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Good Luck to All the Candidates

“The right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties.”

- Ronald Reagan
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INTRODUCTION

IT'S PRIMARY SEASON again.

I say “again” as if I'm an old hand at this. I'm not – after joining the New Jersey Globe last August, this is my first time experiencing the rough-and-tumble world of New Jersey primaries. And it's been quite the ride.

I witnessed hundreds of Morris County Republicans' eyes glaze over as they hit hour six of their party convention; I got to meet candidates no one in the New Jersey political world had ever heard of as they filed their last-minute candidacies with the Division of Elections; I sat through a staggering 16-hour hearing to determine if one Hudson County candidate had enough valid signatures to make it onto the ballot (he didn't).

And as a result of all that and more, we have this: a comprehensive guide to every congressional primary happening on June 7, as well as a look at municipal elections on May 10.

Because 2022 happens to be an off-year where neither the presidency nor one of New Jersey's two U.S. Senate seats are up for election, the state's 12 congressional districts are the top of the ticket this year.

Up and down the state, fascinating contests are playing out between different wings and factions of both parties in a midterm year that's looking positive for Republicans.

Two Republicans with deeply different backgrounds are vying to take on Rep. Andy Kim (D-Moorestown) in the 3rd district; will primary voters go with straight-laced yacht manufacturer Bob Healey Jr., or bearded anti-lockdown DUI arrestee Ian Smith?

In the 4th district, two Republican challengers are seeking to take down 21-term Rep. Chris Smith (R-Manchester), while two Democrats are trying to do the same to Rep. Donald Payne Jr. (D-Newark in the 10th district, but can any of them convince voters to break the 100% winning streak New Jersey congressional incumbents have had in primaries since 1980?

Former Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. (R-Westfield) has long been viewed as the frontrunner for a rematch in the 7th district after narrowly losing in 2020, but will any of his six primary challengers give him a run for his money?

Who will Republicans choose as their nominee in the potentially competitive 5th and 11th districts? Can anyone come close to halting the ascendance of Port Authority Commissioner and congressional scion Rob Menendez? Will Trump-loving Democrat Roger Bacon get more than 5% of the vote in his “campaign” against Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-Ringoes)?

Thanks to New Jersey's party line system, and its strong party organizations in general, these questions are less open-ended than they might be in other states.

The simple truth of New Jersey politics is that the party-endorsed candidate usually wins, and the New Jersey Globe isn’t about to break with history; in all 15 of the state’s contested primaries, we consider the candidate with the most party lines to be the favorite. (Of course, that makes it all the more exciting if an underdog candidate does break through.)

Candidates also have congressional redistricting to contend with. The state’s 12 districts all changed to some degree as a result of the new Democratic-drawn map, and it's already caused one person's candidacy to go up in flames: Republican Richard Franolich filed in the 5th district, where his hometown of Oakland used to be, but discovered after submitting his petitions that he should have filed for the 9th district.

But while some incumbents, especially Kim in the 3rd district and Smith in the 4th, have a lot of new territory to contend with, the effects of the new lines are more likely to be felt in November, when the inclusion or exclusion of any given town might matter a tremendous amount to the final results.

Also on the ballot this spring is the small collection of cities and towns that will hold their nonpartisan elections on May 10.

Newark has a seemingly uncompetitive mayoral election and a few fascinating city council races; Paterson has crowded and chaotic contests for both mayor and council, because how could it not; and Bayonne is hosting a mayoral race that amounts to something of a settling of scores.

The Globe's official position is that if you don't vote, you can't complain about the results. That adage is a bit shaky when it comes to primaries, since there will be millions of voters faced with uncontested congressional primaries this June, and some who likely won't see a single contested race on their entire ballot.

Regardless: vote. If you don't like the incumbent, vote for their challenger. If you don't like any of your options, write someone in. If your write-in vote still doesn't change anything, talk with your friends and your local party and launch your own bid the next time around.

We at the Globe can't wait to write about your campaign.

– JOEY FOX
New Jersey Globe Reporter
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, and West Virginia.

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George Norcross had a bad year in 2021. Not only did his bid to hold or flip seats in the 2nd and 8th legislative districts fall short, he unexpectedly lost his greatest champion in state politics: Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-West Deptford), whose defeat by underfunded trucker Ed Durr (R-Swedesboro) will go down as one of the great political upsets in New Jersey history.

This year, though, Norcross has little to worry about. His brother, Rep. Donald Norcross (D-Camden), drew three opponents, none of whom has a chance of unseating the four-term incumbent.

In the Democratic primary, Norcross will face teacher Mario DeSantis, who waged a one-day primary campaign against Sweeney last year which fell apart when he failed to gather the necessary number of signatures to get on the ballot.

Anti-establishment Democrats in New Jersey have little love lost for the Norcross machine, but Donald Norcross himself hasn’t drawn much criticism from the left. A union electrician, Norcross has strong labor ties and is a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and DeSantis’ $6,000 total raised means he won’t have the resources to convince voters Norcross should be denied another term.

The Republican primary is also a sleepy affair, with 2020 nominee Claire Gustafson garnering every county endorsement as well as the high-profile backing of Durr and his Assembly running mates. The last minute entry of union carpenter Damon Galdo, who didn’t announce his campaign until he filed his petitions, probably won’t derail Gustafson’s path to the nomination.

Assuming that the general election contest is between Norcross and Gustafson as expected, Norcross has the obvious upper hand. The congressman won by 25 points in 2020, and while the national environment has deteriorated for Democrats since then, it almost certainly won’t be enough for Gustafson.
COUNTIES: Burlington, Camden, Gloucester
BURLINGTON: Maple Shade, Palmyra
CAMDEN: All

INCUMBENT: Donald Norcross

DEMOCRATS: *Donald Norcross, Mario DeSantis
REPUBLICANS: Claire Gustafson, Damon Galdo

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 61.5% // Trump 37.1%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Norcross 62.5% // Gustafson 37.5%
2020 D PRI: Norcross 100%
2020 R PRI: Gustafson 100%

Demographics
59.4% White // 19.4% Black // 14.9% Hispanic // 6.3% Asian
First elected as a Democrat in 2018, Van Drew’s defection to the Republican Party in late 2019 was a politically risky move, since he faced the potential of rejection in both the primary and general elections.

But Van Drew threw himself onto the Trump Train with the fervor only a convert could muster, and he easily won the Republican primary after his main prospective primary opponent, David Richter, was persuaded to run for the 3rd district instead. National Democratic disgust with the turncoat congressman wasn’t enough to unseat him, either; well-funded Democratic recruit Amy Kennedy fell short by six points in November.

Two Republicans filed to challenge Van Drew this year: U.S. Army veteran and businessman John Barker, who started his campaign in the 3rd district before switching races after new lines were drawn, and union carpenter Sean Pignatelli. A third challenger, U.S. Air Force veteran Scott Hitchner, didn’t end up filing to run.

With no reported fundraising from either of them, neither Barker nor Pignatelli has a shot at Van Drew, especially with both in the race. Van Drew, by contrast, has raised $2.2 million since the cycle began and has more than $1 million cash-on-hand.

