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Opinion

Opinion: Phil Murphy or Stephen Sweeney? It won't matter to NJ voters at the polls

By Carl Golden

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While the civil war burning through the state Democratic Party shows no signs of abating — indeed, just the opposite — its impact on the New Jersey Assembly elections this November will be negligible. The partisan makeup of the 80-member chamber that will be sworn in in January will be little changed from the current body.

The open warfare will continue to capture the imagination of the media/political establishment, providing innumerable column inches of print, hours of airtime, and incalculable numbers of mouse clicks, while filling the halls of the Statehouse with gossip and the latest intrigue.

As for swaying voters in November, not so much.

The bitter exchanges between Gov. Phil Murphy and Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-3rd of West Deptford, portray a Democratic Party riven by a struggle for dominance but have scant resonance among voters.

In a state in which Democrats hold an insurmountable lead in voter registration — nearly 1 million over Republicans — Assembly elections and the paltry turnouts they draw are decided by committed party voters, those who troop faithfully to the polls every year to support the organization candidates.

In the absence of any overarching policy issue that mobilizes voters intent on delivering a message, it is party identification and allegiance bolstered by long-established voting patterns that determine the outcome. An appreciable shift in the 54-26 edge currently held by Democrats isn't in the cards.

That New Jersey's district map is a model of noncompetitiveness is a given. It is fundamentally an incumbent protection plan, reflecting the reality of one-party dominance in legislative elections. It's been 18 years since Republicans last controlled the Legislature, for instance, and short of a gubernatorial landslide, the party faces years of minority status.

Voters may side with the Murphy- or Sweeney-led faction, but the conflict is more a topic of conversation than a decisive factor in their ballot decision.

Democratic voters won't abandon the party because of a power struggle at the top. They will not opt for a Republican candidate to express dissatisfaction with what they believe is a messy situation that should never have gotten this far.

It's a bit like watching two friends duke it out in the parking lot of the neighborhood bar. They're interested in who wins, but it doesn't affect the way they feel about either one of the combatants.

Some dismiss the entire feud as typical inside baseball that voters shrug off as the usual family disagreement. Strong personalities in positions of power inevitably butt heads — particularly when personal ambition is a factor — but eventually a truce is reached, leaving only hurt feelings and bruised egos.

The impact of the constant sniping and snarkiness won't be felt this November, but, if not dialed back, will create a serious and potentially perilous threat in 2020.

Murphy, for instance, has continued to identify an increase in the tax on incomes above \$1 million as the centerpiece of his legislative priorities, and has been unsparing in his criticism of those who disagree. He has remained adamant and presumably intends to include it in his budget message next March, teeing up another confrontation and bringing the state to the brink of a shutdown for the third consecutive year, a less-than-enviable accomplishment.

The governor delivers his "whose side are you on?" challenge to the legislative leaders in a manner suggesting that the wrong answer will draw retaliation. The choose-up-sides dare will take on a more divisive tone as eyes and attention increasingly turn to the 2021 election, placing every action in the context of the gubernatorial and legislative campaigns.

Murphy's critics — chiefly South Jersey political leader George Norcross — have already raised the prospect of a primary election challenge. Whether it develops will depend in considerable measure on if the existing differences, while deep, can be put aside.

If there is no letup in the rhetorical swordplay, and if it intensifies, it will be settled only by the results of the 2021 election.

The unprecedented level of intraparty conflict has upended the conventional wisdom that unified, one-party government is the path to achieving public policy goals through compromise, finding common ground and embracing coexistence — uneasy though it might be.

This November will produce a status-quo election, and the Assembly will remain firmly in the grip of the Democrats. What they do with that control will determine all that follows.

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