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POLITICAL POWER in New Jersey, from the local level all the way up to the very top, requires tremendous skill and precision. It’s not easy to reach a point where you are truly influential, at least in a way that can be substantiated. And it’s even harder to hold on to power, especially in a business where luck and timing sometimes overshadow ability.

But each year, as some people go up and others go down – and some drop off completely – it’s clear that amassing power requires certain skill sets.

To be powerful in New Jersey, you have to be a good poker player. If you’re not, then there’s a decent chance that you’ll just be some character in Lord of the Flies.

In reality, there are a lot of people aimlessly wandering the walkways of New Jersey politics who have not fully grasped what it takes to exert real authority. For the folks who don’t understand the components of leadership and power, it’s almost impossible to be impactful.

Here’s a checklist of the basic requirements of power: you must be able to read a room; the ability to count is essential; and people need to know what they don’t know. These three things, frankly, are not negotiable.

Being powerful means even more. Pick and choose your battles. Be self-aware and own your decisions. Build lasting relationships. Regardless of your gender, have a set of balls and be ready to show what you’ve got. And if you see ghosts at every corner, at least know that you do. If you need someone to tell you that your hair is on fire, it’s probably too late.

People, at least in Jersey, don’t get to display omnipotent dominance without working hard. It doesn’t just miraculously appear. And power is fleeting, so it’s use it or lose it.

“TO BE POWERFUL IN NEW JERSEY, YOU HAVE TO BE A GOOD POKER PLAYER. IF YOU’RE NOT, THEN THERE’S A DECENT CHANCE THAT YOU’LL JUST BE SOME CHARACTER IN LORD OF THE FLIES.”

- DAVID WILDSTEIN,
Editor, New Jersey Globe
There’s an old joke and it goes sort of like this: what do you call a governor who wins by a single vote? You call him governor. While Phil Murphy didn’t prevail by the margin many expected, he still won. And for the next four years, he’ll be the most constitutionally powerful governor in the nation. George Helmy, his chief of staff for the last three years, gets a lot of credit for the win – and for drawing the roadmap that set up Murphy to become the first Democratic governor in 44 years to get a second term. Murphy didn’t have a great first year. He wasn’t getting along with fellow Democrats in the legislature and the circumstances of Al Alvarez’s hiring messed him up. New Jersey Transit was a mess. Few New Jerseyans knew who Murphy was, other than he wasn’t Chris Christie. Murphy publicly came to blows with George Norcross and there was a general assumption that Murphy would face a primary challenge. Helmy took over the governor’s office on February 2019, thirteen months before the coronavirus pandemic wound up defining Murphy’s first term.
He fixed much of the internal chaos within the administration. He fought some battles -- he won some and he lost less -- but when Helmy engaged in combat, he did so from the front of the line and never hid his face. He never used anyone as his shield.

Incrementally, Helmy fixed a governorship that some viewed as broken. He also repaired relationships that played a critical role in Murphy’s ability to win a second term. Murphy’s agenda was passed by the legislature, albeit not easily. Once COVID-19 came along, Helmy brandished his managerial skills as Murphy catapulted to national prominence. That’s not to say that there weren’t any missteps, but in this particular situation, the numbers don’t lie. Murphy’s job approvals vaulted, with the percentage of New Jerseyans who viewed the governor’s handling of the pandemic even higher. Helmy’s approvals shot up too – not just with the governor and the first lady, but with Democratic Party leaders he had assiduously courted. He even opened a steady line of communication with Norcross.

While Murphy won’t go down in the record books as “Landslide Phil” – regardless of the post-election spin, an 84,286-vote victory is not what Helmy wanted – but given the choice between a re-election rout or a three-point win accompanied by a change in the Senate leadership and diminished power of South Jersey Democrats, it will never be completely clear which option Helmy might have chosen. As the governor prepares to be inaugurated for the second time, Helmy is staying on. The fact that nobody really knows how long he’ll stay only serves to increase his authority. It’s improbable that he’ll stay for four years, but he won’t make himself a lame duck either.

Typically, chiefs of staff don’t enter a fourth year – it hasn’t happened since Edward McGlynn became Tom Kean’s top aide just after the re-election campaign and remained to turn off the lights at the close of Kean’s governorship. Still, it appears that Helmy isn’t ready to go yet. The second term won’t be easy for Murphy or Helmy. Together, they’ll need to navigate a legislature with more Republicans – and an Assembly minority that is more ideologically conservative and looking for a fight – and Democrats who don’t view the governor’s re-election as the sort of mandate McGlynn inherited 36 years ago.

So, let’s talk about the elephant in the room: Helmy is now #1 on the power list, and in doing so, he replaces the man who’s held the top slot for years, Norcross. Here’s why: with Norcross’ hold over the State Senate vastly diminished, and with a governor who is unopposed to delegating, Helmy might be the most powerful gubernatorial chiefs of staff in state history.

GEORGE HELMY’S ORBIT

- Gary Taffet
- Cory Booker
- Bob Menendez
- Bill Castner
- Parimal Garg
- Zakiya Smith Ellis
- LeRoy Jones Jr.
- Kevin McCabe
- John Currie
- Dan Bryan
- Mahen Gunaratna
- Matt Platkin
- Paul Juliano
- Mo Butler
- Justin Braz
- Brendan Gill

Phil Murphy
Tammy Murphy
THEY SAY THAT IF YOU FIND YOURSELF face-to-face with a bear, your best defense is to appear bigger than you really are -- and make a lot of noise.

