

SPECIAL EDITION

# RANKING THE TOP 25 COUNTY PARTY CHAIRS



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# INTRODUCTION

In a few days you will find in these pages an assessment of the critical battleground contests in this year's 2023 legislative battleground season, and the implications of those races.

The political fortunes of the county party chairs considered below hinge somewhat on those contests, and in the blurbs accompanying the names of the party leaders you will find a size-up of precisely those dynamics.

Simultaneously, don't discount 2024 as a major theater of power persuasion as, apparently, the parties will attempt the exorcism of incipient or actual octogenarians Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

But from now on in New Jersey,

2025 devours the political landscape of this state.

Certainly, what happens next year with incumbent U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) informs that discussion.

Finally, though, as sitting Governor Phil Murphy limps through the underbrush in his efforts to get noticed nationwide as an alternative to Biden, the party leaders have their eyes narrowed on the next version of statewide power.

We assume the deal gets cut at the same time for governor, senate president, and speaker.

A rough itemization of those most

likely to fill those positions appears below.

More importantly, though, the following list contains a ranking of those county party chairs most relevant in the ongoing discussions about who will occupy those positions, presumably as part of a power-sharing agreement among those most relevant powers.

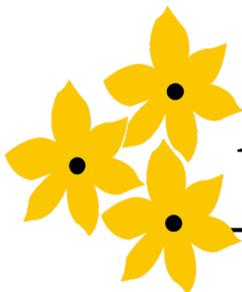
Politics, after all, is a soft science. In New Jersey in particular, under the guise of tough guy posing, it seems squishier than elsewhere. But we have tried to juggle a cross-section of considerations, among them the size of the counties involved, the voter performance of said counties, the history and performance of the chairs under review, and the challenges on their plate in this specific election cycle.

Hopefully, an accurate depiction of political power results, which from the start remained the only aim of this exercise.

Max Pizarro

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Editor, Insider NJ



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# A CLOSER LOOK

## TOP 25 COUNTY CHAIRS IN 2023

### 1. LEROY JONES



New Jersey has strong ties to the old world, and even at its most so-called progressive, retains features that readily identify it as a structural holdover from the Middle Ages. Its broad institutional strokes enable easy manipulation by power for the sake of perpetuating power. A power player in the truest sense, Jones simultaneously occupies three thrones at different levels of influence: the state Democratic Party chairmanship, the Essex County Democratic chair-

manship, and the East Orange Democratic Party chairmanship. That would be like someone scaling the spiritual pyramid to fulfill the roles of monsignor, bishop, and cardinal all at once. But the political holy trinity, as it were, for Jones amounts to more than merely a Divine Comedy. Occupying the Essex chairmanship alone makes him uniquely powerful as he commands a countywide post that by definition equips him with considerable political power. Essex Democrats, after all, oversee that county with the biggest plurality of Democratic Party membership. The local and statewide portions of his realm hinge to left and right of his county iteration, to form a kind of picturesque triptych of power. In real, 21st Century terms what does it mean?

Following up on some of the statewide power moves of his State

Party predecessor John Currie (see below), Jones has steadily restored Essex County to its rightful place as the Democrats' true party stronghold. On election night 2021, as members of his own party appeared ready to surrender to Republican Jack Ciattarelli, Jones pointed out to NJTV that the Essex Clerk had yet to tally all the votes coming out of Essex. He had no doubt his candidate, incumbent Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, would win – on the strength of Essex. He was right, as Murphy was able to offset Ciattarelli's GOP gains in red and swing counties with a modest showing in Jones' gargantuanly Democratic Essex. In addition, Jones relieved Essex' dependency on South Jersey (remember, Essex took the deal to make Steve Sweeney of Gloucester County senate president by chucking its own senate president, Dick Codey, then of West Orange,

overboard, and instead accepting the speakership with the late Sheila Oliver of East Orange). From 2009, when Essex empowered Sweeney by scalping one of its own, to 2019 when Republican Mike Testa beat Democrat Bob Andrzejczak, South Jersey Democrats wielded undue influence over North Jersey, primarily through Essex, in fact bullying the big North Jersey party power center as a needy stepchild of power. The South originally got behind Jones in hopes of perpetuating this lopsided statewide relationship, but the new chairman, who took over in 2021, maintained Currie's history of taking Democrats away from the South, where Democrats crumbled in the Trump era even as they made gains in the North Jersey suburbs. As Jones made his case for why Murphy would win reelection, Sweeney lost reelection, a bifurcation that

