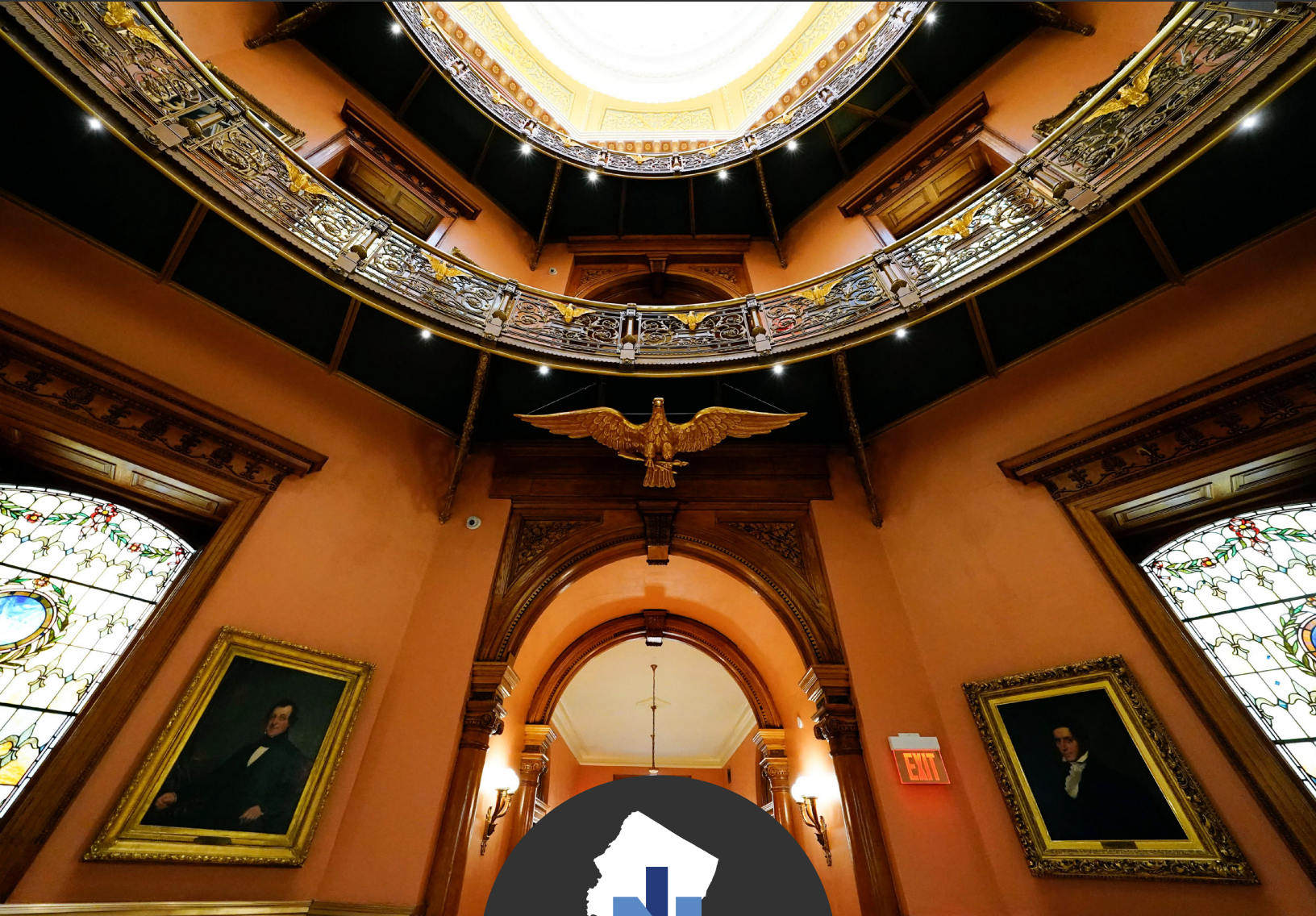
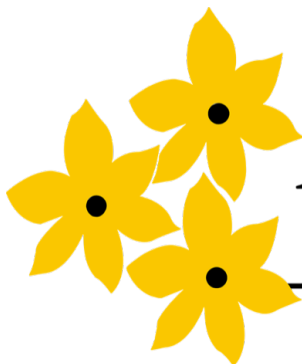


INSIDERNJ.COM

THE NOV. 7TH GENERAL ELECTION



SPECIAL EDITION



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FOUNDATION

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INSIDERNJ SPECIAL EDITION: THE NOV. 7TH GENERAL ELECTION

By Max Pizarro

InsiderNJ slumped on a stool in a Jersey watering hole watching the traffic snarled in the miniature, dysfunctional downtown, observing the insistence of New Jerseyans to simultaneously occupy oversized automobiles on under-sized streets.

