

**THE IMPACT OF NEW JERSEY’S COUNTY LINE PRIMARY
BALLOTS
ON ELECTION OUTCOMES, POLITICS, AND POLICY**

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This article examines New Jersey’s unique county line primary ballots; specifically, how the county line ballots affect primary election outcomes, and how that, in turn, impacts the state’s political system. Primary elections are particularly important in New Jersey because the majority of the state’s counties and legislative districts are dominated by one of the two major parties.¹ With general election outcomes largely a foregone conclusion in much of the state, the real contests happen in the primaries.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section describes the county line ballot and the mechanisms through which it may affect voting behavior. The second section examines the impact of the county line ballot on primary election outcomes. The third section describes how parties award the county line and the resulting candidate choices available to voters. The article concludes with a discussion of how the county line primary ballot affects New Jersey politics and policy.

I. NEW JERSEY’S UNIQUE PRIMARY BALLOT

New Jersey’s county line primary ballots are very different from primary ballots in other states.² A review of primary ballots in the


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¹ See Matt Friedman, *N.J. Advocates Push Commission to Draw More Competitive Legislative Districts*, NJ.COM (Feb. 18, 2011), https://www.nj.com/news/2011/02/commission_based_on_nj_politic.html.

² See Julia Sass Rubin, *Toeing the Line: New Jersey Primary Ballots Enable Party Insiders to Pick Winners*, NJ POLLY PERSP. (June 29, 2020),

largest counties in all fifty states and the District of Columbia found that, outside of New Jersey, primary ballots are organized by the electoral position being sought, such as Senator or Governor. Most states list candidates beneath the position they are seeking.³ In a few states, candidates appear to the right of the position they are seeking.⁴ These ballot designs make it relatively easy for voters to identify which candidates are running for each electoral position.

Figure 1: Elko County, NV 2018 Democratic primary ballot (left) and Sussex County, DE 2018 Democratic primary ballot (right)

FEDERAL PARTISAN OFFICES	STATEWIDE PARTISAN OFFICES		
UNITED STATES SENATOR Six (6) Year Term VOTE FOR ONE	GOVERNOR Four (4) Year Term VOTE FOR ONE	 DEMOCRATIC PARTY	
BURLEIGH, DANNY <input type="radio"/>	BONAVENTURA, JOHN <input type="radio"/>		
KNIGHT, DAVID DREW <input type="radio"/>	DEWAN, ASHEESH <input type="radio"/>		
MAHENDRA, SUJEET "BOBBY" <input type="radio"/>	GIUNCHIGLIANI, CHRISTINA "CHRIS G" <input type="radio"/>		
RHEINHART, ALLEN <input type="radio"/>	JONES, DAVID E. <input type="radio"/>		
ROSEN, JACKY <input type="radio"/>	SISOLAK, STEVE <input type="radio"/>		
SBAIH, JESSE <input type="radio"/>	THORNS, HENRY <input type="radio"/>		
NONE OF THESE CANDIDATES <input type="radio"/>	NONE OF THESE CANDIDATES <input type="radio"/>		
UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS, DISTRICT 2 Two (2) Year Term VOTE FOR ONE	LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR Four (4) Year Term VOTE FOR ONE		FOR UNITED STATES SENATOR VOTE FOR ONE (1)
ALM, VANCE <input type="radio"/>	HANSEN, LAURIE L. <input type="radio"/>		THOMAS R. CARPER <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
FOGARTY, PATRICK <input type="radio"/>	MARSHALL, KATE <input type="radio"/>		KERRI EVELYN HARRIS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
HURLEY, JESSE DOUGLAS <input type="radio"/>	NONE OF THESE CANDIDATES <input type="radio"/>		FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL VOTE FOR ONE (1)
KOBLE, CLINT <input type="radio"/>	ATTORNEY GENERAL Four (4) Year Term VOTE FOR ONE		KATHLEEN JENNINGS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
SCHOFIELD JR., JACK L. <input type="radio"/>	FORD, AARON <input type="radio"/>		CHRISTOFER JOHNSON <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
SHEPHERD, RICK <input type="radio"/>	MACKIE, STUART J. <input type="radio"/>		TIMOTHY P. MULLANEY, SR. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	NONE OF THESE CANDIDATES <input type="radio"/>		LAKRESHA ROBERTS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
			FOR AUDITOR OF ACCOUNTS VOTE FOR ONE (1)
			KATHLEEN ANN DAVIES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
			KATHLEEN K. MCGUINNESS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
			DENNIS E. WILLIAMS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

By contrast, county line primary ballots, which are used by both the Democratic and Republican parties in nineteen of New Jersey’s twenty-one counties, are organized around a group of candidates endorsed by the county parties. These groups of party-endorsed candidates are referred to as the “county line,” “party line,” or organization line” because they are presented on the ballot as a vertical or horizontal line of names, usually with a candidate included for every position on the ballot in that election cycle.

Figure 2 shows a 2021 New Jersey Republican primary ballot from Essex County. The seven county line candidates are in row E. The remaining nine candidates are scattered across the other three, mostly empty, rows. There is no obvious logic as to why each of the non-





<https://www.njpp.org/publications/report/toeing-the-line-new-jersey-primary-ballots-enable-party-insiders-to-pick-winners/>

³ See *infra* Figure 1, Elko County, Nevada ballot.

⁴ See *infra* Figure 1, Sussex County, Delaware ballot.

endorsed candidates is in a particular row. Row F includes a candidate for Governor. Row G includes another candidate for Governor separated by a blank column from two candidates for the State Assembly. Row H includes a fourth candidate for Governor separated by two blank columns from a candidate for the State Assembly, a candidate for County Sheriff, and two candidates for County Commissioner.

