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Democrats use N.J. gubernatorial debate to bash Christie, front-runner's Goldman-Sachs ties

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Democratic gubernatorial candidates (from left) Jim Johnson, Ray Lesniak, Phil Murphy, and John Wisniewski arrive on stage as they meet in the first debate before the primary. The moderator at the Stockton University event was Sharon Schulman, executive director of Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

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GALLOWAY, N.J. — The New Jersey Democrats running for governor used their first debate before next month’s primary to bash Gov. Christie’s stewardship of the economy, environment, and public schools, and called for a liberal counterbalance to President Trump.

Sharing the same stage for the first time Tuesday at Stockton University, two of the contenders attacked the front-runner, Phil Murphy, for his background as a Goldman Sachs banker and ties to party bosses who helped elevate his candidacy.

The candidates rarely disagreed on the issues, as they proposed to fully fund schools and public workers’ pensions, and pursue liberal priorities such as renewable energy and legalizing marijuana.

For his part, Murphy railed against “special-interest politics” and ignored references to his two-decade past on Wall Street. He nodded in agreement as other candidates discussed the issues.

“For the past two years, this Democratic primary has been run a bit like an auction, except there’s only one candidate who keeps bidding up the price,” said Assemblyman John S. Wisniewski of Middlesex County, referring to Murphy.

Wisniewski said he had “stood up against our first Goldman Sachs governor” — Jon S. Corzine, the firm’s former chief executive — and “Chris Christie, when his team closed lanes on the George Washington Bridge.”

Wisniewski and Jim Johnson, a former top U.S. Treasury Department official, suggested that a Murphy governorship would empower political bosses and foreclose the possibility for real change in Trenton.

“New Jersey is not for sale,” Johnson said.

The debate was sponsored by Stockton’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

Murphy, a former ambassador to Germany under President Barack Obama, has locked up the support of the state’s Democratic establishment: county party chairs, labor unions, environmental groups, and others.

He made an unusual decision to announce his candidacy a full year before the primary and immediately lent his campaign \$10 million.

Despite those advantages, his opponents note that a majority of Democratic voters — 52 percent — remain undecided when asked whom they support in the June 6 primary, according to the most recent poll (<https://poll.qu.edu/new-jersey/release-detail?ReleaseID=2454>).

Still, the May 3 Quinnipiac survey showed that Murphy leads the field with 26 percent of the vote, compared with 7 percent for Johnson, 5 percent for Wisniewski, and 4 percent for State Sen. Raymond J. Lesniak.

Lesniak was the lone challenger who did not invoke Murphy's Wall Street pedigree. He said his chief goal was to make New Jersey fossil fuel-free by 2050.

The Democratic debate followed one held by the two leading Republican candidates (<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/nj/GOP-debate-Guadagno-ciattarelli-Christie-taxes-school.html>), Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli. The Republicans sought to distance themselves from Christie, who has served the allowed two terms and will leave office in January. Both presented themselves as problem-solvers who would not “yell and scream” to advance their agenda.

In a state where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by about 840,000, and where the departing Republican governor is widely unpopular, the Democratic nominee will be considered the favorite in November's general election.

“We've had 7½ years of an ‘us vs. them’ governor,” Murphy said, vowing to usher in a new spirit of collegiality in Trenton.

The next Democratic debate is scheduled for May 18 in Newark.

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