

# Opinion: Murphy beats Ciattarelli in a walk? Not so fast

CARL GOLDEN | JUNE 28, 2021 | [OPINION](#)

Ciattarelli may be able to gain ground if he concentrates on property taxes and Murphy's ethical missteps. But he can't afford to get sucked into a debate about Trump



Carl Golden

In the days following the June 8 primary election, the high priests of conventional wisdom pronounced the gubernatorial election noncompetitive and a Gov. Phil Murphy landslide reelection assured.

The signs are all there, said the seers:

Murphy's approval rating is over 50%.

His handling of the COVID-19 pandemic enjoys majority public support.

Democrats outnumber Republican voter registrants by more than 1 million, an unprecedented head start.

The holy war between Murphy and South Jersey political power broker George Norcross is over.

The Republican Party remains in thrall to former President Donald Trump, arguably the most disliked public figure in New Jersey political history, and that will rub off on Republican candidates this fall.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Jack Ciattarelli may as well concede now, the insiders smugly suggest, and spare New Jerseyans five months of

partisan carpet-bombing on television, in their mailboxes and on their favorite websites, blogs and in news columns.

Murphy certainly gazes at a friendly political environment as he seeks to become the first Democratic governor reelected since 1977, while Ciattarelli — like any statewide Republican candidate — faces a struggle to gain name recognition and convince the wide swath of unaffiliated voters that he can better administer state government than Murphy.

It's likely that Trump's name and image will appear in Murphy's campaign ads and literature more often than those of his Republican opponent.

## **The Trump factor**

The governor will attempt to tie Ciattarelli to Trump while Ciattarelli will portray it as a referendum on Murphy's first term.

Ciattarelli's history with Trump is ambivalent, once describing him as a charlatan who didn't deserve to be president but softening his view later as he sought the party's gubernatorial nomination.

While Murphy heads into the campaign with distinct advantages, Ciattarelli is not without issues and lines of attack that he hopes will keep the focus on state matters Murphy has either ignored or handled poorly.

Property taxes, historically the issue most troubling to New Jersey voters, are at the core of Ciattarelli's strategy. With the average tax bill now in excess of \$9,100 annually and well into five figures in many municipalities, he's criticized Murphy for failing to act in any meaningful fashion to control them.

The current state aid to local school districts formula is, according to Ciattarelli, at the heart of the issue and reforming and replacing it are long overdue. Murphy, aside from seeking ever increasing amounts of state aid,

has refused to face up to the problem, he contends, out of his allegiance to the New Jersey Education Association and his fear of alienating it.

Without addressing the formula in a comprehensive way and relying instead on year-to-year aid increases simply buys time and accomplishes nothing toward long-term stability, Ciattarelli argues.

## **Fuel for Ciattarelli**

Forcing Murphy into a full-throated debate over school aid and the relentless increase in property taxes can only benefit Ciattarelli by turning an intense focus on an issue that has bedeviled governors and legislatures for more than 40 years.

Murphy's long delays in dealing with scandals in his administration provide an opportunity for Ciattarelli to cast doubt on the governor's ability to act decisively when confronted with ethical misconduct.

When revelations of widespread and systemic abuse, beatings and sexual assaults at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women emerged, Murphy stood by Department of Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks for weeks despite demands for his resignation, including a resolution signed by all 25 Democratic senators urging Murphy to dismiss him.

While expressing his horror at the reports of abuse of inmates at the facility, Murphy remained silent on Hicks' future, suggesting that he hoped the incident would blow over with the passage of time and the implementation of internal reforms.

It was only after a damning report from an outside investigation that Hicks was forced to resign and Murphy attempted to recoup some credibility by announcing the facility would be closed.

He dallied in 2019 as well when it was revealed his appointed director of the Schools Development Authority had dismissed some 30 career employees of the agency and replaced them with friends, relatives or former co-workers, many of whom had little or no qualifications for their positions.

Only after weeks of critical news accounts and Murphy's silence was the director forced out and, in a parting shot, said all personnel actions she took were approved in advance by the governor's office.

## **Pouncing on missteps**

The administration's handling of sexual assault allegations brought by a campaign staffer against a co-worker was stunningly inept and publicly embarrassing as top advisers to the governor scrambled madly to avoid any responsibility while insisting Murphy was unaware of the entire incident.

The conflicting testimony to a special legislative committee and the clumsy, often contradictory, explanations led to weeks of critical media coverage and serious accusations that the campaign and administration had turned a blind eye to a hostile work environment and tolerated harassment of female staffers. In the early stages of the administration, the episode stood out as a stark example of an inexperienced and naïve governor's office staff incapable of dealing with difficult and sensitive issues.

Ciattarelli can claim these scandals as evidence that political considerations were of higher priority than strict standards of ethical behavior.

For Ciattarelli to achieve any headway, it is crucial for him to avoid being dragged into a debate with Murphy over Trump and the former president's stream of outrageous actions and claims that massive voter fraud cheated him of a second term.

There is no indication at this stage that Trump will involve himself in the election, either by endorsing Ciattarelli or going on the offensive against Murphy.

Two of Ciattarelli's opponents in the primary ran as unabashed Trump supporters and received a combined 47% of the vote, an indication that the ex-president retains some hardcore party support.

It is likely that those who supported the two challengers will come home in November and support Ciattarelli. They'll certainly not desert the party and throw in with Murphy.

## **The 'oops!' factor**

Notwithstanding the conventional-wisdom crowd, Ciattarelli understands the long odds he confronts as well as the challenge to maintain the focus on New Jersey issues and concerns.

Murphy is formidable but not invulnerable; the favorite but not the inevitable.

Conventional wisdom, after all, is not infallible.

In 2016, it predicted confidently that the nation's next leader would be addressed as "Madam President" rather than "Mister President."

In 2020, it foresaw a landslide by Joe Biden, only to have the Electoral College result nearly identical to Trump's 2016 margin. (304-227 in 2016; 306-232 in 2020).

In 2020, it assured the country that Democrats would build on their majority in the House of Representatives by as much as 20 seats, only to have Republicans gain 15 seats.

There's always an "oops!" factor that Ciattarelli can hope for.

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