

Stockton Hosts State's First Gubernatorial Primary Debates for Republicans and Democrats in 2017

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Thursday, May 11, 2017

Contact: Maryjane Briant
News and Media Relations Director
Galloway, N.J. 08205
Maryjane.Briant@stockton.edu
(609) 652-4593
stockton.edu/media

Galloway, N.J. - Candidates for their parties' nominations to run for governor of New Jersey - one of the most powerful governorships in the nation - squared off at Stockton University tonight in the first statewide gubernatorial primary debates.

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli of the 16th District faced off for the GOP beginning at 6:30 p.m., beginning with a handshake. But in several spirited exchanges, each accused the other of "pandering" and they disagreed on how to resolve the state's economic problems and property tax issues.

Guadagno said she had been a job creator and pushed her "circuit breaker" plan to help millennials and those living paycheck-to-paycheck by having the state pay the remainder of homeowners' school-tax bills once that hits over 5 percent of annual income. She plans a state audit to find funds to pay for it and also counts on revenue growth. She said it would take too long to get a new school funding formula through the Legislature, as Ciattarelli advocates.

Ciattarelli said there were "stark differences" between their approaches and said, "You can't solve the property tax problem without solving the inequitable K-12 school funding formula." A certified public accountant himself, he said he "could recommend a good CPA to her," adding that her plan relies on "phantom revenues."

Several Democrats, who began their debate at 8 p.m., took shots at former Goldman Sachs financier and ambassador to Germany Phil Murphy. Assemblyman John Wisniewski, of the 19th District, said the primary race has been "like an auction" with one person "bidding it up." Jim Johnson, an attorney and a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and Under Secretary of the Treasury for Enforcement, said "I'm for real change," and told the audience, "the old playbook" brought the state governors Jon Corzine and Chris Christie. "If we don't stand up and open up this process to all of us, it will give us Phil Murphy."

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All the candidates in both parties supported legalizing medical marijuana, but there were differences on legalizing marijuana for recreational use. Guadagno said veterans and children suffering from cancer should have access to medically prescribed marijuana, but since U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions opposes legalization, “there may be a problem.”

Ciattarelli, a cancer survivor, said he would support medically prescribed marijuana for serious pain and decriminalizing it for recreational use. But he is “not for outright legalization.”

State Sen. Ray Lesniak, of the 20th District, said he founded a high school for children who are substance abusers and it was difficult for him to come out in favor of legalizing medical marijuana, but he had been convinced by Canada’s approach. He favored restricting “candies” or edible marijuana that attracts children. “By 2018,” he predicted, “we will have legal marijuana in New Jersey.”

Responding to climate change and ensuring clean drinking water were big issues crossing party lines.

Lesniak said he established the first Superfund site law and prevailed in court when it was challenged. “I sponsored the first safe drinking water law in the country,” he said, adding that he has advocated “clean water, clean energy and a clean economy” for his entire career.

Wisniewski criticized Gov. Chris Christie, saying through appointments, he “engineered the Pinelands Commission to get a pipeline through the Pinelands.” He said he would push back on that decision, step up state purchases of open space to protect water and “ban fracking,” which is currently under a moratorium.

Ciattarelli said he did “not believe pipelines belong in either the Highlands or the Pinelands.” He called the drinking water situation a crisis. “We have 100-year-old wooden and concrete pipes delivering water,” he said. He saw “a unique opportunity for public-private partnerships” to be used to provide new infrastructure.

“It’s a balance between jobs that are created” by natural gas pipelines and protecting the environment, Guadagno said.

“I would focus from the source to the faucet,” said Johnson. He advocated focusing on new technology to remove lead from water.

Asked about wind turbines and offshore drilling, reactions were mixed.

Wind turbines “are renewable energy and could create innovative new jobs,” Guadagno said. She added that they are “friendly to tourism” and could help provide more energy when Oyster Creek, the nation’s oldest nuclear plant located in Ocean County, goes offline.

“The Jersey Shore is the most precious resource,” said Ciattarelli, adding that drilling and turbines are both threats. He advocated nuclear and natural gas as energy sources, but said tax dollars should not be used to fund them.

“Offshore drilling is wrong at every level,” said Murphy. “Embrace offshore wind and turn away from offshore drilling.”

Wisniewski said offshore drilling was “a horrible idea” that could kill tourism if there were a spill. He also advocated more funding for mass transit to help the environment. “Get people out of their cars and onto trains and buses,” he said. “Invest in transportation infrastructure - rails not roads.”

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“We need a governor with the right temperament, skills, the experience, life story,” said Murphy, the current front-runner among the Democrats in polls. “A governor who will grow the economy and make it fair again. I will be a governor who has your back.”

Sharon Schulman, executive director of the university’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, moderated the debates. The university was selected to host the events by the N.J. Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC), which determined which candidates were eligible to participate.

In opening remarks, University President Harvey Kesselman said that civic engagement, which the debates exemplify, has always been one of Stockton’s core values. He noted that the questions being asked of the candidates were drawn from those submitted by students, faculty, staff and the general public, to promote participation.

Four other candidates, who were not selected by ELEC as they had not raised enough funds to qualify, held their own debates outside the Campus Center earlier in the evening.

GOP gubernatorial candidates Joseph Rudy Rullo, a businessman who ran for the U.S. Senate in 2012, and Steven Rogers, the Nutley commissioner of Public Affairs, debated Democratic candidates Bill Brennan, a retired firefighter with degrees in law, social science and fire science, and Mark Zinna, a Tenafly councilman and businessman.

Rogers and Rullo also invited fellow Republican governor candidate Hirsh Singh, an Atlantic County aerospace engineer, to join them. Singh reportedly declined, saying he is challenging ELEC’s decision to exclude him in court. He has said he raised over \$900,000 - more than double the required \$430,000. But ELEC excluded him after he missed a deadline to submit an application.

Under New Jersey’s Constitution, only the governor and lieutenant governor are elected on a statewide basis. The governor appoints the cabinet, subject to confirmation by the State Senate. In New Jersey, the governor also has the power to appoint Superior Court judges and county prosecutors, although “senatorial courtesy” allows home district legislators to have a say.

The governor also appoints the state Attorney General and the N.J. Secretary of State, with the approval of the State Senate.

The gubernatorial primary election will take place on June 6, and the general election will be held Nov. 7. Christie has served two terms and cannot serve a consecutive third term. Guadagno is the state’s first lieutenant governor (since the colonial era) and also serves as Secretary of State of New Jersey. A referendum in 2006 was passed amending the state’s Constitution to provide for the position beginning with the 2009 election.

The debates were livestreamed on stockton.edu/governordebates, with signing provided for the hearing impaired and a Spanish translation provided. The event was also available on [Stockton’s Facebook page](#).

Tickets were free and went fast for the Campus Center Theatre, which seats about 250. Due to public demand, an additional 350 tickets were offered to watch the debates being simulcast in the Campus Center Event Room.

For more information about Stockton University’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, visit stockton.edu/hughescenter.

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