Figure 2: Essex County 2021 Republican primary ballot

	For Governor Four Year Term Vote for One <i>Para Gobernador</i> Término de Cuatro Años Vote por Uno	For Member of the State Senate 26th Legis. Dist. Two Year Term Vote for One <i>Para Miembro del Senado Estatal</i> Dist. Legis. 26 Término de Dos Años Vote por Uno	For Members of the General Assembly 26th Legislative District Two Year Term Vote for Two <i>Para Miembros de la Asamblea General</i> Distrito Legislativo 26 Término de Dos Años Vote por Dos		For Sheriff Three Year Term Vote for One <i>Para Alguacil</i> Término de Tres Años Vote por Uno	For State Committee Four Year Term Vote for Two <i>Para Comité Estatal</i> Término de Cuatro Años Vote por Dos		For Mayor Three Year Term Vote for One <i>Para Alcalde</i> Término de Tres Años Vote por Uno
	Jack CIATTARELLI <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 1E <input type="radio"/>	Joe PENNACCHIO <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 2E <input type="radio"/>	Bettylou DeCROCE <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 3E <input type="radio"/>		Nicholas G. PANSINI <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 5E <input type="radio"/>	Peter TANELLA <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 6E <input type="radio"/>	Janet TREAMONT <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 7E <input type="radio"/>	James GASPARINI <i>Essex Republican Party Organization, Inc.</i> 8E <input type="radio"/>
	Brian D. LEVINE <i>Essex County Republican Party Committee</i> 1F <input type="radio"/>							
	Philip RIZZO <i>Republicans for Conservative Values</i> 1G <input type="radio"/>		Jay WEBBER <i>Republicans for Conservative Values</i> 3G <input type="radio"/>	Christian E. BARRANCO <i>Republicans for Conservative Values</i> 4G <input type="radio"/>				
	Hirsh V. SINGH 1H <input type="radio"/>			Thomas MASTRANGELO 4H <input type="radio"/>	Maureen EDELSON 5H <input type="radio"/>	Michael D. BYRNE 6H <input type="radio"/>	Sue Ann PENNA 7H <input type="radio"/>	

This ballot design provides multiple advantages for candidates who appear on the county line. First, the county line is easy for voters to find on the ballot. The inclusion of candidates for every position makes it visually distinct. It also usually has prime ballot position, in the first or second column or row.

Candidates on the county line are further advantaged by the placement of candidates for the highest position on the ballot that cycle at the head of the line—such as Jack Ciattarelli in the Essex example. While voters may not know the names of candidates running for county commissioner or county clerk, they generally know the leading candidates for President, Governor, or U.S. Senator. These better-known candidates lend familiarity and legitimacy to the other county line candidates.

Candidates not on the county line appear in different columns or rows and are often separated from the county line by additional blank columns or rows, such as the two rows between Nicholas G. Pancini, the

county line candidate for Sheriff on the Essex ballot, and his challenger Maureen Edelson. In extreme examples, candidates on the county line are separated from their challengers by many columns or rows. For example, on the 2018 Camden County Democratic primary ballot shown in Figure 3, Donald Norcross, the county line candidate for U.S. House of Representatives, is separated from his challengers by six blank columns. This can make the non-county line candidates more difficult for voters to find on the ballot, a placement that has colloquially come to be known as “ballot Siberia.”

Figure 3: Camden County 2018 Democratic primary ballot

		DEMOCRAT BALLOT				PAPELETA DEMOCRATA				
OFFICE TITLE TÍTULO DE OFICINA	COLUMN COLUMNA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
United States Senator Senador de los Estados Unidos		MC CONNICK	WISNIEWSKI							
Member of the House of Representatives Miembro de la Casa de Representantes			NORCROSS							TOMASZEWski CARLSON
Sheriff Alcalde del Condado			EDELSON							
Member of the Board of County Freeholders Miembro de la Junta de Gobernadores del Condado			WALK	CANAS	KONICKA	DE LUCA	OTTE	KENNER	LEONETTI	
			SHEN ANGELO	SMITH	STRONG	GRIFIS	ROSSELL	GOBBI, JR.		
			MOEN, JR.							

Candidates not on the county line also may be placed in the same column or row as their opponents. For example, on the 2018 Camden County Democratic primary ballot, two candidates running against each other for the U.S. House of Representative both appear in column 9.

Designing primary ballots in this way creates murky contest boundaries that make it difficult for voters to determine which candidates are running for each office.⁵ This results in voters not realizing that some positions are contested, benefiting the candidates on the county line, who are easier to locate on the ballot. By confusing voters, the county line ballots also encourage overvotes and undervotes.

The 2020 primary election provided examples of both outcomes. The Mercer County Democratic primary ballot shown in Figure 4, listed two of the three candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives Fourth Congressional District one below the other in column A, which is the county line. The third candidate appeared in column B.⁶

⁵ See generally Andrea Córdova McCadney, Lawrence Norden, & Whitney Qusenbery, *Common Ballot Design Flaws and How to Fix Them*, THE BRENNAN CTR. (February 3, 2020), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/common-ballot-design-flaws-and-how-fix-them>.

⁶ Article VII of Mercer County Democratic Committee Constitution and Bylaws states that “Any candidate failing to be endorsed shall have the option of choosing to run in the same column as the endorsed candidate(s) but without the party slogan only if the unendorsed candidate received at least forty percent (40%) of the vote of the registered delegates in any ballot in which a candidate received the endorsement of the Convention.” See MERCER CNTY. DEMOCRATIC COMM., CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS 6 (2022), https://www.mercerDemocrats.com/_files/ugd/f6fae7_3f3c588f8c354170aca934a23017a381.pdf.

New Jersey primary voters are encouraged by the county parties, and conditioned by years of practice, to vote for all the candidates on a county line regardless of the ballot instructions. In this case, placing both Christine Conforti and Stephanie Schmid on the same column encouraged voters to vote for both even though the ballot instructed them to vote for only one candidate. This ballot design resulted in a 32.4 percent overvote in this Congressional contest, leading to all the overvotes being discarded.

Figure 4: Mercer County 2020 Democratic primary ballot

OFFICE TITLE	Column A Democratic	Column B Democratic	Column C Democratic	Column D Democratic
U.S. President 4 Year Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization Joseph R. BIDEN (1A)		Some 2020 Polls, U.S. Bernie SANDERS (1C)	A VOTE HERE IS A VOTE FOR ALL UNCOMMITTED DELEGATES BELOW (1D)
8th District Delegates to Democratic National Convention	A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL DELEGATES JOSEPH R. BIDEN <i>Biden For President</i> Linda GREENSTEIN Colleen LEWIS Sharon SHIMBLE Brian STERN Kevin GREGES		A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL DELEGATES BERNIE SANDERS <i>Bernie 2020, Not Me, Us.</i> Renee BANERJEE Lizette DELGADO Stephanie SHREY Brady RIVERA Neelaktha THIRAVIL	A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL UNCOMMITTED DELEGATES UNCOMMITTED Joseph WOLFGANG
U.S. Senate 6 Year Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization Cory BOOKER (2A)	Not On Line Lawrence HAMM (2B)		
U.S. House of Representatives 2 Year Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization Christine CONFORTI (3A)	Continues in Healthcare, Schools, Social Businesses David APPLEFIELD (3B)		
Sheriff 3 Year Term - Vote for One	Mercer County Democrats Stephanie SCHMID (4A)			
County Clerk 5 Year Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization John A. "Jack" KEMLER (5A)			
County Clerk 5 Year Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization Paula SOLLAMI COVELLO (6A)			
Board of Chosen Freeholders 3 Year Term - Vote for Two	Regular Democratic Organization Lucyille RS WALTER (7A)			
Council 1 Year Unexpired Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization John A. CIMINO (8A)			
Council 1 Year Unexpired Term - Vote for One	Regular Democratic Organization Charles F. WHALEN (9A)			
County Committee 2 Year Term - Vote for Two				

In contrast, the Atlantic County Democratic primary ballot shown in Figure 5 resulted in substantial undervotes, with the number of Democratic votes cast for the U.S. Senate totaling only eighty-one percent of the votes cast for President and only eighty-two percent of the votes cast for U.S. House of Representatives. In every other county, the total votes for U.S. Senate exceeded the number cast for the U.S. House of Representatives and equaled at least ninety-seven percent of the total votes cast for President.

