

Our 7 takeaways on why Democrats won big in N.J. legislative elections

Updated: Nov. 14, 2023, 11:29 p.m. | Published: Nov. 08, 2023, 5:46 p.m.



People arrive at J.P. Case Middle School polling place in Flemington on Election Day to vote Tuesday. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Republicans were seeking to paint the New Jersey Legislature a little more red in [Tuesday's elections](#). Instead, Democrats made it a deeper shade of blue with a dominating Election Day that followed [a heated campaign season](#).

With all 120 seats topping the ballot, [Democrats held on](#) to their 10-seat majority in the state Senate and picked up five more seats — for a 12-seat advantage — in the state Assembly.

- **[UPDATE: N.J. Democrats' dominant Election Day may get even better, updated numbers show](#)**

This comes two years after Republicans [gained seven seats](#) in the Legislature, a shocking development in the same election Democratic Gov. [Phil Murphy](#) won a second term by [a closer-than-expected margin](#).

But the GOP's hopes to expand on that this year and maybe even wrest control of a chamber after two decades of Democratic rule were dashed as Democrats enjoyed big victories here and [in other parts of the country](#).

So what happened? And what does it mean for next year and beyond? Here's a closer look:

1. Did Republican culture wars backfire?

Political experts say the GOP made headway in 2021 because many voters — especially Republicans — were angry, thanks to backlash to Democratic Gov. [Phil Murphy's COVID-19](#) restrictions and the lingering sting of former President [Donald Trump's](#) re-election loss. Affordability in high-tax New Jersey was also an issue.

This time, Republicans focused significant attention on [social or culture war issues](#), including “parental rights” in education and offshore wind development. That put Democrats on the defensive this summer heading into a likely low-turnout election, and they responded largely by accusing Republicans of exaggerating or fabricating issues.

The question now is whether that messaging failed to resonate with Republican voters and turn off others.

Murphy told NJ Advance Media on Wednesday the election results were a “rejection” of Republicans’ “change-the-subject, us-versus-them agenda,” noting “the world is different than it was two years ago.”

Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, argued Republicans in blue-leaning Jersey have “insulated themselves” from national culture wars in the past, allowing them to win governorships and legislative seats.

“The problem we see is: Once those culture wars infiltrate New Jersey, residents start to take sides more to the left than the right,” Murray said.

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, noted “New Jersey is not Florida.”

“Parents are concerned about what children are exposed to, but they are not comfortable vilifying gay and trans students,” Froomjian said.

State Sen. Jon Bramnick, R-Union, who has long called for cooperation between Democrats and Republicans, said people “don’t trust the Republican brand” in New Jersey, where Trump is popular only in pockets.

“People go: ‘You know something? We want some change. But we want Republicans we trust,’” said Bramnick, who easily won re-election Tuesday by 10 percentage points. “You can’t look hostile, because the Republican brand is defined by Donald Trump.”

Stacy Schuster, executive director of Women for a Stronger New Jersey, an organization dedicated to electing more Republicans, said Tuesday “was not a good night” in New Jersey or nationally. But she noted the party did pick up various local seats, including in Summit and Westfield.

“I think reconciling with the success at the local level with the disappointment and losses at the legislative level, the key is defining a path forward,” Schuster said Wednesday during a post-election talk hosted by Rutgers University’s Eagleton Institute of Politics.

She noted local candidates focused on affordability, overdevelopment, taxes, and government transparency — “things that highlighted a vision that they could accomplish, and they were disciplined in that message.”

Tom Szymanski, a former executive director of the state Republican Party, posed a question, though: “If we don’t talk about affordability, draconian energy mandates, making sure parents are involved in education, I don’t know what we’re supposed to be talking about.”

“Could we have talked about those issues in a more crisp way? Could the delivery have been better?” Szymanski said. “It’s something we need to look at and do some soul searching on.”

- **MORE: Voters give wins to both sides of school wars, but Dems are happy**

2. Democrats still outdo Republicans with mail-in voting

Democrats once again entered Election Day with a leg up on Republicans in both mail-in and early in-person voting, outpacing them 3 to 1 in an election with light turnout. More than 545,000 people voted in advance — about 329,000 Democrats and 129,500 Republicans, according to The Associated Press.