Civil rights lawyer Tim Alexander, a former detective captain in the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office, has essentially been the de-facto frontrunner for the Democratic nomination since he launched his campaign. One other serious candidate, former Egg Harbor Township police officer Hector Tavarez, dropped out of the race after Alexander won the Atlantic County Democratic convention; a third contender, Rev. Curtis Green, had been running a shoestring campaign and didn’t submit petitions.

That leaves just Carolyn Rush, a political newcomer who didn’t make much of a dent at any party convention. With Alexander leading the money race (he’s raised $260,000 total to Rush’s $51,000) and running on the line in every county, there’s no reason to think he’s in danger of losing.

Yet the era of Alexander’s victory will likely be short-lived. The 2nd district would be a difficult lift for a Democrat in any year – Donald Trump won its reconfigured lines by five points in 2020 – and the midterm dynamics under a Democratic president will make it even harder.

Even if Alexander taps into a national vein of anti-Van Drew sentiment and picks up his current milquetoast fundraising, 2022 isn’t looking like the year Van Drew falls.
COUNTIES: Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Salem, Ocean

ATLANTIC: All
CAPE MAY: All
CUMBERLAND: All

GLOUCESTER: Clayton, East Greenwich (pt.), Elk, Franklin, Greenwich, Harrison, Logan, Newfield, South Harrison, Swedesboro, Woolwich

OCEAN: Barnegat, Barnegat Light, Beach Haven, Berkeley (pt.), Eagleswood, Harvey Cedars, Lacey (pt.), Little Egg Harbor, Long Beach, Ocean, Ship Bottom, Stafford, Surf City, Tuckerton

SALEM: All

INCUMBENT: Jeff Van Drew

DEMOCRATS: Tim Alexander, Carolyn Rush
REPUBLICANS: Jeff Van Drew, John Barker, Sean Pignatelli

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Trump 51.9% // Biden 46.8%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Van Drew 51.9% // Kennedy 46.2%
2020 D PRI: Kennedy 62.1% // Harrison 22.3% // Cunningham 12.8%
2020 R PRI: Van Drew 82.4% // Patterson 17.6%

Demographics
63.9% White // 13.7% Black // 17.3% Hispanic // 4.5% Asian
HOW CAN Republicans take out a squeaky-clean congressman like Rep. Andy Kim (D-Moorestown)? This year, they’ve got two unorthodox answers.

One is Bob Healey Jr., a wealthy yacht manufacturer and philanthropist who is the choice of the district’s three county Republican parties. On the surface, the straight-laced businessman is a standard Republican contender, and he’s got the fundraising prowess – $750,000 raised from donors supplemented by $250,000 in self-funding – and the national GOP support to prove it.

But Healey wasn’t always the type of guy who would be welcomed at your average Republican Party convention. When he was a teenager, Healey was the lead singer of The Ghouls, a hardcore punk-rock band that toured the country, and wrote some unsavory songs that could still come back to haunt him.

“I was a lead singer, and I wrote those songs and I understand if people might find it offensive,” Healey said when he launched his campaign. “I was an angry guy back then.”

Healey’s got nothing, though, on his main primary opponent, Atilis Gym owner Ian Smith. A large man with an even larger beard, Smith gained national notoriety early on in the pandemic when he refused to comply with Gov. Phil Murphy’s closure of nonessential businesses. Smith racked up nearly $1 million in legal fees, which he paid off with a GoFundMe that attracted sympathetic anti-lockdown donors from around the country.

Adding further chaos to Smith’s candidacy was his arrest on DUI charges in late March. While that would be a tough story for any congressional candidate, it’s especially damaging for Smith, who at 20 years old went for a drive with alcohol in his system and ended up hitting and killing a teenager.

But despite the cards stacked against him, Smith could attract the kind of grassroots Republican supporters that have generated surprise primary wins in other districts across the U.S. over the last four years.

A third Republican candidate, realtor Nicholas Ferrara, is also in the mix. He hasn’t made any real headway in a race with two far bigger names taking up oxygen.

The contest between Healey and Smith is a difficult one to handicap. Smith doesn’t have any establishment support or county lines, but he wasn’t gunning for them anyways; Healey has the lead in the money race, but Smith consultant Steve Kush has done more with less before.

Based on the fact that party-endorsed candidates tend to win primaries, and Smith’s unfavorable DUI headlines, Healey has to be seen as the favorite.

If any candidate in the state has the ability to defy the odds, though, it’s probably someone like Smith.

As for Kim, he technically faces a primary against young progressive Reuven Hendler, who made some waves when he unsuccessfully sued the Mercer County Democratic Party for excluding him from their annual convention.

But Kim, first elected in 2018 against incumbent Rep. Tom MacArthur (R-Toms River), has given the left wing of his party few reasons to complain – he is unequivocally the most progressive swing-seat representative in the state – and there’s no real opening for an underfunded candidate like Hendler.

Kim has a habit of outrunning the top of the ticket in general elections; in 2020, he overperformed Joe Biden by eight points, winning 53-46% even as Donald Trump was narrowly carrying the 3rd district. He’s now sitting on a campaign war chest of $3.8 million, something any challenger would have a hard time matching.

Last year’s congressional redistricting process also dramatically reshaped the district, which ditches heavily Republican areas in Ocean County for more competitive parts of Mercer and Monmouth Counties. The new district would have voted for Biden by 14 points, a comfortable margin even for a less skilled politician than Kim.

Even in a best-case scenario for Republicans – Healey vs. Kim with an unpopular Democratic president at the helm – Kim is still the favorite. And if Smith were to upset Healey in the primary, national Republicans will probably turn their sights elsewhere.
COUNTIES: Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth
MERCER: East Windsor, Hamilton, Hightstown, Lawrence, Robbinsville
MONMOUTH: Allentown, Englishtown, Freehold Borough, Freehold Township (pt.), Holmdel, Manalapan, Marlboro, Millstone, Roosevelt, Upper Freehold

INCUMBENT: Andy Kim

DEMOCRATS: *Andy Kim, Reuven Hendler
REPUBLICANS: Bob Healey, Ian Smith, Nicholas Ferrara

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 56.4% // Trump 42.3%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Kim 53.2% // Richter 45.5%
2020 D PRI: Kim 100%
2020 R PRI: Richter 61.1% // Gibbs 38.9%

Demographics
63.5% White // 14.6% Black // 11.3% Hispanic // 9.8% Asian
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The cohort of candidates was for a time much larger, but two petition challenges and four early exits winnowed the field considerably. The most recent departure was realtor Mike Blasi, who said he didn’t want to split the vote with the other challengers and allow Smith to prevail. Because the filing deadline had long since passed when Blasi left the race, his name will still appear on the ballot, and many voters may not even know he isn’t running anymore.

Before him, Robert Shapiro and Tricia Flanagan, perennial candidates who have run for countless offices around the state without regard for geography or filing deadlines, were booted from the ballot for having too few valid signatures. Rev. Shawn Hyland, Englishtown Councilman Daniel Francisco, and attorney David Burg, meanwhile, all left the race before the filing deadline. Hyland quickly endorsed Smith, while Francisco backed Crispi and Burg endorsed Blasi.

