

Democrats Attack Murphy; Republicans Separate From Christie

Democrats running for New Jersey governor have targeted the wealthy front-runner during their first primary debate.

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By MICHAEL CATALINI, Associated Press

GALLOWAY, N.J. (AP) — Democrats running for governor trained their rhetorical firepower on wealthy front-runner Phil Murphy during Tuesday's first primary debates, which also saw Republicans attacking each other and distancing themselves from GOP Gov. Chris Christie.

The pair of one-hour debates Tuesday at Stockton University were livestreamed online and gave voters in New Jersey, which along with Virginia will hold the country's only two statewide elections this November, their first look at the Democratic and Republican candidates going head to head.

Murphy, a former Obama administration official who served as an executive at Goldman Sachs, highlighted his middle-class roots, reiterated calls for rebuilding the "innovation economy" and stayed above the fray by avoiding sharp attacks. He later criticized Christie and Republican President Donald Trump, casting him as divisive.

Murphy's opponents relished the opportunity to compare him to former Democratic governor and Goldman executive Jon Corzine.

Assemblyman John Wisniewski said the state didn't need another "Goldman Sachs governor" and attacked Murphy's keynote idea of forming a state bank. Jim Johnson, an attorney and former Clinton administration official, decried the idea of "more of the same."

Johnson said the same establishment that elected Christie and Corzine would elect Murphy.

"If we continue to play by the same old playbook written by the same insiders do you think your lives will be any better?" Johnson asked.

State Sen. Ray Lesniak, a former attorney, highlighted his experience as an Army veteran, lawmaker and environmental advocate in the Legislature.

In the earlier Republican debate, Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli opened with pointed attacks toward each other.

Guadagno, who has served with Christie since 2010, said Ciattarelli's economic plan would require higher taxes. Ciattarelli said Guadagno's so-called "circuit breaker" plan to cap property tax levies would rely on "phantom funds." Guadagno's proposal would cost \$1.5 billion, part of which she says she would find by auditing the government.

Some of the sharpest attacks came when the candidates distanced themselves from Christie, who is term-limited.

Ciattarelli said the Christie-Guadagno administration "just haven't been able to get it done" over the past two terms.

"No Republican in this state has been more critical of the governor than Jack Ciattarelli," he said.

Guadagno alluded to Christie, who gained a reputation for telling it like it is and famously battles with the state's public sector unions over pensions. After a question about how she would deal with the issue, she took the opportunity to contrast herself with Christie.

"I don't believe yelling and screaming and shouting at everyone gets anything done," she said.

Guadagno praised her tenure as the state's first lieutenant governor, saying she helped create jobs, but she pivoted away from Christie.

"We need to make New Jersey better," she said. "We need to make it more affordable."

The contest to replace Christie has been underway for months but has flown under the radar.

On the Republican side, Guadagno has led in recent polls, but Ciattarelli gained ground in a recent survey. Experts say both candidates face an uphill climb after two terms of Christie, a Republican incumbent whose job approval is near record lows.

Among the Democrats, Murphy has poured \$10 million of his own cash into the campaign, won endorsements from influential politicians and unions and leads in recent polls. Johnson, a former Clinton administration Treasury official, is a political outsider but has succeeded at raising cash and rising in polls.

Lesniak is a long-time state legislator with a base of support around his Elizabeth-based district. Wisniewski, also a long-time legislator and former state party chairman, is staking his campaign to his support for independent Vermont U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders' Democratic presidential campaign, which he chaired in New Jersey last year.

The primary is June 6. Christie, who ran an unsuccessful campaign for president last year, is a friend of Trump's and is leading a commission examining opioid addiction for him.

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