

# Opinion: Speaker chaos? NJ has been there, done that

CARL GOLDEN | OCTOBER 6, 2023 | [OPINION](#)

In 1971, a divided state Assembly failed to agree on a leader



Carl Golden

As the Republican majority in the House of Representatives struggles to select a new House speaker, talk of consensus, negotiations, deals and accommodations fill the air above the U. S. Capitol. It's the aftermath of a handful of Republican malcontents — aided by Democrats — driving Californian Kevin McCarthy from the leadership office he occupied for less than 10 months.

For the first time in the country's history, a sitting speaker was deposed, leaving the House incapable of conducting anything other than routine housekeeping business while major issues go unaddressed, including the possibility of a government shutdown in mid-November unless a funding proposal is approved.

Dire warnings of chaos resulting from an unprecedented deadlocked House unable to agree on an elected speaker have intensified and, in the absence of a swift resolution, half of the U. S. Congress will be paralyzed.

Unprecedented? For the Congress, perhaps, but more than 51 years ago, in January of 1972, it was a reality in the New Jersey General Assembly.

## Deadlock

The 1971 election produced a partisan deadlock: 40 Democrats, 39 Republicans and one independent who refused to align himself with either party. Neither

party had secured the 41 votes necessary to organize the Assembly and elect a speaker.

In the weeks following the election, it became apparent that neither side intended to blink first and break the impasse, raising the prospect that, when the new legislative session convened the following January, it would do so without a presiding officer.

The Republican caucus had selected Essex County Assemblyman Tom Kean as its candidate for speaker while Democrats supported Mercer County Assemblyman S. Howard Woodson, a Trenton clergyman who would, if elected speaker, become the first Black man to fill the position.

The independent member — and potentially the one who held the decisive vote in the speakership contest — was Anthony Imperiale of Newark, a burly demagogic figure of great controversy and notoriety who led a citizen's law-and-order group from his base in the predominantly Italian North Ward of the city in response to the 1967 riots.

I found myself in the thick of it having joined Kean's majority office staff at the beginning of 1971 as press spokesman after spending little more than four years as a staffer in the U.S. House of Representatives.

There was a great deal of speculation but little movement in the period between the election and the opening day of the new legislative session and, when it arrived in January, nothing had changed in either party's position.

When the Legislature convened in January, the role of presiding officer in the Assembly was filled by the clerk.

## **Bipartisan discord**

Little did anyone know that what was to follow was the most raucous, contentious, confrontational, ill-tempered and mean-spirited governmental

procedure in the state's history.

Unbeknownst to all but a few, a closely-held accommodation had been reached between Republican leadership and Democratic Assemblyman David Friedland of Hudson County to deliver his and three other votes in support of Kean for Speaker.

When the tally was taken, Friedland, two other Hudson Democrats and one from Union County voted for Kean. The explosion of anger and fury reverberated throughout the chamber.

Friedland — a controversial figure in his own right but one of the most politically shrewd individuals in a county where historically such insight was embedded in the DNA — was excoriated unmercifully.

At one point, a freshman Democrat took the floor and stunned the chamber when he pointed at Friedland and bellowed “Judas!”

Denunciations of the arrangement and all involved in it echoed off the walls of the Assembly chamber for upwards of five hours as vitriol poured forth from lawmaker after lawmaker.

In dealing with the stalemate, Democrats were in a bind. They were loath to woo Imperiale and risk the uproar that would surely follow their accommodating and rewarding an individual whose actions and rhetoric on racial issues was anathema to them.

Had they done so, though, it would have been the ultimate in political irony: securing the decisive vote from a racially charged individual to elevate a Black inner-city clergyman to the highest leadership position in the Assembly and second-in-line of gubernatorial succession behind the Senate president. The storyline would have been irresistible.

Republican leadership wisely ignored Imperiale altogether, understanding that his lone vote was meaningless and would produce only a 40-40 draw. In the end, Imperiale was a non-factor.

## **Media outrage**

The uproar that day, though, was but a precursor to the political/media outrage that ensued.

For days at a time, criticism rained down on Kean from every newspaper in the state. Editorial writers thumbed furiously through their thesaurus in search of synonyms for “corrupt” and applied them all to Friedland.

At the time, the print media was supreme, at the pinnacle of their power and influence as the exclusive source of political news and commentary and their attacks were relentless and merciless.

Republicans justified the arrangement as a necessary step to end a potentially damaging stalemate to organize the Assembly and conduct legislative and governmental affairs in an orderly fashion.

For his part, Friedland said his decision to cross over party lines in support of Kean reflected his view that the needs of Hudson County and the attention paid to its issues were consistently lacking and demanded correcting.

In return, Friedland received authority to name a few committee chairs, an office in the State House and a modest appropriation to hire a staff assistant.

## **Moving on**

Kean absorbed the drumbeat of media criticism and felt the most effective way to deal with it was to conduct legislative business responsibly and fairly and to move steadily toward building a record of accomplishment in addressing the state’s problems and issues.

The public, he felt, would notice and once the initial shock of what had transpired wore off, the media would move on grudgingly.

Time proved him right and his two years as speaker were consequential and successful.

For me, the several weeks that elapsed before what was referred to in media shorthand as “the Friedland deal” waned were exhausting, challenging, draining and, at times, surreal.

Kean’s hand was steady and his disposition remarkably evenhanded and balanced and I tried to emulate him while navigating the media storm.

Kean, of course, went on to forge a successful career, culminating in two terms as governor, including a reelection victory margin which will likely never be equaled and to this day — 32 years after leaving office — maintains a public approval rating above all others.

Woodson, the Trenton clergyman, rose to the speaker’s office in 1974 following the Democratic landslide of the previous November.

## **Similarities to now**

The comparison between the dilemma faced by Congress and that of the Assembly in 1972 isn’t perfect, of course. But the similarities are striking.

The most notable difference is that while the partisan balance in the Assembly on that day in 1972 was deadlocked by the election two months earlier, House Republicans hold a five-seat majority. It was divisive infighting that led one small faction to turn on the party and punish McCarthy with banishment for striking a bargain with Democrats on a spending bill.

Moreover, while Kean needed a majority of the entire Assembly membership — 41 votes — to succeed, McCarthy needed 218 votes to hold the speaker’s office.

Eight Republican members voted in favor of his dismissal and — joined by all Democrats — inflicted a 216-210 defeat on McCarthy.

The drama in Congress has yet to play out fully and there remains some optimism that Republicans will unify behind a speaker candidate. That would obviate the need to bargain for votes with Democrats who — given significant leverage — may demand far-reaching concessions and perhaps even creation of a coalition government.

For me, “The Making of the Speaker 1972” was a life experience in a book that will never be fully closed. It remains an unforgettable chapter in my career, an episode and a lesson from storied New Jersey political history.

And I’m okay with that.

**1967 RIOTS**

**ANTHONY IMPERIALE**

**CARL GOLDEN**

**DAVID FRIEDLAND**

**HOUSE SPEAKER KEVIN MCCARTHY**

**HUDSON COUNTY**

**LEGISLATURE**

**NEWARK**

**SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE**

**TOM KEAN**

**US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**