The undervotes in the Atlantic County example likely reflect the lack of a Senate candidate on the county line in column A. Cory Booker, the incumbent senator running for reelection, was endorsed by all the county parties but chose not to run on the line in Atlantic County. Instead, Senator Booker appeared on the primary ballot in column J above his friend Brigid Callahan Harrison, who was running for the U.S. House of Representatives and did not receive the Atlantic County party's

endorsement. Nearly twenty percent of the Democratic voters in this primary left the U.S. Senate position on their ballots blank. Conditioned to vote for everyone on the line, they may have been reluctant to vote for candidates not on the county line or may not even have realized that they could do so.

Figure 5: Atlantic County 2020 Democratic primary ballot

OFFICE TITLE	Column A Democratic	Column B Democratic	Column C Democratic	Column D Democratic	Column E Democratic	Column F Democratic
Choice for President VOTE FOR ONE	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Joseph R. BIDEN	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Bernie SANDERS				
2nd District Delegates to Democratic National Convention	A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL DELEGATES Atlantic County Democratic Committee Joseph R. BIDEN Brenda WEAVER Michael SULLIVAN Philip WOFFORD	A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL DELEGATES Bernie SANDERS Lynn-Faye HILL Scott LUTTUS Cristian MORENO RODRIGUEZ		A VOTE ABOVE IS A VOTE FOR ALL DELEGATES Ilhamuddin Angela WOLLMEAR		
U.S. Senator VOTE FOR ONE		Atlantic County Democratic Committee Lawrence HAMM	Atlantic County Republican Committee Cory BOOKER			
House of Representatives VOTE FOR ONE	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Amy KENNEDY		Atlantic County Republican Committee Bridget CALLAHAN HARRISON	First District Will CUNNINGHAM	Atlantic County Moderate Caucus Robert D. TURKAVAGE	Atlantic County John FRANCIS
Sheriff VOTE FOR ONE	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Eric SCHEFFLER					
Surrogate VOTE FOR ONE	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Stephen DIGHT		Atlantic County Republican Committee Levi FOX			
Freeholder-at-Large VOTE FOR TWO	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Caren FITZPATRICK					
	Atlantic County Democratic Committee Celeste FERNANDEZ					

II. IMPACT OF THE COUNTY LINE ON NEW JERSEY PRIMARY ELECTION OUTCOMES

To evaluate the impact of the county line primary ballot on election outcomes, Diez examined New Jersey legislative election outcomes for incumbents from 2003 to 2019.⁷ I updated his data to include the 2021 and 2023 legislative primary elections.

Between 2003 and 2023, 1033 incumbent NJ state legislators ran for reelection; 227 of them had a challenger.⁸ In 208 of those 227 contested primaries, incumbents were awarded the county line in all the counties in their district that used a county line ballot. In 19 of the 227 contested primaries, incumbents were denied the county line in at least one of the counties in their district. Of the 208 incumbents who ran on the county line in all the counties in their district, 205 won renomination and three were defeated.

⁷ Francisco Diez, *The Likely Advantages of the Line*, COMMC'N WORKERS OF AM. ANALYSIS (July 29, 2019) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

⁸ Incumbent is defined as having served in the prior term in the same capacity in at least some of the same counties. This includes incumbents whose district number changed post redistricting and those who ran against other incumbents post redistricting.

Figure 6: New Jersey incumbent legislators who lost primary while on county line in all counties that used a county line ballot (2003–2023)⁹

	Year	Incumbent	Party/ District	Chamber	# of Counties in District	County	Had county line	Won County
1	2003	Joseph V. Doria	D/31	Assembly	1	Hudson	Y	N
2	2003	Elba Perez- Cinciarelli	D/31	Assembly	1	Hudson	Y	N
3	2009	Marcia A. Karrow	R/23	Senate	2	Hunterd on	Y	N
						Warren	N	N

Of the 19 incumbents denied the county line in at least one county in their legislative district, nine won their primaries and ten were defeated. Only two of those nine won while running off the county line in every county in their district—Nia Gill in 2003 and Ronald Rice in 2007. The other seven had the county line in at least one of the counties in their district. For example, Robert Auth and Deanne DeFuccio lost the county line in Passaic in their 2021 reelection bid for the Republican nomination for the 39th NJ Assembly District. However, they kept the county line in Bergen, which was the larger portion of their district. They lost their races in Passaic but still won the primary because they won in Bergen.

⁹ Note that Warren County did not use a county line ballot in 2009. Also, the data from 2003 to 2019 is data courtesy of Francisco Diez's analysis for the Communications Workers of America.

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Figure 7: New Jersey incumbent legislators who won primary after losing at least one county line (2003-2023)

	Year	Incumbent	Party/ District	Chamber	# of Cntys in District	Cnty	Had Cnty Line	Won Cnty
1	2003	Nia H. Gill	D/34	Senate	2	Essex	No	Yes
						Passaic	No	Yes
2	2007	Ronald L. Rice	D/28	Senate	1	Essex	No	Yes
3	2007	David C. Russo	R/40	Assembly	3	Bergen	No	Yes
						Essex	Yes	Yes
						Passaic	Yes	Yes
4	2017	Samuel D. Thompson	R/12	Senate	4	Burlington	No	Yes
						Middlesex	No	No
						Monmouth	Yes	Yes
						Ocean	Yes	Yes
5	2017	Ronald S. Dancer	R/12	Assembly	4	Burlington	No	Yes
						Middlesex	No	Yes
						Monmouth	Yes	Yes
						Ocean	Yes	Yes
6	2017	Robert D. Clifton	R/12	Assembly	4	Burlington	No	Yes
						Middlesex	No	No
						Monmouth	Yes	Yes
						Ocean	Yes	Yes
7	2021	Jay Webber	R/26	Assembly	3	Essex	No ¹⁰	Yes
						Morris	Yes	Yes
						Passaic	No ¹⁰	Yes
8	2021	Robert Auth	R/39	Assembly	2	Bergen	Yes	Yes
						Passaic	No	No
9	2021	Deanne DeFuccio	R/39	Assembly	2	Bergen	Yes	Yes
						Passaic	No	No

¹⁰ Voters were instructed to vote for two candidates for the Assembly, but only one Assembly candidate (BettyLou DeCroce) appeared on the Essex and Passaic county lines.