“This cycle’s been a nightmare,” the Democratic Party source on the other side of the table admitted, referring to the machinations connected to the Nov. 7th general election.

Really?

To the naked eye, it hasn’t looked like much.

It’s looked a little like the ultimate oversimplification of existence, as Democrats hammer Republicans with abortion and Republicans hammer Democrats with parental notification, details be damned.

Not that politics has to be deep necessarily, but the cycle feels like calculated reductionism, an intentional curtailment to preserve only that segment of the voting population impassioned by either abortion or schools.

“I get it,” said the source, “But under the surface it’s contained a lot of drama.”

Ah, interesting.

Here sat a New Jersey political insider

actually acknowledging the world beyond that tiny cocoon of messaging dominating the cycle's legislative contests.

He recognizes the essential complexity of things, and the potential interference of the following: the Democrats' passage of a budget roughly \$20 billion more than the last budget submitted by Governor Chris Christie in 2017; the Republicans' failure to choose a speaker for the U.S. House of Representatives and the party's ongoing apparent fear of both Fox News and former President Donald J. Trump; the meltdown into gold bar absurdity of U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ); and the developing war in the Middle East, between Israel and Hamas; not to mention the fast-accelerating 2024 presidential contest and the impact thereon of Trump and incumbent President Joe Biden.

World events, the source, admitted, have played havoc with polling.

Democrats looked bad, and then they started hitting back with pro-choice ads.

Then they looked good.

Then Menendez imploded.

Then they looked bad.

Then they went negative.

Then they looked good.

Or at least stabilized.



Assembly Republican Leader John DiMaio (R-23) raged against Democrats' insistence on dumbing the battleground contests down to abortion, as if the state can do more to inoculate itself against the U.S. Supreme Court's revocation of Roe V. Wade. The state in response to the Supreme Court's Dodd Decision already enacted stronger abortion protections – some of the strongest in the country.

“It's reprehensible, and dishonest,” DiMaio said earlier this month at a GOP candidates' forum sponsored by the Hunterdon Federation of Republican Women, referring

to the Democrats' one note abortion samba. Polls show most people didn't want Roe v. Wade overturned, even in heartland states, so Dems only too happily want to keep it front and center, much to the Republicans' chagrin.

But the GOP has relished its own opportunity to keep things not just simple, but, just like their pals the Democrats, excruciatingly simplistic.

Originating in Sussex County, a cartoon commissioned by the Republican organization there shows Gov. Phil Murphy wrenching children away from their parents, with the tagline, “No family is safe from Phil Murphy's sex education mandates.” The cartoon references the state's opinion that schools do not have to notify their parents of gender identity.

This public poll by Fairleigh Dickinson University spells out what Dems and the GOP have known for weeks behind the scenes:

“While New Jersey residents favor Democratic over Republican candidates in the upcoming race for the state legislature, Republican attacks based on parental control of schools cut into those margins substantially, potentially putting Democratic control of the General

Assembly at risk. According to the latest results from the FDU Poll, asking residents about the parental control issue makes them six points more likely to say that they'll support the Republican candidate in the upcoming election in their district, and nine points less likely to support the Democratic candidate.

"Republican candidates are using these attacks because they work," said Dan Cassino, a professor of Government and Politics at FDU, and the director of the poll. "If voters are thinking about parental control of schools when they go to the ballot box, Democrats are in real trouble."

"In November, all 80 seats in the New Jersey General Assembly and the 40 seats in the State Senate will be up for election. In the 2021 elections, Republicans gained six seats in the General Assembly, and even though that ballot also featured a gubernatorial election, only 40 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. In the 2019 race, the last time an election was headlined by state legislative elections, turnout was just 27 percent.

"Overall, 37 percent of NJ residents who say that they're likely to vote in the upcoming election (or already have cast a ballot) say that they'll vote for the Democratic can-

didate in their district, while 29 percent say that they'll vote for the Republican, and the remainder (27 percent) aren't sure."

Consider this context from North-Jersey.com:

"A judge in Morris County has blocked the Hanover Township school district from implementing a disputed policy that would require the district to notify parents of certain student behavior, because the policy could expose LGBTQ+ students against their will.

"The policy and similar ones adopted by several other New Jersey school districts are at the center of a legal battle between the state attorney general and those districts over the rights of transgender students.

"Superior Court Judge Stuart Minkowitz granted Attorney General Matt Platkin's request for a temporary injunction Friday. Platkin's office released a statement saying it was 'pleased' with Minkowitz's ruling and assuring districts that it "will never seek a 'ban' on parental notification.