For a time, it seemed like the Smith challengers’ biggest obstacle would be each other; mounting a challenge to an incumbent is always hard, but it’s even harder when you’re competing for space with other challengers. With so many candidates dropping out, Crispi and Gray have a clearer shot at Smith – but that doesn’t mean they’re not still heavy underdogs.

As expected, Smith won the primary line in both Monmouth and Ocean Counties, which gives him a major leg up over his competitors. Smith also has a war chest of $825,000, while neither Crispi nor Gray have been able to raise more than $100,000, even with some self-funding from both.

Smith, an old-school representative who has long prioritized constituent service and casework, has been underestimated as a candidate before. As a 27-year-old executive director of New Jersey Right to Life in 1980, he ousted a 13-term incumbent in an election few thought he could win. Since then, he has faced a few giant Democratic opponents and a gerrymander that left him for dead, but he always won.

Should one of Smith’s challengers defy the odds this year and turn the primary into a competitive race, it may have more to do with geography than with ideology. As part of the overall Democratic-drawn reconfiguration of the state’s districts, the 4th district gained a huge swath of Ocean County and lost parts of Monmouth and Mercer Counties, including Smith’s hometown of Hamilton Township. (Smith moved to Manchester almost immediately after the new lines were approved.)

That means Smith will be introducing himself to voters in staunchly Republican towns like Toms River and Berkeley, where voters don’t have built-in familiarity with him. It also means, though, that Smith won’t have to worry about Democratic challengers for the next decade, assuming he makes it past the primary.

Speaking of Democratic challengers, Smith does have one: small businessman Matthew Jenkins, who will win the Democratic primary unopposed. Even if Jenkins were an electoral juggernaut – which he doesn’t seem to be – he wouldn’t be able to touch Smith in the state’s most Republican congressional district.

If Smith is held to a narrow win or somehow loses in the primary, it will be a shocking indication of Donald Trump’s continued electoral influence, more than a year after he left office. That’s not particularly likely, and the runner-up Dean of the House should be safe for another term.
COUNTIES: Monmouth, Ocean


OCEAN: Bay Head, Beachwood, Berkeley (pt.), Brick, Island Heights, Jackson, Lacey (pt.), Lakehurst, Lakewood, Lavallette, Manchester, Mantoloking, Ocean Gate, Pine Beach, Plumstead, Point Pleasant, Point Pleasant Beach, Seaside Heights, Seaside Park, South Toms River, Toms River

INCUMBENT: Chris Smith

DEMOCRATS: Matthew Jenkins
REPUBLICANS: *Chris Smith, Mike Crispi, Steve Gray

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Trump 60.6% // Biden 38.1%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Smith 59.9% // Schmid 38.3%
2020 D PRI: Schmid 67.4% // Conforti 25.1% // Applefield 7.4%
2020 R PRI: Smith 94.8% // Richter 5.2%

Demographics
80.4% White // 4.5% Black // 10.3% Hispanic // 3.3% Asian
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When former Clinton White House speechwriter Josh Gottheimer (D-Wyckoff) unseated Rep. Scott Garrett (R-Wantage) in 2016, New Jersey Democrats were hard-pressed to celebrate, given the simultaneous election of Donald Trump to the White House. Little did they know that Gottheimer’s victory was just a taste of the heights their party would reach in 2018, when Democrats won 11 of the state’s 12 congressional districts.

Now in his third term in Congress, Gottheimer has taken that initial victory and turned it into a political juggernaut. The co-chairman of the bipartisan House Problem Solvers Caucus has dispatched both primary and general election challengers with relative ease, amassed a Godzillanian $13.1 million war chest, and has become one of the most prominent moderates in the Democratic caucus.

Gottheimer has no primary opposition this year, despite his frequent feuds with his party’s left wing; after Glen Rock Councilwoman Arati Krebich lost to the congressman 67-33% in 2020, no Democrats decided to take their chances for 2022. But Republicans aren’t so willing to give Gottheimer a free pass, and two serious candidates are waging campaigns to take him on.

The frontrunner seems to be U.S. Marine veteran Nick De Gregorio, who mopped the floor at the Bergen County Republican convention and has the semi-tacit support of the National Republican Campaign Committee. De Gregorio’s raised $716,000 so far, an impressive sum for a first-time candidate not doing any self-funding.

His main opponent is Frank Pallotta, an investment banker who ran against Gottheimer in 2020 and lost by eight points. Thanks to that run, he likely began the campaign season with the highest name recognition of anyone in the Republican field, and he also has the Passaic County line and the support of Sussex County Republicans (the Sussex Republican Party doesn’t have a formal county line).

The problem for Pallotta is that his fundraising hasn’t kept pace; he raised just $38,000 last quarter and $250,000 overall, with none of the self-funding that powered his 2020 campaign.

Two more candidates will also appear on the ballot, though neither are likely to make much impact. One, Fred Schneiderman, is a self-funding businessman who unexpectedly dropped out of the race in May but will remain on the ballot anyways; the other, Sab Skenderi, is still running but without any real campaign presence. A third unknown contender, Richard Franolich, was removed from the ballot after he realized he had mistakenly filed for the 5th district when he meant to run in the 9th.

If voters base their votes on establishment support, De Gregorio should win. If they focus on name recognition, Pallotta’s previous run probably gives him the edge. In New Jersey, it’s always safest to bet with the county party, so De Gregorio should be seen as at least a mild frontrunner.

Thanks to the new Democratic-drawn map, Gottheimer should have an easier time winning in the general election than in previous cycles, though he was left more vulnerable than some of his Democratic colleagues.

The new 5th district includes more of Bergen County and ditches parts of Warren and Sussex County, but it’s not completely out of reach for Republicans – Joe Biden won it by around 12 points last year – and Gottheimer has never had to run in a truly adverse cycle. If the national environment is atrocious for Democrats in November, there is a genuine risk that the Human Fundraising Machine could go down.
COUNTIES: Bergen, Passaic, Sussex


PASSAIC: Bloomingdale, Ringwood, Wanaque, West Milford
Sussex: Andover Township, Branchville, Frankford, Franklin, Hamburg, Hampton, Hardyston, Lafayette, Montague, Newton, Sandyston, Sussex, Vernon, Wantage

INCUMBENT: Josh Gottheimer

DEMOCRATS: *Josh Gottheimer
REPUBLICANS: Nick De Gregorio, Frank Pallotta, Sab Skenderi

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 55.6% // Trump 43.2%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Gottheimer 53.2% // Pallotta 45.6%
2020 D PRI: Gottheimer 66.5% // Kreibich 33.5%
2020 R PRI: Pallotta 51.7% // McCann 32.4% // Baldini 10.3% // Castillo 5.6%

Demographics
59.2% White // 7.3% Black // 16.2% Hispanic // 17.3% Asian
New Jersey Realtors® congratulates all who seek to run for public office and look forward to working with our elected officials.
WHEN ONE PARTY is forecasted to have a good election year, one consequence is that formidable challengers can often emerge even in districts where they won’t have much of a chance of victory.

That dynamic seems to be at play in the 6th district, where Monmouth County Commissioner Sue Kiley is having a go at Rep. Frank Pallone (D-Long Branch). Fresh off a landslide re-election to the county commission, Kiley is the strongest challenger Pallone has had in a long time – and she’ll still have to hope for a miracle in the Biden +20 district.

