



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on October 14, 2023

GOP Sees Opportunity to Take NJ Legislature, Democrats Worried

Democrats have enjoyed two decades of rule in the New Jersey state Legislature, but Republicans see a unique opening for taking one or both houses in next month's election.

Although Democrats still have the advantage — they beat the GOP by nearly a million when it comes to voter registration numbers — Republicans are encouraged by surprising gains in 2021 and the indictment of Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez, which is casting a shadow of corruption on Democrats in the Garden State.

“It feels really different. We haven't seen this type of favorable Republican environment in, I would say, 20 years,” state Senate Minority Leader Anthony Bucco told [Politico](#).

A GOP win would have major consequences at both the state and federal levels. Should Republicans capture one or both houses of the Legislature, it would be a major hurdle for Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy, who is now serving the last two years of his term and is used to working with a friendly legislature.

Moreover, a Republican victory in blue New Jersey would be a warning siren for Joe Biden's reelection chances going into 2024.

New Jersey Democrats acknowledge that the race will likely be close and what a loss would mean. “We are looking at a razor-thin proposition of holding the majorities in both houses this year. It's going to come down to a few districts,” said Kevin McCabe, who serves as chair of the Middlesex County Democratic Party and is a major player in state politics.

Democrats hold a 25-15 majority in the Senate and a 46-34 majority in the General Assembly. The party of Andrew Jackson has been in control of the Assembly since 2002 and the Senate since 2004. Clearly, the numbers are against Republicans.

Yet the GOP hopes that a unique set of circumstances could provide the opening they need to pull off an upset. As *Politico* reports:

— Murphy has become the face of lawsuits against school districts adopting policies to inform parents of children's changed gender identity — a national issue that at least one poll shows most New Jersey voters favor.

— Wind energy, once a popular bipartisan issue, has taken a big hit in public opinion and become a major campaign target of Republicans as Murphy pushes to jumpstart offshore development.



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New Jersey State House



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- Biden is unpopular in New Jersey, with an August poll showing 52 percent of voters disapproved of his job performance.
- Though vastly outnumbered, Republicans have repeatedly outpaced Democrats in monthly new voter registrations.
- And Republicans, having worked out a compromise legislative district map with Democrats last year, are for the first time in decades running under a map that wasn't drawn exclusively by their opponents.

Democrats have pushed back against the seeming wave of momentum Republicans are currently enjoying. After Labor Day, they launched a messaging assault attacking the GOP for seeking to limit abortion, attempting to paint Republicans as radical extremists on the issue.

Some Democrats thought the issue was a winning one for them. But the momentary bump in their popularity was derailed after the indictment of Menendez, a fixture in New Jersey politics who has long dodged corruption and bribery allegations. While Menendez and Biden may not be on the same ticket, Republicans are hoping that public dissatisfaction with the senator will extend to his party — including to Biden.

Moreover, while Democrats have sought to focus on “kitchen table” issues, the GOP is leaning into culture war topics and national political issues. Some observers believe the latter resonate much more with Republican voters.

Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray told *Politico* that economic issues were “only the message on the surface” of the 2021 New Jersey election, while issues such as 2020 electoral fraud and parental rights were huge motivators for GOP voters.

“Underneath was that Republicans were able to motivate their base and turn out voters that didn't normally turn out in these elections by focusing on national culture issues,” said Murray. “So now they're focusing on them a lot more.”

This could play into Republicans' hand because it's expected that 2023 will be a low-turnout election, meaning the side that is able to more effectively motivate its base to get out and vote has the better shot at winning.

“Considering how well the Republicans have done at framing the terms of the debate for this election, it's not clear that Democrats have responded strongly enough to motivate their own base in what was going to be a low-turnout election,” Murray explained.

Moreover, in two of the most competitive races this cycle (taking place in Central Jersey), Democrats are playing defense amid controversy surrounding school gender-identity policies and wind energy — issues that play to Republicans' favor.

And South Jersey has become more Republican since the Trump era. It's where unknown Republican challenger Ed Durr famously defeated then-Senate President Steve Sweeney, a Democrat, in 2021.



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