

# N.J. Republican primary expected to test Trump's hold on GOP

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June 2 (UPI) -- New Jersey Republicans are gearing up for one of the nation's first real tests of former President Donald Trump's hold on the party -- the state's gubernatorial primary next week, which includes a few candidates with different views on the GOP.

New Jersey is one of several states that have primaries scheduled through August. Even traditional Democratic states like New Jersey will have a litmus test for Republicans hoping to win public office.

Two of the four main GOP candidates have tied themselves to Trump. In the fall, one will go up against incumbent Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy. But even the primary Tuesday should indicate whether voters are following the former president.

Experts say the public's reaction to coronavirus restrictions and a growing, but not yet dominant, ultra-conservative movement in New Jersey has made the race interesting. Even a strong showing against Murphy could be a sign of trouble for Democrats in 2022, when they will try to grow a slim majority in the House and a razor-slim margin in the Senate.

New Jersey has not elected a Republican U.S. senator since 1972, but there has been parity in governor's mansion -- five Democrats and five Republicans since 1994. Before Murphy, it was conservative and Trump supporter Chris Christie for two terms. And Tuesday's vote might indicate whether residents favor a return to that type of governing.

Experts say the apparent GOP favorite is former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, who finished second in the 2017 Republican primary. Once a critic of Trump, Ciattarelli eventually grew to support him -- although his loyalty [has been questioned](#).

Ciattarelli's main competitor is Hirsh Singh, a South Jersey resident who also ran in 2017 and challenged Sen. Cory Booker last year. Singh is seen by most in the party as Trump-like, mainly owing to his anti-establishment rhetoric, and he's been endorsed by former Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale.

Experts say it will be interesting to see if those connections give him an edge over the front-runner.

Singh [has said](#) election integrity and immigration are New Jersey's biggest issues and he opposes critical race theory and LGBTQ+ curriculum in public schools.

On Twitter and in speaking appearances, Singh often ties himself to Trump and dismisses Ciattarelli as a "RINO" -- one of Trump's favorite partisan insults, which stands for "Republican in Name Only."

"Unlike Never-Trump Jack Ciattarelli, I'm not afraid to tell the truth," Singh tweeted last month. "I won't cower in the face of the radical left and liberal media over the 2020 presidential election. I will have President Trump's back, stop voter fraud and restore the integrity of our elections."

Experts say New Jersey's GOP appears to be solidly behind Ciattarelli, but a conservative media [poll in April](#) showed Singh ahead by a little more than 2%.

Those figures indicate that Tuesday's race could be ripe for an upset. Some experts, though, aren't sure.

"I'm not criticizing [the poll], or saying it's not believable, but as a social scientist, I would want to see the methodology before I can have faith in it," John Froonjian, executive director of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, told UPI.

"Did they screen for registered Republicans, those who have voted in primaries before? Only 20% of Republicans voted in primary in 2017."

A different [poll this week](#) shows Ciattarelli with a 29% to 23% edge, with almost 40% of likely GOP voters undecided.

Froonjian noted that Ciattarelli has vastly outraised Singh, and suggests that Singh may not have grass-roots support among Republicans that is usually key to making a serious run. Both are far behind Murphy in fundraising, according to the [New Jersey Globe](#).

Froonjian said if Singh or another Trump-connected candidate, Pastor Phil Rizzo, make some noise in Tuesday's primary, it could be because they pushed Ciattarelli too far to the right -- possibly turning off the state's moderate Republican voters.

Rizzo, who polled about 10% last month, also slightly outraised Singh in the last reporting period and has been endorsed by the leader of N.J. Women for Trump.

A fourth candidate, Brian Levine, lags further behind. Levine has [also been critical](#) of Trump and has emphasized conservative issues over allegiance to one person.

As for Trump, who is no stranger to New Jersey, he's endorsed no candidate -- at least, so far. Trump has owned multiple properties in Atlantic City and still maintains a residence in Bedminster.

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“ “ Let's make New Jersey great again!<https://t.co/cpQTCiNXiN>— Phil Rizzo for NJ Governor (@JerseyRizzo) [May 19, 2021](#)

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Whoever advances to challenge Murphy in November, experts like Froonjian believe it's the incumbent's race to lose -- even though polling shows that his support among all residents and independents [has slipped](#) over the past year.

"[Murphy] has several advantages. There are a million more Democrats than Republicans in New Jersey," Froonjian said.

"The biggest block of voters in New Jersey used to be independents. That changed for the first time a year ago during the presidential election. That gives Murphy a numerical and money advantage," he said.

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, agrees. He says there's always "grumbling around the margins," but noted that Murphy's political stock has increased during the pandemic.

"He became one of the country's more prominent governors as the pandemic went on, and I think it helped him enormously," Weingart said.

Since 1990, New Jersey voters have elected a governor from the opposite party of the last U.S. presidential race winner. Murphy would break that long streak if he's re-elected. Froonjian says that's likely, as Murphy has something none of the GOP challengers has.

"Crises [like COVID-19] give politicians an opportunity to demonstrate leadership," he said. "Murphy generally received high marks for handling the pandemic.

"New Jersey will probably have a great summer tourism season as people go back to work. Putting all of those things together, Murphy could be tough to beat."

