

Inside Elections

with
Nathan L. Gonzales
Nonpartisan Analysis

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New Jersey Governor: Can Murphy Break The Curse?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Not long ago, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was riding the wave of a re-election win into a top-tier presidential bid. A few years later, politics on the ground have shifted, and Garden State Republicans are grasping for power, just hoping to stay competitive in this year's gubernatorial contest.

New Jersey is one of two states (Virginia is the other) that will elect a governor this year, posing as the appetizer for 2022, when 36 states will host a gubernatorial election. Politicos will be looking at both 2021 races for any clues about the national political environment for the midterms, including whether the party in power will suffer from the health or economic effects of Covid-19.

Lay of the Land

New Jersey is a Democratic state. With the exception of 2004, when John Kerry won the state by a vanishingly narrow 7 percent, every Democratic presidential candidate since 2000 has won the state by between 14 points (Hillary Clinton in 2016) and 17 points (President Barack Obama in 2012), regardless of national environment. The state hasn't pulled the lever for a Republican presidential candidate since 1988. Neither has New Jersey elected a Republican to the Senate since Clifford Case in 1972.

The one area where New Jersey voters show any proclivity toward the GOP is in gubernatorial contests, with Republicans winning four of the last seven races even as the party has had no other statewide success. The last Democratic governor to win re-election in New Jersey was Brendan Byrne in 1978. Most recently, Gov. Jon Corzine lost his 2009 re-election campaign to Christie, then a former U.S. Attorney, by 4 points; Christie would go on to cruise to re-election in 2013, winning 60 percent in the most dominant performance for a New Jersey Republican since Tom Kean Sr. in 1985.

However, Democrats have steadily extended their voter registration advantage. In 2009, Democrats had a 34-20 percent edge in voter registration (700,000 voters). By January 2021, Democrats had a 39-22 percent edge in voter registration and even outnumbered unaffiliated voters for an edge of over 1 million voters.

More evidence of the state's movement: the state's U.S. House delegation has shifted from being evenly divided a decade ago to a 10-2 Democratic advantage.

The Democratic Incumbent

Phil Murphy, 63, was elected governor in 2017 over GOP Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, 56-42 percent. Born and raised in Massachusetts, Murphy

Continued on page 6

2022 Senate Ratings

BATTLEGROUND

Democratic-Held (4)

Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)
Hassan (D-N.H.)
Kelly (D-Ariz.)
Warnock (D-Ga.)

Republican-Held (4)

NC Open (Burr, R)
PA Open (Toomey, R)
Johnson (R-Wisc.)
Rubio (R-Fl.)

Solid Democratic (10)

Bennet (D-Colo.)
Blumenthal (D-Conn.)
Duckworth (D-Ill.)
Padilla (D-Calif.)
Leahy (D-Vt.)
Murray (D-Wash.)
Schatz (D-Hawaii)
Schumer (D-N.Y.)
Van Hollen (D-Md.)
Wyden (D-Ore.)

Solid Republican (16)

OH Open (Portman, R)
Blunt (R-Mo.)
Boozman (R-Ark.)
Crapo (R-Idaho)
Grassley (R-Iowa)
Hoeven (R-N.D.)
Kennedy (R-La.)
Lankford (R-Ok.)
Lee (R-Utah)
Moran (R-Kan.)
Murkowski (R-Alaska)
Paul (R-Ky.)
Scott (R-S.C.)
Shelby (R-Ala.)
Thune (R-S.D.)
Young (R-Ind.)

CALENDAR

March 20	Louisiana's 2nd & 5th Districts Special Elections
April 24	Louisiana Special Election runoffs (if necessary)
June 8	New Jersey Gubernatorial Primary
June 8	Virginia Democratic Gubernatorial Primary
Summer TBD	Virginia Republican Gubernatorial Convention
Nov. 2	New Jersey & Virginia Gubernatorial Elections

Pulling Back the Curtain on Race Ratings

By Nathan L. Gonzales

Each election cycle, race ratings are an integral part of the discussion about the fight for the House and Senate majorities. But where did they come from and how do they work?

While a few folks such as Kevin Phillips and Alan Baron dabbled with ratings going back to the late 1970s, the first person to make ratings a regular feature was Charlie Cook back in April of 1984, even before his newsletter was called *The Cook Political Report*. Stuart Rothenberg followed suit in *The Rothenberg Political Report* (now *Inside Elections*) a few years later, and the rest is history.

Now it seems like everyone does ratings, putting races in Toss-up, Lean Democratic, Likely Republican, etc., but I can only speak to how we do it.

There are many ingredients to race ratings including past election results, district demographics (including partisanship, race, and education), open seat vs. incumbent race, challenger quality, incumbent strength, fundraising and outside spending, district-specific polling, the national political environment, and any unique dynamics, such as someone getting indicted...hypothetically

When it comes to race ratings, there are a few key points that might be helpful to understand how they come to be.

