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# At First New Jersey Governor Debates, Parties Differ on Policy and in Tone

By NICK CORASANITI    MAY 10, 2017

GALLOWAY, N.J. — After months of a campaign fought largely in town halls and mailboxes and on scattered commercial airwaves, the candidates for governor of New Jersey met here at Stockton University on Tuesday for the first televised primary debates. And while the Republican candidates sparred over tax policy and achievements, the Democratic candidates found themselves largely in agreement.

Voters looking for a substantive debate about the many issues plaguing New Jersey — including critically underfunded pension and school systems, record property taxes and a transportation network on the brink of failure — were treated largely to candidate indictments of Gov. Chris Christie’s stewardship of the state.

In a Democratic debate that was more peaceful than acrid, the candidates transitioned from making biting opening statements to standing in unison in support of legalizing marijuana, supporting alternative energy sources such as wind turbines, paying for the entire school funding formula, investing in the state’s failing infrastructure and countering President Trump.

One of the few divisive moments in the Democratic debate came as Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive and ambassador to Germany who is

leading comfortably in early polling, offered his proposal of a public bank, run by the state, as a method to combat unemployment.

John Wisniewski, a state assemblyman, countered: “A state bank for New Jersey would be a disaster. If Mr. Murphy wants to create a state bank, maybe he should go back to Wall Street.”

Jim Johnson, a former undersecretary of the United States Treasury, said, “We cannot adopt Wall Street gimmicks to address Main Street problems.”

In his opening statement, Mr. Johnson had repeatedly framed Mr. Murphy’s experience through the lens of Goldman Sachs, an investment bank frequently vilified by progressives.

At the outset, it appeared that Mr. Johnson and Mr. Wisniewski, trying to chip away at Mr. Murphy’s polling lead, would frame their arguments as a condemnation of the “political machine” that had thrown its early support behind Mr. Murphy and would portray him as an out-of-touch banker. But the early animosity largely faded.

Mr. Murphy weathered the attacks, claiming support from Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont for a public bank. Perhaps aware of the coming Goldman references, he introduced his family story as one of the “working poor.”

Several of the questions focused on the environment, and Mr. Murphy emphasized that he had a plan “that envisions a 100 percent clean energy economy by the year 2050.”

The fourth Democratic candidate, Raymond J. Lesniak, a state senator of about 40 years, pointed to his extensive experience in Trenton — particularly fighting for environmental legislation — and his frequent battles with Mr. Christie.

“On Monday there’s another deal I’m going to stop,” Senator Lesniak said, asserting that he was going to put a “temporary restraining order” on the governor’s proposed \$300 million renovation of the State House.

On the Republican side, Jack Ciattarelli, a state assemblyman, kicked off the debate with a blunt warning, and harsher blame.

“We’re on the brink, and you all know the crisis: They ruined our economy and punished New Jerseyans every single day,” Mr. Ciattarelli said, adding: “Kim Guadagno and the Christie administration had seven-plus years to fix New Jersey. They just haven’t been able to get it done.”

Ms. Guadagno, the lieutenant governor and the other Republican candidate at the debate, found herself in the delicate dance she has performed for most of her nascent campaign: embracing the few successes of her tenure with Mr. Christie at the helm while frequently pointing out where she disagreed with the governor. She said that she was “not a climate denier” and that the current Republican plan in Congress to repeal the Affordable Care Act was a “disaster.” But she also said she opposed the gas tax.

The two Republican candidates repeatedly sparred over taxes. Ms. Guadagno tried to frame Mr. Ciattarelli’s plan to solve the property tax crisis with a reorganization of the school funding formula as a potential tax. “I have never seen a job that was created with a tax,” she said.

She offered instead her “circuit breaker” program, which would provide a direct tax credit to residents with excessive property taxes in proportion to their income, although she never offered a detailed explanation of the plan.

“I’ve presented a circuit breaker plan that will help those who are in need of making payments for their property taxes now,” she said, “not in two or three years when Jack tries to get his school funding formula through the legislature.”

But speaking with the rapid, metronomic clip of a candidate armed with an arsenal of practiced responses, Mr. Ciattarelli was relentless as he attacked Ms. Guadagno. He said she refused to address issues “with any specificity” and called her circuit breaker plan “irresponsible,” her position against the gas tax “hypocritical” and her pledge to never support a tax increase as “pandering of the worst kind.”

Mr. Ciattarelli even looked to the moderator at one point, alerting her when he saw that Ms. Guadagno had gone over her allotted time as she was answering a question about marijuana legislation.

“Thank you for reminding me about the time, Jack,” the moderator said.

The debate came at a pivotal time in the race to succeed Mr. Christie, a Republican whose historically low approval ratings indicate an electorate anxious for a change.

Yet no candidate has been able to break through and excite voters: A Quinnipiac poll last month found that 57 percent of state residents remained undecided.

Participants in the debate were determined by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission, which sponsors the debates.

Candidates qualifying for the state’s matching funds program, which is available to any campaign that has raised at least \$430,000, are required to take part in the debate. Mr. Murphy, who has opted out of the matching funds program, agreed to participate.

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