That was what a rather puffy George E. Norcross III did during the early morning hours on November 3, when he came to grips with the reality that Senate President Steve Sweeney had lost his own bid for re-election to a truck driver named Edward Durr.

One thing about Norcross is that he’s a pragmatist. There’s not a lot of sentimental, namby-pamby bullshit to him. While he prefers to be the house and deal the cards, he also understands how to play the hand he’s dealt.

In the instance of the 2021 general election, he was, to put it mildly, dealt a shitty hand. It wasn’t just Sweeney’s upset defeat; Norcross spent millions to flip the Atlantic County Senate seat and to hold on to party-switcher Dawn Addiego’s seat in Burlington County. But this year’s election cycle wasn’t about money – something that had frequently been Norcross’ secret sauce over the years -- and Republicans won both races.

Over the course of the last four years, South Jersey has lost four Senate seats and six Assembly seats. That’s a big blow. He’ll be forced to spend much of 2022 making sure that he doesn’t lose control of county government in Gloucester and Cumberland.

Still, the rumors of his demise are a bit hasty.

Over the last 32 years -- he was elected Camden County Democratic Chairman in 1989 at age 33-- Norcross has seen Senate seats come and go. He’s also made and lost governors, sometimes from both parties. The resiliency of the leader of the “Can Do Club” is indisputable. He remains a formidable friend and foe.

Norcross still controls county governments in South Jersey, along with countless local governments, school boards, authorities, and agencies. He still has four senators and eight Assembly seats. And an excellent relationship with the incoming Senate President, Nicholas Scutari. That’s not too shabby.

Also undeniable was the importance of the senate presidency. Norcross figured out twelve years ago that while governors come and go, control of the State Senate was something he thought he could hold onto forever. That’s why he spent whatever he needed to in 2017 when Sweeney was thought to be in real trouble.

This time, nobody saw Durr’s Raymour & Flanigan truck coming right at the heart of Norcross’ power base.
But for Norcross, life goes on. He’s not a man who sits shiva. That was clear at 5 AM on the day after the election, when he started making calls to make sure he had a friend still running the New Jersey Senate.

Norcross is already plotting his bid to regain some of his legislative footing in 2023 and looking ahead to best leverage organization lines he controls – and alliances he’s built – when Democrats look for a gubernatorial candidate in 2025.

In the meantime, he’ll just act bigger and louder than everybody else.
Kevin McCabe
Middlesex County Democratic Chairman

There is a certain quality to Kevin McCabe that could make him the Robert F. Kennedy of New Jersey politics. He can be relentless in his pursuit of victory, but he also operates under an ideological compass that frequently demonstrates the old adage that good government is the best politics.

The tentacles of the Middlesex County Democratic organization run up and down the state in a way that New Jersey hasn’t seen since John Lynch retired from the Senate twenty years ago. The reason is McCabe, who has built a solid political operation based on personal relationships and a no-nonsense approach to leadership during his nine terms as county chairman.

Like many successful leaders, McCabe isn’t risk-averse and he doesn’t suffer fools easily.

McCabe has had an ally occupy the Assembly Speaker post for the last four years, and once Craig Coughlin completes his next term, he’ll be the longest-serving Democratic speaker in state history.

When the legislature reorganizes in January, McCabe will have the kind of numbers in the State Senate that George Norcross used to wield in the South. That’s why the next Senate President, Nicholas Scutari, worked with McCabe as he locked down votes to succeed Steve Sweeney. Add that to a solid relationship with Gov. Phil Murphy and Chief of Staff George Helmy – he delivered 116,352 votes for the governor’s reelection -- and a seat on the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and McCabe is sitting on top of the world.

But with such power comes a huge target on his back. To his credit, McCabe appears to recognize that.

He put Democrats on notice that “the time for burying our heads in the sand is over” and put a zero tolerance of any racist behavior in place. He pledged to pull his support from any candidate who engaged in racist or misogynistic behavior.

In what was a tough year for many Democrats across the state, 2021 was mostly lemonade for McCabe. He gets credit for making a lot of his own luck – much of it because he possesses the kind of testicular fortitude to make that happen.

McCabe added another Middlesex senator in the 16th district – the only Democratic pickup of the cycle – largely because he stood firm for Andrew Zwicker despite a push by Somerset County Democrats and Sweeney to go with someone else.
His biggest move came last spring, when McCabe overruled a vote of the Edison Democratic County committee and refused to support Mahesh Bhagia, who was under an ethical cloud, for mayor. Instead, he backed a young councilman, Sammy Joshi, and got him through a contentious primary and a tough general election.

Under McCabe’s leadership, more than twice as many women as men hold countywide office in Middlesex, and a majority of county elected officials are people of color. That comes from a county that is largely suburban.
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This has got to happen every so often: the phone rings and a person looks down, sees Tammy Murphy’s name on the caller ID, and grimaces.

It’s not because people don’t like her, but rather because there’s a decent chance that she’s going to ask them for money.

The First Lady of New Jersey might be the most successful political fundraiser in New Jersey history -- and that includes giants like Bob Menendez, Bob Torricelli and Josh Gottheimer.

But her role isn’t limited to boosting the campaign coffers of her husband, Gov. Phil Murphy, and other Democratic candidates in New Jersey and nationally – or her work as chair of the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund, which has raised tens of millions of dollars over the last twenty months.

Murphy has taken the lead in revamping maternal and infant health policies with a push to reduce maternal mortality in New Jersey by 50% over the next five years. She’s also working to eliminate racial disparities in birth outcomes, and to boost clean energy across the state.

