

Welcome to the

2026

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InsiderNJ

Retrospective



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InsiderNJ is a nonpartisan website dedicated to political news in the state of New Jersey.

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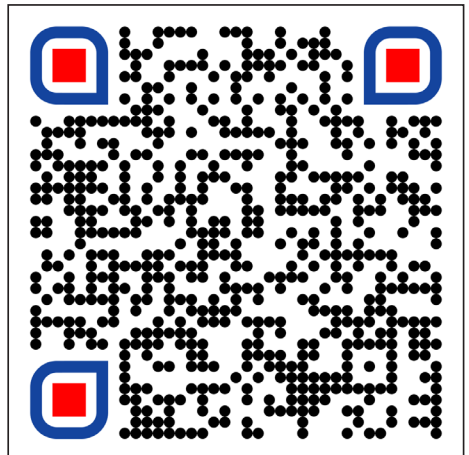
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INTRODUCTION

As we bid farewell to a remarkable year in New Jersey politics, please find in the following pages InsiderNJ's recollection of the key currents of 2025, most of them naturally pertaining to the governor's race.

As with any great American political contest, we experienced again the thrill of our democratic republic at its core, with nearly 3.6 million New Jerseyans (or 54% of registered NJ voters) participating in this year's gubernatorial and legislative races. That's the most participation in a non-presidential election year in this millennium, and a healthy sign amid – to put it mildly – systemic wear and tear.

In addition, the state Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) reported that New Jersey gubernatorial candidates and Independent Expenditure-Only Filers (IEFs) spent over \$259 million on this year's primary and general elections. "In nominal dollars, New Jersey's spending total was the fourth largest amount of dollars ever spent during a gubernatorial election year nationally and ranked sixth when past totals were converted to 2025 dollars to reflect inflation's impact," according to ELEC.

New Jersey voters made a definite statement this year about the current trajectory of the



country under the leadership of President Donald J. Trump, awarding a significant 57-43% victory to Democrat Mikie Sherrill over (Trump-backed) Republican Jack Ciattarelli.

Whatever the larger implications of their candidacies, we liked covering the contest between Sherrill and Ciattarelli, strong and transparent candidates, who brought substance and guts to the public square. We also enjoyed looking back on the year as we tried to iden-

tify what it all means for next year and beyond. Be sure to keep watch for our 2026 Year-in-Advance, another special issue, which will appear on InsiderNJ's website in the coming days.

At the end of this edition unfortunately you will find a list of some of the people in New Jersey politics who died this year. Among them you will not see the name of Matthew Arco. We wish to make special mention of here, as he was a col-

league and a friend, and highly prized in the New Jersey press corps for his integrity, professionalism, good humor, and public spirit.

Darryl Isherwood, former editor of PolitickerNJ, on May 1st submitted an appreciation of Mr. Arco, reflecting on 2011, and the first time we met this bright young star when he arrived in Trenton.

“He was young – mid 20s – but damn he was hungry,” Isherwood wrote. “There was a delay in hiring him as we cleared some logjam or other and he reached out and firmly told me that he REALLY wanted the

job. I told him be patient and I would get it through but he let me know he was ready to go. Immediately. I called my boss and had a tense conversation, but won out in the end. Matt was at work two weeks later.

“He worked hard and grew with the role and over time became an invaluable member of the small team that hung out in the tiny statehouse office we affectionately dubbed the clown car because of our penchant for jamming four reporters into a converted storage closet. Matt took quickly to our mission and we’d revel in beating our larger competitors to a story even if it was only by a few minutes. The

camaraderie and pride in being the underdog that Matt, Max Pizarro, Tim Carroll and I developed in that tiny office were extremely rare and Matt’s competitive drive was a huge part of it.”

That is well said of this special man, this special professional and friend, who gave much to our beloved state, who left us too soon, who is dearly missed, but who is present wherever public servant Americans vitally and fearlessly pursue the truth.

Goodbye, Matt. Goodbye 2025.

Thanks for the memories.





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THE 2025 CONTEST FOR GOVERNOR: SEISMIC ANTAGONISM AND BACKYARD ANTICS

I THE DEMOCRATS

The 2024 return to the White House of convicted felon Donald J. Trump mostly produced another round of barstool rejoicing among segments of the New Jersey Democratic Party establishment. Their reasoning barely departed from the same high fiving accompanying past GOP wins nationally, for even the dimmest of political bulbs knows that when a Republican wins the presidency, the public - in horror - tacks back to the security blanket of the Democratic Party, which nurses a sizable majority here.

But if the same legs kicked up on the ballot box mentality pervaded, a faint shudder of unease also coursed through the frames of fat cats up and down the chilly Atlantic coast. For Trump was not simply any opposition party member, and even the perceived sin of complacency when he writhed at the end of multiple indictments then, might prompt retributive rancor now from the former television personality star turned combat-averse, golf course version of Andrew Jackson. Certainly, Trump would look to New Jersey - that suburban swamp zone of elitism - to saber-skewer a Democrat or two and give Fox News a handful of holy shit headlines in

time for the next election cycle. So, while cocktail Dems here celebrated his victory - "He'll be the gift that keeps on giving," and "we won't have to work hard" against what might have been a rational GOP alternative, like, say, Nikki Haley - they also knew they stood their best chance of keeping the gravy train rolling by keeping their mouths shut and letting the public conclude that the best way of combating Trump would be to elect (and keep electing) Democrats.

Yet, there was another wrinkle coming out of 2024 and into 2025, which put everyone on guard: namely the success of Andy Kim's lawsuit, which re-



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sulted in a judge banishing the bracketing system in the Democratic Primary, thereby diminishing the strength of county party organizations that manipulate the brackets to benefit, not people, but power.

Kim's win sent a message to the party bosses, and it was this: you cannot only rely on having Trump to kick around in the 2025 press releases of legislative underlings, or to not kick around but quietly and safely condemn via media shyness and reliance on the public expressing its frustration with Trump by voting for Trump's opposite.

If you're not careful, or unresponsive to real people, or too comfortable in the folds of nepotism, you might find, Kim suggested, deeper problems in your own backyard – problems deeper even than the radioactive tunnels inhabited by the groundhogs at Trump's Somerset County golf course.

The year began then with the bosses alert to these atmospheric conditions, knowing a misstep could mean an indictment by Trump's justice department, or an ejection from the thrones of power by – of all things – the people. As it happened, a year after Andy Kim – a Burlington County congressman – poked

the bully in the eye by forcing Governor Phil Murphy's wife out of the United States Senate race and claiming – on the strength of his progressive, power-to-the-people-not-the-party-machines messaging – a statewide federal seat, that unholy alliance of party power and people power would go to the polls again to pick a new governor, the successor to two-term Democrat Murphy.



They would do so with the power of the bosses reduced, and the people's primary power enhanced, thereby making it unlikely to see a repeat of Goldman Sachs-all-21-county-bosses-backed Jon Corzine (2005) or Goldman Sachs-all-21-county-bosses-backed Murphy (2017). If another Goldman Sachs white dude got in the race with little public sector experience and an earnest promise to use his financial aptitude to fix the mess in Trenton, that person would likely go nowhere fast. Not in the post-Kim universe. Not in 2025.

The bosses paid heed.

Where to begin?