Two of the ten incumbents who lost after losing the county line in at least one county in their district had the county line in other counties in their district. Both won the counties where they were on the county line.

Figure 8: New Jersey incumbent legislators who lost primary after losing at least one county line (2003–2023)¹¹

	Year	Incumbent	Party/ District	Chamber	# of Cntys in District	Cnty	Had Cnty Line	Wo n Cnty
1	2003	Arline Friscia	D/19	Assembly	1	Middlesex	No	No
2	2005	Joseph Azzolina	R/13	Assembly	2	Middlesex	Yes	Yes
						Monmouth	No	No
3	2005	Anthony Chiappone	D/31	Assembly	1	Hudson	No	No
4	2007	Craig A. Stanley	D/28	Assembly	1	Essex	No	No
5	2007	Oadline D. Truitt	D/28	Assembly	1	Essex	No	No
6	2007	Wilfredo Caraballo	D/29	Assembly	2	Essex	No	No
						Union	No	No
7	2019	Joe Howarth	R/8	Assembly	3	Atlantic	No	No
						Burlington	No	No
						Camden	No	No
8	2021	Serena Dimaso	R/13	Assembly	1	Monmouth	No	No
9	2021	BettyLou DeCroce	R/26	Assembly	3	Essex	Yes	Yes
						Morris	No	No
						Passaic	Yes	Yes
10	2023	Nia H. Gill ¹²	D/27	Senate	2	Essex	No	No
						Passaic	No	No

¹¹ The data from 2003 to 2019 is courtesy of Francisco Diez's analysis for the Communications Workers of America.

¹² From January 2002 to January 2024, Senator Nia Gill represented the 34th legislative district in the New Jersey State Senate. As of June 2023, the 34th district included parts of Essex and Passaic Counties. Following the 2022 redistricting, Senator Gill's hometown of Montclair was moved into the 27th legislative district. Prior to redistricting, the 27th legislative district included parts of Essex and Morris Counties. After redistricting, the 27th district included parts of Essex and Passaic Counties. In the 2023 primary, Gill ran against another incumbent, Senator Richard Codey, who had represented the 27th legislative district prior to redistricting.

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No incumbent on the county line in all the counties in their district has lost a primary election since 2009. This fourteen-year period encompasses seven legislative election cycles. In contrast, in the other forty-nine states, 1,145 state legislative incumbents lost primary elections over that time period.¹³

To quantify the impact of the county line on primary election outcomes, I analyzed the results of congressional and senatorial primary election contests held between 2002 and 2022 in which political parties in different counties endorsed different primary candidates.¹⁴ For example, in the 2020 primary, two candidates split the Republican party endorsements in the two counties that made up the Third Congressional District.¹⁵ Kate Gibbs was endorsed and given the line by the Burlington County Republican party and David Richter was endorsed and given the line by the Ocean County Republican party.¹⁶ Gibbs received 57 percent of the vote when she was on the county line in Burlington and 22 percent when she was not on the county line in Ocean.¹⁷ Richter received 78 percent of the vote when he was on the county line in Ocean and 43 percent when he was not on the county line in Burlington.¹⁸ The difference in how Gibbs and Richter performed when they were on the county line versus when their opponent was on the county line was 35 percentage points.¹⁹

¹³ In the 48 states that hold their state legislative elections in even-numbered years, 1,121 state legislators lost primary elections between 2010 and 2022. See Douglas Kronaizl, *A Closer Look at the 229 Incumbents who Lost State Legislative Primaries*, BALLOTPEdia (Oct. 21, 2022), <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2022/10/21/a-closer-look-at-the-229-incumbents-who-lost-state-legislative-primaries/>. In Virginia, the only other state besides New Jersey to hold its state legislative elections in odd-numbered years, 24 state legislative incumbents lost their primary elections between 2011 and 2023. *Id.*

¹⁴ The historical election results are from the NEW JERSEY VOTER INFORMATION PORTAL, DEP'T OF STATE, DIV OF ELECTIONS, <https://www.state.nj.us/state/elections/election-information-results.shtml>.

¹⁵ N.J. DIV. OF ELECTIONS, 2020 OFFICIAL PRIMARY CANDIDATES U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES 5 (Apr. 9, 2020), <https://www.state.nj.us/state/elections/assets/pdf/election-results/2020/2020-official-primary-candidates-us-house.pdf>.

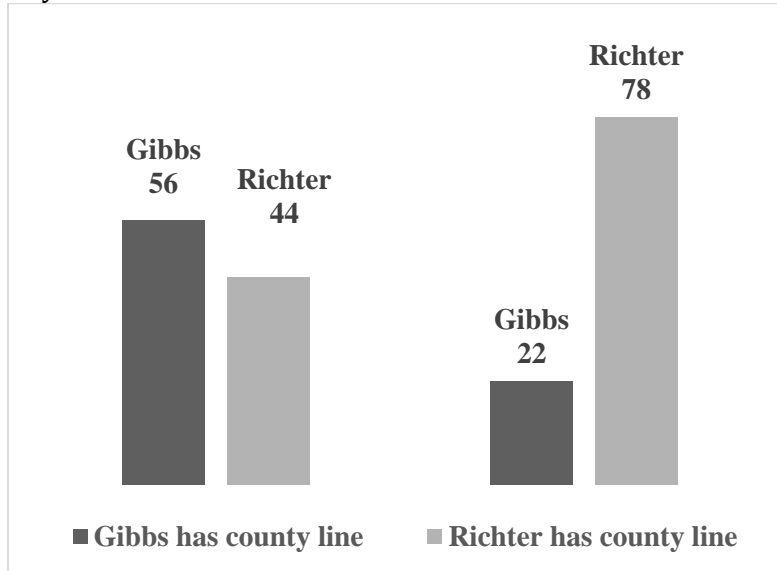
¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ N.J. DIV. OF ELECTIONS, 2020 OFFICIAL PRIMARY RESULTS U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AMENDED 5 (Aug. 8, 2020), <https://www.state.nj.us/state/elections/assets/pdf/election-results/2020/2020-official-primary-candidates-us-house.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

Figure 9: New Jersey 3rd Congressional District 2020 Republican primary



Between 2002 and 2022, forty-five congressional and senatorial candidates appeared on the county line in at least one county and had at least one opponent on the county line in a different county.²⁰ Each of the forty-five candidates performed substantially better when they were on the county line than when their opponent was on the county line. The average margin in performance for those forty-five candidates between being on the county line and having their opponent on the county line was thirty-eight percentage points.

