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## **Continuing pandemic could dominate Murphy's reelection campaign next year, says Carl Golden**

Carl Golden For The Press  
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If the warnings of physicians and public health experts that the COVID-19 pandemic will ease over the summer but come rampaging back in the fall and winter come to pass, the impact on the 2021 gubernatorial election will be significant.

The Murphy administration's response to a second wave of the virus infecting and possibly killing thousands of people and causing economic and personal disruption will dominate the gubernatorial and legislative campaigns.

Will New Jerseyans already weary from months of home confinement, closed schools and business closures accept a second shutdown as the price of controlling the spread of a lethal virus for which there is no known cure?

The state has begun a cautious crawl out of the economic trough into which it's been driven and some level of normalcy has slowly returned.

The pace of re-opening has been criticized by some Republicans and financially distressed business owners, but Murphy has steadfastly opposed a premature lifting of restrictions.

His approach has been validated by the experience in a number of other states whose governors re-opened commercial activity, only to retreat and re-impose restrictions following a surge in infections.

He has enjoyed the support of the majority of people who have accepted upending their lives as a prudent response to the most serious public health crisis in a century.

Wearing face coverings, standing 6 feet apart, picking up food and consumer goods at curbside were accepted as inconvenient alternatives to contracting an infection so virulent that lengthy hospitalizations and ventilators were required to treat it.

If it becomes necessary to re-impose the restrictions people have endured for more than three months, will there be the same public acquiescence or will Murphy suffer political consequences as he seeks a second term?

Republican critics accused Murphy of exceeding his emergency powers by issuing a series of executive orders and using police powers to clamp down on violators.

They grumbled he acted too slowly in allowing businesses to resume, a delay extremely costly to small businesses whose owners could ill afford prolonged closures.

Those, however, are judgment calls, subjective conclusions arrived at based on the best available data and forecasts. Obviously, differences of opinion can be raised legitimately, but Murphy is in a position of strength in justifying his decisions as protecting public health.

Halting the spread of the virus while assuring adequate hospital space was available for the most serious cases lay at the heart of Murphy's response.

Critics can cherry pick areas in which Murphy could have acted differently, but there is scant political advantage to be gained by arguing in a campaign setting that his decisions were uniformly flawed.

To be sure, he erred by directing infected individuals be transferred from hospitals to long term care facilities where the virus spread rapidly among the most vulnerable despite an order to quarantine those infected.

He blundered as well and drew scathing criticism for participating in a protest march in a very public violation of his social distancing order.

His daily briefings have been exemplary, providing the latest information, announcing executive decisions and the rationale behind them, and complimenting the state's people for stepping up and doing their part to meet the crisis.

He's wisely avoided direct criticism of President Trump, primarily because the state will continue to require substantial infusions of federal aid which only the president can provide.

Beyond the aid considerations, though, Murphy understood that attacking Trump would be seized upon as an attempt to shift responsibility to the federal level, substituting a political context for a public health one and undercutting his contention that the well-being of the state is his sole motivator.

A second wave of the virus remains a distinct possibility and the prospect of re-imposing the kind of restrictions the state has lived through thus far looms large.

If it extends into the spring of 2021, it will become inextricably enmeshed in the campaigns, creating a tricky terrain for Republicans to navigate.

They may wish to avoid aligning themselves too closely with Murphy, but at the same time acknowledge the necessity to act decisively, point out where they believe Murphy fell short and outline what they would have done differently.

They must come across as equally as committed as Murphy in providing the greatest possible protection to the public. He can point to his record and challenge his opponents to contradict it.

Snappy slogans and jingoism are no substitute for tough decisions and resolute actions.

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