

Opinion: Brace for three years of nonstop political campaigning and posturing

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It may be 'more than the body politic can digest safely'



Carl Golden

In the coming three years, New Jersey voters will elect members of Congress twice, state legislators twice, a governor, a U. S. senator and will help choose a president.

This smorgasbord of political campaigns may turn out to be more than the body politic can digest safely.

While the issues, personalities and ideologies will stream across the board, two individuals will cast long and dark shadows over the landscape and likely impact many of the outcomes — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump.

It's uncertain whether either will appear on the 2024 ballot as presidential candidates, but the presence of both in the congressional midterms little more than two months off will be crucial.

The deep sense of disquiet that has gripped the nation since 2020 has not spared New Jersey, an anxiety brought on and intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and bitter, often violent, political upheaval.

It's been exacerbated by a punishing rate of nearly 10% inflation accompanied by commodity shortages and soaring cost of living that has driven millions of Americans into heretofore unknown economic distress.

Competitive House seats

At the same time, the unease produced by seemingly constant political turmoil has seeped into virtually every element of daily life and could well translate into voters' decision-making.

Genuinely competitive House seats are relatively rare in New Jersey (Senate contests even less so), but this year — thanks to redistricting and the exceedingly high level of volatility in the political environment — four incumbent Democrats are considered at risk in varying degrees.

Two-term 7th District Rep. Tom Malinowski is thought to be the most vulnerable primarily due to his one-point victory in 2020 over former State Sen. Tom Kean Jr., his opponent this year as well in a district that is more Republican-friendly.

The others in less serious straits are two-term members, Rep. Andy Kim in the 3rd District, and Rep. Mikie Sherill in the 11th District, and three-term Rep. Josh Gottheimer in the 5th District.

At the current 10-2 Democratic majority, Republicans would need to run the table to achieve a 6-6 even split. Not likely, although the long-shot outside chance of an overpowering red wave could endanger Kim, Sherill and Gottheimer.

Republican ambitions

With 70% of Americans believing the country is headed in the wrong direction and a president who has struggled to achieve a 40% public approval rating, Republicans are expected to do well nationally, recapturing the House of Representatives and competing strongly for control of the Senate.

Republicans are gambling that memories remain fresh of \$5 a gallon gasoline, empty supermarket shelves and double-digit percentage increases in the price of everyday necessities.

History suggests that voters are driven largely by personal economic circumstances — pocketbook or kitchen table issues — and lean toward assigning blame for financial distress to the party in power.

Adding to their restlessness are concerns over rising rates of violent crimes, a porous southern border open to unprecedented immigration and a fear of a resurgence of a mutated pandemic that has sickened 93 million people, proved fatal for more than 1 million and paralyzed the country. (New Jersey recorded 2.25 million COVID-19 infections and nearly 35,000 deaths.)

Republicans believe these issues will overwhelm misgivings and concerns over handing control of Congress over to a party controlled in substantial measure by Trump.

Trump looms

The former president's two-year-long insistence that he was cheated out of reelection in 2020 has worn exceedingly thin and he now appears petty and petulant. Moreover, he's been damaged by revelations that he bore some responsibility for the Jan. 6, 2021 assault on the U. S. Capitol in an effort to overturn the election results, deny Biden his victory and somehow concoct a scheme to remain in office.

His personal legal problems have mounted and the recent FBI execution of a search warrant at his Mar-a-Lago home in Florida to retrieve cartons of documents — some classified — the Department of Justice believes Trump took with him when he departed the White House and kept in his home will play out for months while speculation continues over whether formal criminal charges will be lodged against him.

Democrats will be certain to remind voters that Trump's three appointees to the U. S. Supreme Court provided the swing votes to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 50-year-old ruling that held a constitutional right to an abortion. They will also recount instances of his mercurial behavior which resulted in arguably the most chaotic national administration in modern history.

While this year's congressional elections will be the most immediate test of the competing narratives and a referendum on the Biden presidency, the results will reverberate into the 2023, '24 and '25 cycles.

Gov. Phil Murphy, for instance, will see next year's legislative contests as an opportunity to renew his effort to provide greater access to abortion services in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and more stringent regulations on firearms purchases and possession, reinforcing his left-leaning bona fides as he continues to tease his availability for the 2024 presidential nomination.

Murphy chatter

He's become a part of the conversation as speculation continues over whether Biden will seek another term and, despite his dismissal of any interest, has moved to heighten

his profile as a chief executive who's compiled a significant record of accomplishment.

As he lays out his agenda for 2023, it may well be an audition for one of the leading roles in the 2024 presidential production, an out-of-town opening before heading to Broadway.

It's likely Democrats will maintain control of the Legislature as well, currently at 24-16 in the Senate and 46-33 (one vacancy) in the Assembly, but Murphy — a lame duck at that point — will face challenges securing approval of his agenda, particularly those items considered left of center fringe and designed to burnish his credentials nationally.

Murphy's ambitions — should they become more pronounced at that time — will never be far from the minds of legislators who will view his agenda in that context. And their interests may not always coincide.

While presidential politics and Murphy's potential role in them, will dominate 2024, the open governor's officer the following year will take on a larger role.

Jockeying for advantage will become increasingly common in the Legislature and elsewhere, even though former Senate President Steve Sweeney and 2021 Republican candidate Jack Ciattarelli have already made their intentions clear — they're running.

New Jersey voters should prepare now for more than three years' worth of incessant campaigning, political posturing and often outrageous conduct.

It's irresistible catnip for the media and the political cognoscenti. Even with New Jersey's history as a state where politics starts at sunup and ends at sundown before repeating itself, the next three years will likely establish records for words written and spoken and for deeds shamelessly promoted. Indigestion may ensue.