essentially told the story of the party and its future. By the time Jones gave the toothless Sweeney a rather humiliating heave-ho off the redistricting commission, he had solidified himself as a true Essex-based statewide party chairman, not merely the tool of South Jersey parading in Four Seasons motley. While those wriggling remnants of the South Jersey empire continue to try to weaken him, Jones has his sights set on the Democratic National Convention of 2024 and, presumably the re-election of the Biden-Harris ticket. Pay particular attention to his connectivity to Pennsylvania Democratic State Party Chair Sharif Street and his efforts on behalf of Biden in that critical neighboring swing state. Other considerations? Jones' detractors point out that powerful Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo still requires manic consultation on all matters

political and ontological. In addition, Newark, under the political auspices of Mayor Ras Baraka, never seems to neatly line up with Essex on the political front, and, if rumors persist, may even go in a completely different, even oppositional direction, if Baraka indeed undertakes a run for governor. Central Jersey Democratic Party diehards nurse ill will as a consequence of the establishment's unceremonious redistricting guillotining U.S. Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-7) for the sake of the son of a former GOP governor. Some of them blame the Democratic State Party chair. But the howls, it must be said, seem muted in comparison with the euphoria around U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-11), the prime beneficiary of mapping that upended Malinowski. Sherrill – a key Jones ally – still remains the favorite as the Democrats next establishment candidate for governor.



GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

## 2. KEVIN MCCABE



The Middlesex County Democratic Party chairman supplanted South Jersey's George Norcross III (now apparently retired from politics) as that most relevant political player in the Democratic Party outside of North Jersey. First of all, he wields power over the biggest stable of senators, with convincing connective tissue beyond just those who reside under his county-wide roof. McCabe starts with state Senator Joe Vitale, Senator Bob Smith, Senator Pat Diegnan, Senator Linda Greenstein, and Senator Andrew Zwicker. Then he has close ties to Senators Joe Cryan, Vin Gopal and Nick Scutari. Notwithstanding Norcross' endzone dance at the time, Scutari couldn't have

become senate president without Middlesex. Barring a GOP tsunami this November (which seems hard to envision) if four of his five Middlesex-based senators get reelected, and Cryan and Scutari occupy Democratic districts that amount to non-contests in a general election season, making them both next-door neighbor walkovers, McCabe does have to pay attention to Zwicker and Gopal. Now, both Democrats look well-positioned to win (mostly on the strength of money, messaging, and organization) if this proves to be a conventional, low voter-turnout legislative election cycle. The fact that they both matter to McCabe may prove an X factor too big for either Steve Dnistrian or Mike Pappas (respectively, Gopal's and Zwicker's opponents) to surmount. McCabe wants to consolidate power, not cough it up in a boring election cycle. He's playing statewide, and wants leverage, if not half the joystick control, the deal that ultimately gets done for speaker, senate president, and governor. This year,

McCabe's Woodbridge-based speaker, Craig Coughlin, provided the party chairman with more political ammunition as an initially reluctant governor signed off on Coughlin's senior property tax relief plan. That puts Middlesex, and specifically McCabe, in his strongest position yet, since becoming chair a decade ago. He doesn't want to muss that up by having to eat "Gopal and Zwicker lose" headlines amid bore-snore statewide atmospherics. If Jones has nothing going on in Essex this general election season, McCabe arguably has it all going on in the space of two battleground legislative districts that ultimately could prove to be precisely those trenches the chairman needs to solidify to catapult Middlesex beyond the speakership and bragging rights for making the senate president from another county. Given Middlesex's amassed power, don't underestimate McCabe's most audacious play, especially on the heels of favorable StayNJ headlines: running Coughlin for governor.

## 3. PAUL JULIANO



Big county operator. Player. Can't make moves statewide without him. Like other chairs of this size, he has his detractors, or rather those who make a case that he hasn't completely exploited this powerful party organization essentially constructed during the Christie years by his predecessor, Lou Stellato. Like Jones in Essex, Juliano does have to sort of share power with a

powerful county executive, in this case Jim Tedesco, who somewhat marches to his own drummer. That said, Juliano has full control of the Bergen County delegation, even the swashbuckling state Senator Paul Sarlo (D-36), including all co seats. That's pretty big. In addition, he doesn't have to seek permission from anybody to award the line to anybody. Good relations in Hudson, Passaic, Middlesex and others, and raises more than any of them. Unlike Jones, who essentially faces an inconsequential election cycle in Essex, Juliano effectively maintains what in many regards remains a swing county (Murphy 145K votes in Bergen to Ciattarelli's 130K in 2021). Places like Paramus and South Bergen (and legislative battlegrounds like LD-38 and even countywide commission

