

In a State Notorious for Political Scandal, Signs of Change Emerge

New Jersey's senior senator is on trial, charged with taking bribes. A political power broker is accused of racketeering. A judge has declared the election system unfair.

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By Nick Corasaniti and Tracey Tully

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New Jersey's senior U.S. senator is on trial, charged with taking bribes in exchange for political favors. A federal judge has declared the state's method of conducting primary elections fundamentally unfair. And on Monday New Jersey's attorney general charged one of the state's most formidable Democratic power brokers with racketeering.

A state famous for explosive political prosecutions like Abscam, Bridgegate and Bid Rig has over the past year lived up to a reputation for scandal that has left six in 10 residents convinced that New Jersey's politicians are either somewhat or very corrupt.

"I'm more surprised by the good things than the bad things in New Jersey politics," said Amol Sinha, executive director of New Jersey's chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

But there are also signs that recent political upheaval might offer a history-changing silver lining: a tipping point that leads to change.

"It's like that slow-motion video of an object falling down," said State Senator Andrew Zwicker, a physicist with Princeton University's plasma lab. "You know that it's falling, but you just don't know where it will finally end up."

"But the object will absolutely not be in the same place," he added.

The state, which has no shortage of corruption war stories, has a long way to go to reach a new equilibrium.



Senator Robert Menendez is on trial in Federal District Court in Manhattan, accused of an international corruption conspiracy. Jefferson Siegel for The New York Times

Former Gov. Chris Christie's march to the White House was derailed by a bizarre and brazen scandal involving the closing of access lanes to the George Washington Bridge as political payback to an unfriendly mayor. Former Gov. Jim McGreevey resigned after admitting he was having an extramarital affair with an aide whom he had hired for a security post without even conducting a background check. And Senator Harrison Williams, the last U.S. senator to be convicted of corruption and sent to prison, was caught by federal officials in the bribery scandal known as Abscam that inspired the movie "American Hustle."

In 2009, a sprawling corruption sting that became known as Bid Rig led to charges against 44 people, including three New Jersey mayors, two state assemblymen and five rabbis. The operation was so vast that the former news site Gawker ran the headline "Everybody in New Jersey Was Arrested Today."

Since 1980, five mayors from Atlantic City have faced criminal charges of extortion, bribery, child abuse and theft, including stealing \$87,000 from a youth basketball organization.

In Newark, the three mayors who governed the city from 1962 to 2006 were all charged with crimes.

There are structural hurdles to weeding out corruption in a densely populated, high-tax state with a roughly \$55 billion budget — and 21 separate county governments.

“New Jersey politics is very transactional, and there’s always some other thing that somebody needs,” Loretta Weinberg, a retired state senator, said.

“The political environment is dominated mostly by men who are in businesses other than government — real estate brokers, lawyers, developers — and government becomes a way to enhance their bottom line and their private businesses,” she said. “And after a while, it’s almost feels like it’s like that’s how politics operates in New Jersey.”



In 2014, former Gov. Chris Christie apologized in person to Mark Sokolich, the mayor of Fort Lee, N.J., for the traffic jams created by the shutdown of lanes on the George Washington Bridge the year before. Richard Drew/Associated Press

Representative Andy Kim’s campaign for Senator Robert Menendez’s seat has taken direct aim at that premise.

This month, running on a platform of “restoring integrity” to New Jersey politics, Mr. Kim, 41, won the Democratic nomination with 75 percent of the vote. He will face Curtis

Bashaw, a Republican from Cape May, N.J., in November.

On Monday, after the attorney general, Matthew J. Platkin, outlined the charges against the power broker, George E. Norcross III, Mr. Kim urged voters to resist allowing news of yet another major indictment to overwhelm them to the point of apathy.

“There’s no doubt that NJ politics is going through a lot of turmoil, but I believe we will come out of this better,” he wrote on social media. “As you read about scandals/corruption, don’t disengage. Let’s step up.”

To win the nomination, Mr. Kim dispatched Tammy Murphy, the wife of Gov. Philip D. Murphy, whom he cast as a stand-in for the same broken politics that had nurtured Mr. Menendez.

He also filed a lawsuit that has upended a fundamental source of power for party leaders in New Jersey — the so-called county line. The “line” has for decades permitted Democratic and Republican Party officials to group their chosen candidates for every office in a single row or line on the primary election ballot, preferential placement that has made it hard for outsiders to break into politics.



Representative Andy Kim won an overwhelming victory in the Democratic primary for Senator Robert Menendez’s seat. Hannah Beier for The New York Times

In March, a federal judge, Zahid N. Quraishi, ordered Democrats to redesign the June

primary ballot, grouping all candidates running for each office together. Lawsuits to permanently bar use of the “line” are pending, but an appellate court issued a ruling supportive of abolishing the practice.

Left-leaning voters supportive of Mr. Kim see the judicial ruling as a vital step in breaking a decades-long fever of corruption.

Jim Johnson, who ran for governor against Mr. Murphy in a 2017 Democratic primary, has long been critical of the county line system and the backroom dealings of local political machines.

“Voters have been tired of the nature of New Jersey politics for a while, and for the most part, they’ve shown that by not showing up to the polls,” Mr. Johnson said.

“There’s a real appetite for candidates of substance — and candidates who are independent,” he added.

Next year’s race to replace Governor Murphy, who is barred by term limits from running for re-election, is expected to offer the first test of the effect of the new ballot design — and a truly competitive primary.

For the first time in recent memory, Mr. Norcross, who said a year ago that he was stepping back from politics, will hold far less sway over which Democrat ultimately wins the nomination, both because of his legal problems and the likely absence of the county line ballot design.

The field of contenders is large and expected to grow, with four Democrats and three Republicans already campaigning for the job.



George E. Norcross III, the influential Democratic power broker, spoke to reporters in Trenton, N.J., on Monday after the attorney general announced the indictment against him and five others. Mike Catalini/Associated Press

Sue Altman, a Democratic candidate for Congress, argues that the change could make a significant impact. The longstanding absence of competitive primary races, she said, has insulated those in power from being accountable for their actions.

“Everyone in New Jersey essentially pays a corruption tax,” she said.

Before Judge Quraishi ordered a redesign of the June ballot, Mr. Platkin weighed in, declaring the county line ballot design an unconstitutional practice that the attorney general’s office could not defend.

At the time, Ms. Murphy’s path to victory in the Senate primary hinged largely on appearing on the “line” in the state’s most populous urban counties. And Mr. Platkin’s legal analysis about the indefensibility of the practice contributed to a rupture in his relationship with the governor, once one of his closest political allies who had chosen him to be attorney general.

This week, at a news conference announcing the charges against Mr. Norcross, Mr. Platkin held up an alternative vision for New Jersey politics.

“It’s often said that in New Jersey, politics is a blood sport,” Mr. Platkin said as Mr. Norcross stared at him from the front row after showing up at the news conference with

his team of lawyers.

“But there is nothing inherent in our state’s culture that requires us to accept politics and government that functions in this way,” he added.

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