To reach Pallone at all, Kiley will first have to get through a Republican primary, but that probably won’t be too difficult. She won the county line in both Middlesex and Monmouth Counties and has $200,000 in the bank, $100,000 of which came from her own pockets.

Kiley’s main opponent is 2020 Senate nominee Rik Mehta, who likely has residual name recognition from that run; he began the cycle running in the 7th district before switching campaigns at the beginning of this year. He’s raised $150,000 overall, but that’s over the course of many months, and he notched just $27,000 in the most recent fundraising quarter.

Like a number of other off-the-line Republican candidates, Mehta is making his campaign a direct appeal to Donald Trump and his policies; Mehta’s ballot line, echoing many others around the state, is “America First Republicans.” Kiley hasn’t given much reason for Republicans to distrust her, though, and Mehta hasn’t clearly articulated why he would be a better alternative.

Another candidate, former Republican National Committee staffer Tom Toomey, has demonstrated nothing about his campaign that suggests he will be anything but an also-ran. Former Libertarian gubernatorial nominee Gregg Mele was in this category as well, until a Mehta-led challenge successfully kicked him off the ballot for insufficient signatures.

Pallone, who was weakly targeted by the left in 2020 and easily turned back Democratic opponent Russ Cirincione, is uncontested in the Democratic primary this year.

If and when Kiley wins the primary, Republicans are sure to – correctly – cite her as a top-tier challenger. But all the focus in the world probably won’t make the 6th district competitive, and Pallone can start preparing for his 18th term in Congress.
COUNTIES: Middlesex, Monmouth

MIDDLESEX: Carteret, Edison, Highland Park, Metuchen, New Brunswick, Old Bridge (pt.), Perth Amboy, Piscataway, Sayreville, South Amboy, South Plainfield, Woodbridge

MONMOUTH: Aberdeen, Allenhurst, Asbury Park, Atlantic Highlands, Bradley Beach, Deal, Fair Haven, Hazlet, Highlands, Interlaken, Keansburg, Keyport, Little Silver, Loch Arbour, Long Branch, Matawan, Middletown (pt.), Monmouth Beach, Neptune City, Neptune Township, Oceanport, Red Bank, Rumson, Sea Bright, Union Beach, West Long Branch

INCUMBENT: Frank Pallone

DEMOCRATS: *Frank Pallone
REPUBLICANS: Sue Kiley, Rik Mehta, Tom Toomey

Statewide results
2020 Pres: Biden 59.2% // Trump 39.5%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 Gen: Pallone 61.2% // Onuoha 38.8%
2020 D Pri: Pallone 79.2% // Cirincione 17.0%
2020 R Pri: Onuoha 100% (write-in)

Demographics
41.8% White // 13.3% Black // 24.5% Hispanic // 20.3% Asian
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7TH DISTRICT

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY: SOLID MALINOWSKI

REPUBLICAN PRIMARY: LIKELY KEAN

FROM THE MOMENT former Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. (R-Westfield) conceded defeat to Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-Ringoes) in November 2020, a rematch looked inevitable. Kean had defied the national environment and come within one point of unseating Malinowski as Joe Biden was winning the 7th district by 10 points; with Republicans looking to retake the House in 2022, Kean was an obvious choice.

Kean formally launched his rematch campaign last summer with the support of House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), and his prospects have only improved since then. A House Ethics Committee inquiry into Malinowski’s stock trades is still ongoing, and the state’s newly drawn congressional map shifted the 7th district six points to the right, making Republicans at least small favorites to flip the district in November.

Given all of this, it’s notable that the 7th district Republican primary is the most crowded in the state. Kean, treated as the heir apparent to the district by national Republicans, actually has to get past no fewer than six primary opponents, three of whom are running real campaigns with real things to say.

One such challenger is Assemblyman Erik Peterson (R-Franklin), who has a legitimate claim to being the most conservative member of the New Jersey legislature. Peterson has argued that Kean, who was considered a moderate in the State Senate, can’t be trusted to stand up for conservatives if he’s elected to Congress.

Also occupying the rightward lane is Phil Rizzo, a former pastor who ran for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 2021 and came in second. Rizzo’s campaign is one of the most Trump-drenched in the state, and he’s banking on voters’ loyalty to the former president winning out over the networks Kean has built.

Finally, there’s 27-year-old John Henry Isemann, who left a job on Wall Street to lead a humanitarian effort in Guatemala. Isemann was not a known political force before this cycle but has impressed many insiders, and – assuming he loses the primary this year – may have a future in state Republican politics.

Kean was victorious at all six of the district’s county conventions, though Peterson nipped at his heels in Hunterdon County and Isemann forced him into a runoff in Morris County. Kean also has a major financial advantage: nearly $2 million raised since last summer, while his next-closest opponent, Rizzo, has raised just $211,000.

All of that isn’t even accounting for three other Republican challengers – Fredon Mayor John Flora, retired U.S. Navy officer Sterling Irwin Schwab, and licensed public works contractor Kevin Dorlon – who filed for the seat despite not making much of a splash in fundraising or at the county conventions. (Yet another candidate, businessman Robert Trugman, did not file and seemingly endorsed Kean.)

As a relative moderate with a long paper trail in New Jersey politics, Kean could have certainly been vulnerable to a strong off-the-line challenger if the anti-Kean energy had been marshaled towards one candidate. But the June ballot will feature six alternatives to Kean, not one, and none of the six has consolidated support to nearly the extent needed to take down the frontrunner.

The Democratic primary, by contrast, will be a sleepy affair. Malinowski only drew one opponent, and it’s perennial candidate Roger Bacon: the Trump-loving Democrat in Name Only who was last seen getting kicked off the 2021 gubernatorial Democratic primary ballot for having too many registered Republicans sign his nominating petitions.

Mystery man Brandon Wienberg also filed a Democratic bid with the Federal Election Commission, but he didn’t submit petitions to run.

In a prospective Kean versus Malinowski rematch, Kean is widely considered to have the upper hand, to the extent that it wouldn’t be a huge surprise if both parties write Malinowski off as a goner by the fall.

A contest against Peterson or Rizzo, on the other hand, could be more favorable for Democrats, since both men hold some polarizing views and neither have the demonstrated electoral skills of Kean. Democrats seeking to defend every House seat they can in November will surely be wishing for an upset in the 7th district primary – but Kean’s dominance means their wishes are unlikely to be granted.
COUNTIES: Hunterdon, Morris, Somerset, Sussex, Union, Warren

HUNTERDON: All


SOMERSET: Bedminster, Bernards, Bernardsville, Branchburg, Bridgewater (pt.), Far Hills, Green Brook, Hillsborough (pt.), Peapack and Gladstone, Raritan, Somerville, Warren, Watchung

SUSSEX: Andover Borough, Byram, Fredon, Green, Hopatcong, Ogdensburg, Sparta, Stanhope, Stillwater, Walpack


Warren: All

INCUMBENT: Tom Malinowski

DEMOCRATS: *Tom Malinowski, Roger Bacon

REPUBLICANS: Tom Kean Jr., John Henry Isemann, Erik Peterson, Phil Rizzo, John Flora, Kevin Dorlon, Sterling Irvin Shwab

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 51.0% // Trump 47.4%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Malinowski 50.6% // Kean 49.4%
2020 D PRI: Malinowski 100%
2020 R PRI: Kean 79.4% // Barsoom 10.8% // Phillips 9.8%

Demographics
70.8% White // 6.3% Black // 12.2% Hispanic // 9.6% Asian
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NOT EVERYONE can, at age 36 and with no previous elected experience, waltz into a congressional seat with virtually no pushback. Then again, not everyone is the son of a U.S. Senator.

