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CAUCUS ROOM

The Irresistible Story Line of the Senate Primary

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In entering the race for United States Senate in 2024, First Lady Tammy Murphy has teed up what will likely be the most expensive, intriguing, contentious and consequential primary election in modern state history.

Even in a state with a rich political history steeped in moments of high drama and occasional episodes of low farce, the story line is unprecedented and irresistible:

*The wife of a sitting Democratic Governor seeking to defeat two members of Congress of her own party and make history as the first woman from New Jersey elected to the Senate.

*Sen. Robert Menendez who has held the seat since 2006 pursuing re-election despite under Federal indictment for bribery

(<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/12/nyregion/menendez-indictment-new-charges.html>), extortion and acting as an agent for the Egyptian government in return for cash and gifts.

*Third District Rep. Andrew Kim who beat his colleagues to the punch by announcing his intention to challenge Menendez within 24 hours of the indictments, motivated to run, he said, by the severity of the allegations against the incumbent and the arrogance he displayed with his “I’m not going anywhere” response.



Menendez

Menendez public approval rating plummeted into the low teens in the immediate aftermath of his and his wife's indictment and calls for his resignation filled the air from his home state's party leaders as well as from nearly half of his Senate colleagues.

He swatted them all aside, characterizing the charges against him as part of a plot by overzealous Federal prosecutors to concoct a crime to pin on him and drive him from office.

While resignation was off the table and he carefully sidestepped the issue of re-election, he remained defiant and prepared to wage a vigorous fight against his accusers, critics and challengers.

While Kim moved quickly in the hope of pre-empting the field, the sudden emergence of Tammy Murphy vaulted to frontrunner status, largely on the assumption that the party establishment would coalesce behind her endorsed by county chairs and organizations who would place her name at the top of the invaluable county line on the primary election ballot.

In short order, outgoing State Sen. Richard Codey — a powerful voice in Essex County politics — issued a ringing endorsement of her (<https://www.insidernj.com/codey-backs-tammy-murphy-for-united-states-senate/>), followed shortly by a broad hint from South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross that he, too, would throw the considerable weight of his organization behind her.

For a deeply damaged Menendez and for a committed Kim, overcoming the advantages inherent in the county line ballot placement is a seriously steep hill to scale.



Kim

Menendez has no support among the county chairs and while Kim can anticipate favorable ballot position in his Burlington County Congressional district, Norcross' defection will have an adverse impact.

Primary elections are by and large political party functions and, while issues play a role, they are secondary to the influence exerted by financial and organizational power in the selection of candidates.

The majority of voters who participate in primaries year after year are individuals committed to a party and who are sensitive to the wishes and desires of political leadership.

Kim's most severe test will be making significant inroads outside his South Jersey base.

For instance, of the state's 2.5 million registered Democrats, 1.4 million live in six counties north of Interstate 195 — Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, Union and Passaic — while the six further south — Burlington, Atlantic, Camden, Gloucester, Ocean and Cape May — total just over 605,000 Democratic registrants.

It will require a major commitment of time and money from the Kim campaign to achieve a more favorable and competitive balance if Tammy Murphy secures the county line and the dedicated base of support that goes with it.

Moreover, a Menendez candidacy — should there be one — will draw off some of that support, albeit a miniscule portion.

There may come a time when Menendez peeks over the horizon and glimpses a vast deserted expanse where his future once lay and decides to surrender to reality.

Kim is undeniably a highly capable and quality individual who brings a great deal to the table — much more, his supporters say, than does Tammy Murphy who lacks experience in elective politics and government.

Under other circumstances — that is, head-to-head with Menendez, for instance — Kim would be the odds-on favorite to sit in the U. S. Senate come January of 2025.

Despite his lame duck status, Murphy is in firm control of the party apparatus. County chairs will respond favorably to his requests and follow his lead in internal party matters. His closest ally is state chairman LeRoy Jones.

He is the head of the party in more than name only. He is coming off a legislative election in which Democrats defied history by winning six seats in the Assembly and building upon the partisan majorities in the Assembly and Senate.

The chances of his winning near universal support in seeking the county line for his wife's candidacy are not in doubt.

He's been a steadfast supporter of the county line process, defending it against progressive elements in the party who've railed against it as encouraging bossism at the expense of democracy.

In 2017, he used his personal financial resources to assist county organizations in return for county line ballot position, effectively ending the gubernatorial ambitions of Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop and former Senate President Steve Sweeney.

He grasps also the existential threat to Democratic Party viability and his own political future of a Menendez candidacy and victory, however unlikely. The consequences of such an outcome would exalt Menendez as bigger than the party—a disastrous development in the governor's view.

Adequate financing for a Tammy Murphy campaign is not in doubt nor will there be a paucity of outside consultants, researchers and media experts poised to toil on her behalf.

She may be a novice in terms of elective office, but by all accounts is smart, insightful and a quick study of policy.

While all of these matter — both Menendez and Kim possess them in abundance as well — she has the political power head start.

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



NJ Governor Phil Murphy and First Lady Tammy Murphy
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