

Open Enrollment:
Choose Your Provider
Wisely

READ MORE



[\(https://www.nbclosangeles.com/investigations/i-team-helps-chino-medicare-recipient-recover-15000-from-insurance-company/3264935/\)](https://www.nbclosangeles.com/investigations/i-team-helps-chino-medicare-recipient-recover-15000-from-insurance-company/3264935/)



COLUMNIST

Assessing The Impact of the County Line Injunction

By Carl Golden | April 15, 2024, 11:42 am | in **Columnist** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/columnist/>), **The Diner Booth** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/the-diner-booth/>)



When a federal judge ruled last month that New Jersey's primary election ballot design was unconstitutional, the media/political universe erupted in joyous fervor, reaching for evermore colorful adjectives to describe its impact – bombshell, explosive, earthquake, historic, death

knell for political bossism, etc.

It was, of course, none of those.

The “ding, dong the wicked witch is dead” line dance engaged in by opponents of the county line ballot structure was a bit premature.

The injunction granted by the judge applies to the 2024 primary election only, places the future of ballot design in the hands of the Legislature and accomplishes nothing to curb the dominant influence of local political organizations in endorsing or providing financial and organizational support to their favored candidates.

While the judicial ruling certainly delivered a blow to the largely unfettered power of the political establishment to confer an electoral advantage on their chosen candidates through favored ballot position, the impact was less seismic than initial reaction has suggested.

There will still be screening committee interviews with prospective candidates, county conventions, party endorsements, identical ballot slogans, commitment of funds and personnel to staff get out the vote programs.

Formidable obstacles will remain for potential candidates who were shunted off to hard to find ballot positions after being denied the county line.

Fund raising will be difficult as will building name identification and mobilizing supporters to assure voter turnout.

Attorneys for the county clerks seeking a stay of the injunction made their case on behalf of retaining the county line process but did so while aware that by confining it to this year only, a loss in court is a setback that will inflict minimal damage.

Congressman Andy Kim who brought the lawsuit while locked in a struggle with First Lady Tammy Murphy to secure county line designations for the U.S. Senate nomination to replace scandal-ridden Sen. Bob Menendez is the prohibitive favorite to win the nomination and the Senate seat.

Despite the even division of victories in county endorsements, Tammy Murphy abandoned her campaign in a tacit acknowledgement that the rush of endorsements from party establishment leaders would create an unstoppable momentum had failed. Resentment among the party's rank and file over the bulldozer approach to her selection ran deeper than her campaign anticipated and a loss to Kim – while not inevitable – was a genuine possibility.

While the dispute over the county line was credited with convincing Tammy Murphy her candidacy was in jeopardy, the issue was simply the instrument by which restive party loyalists could vent their dismay over what they believed was a disrespectful power grab by her husband governor and leaders who sided with him for purely personal or self-aggrandizing motives.

If not the county line, the confrontation would have centered on another issue around which to coalesce and voice their anger.

At its most fundamental, it represented a serious miscalculation of the potential pushback and an overestimation of the organizational support for the governor and his allies, a belief that loyalty to Murphy would outweigh any misgivings about the circumstances of selecting his wife as the Senate candidate.

The governor himself — in a comment with a tinge of bitterness — dismissed the county line dispute as a flyspeck issue that received a disproportionate amount of media attention to the detriment of serious matters of the national economy, immigration, foreign policy, aid to Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas conflict, crime and public safety.

He avoided any public references to the undercurrent of hypocrisy that others saw in the controversy and who were quick to point out that for many years, political figures, activist public policy groups and the media co-existed comfortably alongside the county line system, raising periodic criticisms which faded quickly.

It was only in response to the Tammy Murphy candidacy that they suddenly decided the county line was an institutional evil and demanded it be excised from the body politic as an existential threat to democracy.

Should the ultimate decision on ballot design rest in the hands of the Legislature — as its leadership has suggested — it will tee up a potentially bitter conflict between those who wish to stay with a tradition from which many of them have benefited and those who believe it must be abolished altogether as a remnant of the old style corrupt backroom politics which has always sullied the state's reputation.

Whatever emerges from the turbulent cross currents of the legislative process will likely be challenged if it falls short of a complete prohibition of any resemblance to the county line.

The debate will test the creative prowess of those who believe the county line has been beneficial in weeding out fringe or non-serious candidates while assuring the party faithful that they will enter the general election season united behind candidates who stand the greater chance of victory.

In the interim, county organizations will continue to function as they have historically, gathering strength as increased attention is directed toward what is shaping up as a fiercely contested 2025 gubernatorial primary election.

Endorsements will be eagerly sought, their value undiminished by the absence of favored ballot position, and fund raising will likely establish records. The potential for handshake deals and accommodations will remain as strong as ever.

The recent apocalyptic rhetoric predicting the demise of local organizational political power will fade away, not so much because it's been proven wrong; rather because it was over-hyperbolic from the outset.

The opponents of the county line certainly have reason to celebrate their judicial victory, but a bit of perspective was lost amid the cheers and confetti tossing.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.