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RIO DE DELAWARE

By Max Pizarro



In a way, the times proved no different from the past, as the rest of the world looked to America for direction, and found, not government institutions built on primary documents steeped in democracy – but a barbaric invitation to mob rule.

It was *The Ox Bow Incident* all over again, played out not on Boot Hill, but Capitol Hill, and in those countries intent on replicating this grand social experiment otherwise known as the United States.

In Brazil, for example:

Hundreds of supporters of former leader Jair

Bolsonaro stormed government buildings to protest against his successor and rival, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, according to CNN. "The breaches came about a week after the inauguration of Lula da Silva, who returned to power following a 12-year hiatus that ended when he defeated Bolsonaro in a run-off election in October."

We have met the banana republic – and it is us.

Denied their coveted red wave in the 2022 federal elections and fractured with an albatross of former President Donald J. Trump around their necks, Republicans only picked



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up nine U.S. House seats, far short of what they hoped would provide U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California with a comfortable margin in his pursuit of the speakership. Consequently, it took McCarthy 15 attempts to become speaker, the most ballots since before the Civil War, with former President Donald J. Trump taking an active, real-time role in securing votes for the GOP. Then former Vice President Dick Nixon told reporters in 1962, "you don't have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." If Trump couldn't provoke a short-circuiting of his own vice president's certification of the 2020 election, which he infamously attempted by inciting a 2021 insurrection, he would at least have McCarthy to kick around anew.





In the aftermath of those grim days of the republic when Trump, in full-blown temper tantrum mode, tried to influence a crowd of pirates to deny the formal ratification of Joe Biden as victor, McCarthy proved his adroitness as a ring kisser of power by traveling to Mar-a-Lago to confer with the disgraced ex-prez.

Following his embattled election as speaker this year, and in case anyone questioned Trump's relevance, certainly in doubt when many of his tailor-made candidates lost their election bids last year:

"I don't think anybody should doubt his influence. He was with me from the beginning," McCarthy said of Trump after the House had adjourned for the weekend, per The Hill. He added the former president was "all in" and "helping get those final votes."



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In addition:

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) confirmed Trump was on the other end of the line when she offered her phone to Rep. Matt Rosendale (R-Mont.), one of McCarthy's detractors. A photo of her doing so was widely circulated during the votes." "Absolutely," she said. "My favorite president."

In New Jersey, Republicans' governmental incompetence, and newfound capacity to inspire Brazilian lawlessness added up to one thing: one party rule by gleeful, payroll-competent Democrats alert to their capacity to do just about anything with impunity.



Whatever its value in Brazil, or Alabama, Trump's insistence on maintaining "influence," to borrow McCarthy's term for it, in New Jersey succeeded in essentially giving Democrats carte blanche; or, at least their own one-word, morally outraged answer for everything.

"What are you going to do about property taxes?"

"Trump."

"What about New Jersey corruption?"

"Trump."

"What about the state budget, is there any way to prevent it from totaling \$100 billion in five years?"

"Trump."