It's a lingering problem for the GOP that started under Trump, who questioned the legitimacy of voting by mail as it ballooned during the pandemic. New Jersey Republicans have tried to address the issue, spending nearly \$1 million to promote mail-in voting heading into the election.

But state Republican Party Chairman Bob Hugin noted Wednesday that Republicans need to “accelerate and improve our plans for closing the gap with Democrats.”

People who request mail-in ballots automatically continue to receive them each election, and that has helped Democrats draw out more voters. The party has focused on the issue for years, with Murphy installing policies to expand voting by mail.

Szymanski, who advised the Republican State Leadership Committee on vote-by-mail, said while the GOP has made strides, including increasing mail-in votes in critical districts this year, the party's deficit is an even bigger problem in an election with small turnout.

“It's something that we need to get better at or we will lose otherwise winnable races,” Szymanski said. “Not all of them, but some of the closer losses yesterday might have been avoided had we started taking this more seriously three or four years ago.”

Money also boosted Democrats, who outspent Republicans at least \$13.8 million to \$5 million in in these legislative races, according to numbers released last month by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

- **MORE: Democrats have big night in battle for N.J. Legislature**

3. Abortion hit home for Democrats

Democrats focused on abortion in the first battle over the Legislature since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, even though Murphy signed a law last year ensuring it remains legal here.

The issue has energized Democratic support nationwide — Ohio voters on Tuesday enshrined abortion rights in their state’s constitution — and it worked here, too, in districts Republicans wanted to take. Democrats warned GOP control could lead to cutbacks in reproductive rights.

“Abortion was on the ballot, and voters understood the stakes,” said Jackie Cornell, executive director of Planned Parenthood Action Fund of New Jersey. “Across New Jersey, voters resoundingly sent a message: Protect our reproductive freedom.”

Cornell added that candidates such as Sens. Andrew Zwicker, D-Middlesex, and Vin Gopal, D-Monmouth, who won re-election handily in tough races, campaigned “proudly” on their record protecting abortion rights.

Murphy said Tuesday proves that “staunchly defending reproductive freedom and abortion rights” is a winning stance.

Szymanski said Democrats took “a lot of liberties” focusing on the matter, but it was “a powerful force in motivating their base to turn out in greater numbers than many were expecting.”

Chris Russell, a Republican operative, told Politico New Jersey on Wednesday that Republicans who “continue to put their heads in the sand on abortion are going to continue to pay a price for it.”

“We need to understand the ground has shifted on that issue and meet voters where they are,” Russell told the website.

- **ELECTION RESULTS: N.J. Senate, Assembly races**

4. Democrats took a lesson from their 2021 losses — and maybe just do better running scared

After 2021, Democrats concluded their setbacks were because New Jersey voters were angry about pocketbook issues. They vowed to focus on affordability and stuck to it over the next few state budgets.

Democrats expanded ANCHOR property-tax relief and installed a senior tax-cut program called StayNJ (though it’s unclear whether it will ever get funded). They even sent out ANCHOR checks just before the election.

As a last-minute poll showed, despite all the talk about social issues, affordability was the key issue in the race, just like it was two years ago.

“It’s as if the Democrats and not the Republicans learned lessons from the strong showing two years ago,” Froomjian said.

Also, it’s possible Democrats just do better when they run scared. Last year, they worried about a potential red wave in congressional elections and prepared with a big ground game. That red wave didn’t happen.

This year, they privately fretted about what could happen on Election Day and worked the levers of getting the vote out.

Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, said in a statement that voters ultimately chose “solutions over cynicism, solutions over misinformation, solutions over division.”

- **MORE RESULTS: Local, county, school board races**

5. There was revenge in South Jersey

Democrats in the southern half of the state — a bloc long overseen by powerbroker George Norcross III — watched their seats erode in the last few legislative elections. That included a stunning win in 2021 by Republican truck driver Ed Durr, who unseated then-Senate President Stephen Sweeney in an upset that made national news.