raises) keep him honest. He actually has to still run a GOTV program and win. Deep relationships in all his big towns that matter, like Cliffside Park, Fort Lee, Englewood and Hackensack. Does it 16 hours a day. In addition, has a guy on a very short list to be the next governor (or senator, if that opens up, depending on what Mikie Sherrill does, see above) in U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-5). Also, keep an eye on Senator Joe Lagana (D-38) as an option for senate president, or Assemblywoman Lisa Swain (D-38) for speaker as the power players at the top jockey to put their key allies in positions of power. Edges Currie on this list only because Bergen remains potent, and always a first, second or third phone call away in the arena of statewide power.



## 4. JOHN CURRIE



It says a lot about Currie – who hails from a relatively small county – that he occupies the fourth spot on this list right behind someone like Bergen County Democratic Committee Chairman Paul Juliano, whose county harvested 145,000 votes for Phil Murphy in 2021. The Passaic County Democratic Committee oversaw a much more modest 57,812 votes for Murphy in its smaller neighboring county. It's not just the numbers, though. It comes down to Currie's influence and history and the trajectory of the party, both under his watch and on the heels of his eight-year tenure. Currie essentially went to war with South Jersey on behalf of Governor Murphy, suffering all the slings and arrows as a con-

sequence, and finally handing off to a successor who appeared – by virtue of his political history – ready to reverse course. But as noted above, Jones came in and doubled down on the North Jersey-dominant direction of the party favored by Currie. No, Passaic doesn't have the raw number advantages of Essex, Hudson, Bergen, Middlesex, or that block of Democratic Party GN3 underlings formerly classified as South Jersey. What he has is accumulated successful history and the capacity – witness the way he pulled together the North Jersey chairs in 2017 and cohered them on behalf of Murphy in 2021 – to forge and keep alliances. He also has a strong connection to Paterson Mayor Andre Sayegh, in a county where the chair and mayor often didn't get along. While Currie presumably doesn't have the long runway of some of the younger chairs in his party, he does contribute an otherwise elusive adhesive to those northern chairs and players who come together in part because they like and trust Currie. Envisioned at the outset of his chairmanship

as a South Jersey stooge, Currie almost instantaneously bucked that tag in his almost feverish defense of Murphy, then more than survived the Murphy era as a key player going into the next gubernatorial cycle. Sometimes, the battles won actually add up to something tangibly powerful in the mostly safety-first conscious world of New Jersey politics. Even though he lost a commissioner's seat last year and party insiders whispered about irrevocable political denting, much-lionized party leader Currie's a testament to that.



## 5. GEORGE GILMORE



Since his conviction on federal tax charges and subsequent pardon by President Donald J. Trump, the Ocean County GOP chair does not occupy the throne with the

same kind of Nebuchadnezzar-like flair. He's more like Herod, ruling under Rome (if we can stretch the metaphor of Trump to represent Rome). Or, if you please, he's John the Baptist, wholly in service to a higher master. Whatever else he does, come crunch time, Gilmore will be standing beside Trump, the man who supplied him with a get-out-of-jail free card, and furnished the atmospherics that made Gilmore's return to power not inevitable exactly but presumably (even as Trump stares into the seeming eternity of 91 criminal charges) politically practicable in

this upside-down universe version of the Republican Party. While former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie languishes in presidential polls, attempting through a steady repetition of mea culpa to convince fellow Republicans of how Trump duped him back in 2016, Gilmore looks like a steady Eddie by comparison. That doesn't hurt in the GOP Primary, as Trump swamps his next closest competitor, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 55.5-14.2% and Christie brings up the rear with 3.1%, according to FiveThirtyEight.

## 6. NICK SCUTARI



One of those cruel twists of political fate ensures that Scutari lives or dies politically according to the imperial thumbs up or down

of Middlesex County. Middlesex actually created Union, or rather Union emerged from the clay of Middlesex, and so too politically the chair of the Union County Democratic Party animates, or becomes dust, according to Chairman McCabe's edict. Perhaps it isn't too cruel. After all, Middlesex getting behind Scutari landed him on the throne at the outset. But Scutari outhustled everyone else in his delegation to succeed the shockingly ousted Steve Sweeney. It's not as though he's a warm body plopped there by

the party like a sack of grain. He's a live wire, Scutari. But for all his competency, he must live in the shadow of Middlesex's guillotine, which doesn't aim at Scutari so much as formulate statewide power sharing with players (see above) who don't really care about Union. It's a tribute to Scutari's political prowess that he's as high on this list as his, navigating as he must that purple haze-overcast, Robert Heinlin-like world between the death of South Jersey and the rebirth of Middlesex.