The thing about power is that it’s almost always fleeting, especially for the state’s first family. In the case of Tammy Murphy, it’s possible that her extraordinary fundraising prowess and public policy chops could keep her on a power list even after her husband leaves office in January 2026.
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“However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”
-Winston Churchill

Warmest Congratulations to all those named to New Jersey Globe's 2021 Power List!

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DON’T LET THE PLEASING personality of LeRoy Jones, Jr. catch you off guard. He honed his skills in the cut-throat terrain of Essex County politics, and when it’s time for a fight, it would be smart never to bet against him.

Jones is now at the apex of a political career that began as a 31-year-old freeholder – he bested the famed Joe Clark in a 1988 special election -- and in the 1990s as the progressive champion of the New Jersey State Assembly. He became Democratic State Chairman in June and has served as the Essex County Democratic chairman for the last eight years.

He’s also the Democratic chairman of the Legislative Apportionment Commission that’s redrawing the state’s 40 districts for the 2023 election. But the most important thing to know about Jones is that the real joy of his political existence comes as the East Orange Democratic Municipal Chairman. He’s in daily contact with his county committee and with the mayor, Ted Green. East Orange delivered 11,036 votes to Gov. Phil Murphy and their favorite-daughter, lieutenant governor, Sheila Oliver. That’s 96% of the vote.

A constant presence on the campaign trail across New Jersey this year, Jones became the first Democratic State Chairman to preside over the re-election of a governor in 56 years. Essex County delivered 132,520 votes for Murphy, the second-highest in the state and just 12,630 behind Bergen.

These days, Jones can get pretty much anything he wants out of Trenton. He’s emerged as a close ally of the governor and his staff, as well as Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin and of the incoming Senate President, Nick Scutari. He’s close to the state’s two United States Senators, and mentors two House members from Essex County, Donald Payne and Mikie Sherrill.

Jones plays a long-game on relationships, enabling him to keep peace in Essex County for nearly a decade – and that’s no small task.

One more thing that’s important: in addition to his political responsibilities, Jones spent months as a regular volunteer at an Essex County vaccination center.
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AS THE GOVERNOR’S LAWYER, Parimal Garg might appreciate the boilerplate language in the justification for his inclusion at the top of a list of the most powerful people in New Jersey politics: “Every piece of legislation that passes the legislature touches his hands, and his review will largely determine whether it becomes a law or faces a veto. Every judge and prosecutor nominated by the governor will be vetted by his office.”

For some New Jersey insiders, the indelible image of a 16-year-old Garg standing with then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama during the 2005 gubernatorial campaign evinces the fact that despite his relative youth – he became the second-youngest chief counsel in state history last year—he’s actually been watching state politics for sixteen years. But make no mistake: the job of chief counsel can age you, and Garg’s puppy year probably ended in 2018 when he was serving as deputy chief counsel. After 15 months as chief counsel – and after authoring the greatest number of executive orders in New Jersey history – Garg remains a key member of Gov. Phil Murphy’s senior staff. Murphy and Chief of Staff George Helmy rely on his advice every day. He runs what is effectively a large, in-house law firm that meticulously reviews a seemingly immeasurable number of documents.

His brains take him a long way. He is one of at least two members of the Murphy administration to get a perfect score on the SATs; the other is Rachel Wainer Apter, the governor’s nominee for a seat on the New Jersey Supreme Court. Garg is quiet and unassuming, but unhesitant to speak up and share his opinion when he feels strongly. The idea that he doesn’t inject himself into every fight has helped him become a credible powerhouse within Murphy’s world. As a former law clerk to Chief Justice Stuart Rabner, he’s also a bit of an institutionalist with an inherent respect for the State Constitution.

He’ll become the first chief counsel to move with a governor into a second term since David J. Goldberg held the post before and after Gov. Richard Hughes’ re-election. There is no indication that he’s departing anytime soon; indeed, it’s not difficult to imagine Garg leaving office when the governor does.
IN NEW JERSEY POLITICS, Kevin J. O’Toole is the consigliere for the consiglieres, and as a 57-year-old elder statesman, he’s more influential today that he was when he retired from the State Senate four-and-a-half years ago.

Just four years ago, as Democrat Phil Murphy prepared to assume the governorship, there was a belief by some, including the new governor, that O’Toole’s time as chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was limited. Now, it’s entirely possible that O’Toole can extend his stay at the powerful bi-state agency that has a budget larger than six U.S. states, through the entirety of the Murphy administration – and perhaps into the tenure of the next governor.

That’s a testament to O’Toole’s political skills. Relationships with key Democratic senators forged during his nearly 22 years in the New Jersey Legislature resulted in his protection. At this point, even Murphy doesn’t necessarily think he can do better than the incumbent and there is no sign that the recently re-elected governor will move against him. O’Toole’s network of close friends – old and new -- branches out to some of the highest levels of the public and private sector. Unencumbered by the need to run for office, O’Toole has focused on building a flourishing law firm and retains the ability to extend his reach without regard to political party.

Funny as it seems, O’Toole appears to have been strengthened in the 2021 election. One close friend in the senate presidency was replaced with another, a second ally is the new minority leader, and a third, the new Senate Judiciary Committee chairman, would stand in front of a truck for him.
IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE WHAT must have been going through Bill Castner’s mind on November 2. His close friend, Gov. Phil Murphy, was going home without knowing if he won, although it looked like he would. His onetime friend, Steve Sweeney, appeared to be losing his own seat.