That snarky summary isn’t quite fair to Rob Menendez, a corporate lawyer at one of New Jersey’s most prominent firms who has served on the powerful Port Authority Board of Commissioners since last summer. But it’s hard to escape the conclusion that Menendez has a glide path to the House because his father, Senator Bob Menendez – a former representative from the district, which was then numbered as the 13th – is one of the biggest names in state politics.

When news broke in December of Rep. Albio Sires (D-West New York)’s retirement, state Democrats immediately began lining up behind Menendez, with hugely important endorsements from Gov. Phil Murphy and the Hudson County Democratic Party coming within less than a week. Menendez didn’t actually launch his campaign until early January, but doing so felt like more of a formality than anything else.

In spite of the long odds, two Democratic contenders have successfully filed to take Menendez on. The clearer fit for the “young progressive challenger” archetype is David Ocampo Grajales, the director of a healthcare startup who is running on a standard left-wing policy platform. Joining him on the ballot is Amistad Commission member Ane Roseborough-Eberhard, whose campaign is focusing heavily on education.

There would have been two other challengers, entrepreneur Brian Varela and election law professor Eugene Mazo, had the Hudson Democratic Party not waged successful petition challenges in an apparent effort to give Menendez the most seamless path to Congress possible. One other candidate, Ricardo Rojas, dropped out in February. Rojas had previously managed the campaign of Hector Oseguera, a candidate against Sires in 2020 who lost the Democratic primary 70-27%.

With both Ocampo Grajales and Roseborough-Eberhard competing for money and attention, neither have clearly taken off. Menendez raised $840,000 in the first quarter of 2022 – a genuinely staggering total even with the caveat that his dad is a well-connected senator – while Ocampo Grajales raised $26,000 and Roseborough-Eberhard hasn’t filed with the FEC.

Other than a trifling endorsement from 2020 presidential contender and spiritual guru Marianne Williamson for Ocampo Grajales, neither of the anti-Menendez contenders have gotten any significant outside backing, either.

Menendez isn’t quite a congressman yet, and given that he’s never even run for office before, a small dose of caution is warranted with regard to his chances. Yet neither of his challengers have positioned themselves to be a top-notch competitor, so it’s hard to see how either would get the number of votes they’d need to topple him.

One Republican, Marcos Arroyo, also filed, but his utility is largely in making sure that Republicans can say they’re contesting every race in the state. No Republican can win in a district that went for Joe Biden by 45 points, and unless the Democratic primary takes a dramatic turn, the number of Menendezes in Congress can be expected to double.
COUNTIES: Essex, Hudson, Union

ESSEX: Newark (pt.)

HUDSON: Bayonne, East Newark, Gutenberg, Harrison, Hoboken, Jersey City (pt.), Kearny (pt.), North Bergen, Union City, Weehawken, West New York

UNION: Elizabeth

INCUMBENT: Albio Sires

DEMOCRATS: Rob Menendez, David Ocampo Grajales, Ane Roseborough-Eberhard

REPUBLICANS: Marcos Arroyo

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 71.8% // Trump 27.1%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Sires 74.0% // Mushnick 24.6%
2020 D PRI: Sires 70.3% // Oseguera 27.3%
2020 R PRI: Mushnick 100%

Demographics
24.9% White // 11.7% Black // 51.0% Hispanic // 12.9% Asian
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9TH DISTRICT

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY: UNCONTESTED PASCRELL

REPUBLICAN PRIMARY: UNCONTESTED PREMPEH

There’s only so much ink that can be spilled about two uncontested primaries, especially when both of the candidates running previously faced one another just two years ago.

Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-Paterson) turned 85 earlier this year, but he’s showing no signs of letting up. The feisty former mayor of Paterson is a fixture in Passaic County politics, and no one from his own party bothered to file against him this year after he crushed primary opponent Zina Spezakis in 2020.

As for Billy Prempeh, the Republican seeking a rematch after a 34-point loss in 2020, he’s also running unopposed; his one-time opponent in the primary, realtor Patrick Quinn, failed to file any petitions. Quinn’s exit gives Prempeh a glide path to the nomination – and to another general election loss against Pascrell.

In fairness to Republicans, the 9th district was made somewhat more Republican in redistricting, and if Latinos continue trending rightwards, it might not be a slam-dunk for Democrats years down the line. This cycle, however, the battle of the Bill Ps is clearly skewed towards the incumbent.
COUNTRIES: Bergen, Hudson, Passaic
HUDSON: Kearny (pt.), Secaucus
PASSAIC: Clifton, Haledon, Hawthorne, North Haledon, Passaic, Paterson, Pompton Lakes, Prospect Park, Wayne (pt.)

INCUMBENT: Bill Pascrell

DEMOCRATS: *Bill Pascrell
REPUBLICANS: Billy Prempeh

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 59.0% // Trump 40.0%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Pascrell 65.8% // Prempeh 31.9%
2020 D PRI: Pascrell 80.6% // Spezakis 16.9%
2020 R PRI: Prempeh 74.2% // Walsh 25.8%

Demographics
38.3% White // 11.4% Black // 41.6% Hispanic // 10.1% Asian
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FOR YEARS, Rep. Donald Payne Jr. (D-Newark) kept one of the lowest profiles of any New Jersey congressperson. A former president of the Newark City Council and longtime ally of now-Senator Cory Booker, Payne succeeded his late father, Rep. Donald Payne Sr. (D-Newark), in 2012 and has quietly held down the 10th congressional district since then.

2021 forced a change: Payne drew his first remotely serious primary challenger in a decade, and made deeply unflattering headlines when he attended a Zoom congressional hearing in his underwear and a too-tight Captain America t-shirt.

Now, Payne is running one of the most active campaigns anywhere in the state. He has touted new endorsements from state and national Democrats practically every week, and turned in 9,933 nominating signatures – just a few more than the 200 necessary to make the ballot in New Jersey.

His main opponent, Imani Oakley, is something of a mystery. She’s held a variety of jobs in progressive organizations in recent years but hasn’t been able to hold any of them, and isn’t running with any particular institutional backing.

Yet despite her lack of an obvious base, she’s raised enough money to put a genuine scare into Payne: $389,000 since launching her campaign in July. Payne, long a sluggish fundraiser, has picked up the pace accordingly, and has more than doubled Oakley’s haul at $816,000 raised in the cycle to-date.

Oakley has tried to run to Payne’s left, though the congressman hasn’t left a massive amount of room for her to do so, promoting endorsements from progressive luminaries like Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) and Gov. Phil Murphy.

(A third candidate, sociology professor Akil Khalfani, is technically also running; he was last seen getting 1% of the vote against Payne as an independent last year.) With the family name and his many political connections to boost him, Payne is very much the favorite for renomination, and even a challenger stronger than Oakley would have a tough time taking down the incumbent. But as plenty of other contests around the country have shown, incumbents can go down unexpectedly – especially if their challengers have adequate financial resources, as Oakley does.