## 7. ANTHONY VAINIERI



Hudson is Hudson. But there is a great distance between Frank “I am the law” Hague and Anthony “Team Sacco” Vainieri. Even Augie Torres, who coined the much-in-use term “Hudson County Dead-o” couldn’t have foreseen this version of the vaunted HCDO. Sources say Vainieri’s gubernatorial endorsement of Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop gave all kinds of agita to the mayors and other power players who wanted Hudson to genuinely occupy a sagely position in the lead-up to the 2025 statewide contest. Aside from the scattered endorsements that seem to echo his aborted 2017 bid, Fulop does not appear to have any countywide teeth outside of Hudson. And Vainieri’s endorsement continues to create mild pushing and shoving behind the scenes. In the words of one grumpy Democrat yearning for the days of Hague, “Hudson’s a mess.”

## 8. LAURA ALI



The consequential Morris County GOP chair has had another good year so far, when considering the arrayed forces challenging her authority in the Republican Primary. Tom Mastrangelo and his allies (including former Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce) mounted a real challenge of incumbent state Senator Joe Pennacchio and Ali’s other establishment fixtures backed by the Ali-helmed county party organization. The line held, not only on the legislative front but also countywide. In addition, the organization gave Ali a vote of confidence this year in a special election.



## 9. PETER MURPHY



There was a time, and it wasn't too long ago, when many party chairs also ran taverns. A lot of the men at the tail end of their political careers grew up in the sawdust shavings of bars run by local bosses. Murphy is one of those old school North Jersey pols, whose Totowa-based watering hole with his name on it, serves as a gathering point for local GOP political operations. The Passaic County Republican Committee chair not only has a strong tie-in to influential state Senator Kristin Corrado (R-40), but his hometown base and network of influence (including Essex County GOP Chairman Al Barlas) always causes a threat factor. Any doubts? Look at the GOP's countywide win last year, which dented the otherwise implacable Currie. It's a reminder that sometimes the guys on bar stools aren't just drinking. Amid the complacency of our age, some of them just might be politically operating overtime.

## 10. JOE ANDL



The Burlington County Democratic Party chair made significant gains during the Trump era. Controls the commissioner board. Has a first-tier consigliere in the form of Adam Malamut. Differentiated nicely from Camden. State Senator Troy Singleton (D-7) has distinguished himself from the pack and continues to draw attention as a fairly obvious pick for senate president, if Burlington can land in the right conversation with the north, or LG.



# 11. JANICE MIRONOV



Underestimate the East Windsor Mayor at your own peril. That was Mironov's message this year, as incumbent Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes – the son of a former governor, no less – fell under the chair's political ax. She's tough. No, look, Mercer will never scare anyone unless it combines forces with other counties, but based on her takedown of Hughes – and alliance with incipient County Executive Dan Benson – Mironov occupies the upside of an impressive political run, capped by this year's pre-primary season.

# 12. SHAUN GOLDEN



Watch the LD-11 race closely. If you're a Republican, this is finally about Golden (who doubles as Monmouth County sheriff), and what the Monmouth County GOP chair can do represent the interests of his party. State Senator Vin Gopal (D-11) is, conceivably, the size of a future governor. Strangle him politically now and you're a hero. Fail to stop him and you have allowed the Democrats to give birth (Again) to Hercules.

# CWA

## 13. MIKE TESTA



The Cumberland County GOP chairman doubles as the vociferous Republican state senator from Vineland representing the 1st District. Agree or disagree with Testa, he is so effective at what he does, he occupies everyone's GOP gubernatorial short list. Ciattarelli's the favorite, of course, and radio personality Bill Spadea appears poised to hit go on a statewide run. But keep an eye on Testa, the human spear point of the GOP regional onslaught in the Trump era (and former co-state director of the Trump reelection campaign, along with Pennacchio). Scion of a proud family legal tradition, the well-educated and grounded Testa doesn't back down from a fight, in fact, welcomes them. In this safety-conscious, headgear-wearing era of establishment politics, Testa walks around like a human wild card. A relevant South Jersey Republican? Imagine that!

