

Op-Ed: Challenging the tradition of the county line in NJ's primary elections is a 'hopeless' task

CARL GOLDEN | JUNE 11, 2021 | [OPINION](#), [POLITICS](#)

'The tenacity of those who seek the demise of the county line is to be admired, but ... the way is rocky, and the walls manned by fierce and determined opponents'



Carl Golden

The effort to prohibit the awarding of county lines and favored position on primary election ballots to party-endorsed candidates took a hit — perhaps a mortal one — in Tuesday's balloting by guaranteeing that anyone running off line will fail before the first ballot is cast.

The equally unmistakable subtext: The system won't change anytime soon, or ever. Save your money, time and energy, is the clear and discouraging message; the die is cast and it's better to avoid the embarrassment of low double-digit vote percentages.

From mayoral contests to seats in the Legislature, organization-line candidates ran the table, solidifying the absolute power of county chairs and their organizations to control primary election outcomes and candidate selection.

The message isn't lost on anyone considering entering public life — deal with us or the career you want will end before it begins.

Even the inherent power of incumbency doesn't help; four sitting members of the Assembly were defeated, three in seeking Senate seats and one standing for reelection and all off the line.

With all due respect to the groups and individuals challenging the primary ballot makeup, the task is hopeless.

Parties resist change, Gov. Murphy shies away too

County parties have been clear they will not voluntarily cede control to an open primary system and the Legislature — many of whose members are beneficiaries of the county line — has shown no appetite for change.

Prospects for a successful court challenge are dim, as well. The judiciary has been reluctant to take on issues involving intraparty political issues, deferring to the legislative process to settle disputes and require changes.

Gov. Phil Murphy, like his predecessors in both parties, has shied away from demands to abandon the county-line tradition and isn't apt to change his mind.

In 2017, Murphy, who'd never held elective office, won the Democratic nomination by spreading millions of dollars around to county organizations, winning their endorsements and clearing the field of potential opponents.

County chairs and organization leaders have defended the system, arguing that it guarantees the strongest possible candidates will be selected while weaker and less serious contenders will be weeded out, allowing the party to concentrate all its financial and organizational skills on those with a greater chance of success.

Some counties utilize conventions to settle on candidates while others use so-called screening committees to vet potential contenders, claiming both are open processes and provide a somewhat fair and democratic aura to the entire exercise.

A ‘jungle primary’

Eliminating the organizational role in the process would, line supporters argue, produce what in other states is referred to as a “jungle primary” with potentially dozens of individuals packing the ballot, confusing voters and, in the worst case, nominating unqualified and underfunded candidates with no hope of success.

Historically, primary elections have been accepted as largely a party function, and a tilted playing field is a small price to pay to remain competitive by choosing the strongest candidates.

The movement to prohibit the ballot-position favoritism portrays it as an affront to the democratic process and one that effectively blocks newcomers, minorities and women from any meaningful participation.

Critics suggest further that the system is riddled with reward/punishment elements in which the county line is awarded to candidates who will follow direction and do the bidding of county political leaders in approving jobs, contracts and policies desired by private interests.

There is some merit to be found in the positions of both sides, but it is one of those issues in which common ground and compromise appear out of reach.

Privately scoffing at ‘goo-goos’

For county chairs, the awarding of the ballot line is one of the few remaining weapons they possess to exert control and influence over the political process. Without it, their organizations would tumble into irrelevancy.

For years, they’ve successfully resisted the infrequent efforts to eliminate the county line, privately scoffing at their critics and dismissing them as “goo-

goos” — derisive shorthand for “good government” types.

Changes in the political climate, though, have brought increased attention to instances of autocratic boss rule and breathed life into various reform movements.

The county line system, its critics argue, increases the potential for corruption, silences the voices of outsiders and turns aside new and innovative ideas.

An open process, they say, is consistent with democracy and can be a cleansing agent sweeping aside autocratic leaders who corrupt the system for personal gain.

The tenacity of those who seek the demise of the county line is to be admired, but like so many similar movements, the way is rocky, and the walls manned by fierce and determined opponents.

The outcome of the 2021 primary election has made their task that much more difficult.

Former President Ronald Reagan once opined: “The closest thing to eternal life on Earth is a government program.”

In New Jersey, though, it’s the county line.