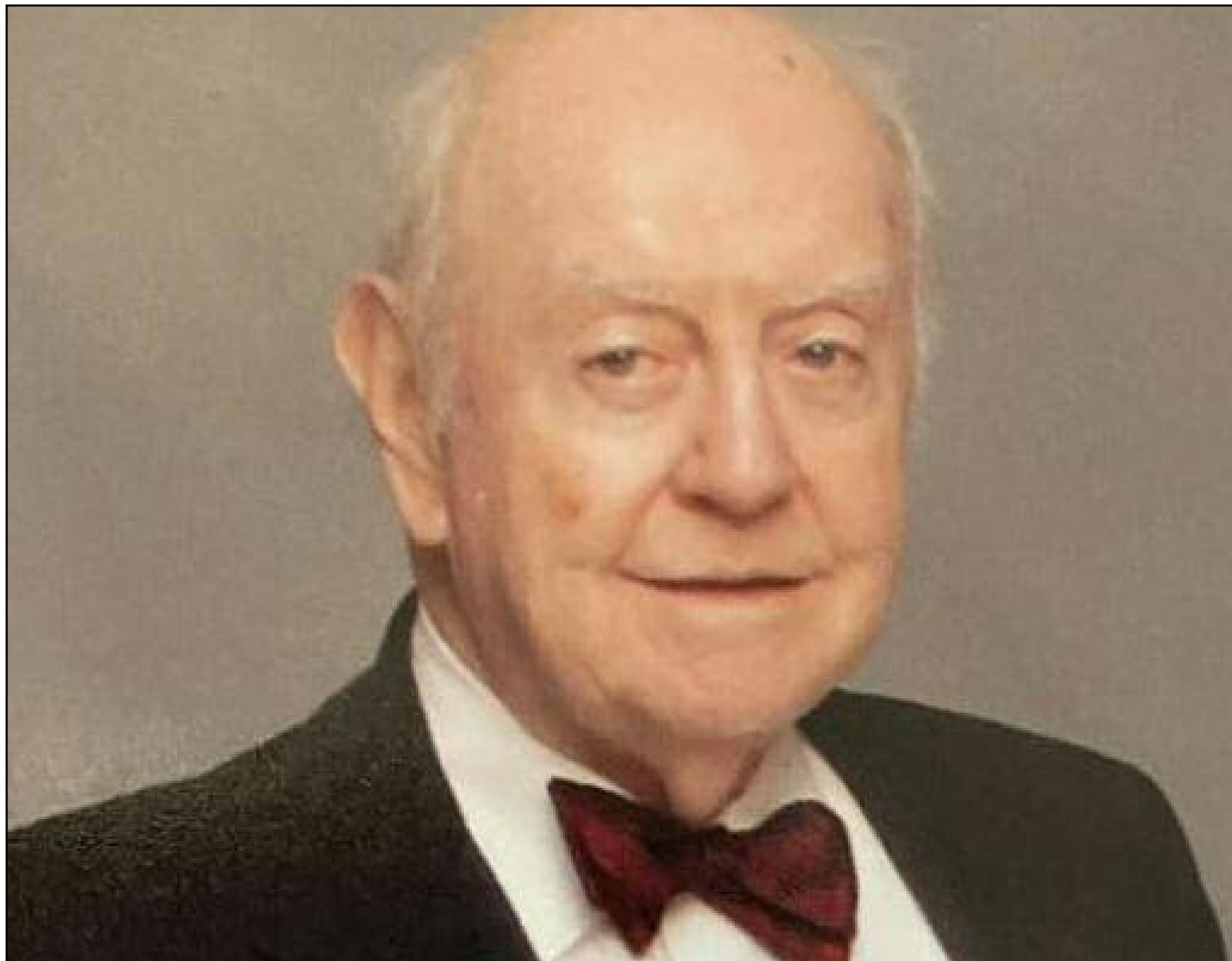
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**IN MEMORIAM**

*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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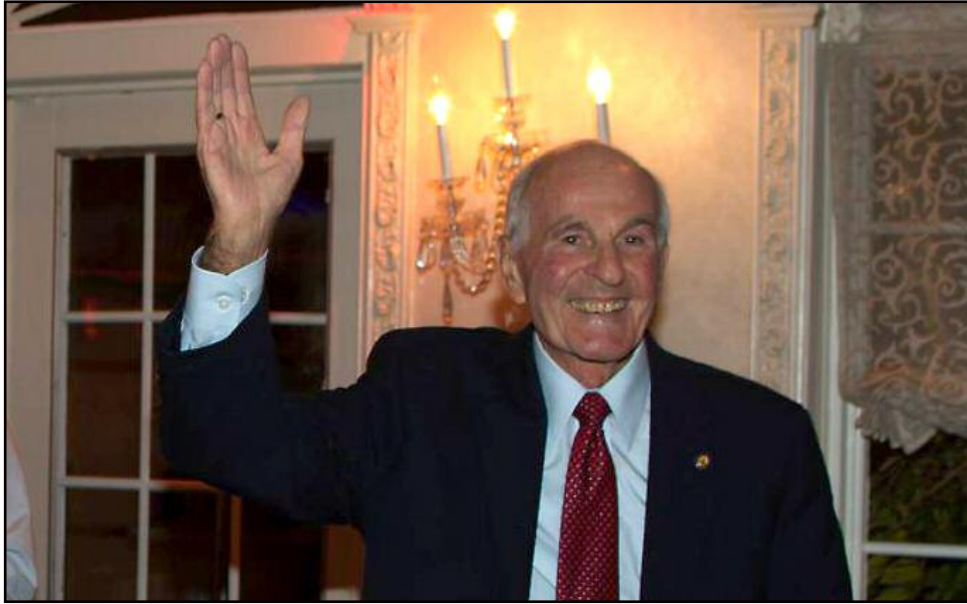
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## IN MEMORIAM