Figure 10: Impact of split county endorsements for U.S. House and Senate, 2002–2022

	Year	Candidate	Margin	Contest/Party	Incumbent
1	2002	Allen	+31	Senate/Republican	No
2	2002	Forester	+44	Senate/Republican	No
3	2002	Matheussen	+31	Senate/Republican	No
4	2006	Sires	+47	CD13/Democrat	No
5	2006	Vas	+47	CD13/Democrat	No
6	2008	Kelly	+34	CD3/Republican	No

²⁰ For contests with more than two counties, a candidate's percentage of the total vote was averaged for all the counties in which that candidate was on the county line versus their percentage of the total vote for all the counties in which one of their opponents was on the county line. Counties that did not use a county line ballot in that election contest were excluded from the averages.

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7	2008	Myers	+46	CD3/Republican	No
8	2008	Lance	+42	CD7/Republican	No
9	2008	Hatfield	+39	CD7/Republican	No
10	2008	Whitman	+27	CD7/Republican	No
11	2008	Pennacchio	+27	Senate/Republican	No
12	2008	Sabrin	+13	Senate/Republican	No
13	2008	Zimmer	+27	Senate/Republican	No
14	2008	Andrews	+36	Senate/Democrat	No
15	2008	Lautenberg	+33	Senate/Democrat	Yes
16	2012	Hughes	+79	CD 2/Democrat	No
17	2012	Shober	+72	CD 2/Democrat	No
18	2012	Cullari	+24	CD 6/Republican	No
19	2012	Little	+24	CD 6/Republican	No
20	2012	Pascrell	+64	CD 9/Democrat	Yes, redistricted
21	2012	Rothman	+64	CD 9/Democrat	Yes, redistricted
22	2012	Gill	+36	CD 10/Democrat	No
23	2012	Payne	+22	CD 10/Democrat	No
24	2014	Chivukula	+52	CD 12/Democrat	No
25	2014	Greenstein	+48	CD 12/Democrat	No
26	2014	Watson Coleman	+57	CD 12/Democrat	No
27	2014	Goldberg	+27	Senate/Republican	No
28	2014	Pezzullo	+33	Senate/Republican	No
29	2014	Sabrin	+15	Senate/Republican	No
30	2016	Keady	+58	CD 3/Democrat	No
31	2016	Lavergne	+58	CD 3/Democrat	No
32	2018	Fiocchi	+34	CD 2/Republican	No
33	2018	Singh	+37	CD 2/Republican	No
34	2020	Harrison	+20	CD 2/Democrat	No
35	2020	Kennedy	+25	CD 2/Democrat	No
36	2020	Conforti	+36	CD 2/Democrat	No
37	2020	Schmid	+40	CD 4/Democrat	No
38	2020	Gibbs	+35	CD 3/Democrat	No
39	2020	Richter	+35	CD 3/Democrat	No
40	2020	Mehta	+41	Senate/Republican	No
41	2020	Singh	+50	Senate/Republican	No
42	2022	Pallotta	+13	CD 5/Republican	No
43	2022	De Gregorio	+17	CD 5/Republican	No
44	2022	Tayfun	+33	CD 11/Republican	No
45	2022	DeGroot	+38	CD 11/Republican	No

Only three of those forty-five candidates were incumbents: Senator Frank Lautenberg, who split county endorsements with Congressman Rob Andrews in the 2008 Democratic senatorial primary, and Congressmen Bill Pascrell and Steven Rothman, who split endorsements with each other in the 2012 Democratic primary for the Ninth Congressional District.²¹ The small number of incumbents is not surprising as incumbents, particularly those at the federal level, generally maintain county party support for their reelections.

Although incumbency did not protect state legislators who lost the county line, we might expect congressional incumbents to have greater name recognition with primary voters, which could help counter the impact of the county line. In each of the three federal primaries that included incumbents, however, being on the county line provided a greater advantage than incumbency. Lautenberg, Pascrell, and Rothman lost every county in which their opponent was on the county line and won every county in which they were on the county line.

Figure 11(A): 2008 Democratic primary for U.S. Senate percentage of total vote by candidate (Vote percentage of candidate on county line shown in bold)²²

County	Frank Lautenberg	Robert Andrews	Donald Cresitello
Atlantic	45%	50%	4%
Bergen	79%	17%	5%
Burlington	42%	52%	6%
Camden	16%	80%	3%
Cape May	45%	50%	5%
Cumberland	46%	47%	6%
Essex	76%	21%	3%
Gloucester	17%	80%	3%
Hudson	75%	22%	4%
Hunterdon	59%	34%	8%
Mercer	74%	22%	4%

²¹ Pascrell and Rothman competed against each other after New Jersey lost a Congressional District following the 2010 census. Prior to redistricting, Rothman represented the Ninth Congressional District consisting of Bergen, Hudson, and a small part of Passaic County, while Pascrell represented the Eighth Congressional District, consisting of Passaic and Essex counties. Post redistricting, parts of both of their former districts ended up in the new Ninth Congressional District, which consisted of Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic counties. Rothman and Pascrell split county endorsements. Rothman received the county line in Bergen and Hudson counties and Pascrell, who had represented a much larger portion of Passaic than Rothman, received the county line in Passaic.

²² The asterisk next to Salem, Sussex and Warren counties indicates that those counties did not use a county line ballot for the 2008 Democratic primary.

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Middlesex	62%	29%	9%
Monmouth	66%	22%	11%
Morris	65%	24%	11%
Ocean	58%	33%	9%
Passaic	79%	14%	7%
Salem*	32%	60%	9%
Somerset	65%	25%	10%
Sussex*	53%	30%	17%
Union	68%	28%	5%
Warren*	47%	31%	22%

Figure 11(B): 2012 Democratic primary for CD 9 % of total vote by candidate (Vote % of candidate on county line shown in bold)

County	Bill Pascrell	Steve Rothman
Bergen	27%	73%
Hudson	26%	74%
Passaic	90%	10%

III. AWARDING THE COUNTY LINE AND NEW JERSEY POLITICS

The county line is awarded to candidates endorsed by the county Democratic and Republican parties. In theory, the endorsement decisions are made by county committee members, two Democrats and two Republicans elected in each precinct by primary voters who belong to those parties.²³ In determining which candidates to endorse for local, county, and state-level positions, the county committee members are meant to represent the voters of their political party who live in their home precincts.