"We are pleased the Superior Court has again prohibited the parental notification policies enacted by the Hanover Board of Education in May 2023 and June 2023 from

taking effect while the case challenging these policies is ongoing," the Attorney General's Office said. What pleases the AG's Office doesn't necessarily please Democratic incumbents in legislative battlegrounds.

They're jittery.

But the damage sustained by the GOP throughout the speaker debacle somewhat heartens them as New Jersey heads into the vortex of the Nov. 7th election.

With a 25-15, edge in the Senate and 46-34 advantage in the Assembly, Democrats want to play hard defense in six battleground districts.

As for Menendez, that sitting senator reduced to rubble by the latest federal indictment, the GOP appears less than totally animated by the prospect of attacking him, probably because a certain former president who controls their party faces his own battery of indictments.

Even Democrats, of all people, assume moral authority in that universe in which Republicans allow Trump, not only to persist, but to remain the organizing principle of their party. Bottom line: as long as Trump continues as the GOP standard bearer, Republicans don't really know how to handle a supposedly Democratic Party headache like Menendez other than to offer no comment or, like the ever affa-

bly absent U.S. Rep. Tom Kean, Jr. (R-7), simply remain underground.

If any invocation of Menendez merely re-dredges Trump as a campaign issue, the GOP seems satisfied to return to parental notification, just as Trump as an issue for Democrats reanimates the specter of Menendez, making abortion the easier centralizing subject.

With a 25-15, edge in the Senate and 46-34 advantage in the Assembly, Democrats want to play hard defense in six battleground districts where the GOP reckons to cut their majority tormentors down to size.

The latest spending totals assessed by the state Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) tell the story of where the two parties concentrate their resources:

District	Spent	Indie Groups	Cash-on-hand	Total
11	\$ 3,944,626	\$1,675,915	\$ 941,276	\$ 6,561,817
16	\$ 2,374,051	\$1,539,748	\$ 298,508	\$ 4,212,308
4	\$ 1,530,068	\$1,086,394	\$ 414,192	\$ 3,030,653
38	\$ 2,161,747	\$ 206,298	\$ 686,195	\$ 3,054,240
14	\$ 551,325	\$ 183	\$ 1,001,065	\$ 1,552,573
3	\$ 512,828	\$ 82,573	\$ 905,441	\$ 1,500,842
2	\$ 787,865	\$ 147,170	\$ 556,911	\$ 1,491,946
8	\$ 443,159	\$ 428,495	\$ 238,062	\$ 1,109,716
Subtotal	\$12,305,669	\$5,166,776	\$ 5,041,650	\$22,514,095

We'll dig into those down below.

Suffice to say, both parties continue to engage in some head-faking in order to fool their rivals away from those districts where they plan to focus their main attention in the closing days of the 2023 legislative contests.

In the interim, let's take a few moments to consider some of those big, overarching dynamics in this cycle that give party organization pollsters fits.



MONMOUTH COUNTY

CONDADO DE MONMOUTH

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ESTA URNA DE BOLETAS ELECTORALES CIERRA EL DÍA DE LAS ELECCIONES A LAS 8:00 P.M.

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OFFICIAL ELECTION BALLOT DROP BOX



BIDEN V. TRUMP



If you ever wanted to make an argument for the static, corroded quality of national politics, you need only mention the apparent likelihood of a 2024 rematch between President Joe Biden and former President Donald J. Trump.

Consider a poll furnished in October by Monmouth University, in which “three-quarters (76%) of American voters agree that Biden is too old to effectively serve another term as president. Just under half

(48%) say the same about Trump. In fact, 55% of voters *strongly agree* with this assessment of Biden’s age while 26% *strongly agree* with the same statement about Trump. As may be expected, there are partisan differences in these results, with Republicans (23%) being much less likely than other voters to think Trump is too old and Democrats being less likely – although still a 56% majority – to say Biden is too old. There are no sizable differences by age within each party on these views.”

“These two men were born only three and a half years apart, but public perceptions of their age are wildly different. This is certainly one of the reasons, but probably not the only reason, why there is little voter enthusiasm for seeing a rematch of 2020 except among partisan loyalists,” said Patrick Murray, director of the independent Monmouth University Polling Institute.

The apparently inexorable 2024 rematch between Trump and Biden feeds the ongoing cynicism about the system, and about the state of American politics and government. A legislative election year with no statewide office on the ballot, 2023 in and of itself fails to stir a significant voter response.

Consider this from InsiderNJ columnist Jay Lassiter:

If past in prologue, voter turnout should be low according to Micah

Rasmussen who leads the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University.

“In 2019, the last time the state Legislature was at the top of the ticket, turnout was 27%, or 1.6M votes,” Mr. Rasmussen told InsiderNJ. “The time before that, in 2015, turnout was an abysmal 22%, or 1.1M votes. Going back one more cycle to 2011, turnout was 27% or 1.4M votes.”

