

STATE HOUSE NEWS- PRE-ELECTION 2011

With Election Day around the corner in New Jersey, I give you a special edition review. Though the Governor is not on the ballot, all 120 members of the Legislature are.

The redistricting that took place earlier this year has largely robbed New Jersey of realistic competition in about 95% of the districts. Consequently, at most a handful of races are looking like absolute bloodbaths. In the rest of the districts, the powers that be can (and in some places did) arbitrarily anoint anyone to be a legislator without concern of the electorate overruling the selection. This will focus on the bloodbaths.

SENATE RACES

Realistically there appears to be only 2 districts in doubt, the Atlantic City based 2nd and the newly configured 38th in Bergen and Passaic Counties. The Central Jersey 14th looked to be competitive when Richard Kanka, a union pipefitter and father of Megan's Law's namesake, filed to run in the Senate. However, this campaigned turned Democrat when: 1.) union leadership ignored the solidarity they so often preach and endorsed Senator Greenstein, a lawyer by trade; and 2.) Governor Christie went to war with public employees over pension and benefits.

2nd

This fight superficially pits Senator Jim Whelan against Assemblyman Vince Polistina. This fight really pits Governor Christie vs. South Jersey political boss George Norcross. With a number of state authorities associated with Atlantic City as well as many well-heeled interests in the casino and auxiliary industry, both power players have a vested interest in keeping this Senate seat as a point of contact at where all those interests converge.

Whelan, the Democratic incumbent, is a teacher by trade and one of the few former mayors of Atlantic City that did not wind-up incarcerated. Polistina is a two-term Assemblyman and an engineer. Much of the campaigning thus far has centered on who has pilfered the State coffers more, Whelan for having multiple public sector jobs or Polistina for accepting publicly bided contracts.

38th

The person who probably got the shortest end of the stick from redistricting, besides voters, was Senator Bob Gordon. His neighbor to the south, Senator Paul Sarlo of the competitive 36th, sat on the redistricting commission.

Instead of employing a "good neighbor policy," Sarlo undertook what could be likened to the "Mariel boatlift" and moved as many swing voters out of his district and into his neighbor's as possible. Additionally, Gordon was on the losing side in the Sweeney vs. Codey leadership fight for the Senate. Conversely, Whelan hails from Sweeney's South Jersey powerbase.

Senator Gordon, the Democrat, is being challenged by Bergen Freeholder Director John Driscoll. Again, larger issues are at work in this race. Bergen County is the largest county in the State. It has a population larger than 5 states. Republicans have never won a statewide race when they lost in Bergen County. There are a lot of votes and a lot of money to be extracted from Bergen County, and as of now, the Governor's party only holds one of the four seats here.

7TH ASSEMBLY

Besides the coattails of the 2 aforementioned Senate races, there appears to be only one race of consequence in the lower house, the Burlington based 7th. Already a swing district with a Republican Senator and Democratic Assemblymen, redistricting made this that much tougher for the D's to defend, as well as force one of them into retirement.

Incumbent Herb Conaway is joined by newcomer Troy Singleton, a carpenter's union leader. They are taking on Jim Keenan, the Mayor of Mt. Laurel, and Chris Halgas, a local businessman. The greatest importance of this race is part of the larger issue who will be Speaker next year, and how many votes South Jersey brings to the negotiations.

SPEAKING OF...

The Democrats are going to maintain majorities in both houses this election. That bet is money in the bank. Who will lead those majorities? That's where it gets interesting.

Most believe Sweeney has locked down another term as Senate President, though a Whelan loss coupled with a Gordon win MIGHT make things more interesting. But far more interesting is what is going on in the Assembly, where grudges still fester over pension/benefits reforms.

The worst kept secret in Trenton is that Majority Leader Joe Cryan is trying to line-up votes to become Speaker. The Oliver Camp countered with a conference call by all 8 members of the Essex delegation to show unanimous support for their favorite daughter. Unfortunately, only 7 showed-up. A couple days later word leaked another is having issues with public employees backlash over Oliver. Then, one week before election day, only half the delegation showed at a rally to maintain Oliver as Speaker.

The wildcard is South Jersey, who will have between 10 and 12 votes to barter in the Assembly, about 40-45% of the votes needed in caucus. These votes will mostly be leveraged to horse trade for Sweeney votes in the Senate. It is doubtful they would ever go with Cryan- too much bad history between the two sides. But the question will be if they stay with Oliver or look to anoint a new Speaker?