But they took revenge Tuesday. Former Assemblyman John Burzichelli booted Durr from the Senate after one term in the 3rd District, while Durr’s Assembly running mates lost, too. Democrats also held on to the neighboring 4th District despite a fierce Republican challenge.

Froomjian said the Durr race was “personal” — a “grudge match.” He also noted other parts of South Jersey are still Republican and the area may continue to trend red, though Democrats are “breathing a sigh of relief.”

More north, Democratic Senate incumbents Gopal in the 11th District and Zwicker in the 16th District staved off strong Republican challenges with ease — the latter underlining the growing power of Middlesex County Democrats.

6. The Murphys had reason to celebrate. Does Biden?

One Jersey politics insider quipped that Democrats benefitted Tuesday from Murphy’s name not being on the ballot this time. Others called it a big night for the governor because the elections were the midterms of his second and final term and he bucked historical trends showing that scenario often doesn’t bode well for the party in power.

Daniel Bryan, a Democratic operative who has long worked closely with Murphy, said Tuesday proved “the Democratic Party is in good hands right now.”

The results also could boost Murphy’s wife, First Lady Tammy Murphy, who is expected to soon enter the 2024 race for the U.S. Senate seat held by indicted Democrat Robert Menendez. Party bosses who influence the Democratic primary could now have more ammunition to support her over another candidate, such as U.S. Rep. Andy Kim, who is also running.

Indeed, New Jersey Democrats prevailed despite falling poll numbers — even in this blue state — for Democratic President Joe Biden, who is up for a second term next year. Pundits were unclear what that could mean for the party’s 2024 chances nationally. Some felt Democrats’ approach here could be a roadmap.

Murphy gushed about the party performing well in “purply places and outright red” areas — such as Kentucky, Ohio, and Virginia — and said this all “bodes well for the president.”

Others suggest Democrats won despite Biden. Froomjian said it seems this election wasn’t “nationalized” and called 2024 “a totally different election.”

Jeannine LaRue, a veteran Democratic strategist and lobbyist, noted the party’s victories in New Jersey “could be a game-changer” and build momentum for Democrats running next year. Speaking at Rutgers’ post-election gathering Wednesday, LaRue also acknowledged a year is a long time in politics and fortunes can fade.

“Neither Democrats or Republicans can sleep right now because everything is a moving target,” she said.

7. This all could help shape the 2025 governor’s race

New Jerseyans will pick a successor to term-limited Murphy two years from now. Tuesday’s results could give a boost to a number of possible gubernatorial candidates — from Sweeney to Bramnick to Coughlin to Senate President Nick Scutari, D-Union. They are among the many names on the shortlist.

Sweeney, for his part, said had things gone “the other way,” pundits would have argued “Sweeney’s done.”

Bramnick said he is “seriously thinking about running for governor mostly because I believe we have to rebrand the Republican Party if we’re going to win the majority in this state.”

Bonus thought: A few pieces of history were made

Democrat Luanne Peterpaul, an attorney who flipped an Assembly seat in the 11th District, became the first openly LGBTQ+ woman elected to New Jersey's legislature.

Plus, Democrat Codey Miller, a 32-year-old Monroe Township school board member who won an Assembly seat in the 4th District, will not only become the new youngest member of the Legislature but its first-ever member born in the 1990s.

Our journalism needs your support. Please subscribe today to [NJ.com](#).

[Brent Johnson](#) may be reached at bjohnson@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on X at [@johnsb01](#).

[Susan K. Livio](#) may be reached at slivio@njadvancemedia.com. Follow her on X at [@SusanKLivio](#).

[Derek Hall](#) may be reached at dhall@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on X [@dereknhall](#).

If you purchase a product or register for an account through a link on our site, we may receive compensation.

By using this site, you consent to our [User Agreement](#) and agree that your clicks, interactions, and personal information may be collected, recorded, and/or stored by us and social media and other third-party partners in accordance with our [Privacy Policy](#).