In practice, the endorsement process varies substantially by county and between election cycles. A few county party bylaws mention a specific endorsement process. Most county party bylaws, however, are silent on this issue.

In some counties, the party endorsement process includes a vote by county committee members.²⁴ Municipal party committees, made up of the county committee members in each municipality, decide on endorsements for mayor and city council. The entire county committee meets at county nominating conventions to determine county-wide endorsements (e.g., county elected positions, state legislature, congress, governor, and president). In other counties, the endorsement decisions

²³ County committee members are elected during primaries and serve for two-, three- or four-year terms, depending on the bylaws of their county party.

²⁴ The number of county committees that allow a vote varies by year, based on the preferences of the county party chairs.

are made solely by the county party chair, sometimes after consultation with the chairs of the municipal party committees in that county.²⁵

Even in counties that hold county nominating conventions at which all county committee members vote, the county party chairs may be able to influence the endorsement process by stating their preferences, or by pressuring local party officials to endorse specific candidates and to ensure that their local committee members vote accordingly.²⁶ This is particularly a concern in counties where individual committee members' convention votes are not secret, which can create pressure for them to vote in ways that align with the wishes of the county party chairs.²⁷

Pleasing the county party chair is important for county committee members because the chair determines which county committee members may run for election on the county line, along with the other endorsed candidates. If the chair removes a committee member from the county line, it can be much more difficult for that committee member to be reelected. This happens regularly. In Union County, for example, the chair of the county Democratic Party, Nicholas Scutari, removed a large number of county committee members from the county line in 2019 after they supported his opponent in the 2018 chair election.²⁸ Scutari knew which committee members voted for him because they had to sign their names on the ballots.²⁹

County committee members also may be motivated to act in accordance with the wishes of the county party chair because they or their family members may be municipal or county employees and fear

²⁵ See Colleen O'Dea, *Some NJ Congressional Primary Candidates Argue Party-Line Politics Are Unfair*, NJ SPOTLIGHT (May 14, 2018), <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2018/05/18-05-13-some-nj-congressional-primary-candidates-argue-party-line-politics-are-unfair/>; see also Brett M. Pugach, *The County Line: The Law and Politics of Ballot Positioning in New Jersey*, 72 RUTGERS U. L. REV. 629, 653 (2020) (explaining county party chairs are elected by members of the county committee and must reside in the county, but do not have to be county committee members themselves).

²⁶ See Insider NJ, *Vainieri Huttler Pursues Senate Candidacy In Primary; Says She Won't Allow A 'Pre-Determined Outcome'*, INSIDER NJ (Feb. 23, 2021), <https://www.insidernj.com/vainieri-huttler-pursues-primary-candidacy-says-wont-allow-pre-determined-outcome/>.

²⁷ See O'Dea, *supra* note 25; see also Max Pizarro, *Live Blog: Union County Democratic Committee Special Convention*, INSIDER N.J. (Feb. 21, 2018, 7:44 PM), <https://www.insidernj.com/live-blog-union-county-democratic-committee-special-convention/>.

²⁸ See Clark "Column D" Democrats, *Union County Dem Chair Wages War on Opponents in Local Towns*, TAPINTOCLARK (May 28, 2019, 3:26 PM), <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/clark/articles/union-county-dem-chair-wages-war-on-opponents-in-local-towns> [hereinafter "Clark Column D Democrats"].

²⁹ See Pizarro, *supra* note 27.

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losing those jobs as retribution from the county party chairs.³⁰ Retribution is a particular concern when the party chair also holds other positions of power. Scutari, for example, is Union County Democratic party chair, represents part of Union County in the New Jersey State Senate, has served as Senate President since 2021, and is the prosecutor for the Union County City of Linden. Similarly, Shaun Golden, the Republican party chair of Monmouth County, serves as the elected county sheriff.

In addition to their ability to influence the votes of county committee members, county party chairs also can influence endorsement decisions by withholding information regarding the endorsement process from candidates they do not support or by implementing county convention rules that are challenging for those candidates to navigate. In Somerset County, for example, some of the 2021 Democratic candidates for state assembly were excluded from consideration because of a requirement that they be nominated from the convention floor. Chris Fistonich, one of those candidates, described his experience:

The Somerset County Democratic Committee (SCDC) has a screening process to vet candidates... They held their nominating convention on March 4th, 2021. With no public notice in any newspaper or any public facing publication . . . As a candidate for the 16th Assembly District, I reached out to Somerset County party leadership in February, formally announcing my intention to seek the endorsement of the SCDC. I was told that I had “missed screening.” Later that week I finally learned when the convention would be and was instructed that I would require a member of the SCDC to nominate me, and another member to second the nomination in order to speak and to be eligible to earn votes at the convention. Delegates were forbidden from nominating or seconding multiple candidates, already reducing the pool of delegates who might consider nominating the myriad candidates running for the Assembly seat. Contact information was provided for the voting delegates that I might seek their support. A dozen of the email addresses bounced back from being either out of date or erroneously written out. More than half a dozen delegates were excited about my candidacy: a bold, progressive vision backed by technical expertise. Many agreed that more scientists are needed in our state government. Several indicated they would be happy to vote for me. Zero delegates, however, would nominate me or

³⁰ See Clark “Column D” Democrats, *supra* note 28.

second my nomination. One cited a “conflict of interest.” Another cited “fear of blowback from party leadership, especially Peg [Schaffer].” Yet another mentioned in no uncertain terms that they were “discouraged from nominating a non-Somerset resident.” I would not get to speak at the convention due to these insurmountable restrictions and roadblocks.”³¹

Even in counties that allow county committee members to participate in the candidate endorsement process and to vote by secret ballot, county committee decisions can be overruled by the county party chair, who has the power under New Jersey law to determine who will be on the county line.³² In 2021, for example, the Middlesex County Democratic party chair Kevin McCabe overruled the Edison municipal committee endorsements for mayor and city council and awarded the county line to other candidates.³³

A more recent example of the power of the county party chairs to singlehandedly endorse candidates is the 2024 U.S. senate race. Within two days of Tammy Murphy announcing her candidacy, and six months before the primary, she was endorsed by the Democratic party chairs of four of New Jersey’s most populated counties (Bergen, Camden, Hudson and Middlesex).³⁴ Such top-down endorsements are typical for Camden and Hudson counties.³⁵ Bergen and Middlesex counties, however,

³¹ Personal communication with Chris Fistonich, 2021 Somerset County Democratic Candidate (Mar. 6, 2021).

