



**EDWARD EDWARDS**

## Ciattarelli Sinks into Ideological Quicksand – Again

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With slightly more than 90 days out from the gubernatorial election, the dramatic and alarming surge in COVID-19 infections driven by the Delta variant (<https://www.thirteen.org/programs/nj-spotlight-news/covid-variants-1623436631/>) has thrust the pandemic back into the campaign dialogue.

The rate of infections and transmission has climbed steadily and, while not approaching pre-vaccination levels, has reignited the debate over the possibility of re-imposing mask wearing mandates and other more dramatic steps not seen since the lockdown.

Gov. Phil Murphy as well as chief executives across the country have attributed the resurgence to the refusal or failure of millions of Americans to accept vaccinations.

The data clearly supports their view that the country is suffering through a pandemic of the unvaccinated, creating a nearly out of control spread of the variant and resulting in numbers not seen in many months.

While Murphy continues to mull over reinstating restrictions which were eased or dropped altogether, he has urged the unprotected to receive the vaccine as the only tried, tested and successful response.

Inexplicably, in the midst of a potential repeat of the pandemic crisis, Republican gubernatorial candidate Jack Ciattarelli – who has been vaccinated – shifted the debate somewhat by recommending expanding the exemptions from the state requirement (<https://www.politico.com/states/new-jersey/story/2021/07/26/ciattarelli-calls-for-expanded-vaccine-exemptions-parental-rights-ombudsman-1388990>) that public school students be immunized against several contagious childhood diseases.

He went further by pledging to include a “philosophical exemption” to the vaccinations required for enrolling in school.

For decades, proof of vaccination against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B and meningococcal was required or entering school would be denied.

“Philosophical exemption” was left undefined but presumably would join current regulations which allow for exemptions on religious or medical grounds. An exemption so broadly applied is so open to abuse it is tantamount to avoiding immunizations in their entirety.

To emphasize his point, he said: “I don’t think government has any right to tell any individual they have to take a vaccine or a medicine.”

He also pledged that, if elected, he would create an ombudsman in the department of health to “protect parental rights” over issues such as immunizations and school curriculum.

While he attempted to frame his position around freedom of choice, his comments, coming during the worst public health crisis in a century, could not have been more tone deaf, a stunning refusal to acknowledge that more than 900,000 New Jerseyans have been infected and nearly 27,000 have died from the COVID pandemic.

While those 50 years old and up accounted for 36 percent of the infections, a staggering 94 percent of the fatalities was in this age group.

The incident is another unforced error on Ciattarelli’s part, coming within a few weeks of his promise to roll back the LGBTQ curriculum in public schools, characterizing it as intruding on parental rights and responsibilities.

Tying school curriculum to his call for immunization exemptions suggests he doesn't intend to back away from the issue.

For many, Ciattarelli's plunge into these issues indicates a calculated effort to solidify the party's right wing to whom cultural issues are paramount.

Unanimous support from that firm base is crucial in a statewide effort, but it is equally crucial that Ciattarelli maintain his balance on the tightrope that allows him to reach unaffiliated voters and any dissident Democrats.

His widely quoted appeal to conservatives to allow him some "wobble room" clearly suggests he understands full well that he can't walk the tightrope if a group of people stand at one end shaking it from side to side.

At the same time, engaging in issues like vaccination exemptions and school curriculum that require explanation and clarification to calm public outcry is a highly questionable strategy.

Creating an environment in which such issues overshadow matters like record high property taxes, aid to public education, law enforcement, and economic growth is decidedly unhelpful, little more than a short-term appeal to mollify a segment of the party faithful.

Murphy, leading a deeply unified party, is content to remain on the higher moral ground, leading government's response to the pandemic, urging an increase in vaccination rates and carefully navigating through the demands for stepping up the response to the pandemic resurgence to include mandatory mask wearing and other restrictions on business activity and public gatherings.

He continues to enjoy majority support for his handling of the pandemic, despite some grumbling and displays of unhappiness with some of his decisions.

In the three months before voters decide who they want and trust to lead the state, Ciattarelli has time to offer himself and his governing philosophy to them.

Easing the necessity of inoculating children against disease and involving the governor's office in developing school curriculum probably isn't the most effective and vote-gathering method to accomplish that.

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