

Murphy pandemic response will by key issue in NJ governor's race

Carl Golden For The Press

Mar 19, 2021

It's a given that the COVID-19 pandemic and the Murphy administration's response to it will be the principal point of contention in the 2021 gubernatorial campaign.

There will be policy issues, political controversies or natural disasters (hurricane season could begin as early as May this year, for instance) that will arise in the next seven months and capture attention. None, though, will equal the impact nor overshadow the most serious public health crisis in a century. Nearly three-quarters of a million New Jerseyans were infected and more than 25,000 died.

It is risky, of course, to engage in handicapping elections or predicting outcomes well in advance of serious campaigning, but if the pandemic remains the central issue, the odds fall in favor of Gov. Phil Murphy accomplishing what no Democratic governor of New Jersey has in 44 years — win a second term.

His five day a week briefings (since reduced to three) on the pandemic and the steps taken to bring it under control and avoid an overwhelmed health care system not only kept people informed but presented an opportunity for him to display leadership and competence at the top.

Murphy used the bully pulpit effectively and has enjoyed majority support even as the economy faltered, unemployment rose, schools closed, and travel and public gathering restrictions were imposed.

As frustrations grew and tempers frayed, New Jersey's notoriously cranky populace accepted upending their lives in the interest of protecting themselves from a contagion for which a vaccine didn't exist.

Critics faulted Murphy for moving too slowly to lift the lockdown on restaurants and for creating a piecemeal approach to restoring in school instructions.

Republicans groused that Murphy was guilty of over-reliance on executive orders, setting policies and conditions by fiat, bypassing the Legislature. They accused him of mishandling the response to conditions in nursing homes and long-term care facilities, resulting in thousands of the vulnerable elderly falling ill and dying.

The pandemic took a significant toll on those in veterans' facilities in Paramus and Menlo Park, amid complaints that proper safety protocols were ignored and protective equipment in short supply.

Former Somerset County Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, the presumptive Republican gubernatorial nominee, has kept up steady criticism of Murphy's handling of the crisis, emphasizing the impact on small businesses driven into closures and bankruptcies.

There is no question that Murphy has moved with caution in moving toward a restoration of pre-pandemic life. He's defended his actions as guided by scientific evidence and the expertise of public health professionals.

His rationale has held up well and, with vaccines available, reductions in infections, hospitalizations and fatalities, the long sought "return to normalcy" may be at hand.

If, for instance, crowds throng beaches and boardwalks on Memorial Day, July 4 fireworks light up the sky and "back to school" isn't just a retail sale, Murphy will emerge as a far more formidable candidate.

New Jerseyans will remember the phrases introduced into the vernacular this past year — "flatten the curve, remote learning, mask up, social distancing, contact tracing" — but it will be with a sense of relief that they've endured and will reward Murphy for it.

There have been missteps and flawed judgments by the administration, largely because it confronted an unprecedented crisis for which there was no history or prior experience to fall back on.

In a campaign setting, these questions will be raised but they must be presented as legitimate policy differences rather than partisan second-guessing.

It will be necessary for Murphy to fend off the criticism by emphasizing his commitment to protecting the state's people, adhering to established medical advice and standing firm against outside pressures that could lead to an escalation of the outbreak.

Ciattarelli will likely focus on the long-term impact of the lockdowns and school closures, arguing they were kept in place even though not justified by the infection and transmission data.

He may feel that Murphy is vulnerable as well for failing to recognize early that patients and staff in long term care facilities were more susceptible to the virus, then was slow to take adequate steps to address it.

While the pandemic will be the dominant issue in the campaign, whether Murphy's handling of it was so egregious that it demands voters opt for a change in the executive office is problematic.

At this point — early thought it may be — making that case will be difficult, indeed.

Carl Golden, of Burlington Township, is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.