

Party loyalists expected to be decisive in low-turnout governor's race, says Carl Golden

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The rule of thumb in New Jersey statewide campaigns has always been that, in primary contests, the candidates hew closely to their party bases — that is, Democrats run to the left and Republicans to the right.

Upon winning the nomination, the victors shed some of their ideological baggage and tack toward the vote-rich and more moderate, pragmatic center.

This year's gubernatorial election seems to have broken the pattern.

Democratic candidate Phil Murphy — checkbook in hand — waltzed through the primary by scooping up endorsements from county leaders and securing favorable ballot designations.

Republican Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno overcame a serious challenge from Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, R-Somerset, and coasted to a 16-point win.

Murphy's left-of-center bona fides were never in doubt. He ran in the spring on a platform of more spending, higher taxes on the wealthy and big business, legalization of marijuana, stricter gun control, tuition-free county college, \$15 per hour minimum wage and paid family leave, and has continued to do so.

His most recent promise to designate New Jersey a sanctuary state to limit law-enforcement authority in dealing with undocumented immigrants moved him more firmly to the left.

Guadagno quickly pounced on Murphy's sanctuary state promise, accusing him of offering official government protection to individuals who entered the country illegally and committed crimes while here.

To many observers, Murphy's pledge of sanctuary-state designation sent a jolt of energy through Republican voters — a gift to Guadagno, who has been consistently outpolled and outspent and whose message of property-tax relief and reduced government spending hasn't gained deep traction.

The issue is a divisive one but could have a galvanizing effect on core Republican voters to whom it is simply a question of legal versus illegal and who believe law enforcement.

The perceived lack of energy and enthusiasm has produced low turnout expectations, with some suggesting it will fall well below 50 percent of the 5.65 million registered voters.

To support their predictions and as evidence of voter indifference, they point to polling data showing that with the election less than three weeks off, upwards of 30 percent of respondents admit they are not sufficiently knowledgeable about either candidate to arrive at a firm conclusion.

The task for Guadagno, though, is a daunting one. Murphy's lead has never fallen into single digits and his fundraising has quadrupled hers, opening the way for him to launch a saturation advertising blitz in the final two weeks of the campaign.

Moreover, Guadagno's association with Gov. Chris Christie remains a drag on her candidacy, costing her — according to some — as much as five to six points in support.

The political center is a powerful force and has often been the deciding factor in statewide elections.

The center, however, is not stationary. It moves either left or right according to issues as they develop or as government grapples with them.

It does not normally move to the ideological fringes, and history's political landscape is littered with the dashed hopes of candidates who ran from the extremes.

It appears, though, that this year's gubernatorial race will lean more heavily and be decided on shared ideology than on broad-based centrist appeal.

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