Well, they figured (and keep in mind, there was not exactly uniformity among the 21 county chairs, not since the public power demise of George Norcross III, South Jersey's signature Democratic Party poohbah) they should start by entertaining someone who was the opposite of themselves, or anyway, the opposite of Trump. So, if perhaps their own tastes ran to playing a round of golf with someone like the Donald, they would – in order to justify their continued existence on the New Jersey political landscape – better placate a ticked off public by supporting someone who would *not* appear comfortable on Trump's golf course. By the same token, if the nibbling political classes had become a technocratic core of COVID concocted creatures cocooned in basements, the bosses would need someone fresher and fitter. If politicians had become stale and static in the service of power, they would need – maybe “hero” was a strong word – but the idea enticed. They would need, more than a mucky muck or a sunken and cynical power-protector, something a little more intrepid, or someone even approaching the status of inspirational figure.

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They would need, in fact, at the core of it, to look closely at someone, a statewide candidate, who indeed, possessed a *public* – not *private* – interest. They would have to find someone who approximated a facsimile of respect for actual people – never easy in the only semi-serious people business of New Jersey politics. They stood a greater chance of convincing a public rocked by the double whammy of Trump and Kim, by furnishing someone with an actual public service *record*.



Names took shape on the landscape. Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop. Newark Mayor Ras Baraka. Former Senate President Steve Sweeney. U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer. New Jersey Education Association President Sean Spiller. U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill. Of all of them, Sherrill emerged early as that candidate most obviously distant from the carpeted comfort zones of merely putrid male

power, and not just because she was a woman. Sherrill had done something in the way of public service that no boss could approach, not really, in the demonstration of love of country expressed as courage. Sherrill had flown the Navy's Sea King helicopter for nine years. It set her apart. This was not someone who clutched a desert or jungle floor in terror for a few months to check a combat box on the political resume. This was a legitimate veteran of real military service. And it jarred tremendously not only with Democratic Party bosses suspended on the meat hooks of public impatience, but – and this was the more critical point – with the colossal grotesqueness of the guy who had just won the White House. The bosses knew if they put up a nondescript dude kind of like themselves who might be caught, in an unguarded moment, complacently putting at a Trump resort – they could backfire out of business.

Kim was watching, after all.

The public watched.

Those party power players mostly concentrated in the populous north saw Sherrill as the best prospect to accomplish two things simultaneously: make them relevant but also

prove they weren't the enemies of the public interest, not really, because they would actually affiliate with a candidate interested in the public.



Add the fact that Sherrill was a proven winner in a battleground district (she had first won her congressional seat in 2018 by driving a longtime Republican out of office and flipping the seat). After all, even with Trump thrashing around like a maniac in the Oval Office and backlash probably inevitable, no party had won a third gubernatorial term going back to when the Beatles played the Hollywood Bowl. So, they would need to thread a very delicate needle.

And – yes – she was a woman.

That wouldn't hurt, a year after Trump had beaten Kamala Harris, who had not received an adequate runway after a malfunctioning Joe Biden (or his



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handlers) had refused to budge. It wouldn't hurt a year removed from Kim – for all his super-charged good government gleam – unceremoniously derailing the candidacy of Tammy Murphy. It wouldn't hurt amid the upsurge of green-lighted countrywide misogyny from lackeys falling over themselves to appease a criminally (literally) misogynist presidency. And no, it wouldn't hurt to make history with the New Jersey Democrats' first woman governor, in part to remove heavy suggestions of a bunch of dudes only semi-secretly running the state like little demonic wizards of Oz



Now, to be fair, some of the other candidates would tantalize the public.

Fulop had a record of running a difficult city, real political chops honed in Hudson County, public service on the resume (he had served as a Marine in

Iraq), a progressive history, strong progressive campaign messaging, and the chutzpah of having bucked the fallen Norcross in a former political lifetime. Same with Baraka, who had done wonders for Newark, even according to some of his detractors, possessed deep progressive convictions – and had a gift for public speaking that went far beyond what most New Jersey audiences grew up with, and reflected the fact that Baraka's father, the late Amiri Baraka, was a real poet. More than that, even, Baraka gave more than the very strong impression that he himself was a poet. If Sherrill presented a new image in New Jersey politics, Baraka alongside the cranky old bosses resembled the Pink Floyd character in *The Wall* when the supercilious teacher discovers a piece of precocious verse at the student's desk. The only difference? Baraka occupied the race not to learn, but to teach, and yes, to preach.

He quickly emerged as a fan favorite.

But if Essex County Democratic Chairman (and statewide Democratic Chairman) LeRoy Jones – who backed the congresswoman from Montclair – suffered the headache of having Baraka run from the biggest city of Sherrill's home

county, Baraka and Fulop had the problem of entangling each other in the party's progressive primary lane.



In addition, and this was critical – if Kim had perhaps cornered that swathe of the Democratic Primary vote seemingly closest in a primary to Fulop and Baraka, he, in fact, had a profile also very close to Sherrill. This was where Sherrill could be a chameleon in the best sense, like Kim. The pair of congresspeople, both defined publicly by public service (Kim came from the Foreign Service sector), came into office at the same time, during the first Trump Administration's mid-term election, both with profiles larger than the sordid dimensions of small-bore organization politics and overly cozy "relationships."



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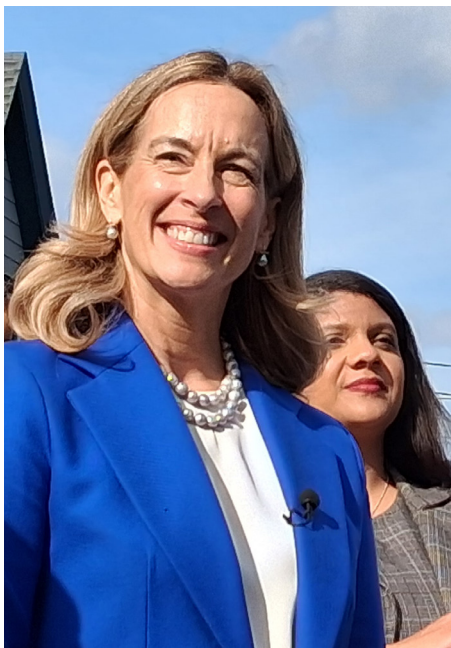
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Ultimately, Sherrill proved bigger than anyone's attempt to affix her to a static cul-de-sac. In a party with a 60-40% female membership on paper, she had suburban women behind her, women tired of having to watch males play footsy while the GOP dismantled *Roe v. Wade*, looked the other way from stampeding U.S. Capitol-desecrating madmen, and reelected the ever fractious (let's be very generous for a change with the adjectives) Trump.

Sherrill won with 286,244 votes or 34.02%, followed by Baraka (174K) and Fulop (135K), the two most robust progressives in the race, who canceled each other out, and the others trailing. Sweeney registered an especially awful showing (7 percent), underscoring Democrats' overall disconnect from building trades labor.



On election night, Sherrill at the podium put an exclamation point on the scope of the contest. Leaning heavily on her public love of history and George Washington, who turned the tide of the war against tyranny with his victory at the Battle of Trenton, "This is not going to be a national race," she said of her coming general election showdown with Trump's endorsed candidate Jack Ciattarelli. "It's going to be an international race."

New Jersey, Sherrill said pointedly, would not be turned over to a Trump "lackey."

But the Democratic Primary nominee for governor would have to tread carefully. If she just bashed Trump and didn't address the problems of real New Jerseyans assailed by obscenely high property taxes, she could run the risk of looking out-of-touch, or too keen to change the topic of conversa-

tion from a state long reeling from self-generated problems.

Trump was everybody's favorite punching bag and with good reason, but he didn't invent New Jersey's affordability crisis. It perhaps wasn't an accident that Trump's corruption roots went back to the state where politicians – most of them Democrats – lavished him with tax abatements to lure the New Yorker down the shore, to invest in casinos.

