



DEMOCRATS

'We Have a Problem': Democrats in New Jersey Are Trying to Figure Out How to Keep the Governor's Seat

After New Jersey shifted right on Election Day, Democrats in the state are looking ahead to the race in 2025. Several candidates are already running.



(Julio Cortez/AP)



November 12, 2024 05:00 AM | Updated: November 12, 2024 05:00 AM



Kamala Harris' tight win in New Jersey has been a wake-up call for Democrats as they look to maintain party control in the state's 2025 gubernatorial election.

New Jersey Democrats have long enjoyed easy presidential wins in the blue stronghold. But last week, Harris scraped by compared to Democrats in previous election years, carrying the state by just over 5 percentage [points](#). With a gubernatorial race looming in 2025, last Tuesday's results are just the latest sign that the party needs to change how it's approaching New Jersey voters, multiple Democrats across the state told NOTUS.

"We have a huge set of elections on the ballot next year, so we need to get our shit together and do it pretty quick," one high-ranking Democratic operative in New Jersey told NOTUS.

Hillary Clinton won the state by 14 percentage points in 2016, and Biden won the state by more than 15 percentage points in 2020. But this year — like most other parts of the [nation](#) — every single county across the state shifted to the right. Five of them flipped from Biden in 2020 to Trump on Tuesday.

Tuesday's results marked the one-year countdown to a statewide race that could set the stage for how voters are feeling coming off the presidential election and heading into the midterms. Democrats haven't won three consecutive terms for the New Jersey governorship for more than 50 years, but the party not in power in the White House won in the state's gubernatorial races in every election from 1989 until 2017. There's the potential for a competitive race.

Outgoing Gov. Phil Murphy can't serve more than two consecutive terms, and seven



Sherrill — are also [eyeing](#) a [run](#).

Steven Fulop, the Jersey City mayor who's running to be the Democratic nominee in the looming gubernatorial election, [said](#) in a tweet after the election that the state party is "lazy, ineffective, and leadership has monetized positions for personal gain as opposed to growing the party."

The state party did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Democrats on the ground are worried about several key parts of New Jersey's electorate, including [Latino](#) and [Arab American](#) voters, moving right. New Jersey's Passaic County, for example, has high [Latino](#) and [Arab American](#) populations and went from a 17-point Biden lead in 2020 to a 3-point Trump win this year. Hudson County, with a high Latino population, remained blue, but Harris had a 28-point lead compared to Biden's 46-point lead in 2020.

Selaedin Maksut, the executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said Arab American voters in the state were responding to national Democrats' approach to Gaza and Israel more than anything in the state.

"This is their way of saying, 'We will not tolerate this, and we will no longer support the Democratic Party until they can get this issue right,'" Maksut told NOTUS. "I don't know how much work or how much effort local officials and local party officials could have possibly put in that would have swayed people."

But Maksut added in a text to NOTUS that those voters are "by no means married to any particular party."

If Democrats don't step up their ground game to reach the voters who moved away from them, they worry they could lose them further in upcoming races.



Medina, who ran in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate in New Jersey this year, told NOTUS. Campos-Medina emphasized her background as a union leader and campaigned largely on connecting with working-class voters, who she said New Jersey Democrats haven't put enough effort into connecting with.

"I hope that the Democratic Party learns its lessons and ... actually goes back to grassroots building and building an economic message of empowerment," she added.

A close 2025 gubernatorial race wouldn't be a surprise, nor would it come out of a rightward shift created solely by the presidential election. Campos-Medina said there have been "warning signs" for Democrats brewing in the state for several years.

Murphy, a Democrat, [retained](#) his seat by just 3 percentage points during the 2021 gubernatorial election. And some of the counties that shifted right this election, like Passaic and Hudson, had already [moved in that direction](#) in 2020.

It's a trend that's frustrated Democrats across the state who are hoping to get away from these tight margins.

"The people in New Jersey think we are going to always win, and a lot of those people did not do any work in the state of New Jersey," said a Democratic consultant to the state party about the 2024 results, adding that some of the state's leaders were focused on sending resources to the battleground state of Pennsylvania instead.

The state party consultant also blamed larger forces, adding that the level of support the state got from national Democrats was "abysmal," that "they should all be fired" and that those working for the national party don't understand the ins and outs of New Jersey politics.

The Democratic National Committee said in a statement to NOTUS that it invested more



"In 2025, the DNC will continue its historic support of state parties and work hand in hand with our trailblazing newly elected Democrats to hold Donald Trump accountable as we fight to protect working families," the statement said.

Republicans in the state are looking to capitalize on the red shift, hoping it'll be an advantage for them in 2025. Other Democrats on the ballot fared fairly well in New Jersey, but overall trends could be a signal that there's an opportunity to grow the state's Republican electorate beyond just the presidential ticket, said Chris Russell, a New Jersey GOP strategist.

"We can absolutely pick up more counties like Passaic and, you know, kind of further our advances in places down in South Jersey and even places up in Bergen County," Russell said. South Jersey is home to some of the counties in the state that Trump won by the biggest margins, and Bergen County is among those he lost by the smallest.

"I think it's a process. I don't think you're looking at an overnight change, but I think you can see big wins. And I think it starts next year," Russell added.

Russell pointed to Republicans consistently beating Democrats in monthly voter registrations as a sign of Republicans' expanding influence in the state.

Right before the 2020 election, the state had about 1.1 million more Democrats [registered](#) to vote than Republicans. As of last week, the gap had [narrowed](#) to just under 906,000.

Murphy said on Wednesday that New Jersey won't become a swing state, but Jack Ciattarelli, the former New Jersey state representative who narrowly lost to Murphy in 2021, told [Fox News](#) on Monday that Murphy is "in denial."

"I believe we'll make up for that very small margin we lost by in 2021," Ciattarelli said.



time" that could fade away when Trump's cult of personality does.

The other Democratic consultant agreed.

"I don't believe New Jersey will go red. I do believe we have to adjust our thinking and our practice," they said. "I do think that we have a problem. I also don't think it's insurmountable."

[Shifra Dayak](#) is a NOTUS reporter and an Allbritton Journalism Institute fellow.

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