

THE A



Frustrated with the stalemate in Washington, many progressives have set their sights on the 15 states where Democrats control both houses of the legislature and the governorship. New Jersey is one of those 15: Democrats have virtually veto-proof legislative majorities, Gov. Philip D. Murphy is a self-described progressive, and the 14-member congressional delegation has only two Republicans.

The state has adopted some progressive measures, notably raising the minimum wage to \$15 and expanding paid sick leave. But the Democratic leaders in the state legislature have blocked key policies that Murphy supports, including raising taxes on millionaires and shrinking a corporate tax credit program benefiting special interests and costing the state billions of dollars. Stephen M. Sweeney, the Senate president, regularly attacks public-sector unions and has led a campaign to cut their members' health and pension benefits.

New Jersey's Democratic establishment, however, faces challenges by progressive candidates in a July 7 primary. Across the state, progressives are running against incumbents for congressional seats as well as county-level positions that control spending and the administration of elections. These races will test the political establishment's power in the context of a pandemic and economic crisis that has hit New Jersey hard.

Recently, Senate President Sweeney has echoed Republicans in pushing for the state to reopen more quickly following a lockdown imposed by Murphy in mid-March to fight COVID-19. Sweeney has also withheld support from Murphy as the governor seeks to expand state borrowing to make up for the shortfall in revenue produced by the pandemic. Although New Jersey's constitution generally bars the state from borrowing to pay for operating costs, it provides for an exception "to meet an emergency case"

The explanation for Sweeney's behavior and for New Jersey's limited progressive gains is that political machines aligned with Sweeney control the legislature. The machines purport to be Democratic, but they are primarily transactional rather than ideological. When Republican Chris Christie was governor, they collaborated with him, enabling much of his conservative agenda to become law.

The continuing impact of that collaboration with Christie is evident in the makeup of the state's powerful independent authorities and boards. Although ~~the~~ ~~majority~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~members~~ ~~are~~ ~~Republican~~ ~~and~~ ~~have~~ ~~been~~ ~~appointed~~ ~~by~~ ~~Christie~~ ~~or~~ ~~his~~ ~~predecessors~~, ~~they~~ ~~are~~ ~~not~~ ~~representative~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~state's~~ ~~diverse~~ ~~population~~.

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Although the power of New Jersey's political machines has its origins in judicial decisions and legislation of the 1980s and '90s, the current regime dates to September 2009.

According to former Gov. Richard Codey, that's when six white men met to decide how they would carve up control of the state.

Besides DiVincenzo and Norcross, the six men included Sweeney, who was one of Norcross's childhood friends; Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, who headed the state Democratic Party; and two state senators, Bob Smith and Ray Lesniak. By the end of the meeting, the six men had worked out an arrangement under which they would use their influence to elect legislative leaders and ensure that the Sn

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## **SUPPORT THE PROSPECT**

The machines use their control of the legislature to generate resources for themselves and their allies. For example, while Christie was governor, the state greatly expanded a corporate tax credit program that had existed since 1994. One bill, the Economic Opportunity Act of 2013, directed subsidies to Norcross and his allies by carving out special provisions for Camden, Norcross's home turf. Investigations in the past year have documented troubling details about how that legislation was drafted and the disproportionate benefits received by Norcross's inner circle.

According to *The New York Times*, before the 2013 bill was enacted, an attorney at the Parker McCay law firm, where George Norcross's brother Philip is the managing partner, was "allowed by lawmakers to edit drafts of the bill in ways that opened up sizable tax breaks to his firm's clients." An investigation by [ProPublica and WNC](#) found that Norcross and his allies received \$1.1 billion of the \$1.6 billion in tax

change in New Jersey politics” over the previous decade.  
Until the election of Brendan Byrne