³² See Pugach, *supra* note 25. (“The practical effect of receiving the endorsement of the county committee is that it leads to the endorsed candidates having their names listed on the same column or row of the ballot, with the same ballot slogan under each of their names. . . . The slogan used by county committee-endorsed candidates is often owned by a corporation, which grants permission for the slogan’s use to the slate of candidates endorsed by the county committee. This is because New Jersey law requires that those who wish to use a ballot slogan containing the name of another person or an incorporated association must receive the written consent of such person or entity. For all practical purposes, the county chair and the county’s political machine, or those under their close direction, will control the corporation that owns the slogan. Furthermore, all endorsed candidates will be featured on the same line of the ballot with that same slogan. Technically, the county line itself is controlled by the campaign manager of the candidates (usually two or more [county commissioner] candidates) who file a joint petition with the county clerk, and not by the county chair; however, in practice, the county chair will control who that campaign manager is.”).

³³ *Bhagia Hits Back After McCabe Awards Edison Line to Joshi*, INSIDER NJ (April 7, 2021), <https://www.insidernj.com/bhagia-hits-back-after-mccabe-awards-edison-line-to-joshi/>.

³⁴ See David Wildstein, *Middlesex, Bergen Back Tammy Murphy*, NEW JERSEY GLOBE (Nov. 15, 2023, 12:00 PM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/congress/middlesex-bergen-back-tammy-murphy/>.

³⁵ See David Wildstein, *DeGise rejects open primary for president in Hudson*, NEW JERSEY GLOBE (Jan. 14, 2020 9:19 AM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/presidential->

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usually endorse candidates through a secret vote by county committee members at an endorsement convention.³⁶ It is too early to know if a county committee vote will still take place in those counties or how a county committee vote would be influenced by the stated preferences of those county party chairs. Candidates are aware of the power of the county line to determine primary election outcomes. Many drop out of the primary if they do not receive the party's endorsements. This is particularly the case for county-level and state legislative positions, candidates for which tend to be less well-known to the voters. This includes incumbents. In 2021, for example, Assembly Majority Whip Nickolas Chiaravalloti did not seek reelection to a fourth term in the state Assembly after losing the county line.³⁷ Chiaravalloti said that he decided to retire because "the prospect of winning a Democratic primary off an organization line was too daunting."³⁸

The difficulty of winning when not on the county line may explain New Jersey's low percentage of contested primary elections, particularly for the state legislature and county positions. In 2021, for example, only 10 percent of the state legislative positions were contested in the primary. Two years later, following redistricting that saw the retirement of a historically large number of incumbents, the

election/degise-rejects-open-primary-for-president-in-hudson/; David Wildstein, *Camden County goes with Tammy Murphy for Senate* (Nov. 16, 2023, 9:17 AM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/campaigns/camden-county-goes-with-tammy-murphy-for-senate/>.

³⁶ The Bergen County Democratic Party adopted nominating through convention in 1976. See David Wildstein, *Bergen Conventions Around Since 1976*, NEW JERSEY GLOBE (Mar. 23, 2020, 8:55 PM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/local/bergen-conventions-around-since-1976/>. The Bergen County party bylaws stipulate that a convention take place as part of the endorsement process and that at that convention "the candidates who receive the highest number of the votes cast shall be given the Democratic Committee of Bergen County Party designation on the official Bergen County Primary Election Ballot in the order of the votes received for the particular office" page 11, <https://bergendemocrats.com/dcbc-bylaws>, 11/19/2023. The Middlesex County Democratic Party's bylaws are silent on the endorsement process, but the county has held nominating conventions. Most recently, see David Wildstein, *Middlesex Dems Back Incumbents for County Commissioner, Legislature*, NEW JERSEY GLOBE (Mar. 8, 2023, 9:58 PM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/local/middlesex-dems-back-incumbents-for-county-commisisoner-legislature/>.

³⁷ By long-standing tradition, the county line for the two state assembly positions in Chiaravalloti's district is allocated by the mayors of Bayonne and Jersey City. See Peter D'Auria, *Chiaravalloti Will Seek Re-election Without the County Line*, JERSEY J. (Mar. 30, 2021), <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2021/03/chiaravalloti-will-seek-re-election-without-the-county-line.html>.

³⁸ See David Wildstein, *Chiaravalloti Drops Bid for Re-Election After Losing Party Support*, NEW JERSEY GLOBE (Apr. 19, 2021, 10:02 AM), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/legislature/chiaravalloti-drops-bid-for-re-election-after-losing-party-supports>.

percentage of contested primaries increased only minutely to 11.3%.³⁹ This is one of the lowest percentages nationally.⁴⁰

Figure 12: Contested New Jersey legislature primaries (2021 and 2023)

2021 Legislative Primaries				
Assembly District	Party	Number of Seats Challenged	Senate District	Party
10	Rep	2	2	Rep
12	Rep	1	16	Rep
13	Rep	1	18	Dem
16	Dem	1	20	Dem
18	Dem	2	24	Rep
20	Dem	2	28	Dem
21	Rep	1	37	Dem
26	Rep	2		
30	Rep	1		
37	Dem	2		
39	Rep	2		
2023 Legislature Primaries				
Assembly District	Party	Number of Seats Challenged	Senate District	Party
3	Rep	1	3	Rep
3	Dem	2	3	Dem
4	Rep	2	4	Rep
12	Rep	1	18	Dem
14	Rep	1	19	Dem

³⁹ In 2023, 28 out of 240 state legislative positions did not have an incumbent running in the primary. Seven incumbents retired from the New Jersey State Senate before the primary and two others were redistricted into the same district. Twenty incumbents retired from the New Jersey Assembly before the primary. In comparison, there were only fifteen seats without an incumbent running in 2011, the first year after the 2010 redistricting, and an average of 8.4 open seats for the five election cycles in between 2011 and 2023. See *New Jersey State Senate Elections, 2023*, BALLOTPEDIA, https://ballotpedia.org/New_Jersey_State_Senate_elections_2023 (last visited Sept. 17, 2023).

⁴⁰ In 2021, 24 out of 240 state legislative seats (120 Republican and 120 Democratic) were contested in the primary. In 2023, 27 out of 240 state legislative seats were contested in the primary. According to Ballotpedia, twenty percent of the legislative primaries held in 2022 were contested, ranging from 1.7 percent in Alaska to 60 percent in California. The national percentage of contested even-year state legislative primaries held during the prior decade ranged from 16 to 19 percent. See *Contested State Legislative Primaries, 2022*, BALLOTPEDIA (Aug. 31, 2023), https://ballotpedia.org/Contested_state_legislative_primaries_2022. Direct comparisons across states are challenging because Ballotpedia calculates the number of contested primaries using the number of primaries rather than the number of contested seats. Because New Jersey ballots ask voters to select up to two candidates for the state Assembly, Ballotpedia treats both candidates as one primary. As a result, Ballotpedia does not differentiate whether one or both seats are contested.