In a sign of the excitement propelling Republican candidates with an unpopular Democratic president in the White House, two different Republicans have filed for the safely Democratic district.

The favorite is presumably party-endorsed David Pinckney and not Garth Stewart, running on the delightful “FOG – Friends of Garth” line. But in a district that typically gives Democrats more than 80% of the vote, there are better contests to focus on come election night.
COUNTIES: Essex, Hudson, Union
ESSEX: Caldwell, East Orange, Essex Fells, Irvington, Montclair (pt.), Newark (pt.), Orange, Verona, West Orange
HUDSON: Jersey City (pt.)
UNION: Cranford, Garwood, Hillside, Kenilworth, Linden, Roselle, Roselle Park, Union

INCUMBENT: Donald Payne Jr.

DEMOCRATS: *Donald Payne Jr., Imani Oakley, Akil Khalfani
REPUBLICANS: David Pinckney, Garth Stewart

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 80.9% // Trump 18.3%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Payne 83.3% // Zinone 13.9%
2020 D PRI: Payne 88.5% // Mazo 7.1%
2020 R PRI: Zinone 100%

Demographics
18.8% White // 53.7% Black // 21.4% Hispanic // 7.2% Asian
NO PARTY CONVENTION this year was more important than the Morris County Republican convention, so of course it also had to be the messiest in the state.

Presented with a deeply unsettled primary in the 11th district, Morris Republicans gathered for six hours and still didn’t come away with a concrete challenger to Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-Montclair). Problems with the party’s voting machines, as well as unexpectedly high turnout among party officials, meant that the runoff for the county line between Morris County Commissioner Tayfun Selen and former Kinnelon Council President Larry Casha was delayed for a full week.

Selen ended up winning that runoff 240 to 225, and Casha dropped out and endorsed him soon afterwards. Three other candidates had already dropped their campaigns: former Ridgefield Park Councilman Robert Kovic and attorney Larry Friscia after they failed to make the runoff at the convention, screenwriter Hillery Brotschol a few weeks before that.

Two other candidates, former Assistant Passaic County Prosecutor Paul DeGroot and U.S. Army veteran Toby Anderson, remained in the race. DeGroot won the Passaic County line and Anderson came close to making the runoff at the Morris convention, so while both are clear underdogs, they’ve proven themselves capable of waging real campaigns.

Finally, there’s farmer Ruth McAndrew and real estate consultant Alex Halter, both of whom only revealed their candidacies when they filed signatures with the Division of Elections.

Because Morris County makes up the vast majority of the 11th district’s Republican primary voters, the county line is all-important; Selen’s victory there and in Essex County makes him the favorite for the nomination.

On the fundraising side, DeGroot is technically the frontrunner at $235,000 raised, but that’s powered almost entirely by $200,000 in self-funding. Selen has raised $229,000, which includes $20,000 of his own money, and Anderson – who got into the race much later than his two opponents – raised $21,800 and gave himself another $50,000.

For Anderson or DeGroot to catch up with Selen, they’d have to demonstrate some clear distinction between themselves and Selen, perhaps stepping up their fundraising or notching a critical endorsement. Neither has been able to do that so far, and every day closer to Election Day is another missed opportunity. The Democratic primary has featured no such drama. Since Sherrill scared Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-Harding) into retirement in 2018, she’s been a force to be reckoned with in the district, and no Democrats have bothered to take her on since she arrived in Congress. Sherrill is sitting on a war chest of $5.5 million, making her one of the best-funded candidates in the state.

Whether the general election will ultimately be competitive is still something of an open question. Republicans are on the upswing nationwide and like their chances of expanding the playing field, but Sherrill is a strong incumbent and Democrats redrew the 11th district to favor Joe Biden by an intimidating 17 points.

State and national Republicans most likely prefer Selen to win, since he has an impressive track record of victory in competitive Morris County. But unless the political situation dramatically collapses for Sherrill, the Republican primary will probably just be choosing November’s loser.
COUNTIES: Essex, Morris, Passaic

ESSEX: Belleville, Bloomfield, Cedar Grove, Fairfield, Glen Ridge, Livingston, Maplewood, Millburn, Montclair (pt.), North Caldwell, Nutley, Roseland, South Orange, West Caldwell

MORRIS: Boonton Town, Boonton Township, Butler, Chatham Borough, Chatham Township, Denville, Dover, East Hanover, Florham Park, Hanover, Harding, Jefferson, Kinnelon, Lincoln Park, Madison, Mendham Township (pt.), Montville, Morris, Morris Plains, Morristown, Mountain Lakes, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Pequannock, Randolph, Riverdale, Rockaway Borough, Rockaway Township, Victory Gardens

PASSAIC: Little Falls, Totowa, Wayne (pt.), Woodland Park

INCUMBENT: Mikie Sherrill

DEMOCRATS: *Mikie Sherrill
REPUBLICANS: Tayfun Selen, Paul DeGroot, Toby Anderson, Alex Halter, Ruth McAndrew

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 57.8% // Trump 41.0%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Sherrill 53.3% // Becchi 46.7%
2020 D PRI: Sherrill 100%
2020 R PRI: Becchi 100%

Demographics
61.6% White // 8.0% Black // 16.5% Hispanic // 13.4% Asian
AST (AND, THIS YEAR, LEAST) is the 12th district, where Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-Ewing) and businessman Darius Mayfield are both headed to the general election uncontested.

Watson Coleman, a former Assembly Majority Leader, won her last primary by a colossal 89-11% margin against perennial candidate Lisa McCormick. McCormick, a frequent gadfly in state politics, had run a nasty campaign that sent out fake anti-Semitic emails designed to look like they had come from Watson Coleman’s campaign.

The shadowy McCormick went on to fail to get on the ballot against Gov. Phil Murphy in 2021, and Watson Coleman will not have to deal with any equivalent nuisances this year.

For a while, Mayfield had a nuisance of his own to deal with: filmmaker Nick Catucci, who kept his campaign alive despite receiving just three votes total across three different county conventions. But a challenge to Catucci’s petitions revealed a number of basic flaws – one of his signatories listed a Pennsylvania address – and he got thrown off the ballot.