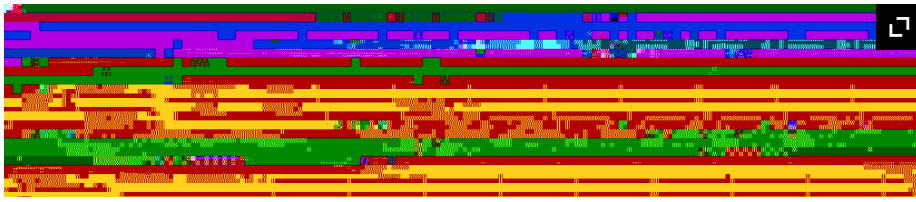
Byrne prevailed, helped in par

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Democratic and Republican legislative leaders. The Senate president, the Speaker of the Assembly, and the minority leaders of the Senate and Assembly could no raise and distribute campaign funds to their party's candidates under very favorable fundraising and spending limits. This enabled party bosses and top legislative leaders to amass large ar chests that they could use to help elect their allies and scare offidre oul

county and local office. The



The advantage comes from the placement of the better-known candidates for president, U.S. senator, or governor at the top of the county line. The county line also receives the prime location on the ballot. Without the county party's endorsement, candidates must run "off the line," appearing in a column by themselves or with other candidates who may be running with or against them. This confuses voters and makes off-the-line candidates appear less legitimate. Some counties exploit the current laws to place the off-the-line candidates several columns away from those that receive the party endorsement (see column 9 of the Camden ballot), so voters may not even realize that they are running.

A recent analysis by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) found that no incumbent state legislator who ran on the county line had lost a primary election in New Jersey between 2009 and 2018. Although incumbents generally win re-election, that advantage is rarely so absolute. In New York state, for example, 22 state legislature incumbents lost a primary election during that same time period.

It's not surprising that running off the line in what progressive activists have termed "ballot Siberia" is a substantial electoral disadvantage. Decades of research has documented that ballot design and ballot placement impact voting behavior. This effect is particularly strong in low-information elections without interparty competition, which describes New Jersey's primaries.

The experience of one New Jersey candidate illustrates the importance of the county line. Rush Holt, a Princeton physicist, was assistant director of the university's Plasma Physics Laboratory in 1996, when he decided to run in the



Democratic primary for the local congressional seat, which  
had been in Republican hands for



facing a \$10 billion budget shortfall through the 2021 fiscal year. Sweeney has so far refused to support Murphy's effort to invoke emergency borrowing authority, but both the Assembly Speaker and key Sweeney allies in the Senate are backing the governor.

Although the legislature itself is not up for re-election until 2021, the July 7 primary may be a telling sign of the machines' strength. In South Jersey, Amy Kennedy, the wife of former Rhode Island Rep. Patrick Kennedy, is vying to go up against Jeff Van Dreese, who switched to the Republican Party in December 2019 after refusing to support Trump's impeachment. Brigid Garrison, a political science professor with machine backing, is Kennedy's chief rival. The district includes municipalities from

Even if some of the challengers win their primaries, the barriers to structural change that would permanently weaken the machines remain formidable. Unlike many other states, New Jersey lacks a statewide initiative or referendum process that would allow citizens to put a new constitutional amendment or law directly on the ballot. Changes to the state's constitution require approval either by three-fifths of the legislature or by a majority in two consecutive years before going to the voters. So legislative leaders can cut off that route.

In addition, unlike New York, New Jersey has highly restrictive laws regarding political parties. While New York has eight parties competing for primary voters, New Jersey has only the Democrats and Republicans because of laws that make it virtually impossible for new parties to hold primaries. A more accessible process could open things up. New York also allows "fusion voting," which enables smaller parties to influence general-election results by nominating one of the major-party candidates or someone else.

Another factor inhibiting change is that few of New Jersey's state legislative districts are competitive. Nearly all are either firmly Democratic or firmly Republican, so for most of the state, winning the party primary guarantees a win in the general election. ~~winning the endorsement of the county party organization virtually guarantees a win in the primary, the machines have a lock on the primary of~~ winning the endorsement of the county party organization virtually guarantees a win in the primary, the machines have a lock on the primary of

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