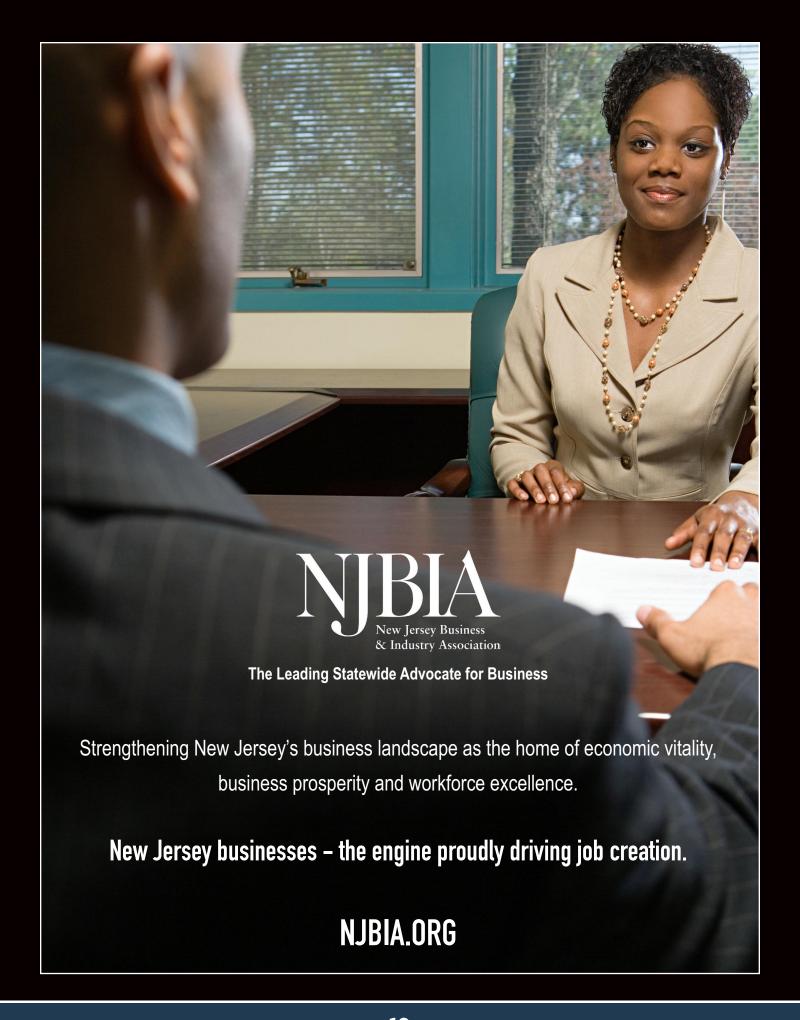
"Who's at fault for allowing New Jersey's cities from sliding into the abyss?"

"Trump."

"Nepotism."

"Trump."

"Narcolepsy."



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"Trump."

And so on and so on and so on. They engaged with the media more than Republican Tom Kean, Jr, by one word.

As practiced here, the two-party system limited influence to a small club of influencers, and gave regular people – workers and voters – nowhere to go except to one of two shunted train stalls: Democrat and Republican.

In New Jersey, the Dems maintained an edge of about a million voters, so as long as Trump continued to infect his own party and contribute to the appearance of a Manchurian speakership – in addition to whatever other megalomaniacal havoc he intended to wreak – Dems would indulge their own vulgar, wretched excesses of statewide power.

If Trump hung around, who could predict what outrageous epicurean heights they could attain?

Remember it was George W. Bush overreaching in Iraq and dooming his popularity in New Jersey that gave Democrats here the chutzpah to forego only relying on Wall Street money in the background and actually simply installing a Wall Street candidate in office. Why work for it when Bush already did that, and somebody else – Jon Corzine – would

pay for the rest?

Not too long ago, this was a battleground state.

But if Bill Clinton in the 1990s began the process of swinging New Jersey firmly into the blue column, Bush drove a nail into the GOP coffin here. Yes, Chris Christie attempted to resummon Ronald Reagan's mystique, only to jump in a dump truck with Trump and bulldoze it more firmly out of reach, giving the same cast of mostly power-fatted, foot-dragging Democrats the confidence to install another Wall Street candidate (no less from the same firm, Goldman Sachs) to "unite" the party. The single question going into 2023 was simply this:

Who would be the Democrats' next Wall Street candidate, recruited to protect an overwhelming special interest in the Garden State, in the name of advancing that sacred cause otherwise known as "the people?" Certainly, other relevant questions pertained. Would Trump's apparent strangulation hold on the halls of power breed too much intra-party strife among New Jersey Democrats, in their scramble to extend *influence*, and cause them to splinter apart in time for the next big statewide election? Corzine and Murphy emerged as guys with bank accounts sufficiently massive to

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frighten the masses, or at least frighten those party organizations and their leaders installed to quell, er, represent the masses.

The results proved less than robust.

Corzine lost his reelection to Christie in 2009, and Murphy barely won in 2021 against Jack Ciattarelli.