### *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 Snowflake*

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

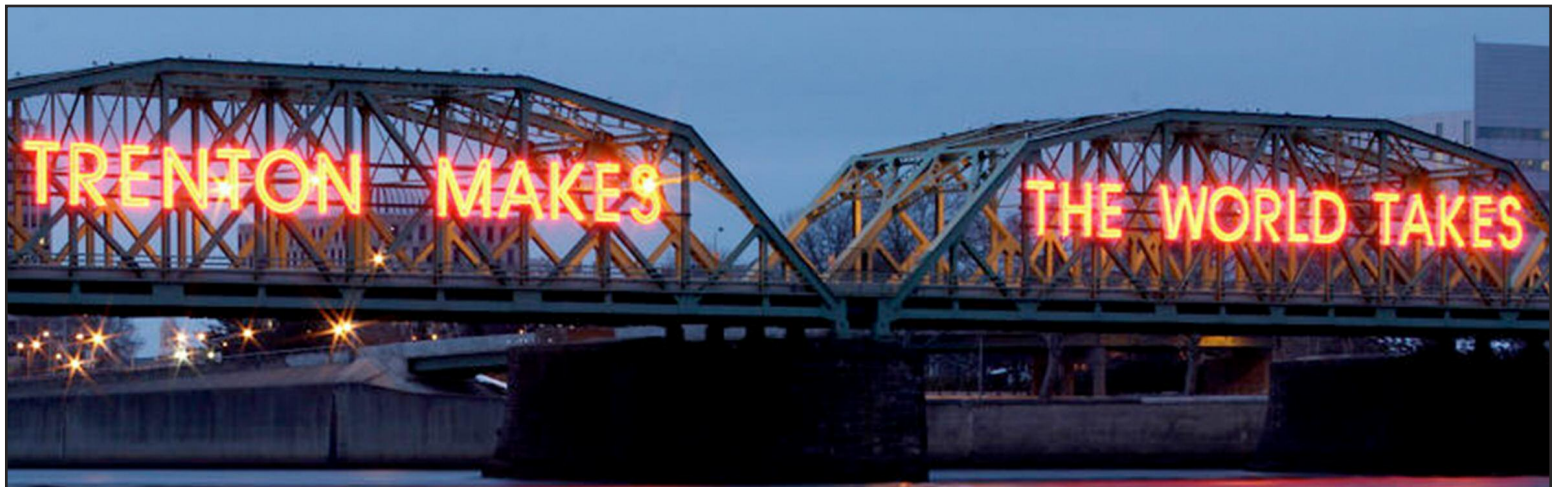
the campaign, something else came to mind. Many voters are not ideologically connected to one party or the other. Many are not ideological at all.

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. "Megasites" 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-Norcross 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 man with a beard and a woman are smiling and looking towards the camera. They are outdoors, with a body of water and greenery in the background. The man is wearing a maroon polo shirt, and the woman is wearing a light blue button-down shirt.

how far would  
you go if they  
were sick?

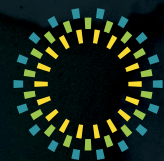
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to throw his hat into the ring and run for governor, running on a MAGA platform which came as no surprise, considering his close ties with the Trump White House and Trump Campaign.

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 Snowflake*

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.



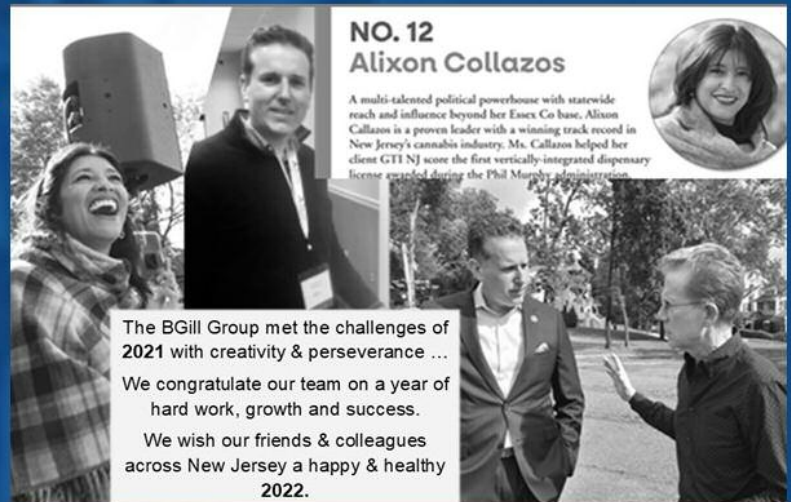
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An immediate casualty of the move was Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCrocce, who was not endorsed for reelection. She ran in the primary, nonetheless, but lost a close race to Christian Barranco, the party-endorsed candidate.

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.