## 14. PEG SCHAFFER



The Somerset County Democratic chair took over control from the long ruling Republican Party here, and has no apparent design to let go. Herself a warpaint-wearing firebreather (originally from Union County), the chair's brain trust includes the always deft lethal touch under the elegantly urbane exterior Joel Shain (former mayor of Orange), Joe DeMarco (of the old Hudson County vintage, with wins racked in West New York and Bayonne), and Somerset County Administrator Colleen Mawr. Keep an eye on Somerset this season. While LD-16 appears to be more properly the Frankenstein monster of Kevin McCabe, Somerset owns a piece of it, too.

## 15. JACCI VIGILANTE



The Gloucester County GOP chair faces a true test this year, as she attempts to maintain the gains won by her party with the 2021 displacement of state Senator Steve Sweeney, supplanted by Vigilante ally state Senator Ed Durr. The incumbent Republican's folk hero status makes him a tough out this year, even against former Assemblyman John Burzichelli (D-3). If Durr (and his assembly team) can gut it out and hold onto the advantages secured in the Trump era, watch Vigilante continue to consolidate influence in the party.

## 16. JAMES BEACH



The remnants of the once proud Camden County Democratic Organization have virtually withered down to the size of that countywide domain overseen by the Camden County Democratic chair, who doubles as the 6th District state senator. A good guy, Beach stands as a testament to what state Senator Brian Stack once described as South Jersey's predilection for high quality, low drama occupants of elected office.



## 17. DAVE BROWN



LD-11 might just be the most consequential legislative battleground contest of the season, as Brown's ally, state Senator Vin Gopal (D-11), tries to stay alive amid tough, lame duck atmospherics for the New Jersey Democratic Party. Businessman Steve Dnistrian wants to relieve Gopal of the seat, as Brown – the veteran chair of the Monmouth County Democratic Committee – stakes his political career on Gopal's reelection. You like New Jersey politics? This is the race you want to watch.

## 18. DOUG STEINHARDT



The Warren County GOP Chairman parlayed strong and longtime establishment ties in both parties into apportionment commission dealmaking resulted in him becoming the state senator from the 23rd District. A former brief candidate for governor, Steinhardt could resurface at some point in a statewide capacity with movement conservative credentials to back up his considerable inside game.

## 19. MIKE DONOHUE



The Cape May GOP chairman (a former judge) controls his county, and has a strong (and long) history of relationship-building to make him a legitimate player in any discussion of Republican Party persuasion.

## 20. GABE PLUMER



Don't forget Hunterdon County Republicans. As Hunterdon goes, so goes the country, at least when it comes to the Republican Party.

## 21. DON PURDY



Successor to the distinguished Keith Davis, the Atlantic County GOP chairman appears to want to broaden his platform, as he is getting involved in a lot of races, including the much-watched LD-4 contest, where Republicans look to rack a win for the seat occupied by retiring state Senator Fred Madden (D-4).



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## 22. JACK ZISA



A veteran player of the game, the Bergen County GOP should not be counted out, despite that unmistakable gurgling sound in the vicinity of the North Jersey GOP. Trump won't be around forever. Neither the specter of Trump. Those sparse-looking rooms could become suddenly become the springboards for future gains.

## 23. JOE LABARBERA



The Sussex County GOP chair had a breakout year, at least in terms of injecting some high-octane political entertainment into a somewhat otherwise pretty moribund general election cycle. After his committee commissioned a cartoon highlighting a key issue for the GOP base, namely parental control, with the tag line, "No Family is Safe from Phil Murphy's Sex Ed Mandates," Republicans appeared to have a leg up on messaging in a low-turnout year.



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## 24. MIKE SULEIMAN



He doesn't control the commissioner's board. He probably wasn't thrilled when Atlantic County Mayor Marty Small backed Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop for governor. But Suleiman gets involved and does not allow contests to pass without affixing the influence of his own fingerprints. Even after all these years, the millennial player remains a talented up-and-comer.

## 25. ARLENE QUINONES-PEREZ



The establishment's behind-the-scenes chop-down of Tom Malinowski hardly won the hearts and minds of rural and suburban anti-establishment Democrats who thought the *Star Trek*-like presence of a D.C.-beamed-down Malinowski honored the Central Jersey district. If he wasn't relatable, he was at least intellectual, while his successor, Tom Kean, Jr., is neither intellectual nor relatable. What does any of this have to do with the chair of the Hunterdon County Democratic Party? For those paying attention (or who care) she's both intellectual and relatable.



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