We don't have a specific formula, and we weigh factors differently throughout the cycle. For example, early on, ratings reflect past election results, demographics and incumbent strength. But as the cycle progresses, candidate quality and fundraising matters more. And, at the end of the race, ratings are more heavily weighted toward district or state-specific polling.

Ratings are meant to evaluate a party's likelihood of winning and not an attempt to predict the margin. For example, in 2018, we never moved the Texas Senate race any more competitive than Likely Republican- not because we didn't think Democrat Beto O'Rourke could get close, but that he ultimately couldn't get enough votes to win against GOP Sen. Ted Cruz. O'Rourke lost by 3 points.

Ratings are a combination of where a race stands and where it's headed. If ratings were merely a reflection of current polling, there wouldn't be any need for ratings. We try to look at the important factors and project where it is most likely to end up on Election Day. For example, in Tennessee, Democrat Phil Bredesen was leading Republican Marsha Blackburn in polls into mid-September of 2018. But we never moved our rating to anymore more competitive than Lean Republican. And Blackburn won by more than 10 points.

Sometimes looking ahead means not changing ratings with every burp and hiccup of a race. I'd rather wait and identify the trend of the

race than bounce the rating back and forth a bunch of times.

This cycle, we've made a slight change to our ratings process. Instead of using specific rating categories from the get-go, we're using broader terminology. We're identifying which races are part of the Battleground — in other words, which races are competitive and will decide the majority — and which races start as Solid for one party or the other. Later on, as the cycle and the races develop, we will shift to our more traditional categories.

Finally, ratings aren't set in stone. One of the worst things we can do is to put a rating on the race a year or more from an election and be stubborn and not move it. As the cycle evolves, so do our race ratings. **IE**

Candidate Conversation



Sarah Godlewski (D)

Wisconsin Senate —
Rating: Battleground

Interview Date: Jan. 28, 2021
(Zoom)

Date of Birth: Nov. 9, 1981;
Eau Claire, Wisc.

Education: George Mason

Univ. (2004); Univ. of Pennsylvania (attended)

Elected Office: State Treasurer (2019-present)

Current Outlook: Godlewski has not formally announced her candidacy, but she'll likely be one of several Democrats vying for this seat, which may be open depending on what GOP Sen. Ron Johnson decides. The only Democratic candidate currently in the race is Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson, but Milwaukee Bucks executive Alex Lasry, state Attorney General Josh Kaul, and Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes could also run.

Evaluation: Godlewski first ran for office a couple years ago, but already interviews like a seasoned candidate. She was upbeat and personable while navigating questions about the campaign and the Packers' playoff loss, sometimes avoiding specifics on answers in a way most candidates do. Godlewski has the benefit of a statewide campaign on her resume, even if it's a low-profile office, but she'll also stress her business background in her pitch to voters. Godlewski should be a credible candidate in one of Democrats' best pickup opportunities of 2022.

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Ohio Senate: Open Season

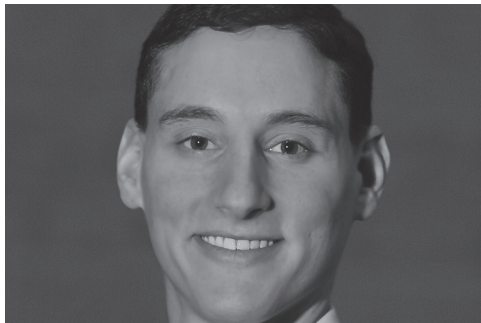
It's been less than two weeks since GOP Sen. Rob Portman announced he would not seek re-election in Ohio and the broad field of potential candidates has already narrowed to a handful of contenders from each party.

Portman's decision gives Democrats a glimmer of hope in a state that didn't look all that competitive at this early stage of the 2022 cycle. Even with the open seat, the burden of proof is still on Democrats to prove they can win statewide with someone other than Sen. Sherrod Brown.

Portman is the third Senate Republican to announce he will not seek re-election next year, joining Pennsylvania's Pat Toomey and Richard Burr of North Carolina. GOP senators in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Alabama could join them, but that doesn't mean Republicans can't take back control of the Senate in 2022.

Looking back at recent history, there is no correlation between the number of open seats and the final net loss or gain for a party. For example, more Republican senators decided not to seek re-election in 2020 compared to Democrats and Republicans lost control of the Senate. But the GOP held all of their open seats. The problem was losing incumbents. In 2018, Republicans also had more open seats than Democrats but the GOP gained two seats. Democrats had more retirements in 2016 and gained Senate seats. You start to get the picture.

Democratic optimism about winning Portman's seat next year hinged, in part, on Republicans nominating Rep. Jim Jordan, a proud conservative agitator and one of President Donald Trump's chief



Josh Mandel

Courtesy State of Ohio

apologists. Not only has Jordan said he will not run for the Senate, but Trump won Ohio twice, casting doubt on a connection to Trump being a liability.

