

Party loyalists expected to be decisive in low-turnout governor's race, says Carl Golden

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The rule of thumb in New Jersey statewide campaigns has always been that, in primary contests, the candidates hew closely to their party bases — that is, Democrats run to the left and Republicans to the right.

Upon winning the nomination, the victors shed some of their ideological baggage and tack toward the vote-rich and more moderate, pragmatic center.

This year's gubernatorial election seems to have broken the pattern.

Democratic candidate Phil Murphy — checkbook in hand — waltzed through the primary by scooping up endorsements from county leaders and securing favorable ballot designations.

Republican Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno overcame a serious challenge from Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, R-Somerset, and coasted to a 16-point win.

Murphy's left-of-center bona fides were never in doubt. He ran in the spring on a platform of more spending, higher taxes on the wealthy and big business, legalization of marijuana, stricter gun control, tuition-free county college, \$15 per hour minimum wage and paid family leave, and has continued to do so.

His most recent promise to designate New Jersey a sanctuary state to limit law-enforcement authority in dealing with undocumented immigrants moved him more firmly to the left.

Guadagno quickly pounced on Murphy's sanctuary state promise, accusing him of offering official government protection to individuals who entered the country illegally and committed crimes while here.

To many observers, Murphy's pledge of sanctuary-state designation sent a jolt of energy through Republican voters — a gift to Guadagno, who has been consistently outpolled and outspent and whose message of property-tax relief and reduced government spending hasn't gained deep traction.

The issue is a divisive one but could have a galvanizing effect on core Republican voters to whom it is simply a question of legal versus illegal and who believe law enforcement should not be hobbled by politically correct politicians.

She has continued as well to hammer Murphy's tax- and spending-increase proposals, arguing his claim that middle-income families will not be affected is specious at best and an outright falsehood at worst.

There's a nearly universal consensus his promises to fund new programs or expand existing ones have far outrun his ability to pay for them, but that hasn't much deterred him. He has conceded his proposals are overly ambitious and could only be implemented over time and if the economy experiences robust growth.

The strategies of not straying far from their party bases indicates both believe general election turnout will be low and victory lies in significantly greater participation by committed party voters.

Appearances by former President Barack Obama and former Vice President Joe Biden, for example, were designed to gin up the buzz among the Democratic base.

In light of the apathy and the dominance of the political environment by President Donald Trump, the candidates' concentration on their base vote is easily understood.

While neither will ignore the generally more centrist affiliated voters, it's likely they will continue to direct their efforts toward their party's loyalists, models of dependability who turn out faithfully every year.

The perceived lack of energy and enthusiasm has produced low turnout expectations, with some suggesting it will fall well below 50 percent of the 5.65 million registered voters.

To support their predictions and as evidence of voter indifference, they point to polling data showing that with the election less than three weeks off, upwards of 30 percent of respondents admit they are not sufficiently knowledgeable about either candidate to arrive at a firm conclusion.

The task for Guadagno, though, is a daunting one. Murphy's lead has never fallen into single digits and his fundraising has quadrupled hers, opening the way for him to launch a saturation advertising blitz in the final two weeks of the campaign.

Moreover, Guadagno's association with Gov. Chris Christie remains a drag on her candidacy, costing her — according to some — as much as five to six points in support.

The political center is a powerful force and has often been the deciding factor in statewide elections.

The center, however, is not stationary. It moves either left or right according to issues as they develop or as government grapples with them.

It does not normally move to the ideological fringes, and history's political landscape is littered with the dashed hopes of candidates who ran from the extremes.

It appears, though, that this year's gubernatorial race will lean more heavily and be decided on shared ideology than on broad-based centrist appeal.

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