Any projections for this November’s turnout?

“My best guess is we’ll see just over 1.5 million statewide votes, or about

a quarter of the statewide electorate,” Mr. Rasmussen added.

The coming presidential contest simply further flattens the mood.

We understand that members of Biden’s family, at the very least, face legal troubles, starting with the President’s son, Hunter. Whatever the future holds for Biden, however, as the GOP attempts to substantially link the President with the lobbying largesse of his son and brother, Trump already faces multiple indictments, in part connected to his instigative role in the Jan. 6th 2021 mob stampeding of the U.S. Capitol, and his

alleged attempts to turn the 2020 presidential election, including his alleged strongarming of elected officials in Georgia.



MENENDEZ (AGAIN, BUT WORSE)



The fact that the GOP continues to move forward with support for Trump shows not only the lack of courage among so-called leaders in the party, but also the extent to which the party simply lost its moral compass.

Democrats have their own indicted politician to worry about, namely senior U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ), who allegedly worked as a foreign agent for Egypt as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in exchange for payment, including gold bars, according to federal charges. But

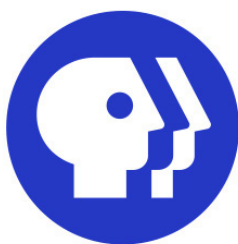
unlike Republicans unable to unstick themselves from Trump, key Democrats in New Jersey almost immediately withdrew support from Menendez, calling on him to resign, even as he digs in, refusing to give up his senate seat.

Barring a miraculous mistake by the prosecution, Menendez will not have the backing of the same party machines that supported him from the beginning of his career and in 2018, following a jury deciding not to move forward with a guilty verdict in another corruption case.

The end result puts the U.S. Senator in a very alienated position in his party, while Trump – even as an indicted commodity – overwhelmingly overshadows the other Republican candidates for president.

Still, even though Democrats showed no tolerance for Menendez this time, will the accumulation of the senator's alleged bad behaviors and the shocking nature of his case settle like a plague on the already Frank Hague-wretched New Jersey Democratic Party?



NJ  **PBS**

REPUBLICAN GOVERNANCE NIGHTMARES

You'd think it might.

Democrats are in charge in New Jersey and they empowered Menendez, whose corruption proclivities – if the feds charges stick – go far beyond even the passable stench emitted by some of the supposedly “good guys” among New Jersey Dems.

But if Trump standing trial for treason doesn't utterly bury the GOP brand, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives haplessly trying – and repeatedly failing – to elect a Speaker – appear hellbent on making the party of Lincoln look even worse.

InsiderNJ columnist Carl Golden writes:

As the Republican effort to select a Speaker of the House stumbles and staggers ineffectually into its third week, it has deteriorated from drama into farce.

Embarrassing is no longer an adequate descriptive for the events since Oct. 4 when California Congressman



Kevin McCarthy was deposed by a small band of ideological misfits, throwing the House into a paralyzing never-never land at a time when the Mideast is in flames and the Federal government is less than a month away from running out of money to function.

Embarrassment has been replaced by disgrace and — if failure to resolve the impasse continues — the Republican House majority will forfeit its right to lead.

So much for an advantage Republicans hoped to muster in New Jersey for this legislative election cycle on the strength of Menendez imploding, state budgeting that billowed by \$20

billion since Chris Christie left office, and anemic Biden polling numbers surely contributing to a deteriorating Democratic Party brand.

Both parties look bad, and for the GOP in New Jersey, where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans by a million, that's not good. As long as the GOP continues to fall over itself in Washington, U.S. Rep. Tom Kean (R-7) – whose district overlaps Central Jersey's LD-16 – feels the impact here, where the incredible shrinking congressman, who runs from the press, and persists with the priority of public invisibility, just looks like one more Republican mishap.



**Agudath Israel
of America**
New Jersey Office

ARMAGEDDON IN THE MIDDLE EAST

After issuing a press release condemning Hamas' murder of 1300 Israelis, Governor Phil Murphy jumped aboard a jet to Japan, leaving Lieutenant Governor Tahesha Way here to sort out the nightmarish New Jersey politics of Israel, the Palestinians, and New Jersey.

The front office gave Way a message of peace to carry to a temple in Hillsborough, where attendees hardly craved a message of olive branch equanimity. Assemblyman Roy Freiman (D-16), a member of Temple Beth-El, politely mentioned Way's speech, then promptly proceeded to call for the eradication from planet earth of Hamas.