The only certainty was that when he woke up on November 3, regardless of the outcome of New Jersey’s general election, President Joe Biden was planning to nominate Castner’s wife to serve as a federal judge. Once a top lieutenant of George Norcross’ South Jersey machine, Castner’s political comeback has been nothing short of remarkable. Four years after Norcross and Sweeney, declared him political dead meat, he’s now the strongest he’s ever been.

Murphy, of course, won re-election; Castner is one of his top outside political advisors, with a major role in shaping gun safety policies. His staff depends on him for sage counsel. Sweeney is gone, Norcross’ presence in the legislature is diminished, and Middlesex County Democrats, with whom Castner has forged a strong personal relationship, are now at the top of their game. Castner has a huge competitive advantage when it comes to remaining influential in New Jersey politics: he’s an extraordinarily smart strategic thinker with deep institutional knowledge. That makes him value added – and given the circumstances of his success, shows that his political foes are out of his league.
SO HERE’S ED OATMAN, sort of minding his own business, expecting to spend a quiet post-election Teacher’s Convention weekend out of town with his kids, when a truck driver named Ed Durr suddenly upended his life and catapulted him to one of the most powerful political insiders in New Jersey.

In an epic political upset, Durr unseated Senate President Steve Sweeney in the 3rd legislative district by about 2,000 votes.

Within two days, Nicholas Scutari had secured enough votes in the Democratic caucus to become the Senate President. Scutari doesn’t have a big inner circle and of the people who have access to his inner sanctum, there is nobody with more influence than Oatman.

Oatman is the Union County Manager, which has similar power to a County Executive, without the encumbrances of dealing with all but one voter: Scutari, who is also the Union County Democratic Chairman.

Scutari wanted Oatman because he’s competent and because he trusts his judgment. He’s also a Scutari loyalist.

It wasn’t always that way. In September 2003, when State Sen. Joseph Suliga dropped his re-election campaign after an unfortunate incident outside a Linden Go-Go bar, Oatman was working for Assemblywoman Linda Stender, who wanted the Senate seat. But Linden Mayor John Gregorio wanted Scutari and that’s how it went.

Stender made a big mistake in 2006 when she legitimately

had a shot an unseating GOP Rep. Mike Ferguson by not hiring Oatman as her campaign manager. Now Stender works for Oatman.

As it turned out, Oatman is a hugely talented political consultant who works on political campaigns with Nick Fixmer. Now he’ll have an opportunity to serve as Scutari’s strategist as he seeks to defend Democratic seats or oust Republican senators under a new map that will begin in 2023.
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THERE IS NO EULOGY BEING DELIVERED HERE.

Kevin Drennan runs the New Jersey State Senate, and despite Steve Sweeney’s re-election defeat and his impending departure from the Senate Presidency, until the new Senate President says otherwise, Drennan retains enormous influence in state government.

There’s no doubt that Sweeney’s successor, Nicholas Scutari, will look to bring in some of his own people, so if Drennan stays, he’ll need to get along with his new boss and Team Scutari. To be clear, Drennan has worked with Scuatri for years. They get along well.

So, as long as Drennan continues to run the day-to-day operations of the Senate, he’ll continue to put his handprint on what legislation makes it to the floor, what nominations get advanced, and who gets hired as staffers.

One of Drennan’s particular strengths is loyalty. Sweeney knew that he’d take a bullet for him if he needed him to. In a business where loyalty can be fungible, you now have to view Drennan as a political widower of sorts. It’s not like he’d be cheating on Sweeney if he becomes a Scutari guy.

Just an objective observation, for what it’s worth: one of the things that made Sweeney so formidable as the longest-serving legislative leader in New Jersey history was his mastery of the Senate. That didn’t happen overnight, and Scutari might need Drennan’s institutional knowledge to help him become Mike Mansfield. (That’s a reference some younger political observers might not get.)
The Eastern Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters is part of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America and is made up of over 41,000 highly skilled men and women living and working in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Washington DC, Virginia, West Virginia, and Puerto Rico.
Union leaders are naturally political, but none have the independence of Greg Lalevee, who marches to his own drummer and makes decisions that benefit members of his own local, even when others go in a different direction. Lalevee is perpetually loyal to those who stand with him, regardless of party affiliation, and wields a massive war chest that he’s not afraid to use. But he’s also pragmatic, endorsing Gov. Phil Murphy for re-election despite some policy differences.
For New Jerseyans obsessed with who controls counties, municipalities, and even zoning boards, the amount of power Matt Klapper exercises as the chief of staff to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland might seem unfathomable. This Jersey guy, a former firefighter and EMS volunteer who started working for Cory Booker in high school and then returned to work at Newark City Hall after earning a law degree from Yale – and served as Booker’s U.S. Senate chief of staff – now runs the U.S. Department of Justice. But, just to put Klapper’s clout in perspective, with Jersey being Jersey, that kind of power ranks just below the head of an Operating Engineers local.

For the last fourteen years, Michael Soliman has been Bob Menendez’s alter ego in New Jersey and is the #1 political advisor to the chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Soliman is a partner at a public affairs firm with a national reach, but he’s able to keep his politics local as a sounding board for Gov. Phil Murphy and his top aides, and as a Hudson County Democratic insider.

