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EDWARD EDWARDS

Murphy V. Ciattarelli: A Dramatic Sea Change Unlikely

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When the state Constitution was adopted in 1947, it provided for a four-year term for the governor, beginning with the 1949 election — a clear intention by the document’s framers that New Jersey’s chief executive would be chosen in the off year free from the influence of presidential election politics.

Writing it into the state's governing charter would guarantee that New Jersey voters would be the ultimate decision-makers for the state's leader and would not be unduly swayed — either beneficial or detrimental — by a top of the ticket national candidate.

By and large, the decision proved to be a wise one. Presidential landslides have lost momentum by the time New Jersey chooses a governor a year later, effectively clipping the victor's coattails and foreclosing the potential for a candidate to ride into the Statehouse on the back of a president rather than on his or her own strengths.

It is, of course, impossible to totally isolate a national Administration from state politics, but the off year election does serve to minimize the impact of presidential performance and make success or failure less dependent on outside forces.

Gubernatorial candidates in both parties have historically aligned themselves with or in opposition to a sitting president — partisanship is, after all, alive and well — but victory or defeat rests more often on a potential governor's outlook on issues closer to home — taxes, education, transportation, environment, economic development and job creation.

This year, though, as Gov. Phil Murphy seeks to become the first Democrat to win re-election since 1977 and Republican nominee Jack Ciattarelli attempts to overcome New Jersey's Democratic million voter registration edge, President Biden and his immediate predecessor Donald Trump have been cast as central players in the campaign.

Murphy has portrayed his challenger as a Trump-like figure who shares the ex-president's conspiracy theories and fantasy that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

As governor, Murphy contends, Ciattarelli will bring the Trumpian philosophy to New Jersey and reverse much of the progress the governor boasts has brought enormous benefits to taxpayers.

In 2020, Biden defeated Trump 57 to 41 percent in New Jersey and the ex-President has remained wildly unpopular in the state.

Ciattarelli is hoping to reap the benefit of the precipitous decline in Biden's public approval, a freefall which has driven the president's approval into the low 40 percent range.

The badly botched withdrawal of the military from Afghanistan and the deaths of 13 service personnel there, the crisis at the southern border, and the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic have put the White House back on its heels.

Along with the heightened possibility that the president's \$4.5 trillion two bill infrastructure package will fail in Congress over fierce Democratic Party infighting, the past several weeks have been a public relations and policy nightmare for the president.

Whether the battering Biden has absorbed will translate into a widespread loss of confidence among independent voters in New Jersey and spill over onto the Murphy campaign is unclear.

Murphy and Biden both continue to enjoy majority public support in the state, but the daily drumbeat of unfavorable news and analysis, accompanied by television images of overflowing hospitals struggling to care for COVID infected individuals or immigrants

massed in horrific conditions at the southern border is bound to have an impact.

The Ciattarelli campaign was buoyed by two recent polls showing that he had gained considerable ground on Murphy, closing a double-digit lead once held by the governor and suggesting the contest was much more competitive than in its initial stages.

One of the polls was a Republican campaign survey and, like all campaign commissioned polls, the favorable results should be viewed with some skepticism.

Despite some grumbling and criticism over Murphy's response to the pandemic, he's managed to maintain public support for his mask wearing mandate and vaccination protocol.

Ciattarelli's opposition, framed as a matter of individual rights and liberties, has left him vulnerable and on the wrong side of public opinion.

Moreover, his muddled and dubious explanation for attending a "Stop the Steal" rally in support of Trump's insistence that Biden's election was illegitimate, fell flat and played into Murphy's assertions of his being a Trump captive.

While New Jersey has become one of the most reliable Democratic states in the country, its voters have demonstrated an independent – if not downright contrary – streak in gubernatorial contests.

Of the nine governors elected since 1969, five have been Democrats and four Republicans. And, since 1977, only incumbent Republicans have won second terms.

The off year gubernatorial election system is largely responsible for the rather competitive nature of the contests, demonstrating that voters can easily put aside their feelings about whoever the president is and concentrate on closer to home issues when making their decision.

While this year has altered the landscape somewhat in terms of presidential influence, a dramatic sea change is unlikely.

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