Without Jordan, the GOP field is likely to be topped by former state Treasurer Josh

Mandel and state Republican Party Chairwoman Jane Timken. Rep. Steve Stivers is also seriously considering the race. Investment banker Mike Gibbons is running and technology executive Bernie Moreno is likely to run as well, but neither man will start in the top tier of contenders.

Former Ohio State wide receiver/Rep. Anthony Gonzalez hasn't ruled it out, but would likely struggle with primary voters after being one of 10 House Republicans to vote to impeach Trump. And former Rep. Jim Renacci could run, but he has been considering a primary challenge to GOP Gov. Mike DeWine at the urging of the former president.

It's too early for a deep dive on the race since the field isn't set, but the GOP primary is important because the nominee will start the general election with a significant advantage.

In 2020, most pre-election polling showed a competitive presidential race, sometimes even with Trump trailing. But Trump finished with



Jane Timken

Courtesy Ohio GOP

an 8-point victory over Joe Biden (53-45 percent). That's very similar to his 8-point win over Hillary Clinton in 2016 (51-43 percent). At the Senate level, Brown has proven a Democrat can win, though Democrats have struggled to

replicate his magic in other partisan races. Beyond the U.S. Senate, all five statewide offices have been held by Republicans since 2011.

According to *Inside Elections'* Baseline, which averages the partisan performance for Democratic and Republican candidates over the most recent four election cycles, a typical Republican candidate would prevail in Ohio 54.7-43.2 percent (a margin of R +12.5).

Ohio hasn't been all that competitive for some time. In 2014, Republicans' Baseline advantage was 8.3 percent (52.4-44.1 percent) and jumped to 12.3 percent after 2016 (54.3-42 percent). After 2018, the GOP advantage dipped to 9.6 percent (53.6-44.1 percent) as both of Brown's victories were included in the formula.

With the strong correlation between the partisan lean of the state and the Senate result in 2020, Republicans should still be given a significant advantage in the 2022 Senate race in Ohio. Not only would the GOP need to nominate a fundamentally flawed candidate but Democrats would also need to identify and cultivate a stellar candidate.

For this race, Rep. Tim Ryan looks finally ready to take the statewide plunge. Democrats are also talking about former state public health director Amy Acton and Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley as potential



Tim Ryan

Courtesy Office of Tim Ryan

candidates. Initially, it's not clear that any of them can put together the coalition necessary to win.

An open seat is a better opportunity for Democrats, but Ohio isn't the swing state it once was. It's probably up to Republicans to snatch

defeat from the jaws of victory. While historical midterm trends aren't in Democrats' favor, they'll be hoping for a replay of 2010, when Republicans minimized their gains by nominating unpalatable Senate candidates in key contests. If those pieces start to fall into place, the Ohio race would move onto the Senate battleground.

IE

Ohio 11 Special: Clash on the Cuyahoga

By Jacob Rubashkin

Just three people have represented the eastern part of Cleveland since the 1960s: trailblazing Reps. Lou Stokes and Stephanie Tubbs Jones, and Rep. Marcia Fudge, who has been nominated by President Joe Biden to serve as secretary of housing and urban development.

Should Fudge be confirmed by the Senate — as expected — then a special election will take place to fill her seat. Not only will the winner of that race be just the fourth person in a half-century to represent the district in Washington, but they will come into possession of a Voting Rights Act-protected, solid Democratic congressional seat.

With statewide races in Ohio becoming less hospitable to Democrats, and a Republican-controlled state legislature slowly squeezing the few remaining Democratic members of the congressional delegation through redistricting, such a seat is highly valuable.

The real race to replace Fudge will be the Democratic primary (likely to be held on May 4 but ultimately dependent on the timing of Fudge's confirmation). The general election will be perfunctory in this deeply blue district where President Donald Trump failed to crack 20 percent in 2020.

However, with Democrats holding their narrowest House majority in decades, individual Democratic members wield considerable power, placing a significance on every new entrant into the caucus, including the eventual winner of this special election.

The Lay of the Land

This gerrymandered Northeast Ohio district encompasses most of the city of Cleveland east of the Cuyahoga River as well as the inner suburbs east of Cleveland, and is connected by a thin line of precincts south down to Akron. The Cleveland metro area supplies 86 percent of the district's population, compared to the 14 percent of district residents who live in the Akron area, according to Daily Kos Elections.

A 2018 lawsuit filed by the ACLU described the district as “a detached shoulder blade with a robotic arm that reaches out from a shoulder of Cleveland.”

The district is majority Black (52 percent), with a sizable White population (37 percent), and is racially segregated, with Black residents concentrated within the Cleveland and Akron city limits, and in the inner ring of Cleveland suburbs (East Cleveland, Euclid, and Bedford).

The median household income is \$42,407, roughly two-thirds the national median, and the poverty rate is 22.7 percent, nearly double the national rate.

Despite Democratic struggles statewide, the 11th remains a stronghold for the party. Biden carried it with 80 percent in 2020 despite losing statewide by 8 points, Hillary Clinton carried it with 81 percent in 2016 despite losing statewide by 8 points, and Barack Obama won it in 2012 with 83 percent while carrying Ohio by 3 points.