Sherrill had already proved she didn't give a damn about free tickets and could really only clumsily connect with a culture that might include, say, trying to high five Jerry Jones at a Dallas Cowboys football game, but she also would have to prove to an underserved and tax-strapped public that she was truly more than merely the latest enabler of a party that frequently looked content to facilitate a party-like atmosphere.



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II

THE REPUBLICAN PRIMARY FOR GOVERNOR

It may be painful in retrospect to acknowledge for a proud party with a history here that includes the late Clifford Case and Millicent Fenwick, but the Republican Primary ended when President Donald Trump placed a single fat and uncalled thumb on the scale and endorsed Jack Ciattarelli.

Radio host Bill Spadea had hoped the President would back him on the strength – in part - of his support for Trump’s aggressive immigration enforcement policy. Certainly, the President was never going to back state Senator Jon Bramnick (R-21), who publicly opposed the President.

With all the eloquence of an un-precocious child scribbling with crayons, Trump enthused in a May Tweet:

“Jack Ciattarelli is a terrific America First Candidate running to be the next Governor of a State that I love, NEW JERSEY!

“Jack, who after getting to know and understand MAGA, has gone ALL IN, and is now

100% (PLUS!). He is strongly supported by the most Highly Respected Leaders in New Jersey and, as your next Governor, Jack Ciattarelli will work closely with me and the Trump Administration to advance our America First Agenda. Jack will fight tirelessly to Grow our Economy, Cut Taxes and Regulations, Restore our Economic Power, Help Secure our now VERY Secure (Record Setting!) Southern Border, Stop Migrant Crime, Murderers, and other Criminals from illegally entering our Country, Protect our Great Military/Vets, Advance American Energy DOMINANCE by helping to keep the price of Gasoline, Oil, and all forms of Energy VERY LOW (CHEAP!), and Defend our always under siege Second Amendment, which has not been attacked, amended, or changed while I was President. Also, Jack is the Republican Candidate who is best positioned to STAND TALL against the Radical Left Democrats and, most importantly, ensure a Big Victory in this Very Important Gubernatorial Election, an Election that is being closely watched by the entire World because, we are ending WOKE, and all of the other NONSENSE that goes along with it, AND NOBODY WANTS TO SEE IT COME BACK!

“Jack Ciattarelli is a WINNER,

and has my Complete and Total Endorsement – HE WILL NOT LET YOU DOWN. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, ELECT JACK CIATTARELLI!”

Ciattarelli was in a box, or a crib, so long as Trump was President. He really didn’t have anywhere to go, unless he wanted to be like Bramnick and finish with 6% of the GOP Primary vote.



A former Somerset County Freeholder and former LD-16 Assemblyman who had run twice previously for governor and twice lost (albeit in a narrow 2021 election), Ciattarelli crushed Spadea in the 2025 gubernatorial primary: 316,283 (or 68%) to 101,408 (or 22%).

But the MAGA mantle that catapulted him in the primary would prove to cling to him like doom in the general. If Democrats got ahead of their “boss problem” by yielding to Sherrill, Ciattarelli – trying to be the adult in the room alongside spendthrift Trenton Democrats – would fight to project gravitas as the political equivalent of Trump’s golf course caddy.

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III

THE GENERAL ELECTION



Democrats still had a problem.

If Trump was unpopular in New Jersey, Governor Murphy at the end of two terms in office, was supposedly even more unpopular. Recognizing the terrain, Sherrill in the general election proceeded to intensify her attack on Trump while seeking to prove that she had no intention of being a Trenton tool. Already in danger of being a Trump toady, Ciattarelli wanted to tie Sherrill to Murphy, hoping independents would be more fed up with Trenton Democrats than MAGA Republicans.

Sherrill launched an early two-pronged attack, which cited the Trump budget's exacerbation of New Jersey problems, especially in the areas of healthcare, ener-

gy, and higher education. She, of course, tied Ciattarelli to Trump, and jumped up and down on the point. But she simultaneously decried her own party's faux pas in Trenton, which led to a utility rate increase for New Jersey taxpayers. She distanced herself from Murphy and threatened to sack the Board of Public Utility commissioners who refused to get on board with her promised energy reforms.

More proficient than Sherrill on state issues, Ciattarelli couldn't convince enough people of his remedy for the state's fiscal crisis. The CPA-MBA wanted to overhaul New Jersey's method of financing public education, which would disable the state's court-ordered Abbott School mode of providing a constitutionally fair and equal education to all students. Trying to corral the high ground on policy, Ciattarelli expressed his desire to follow the pupil with education funding, not the zip code, a feature of Abbott's prioritization of the school needs of New Jersey's urban poor. But Chris Christie had already tried this, to no effect, and the former United States attorney during his years in Trenton had a largely cowed and compliant Democratic Party partner.

To doubters who worried about his ability to govern, Ciattarelli promised to coattail a Republi-

can majority in the legislature, which landed amid the political chattering classes with all the convincing resonance of Sherrill's vow to freeze energy costs on day one.

For most of the general election season, polling showed Sherrill and Ciattarelli in a close race. But if the presence of Murphy and Trump could spur independents in one direction or the other, Sherrill gained by virtue of Murphy's relative underground status and Trump's inability to stay away from the contest.



When the President, presiding over a government shutdown, bragged about terminating the long-sought Gateway Tunnel Project, Ciattarelli said it was merely a Trump negotiating tactic. A scandalized Sherrill pounced, charging her Republican opponent with serving the President instead of New Jersey commuters. The congresswoman too appeared energized by the Ciattarelli campaign's attempt to call into question her military service, a dirty trick that backfired dismally.

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From the start, Sherrill had sought to differentiate herself from the good old boys club by highlighting her service record. Now Ciattarelli, complaining about the Annapolis grad refusing to name the names of participants in an Annapolis cheating scandal when she was in her early twenties, looked like just another guy who himself hadn't served, bitterly sniping from the cheap seats.



Murphy continued to be a mole, absent from the trail, while Trump – in office as a vanity exercise, to enrich himself and his family, and to exact revenge on political enemies – simply rankly stunk up the race with his presence, making it impossible for Ciattarelli to look independent. Ciattarelli hurt himself, too, by hanging out at Trump's golf course, recounting a profane, misogynistic story of Trump's to get a laugh from golf club types, and admitting he disagreed with the president on exactly nothing. At

precisely the time he should have been doubling down on pursuing the independent vote, he stood on a stage in Wildwood at a MAGA event, like an uncomplaining and complaint pillar of fortitude suffused by noxious gas.

In addition, while Bramnick and Spadea sat on their hands after the GOP Primary and the latter even openly vociferously criticized his conqueror's campaign, Baraka critically supported Sherrill and helped repair the primary fractures in Essex County. That gave Sherrill, having already galvanized her own suburban base, a big, extra boost.

By the time Trump opponents packed the town squares, parks and public spaces for a No King's Rally two weeks prior to Election Day, the contest looked all but over. Few people in politics – with the possible exception of the Fox News-siloed Ciattarelli and his closest allies – saw anything other than a Sherrill victory, sparked by New Jersey backlash to Trump.

Once the gutsy darling of wonky grassroots anti-establishment Republican Party moderation, Ciattarelli had become MAGA movement roadkill, while Sherrill proved her proficiency in pulling together all the disparate strands and strains of her home state behind the glaring opposite

of a terminally whiny, puerile, and hateful President.