Watson Coleman and Mayfield can thus start preparing for the general election campaign, though there won’t be much to prepare for. The 12th district is the state’s third-most Democratic (and the most Democratic outside of the North Jersey urban core), and the 77-year-old Watson Coleman will hold it for as long as she chooses.
COUNTIES: Mercer, Middlesex, Somerset, Union

MERCER: Ewing, Hopewell Borough, Hopewell Township, Pennington, Princeton, Trenton, West Windsor

MIDDLESEX: Cranbury, Dunellen, East Brunswick, Helmetta, Jamesburg, Middlesex, Milltown, Monroe, North Brunswick, Old Bridge (pt.), Plainsboro, South Brunswick, South River, Spotswood

SOMERSET: Bound Brook, Bridgewater (pt.), Franklin, Hillsborough (pt.), Manville, Millstone, Montgomery, North Plainfield, Rocky Hill, South Bound Brook

UNION: Plainfield

INCUMBENT: Bonnie Watson Coleman

DEMOCRATS: *Bonnie Watson Coleman

REPUBLICANS: Darius Mayfield

Statewide results
2020 PRES: Biden 66.5% // Trump 32.2%

Congressional results (note: occurred under different district lines)
2020 GEN: Coleman 65.6% // Razzoli 32.6%
2020 D PRI: Coleman 89.2% // McCormick 10.8%
2020 R PRI: Razzoli 100%

Demographics
39.8% White // 18.1% Black // 21.5% Hispanic // 20.7% Asian
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BAYONNE

POPULATION: 71,744

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: Jimmy Davis
Council: Sharon Ashe-Nadrowski (at-large), Juan Perez (at-large), Neil Carroll (1st), Sal Gullace (2nd), Gary La Pelusa (3rd)

Bayonne Mayor Jimmy Davis, after unseating Mayor Mark Smith in 2014 and beating former Assemblyman Jason O’Donnell (D-Bayonne) in 2018, faces a third consecutive tough opponent this year in Council President Sharon Ashe-Nadrowski, a former Davis ally.

After apparently falling out with Ashe-Nadrowski and Second Ward Councilman Sal Gullace last year, Davis is running for re-election with a slate of incumbent At-Large Councilman Juan Perez, First Ward Councilman Neil Carroll, and Third Ward Councilman Gary La Pelusa alongside retired policeman Loyad Booker and bank executive Jacqueline Weimer. Booker is running for Ashe-Nadrowski’s at-large seat, while Weimer is Davis’ replacement for Gullace in the Second Ward.

Ashe-Nadrowski, meanwhile, is running with a full slate of newcomers: school board trustee Jodi Casais and Police Athletic League executive director KT Torello for two at-large seats, small businesswoman Julie Sanchez Lynch for the First Ward, real estate executive George Vinc for the Second Ward, and Bayonne Board of Education president Maria Valado for the Third Ward.

Many of the races also feature at least one tertiary candidate: Mitchell Brown for mayor, Carissa Lintao and Denis Wilbeck for at-large city council, and Peter Franco for the Third Ward. None of the four are running on the same line as any of the others.

On Team Davis are the leaders of both the Hudson County Democratic Party and the Hudson County Republican Party – Bayonne leans Democratic but has a sizable Republican population – while Ashe-Nadrowski has managed to flip some major unions and the Jersey Journal to her side.

Assuming that either Davis’ or Ashe-Nadrowski’s slates are victorious, each would make history; Ashe-Nadrowski would be the city’s first-ever female mayor, while Booker would be the city’s first Black councilman.

BELLEVILLE

POPULATION: 38,261

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: Michael Melham
Council: Thomas Graziano, Naomy De Peña

Conoclastic Belleville

Mayor Michael Melham, who endorsed Republican Jack Ciattarelli for governor last year despite leading a town that voted for Gov. Phil Murphy by 10 points, faces a challenge from longtime Second Ward Councilman Steve Rovell. In 2018, Melham ousted three-term incumbent Raymond Kimble by a narrow margin.

The mayor is joined on his ticket this year by two incumbent at-large councilmembers, Naomy De Peña and Thomas Graziano, while Rovell has formed his own “Belleville Families First” slate with 2018 candidate Charles Hood and Board of Education member Tracy Juanita Williams.

Melham briefly considered running this year for retiring Rep. Albio Sires (D-West New York)’s congressional seat, but decided against it; Belleville wound up in the 11th district days after Melham’s trial balloon.
IRVINGTON

POPULATION: 61,531

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: Tony Vauss
Council: Renee Burgess, Charnette Frederic, October Hudley

IRVINGTON MAYOR Tony Vauss and former Irvington Councilman Paul Inman have a long, complicated history, and this May’s election may be the two politicians’ biggest showdown yet.

Vauss and Inman first faced each other in the 2014 mayoral election; that year, Vauss unseated incumbent Mayor Wayne Smith, while Inman was a minor player who came in seventh. But two years later, Vauss added Inman to his council slate, and Inman was elected to the East Ward unopposed.

Then things began to go sideways. Shortly after he won the mayoralty in 2014, Vauss was unfairly accused of sexual assault by a township employee, and the case went on for three years before a judge firmly rejected the claims and awarded Vauss $7,000 for the defamation of his character.

That might have been the end of it, had it not been for the revelation that Inman apparently colluded with the accuser and encouraged her to take legal action against Vauss. An outraged Vauss kicked Inman off his slate, and Inman was ousted in 2020 by Vauss’ choice, now-Councilman Sean Evans.

This year, Inman is back for revenge, and he’s making a bid for the Vauss slate’s council seats as well. Vauss is running with the three incumbent councilwomen he was first elected alongside in 2014 – Renee Burgess, Charnette Frederic, and October Hudley – while Inman has recruited Yasmina King, Durrell Watford, and Allison Morris for his ticket.

But Vauss, who has brought a certain calmness to a community marked by much turbulence in the past, has united most of Irvington and appears to be a strong favorite for re-election.
KEANSBURG

POPULATION: 9,794

INCUMBENTS:
Council: Jim Cocuzza, Michael Donaldson

Keansburg is hosting one of this cycle’s least interesting elections; Councilmen Jim Cocuzza and Michael Donaldson, the latter of whom replaced former Councilwoman Judy Ferraro in early 2021, are running unopposed for two seats on the borough council.

LONG BRANCH

POPULATION: 31,762

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: John Pallone
Council: Mary Jane Celli, Bill Dangler, Mario Vieira, Anita Voogt, Rose Widdis

Long Branch hosted a wild election in 2018, when Councilman John Pallone, the brother of House Energy & Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone (D-Long Branch), ousted seven-term Mayor Adam Schneider in a 62-33% landslide. Pallone’s council slate, which included incumbent Councilwoman Mary Jane Celli and four newcomers, simultaneously annihilated Schneider’s entire team. In the four years since, Schneider and his team – Celli and Councilmembers Bill Dangler, Mario Vieira, Anita Voogt, Rose Widdis – have evidently coalesced their support even further; not a single candidate filed to oppose any of them.

OCEAN CITY

POPULATION: 11,235

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: Jay Gillian
Council: Karen Bergman, Keith Hartzell, Pete Madden

Ocean City Mayor Jay Gillian is gunning for a fourth term this year, but he’ll have to first defeat Councilman Keith Hartzell; Gillian most recently won re-election in 2018 by defeating a different councilman, former Council President John Flood. Councilmembers Karen Bergman and Pete Madden are running for re-election alongside John “Tony” Polcini, who is Hartzell’s replacement on their slate. The trio will face Second Ward Councilman Tomaso Rotondi, former First Ward Councilman Michael DeVlieger, and local activist Donna Moore.
THE MAYOR’S RACE in New Jersey’s largest city looks like it won’t be action-packed this year; after prevailing in a brutal 2014 contest against Shavar Jeffries and winning re-election handily in 2018, Mayor Ras Baraka has escaped without drawing substantial opposition. His lone opponent is Sheila Montague, a frequent (and unsuccessful) candidate for school board in previous cycles.