In state-level races it is similarly solid — in 2018 Sen. Sherrod Brown won it 83-16 percent while winning statewide, and gubernatorial nominee Richard Cordray won it 80-18 percent while losing his race.

The Democrats

Nina Turner, 53, is most widely known for her role as a prominent surrogate for Sen. Bernie Sanders in his two presidential campaigns, running his political operation Our Revolution from 2017 to 2019, and serving as a national co-chairwoman of Sanders' 2020 campaign. Turner, who had



been seen as a staunch Clinton-world backer until she joined Sanders' campaign in 2016, quickly earned a reputation — and more than a few enemies within the party — for her fiery defenses of the independent senator from Vermont and her equally passionate and occasionally profane attacks on Sanders' opponents.

But Turner also has a deep history in local Ohio politics. A graduate of Cuyahoga Community College and Cleveland State (1997), Turner lost a 2001 Cleveland City Council race by 60 points, but returned four years later and won that Lee-Miles neighborhood seat by 7 points. She was later appointed by the state Senate Democratic caucus to represent the 25th state Senate district, and ran unopposed for a full term in 2010.

In 2014, she ran unopposed for the Democratic nomination for secretary of state and lost the general election to incumbent Republican Jon Husted by 24 points.

Turner enters this race with a significant name ID in the district, according to local Democrats, as well as a nationwide following that has already been proven a fundraising boon (Turner reported raising \$647,000 in the final three weeks of 2020 and had \$484,000 in the bank on December 31). She also locked down early endorsements from leading progressive figures and organizations including Bernie Sanders, Andrew Yang, the Working Families Party, and Democracy for America.

Turner's campaign team includes general consultant Jeff Weaver, who managed Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign. Turner has also brought on Devine Mulvey Longabaugh for advertising, Tulchin Research for polling, BlackBrown Partners for direct mail, and Aisle 518 for digital — all firms whose principals held senior positions across the 2016 and 2020 Sanders presidential campaigns.

Shontel Brown, 45, is a second-term member of the Cuyahoga County

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4

Council, and since 2017 has served as the chairwoman of the Cuyahoga County Democratic Party. She previously served on the Warrensville city council, winning her first election in 2011 by seven votes.

A 2012 graduate of Cuyahoga Community College (with an AA in business management), Brown runs a printing and marketing company, and is the first Black woman to serve as Cuyahoga Democratic chairwoman. Her bid to run the county party was backed by Fudge — Brown won the 2017 contest on the second ballot with 58 percent against Newburgh Heights Mayor Trevor Elkins, who is now Turner's political director.

For this race, Brown has secured endorsements from a raft of local politicians, including Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish, 2018 gubernatorial nominee Richard Cordray, and the mayors of Akron, Shaker Heights, and Bedford. Brown also is known as a mentee of Fudge's, and the outgoing congresswoman helped orchestrate Brown's election to be county chairwoman. And though Fudge is not currently expected to endorse in the race, local Democrats say she is known to be supportive of Brown's campaign.

Brown reported \$40,000 in the bank after the final three weeks of 2020, including donations from the prominent Ratner family, as well as a \$2,000 contribution from the campaign of now former-Rep. Cedric Richmond, the New Orleans congressman currently serving as senior adviser to President Biden.

Brown's campaign team includes Doug Thornell and Daniel Barash of SKDK, Joe Mosbrook of Strategic Resource Consulting, and campaign manager Kim Edwards.

Jeff Johnson, 62, was most recently a Cleveland city councilman from 2009-2017, but has a long history of running for office in the Cleveland area since 1984. From that year to 1998, he served on the city council, in the state Senate, and lost two general elections for Cuyahoga County commission (the predecessor to the county council).

In 1998, Johnson ran for the Democratic nomination to replace the retiring Stokes, but his campaign was derailed by a three-count federal indictment for extortion just two months before the primary. He ended up placing third behind Tubbs Jones and pastor Marvin McMickle.

Johnson was convicted and served nine months in prison. He later had his record expunged in 2008, clearing the way for him to seek office again. That year he ran for the 11th District seat twice — in the special election to replace Tubbs Jones after her death, and in the regular election. He lost both races to Fudge by a wide margin.

Johnson bounced back, defeating an incumbent to win back his old seat on the Cleveland city council in 2009, defeating another incumbent after redistricting in 2013, and in 2017 he placed third in the Cleveland mayoral blanket primary, missing out on a spot in the runoff by 6 points.

In 2018, Johnson challenged state Sen. Sandra Williams in a Democratic primary — Johnson's bid was backed by Fudge, and Williams has said she believes it was retribution for Williams running for county chairwoman a year earlier against Fudge's preferred candidate: Shontel Brown. Johnson lost decisively, 60-23 percent.



Nina Turner

Courtesy Turner campaign

Johnson's campaign raised just \$5,700 by the end of the year, and includes general consultants JR Patton and Nick Daggers of 1833 Group.