At the start of the season, Democrats had fretted about the fractures revealed by Kim's challenge of the establishment, never vigorously challenged in 2024. At the end of the 2025 election season, Sherrill – with her own base and county and, in addition, the North Jersey Democratic Party establishment strongly behind her – spent the last Sunday of the cycle at the side of Senator Kim in Burlington County, regaling a roomful of diehards, many of them progressives, and all of them soldierly in their resistance to the President. Sherrill had united them, and with them, independents, toughly proving the only statewide candidate on the night with considerable coattails, as Democrats rode anti-Trump sentiment past Ciattarelli and his allies to a legislative super-majority and a concussive 57-42% Sherrill victory – a victory, in defiance of vulgarity and vanity at the highest levels of government, for public service.



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Politician of the year



LEROY JONES

The prospect of backing Sherrill against Baraka – popular mayor of the biggest municipality in Essex County – would have unnerved lesser men. But Jones – who had supported Baraka ally LaMonica McIver for a vacant congressional seat a year earlier – handled the primary season with aplomb – and a certain level of visible political serenity. Now, it had to have hurt Jones when Baraka beat Sherrill in Essex in the primary. But remember, Jones is the statewide party chair, which in and of itself signifies his political acumen in having expanded his powers statewide ahead of the gubernatorial election. If he lost the initial bunker battle on his home turf, he secured the bigger victory, and employed his deft touch, to get the important players all aligned countywide in time for Sherrill’s November beat-down of Trump and the GOP, the signature election of Jones’ run as state party chair.

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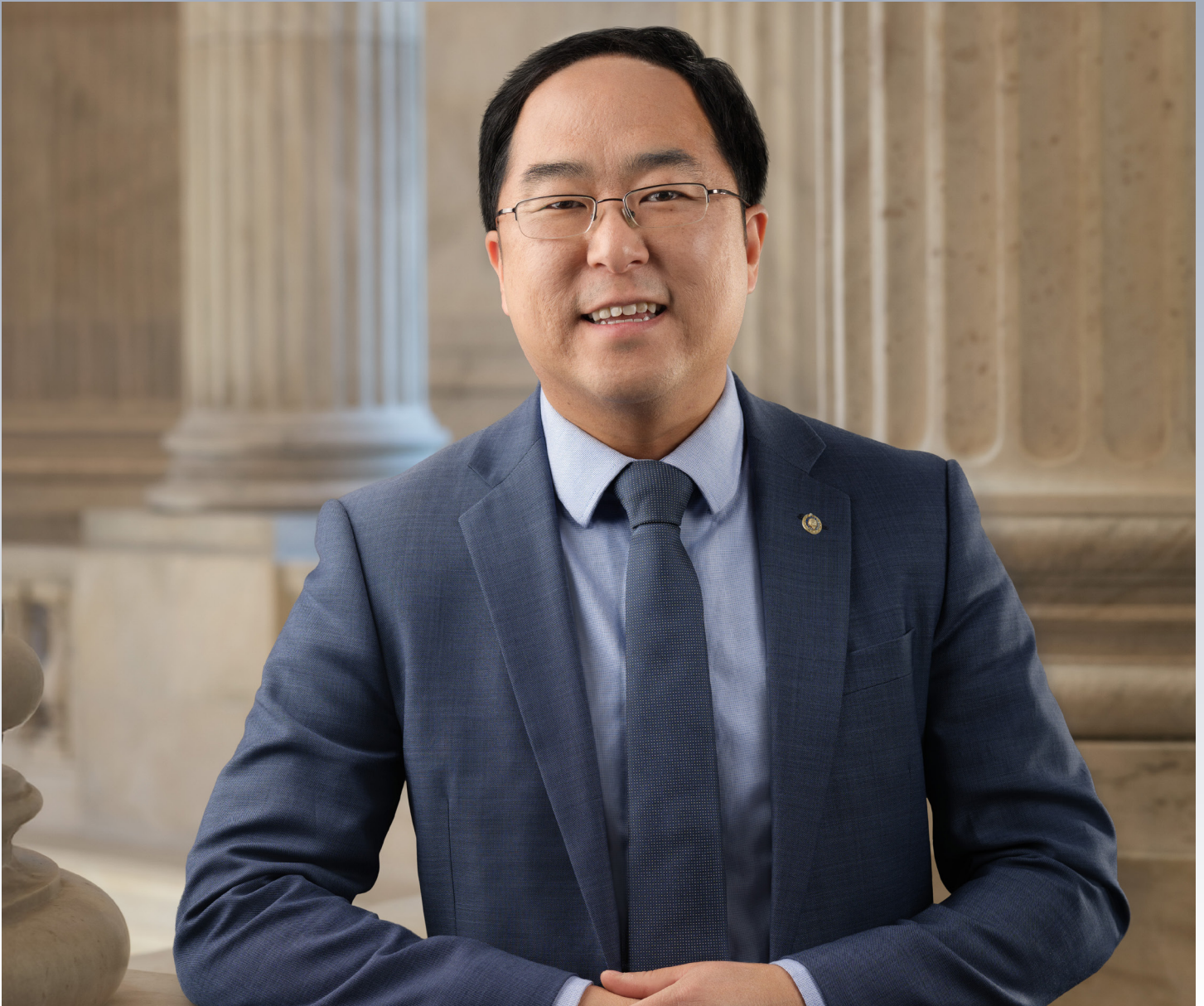
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Politician of the Year **Runner-up**



ANDY KIM

By challenging the line system a year earlier, the junior senator from New Jersey ended up stimulating a dynamic political environment in time for the best primary candidate to surface and present a unified party front to a law-breaking Republican President. Kim also proved publicly engaged (and publicly interested) when he showed up at the Statehouse to oppose Senate President Nick Scutari's stupid and democratically injurious bill that would have weakened the state Comptroller's Office. Wounded and humiliated, Scutari yanked the bill.

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Winner of the Year



MIKIE SHERRILL

If New Jersey politics has a boss problem, and Democrats as the party in charge were the worst offenders, Sherrill – a United States military-educated and trained mother of four who came out of nowhere in 2018 to flip a House seat – presented the poohbahs with a chance to appeal to more than merely the same old tired politics. Never viewed as the wonkiest of statewide political candidates, the Democratic Congresswoman from the 11th District was always going to be her own woman. She showed leadership all year long in resisting those cynical naysayers who lost their way when they followed a hateful and corrupt boss named Donald Trump.



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CONGRATULATIONS

TO THOSE RECOGNIZED ON THE INSIDER NJ LIST HERE—AND TO ALL THE ORGANIZERS, VOLUNTEERS, AND LEADERS WHOSE DAILY, OFTEN UNSEEN WORK, DRIVES OUR PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT FORWARD.

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Winner of the Year **Runner-up**



JAMES SOLOMON

The downtown Councilman beat former Governor James McGreevey in the Dec. 2nd runoff election for mayor of Jersey City. Presenting himself as mayor for the future, Solomon ultimately successfully depicted McGreevey as the past. He won big, along with at-large council candidates Rolando Lavarro, Michael Griffin, and Mamta Singh. Denise Ridley in Ward A, Joel Brooks in Ward B, Tom Zupa in Ward C, and Jake Ephros in Ward D were all on pace to win. In a blowout election result, with 96 districts reporting, Solomon had 22,291 votes (68%) to 10,548 (32%) for McGreevey. McGreevey tried to parlay government expertise and his work on the ground in the city where he was born into a potent political combination. It got him through the November race to the runoff, but finally he could not withstand Solomon's appeal to a new generation of voters.