"The worst loss [of Jewish life] since the Holocaust," he said. "In 1948, with the establishment of Israel, we as Jews said this was going to be

our point where we affirm, 'Never again.' But antisemitism did not go away. Hatred is out there. This is different. This is pure evil. We cannot let pure evil exist. We know what happens and what this will lead to."



In the aftermath of the infamous Oct. 7th attacks, Trump criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Via the Associated Press on Oct. 12th:

Trump at a rally Wednesday night said Netanyahu "let us down" just before the U.S. killed top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in 2020. He also said Israeli leaders needed to "step up their game" and referred to Hezbollah, the group Israel fears may launch a large-scale attack from the country's north, as "very smart." In an interview that aired Thursday, he added to his criticism, saying Netanyahu "was not prepared" for the deadly weekend incursion from Gaza.

By contrast, Biden looked solid in his response to the crisis, going to Israel to stand with Netanyahu, condemning Hamas, and working to establish humanitarian relief for Gaza.

He looked more engaged governmentally than the GOP, especially when you consider the Republicans' inability to plant one of their own on the speaker's chair, and the fact that Trump's hand-picked candidate, U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), imploded.

But Biden had other problems, specifically on the political front.

Consider this from Slate:

A recent Quinnipiac poll underscores Biden's disastrous standing with the youth vote. The president's favorability rating has cratered out at an almost-unbelievable 25 percent among registered voters under 35 years old. A few weeks prior, a Washington Post-ABC poll had Trump winning voters under 35

by 20 points. (The Post's story notes that the poll differs from others taken recently, and that it may be an outlier. It's not the only recent presidential poll that's made publishers raise an eyebrow.)

That same Quinnipiac poll found that 51 percent of voters under 35 years old say they disapprove of the United States sending weapons and military support to Israel—a much higher figure than the 28 percent of Americans who oppose such a policy. Only 21 percent of voters under 35 say they approve of Biden's Israel policy; 42 percent of voters across all age brackets approve.

The Democrats and Republicans running for state office would continue to highlight their

preferred issues for this projected low turnout cycle, respectively choice and parental notification. At the local level, candidates would try to connect with local issues, most commonly taxes.

The aforementioned issues – dramatic and jagged across party lines – contributed new variables to the atmosphere as candidates headed toward the closing days of the season.

Perhaps none would tip the pendulum one way or the other.

But in a cycle overladen with the usual deadness of complacency and voter disengagement from the process, no one could convincingly make a case for boredom as an overarching 2023 theme.

ACLU
New Jersey



**GENOVA
BURNS**

THE CONTESTS TO WATCH:

Again, the GOP needs six seats to take over the state senate, and six sweeps would simultaneously depose Democrats in the Assembly and establish Republican control of the Statehouse.

Here's where the action is right now:



LD-3

More than any of the other recent gashes suffered by the South Jersey Democratic Party's machine, Republican Ed Durr's shocking steamrolling of Steve Sweeney in 2021 truly underscored the shriveling up of an empire.

That word "empire" has a little context, as the late Nick Acocella of Politifact referred to Sweeney's seemingly endless (it ended up being eleven years) tenure as "the imperial senate presidency."

To the insular two-party establishment, Sweeney looked invincible.

But to Durr, a nonunion truck driver, Sweeney looked like a highly vulnerable emblem of a dried-up, insular cocoon.

Durr ran over him.

Now, two years later, as Sweeney continues to tramp around the state amid the lazy, chattering accompaniment of how he still might run for governor, his old slate mate, former Assemblyman John Burzichelli, wants to displace Durr.

Here, like elsewhere, the former assemblyman seeks traction with the Democrats' favorite issue.

InsiderNJ columnist Fred Snowflack went to LD-3.

Durr says he's not sure why Dems keep raising the abortion issue. Of course, he really does know why – it's good politics.

The senator's overall point is that abortion rights in New Jersey have been codified into state law. So, isn't the issue over? Democrats say that law can change if Republicans win total control of the state.

More broadly, he says:

"I've never avoided the fact I am pro-life. I never denied that."

Is that the only issue in LD-3?

Well, no.

But this race, as others here, will come down to turnout, and Durr and the GOP shouldn't forget that Burzichelli has a long history of organizing successful campaigns and elections. If Durr simply caught Sweeney off guard two years ago, Burzichelli will exploit any reelection complacency by the Republican incumbent. Then again, South Jersey has become a

deeper red in the Trump era even as the rest of the state turned more radiantly blue.

In a kind of last stand opportunity given the trajectory of elections over the course of the last five years, South Jersey Democrats hope to reanimate their organization here out of those dusty remnants of LD-3 roadkill.



LD-4

If the trend in South Jersey has favored the GOP, look for a pickup here in a district long served by retired cop state Senator Fred Madden (D-4). Republican challenger Christopher Del Borello looks like the most obvious winner on the Democrats’ checkerboard.