If their rivals overreached again, could Republicans capitalize, or was it too late in the Garden State? Given the GOP's Jan. 6th, 2021 reprehensibility, failure to oust Murphy later that same year, inability to muster a 2022 red wave, and early 2023 federal government incompetence, would N.J. Republicans, mostly silent (and in many cases alarmingly complicit) in the face of insurrectionists overrunning the Capitol, and freighted by the excesses of Trump, simply sink – beyond all recognition of a once mighty party – in New Jersey?



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THE CONTEXT



Perhaps most indicative of where things stand, and the health of the two-party system, Tom Kean, Jr. and Rob Menendez, Jr. emerged last year as New Jersey's two "new faces" on the federal scene.

If Democrats delighted in the contradiction of purporting to represent "working families," while advancing Wall Street; they simultaneously bristled at seditionists while ratifying dynastic rule.

They didn't even care which party it was; if

there was a dynasty to be backed, they were all for it, especially if those dynasties included entwined political establishment histories.

Son of former Republican Governor Tom Kean, Kean Jr. lost three federal elections before Democrats finally contributed a map he could run on and win; just as long as their other Democratic incumbents had districts where they would win, and the GOP didn't say anything negative as Democrats advanced the son of Bob Menendez, Sr., who beat Kean in humiliating fashion back in 2006.



Everyone emerged a winner; or at least two guys named "junior" won, as the state retained its essential Democratic Party-dominant shape, and the two Republican chairs of redistricting, Doug Steinhardt (congressional) and Al Barlas (legislative) came away with legislative seats as part of the overall amiable power-share, while the rest of the country burned with partisan rage.

In what was supposed to be a big backlash and demonstration of GOP resurgence, Kean Jr. ran from media sooner than field questions about Trump and abortion (the U.S. Supreme Court last year had revoked Roe v. Wade), and, on the strength of the Democratic redistricting map, emerged as the only Republican victor in last year's congressional races.

New Jersey's Republican delegation – U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, and U.S. Rep.-elect Kean, Jr. – backed McCarthy from the beginning.



Kean throughout McCarthy's speakership drama occupied the unenviable position of having to sit behind the moving conveyor belt of Matt Gaetz, Andy Biggs, Lauren Boebert and others - Chip Roy, at one point - who derided McCarthy and packaged several alternatives, all of whom ultimately failed. All at once, Kean had to try to look respectful, horrified, simultaneously sympathetic to the anarchists' cause and reviled by it, sufficiently concerned by the right-wing of his party to soothe New Jersey moderates, and yet not enough to further furrow his brow and awaken the ire of the rightward reaches of the 7th Congressional District.

It was an exhausting, three-day facial tightrope just to witness, let alone walk.

Then again, Kean, bubble wrapped by the assurances of a reapportioned 7th District, chose silence as his chief method of communicating. Those nuances of his visible reactions alone became the congressman-elect's closest approximation of substance offered up to the scrutinizing public eye.

It was an intriguing glimpse of the elusive Kean, one made even more interesting by the fact that he is the son of the New Jersey Republican politician who once grabbed a handful of opportunistic Democrats to add

New Name, New Era, Same Great Team!





to his Republican minority to make himself speaker of the New Jersey General Assembly. Central to the modern mythology of New Jersey politics, Kean senior's ability to cross the aisle in search of a coalition-majority on his own behalf, made his son a symbolic suggestion of a strategy to be had here, if Democrats could only find five soulless transactional Republicans in the room.

Nationally, at least to this point, no one thought enough of the ghost of David Friedland, apparently, to counsel Kean, Jr., to move and thereby deprive Democrats of a

conceivable, New Jersey-inspired game plan; or maybe this era had hardened safely beyond GOP fears of defection.

If Kean and Menendez represented the "young" and the "new" New Jersey symbiosis, when he won, trailing images of U.S. Rep. Taylor-Greene passing a cellphone around with Trump on the other line, McCarthy supplied the ready image of new national Republican leadership, subservient to a mob that overran and desecrated the United States Capitol on the orders of a president who lost an election.



THE NEW NEW JERSEY



Besides greater slabs of power layered on Democrats in Central and North Jersey and a drying up of South Democrats' base, what did it mean in New Jersey, and what did it portend for 2023?