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Winner of the Year **Runner-up**



EMILY JABBOUR

The At-Large Councilwoman defeated Councilman Michael Russo in the Dec. 2nd runoff election for Hoboken Mayor. Jabbour earned 6,407 votes (54%) to 5,554 for Russo (46%). Her mayoral campaign emphasized her story about getting involved and committed to reducing gun violence. In her first ad of the season, Jabbour shared that after witnessing an active shooter drill at her daughter's pre-K program, she was inspired to take action by founding the Hudson County chapter of Moms Demand Action. "My administration will focus on prevention, not just reaction," Jabbour said. "I love this city and am so proud to call Hoboken home and raise our kids here with my husband, Peter. ...As a mom, you better believe I've got a long to-do list with new ideas to continue improving our community and make Hoboken a great place to live, work, and raise a family."



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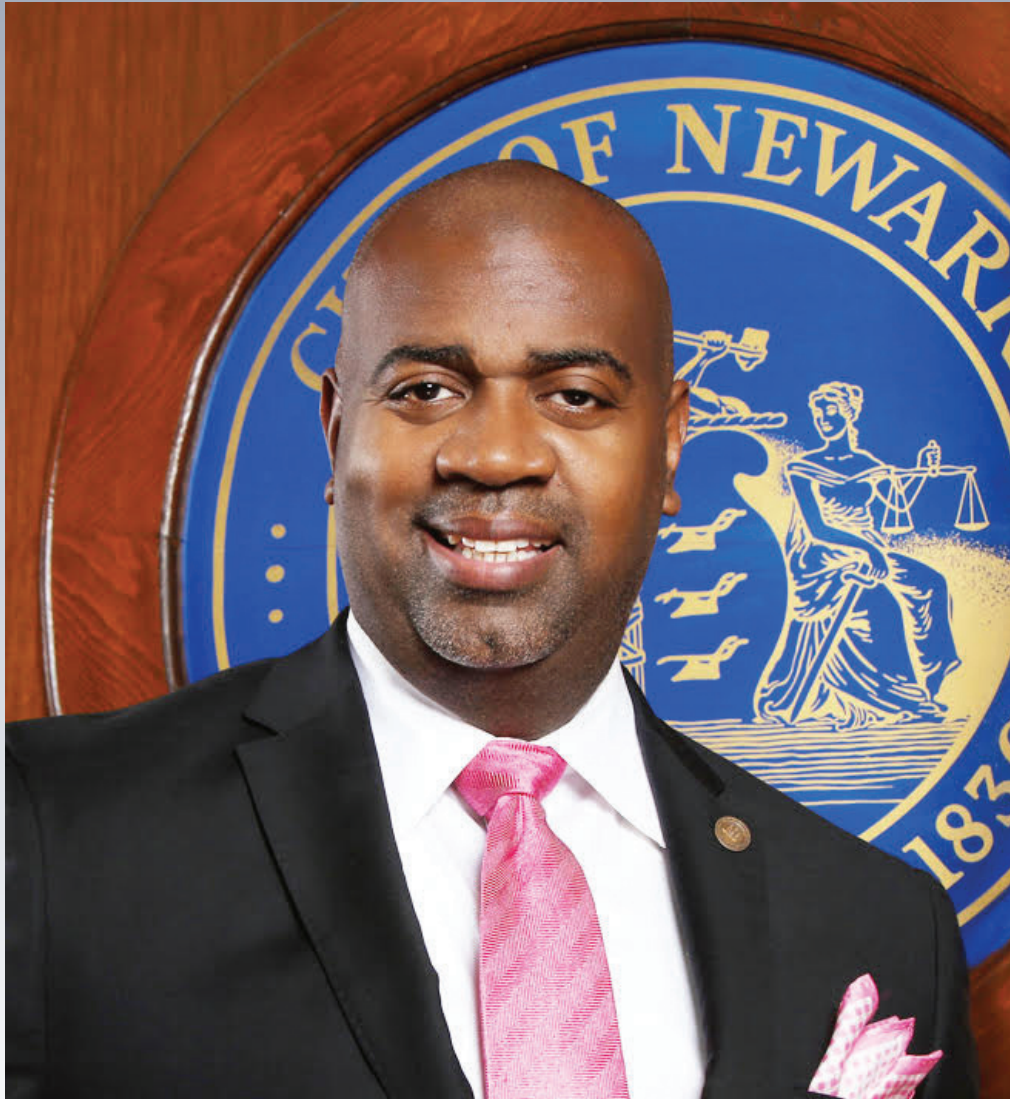


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Winner of the Year **Runner-up**



RAS BARAKA

The most cynical political players saw the May 2025 image of the Newark Mayor in handcuffs outside Delaney Hall as a play by the Trump “justice” department to empower the candidacy of Baraka and propel him to the Democratic nomination for governor. But it, in fact, generated more power than that, as Baraka – whose civil disobedience runs deeper than a golf course junkie’s and his lackies’ political ham-handed manipulation of government – gave a voice to those looking to fight back with more than soundbites. By standing up to Trump and standing outside the decayed nimbus of his own party – Baraka epitomized courage. His endorsement of Sherrill in the end showed more political acumen than someone like Spadea could muster on the other side of the equation.

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Loser of the Year



DONALD TRUMP

The President's inability to simply – in the inimitable words of Chris Christie – “sit down and shut up” - killed the candidacy of his candidate. A vain, miserable, and uneducated man who can't stop talking about himself, Trump would not let go of a wriggling and helpless Ciattarelli, who, without Trump around, probably would have walked into office this year without breaking a sweat.

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Loser of the year **Runner-up**



JACK CIATTARELLI

When the Republican nominee for governor awarded an “A” grade to the constantly preening, attention-seeking and compliment-insisting Trump, he sealed his fate in a state inhabited by a lot of gritty, tough, and unbossed dirt-under-the-fingernail types looking for a demonstration of independence from their New Jersey governor.

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THE FUTURE, LET'S
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ACCOMPLISHMENTS THIS
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**DAVID PARANO
PARANO & ASSOCIATES**



Loser of the year **Runner-up**



THE NJGOP

Where were they? Again, the proud Grand Old Party of Abe Lincoln was reduced to the role of boot-licker, not only for Trump, but for Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Cause. Those cranky ghosts are the sole beneficiaries of Trump's stupid and mean-spirited Make America Great Again Movement, which resides closer to 1858 than 1868, decidedly more gray than blue.

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Loser of the year **Runner-up**



ALINA HABBA

Disqualified from her role as U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, the deposed Habba gave her boss another reason to demonize America's constitutional structure of three co-equal branches of government. Writing on his Truth Social platform, Trump excoriated the Senate, including members of his own party, for supporting senatorial courtesy, and the democratic tradition of empowering the senate to veto presidential nominees to district courts and U.S. attorney offices. "If they say no, then it is OVER for that very well qualified Republican candidate. Only a really far left Democrat can be approved. It is shocking that Republicans, under Senator Chuck G, allow this scam to continue. So unfair to Republicans, and not Constitutional." Yeah, ok, dude. We're going to trust your interpretation of what's constitutional. That's like letting you decide what's lawful.