Also running is Shirley Smith, 70, a longtime legislator who served in the state House from 1999 to 2006, and in the state Senate from 2007 to 2014. Smith, who has not yet put together a campaign team, won three heavily contested primaries, in 1998 (35 percent), in 2002 (44 percent) and in 2006 (51 percent).

Absent Akron?

All four candidates currently running are from Cleveland — none are from Akron, which makes up nearly 20 percent of the district. Local Democrats say that could create an opportunity for a candidate from Akron to potentially prevail over a split field.

Both state House Minority Leader Emilia Sykes and her father, state Sen. Vernon Sykes, have been mentioned by local Democrats as potential candidates for the seat, as has Akron City Council President Margo Sommerville. All three are seen as having strong enough connections and local name recognition to overcome the disadvantage of running in a Cleveland-dominated district.

However, several local Democratic sources say that Akron candidates may be sitting out the race because of the looming redistricting cycle, in which Ohio will lose a congressional seat. While the Cleveland portion of the 11th District is VRA-protected, there is a belief Akron could be severed from the 11th and put in one of the surrounding, much more Republican districts; that would make running in the special election less attractive to an Akron candidate who may find themselves in a less hospitable district in just a year.

How It Plays Out

National and local Democratic observers largely agree that Turner begins the race as the clear favorite. Her name recognition, fundraising ability, and fervent fan base give her a substantial leg up in what is expected to be a low turnout special election.

Already, Turner has significantly outpaced her opponents in fundraising, entering the new year with \$484,000 in the bank; Brown began 2021 with just \$40,000. One national Democratic strategist notes that while Facebook and Google are maintaining their ban on political advertising, Turner's online following (444,000 Twitter followers, 105,000 Facebook followers) is one hundred times larger than her opponents, giving her yet another early advantage.

Brown is seen as Turner's biggest competition — her time as county party chairwoman and relationship with Fudge are assets and give her a local network through which to run a campaign, as evidenced by her strong list of local endorsements.

But the local political power structure is also at its weakest in a long time. When Fudge backed Jeff Johnson's campaign against Sandra Williams, Johnson still lost by 37 points. And in the 2018 Democratic primary for the state Senate's 23rd District, the Cuyahoga Democratic Party, led by Brown, endorsed state Rep. Marty Sweeney, who went on to lose by 10 points to his more liberal opponent, state Rep. Nickie Antonio.

Brown's strategy will be to present herself as the best candidate to work with the Biden administration and a Democratic Congress, aligning herself as closely as possible with the new president, and holding herself out as a dealmaker who can build relationships and bring home economic relief to the district. Brown's team believes that the likely electorate will skew toward older Black voters, who formed the bedrock of the Biden coalition in the 2020 primaries, and will be winnable if

Continued on page 6

Continued from page 5

Brown can establish herself as “the Biden candidate.”

It’s meant as an explicit contrast to Turner, whom Brown will try to portray as too opposed to Biden and Democratic leadership to effectively serve the district in Congress. Brown’s team points specifically to Turner’s comments during the presidential election that voting for Biden was like only having to eat half a bowl of feces.

Brown also intends to draw a contrast between Turner’s outside support, including from celebrities such as Mark Ruffalo and Susan Sarandon, with Brown’s own local connections.

But although Turner has a national reputation as a fiery ideologue, local Democrats say she shouldn’t be underestimated as a pragmatic, highly effective legislator. Specifically, Democrats point to Turner’s high-profile role as a state senator negotiating with Republican Gov. John Kasich on issues including police accountability and public school reform in the early 2010s. Said one senior Ohio Democrat, “it’s very difficult to make yourself relevant when you’re in the super-minority of the state Senate, but Nina did just that.”

Cleveland-area Democrats also point to Turner’s backing of 2009’s overhaul of Cuyahoga County’s governmental organization — Turner was the most prominent Black politician to endorse the effort in the wake of Cuyahoga Commissioner Jimmy Dimora’s corruption scandal and was subject to racist attacks over her involvement — as evidence of her effectiveness and persistence. Says one longtime Cuyahoga Democratic consultant unaffiliated with any campaign, “She was there, she kicked ass and took names and worked hard.”

Since entering the race, Turner has made an effort to showcase her pragmatic side in addition to burnishing her progressive bona fides (she has indicated she will aim to join Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s “squad”). She acknowledged to *Vanity Fair* that Black voters do not always associate with the progressive label, but pitched herself as someone who could unify “the Black caucus with the progressive

caucus,” and cited Rep. John Lewis, a pragmatist, as her inspiration.

In a telling conversation on the democratic socialist podcast “Bad Faith,” Turner was asked whether she supported “forcing the vote” on Medicare for All on the floor of the House, a cause celebre among the leftmost wing of the Democratic Party. Turner would not commit to the movement, and pushed back on the notion that the leftmost voices in the party always understand the best ways to affect change.