The state’s largest public employee union has term limits for its leaders and Sean Spiller assumed the presidency of the 200,000-member union in September and, presumably, he’ll get four years. He starts out with more political clout than his predecessors. Back in 2013, he was considered a potential candidate for lieutenant governor and with an enormously close relationship with the recently re-elected Democratic governor, Phil Murphy. Spiller makes the Power List by virtue of his union post – and the Gottheimeresque war chest that comes with it. But he also has the benefit – or burden – of personal political ambition. He was elected mayor of Montclair in 2021 and he’s a potential candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 2025 when Murphy will be term-limited out of office.
Mo Butler was on the ground floor of Cory Booker’s political career, serving as his chief of staff at Newark City Hall, and then as Booker’s New Jersey chief of staff when he was elected to the United States Senate. Butler has seen his influence expand considerably this year after President Joe Biden placed multiple ex-Booker staffers, and Butler friends, in top position in the White House and in the federal government. (See #12). Butler’s clout also grew after Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin named him to the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority and even more when Gov. Phil Murphy named him chairman.

Whether people agree or disagree with Gov. Phil Murphy’s agenda, there’s no denying that Zakiya Smith Ellis has an enormous say over what it looks like. She’s a member of Chief of Staff George Helmy’s inner circle – it was he who recommended that she leave her cabinet post as Secretary of Higher Education to join the governor’s office in 2021 – and Murphy trusts her. Like many top Murphy aides, the biggest question is how long into the second term she’ll stay.

2021 was no doubt a tough year for South Jersey Democrats and for Mickey Quinn, who heads up George Norcross’ political operation. But in politics, you win some and you lose some, and Quinn remains the implementer of Norcross’ local politics and what will become a two-year fight to make the South Jersey Democratic machine whole. That puts him in a position with much risk, but also with the opportunity for tremendous reward.
Steve DeMicco and Brad Lawrence are sort of the Patty Duke of New Jersey politics – “One pair of matching bookends, Different as night and day” – you might need to be of a certain demographic to get it – but no political consultants have won more statewide races than the two Democratic strategists. Indeed, no Democrat has won statewide office in New Jersey in more than 20 years without hiring them. Gov. Phil Murphy has been relying on them since 2014, and there’s no indication that he’ll stop.

Brendan Gill remains standing – and a member of Gov. Phil Murphy’s inner circle – despite a group of people aiming shivs at his back. That’s a testament to his political acumen and the kind of skills that got Murphy elected in the first place. Few get New Jersey politics as well as he does, and many people who want to run for governor in four years will most certainly seek Gill’s counsel. Unrelated to his statewide political power, he is also an Essex County Commissioner and the Montclair Democratic Municipal Chairman.
For a little while on November 2, it looked like Jack Ciattarelli might have pulled off one of the greatest political upsets in New Jersey history. For the first time since 1981, the two candidates went home on election night without a clear winner. For a race that pollsters predicted Gov. Phil Murphy would win by seven to eleven points, Ciattarelli came within three points of being the next governor. Ten days later, after delivering his concession speech, he announced that he would run again 2025. If you think about it, folks shouldn’t be all that surprised: Ciattarelli was planning on running in four years anyway.

Now, Ciattarelli plays the role of the Republican standard bearer in New Jersey, which won’t have another statewide election until 2024. He’ll have the ability to influence public policy, especially with an expanded presence of Republicans in the legislature. Murphy will likely spend his second term with Ciattarelli breathing down his neck, second-guessing decisions and potentially becoming the lame duck governor’s greatest rival.

Twenty years after he was named Chief of Staff to the Governor, Gary Taffet is now at the zenith of his political power. He’s a key advisor to Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, who put him on the Legislative Apportionment Commission, and to Middlesex County Democratic Chairman Kevin McCabe. Gov. Phil Murphy and his staff frequently rely on his advice.
Ray Pocino exudes old-school respect every day as one of the most influential labor leaders in state history. He began the process of retirement in September, stepping down from his seats as a commissioner of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the New Jersey Turnpike Authority. The Laborers’ will always be powerful in New Jersey, but Pocino’s eventual successor will have tough shoes to fill.

It’s been a long time since Frank Spencer was a Camden County Freeholder; since then, he’s become one of the most influential labor leaders in the nation.

In the fourteen months since he left his post as chief counsel to Gov. Phil Murphy, Matt Platkin has remained a member of the governor’s inner circle from his perch as a partner at a major New Jersey law firm. As Murphy prepares to take office for a second time, Platkin figures prominently as a continued top advisor to the most powerful governor in the nation.
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CONGRATULATIONS TO THE NEW JERSEY GLOBE ON A SUCCESSFUL YEAR AND TO THE 2021 POWER LIST HONOREES.
Democrats lost six Assembly seats in 2021, but Michael Muller still holds the record as the winningest leader of lower house campaigns in state history. He’s also established his own political base as the Democratic municipal chairman of Mount Laurel, a town that has flipped from solid Republican to all-Democratic under his leadership.

The executive at one of the state’s most influential public affairs firms is at a high point – perhaps one of many – in his political career: Al Barlas is the Republican chairman of the Legislative Apportionment Commission, the Essex County Republican Chairman, and a top political advisor to Kevin O’Toole, who now has a safe seat as chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

The success of Joe DiVincenzo as New Jersey’s Vaccinator-in-chief was boosted by the efforts of Phil Alagia, who has worked for Joe D since he was 16 and is now completing his 19th year as the county executive’s chief of staff.
Replacing Hetty Rosenstein isn’t an easy job, but she left the CWA in good shape for the skilled second-generation labor leader to succeed. Fran Ehret gets to work with a second-term Democratic governor for the first time in 44 years.

As New Jersey shifts, people hope, away from Covid vaccinations and toward an era of economic recovery for the state, Joe Kelley’s portfolio as the person responsible for Gov. Phil Murphy’s handling of the economy will continue to expand.