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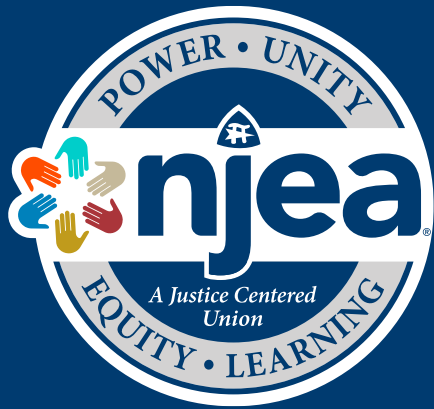
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Campaign of the Year



SHERRILL FOR GOVERNOR

Insiders hated it. They repeatedly badmouthed the Sherrill inner sanctum as a bunch of privileged kids from D.C. who knew nothing about Jersey. But the combination of political intelligence behind Sherrill – including, critically, Essex, Middlesex, Hudson, Passaic, and Bergen, not to mention, for lack of a better term, the Kim wing of the party – and national support from DNC Chairman Ken Martin - showed the power of a coordinated effort, which revealed political intelligence, and finally, brought out the strengths of the candidate.



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Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare, President Steve Beatty & Vice President Petal Robertson

Contest of the Year



LD-8

The chatter was that incumbent Assemblywoman Andrea Katz (D-8) was in trouble. But a lot of people lazily expressed that opinion unaware of the on-the-ground grassroots operation in Burlington, which Senator Andy Kim proudly described to Sherrill as “the toughest political community in the country.” Not only did Katz win against the Republican ticket of Brandon Umba and Assemblyman Michael Torissi, Jr., she helped power in her running mate, Anthony Angelozzi.



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Legislative Newcomer of the Year



CHIGOZIE ONYEMA

Former general counsel for Mayor Baraka's Newark Parking Authority, and former assistant commissioner for the state Department of Community Affairs with Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, the attorney and community activist ran for a Newark West Ward Council seat in 2022, lost to DoItAll Kelly, then in 2024 defeated Kelly for the chairmanship of the West Ward Democratic Committee. In June, Onyema won the LD-28 Democratic Primary for an Assembly seat and won the general election in November in the strongly Democratic district, which contains pieces of Newark, and South Ward and Maplewood. Having navigated the gubernatorial primary in a county rent asunder by the rivalry between Sherrill and second place finisher Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, Onyema – a progressive - holds strong convictions about how to improve a nationally lackluster Democratic Party, and a locally forged, politically pragmatic understanding of how to get there.

Labor Leader of the Year



EDDIE DONNELLY

A certified plumber who worked in the family plumbing business, Donnelly just over 25 years ago became a professional firefighter in Union Twp. At it ever since. No labor leader stood as staunchly this cycle with Sherrill as Donnelly, President of the New Jersey Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association (FMBA). “There’s only one labor candidate in the race,” Donnelly told InsiderNJ. “It’s real simple. New Jersey is going to have some complex issues, around pensions, healthcare, and the administration at the federal level clawing dollars away from New Jersey. Mikie Sherrill’s labor record is solid with labor - 100%, and we believe that will transition into her gubernatorial term where she is going to have to be making some tough decisions and I know we will be at the table with her.”



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Labor Leader of the Year **Runner-up**



MIKE HELLSTROM

Vice president and Eastern Regional Manager of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), Hellstrom critically led his labor organization in support of Sherrill's gubernatorial candidacy while some of his brother Building Trades organizations chose to sit on their hands. Another gamer.

Quote of the Year



“

*This is not a fractured
county at this time*

Democratic State Committee Chairman LeRoy Jones told InsiderNJ on his way into a packed rally for Sherrill at the Flamboyant to kick off the first day of mail-in voting.

Jones was right.

Sherrill pulled 189K votes out of Essex County to Ciattarelli's 55K on Nov. 4th, or the biggest Democratic plurality of any county (by far).



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Upset of the Year



MAUREEN ROWAN

The Democratic Assembly challenge in LD-2 added to the Democrats' Legislative Super-Majority by defeating Republican Assemblywoman Claire Swift, a two-term incumbent.

Operative of the Year



AKEEM CUNNINGHAM OF EAST ORANGE

Sherrill called Cunningham's Essex County coordinated efforts "Team Akeem." Said Chairman Jones of firefighter/operative Cunningham's Get out the Youth vote: "Akeem understands the mission, and that mission is to create and nurture a new generation of voters. But this program is about more than just getting young people to vote – it's also about creating and nurturing a new generation of leaders. Akeem's program has yielded extraordinary results, ensuring that these students are not just watching elections from the sidelines, but they're seeing democracy in action. These students have canvassed for and met elected officials at all levels of government. They have learned about policy. They have talked about the issues that affect their communities and their futures. And while the scope of this program started small, it is a blueprint that can be scaled in any community in this country."

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Lawman of the year



MATT PLATKIN

In addition to standing up to routinely Trump’s opposition to due process, Platkin – as he did last year in the Kim v. Hanlon case – in 2025 critically stood up to his own party. “The idea of wiretapping conducted by a civil enforcement agency never once came up to me, in my four years as an attorney general, as an idea we should even consider, much less one I should be testifying about before this body,” Platkin said in opposition to Scutari’s comptroller power-stripping bill, which, he added, would create “a rogue prosecution agency reportable to legislative leadership with an executive director — as great as Bruce Keller may be — the Legislature reaffirms can be fired at will with no notice.” Scutari subsequently yanked the bill.