Consider this: longtime South Jersey Democratic Party tough guy

George Norcross III told Politico’s Dustin Raciopi that he had retired from politics, essentially extracting himself from culpability in the event that Del Borello runs over Assemblyman Paul Moriarty (D-4).

On paper, that makes it more likely that Moriarty loses.

Madden was one of the older generation allies, a frontline Norcross torchbearer.

The assemblyman is more of a human shield, established as a way of making South Jersey Democrats seem more than merely an old-boys cult. In a real firefight, the question at the outset was whether or not the organization would go all-in for their new senate candidate. InsiderNJ occupied a panel in Atlantic City in the lead up to the election, and most experts saw Moriarty as the rearview mirror image of an essentially toothless regional organization.

But spending in the district tells another story, as Democrats demonstrate their intent to compete hard for the seat left behind by Madden. The 4th District to date commands the third highest spending totals of all

this year’s battleground districts. That bodes well for Moriarty in a competitive district, where the trend lines of the past years will run into legitimate organizational will, with its back not just against the wall, but through the wall.

That puts Moriarty in the game, even if Democrats outside South Jersey don’t want to see their regional rival regain power. Failure to provide check and balance go along get along career politician he is.



LD-11

When Democrat Vin Gopal defeated respected incumbent state Senator Jen Beck in 2017, he had at his back the considerable winds of Chris Christie’s dreadful departing job approval ratings.

But it was much more than merely timing.

A former county party chairman, Gopal undertook some significant fights at his own peril, including his vigorous support for 2013 party nominee Barbara Buono while most of his fellow Democrats hid underground rather than raise the ire of former prosecutor Christie. He also laid the groundwork for his senate run by helping to clear Beck's assembly allies of out of office in favor of his own Democratic candidates.

*Gopal is often
nowhere to be seen.
Our heroes in those
veterans homes deserved
better. And our
communities deserve
better than Gopal's
failed leadership*

Genteel horse country turned almost overnight into a heaping mosaic of McMansion monstrosities, Monmouth County fronted favorite son Bruce Springsteen as grease monkey street cred, even as it plunged into Wall Street bedroom commuter overdrive. Neighbors submerged themselves in Bruce's backbeat, while ignoring the lyrics.

In any event, Gopal defeated the redoubtable Beck less on the strength of Phil Murphy's top of the ticket liberal messaging and more on the strength of his own, deep political spade work.

Now, seven years later, as Murphy gallops ambitiously around the country (kind of like Christie, back in the lead up to 2016), and the world (he just returned from Japan, after all) while nursing a lame duck limp in New Jersey, Gopal seeks to prove that all that work he did, and continues to do on the political front, will hold up under the latest GOP onslaught to reclaim the seat.

Gopal's Republican challenger, businessman Steve Dnistrian, wants to puncture the incumbent Democrat in part by sinking him with absentee landlord Murphy. Amid the usual maelstrom of partisanship, the challenger seemed to find a particularly hair-raising target when he cited the DOJ report on the state's negligence of veterans' nursing homes.