InsiderNJ guest columnist Alan Ashkinaze in a much-read piece at the end of the year, cited Monmouth and South Jersey – specifically Cumberland – as key GOP targets of opportunity.

From that column, he started with Monmouth County:

"It's a continuing story, but often overlooked.

With a deep bench of experienced municipal officials, a dedicated army of volunteers for the ground game and a continuing focus on registering new Republican voters (in fact, almost 35% of all new registered Republican voters came from Monmouth in 2022), Monmouth GOP is one of the best political organizations in the state; and this year they showed why they are so formidable.

"Led by Monmouth County Sheriff and GOP County Chair Shaun Golden, Monmouth Republicans rolled up big wins on all levels- local, county and Congressional: Golden easily won re-election by beating Democrat challenger Larry Luttrell 57%-41%;



























and Commissioners Tom Arnone and Nick DiRocco also won re-election by almost 40,000 votes. The Monmouth GOP team campaigned on their record of delivering fiscally responsible government services and emphasizing "kitchen table" issues (inflation, crime, and education.)

"Congressional candidates in CD-3, CD-4 and CD-6 also did well in the Monmouth portion of their districts. GOP challenger Bob Healey, for example, handily beat Rep. Andy Kim 56%- 42.5%; Rep. Chris Smith trounced his Democratic opponent 60.7 to 37%; and in CD-6, Monmouth Deputy Director Sue Kiley garnered a respectable 46% against Rep. Frank Pallone.

"But this year's big story may be a prelude to one of the biggest story lines of 2023: Can





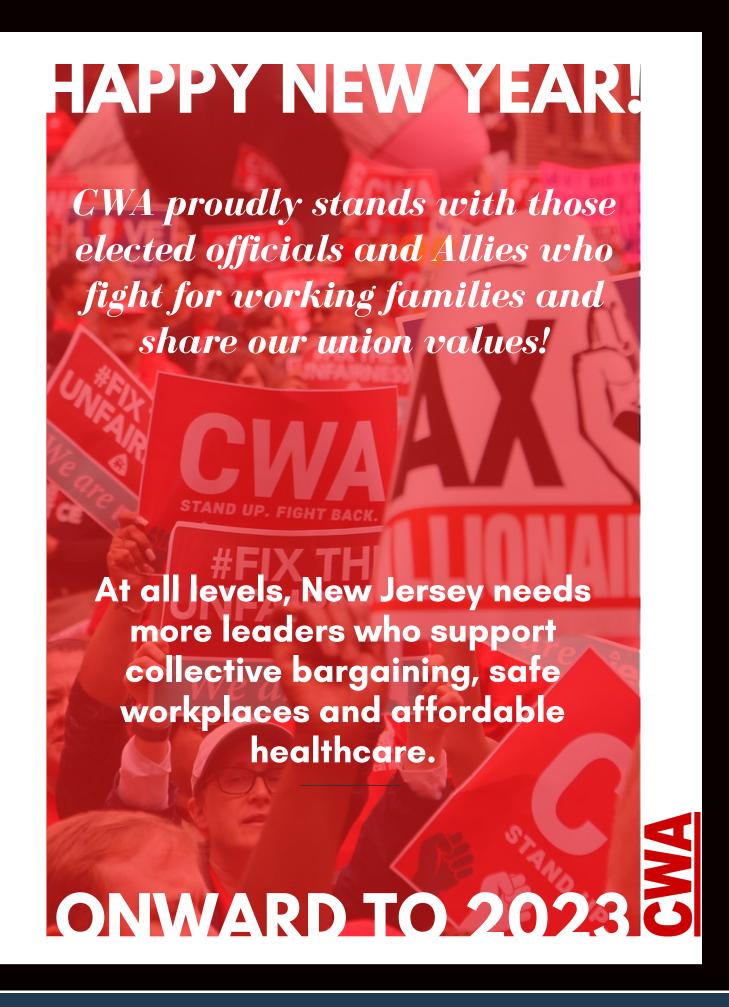
the Monmouth GOP organization muster enough strength to defeat Sen. Vin Gopal (LD -11) next year? In the only split district in the state, Gopal is vulnerable; and the Dems know it. State Dems are committed to making this race one of the most expensive state Senate races in state history. With a deep bench (like the talented first term Assemblywoman Marilyn Piperno), look for the Monmouth GOP to rise to the challenge.

