

Opinion: Why Murphy's handling of the pandemic likely will be a plus in his reelection bid

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The GOP can raise questions, 'but they must be presented as legitimate policy differences rather than partisan second-guessing'



Carl Golden

It's a given that the year-long COVID-19 pandemic and the Murphy administration's response to it will be the principal point of contention in the gubernatorial campaign this year.

There will likely be policy issues, political controversies or natural disasters (hurricane season could begin as early as May this year, for instance)

that will arise in the next seven months and capture public and official attention. None, though, will equal the impact nor overshadow the most serious public health crisis in a century because of a disease that has already infected nearly three-quarters of a million new Jerseyans and proved fatal for more than 25,000 since its onset in March of 2020.

It is risky, of course, to engage in handicapping elections or venturing to predict outcomes well in advance of serious campaigning, but if the pandemic remains the central issue to the near-exclusion of others, the odds fall in favor of Gov. Phil Murphy accomplishing what no Democratic governor of New Jersey has achieved in 44 years — win a second term.

His five-day-a-week briefings (since reduced to three) on the course of the pandemic and the steps taken to bring it under control, prevent its spread, reduce its lethal consequences and avoid an overwhelmed health care system not only kept people informed but presented an opportunity for him to display leadership and competence at the top.

It was an environment rarely placed before most public officials — the chance to dominate news coverage seven days a week, month in and month out.

Steady majority support

Murphy used the bully pulpit effectively and has enjoyed consistent majority support for his performance even as the economy faltered, unemployment rose, schools closed, and restrictions were imposed on travel and public gatherings.

Even as frustrations grew and tempers frayed, New Jersey's notoriously cranky populace accepted the upending of their lives in the larger interest of protecting themselves from an invisible disease for which a vaccine didn't exist.

Critics faulted Murphy for moving too slowly to lift the lockdown on restaurants and for creating a piecemeal approach to restoring in-school instruction to bring students out from behind their computers and leave their bedrooms for their classrooms.

Legislative Republicans grouched that Murphy was guilty of over-reliance on executive orders, setting policies and conditions by gubernatorial fiat rather than consult with and secure the Legislature's approval.

They accused him of mishandling the response to conditions in nursing homes and long-term care facilities, resulting in thousands of the vulnerable elderly falling ill and dying.

The pandemic took a significant toll on those living in veterans' facilities in Paramus and Menlo Park, amid complaints that proper safety protocols were ignored and that protective equipment was in short supply.

Presumptive GOP nominee Jack Ciattarelli

Former Somerset County Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, the presumptive Republican gubernatorial nominee, has kept up a steady drumbeat of criticism of Murphy's handling of the crisis, emphasizing the impact on small businesses driven into closures and bankruptcies and likely never to reopen.

There is no question that Murphy has moved with caution — excessive and ultimately harmful caution, say his critics — toward a restoration of pre-pandemic life. And there is no question either that economic hardship has been widespread.

Murphy has defended his record and actions as being guided solely by scientific evidence and the expertise of public health professionals.

Thus far, his rationale has held up well and, with the successful development of vaccines, steady reductions in new infections, hospitalizations and fatalities, the long sought “return to normalcy” may be at hand.

If, for instance, throngs descend on beaches and boardwalks on Memorial Day, if July 4 fireworks extravaganzas light up the sky and if back-to-school sale days genuinely forecast that “back to school” is imminent, Murphy will emerge politically stronger and a far more formidable candidate.

He already enjoys a united Democratic Party and a voter registration edge of more than 1 million registrants — significant and daunting odds for Republicans.

While New Jerseyans will remember the phrases introduced into the vernacular in the past year — “flatten the curve, remote learning, mask up, social distancing, contact tracing” — it will be with a sense of relief that they’ve endured and will reward Murphy for it.

Yes, there have been missteps

To be sure, there have been missteps and flawed judgments by the administration, largely because it was dealing with an unprecedented crisis for which there was no history to fall back on and no experience to draw upon.

In a campaign setting, these questions will be raised but they must be presented as legitimate policy differences rather than partisan second-guessing.

It will be necessary for Murphy to fend off the criticism by emphasizing his commitment to protecting the state’s people by adhering to established medical advice and standing firm against outside pressures which could lead to an escalation of the outbreak.

Ciattarelli will likely focus on the long-term impact of the extended lockdowns and school closures, arguing they were kept in place even though not justified by the infection and transmission data.

He may feel that Murphy is vulnerable as well for failing to recognize early that patients in long-term care facilities and the staffs that cared for them were more highly susceptible than the general population yet was slow to take adequate steps to address it.

While the pandemic will be the dominant issue in the campaign, whether Murphy's handling of it was so egregious that it demands voters opt for a change in the executive office is problematic.

At this point — early thought it may be — making that case will be difficult, indeed.

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