“I have served in [legislative] bodies before,” Turner told host Briahna Joy Gray, a former Sanders press secretary, “and a lot of times, what people think they know, they don’t really know.”

Johnson is well known from his 40 years in local politics, but his past of corruption still hangs over his head and will likely impede his fundraising, say local Democrats. Furthermore, as the only man in the field, Johnson faces an uphill climb in a party that is more interested than ever in electing women to higher office.

Smith, while well-liked, is not seen as a viable candidate at this stage.

The Bottom Line

There are still opportunities for this race to develop in unexpected ways, most notably with the potential entrance of an Akron candidate. There could also be significant consolidation around Brown as the candidate most likely to stop Turner. If Fudge, White House senior adviser Cedric Richmond, and other national figures come off the sidelines in a major way, that could also help Brown, who may even allow her to leverage Turner’s polarizing national reputation to raise money as the “anti-Turner” candidate.

But Turner begins the race with a clear advantage, and Brown has to prove to donors that she can win this race, helping them justify moves that could earn them Turner’s enmity down the line.

And if Turner does make it to D.C., one only has to look at her time as a state legislator to understand that she may cut a far more pragmatic path in Congress than the last four years might have you believe. **IE**

Continued from page 1

graduated from Harvard University in 1979 and went on to receive his MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in 1983.

He subsequently spent the next 23 years at Goldman Sachs, rising up the ranks of the global financial services firm and working in Germany, Hong Kong, and finally Middle Township, N.J. in 1997. A senior executive at the time of Goldman Sachs’ IPO, Murphy made a fortune — the *National Journal* estimated his net worth to be between \$60 million and \$100 million in 2019.

In 2005, Murphy was appointed by Democratic Gov. Richard Codey as chairman of a task force tackling New Jersey’s pension crisis.

From 2006 to 2009, Murphy served as finance chairman of the Democratic National Committee. That entree into national Democratic politics led to Murphy being appointed ambassador to Germany by President Obama. In 2013, he returned to New Jersey and launched several philanthropic endeavors, and launched his bid for governor in May 2016.

He went on to spend more than \$21.2 million of his own money in the Democratic primary, which he won with 48 percent, and subsequently defeated Guadagno, Christie’s lieutenant governor, in the general election.

Murphy’s first two years in office were rocky. After campaigning on raising the minimum wage, legalizing marijuana, enacting a “millionaire’s tax,” and cleaning up the state tax incentive program, Murphy found himself stymied by the Democratic-controlled state Legislature.

Murphy was at odds with the powerful South Jersey political machine;

its patron, Camden businessman George Norcross; and its champion, state Senate President Steve Sweeney, who is known to harbor gubernatorial ambitions himself. Primary points of contention included the millionaire’s tax — debates over which nearly led to a government shutdown in 2018 — and the tax incentive structure, of which Norcross is a beneficiary.

Murphy suffered from middling approval ratings for much of his first two years. A September 2019 Monmouth Poll found his approval rating among adults at 41 percent approve/38 percent disapprove, with voters giving him poor marks on middle class issues, property tax issues, and his handling of the Newark lead water crisis.

Heading into 2020, Murphy’s political position was precarious, and many observers expected Sweeney to challenge him in the Democratic primary.

Things started looking up for Murphy when Joe DiVincenzo, the powerful executive of Democratic stronghold Essex County and a close Norcross ally, endorsed the governor’s re-election. Local observers say that was a significant setback for Norcross and Sweeney.

As the year progressed and Covid-19 walloped the state, Murphy took full use of his extensive emergency powers to close businesses and halt evictions and foreclosures. The former theatre buff also began delivering daily televised press briefings on the pandemic that were well-received and described by a local source as a “news briefing, a memorial service, and The View, all at once.”

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 6

By mid-year, his approval rating had shot up to 71 percent, according to Monmouth, and *Politico* declared him “the most powerful governor in America.”

Murphy further consolidated his power by making peace with the South Jersey machine. By September, Murphy won the state Senate over to his millionaire’s tax, settled the tax incentive issue with Norcross, gave Sweeney a plum position on the state’s redistricting commission, and was shepherding a marijuana decriminalization referendum to eventual victory.

Over the past year, Murphy has steadied his listing ship, and enters the 2021 campaign as the face of a unified party, and although his popularity has dipped slightly (an October Rutgers-Eagleton poll pegged his approval/disapproval at 62 percent/33 percent) it is still far higher than any time during the his first two years.



Phil Murphy

Courtesy Murphy Campaign

Unlike in 2017, Murphy is utilizing New Jersey’s public financing system for both the primary and general. He has already maxed out his primary fundraising, pulling in \$3.5 million by the end of the year, which qualifies him for \$4.6 million in matching funds, and limits him to spending \$7.3 million in the primary. In the general, Murphy will be eligible for \$10.5 million in matching funds and be capped at \$15.6 million in spending.

Murphy’s campaign team includes media consultants Brad Lawrence and Steve DeMico of 4CM&M, pollsters Danny Franklin and Jessica Reeves of Bully Pulpit Interactive, Ed Peavy of Mission Control for direct mail, and manager Mollie Binotto.