"I wouldn't bet against the Monmouth GOP-especially in next year's marquee race."

Who ends up running against Gopal on behalf of the Republican Party will show the party's level of seriousness.

Did the symbiosis that protected Kean-Menendez permeate LD-11?

Only 2023 will tell.



INSIDER NJ

YEAR IN ADVANCE 2023

In addition, Cumberland represents Republicans' other bastion of opportunity, where a vulnerable-looking state Senator Fred Madden (D-4) gives them a prime pick-up spot.

From Ashkinaze's column:

"Perhaps the biggest GOP victory in 2022 was Cumberland GOP's flipping control of the County Commissioner Board.

"This was not an easy feat when you consider: Democrats still outnumber Republicans 3:2 in the County and President Biden won Cumberland by 6 points in 2020. Not too long ago, Cumberland was considered a Democrat bastion. In 2009, for example, then Gov. Jon Corzine easily beat challenger Chris Christie 50.7%-41.8% in Cumberland.

"Despite the odds, State Senator and Cumberland GOP Chair Mike Testa completed a three-year quest to gain control of the County Commission. With wins by Commissioner Doug Albrecht and Commissioner-Elect Victoria Groetsch-Lods, it will be the first time in 50 years that the GOP will have two consecutive years of control on the County Commission."



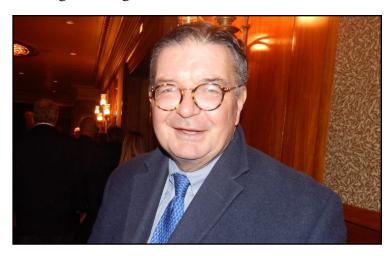
Gopal had a political challenge in front of him, so did Madden, or whomever the party supplanted for Madden ahead of the 2023 elections. Democrats would also keep an eye on LD-16 and state Senator Andrew Zwicker and his running mates. Since undergoing a rift over the course of the past two years, the Somerset GOP still looked less than full tilt boogie. Democrats last year won their countywide contests in Somerset despite Kean's top-of-the-ticket *influence*.

Again, beyond individual legislative contests, the bigger challenges and more enduring political chess moves would involve the ongoing struggle for party power among Democrats, who rule the state.

A legislative district like LD-16 had particular relevance, as it represented part of the base of emergent powerhouse Middlesex County, helmed by Democratic Party Chairman Kevin McCabe.

If Madden loses, and Zwicker wins, the once potent South Jersey Democratic machine – already on the canvas - will have suffered yet another shriveling up in the face of Republican advances in South Jersey, the only dedicated regional zone where Democrats suffered heavy casualties in the Trump era.

Middlesex, perhaps more than any other Democratic Party-run county – has positioned itself to be a major – and perhaps the pivotal - player in the lead-up to the 2025 gubernatorial contest. Already in control of five in-county senate seats and very close to both Gopal and state Senator Joe Cryan (D-20), McCabe sees another opportunity in neighboring Mercer.



Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes wants another term, but will have to get past Assemblyman Dan Benson (D-14) in a Democratic Primary.

Middlesex backs Benson.

The dying South Jersey, stuck in the red quicksand of itself, will attempt to revivify by re-intrenching northward and supporting Hughes. A Benson win would further augment the already powerful Middlesex, where the concentration of legislative power gives McCabe a strong starting position in any statewide conversation about governor and those other intersecting power pieces, namely senate president and speaker.

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In addition, keep an eye on Essex County, the base of Democratic State Party Chairman LeRoy Jones, who wants to de-fuse the potential for his county to explode in intra-party strife on the heels of redistricting. Jones has placed a key ally, Britnee Timberlake, in a position to secure the 34th District senate seat. But the chairman has to figure out what to do about the 27th District, where state Senator (and former Governor) Dick Codey and state Senator Nia Gill find themselves lumped together.