**Happy holidays &
Cheers
to the new year!**

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Lawmaker of the Year



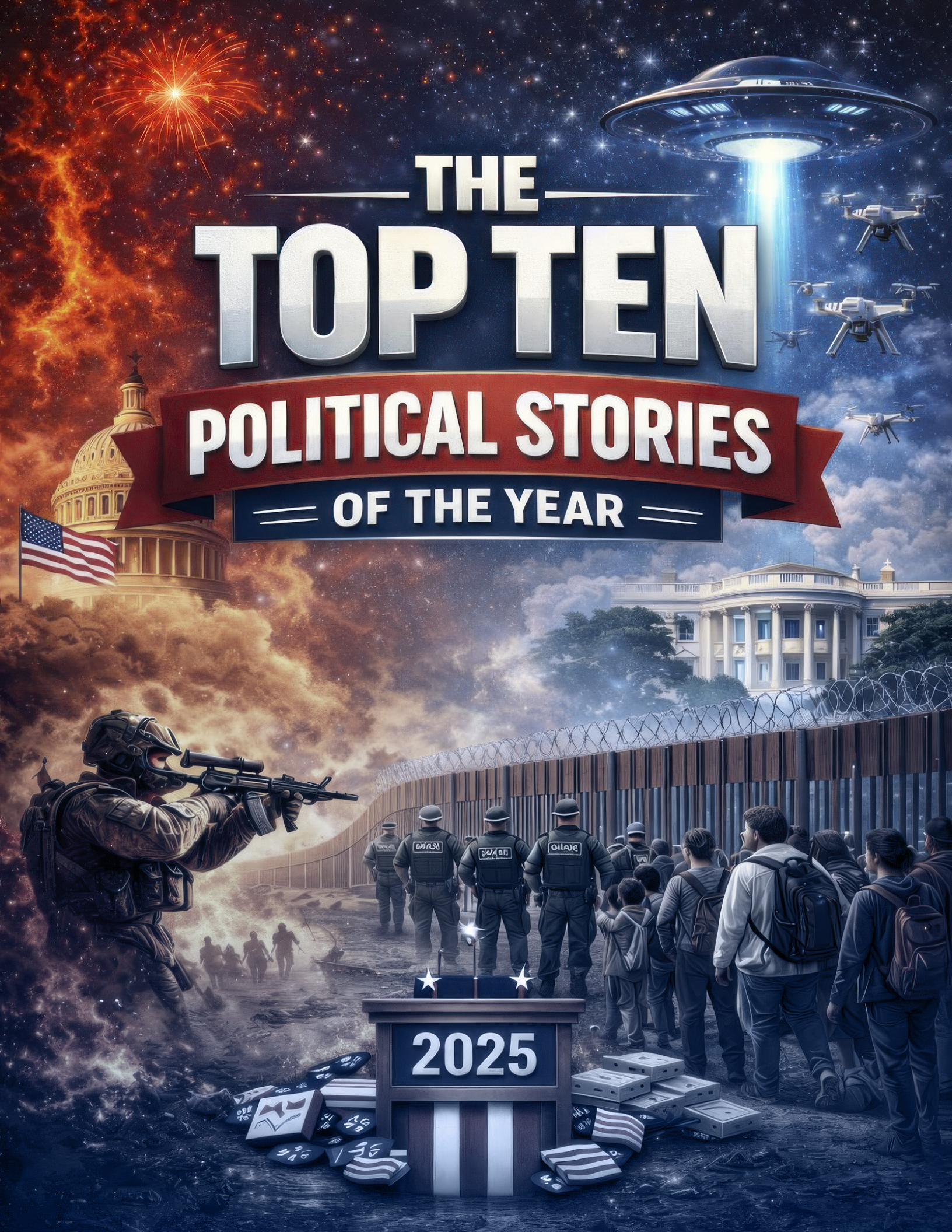
LAMONICA MCIVER

In an ongoing case, McIver pleaded not guilty in June to the three criminal charges stemming from an incident Delaney Hall in May, when the congresswoman tried to protect Newark Mayor Ras Baraka. Armed and masked ICE agents had thrown the mayor in handcuffs as he and a congressional team, including McIver, U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, and U.S. Rep. Rob Menendez sought information about detainees inside the immigration detention facility. Ramrodded by Trump in defiance of senatorial oversight, Acting U.S. Attorney Alina Habba – who brought the charges against McIver – subsequently resigned after a judge ruled her ineligible to serve.

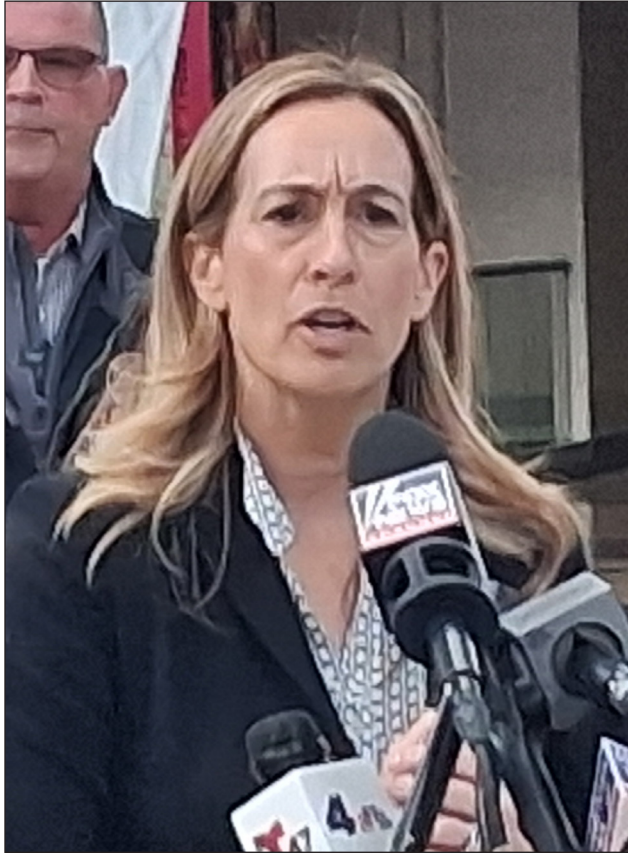
THE TOP TEN

POLITICAL STORIES

OF THE YEAR



#10 Sherrill Announces Guv Bid



On Nov. 18, 2024, Sherrill — a former U.S. Navy helicopter aircraft commander, former federal prosecutor, U.S. Congresswoman, and mom of four — launched her campaign for governor, on a mission to get big things done for New Jersey. In her announcement video, Sherrill shared how she would bring new leadership and a fresh perspective to New Jersey to build more housing, grow the economy, lower costs for families, and defend our freedoms.

We've been through a lot these past couple of years. There've been crises in this country, all over the world, and here in New Jersey. And after this election, we know people are more divided than ever on how to move forward. I'm Mikie Sherrill. As a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and a former Navy helicopter aircraft commander, here's something I learned early on: In a crisis, the worst thing you can do is freeze. You have to choose to lead, to follow, or get out of the way. So we can either stand aside, or we can get to work on New Jersey's future. And I know which one I pick. In New Jersey, we don't whine, we work.

#9 The Murphy Administration Pulls the Plug on Offshore Wind



New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy in February announced that the state would not provide financial backing to new offshore wind projects. That decision dealt a blow to the Democrat's environmental agenda and legacy and – Politico noted – effectively doomed “Atlantic Shores, a project off the coast of Atlantic City that has been the focus of opposition from President Donald Trump and Rep. Jeff Van Drew (R-N.J.). Murphy, a term-limited Democrat, took office in 2018 hoping offshore wind projects would be a perfect issue to unite a liberal coalition and ensure his legacy by providing clean energy to fight climate change and mega projects to employ union workers.”

#8 Kim to Challenge Beach



After Senate President Nick Scutari kicked dirt on a sleezy bill that would have weakened the state Comptroller's Office, which investigates wasteful spending, political favoritism and overall general public corruption, U.S. Senator Andy Kim revealed his intention to back opponents to state Senator Jim Beach, chair of the committee hearing Scutari's bill.

Kim and Beach clashed at the hearing,

"Nobody's special," Beach told Kim. "I have a list, and we're going in order."

Later, the U.S. Senator said:

"I'll be supporting challengers against State Senator James Beach and other elected officials who continue to fuel corrupt machine politics in NJ. Last week's shameful hearing and vote to gut anti-corruption efforts showed the need for more accountability. We halted the bill but need to keep our feet on the gas. We need leaders who represent the people, not powerful interests; and we need a grassroots army to build an anti-corruption movement. I'm putting out a call for people to step up. It won't be easy, but I hope you'll join me in stepping up to build a true democracy for the people."



NJAA is Home to New Jersey!

The New Jersey Apartment Association is the premier statewide organization representing all facets of the multifamily rental housing industry, advancing the success and professionalism of its membership through government affairs advocacy, education, training, and industry events.



#7 Soaring Electricity Prices Shake up the Governor's Contest



A 22% jump in electricity rates jolted the governor's race over the summer.

"We have an affordability crisis because of property taxes and electricity bills," Republican nominee Jack Ciattarelli said.

"Day 1 as governor, I'm declaring a state of emergency on utility costs using emergency powers to end these rate hikes and drive down your bills," said Sherrill, a Navy veteran, while piloting a helicopter in her first TV ad of the general election season.

#6 Rutgers University Scientists Stand up to Trump's Cuts



Reeling but committed to solidarity from the labs to the streets and ready for a long, tough fight, Rutgers University scientists, educators and staff in February called attention to the ravaging, destabilizing impact of Trump administration funding cuts, freezes, and policy changes on life-saving medical research and public higher education.

Dispatching billionaire Elon Musk to overhaul government, President Donald Trump undertook an anti-public science crusade resulting in the freezing of federal grants, sweeping layoffs across federal agencies, and funding cuts for biomedical research.