Bergen County has nearly one million residents and 70 municipalities. County politics remains firmly under the command of Paul Juliano, who became Democratic County Chairman in 2019. He won the most important political test of his career in June when his candidate for State Senate, Gordon Johnson, took the Democratic primary with 72% of the vote.
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The former Republican State Chairman decided not to run for governor, but he remains influential as a partner at a top statewide law firm, as the Warren County GOP Chairman, and as the Republican chairman of the Congressional Redistricting Commission. With the incoming Senate and Assembly minority leaders hailing from Northwest New Jersey, Doug Steinhardt’s influence over GOP politics remains solid.

Dan Bryan and Mahen Gunaratna were the masterminds of the Pool House Strategy: by constructing a relatively inexpensive virtual TV home studio in the pool house of Gov. Phil Murphy’s Middletown home, they were able to advance a direct-to-consumer tactic that didn’t rely on local media and instead put the governor in front of real New Jerseyans via national television and radio appearances that bolstered his name ID and approval ratings during the coronavirus pandemic. For less than $20,000, Murphy became known – and popular – in a way that millions of dollars in paid TV ads could not.
34

WILLIAM SPROULE
Executive Secretary/Treasurer, Eastern Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters

The Carpenters faced some difficult challenges in 2018 after they dissolved the local council to oust their former leader, but Bill Sproule has quickly restored the political clout of the union.

35

CHRIS RUSSELL
Co-Founder, Checkmate Strategies

A shift of just 42,125 votes in the November 2021 gubernatorial election might have put Chris Russell at #1 on the 2021 New Jersey Globe Power List, as his strategy almost resulted in a victory for Jack Ciattarelli. Russell remains a hot commodity as the top GOP strategist in the state, especially as Ciattarelli prepares to mount a 2025 gubernatorial campaign.

36

JOSEPH MUNIZ
Board Secretary, Hudson County Schools of Technology; Chairman, North Hudson Community Action Corporation

As North Bergen Mayor/State Sen. Nicholas Sacco’s top consigliere, and now as an advisor to Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, Joey Muniz is in the room for every major political decision made in Hudson County.
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The talented Democratic political consultant is already influential, but he will see his political clout expand exponentially once Nicholas Scutari is installed as the new Senate President in January. Scutari’s personal inner circle isn’t that big, and Nick Fixmer has a front seat in the room – both for the business of the New Jersey Senate, and the 2023 Democratic Senate campaigns.
KEVIN BROWN  
Vice President and State Director, 32BJ Service Employees International Union

The SEIU is one of Gov. Phil Murphy’s favorite labor unions and Kevin Brown will have the ear of the governor for the next four years.

SETH HAHN  
Deputy Executive Director, Assembly Majority Office

The former CWA official and progressive leader is now the guy Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin relies on to get 41 votes on bills, a job that became a little more difficult after Republicans gained six seats in the November general election. He’ll become Executive Director in January following the retirement of Skip Cimino.

CRAIG GUY  
Chief of Staff to the Hudson County Executive

Nothing happens in Hudson County government unless this Guy signs off.
BILL MULLEN

President, New Jersey Building & Construction Trades Council

The steady hand of Bill Mullen aggressively protects the interests of 13 local building trade councils, over 100 New Jersey-based unions, and more than 150,000 members.

JUSTIN BRAZ

Deputy Chief of Staff to the Governor

When the governor needs the legislature to pass an initiative, Justin Braz’s job is to herd legislators and get the bill across the finish line. And when the governor needed to get re-elected, Braz was one of the people he sent over to the campaign side for a little while.

ANGELO GENOVA

Partner, Genova Burns

When people of power need a lawyer, they turn to Angelo Genova, a man of extraordinary gravitas and institutional knowledge.
William Tambussi
Partner, Brown & Connery

If South Jersey were a state, Bill Tambussi would be the attorney general and the chief justice at the same time.

Raj Parikh
Partner, Genova Burns

There is nobody on the Democratic side with a better track record on election law matters than this Livingston attorney with an A-list client roster.

Charles Wowkanech
President, New Jersey AFL-CIO

There’s no one in New Jersey that bleeds union more than Charlie Wowkanech. Since assuming the presidency of an organization that represents more than 1 million union members in 1997, Wowkanech is now on his 8th governor.
SUE ALTMAN
State Director, New Jersey Working Families

The progressive activist is relentless in pursuit of her policies and holding the feet of the state’s powerbrokers and elected officials to the fire.

MARK LONGO
Director, Engineer Labor-Employer Cooperative

When it comes to political campaigns, the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 825 leader plays to win.

RICHARD MAROKO
President, NY/NJ Hotel and Gaming Workers Union; Recording Secretary and General Counsel of the Hotel Trades Council, AFL-CIO.

This union leader from Montclair represents over 40,000 hotel employees and is a close ally of Gov. Phil Murphy; his union was the first to endorse New York City Mayor-elect Eric Adams in advance of the Democratic primary.
50

MAGGIE MORAN
Managing Partner, Kivvit

The only reason this hugely effective public affairs executive is hanging out at #50 is that she’s leaving Kivvit, the influential firm she helped found. She has not yet announced her next destination other than to say she’s joining the cannabis industry.

51

STEVE AYSCUE
President, Checkmate Advisors

If you ever did something wrong and you run for office, the state’s eminent opposition research guru is going to find it.

52

BRIAN THOMPSON
Reporter, WNBC-TV

After 23 years covering state politics and government, this tenacious and thorough TV reporter is one the New Jersey’s most recognizable faces.
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SENATOR CORY BOOKER

Congratulates everyone recognized on the 2021 New Jersey Globe Power List.