Will Codey retire after half a century in the Statehouse?

Will Gill retire?

Moreover, if Assemblyman Tom Giblin retires,

will Alixon Collazos occupy that seat?

In the 34th, will Bloomfield Mayor Mike Venezia replace Timberlake as the assembly-woman moves up to occupy the senate seat?

If Jones confronts legislative incumbents loathe to go away, he may have to use the commissioners' seats as bargaining chips, and satisfy ambitious local players with those musical chairs for the time being. In any case, how he resolves the situation will go far in determining the readiness of Essex County to play a commanding role in the intensifying discussions around governor 2025.

For the record: the following people continue to stimulate buzz around their potential to run for governor:



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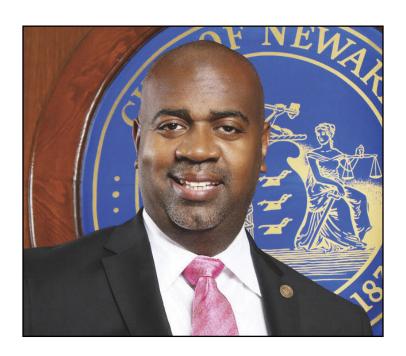
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RAS BARAKA

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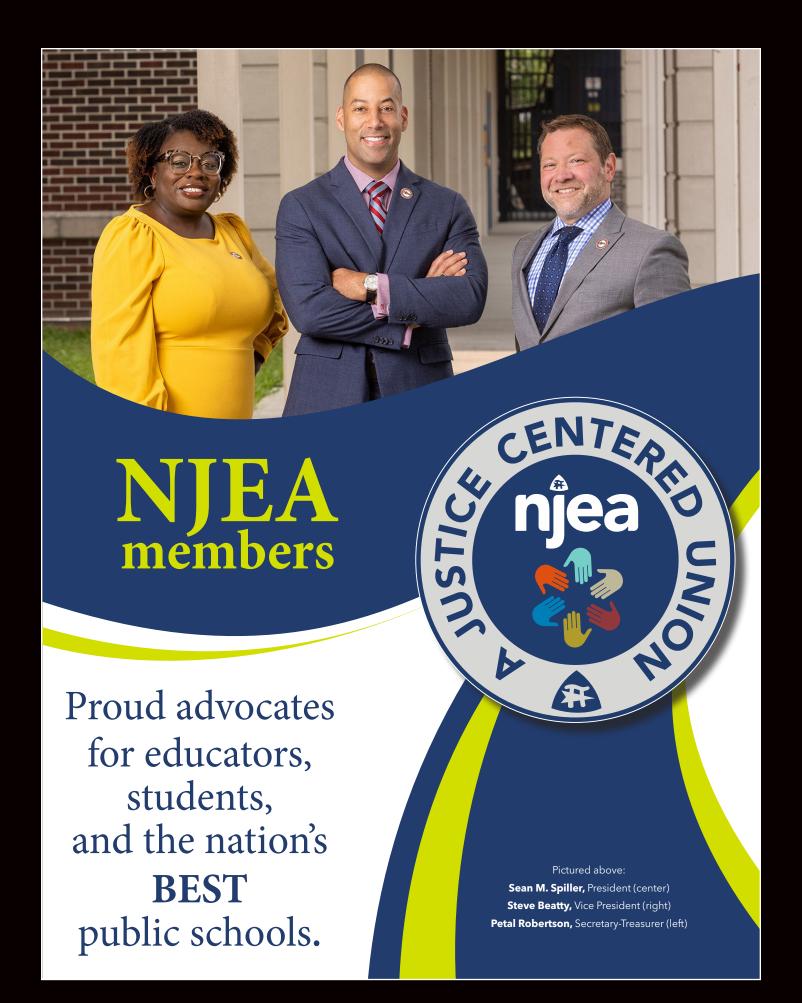
AMONG THE **DEMOCRATS:**

U.S. REP



JOSH GOTTHEIMER

He has the most money of anyone; an enticing prospect for bosses looking to unite the party behind a single financially well-connected candidate as they did with Corzine and Murphy, but the problem solvers' caucus-member may give the party primary fits.