Dr. Monica Driscoll, a molecular biologist and biochemist who specializes in neuro-degenerative disease research, said "I love the way the U.S. has done science – at least in the past." But now, "I am stunned and devastated by this government-mediated dismantling of an incredibly successful scientific enterprise," she said, in a packed general-purpose room in the Life Sciences Building on the Busch Campus.

#5 Trump's Big Beautiful Bill Cuts Medicare, Medicaid and SNAP



Trump's budget reconciliation bill cut \$1 trillion from Medicaid and reduced the tax on health care providers that pays for it. "Every hospital in my district, and throughout the state and throughout the country is going to be negatively impacted," U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone (D-6), a Democrat, said in a press conference at St. Peter's University Hospital on June 18.

That news preceded the government shutdown's freezing of supplemental food assistance funds to New Jersey families, another motivator for voters looking to buck Trump on Nov. 4th.

#4 Baraka Arrested and McIver Charged



Trump's budget took a guillotine to Medicaid and added \$75 billion more for ICE, apparently so that masked agents with guns could throw people like the Newark Mayor and the Congresswoman from the 10th District respectively into handcuffs and criminal charges. Dumb.

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#3 Trump kills the Gateway Tunnel



Led Zeppelin once sang about a *Stairway to Heaven*. Apparently, Donald Trump wanted to put Jack Ciattarelli's campaign on a *Highway to Hell* – or up against a brick wall with no way to tunnel to daylight. Blaming the ongoing government shutdown on Democrats, the President on October 15th did an endzone dance as he announced his decision to stick a fork in the long-delayed Gateway Tunnel Project. “The project in New York—it is billions and billions of dollars of that [Senate Democratic Leader Chuck] Schumer has worked 20 years to get,” Trump told reporters at a press conference broadcast by Fox News (above). “It is terminated.” The President's timing, with less than a month before Election Day in New Jersey in a close race pitting Democratic Mikie Sherrill against Republican Jack Ciattarelli, appeared to create hazardous driving conditions – at the very least - for Ciattarelli.

#2 Thousands Take to the Streets for No-Kings Rally



Americans on Oct. 18th stood up against Donald Trump and his narrow, autocratic, alligator alley-sized vision of an immense and proudly diverse country, founded as a Constitutional republic on the first amendment right of free speech – and with them at the head of an overflow rally in her hometown stood Mikie Sherrill, Democratic candidate for governor.

“New Jersey is not a red state,” she told the crowd in Montclair. “It is not a purple state.

“It is a blue state,” she reminded people, her voice engulfed by the ensuing roar.

The candidate for governor referred to her service to the country as a nearly-decade long U.S. Navy helicopter pilot, as a strong counterpoint to TV personality turned politician Trump.

“This president is running a worldwide extortion racket and putting billions of dollars in his pocket,” Sherrill said. “Not here. Not in New Jersey.”

#1 Sherrill Defeats Ciattarelli



Democrat Mikie Sherrill defeated Jack Ciattarelli on Nov. 4th to become the next Governor of New Jersey. Republican Ciattarelli put up a gallant stand but could not cope with blue state backlash against President Donald Trump in the White House. The election wasn't close. It was unofficially a 13-point blowout. The GOP got smoked in places like Hillsborough, Bridgewater (now in Democratic control), Montgomery, Manville, and Bernards (in Democratic control). Assembly incumbent Republicans fell in the anti-Trump tsunami. Sherrill defeated Ciattarelli in his home county of Somerset - also home to Trump's golf course - by about 10K votes. Trump backed Ciattarelli in the GOP Primary, cementing the statewide prospect to his side. Ciattarelli could not find any disagreement with Trump on, a difficult position as the President's poll numbers nosedived.

One More Thing:



We'll have a full treatment of her life and career in public service next year, but we wouldn't want to leave 2025 without thanking U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-12) for her long and distinguished service to the State of New Jersey. No, Watson Coleman's not going anywhere, but she did announce this year that after ten years in the U.S. Congress, she would not pursue reelection in 2026. That's too bad. But she's got another year down there, and that's great news. We know she'll make the most of it, because it's the essence of who she is: a leader, whose hometown shows up when it counts, because the people there know the generous and principled spirit by which Watson Coleman lives and gives.

More later.

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In Memoriam

Insider NJ remembers some of the notable figures who left us this year.



Reginald T. Jackson

A beloved AME Bishop, one of the best orators in New Jersey history, died this year. An original member of The Group, Bishop Jackson was active in social justice and political causes his whole life.

Said Governor Phil Murphy:

“Bishop Jackson was a trusted source of guidance and counsel and I will always cherish the wisdom he shared on issues big and small. His deep commitment to faith, social justice, and civic life left an enduring impact on our state.

“We extend our deepest condolences and wishes of comfort to his two children, Regina and Seth, his beloved St. Matthew AME Church, the Second Episcopal District and worldwide AME Church, and all the communities he faithfully served throughout his life.”



Michael Dressler

An inspiration to many of a life lived with courage and public integrity, Bergen County Surrogate Judge Michael Dressler died in December.

Serving his sixth term as surrogate, Judge Dressler said he wanted people to remember the organizing principle of public service in government, at a time when too many find money as a motivation. People helped him at his most vulnerable time in life, and that's what drove him to serve the Bergen County public for the last 28 years as the surrogate, a position he described as the best job he ever had.

Said Bergen County Executive Jim Tedesco:

“Michael’s life was a story of resilience, determination, and service. After a tragic accident at the Jersey Shore left him paralyzed just days before his high school graduation, doctors told him he would not survive the night—yet Michael refused to give up. With the support of his family, friends, and neighbors in Cresskill, he pushed forward, returning to school, earning degrees from Bergen Community College, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and Seton Hall Law School, and building a life of purpose and service.

“He started in local government as a councilman and later mayor of Cresskill, before being elected Surrogate Judge in 1996. For 29 years, Michael led the Surrogate’s Court with fairness and compassion. He built programs that became models across New Jersey, including the Guardianship Monitoring Program to protect our frail and elderly, and he worked to make the court more accessible to families by creating satellite offices and practical resources.”



Brian Hughes

A genteel figure who brought a dignified and kindly bearing to public life, not unlike his father before him, former Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes died in June.

He was 68.

U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-12) released the following statement on the passing of the former Mercer leader, son of the late Governor Richard Hughes:

“Brian was a lifelong public servant who tirelessly served Mercer County as its executive with dignity and exceptional service for 20 years. Our families have known each other since our fathers worked together decades ago. He always fought for the less fortunate and was a forward-looking leader in Mercer County. I was honored to work with Brian to help make Mercer County the incredible place it is today. His hard work in service of his constituents and the indelible mark he left on our community will be his lasting legacy.”



Kabir Moss

Beloved founder of Moss Media. Served as communications director for Newark Mayor Ras Baraka's campaign for the Democratic nomination for governor. Former deputy director of Communications with the New Jersey Senate Majority Office. All of New Jersey politicians mourned the untimely loss of this bright light and talent.



Sharpe James

An educator who campaigned vibrantly in his track suit, the former Mayor of Newark – who led the city from 1986 to 2006 – died in May.

Mayor James was 89.

“In his 20 years in office as Mayor, Sharpe James was many things: a warrior for our city, a unifier for its people, a powerful force to launch development like New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Prudential Center, and a strong advocate for Newark and its people,” said Newark Mayor Ras Baraka.

“He was also an outstanding educator and an inspiration to generations of Newark residents. Our relationship included competition, conflict, and collaboration, and through it all, helped define me, my values, and my aspirations for this city. The Newark we live in is, in many ways, a city he created.”