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# At First New Jersey Governor Debates, Parties Differ on Policy and in Tone

By NICK CORASANITI    MAY 10, 2017

GALLOWAY, N.J. — After months of a campaign fought largely in town halls and mailboxes and on scattered commercial airwaves, the candidates for governor of New Jersey met here at Stockton University on Tuesday for the first televised primary debates. And while the Republican candidates sparred over tax policy and achievements, the Democratic candidates found themselves largely in agreement.

Voters looking for a substantive debate about the many issues plaguing New Jersey — including critically underfunded pension and school systems, record property taxes and a transportation network on the brink of failure — were treated largely to candidate indictments of Gov. Chris Christie’s stewardship of the state.

In a Democratic debate that was more peaceful than acrid, the candidates transitioned from making biting opening statements to standing in unison in support of legalizing marijuana, supporting alternative energy sources such as wind turbines, paying for the entire school funding formula, investing in the state’s failing infrastructure and countering President Trump.

One of the few divisive moments in the Democratic debate came as Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive and ambassador to Germany who is



“We’re on the brink, and you all know the crisis: They ruined our economy and punished New Jerseyans every single day,” Mr. Ciattarelli said, adding: “Kim Guadagno and the Christie administration had seven-plus years to fix New Jersey. They just haven’t been able to get it done.”

Ms. Guadagno, the lieutenant governor and the other Republican candidate at the debate, found herself in the delicate dance she has performed for most of her nascent campaign: embracing the few successes of her tenure with Mr. Christie at the helm while frequently pointing out where she disagreed with the governor. She said that she was “not a climate denier” and that the current Republican plan in Congress to repeal the Affordable Care Act was a “disaster.” But she also said she opposed the gas tax.

The two Republican candidates repeatedly sparred over taxes. Ms. Guadagno tried to frame Mr. Ciattarelli’s plan to solve the property tax crisis with a reorganization of the school funding formula as a potential tax. “I have never seen a job that was created with a tax,” she said.

She offered instead her “circuit breaker” program, which would provide a direct tax credit to residents with excessive property taxes in proportion to their income, although she never offered a detailed explanation of the plan.

“I’ve presented a circuit breaker plan that will help those who are in need of making payments for their property taxes now,” she said, “not in two or three years when Jack tries to get his school funding formula through the legislature.”

But speaking with the rapid, metronomic clip of a candidate armed with an arsenal of practiced responses, Mr. Ciattarelli was relentless as he attacked Ms. Guadagno. He said she refused to address issues “with any specificity” and called her circuit breaker plan “irresponsible,” her position against the gas tax “hypocritical” and her pledge to never support a tax increase as “pandering of the worst kind.”

Mr. Ciattarelli even looked to the moderator at one point, alerting her when he saw that Ms. Guadagno had gone over her allotted time as she was answering a question about marijuana legislation.

“Thank you for reminding me about the time, Jack,” the moderator said.

The debate came at a pivotal time in the race to succeed Mr. Christie, a Republican whose historically low approval ratings indicate an electorate anxious for a change.

Yet no candidate has been able to break through and excite voters: A Quinnipiac poll last month found that 57 percent of state residents remained undecided.

Participants in the debate were determined by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission, which sponsors the debates.

Candidates qualifying for the state’s matching funds program, which is available to any campaign that has raised at least \$430,000, are required to take part in the debate. Mr. Murphy, who has opted out of the matching funds program, agreed to participate.

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