The Republican Challengers

Jack Ciattarelli, 59, was born in Somerville, N.J., and raised in nearby Raritan. The grandson of immigrants and the son of parents he said had “one high school diploma between them,” Ciattarelli earned both an undergraduate degree in accounting (1984) and an MBA (1986) from Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.

A certified accountant, Ciattarelli had his first experience with government as a member of the Raritan (pop. 5,798) Borough Council from 1990 to 1995.

Ciattarelli went on to found two medical publishing companies: American Medical Publishing, which he sold in 1999, and Galen Publishing. That business continues to be successful. In 2017, Ciattarelli released a set of tax returns showing he earned roughly \$3.5 million from his companies over the preceding five years.

In 2006, Ciattarelli narrowly won a seat as a Somerset County Freeholder, placing second out of a four-person field and edging out the third-place finisher by less than one point. Three years later, Ciattarelli won a second term, this time placing first in a five-candidate field with 29 percent of the vote.

In 2011, Ciattarelli ran for an open state assembly seat in the 16th Legislative District, again placing a narrow second out of a field of four, winning his seat by 3 points, 26-23 percent. (New Jersey elects two assembly members per district — all candidates appear on the same ballot.)

In the assembly he sat on the Financial Institutions and Regulated Professions committees, and won re-election in 2013 (with 28 percent

and 2015 (with 25 percent), holding on even as a Democrat won the other seat for the first time in the district’s 40-year history.

In 2017, a year after battling throat cancer, Ciattarelli ran for the GOP gubernatorial nomination in an underdog race against Guadagno. He lost by 16 points, 47-31 percent, but ran a well-received campaign that secured important endorsements from the local Republican parties in seven counties.

Ciattarelli is relatively well-liked by the state’s political class, according to several local strategists on both sides of the aisle. That’s a contrast to Guadagno, who was viewed as somewhat of a lightweight, and Christie, who was viewed as a bully. Ciattarelli is seen as a competent campaigner willing to put in the work.

In 2017, the *Newark Star-Ledger* called him “a serious thinker of unblemished integrity, and a man who has proven himself willing to break stale ideological molds to solve big problems.”

During that campaign, Ciattarelli distanced himself from Trump, calling him “charlatan...unfit for office” and affirming that he did not vote for Trump in 2016. He also supported a version of the millionaire’s tax.

Ciattarelli signalled as early as February of 2018 that he intended to run against Murphy in 2021. Over the following three years, Ciattarelli positioned himself more closely to the GOP mainstream, coming out against Murphy’s own millionaire’s tax proposal, and endorsing Trump for re-election in 2020. He later spoke at a rally billed as “Stop the Steal” in December.

Ciattarelli may have been triangulating in an attempt to secure the GOP nomination — state GOP chairman Doug Steinhardt was also expected to seek the nomination. Steinhardt is a vociferous Trump supporter who had attacked Ciattarelli for being insufficiently loyal to the then-president, and was working with Trump’s 2020 campaign manager Bill Stepien.

But Steinhardt abruptly quit the race just days after the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection. Shortly after dropping out, he told conservative talk radio host Matt Rooney that he had made his decision after his law partners delivered him a post-Jan. 6 ultimatum that he could run for governor or remain a partner, but not both. Steinhardt says he “chose [his] livelihood.”



Jack Ciattarelli

Courtesy Ciattarelli Campaign

With Steinhardt out of the race, Ciattarelli does not seem eager to talk about Trump, telling the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “I wouldn’t be surprised if Phil Murphy tries to make this election about Trump, but I’m not going to let that happen.”

Ciattarelli is now the prohibitive favorite, and has been endorsed by 11 county party chairmen. He announced a year-end haul of \$1.1 million, which qualifies him for an additional \$1.8 million in public matching funds for the primary.

Also running are former Franklin Township mayor/former Somerset County Freeholder Brian Levine, who served two terms in Ciattarelli’s home county before losing his seat in 2020, and Atlantic City businessman Hirsh Singh, who placed second in the 2020 GOP Senate primary with 36 percent and second in the 2018 GOP primary for the 2nd Congressional District with 31 percent.

Neither are expected to be competitive, but one local source cautions

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

that if Trump himself were to weigh in on the primary, perhaps by endorsing Singh, who is running the most explicitly pro-Trump campaign, that could change the balance of the competition. But that appears unlikely at the moment.

The primary is June 8.

How It Plays Out

As a popular Democratic governor in a Democratic state with a sizable financial advantage, Murphy begins this race as the favorite.

Ciattarelli will run on a management competency message, positioning himself as a no-nonsense, pragmatic Jersey guy (“straight out of central casting,” says one local source) who gets stuff done, as opposed to the theatrical, globetrotting Murphy.

The coronavirus pandemic will be center stage for both campaigns.