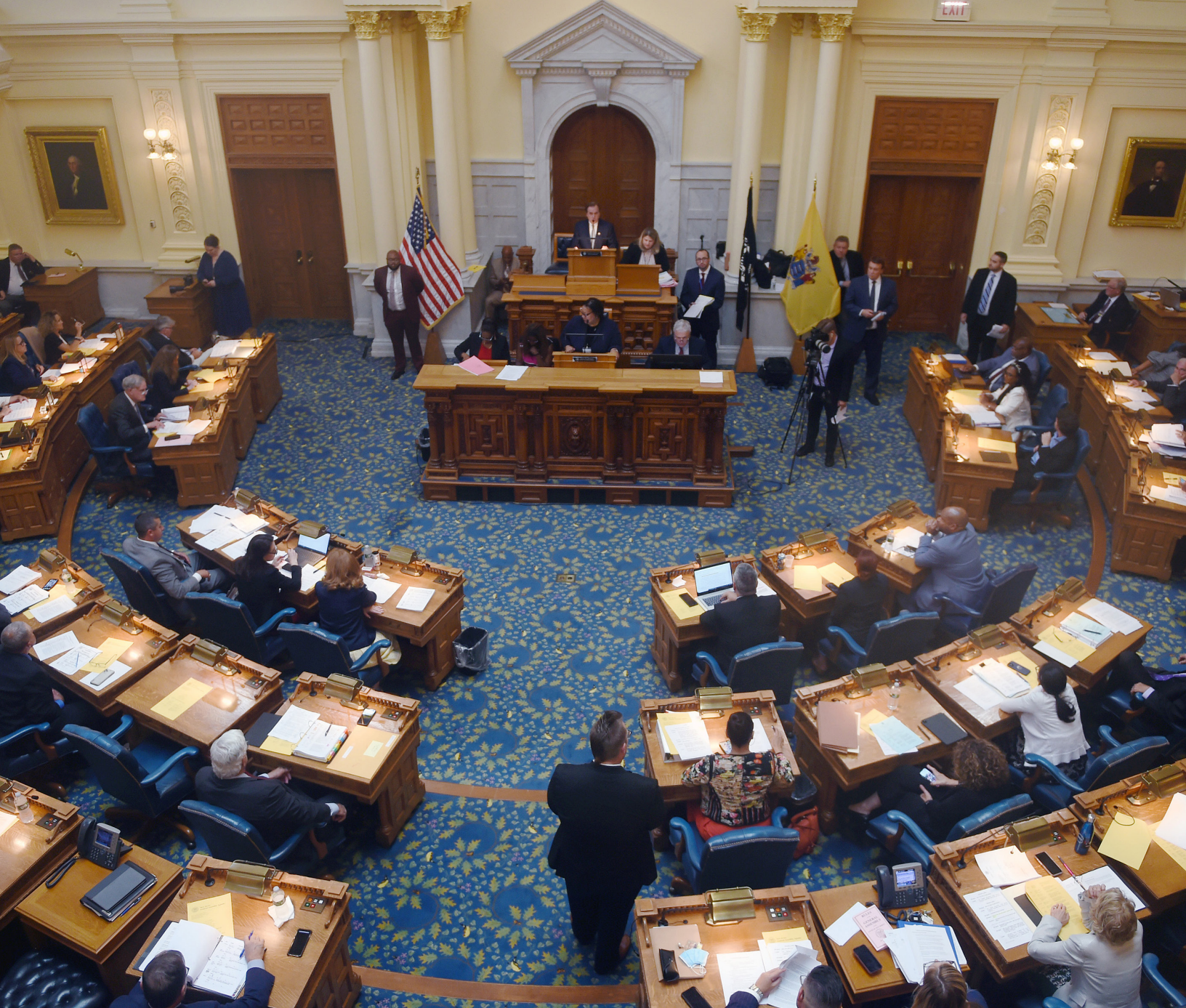
Specifically, the 43 page report found "failures at the homes in Menlo Park and Paramus, citing poor communication and a lack of staff competency that let the

virus spread "virtually unchecked throughout the facilities" and "that even after the U.S. Veterans Affairs Department arrived in New Jersey to help in April 2020, the state Military and Veterans Affairs Department failed to implement their recommendations and otherwise reform infection control."

Said Dnistrian:

"As Chairman of the Senate Military and Veteran's Affairs, Gopal had the power to investigate the state's failings. But as advocates called for an investigation, and the media revealed how Governor Murphy's administration failed our heroes – Gopal did nothing. While a bipartisan group of Senators proposed legislation that would upgrade veterans homes to prevent this tragedy from happening again, Gopal sat out that fight. ...Gopal talks a good game – but when we need leaders, willing to challenge the political powers that be in Trenton – Gopal is often nowhere to be seen. Our heroes in those veterans homes deserved better. And our communities deserve better than Gopal's failed leadership."

Gopal offered the following:



CAUCUS

EDUCATIONAL CORPORATION

“The findings in this report disgust me. United States Veterans and their families have earned our respect through their dedication and service to our country and the very least they deserve, and should expect, are livable, safe conditions. One of the most disturbing aspects contained within this report is that the Legislature appears to have been ignored when we repeatedly called for an implementation of new guidelines and a comprehensive review and revision of best practices. That it took an investigation by the Department of Justice to force critical change is almost unfathomable. It is clear that immediate and decisive action needs to be taken to fix this unacceptable situation. God Bless our Veterans and their families.”

The social issues getting bounced like high-powered ping pong balls from one side to the other had their own specific base-resonance. But Dnistrian hoped the veterans’ neglect issue, coupled with Murphy fatigue, would break through with independent voters and sink Gopal into the same oblivion that ultimately claimed Beck.

It would come down, or so the GOP hopped in a low turnout, shoulders-shrugging year without

Murphy, incidentally, occupying the top of the ticket, to whether Gopal – the ultimate political organizer as legislator – had done enough to protect himself against the Republicans’ counterattack.

But Gopal had a wild card.

All Democrats did, in fact.

It was called “abortion.”

In his first ad of the season, Gopal and his team branded his Republican challengers as human kindling wood in the GOP bonfire to burn down Roe v. Wade.