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20	Dem	2	20	Dem
24	Rep	2	23	Dem
26	Rep	2	26	Rep
27	Dem	2	27	Dem
28	Dem	1	31	Dem
31	Dem	1		

The power of the county party chairs to determine who receives the county line also contributes to the state's relatively low percentages of women in elected office. Unlike thirty-three other states, New Jersey has never had a female U.S. Senator. Only one woman has served as governor and only seven women have served in Congress (with two of those seven elected in the last eight years). New Jersey ranks twenty-seventh nationally for the percentage of women in municipal office and twenty-first nationally for the percentage of women in the state legislature.⁴¹

As Jean Sinzduk, Associate Director of the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, observed:

Valuable [county] line slots are frequently taken by people who emerge from the networks of the party chairs, limiting the ability of outsiders to break through ... And as the network of insiders in the state's political system is already overwhelmingly male, New Jersey remains trapped in a negative feedback loop that privileges the emergence of male candidates and disadvantages women.⁴²

IV. IMPACT OF THE COUNTY LINE ON NEW JERSEY POLITICS AND POLICY

The impact of the county line on New Jersey politics and policy extends well beyond the candidate choices available to voters. Elected officials are aware of the importance of the line for their reelection and the power of county party chairs to award the line. If an elected official does not do as the county chair wants, they can lose the line and almost surely lose the primary, ending, or severely curtailing their political careers. In such an environment, it is the county party chairs rather than

⁴¹ See NEW JERSEY, 2023 STATE LEGISLATURE – NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF OFFICEHOLDERS BY YEAR, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL. (2023), <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/state-state-information/new-jersey>.

⁴² See Jean Sinzduk, *In National Politics, Women are Rising. In New Jersey, They're Treading Water*, NJ.COM (Dec. 6, 2020, 8:45 AM) <https://www.nj.com/opinion/2020/12/in-national-politics-women-are-rising-in-new-jersey-theyre-treading-water-opinion.html>. As of August 2023, only ten of New Jersey's forty-two county party chairs are women, representing 23.8 percent of all chair positions. See WOMEN IN NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENT 2023, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POL. (2023), <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-new-jersey-government>.

the voters that elected officials must please to be elected and to stay in office. This gives the county party chairs substantial power to shape the state's politics and public policy.

The chairs determine not only who is elected to the state legislature but, through their ongoing influence over those state legislators, they also shape whom the legislators elect Senate President and Assembly Speaker. These are very powerful positions that decide which legislators serve as committee chairs and vice-chairs and which bills are posted for consideration. The Senate President and Assembly Speaker also control well-funded political action committees that they can use to support their own reelection as well as that of other political candidates.⁴³

Governors, U.S. Senators, and Congresspeople must also court the county party chairs to receive the county line and win their respective primaries. For example, former Governor John Corzine and Governor Phil Murphy, both wealthy investment bankers, made substantial donations to county party organizations to win the chairs' endorsements.⁴⁴ By early October 2016, months before any formal county party endorsement processes took place and more than seven months before the primary election, Murphy had secured the support of many North Jersey Democratic party chairs and Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop and Senate President Steve Sweeney, Murphy's main primary opponents, had both dropped out of the race.⁴⁵ Matthew Hale, a political

⁴³ See Julia Sass Rubin, *Can Progressives Change New Jersey?* THE AM. PROSPECT (June 26, 2020), <https://prospect.org/politics/can-progressives-change-new-jersey/> ("The leadership of the state Senate and General Assembly is critical in New Jersey. No legislation can advance without the blessing of the Senate president and Assembly Speaker. They decide committee assignments, determine committee leadership, and have final say as to which committee a bill is referred, which bills are heard and voted on in committee, and which bills are voted on by the full Senate and Assembly after clearing committee. They also control legislative leadership PACs that raise their own contributions and help fund the election and re-election of their allies. Legislators who are in their good graces receive committee chairmanships that provide them with additional resources to hire staff and enable them to generate contributions from the groups that hope to move legislation through their committees. In contrast, legislators who upset the leadership risk losing committee positions and the ability to advance legislation.").

⁴⁴ See David Kocieniewski, *G.O.P. Says Corzine's Cash Makes Him the New Boss*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 18, 2005), <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/18/nyregion/gop-says-corzines-cash-makes-him-the-new-boss.html>; Brent Johnson, *Phil Murphy Nabs Another County Endorsement in 2017 Governor's Race*, NJ.COM (Oct. 18, 2016), https://www.nj.com/politics/2016/10/phil_murphy_nabs_another_county_endorsement_in_201.html.

⁴⁵ See Herb Jackson & Charles Stile, *Fulop Won't Run for Governor, Endorses Murphy*, ASBURY PARK PRESS (Sept. 28, 2016), <https://www.app.com/story/news/politics/new-jersey/2016/09/28/fulop-murphy-nj-governor/91219024/>; Matt Friedman, *Sweeney*

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science professor at Seton Hall University, observed that this showed “how important county chairs are, and how important backroom politics in New Jersey is.”⁴⁶

This system of backroom politics is part of a transactional political culture that hinders transparency and accountability and feeds what former state senator William Schluter termed soft corruption, “when people who hold public office figure out how to game the system in ways that enrich them and their cronies without breaking any laws.”⁴⁷ It also has enabled political machines to maintain power in the state even as they have been weakened in much of the rest of the country.⁴⁸

Eliminating the county line primary ballots would not resolve every problem with New Jersey’s political system. However, it would dramatically rebalance the power away from the county party chairs and toward the voters, opening opportunities for much needed reforms.

Out of N.J. Governor’s Race, Setting Up Murphy as 2017 Front-Runner, POLITICO (Oct. 6, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/states/new-jersey/story/2016/10/sweeney-will-not-run-for-governor-in-2017-106135>.

⁴⁶ Chase Brush, *Murphy’s Move: Outsider to Likely Democratic Candidate for Governor*, N.J. SPOTLIGHT (Oct. 7, 2016), <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2016/10/16-10-06-phil-murphy-s-move-from-outsider-to-likely-democratic-candidate-for-governor/>.

⁴⁷ See WILLIAM E. SCHLUTER, *SOFT CORRUPTION: HOW UNETHICAL CONDUCT UNDERMINES GOOD GOVERNMENT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT*, 2 (2017).

⁴⁸ See Rubin, *supra* note 43; Kocieniewski, *supra* note 44.