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THE DINER BOOTH

GOP Primary for Governor: Ciattarelli's Steinhardt Post-Game

By Carl Golden | January 15, 2021, 11:35 am | in **The Diner Booth** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/the-diner-booth/>)



Now that former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli has effectively become the Republican nominee for governor, party leaders would be wise to heed the advice of Atlantic County chairman Keith Davis to unite immediately behind Ciattarelli, avoid a costly primary contest and focus energies on November.

With the withdrawal of former State Chairman Doug Steinhardt, Ciattarelli no longer must convince Republican voters to select him as the nominee, but as governor.

In an e-mail to his colleagues, Davis called on them to put their organizational and fiscal resources behind Ciattarelli now “to give him every advantage going into the fall.”

In both a warning and a recognition that defeating Gov. Phil Murphy will be a Herculean task, Davis wrote “we just can’t afford to start this election after the primary in June.”

“We need to get going now,” he wrote. “We can put our party in the best position to beat Murphy by coalescing behind Jack. It will benefit us down ticket and avoid needless spending against fellow Republicans in a primary.”

The message was unmistakable: A strong presence at the top of the ticket is crucial if Republicans are to either maintain control or seize control of county and municipal governments (hence the reference to down ticket), and money — substantial amounts of it — should be spent on victory rather than on divisive intra-party competition.

With Steinhardt's withdrawal, it is unlikely a credible candidate will emerge to oppose Ciattarelli. The two announced candidates — Joseph Rullo and Hirsh Singh, both from Atlantic County — possess none of the essentials for a viable candidacy — name identification, a base of support and access to significant sums of cash.

In his 15 years as county chairman, Davis has established himself as a thoughtful, insightful political player with valuable organizational and fund-raising skills.

His unity plea to his county chair peers should not be taken lightly or with any suspicion of an underlying political or personal motive.

It is an acknowledgement that Murphy will be a formidable candidate, well-financed, heading a unified party, and, for the moment, enjoying popular support in the 60 percent range due largely to his response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, Democratic voter registration exceeds Republican by more than one million, strengthening Murphy's base and steepening the hill for any challenger.

Moreover, incumbency has been a considerable advantage. In the state's post constitution history, only two governors have failed in re-election bids — Jim Florio in 1993 and Jon Corzine in 2009.

Ciattarelli faces policy issues and an unsettled political environment.

Herewith a few:

PANDEMIC: The COVID-19 onslaught has infected nearly 550,000 people, killed more than 20,000, devastated the state's economy and decimated the state budget. It has tested the governor like no other. And, on balance his Administration has responded well. Ciattarelli and others have criticized Murphy over his use of executive orders rather than legislative approval to close schools and businesses while moving too slowly to lift restrictions, inflicting serious economic damage on small businesses in particular. If the vaccination program now underway achieves success and normalcy returns, Murphy will receive the lion's share of the credit. If the Jersey shore re-opens with crowded beaches and boardwalks on Memorial Day, it will be impossible to begrudge him a victory lap. Ciattarelli must find a way to break through the favorable public response and articulate what he, as governor, would have done differently and better. It will not be easy. People relieved to have weathered the worst public health crisis in a century will be reluctant to re-live the experience through the heat and clamor of a political campaign.

TAXES: With the annual average property tax nearly \$9,000 and in many municipalities considerably greater, Ciattarelli can fault the Administration over failure to confront what has historically been the issue most troublesome to New Jerseyans. He has insisted that a dramatic revision of the state's public school funding formula is long overdue and is the only viable solution to the property tax burden. Murphy, Ciattarelli contends, is beholden to

special interests — principally the New Jersey Education Association — and has steadfastly refused to consider changes to the funding formula, choosing instead to pour ever-increasing sums of state aid into it. Ciattarelli will also challenge the Administration's record of raising taxes and fees while doing little to control spending. The downgrade of the state's credit rating and the unfunded liability in the public employee pension system will be raised as well.

SCANDALS: The patronage hiring binge at the Schools Development Authority and the Administration's failure to address accusations of sexual assault against one of its senior officials in a timely fashion will be cited by Ciattarelli as examples of bungling management which proved both embarrassing and costly. By stonewalling and offering conflicting and contradictory explanations, the Administration turned the issue into a public relations nightmare. It may not be a compelling campaign issue, but it will linger.

Politically, issues facing Ciattarelli include:

ENDORSEMENTS: Even prior to Steinhardt's withdrawal Ciattarelli had already scooped up a significant number of county chair support and promises of favorable ballot placement. It's no longer an issue of concern.

FUNDRAISING: Ciattarelli has already reached the threshold to qualify for maximum public financing in the primary. No reason to believe he'll fall short for the general election.

TRUMP EFFECT: How much ill will remains after the president leaves office is unclear as is whether the ex-president will continue to exert significant influence over the party from his redoubt at Mar-A-Lago. His support has plummeted nationally in the wake of his second impeachment and the horrific assault on the U. S. Capitol. Ciattarelli has been a Trump critic and a Trump supporter in his career and, in all likelihood, will put some distance between himself and the president while hoping his concentration on state issues will cool whatever anger remains.

CHRISTIE EFFECT: The former governor is spending most of his time teasing his 2024 presidential intentions, using his television pundit presence and aggressive media pursuit to remain a subject of attention and speculation. He will, of course, endorse Ciattarelli but the campaign would be wise to utilize him sparingly.

Davis' advice to conduct a general election campaign beginning in January rather than June is unassailably sound as is his call for a united party.

Whatever inner circle of advisers Ciattarelli creates, he'd be well served to include Davis in it.

He understands very well that Murphy enters his re-election year as the favorite but not the inevitable. There is a path for Ciattarelli, and Davis has identified its starting point.

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