If Democrats had done a lot in the last budget cycle, beefing a state budget from \$34 billion, when Chris Christie first occupied office, to \$54 billion, they didn’t want to get crazy when it came to details.

Issues?

Abortion was the issue.

So said Gopal, and so said his colleague, state Senator Andrew Zwicker (D-16).

Proving he could do more than merely repeat the party mantra, Gopal showed a willingness too to

go negative on Dnistrian.

He had the money and the polling showed a tight race, so why not?

With a month out, Democrats did not appear as concerned about LD-11, mostly on the strength of Gopal’s work rate, organizational record, and name ID. Likely a future candidate for statewide office, the Democratic senator has spent considerable time making himself known to voters.



LD-16

Republicans were outraged.

Democrats were more outraged.

The underlying theme of former GOP Congressman Mike Pappas’ campaign against incumbent Democratic Senator Andrew Zwicker seems to be that Democrats

in New Jersey – borrowing the preferred populist currency of these illiterate times – suck, and any thinking person truly hates them.

On the Democrats' side, the incumbents – not unlike Gopal in LD-11 – have grabbed an issue they think will connect in this leafy suburban district, namely a woman's right to choose.

Donald Trump's Supreme Court rolled back *Roe v. Wade*, and if Republicans take over the Statehouse, women – and their rallies – can expect more of the same, or so argues the Zwicker ticket.

Riding an advantage of 18k more registered Democrats than Republicans in District 16, the Zwicker Team so far has run three ads in this battleground, and all three ads highlight choice, in what they evidently identify as the GOP's soft underbelly.

Pappas, for his part, has seemed mostly pinned down on the fundraising front, highlighting events with Sean Spicer (former Trump press secretary) and U.S. Rep. Tom Kean (R-7), and standing down from a League of

Women Voters debate, rather than mix it up too much on the policy front.

Trying to steer the conversation to economics and the Democratic majority's maintenance of state government, while throwing in parental notification as the GOP's issue du jour, Pappas and his running mates, Ross Traphagen and Grace Zhang, offered the following comment: "Senator Zwicker, Assemblyman Freiman and Michelle Drulis continue to lose credibility with voters and disrespect their intelligence with outright lies. The truth is, they have all enabled and supported massive tax hikes that hit our bank accounts and spending cuts to our children's education. That is their real record and that is why they must lie to voters for any hope of being reelected."

But if Republicans gain seats in the Statehouse they may confirm statewide what a Republican Supreme Court already affirmed at the federal level: the trampling of a woman's right to choose, or so argue Zwicker and company.

LD-38

State Senator Joe Lagana (D-38)

looks concerned.

Remember, the GOP always salivates in the vicinity of this district, and local Republican gains in Paramus make this look like a key opportunity for a pickup by the minority party.

Bergen-Record columnist Charles Stile told a roomful of constitutional officers in Atlantic City that Lagana is doing his best to distance himself from Governor Murphy.

Micheline B. Attieh, a Lebanese immigrant, wants to remind voters of the connection.



LD-14

Longtime incumbent state Senator Linda Greenstein (D-14) wants to fend off Republican challenger Patricia "Pat" Johnson in this Mercer-Middlesex battleground district, where sources describe the polling as close.

Middlesex v. South Jersey

Since South Jersey went under, Middlesex became the Central Jersey equivalent, with Middlesex County Democratic Committee Chairman Kevin McCabe picking up where George Norcross left off, as the eagle-hooded cane-carrying party boss of distinction.

South Jersey wants to claw its way back into the fray with wins or a win in LD-3 or LD-4.

Middlesex wants to secure LD-14, LD-11, and LD-16.

Somewhat rudderless since Christie and certainly jagged and confused in the Trump era, Republicans lack a clear organizational edge

in all of these districts. Middlesex Democrats, by sharp contrast, with real ties to Gopal, Zwicker, and Greenstein, have a reason to win those seats, thereby preserving their statewide platform of political influence.

Maybe there is a red wave out there.

It's possible.

Look what happened in 2021.

It snuck up and dealt serious damage to the Democrats, on a night that included the dethroning of Senate President Sweeney.

It could happen again.

But too many variables make the GOP look less than robust, and

with Middlesex and South Jersey very motivated in a downbeat cycle, one can argue that Middlesex versus South Jersey Democrats represents the more compelling – and significant – contest than Democrats versus Republicans statewide.

If South Jersey and Middlesex both absorb losses, Democratic State Party Chairman LeRoy Jones (who simultaneously serves as chair of the Essex Democratic Party) will have to rebuild out of the north, which will constitute that natural starting point for his party to regain an edge heading into a presidential election year and, even more importantly given how close Ciattarelli came in 2021, two years removed from the next gubernatorial cycle.



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