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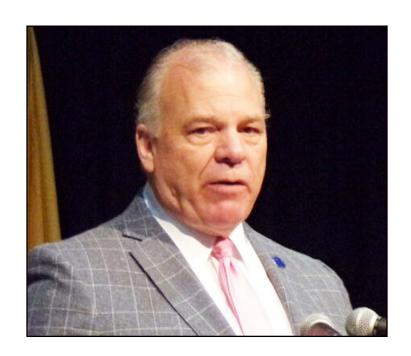
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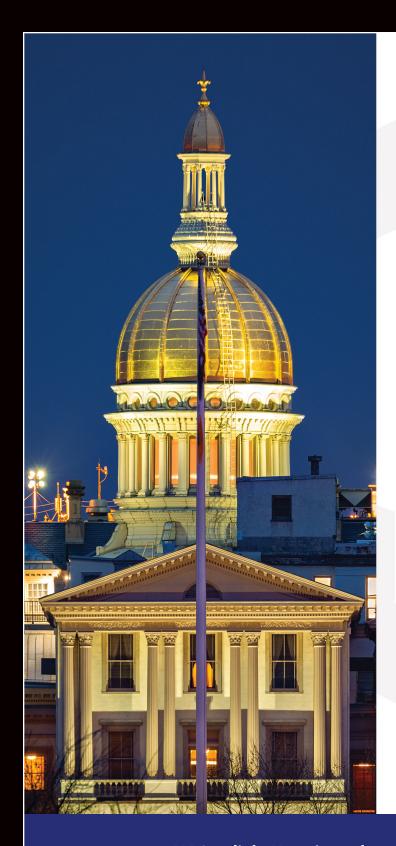


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STATE **SENATOR**



MIKE TESTA

Can the South Jersey star muster enough North Jersey support?



STATE **SENATOR**



HOLLY SCHEPISI

With Ciattarelli expected to get in, can the 2025 GOP field support two moderates?

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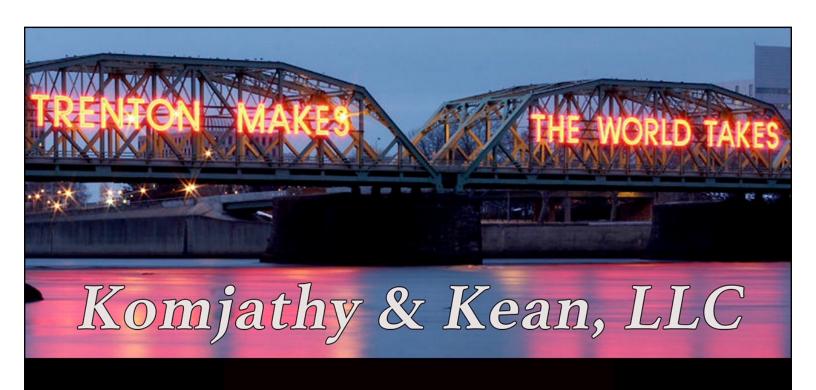


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Not to be outdone by Middlesex and Essex, Hudson will try to maintain relevance (or reinstitute some relevance) though a combination of local politics and intrigue. First, West New York will supply a May nonpartisan injection of both, as retired U.S. Rep. Albio Sires will try to regain the mayoralty in his hometown. Second, Fulop's announcement that he won't run for mayor again will trigger an intensification of interest by other local players for the job.



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CLOSING THOUGHTS

Developing primaries in Mercer and Essex and volatility in Jersey City – New Jersey's second biggest city – give Republicans (and power-deprived South Jersey Democrats) hope of Democrats devolving into hurt feelings, injured egos, and sufficient organizational fracturing to put 2025 in range on the other side of 2023.

Given the GOP's ongoing demonstrations of Trump subservience and insistence on weakening its potential economic arguments by getting entangled in social issues like abortion, Democrats will no doubt satisfy themselves – Antonio Carlos Jobim's considerable influence notwithstanding – with making the case that New Jersey, its limbo bar lowering by the year, at the very least, is not Brazil.