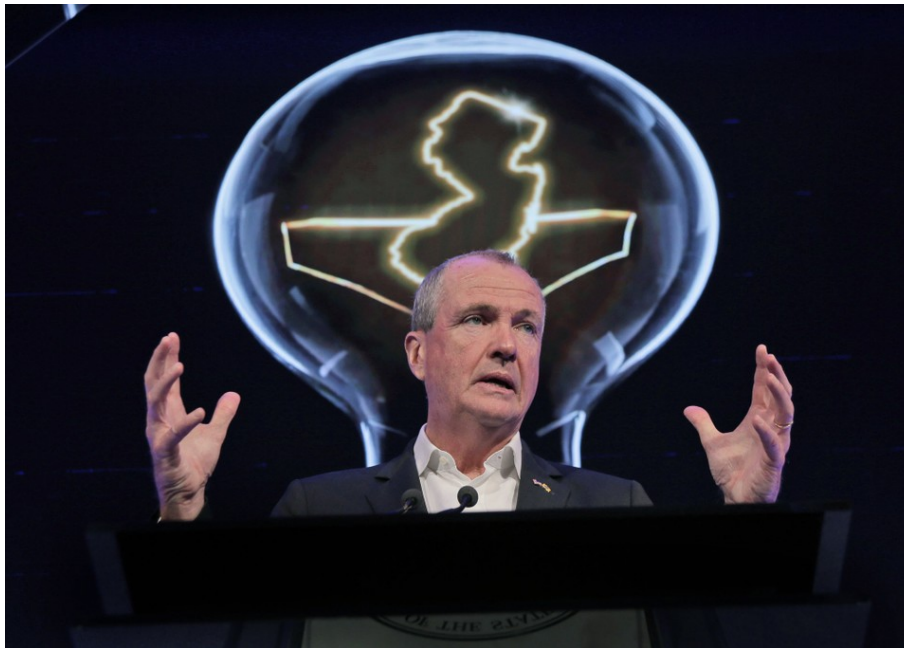


NEW JERSEY POLITICS

Can Phil Murphy be stronger than the storm outrage?

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Gov. Phil Murphy is pictured delivering a speech in Nutley last month. Murphy is nearing his one-year mark as governor. (Seth Wenig | The Associated Press)

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Is Phil Murphy stronger than the storm?

Or, more precisely, can the rookie New Jersey governor overcome the blizzard of protest from motorists and political foes who say his administration mishandled last Thursday's snowstorm?



Murphy has faced other controversies in his first 10 months, but this one hit home in a commuter-centric state where angry residents were either stuck in their cars on unplowed roads for hours or waited in vain for NJ Transit trains and buses.

Then, like those motorists who gun it too fast when stuck in a snow bank, the Democrat dug himself deeper by **blaming weather forecasters** and then dining at a four-star restaurant down the road from his Middletown mansion while New Jersey remained in traffic hell.

"I think Hawaii would have been better equipped to handle the storm than we were," joked one Republican, state Assemblyman Holly Schepisi of Bergen County.

The question now is if Murphy can weather the backlash or if his reputation will take a permanent hit with a populace still getting to know him.

Ben Dworkin, director of Rowan University's Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship, likened Murphy's snow-day dining choice to "a small cut."

"It's not lethal, but it begins the path towards a negative narrative about the Murphy administration," Dworkin said. "If other stories appear that give the impression the governor is aloof from the needs of the populace, then it will make a difference."

Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University, said Murphy isn't alone in navigating the sometimes-tricky minefield of winter weather. Over-prepare, and you get criticized for wasting state money. Under-prepare, and face the wrath of residents.

"It's one of these situations in which an executive sort of has to have the instincts of a meteorologist," Baker said. "It's very hard."

Murphy's predecessor knows this. In 2010, his first year in office, then-Gov. Chris Christie was lambasted for being out of state on a family trip to Disneyworld when a snowstorm hit.

Two years later, the Republican's hands-on response to Hurricane Sandy became one of his defining moments.

As he neared the end of his time in Trenton, Christie said snow and other big storms were among the things he'd miss the least about the job -- though that didn't stop him from angrily tweeting about being stuck for hours last Thursday.



Murphy has carried positive approval ratings in blue-leaning New Jersey so far. He's spent much of his first term instituting progressive policies in the state, including equal pay and more gun-control laws.

But a recent Rutgers-Eagleton poll showed 4 in 10 residents don't have an opinion on him at all. Some say the undecideds could make their minds up fast after sitting in hours of snow-swept traffic.

"This is one of the things that is absolutely crucial for a governor to take the lead on," said Carl Golden, a former spokesman for Republican Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman who is now an analyst with the Hughes Center at Stockton University.

Golden added that Murphy's staff should have been "sensitive" that residents might see Murphy as out of touch for having a swanky dinner the night of the storm.

"People have said to me, 'I couldn't get home to have McDonald's with my kids, and this guy's eating in a five-star restaurant while I'm stuck on 287,'" Golden said. "People personalize it immediately."

Murphy's spokespeople noted the governor ate at the bar and continued to make phone calls to coordinate storm response at the restaurant, which is about a mile from his home.

But Republicans have pounced, calling it the Democrat's "beach-chair" moment -- a nod to the infamous photo of Christie lounging on the sand while the state government was shut down last summer.

State Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick said Murphy should have ordered takeout and eaten at the State Police's emergency center in Ewing -- the Regional Operations and Intelligence Center that's called the ROIC (pronounced "rock").

"The people at the ROIC have a little more information than the waiter at a five-star restaurant," Bramnick, R-Union, quipped.

To some critics, the entire storm response was the latest example of Murphy's inexperience.

This is the first time the Goldman Sachs executive and ex-U.S. ambassador to Germany has held elected office, and some Trenton insiders privately gripe that Murphy is surrounded by a young and politically green staff.



That was one criticism as Murphy and lawmakers came within hours of a state government shutdown this June thanks to a budget battle. But that had little impact on average people because the state never closed.

Murphy faced similar criticism after it was revealed his team made two controversial hires for jobs in the administration -- one a former elected official who was convicted of bribery, a few years ago and another who had been accused of raping a Murphy supporter during last year's campaign.

The circumstances surrounding the rape accusation will be the subject of state legislative hearings next month as both the governor and lawmakers have launched investigations. Depending how they turn out, this could have longer-lasting damage to the governor than his storm response.

When it comes to the snow, Democrats say Murphy's administration needs to learn from its mistakes.

"He's got plenty of time to overcome whatever negative feelings exist right now," said state Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen. "But that's only if that kind of evaluation is seriously undertaken."

State Senate President Stephen Sweeney, who has often clashed with Murphy, had a similar view.

"There's lessons to be learned, and I'm sure they've learned them," Sweeney, D-Gloucester, said.

For his part, Murphy -- who is three years from a re-election campaign -- has repeatedly said his administration will examine what went wrong with the storm and will work to ensure it never happens again.

"I think when summer rolls around, people will probably have forgotten," said Baker, the Rutgers professor. "By the time he's up for re-election, I think, the freak storm of 2018 will have pretty much passed from living memory."

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