Ciattarelli will focus on the thousands of deaths in nursing homes and long-term care facilities over the past year (an issue Sweeney, Murphy’s erstwhile intraparty rival, also wielded against the governor). He’ll also make an issue of the vaccination rollout, which has been slow and disjointed in New Jersey and many parts of the country.

Ciattarelli will go after Murphy for using emergency powers to close businesses, arguing that Murphy has arbitrarily hurt the economy, especially the tourism industry in South Jersey, where the Jersey Shore and Atlantic City rely on in-person patronage to survive.

But there’s only so much Ciattarelli can say if the pandemic begins to recede and Murphy continues to ease restrictions. When Murphy recently announced an increase in indoor dining capacity, Ciattarelli was left describing it as “a bit of good news for the battered restaurant industry” but attacking it as “a drunk on power governor saying ‘let them eat cake.’”

Murphy will present himself as a skilled crisis manager who flattened the curve when New Jersey was one of the first states hit by the pandemic, who let the science, not the politics, guide him in his decisions, and who countered President Trump’s stream of misinformation with his own steady leadership in Trenton.

Murphy will also seize on his productive third year in office, highlighting the millionaire’s tax he was finally able to push through, as well as the \$15 minimum wage, decriminalization of marijuana, and an expansion of paid family leave.

Ciattarelli will also try to paint Murphy as more broadly incompetent and unable to turn the state around, pointing to the creaky unemployment system and persistent issues with long lines and wait times at the Department of Motor Vehicles as evidence the state is broken. Ciattarelli’s slogan is “Let’s Fix New Jersey.”

As all Republicans in New Jersey do, Ciattarelli will also go after the state’s high property taxes as bad for business and the middle class.

Murphy and outside Democratic groups will tie Ciattarelli to Trump, focusing on his endorsement of the then-president in 2020 and his decision to speak at a Stop the Steal rally near Bedminster, where the former president owns a golf club. They will attempt to convince voters Ciattarelli isn’t the moderate problem solver he holds himself out as, pointing to his opposition to a \$15 minimum wage, his pro-life stance on abortion, and his backtracking from the millionaire’s tax.

By The Numbers

Although nearly all statewide Democratic candidates this century have won their races by similar margins, their coalitions have shifted significantly.

Obama and Biden won by identical margins in 2008 and 2020,

respectively, but Obama outperformed Biden in more rural, less dense South Jersey; his vote share was on average 5.7 percent higher than Biden’s in Salem, Cumberland, Ocean, Gloucester, Atlantic, and Cape May counties. Biden outperformed Obama in the North Jersey suburban counties of Bergen, Union, Hunterdon, Morris, and Somerset by an average of 4.7 percent, including a 7-point increase in Ciattarelli’s own Somerset, which for the first time in its history has an entirely Democratic board of commissioners.

Even as they have lost support in the whiter, more rural areas of the state, Democrats have picked up strength among wealthier, suburban voters and in faster-growing areas, which makes off-year elections, where turnout drops significantly, treacherous for Republicans.

Ciattarelli has to continue to increase GOP vote share in South Jersey while also reclaiming GOP territory in North Jersey. That won’t be easy, especially without Trump on the ballot to motivate lower-propensity GOP voters.

Ciattarelli has to find a way to get those voters to show up — so even though he no longer has to deal with Steinhardt on his right flank haranguing him about being insufficiently loyal, he can’t completely abandon the former president either.

The Bottom Line

Murphy begins this race a heavy favorite, despite the historical trend against Democratic governors. So far, the state’s Covid-19 crisis has been an opportunity for him to consolidate support, rather than to lose it.

That could change. The uncertainty of the coronavirus bleeds into this race, and it’s not out of the question that New Jersey’s situation could deteriorate over the next nine months, and Murphy’s political fortunes with it. But that’s not the most likely outcome at the moment.

Ciattarelli needs enough voters, not just Republicans but independents and even some Democrats too, to want badly enough to fire their Democratic governor that they will show up the year after a presidential election to vote. That’s a tall task, even for a talented candidate.

One thing this race could tell us is whether the anti-lockdown protests of last summer have retained any political potency — if Murphy underperforms expectations, especially in South Jersey, a hotbed of anti-restriction protests.

But unless things change, Murphy is well-positioned to break the Democrats’ re-election curse.

IE

2020 Baseline for New Jersey Congressional Districts

District	Democrat	Republican	Margin
1st	61.5%	36.3%	D+25.2
2nd	45.6%	51.7%	R+6.1
3rd	47.1%	50.8%	R+3.7
4th	40.8%	57.0%	R+16.2
5th	50.1%	47.6%	D+2.5
6th	58.8%	39.7%	D+19.1
7th	47.7%	49.1%	R+1.4
8th	76.5%	20.7%	D+55.7
9th	66.1%	31.6%	D+34.5
10th	85.0%	12.8%	D+72.2
11th	48.5%	49.5%	R+1.0
12th	64.6%	32.9%	D+31.7
Statewide	55.7%	42.1%	D+13.6