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JULIE ROGINSKY
President, Optimus Communications
The hard-nosed Democratic strategist contributes to a weekly column on NJ.com.

KEVIN HAGAN
Princeton Public Affairs Group
Steve Sweeney’s loss is Kevin Hagan’s loss, but he’s got plenty of other friends that will keep him as a Trenton powerhouse.

LAURIE MCCABE
Chief of Staff, 19th Legislative district
She runs what might be the most influential legislative operation in the state: the local office of the Assembly Speaker and the Chairman of the Senate Health Committee, where her expertise in health care policy makes her one of the most important wonks in New Jersey.
PATRICK MURRAY  
Director, Monmouth University Polling Institute  
Polls aren’t going away, and if someone is going to fix them, it’s going to be this New Jerseyan who is one of the nation’s most respected pollsters.

LARRY WEITZNER  
CEO, Jamestown Associates  
He started out working on local campaigns in New Jersey and now he’s one of the most-sought after media consultants in the nation, with senators, governors and presidential candidates competing for his attention.

STEVE ADUBATO, JR.  
Television Host/CEO, Caucus Educational  
There is no one in the New Jersey media with more credible policy chops than this Emmy Award-winning TV host and expert on leadership.
AMOL SINHA
Executive Director, American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey

With rapidly increasing frequency, Amol Sinha has emerged as one of New Jersey’s most prolific civil rights leaders whose work affects major legislation and policy, with more than one-third of all cases being heard by the New Jersey Supreme Court being touched in some way by the ACLU.

PHIL SWIBINSKI
Chief Operating Officer, VMMI

The second-generation Hudson County Democratic consultant, Phil Swibinski has a statewide platform as the spokesman for the state party – and at times the Governor – and as a political strategist in major North Jersey campaigns, including the landslide re-election of Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop.

TONY TEIXEIRA
Chief of Staff to Senate Nicholas Scutari

The Elizabeth Democratic Municipal Chairman and longtime political operative sits in the inner circle of the incoming Senate President, Nicholas Scutari.
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MATT ROONEY
Editor and Founder, Save Jersey; Host, The Matt Rooney Show on 1210

He’s the most influential conservative in New Jersey and people from all sides of the political spectrum listen to what he has to say.

PHIL NORCROSS
Managing Partner, Parker McCay; Partner, Optimus Partners

As the skilled brother of both a Democratic powerbroker and a U.S. Congressman, lots of doors are wide open for the South Jersey lawyer and lobbyist.

PATRICK COLLIGAN
New Jersey Policeman’s Benevolent Association

He showed some real balls not endorsing an incumbent governor who had a double-digit lead in the polls, and the eventual tightness of the race shows that Democrats cannot afford to lose the cop vote in New Jersey, although they may already have.
BILL STEPIEN
Partner, National Public Affairs

Donald Trump’s former campaign manager and White House political director is building a major national political consulting firm and remains actively involved in politics in his home state of New Jersey.

SAILY AVELENDA
Executive Director, New Jersey Democratic State Committee

A former banker who once made a congressman hide in his office, Saily Avelenda has transitioned from activist to party leader while remaining fiercely loyal to her causes and to Gov. Phil Murphy.

ARTHUR CIFELLI
Senior Partner, The Venn Group

When the often quiet, unpretentious and always respected political veteran of more than two decades asks for something, the answer is almost always yes – because he never makes a request that isn’t fair.
SEAN DARCY

President, Round World Consulting

His client roster includes the powerful chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and a bunch of other influential House members and state legislators – and an impressive record of winning.

MATT FRIEDMAN

Reporter, POLITICO New Jersey

He’s one of the three best-trained reporters in New Jersey, with an unbridled sense of sarcasm and wit. His POLITICO New Jersey Playbook is essential reading every morning.

ADAM SILVERSTEIN

Owner, Silver Strategies and Communications Group

Not everyone saw a Republican surge in Bergen County coming, but Adam Silverstein did. He’s the top political advisor to key Democrats, including Bergen County Democratic Chairman Paul Juliano, U.S. Senator Cory Booker and Rep. Josh Gottheimer and played a key role in keeping Bergen blue in 2021.
AL GABURO & DALE FLORIO
Princeton Public Affairs Group

Their eight-year gambit to make Jack Ciattarelli governor of New Jersey almost worked, but now the two veteran lobbyists – both ex-Somerset County GOP chairs – need to balance Ciattarelli’s 2025 campaign with their clients who still need access to a governor they tried to beat and a staff they sought to make unemployed. Still, Al Gaburo and Dale Florio remain well-liked and respected in Trenton.

Top: Al Gaburo | Bottom: Dale Florio

JOSHUA HENNE
President, White Horse Strategies

He’s got an impressive stable of clients who sign with him because he’s got a strong handle on what works and what doesn’t in New Jersey.

DONALD SCARINCI
Founding Partner, Scarinci & Hollenbeck

When Bob Menendez ran for student council in Union City, Donald Scarinci was his campaign manager. His law firm has flourished largely on his intellect and personality.
When Kate O’Donnell was in high school, she had a 5.0 GPA. Since then, she’s become even smarter.
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Senator Vin Gopal
Majority Conference Leader
11th Legislative District

JOSEPH & MICHAEL DECOTIIS
Equity Partners, DeCotiis, FitzPatrick, Cole & Giblin

The second generation of a powerful political family – Al DeCotiis was a United Nations Ambassador and Bob DeCotiis was Gov. Jim Florio’s chief counsel – they run a major North Jersey law firm that includes Hunterdon County Democratic Chair Arlene Quiñones Perez and the third generation of the family of lawyers.