Baraka’s Newark Forward slate for four at-large seats – which includes incumbents Larry Crump, Carlos Gonzalez, and Luis Quintana alongside newcomer Louise Scott-Roundtree in place of Councilman Eddie Osbourne – appears to be even safer than Baraka, having drawn no certified opponents whatsoever.

Former Mayor Sharpe James tried to upset the status quo, but his attempt at filing for an at-large seat was rejected by the Newark City Clerk because of his past criminal conviction, a rejection upheld by a Superior Court judge.

Three of Newark’s five wards, however, are hosting hotly contested multi-candidate races.

In the East Ward, traditionally the city’s Portuguese ward, the race appears to have come down to three candidates, all of them Portuguese Americans and all of them former policemen. Michael Silva has the backing of retiring Councilman Augusto Amador and Assembly Budget Chair Eliana Pintor Marin (D-Newark), the state’s two most prominent Portuguese elected officials; Louis Weber is running on Baraka’s slate; and Anthony Campos nearly unseated Amador in 2018, losing by just 83 votes.

Weber has had some setbacks in recent weeks after it was disclosed that a fellow detective accused him of sexual assault 13 years ago. There are also reports that there were 35 use-of-force incidents reported for Weber from 2012 to 2016, more than any other Newark police officer.

None of Silva, Weber, or Campos is an overwhelming frontrunner, and all have a potential path to winning the seat. Also running is supermarket owner Jonathan Seabra, who ran in 2018 and got 9% of the vote in the first round.

Baraka’s choice for the South Ward is South Ward Democratic chair Pat Council, but Council faces no fewer than six opponents in the race to succeed retiring Councilman John Sharpe James, the son of the former mayor. 2018 candidate Terrance Bankston is running as well, as are Christina Cherry, Douglas Freeman, Trenton Jones, Cynthia Truitt-Rease, and Altarik White.

And in the West Ward, Baraka is supporting rapper Dupré Kelly against former South Ward Councilman Oscar James and attorney Chigozie Onyema; also running are Lyndon Brown, Lavita Johnson (who came in third when she ran for the same seat in 2018), and Michelle Lyn Middleton. The winner will succeed Councilman Joseph McCallum, who was charged with wire fraud in 2020.

Two other wards will host less crowded contests: Central Ward Councilwoman LaMonica McIver, first elected in 2018 as the council’s youngest member, faces a rematch with 2018 candidate Shawn McCray, while North Ward Councilman Anibal Ramos is unopposed.
The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.

— John F. Kennedy
The City of Orange, which is of course a township, is hosting a packed election this year, with 13 candidates running for four ward-based spots on the Township Council.

Three of the four wards have incumbents running for re-election. In the North Ward, Councilwoman Tency Eason faces Sharief Williams, whom she beat easily in 2018, and Kami Willis; in the East Ward, Councilman Kerry Coley is being challenged by Fatima Turner and Board of Education member Tyrone Tarver; and in the South Ward, Councilwoman Jamie Summers-Johnson—who won by just three votes four years ago—will square off against James Ward and 2020 council candidate Lynval James.

The West Ward, meanwhile, is a four-way race to succeed Councilman Harold Johnson between Quantavia Hilbert, Jonathan Beckford, Genoria Jenkins, and Mohamed Toure.

For a time last year, it looked like Paterson might host a ludicrous three-mayor race between current Mayor André Sayegh, former Mayor Joey Torres, and former Mayor Jeffrey Jones, but that did not come to pass. Torres was prevented from reaching the ballot due to his 2017 criminal conviction—and will in fact now face new charges for even trying to get on the ballot at all—while Jones apparently decided against running.

That doesn’t mean Sayegh has a glide path to a second term, however. Two councilmen under indictment for election fraud, Michael Jackson and Alex Mendez, are both running, Jackson on the alarmingly named “Vote or Die” ballot line; Mendez was previously the runner-up in the 2018 race that Sayegh won, and Jackson came in fifth in that same race. Current councilman Luis Velez and former councilman Aslan Goow, who served on the council for 12 years but badly lost his comeback bid in 2018, round out the field.

Paterson is more than 80% Black or Latino, giving Jackson, Mendez, and Velez a potential demographic advantage over Sayegh, but the incumbent was able to construct a winning coalition with 41% of the vote last cycle, and he’ll only need to get a plurality of the vote to win once again this year. Sayegh is considered at least a small favorite, with Mendez likely once again the runner-up.

The race for three at-large seats on the city council is also unsettled. One incumbent, Councilman Flavio Rivera, isn’t seeking re-election to a second term, while two others, Council President Maritza Davila and Councilwoman Lilisa Mimms, have split into opposing factions. Davila is leading the 10-candidate field’s one true slate alongside Melissa Baralt and former interim Councilman Gilman Choudhury on the “Consistency Matters” ballot line. Sayegh, a Davila antagonist in the past, seems to be tacitly supporting her and her slate this time.

Mimms, who was a key Sayegh backer in 2018 but has remained neutral this year, is running solo on her own line, as are five other candidates: Md Ford Uddin, Sonia Deliz, Jeyss Abreu, Casey Melvin, and Juan “Mitch” Santiago, the latter two of whom also ran in 2018.
UNION CITY

POPULATION: 68,666

INCUMBENTS:
Mayor: Brian Stack
Commission: Lucio Fernandez, Wendy Grullon, Maryury Martinetti, Celin Valdivia

UNION CITY MAYOR Brian Stack, who also serves in the State Senate as the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee chairman, had a scare earlier this year when he was put into the same district as State Sen. Nicholas Sacco (D-North Bergen), a fellow mayor and Hudson County Democrat. But Sacco, who is 20 years Stack’s senior, ended up stepping aside, and Stack now faces an easy path to re-election both in Trenton and at home in Union City.

No candidates filed to run against Stack, who commands a staggering ability to turn out voters in his hometown, for the third time in a row. And not just that; Stack’s entire slate of commissioners – Lucio Fernandez, Wendy Grullon, Maryury Martinetti, and Celin Valdivia – are unopposed as well.

Stack runs scared even without any opponents, and he’s launching his usual high-energy bid for re-election; the question will be just how many votes he can get in a low-profile, uncontested election.

THE POLITICAL POWER of Weehawken Mayor Richard Turner isn’t as famous as that of Brian Stack, but Turner’s stranglehold on local politics is no less secure; he and his entire council slate – incumbents David Curtis, Rosemary Lavagnino, Carmela Silvestri-Ehret, and Robert Sosa – are unopposed this year.

Turner is hugely respected in Hudson County, where in a patriarchal Democratic machine, he is everybody’s favorite uncle.

Turner’s uncontested re-election will also likely have consequences for Weehawken’s representation in the State Assembly. Thanks to Hudson County’s unwritten mayor-decides-all system for Assembly seats, it will be up to Turner, Stack, and West New York Mayor Gabe Rodriguez whether Assemblywoman Angelica Jimenez (D-West New York) keeps the party line or loses it to another West New York candidate.

NEWTON, RIDGEWOOD, AND TRENTON

IN PREVIOUS overviews of New Jersey’s May municipal elections, Newton, Ridgewood, and Trenton would have made starring appearances, but no more – all three municipalities moved their local elections to November in the past year-and-a-half. And since all three still hold nonpartisan elections, they won’t appear on June’s primary ballot, either.
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