Top: Joseph Decotiis | Bottom: Michael Decotiis
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President, Mid-Atlantic, Anbaric

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Amanda Woloshen Glass
amanda@checkmatewins.com

John Lyons
john@checkmatewins.com @LyonsJohnE
BILL CARUSO
Managing Director, Archer Public Affairs; Partner, Archer

After a career as a top congressional staffer and Assembly Democratic executive director, Bill Caruso has emerged as a powerful lawyer and lobbyist and as one of the most influential people in New Jersey in the cannabis space.

JOE KYRILLOS
Senior Managing Director, Newark, Knight, Frank

The 61-year-old Joe Kyrillos retired from elective office four years ago after 30 years in the legislature – and after a stint as GOP State Chairman and a run for the U.S. Senate. Now he’s the guy people from both parties call when they need solid counsel.

ROGER BODMAN
Managing Partner, Public Strategies Impact

It’s hard to believe it’s been 40 years since Roger Bodman managed Tom Kean’s excruciatingly close campaign for governor. Although he was just 29, Kean put him in his cabinet, first as labor commissioner and then as Commissioner of Transportation. Bodman’s experience and wisdom makes him a go-to guy when people need help in Trenton, regardless of who is in control.
IDIDA RODRIGUEZ
Partner, 1868 Public Affairs

With a solid record of experience in government and political campaigns, clients can count on her giving solid advice all the time.

DAVID PARANO
President/CEO, Parano & Associates

You can’t win a campaign these days without relying on data and targeting, and Dave Parano is one of the best.

HETTY ROSENSTEIN
Retired

After 40 years with the Communications Workers of America, the last fourteen as the state director, Hetty Rosenstein retired in February, sort of. She spent most of 2021 as a senior advisor to Gov. Phil Murphy’s re-election campaign, and this force of nature will remain influential in New Jersey politics for as long as she chooses to.
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HARRISON NEELY
Partner, Goldfinch Partners

Harrison Neely continues to be one of the top Republican strategists in New Jersey. He’s serving as GOP executive director of the congressional redistricting commission and will play a key role in the nationally-watched congressional campaign of Tom Kean, Jr. in 2022 – a race he almost won in 2020.

SEAN KENNEDY
Director, General Majority PAC

The loss of Steve Sweeny and South Jersey clout in the legislature no doubt hurts, but Sean Kennedy has turned lemons into lemonade plenty of times before.

DIANNA HOUENOU
Chair, New Jersey Cannabis Regulatory Commission

When Gov. Phil Murphy needed someone to launch the regulation of legal cannabis in New Jersey, he turned to a trusted staffer and former ACLU lawyer. That opportunity gives Dianna Houenou the chance to become the Joe Lordi of legalized marijuana. If she delivers just half as well as Lordi did for the new casino industry 45 years ago, she’ll be set for life.
88  
TRISH ZITA  
Principal, Kaufman Zita Group  
Trish Zita’s secret sauce has a simple recipe: she’s extraordinarily smart and everybody likes her.  

89  
AMIRI “MIDDY” BARAKA, JR.  
Chief of Staff to the Mayor of Newark  
He is, indeed, his brother’s keeper.  

90  
MIKE DELAMATER  
Former Political Director, Murphy for Governor; former Deputy Chief of Staff to the Governor  
When the Governor of New Jersey has a question about local politics, Mike DeLamater is the guy he calls.
HARRY HURLEY
Radio Host, WPG Talk Radio 95.5 FM

Nobody breaks more political news in Atlantic County than Harry Hurley, whose morning program is the top rated radio show in South Jersey.

ED DONNELLY
President, New Jersey State Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association

The leader of the state’s top first-responder union will put his fist through a brick wall if it’s in the best interests of his membership.

GAIL GORDON
Founder, GB Gordon Associates

With strong friendships on both sides of the aisle, she’s an old-school fixer who gets things done.
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Laura Matos
Managing Director and General Manager, Kivvit New Jersey

In addition to being the public face of one of the state’s top public affairs firms, Laura Matos has emerged as one of the leading voices for empowering Latinas in state and local government.

Leo Hurley
Partner, Connell Foley

Lesson #1: Don’t get in trouble. Lesson #2, if you do, call this smart and aggressive lawyer from one of the state’s most respected firms.

Bill Spadea
Radio Host, NJ 101.5 FM

With a morning drive-time platform, Bill Spadea has the ability to influence conservatives with his positions, including opposition to mask mandates and vaccines.
Here's to a successful 2021 to all!

Also, a small announcement… It’s time for a change… Parano & Associates has had a tremendous run… but it’s always good to reinvent yourself

Stay tuned in 2022 for a brand new company with the same bold vision!

Dave Parano
SCOTT SNYDER
Principal, SJS Consulting

Middlesex County Democrats rely on his advice and guidance.

MOLLIE BINOTTO
Democratic Strategist

As Gov. Phil Murphy's campaign manager, Mollie Binotto has earned enormous respect from the governor, first lady and chief of staff as a respected and valued advisor. Add her time as Mikie Sherrill's 2018 campaign manager and she's got a statewide platform.
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ALYANA ALFARO POST

Press Secretary to the Governor

The former PolitickerNJ reporter has forged a reputation as a strong advocate for the governor while simultaneously viewed by those in the media who understand government as an honest broker.
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IRIS DELGADO
Executive Director, Middlesex County Democratic Organization

This serious, veteran operative and member of the Congressional Redistricting Commission makes the trains run on time in Middlesex County, which has emerged as one of the most powerful Democratic organizations in the state.

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