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Newark's mayor would be N.J.'s first Black governor. Does he have a chance?

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17–21 minutes

Newark mayor and New Jersey gubernatorial candidate [Ras J. Baraka](#) stepped up to the podium as the lunchtime keynote speaker for an urban economic growth conference at Rutgers Law School and started racking up political points right away.

“I was just about to eat, too,” Baraka deadpanned to the 150 attendees, who laughed between bites of roast chicken and garlic mashed potatoes.

With the joke having won the crowd's full attention, Baraka got serious, discussing affordable housing in cities across the country and weighing the successes and limitations of initiatives in his own.

“In New Jersey, if you didn't know, there is a shortage of almost 300,000 units of housing, and the cost of living is growing rapidly, and In Newark, we're not exempt from that,” said Baraka, 54, a past president of the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association. “In fact, we have one the fastest-growing rents, but we are not building fast enough to keep pace with the market. The opposite of

us is a place like Austin, Texas, which has built so much housing that developers themselves are trying to slow down.”

Baraka is [aspiring to be the Garden State's first Black governor](#) — its first governor of color — when the seat opens up at the end of fellow Democrat Gov. [Phil Murphy](#)'s second term in January 2026. New Jerseyans have already demonstrated a willingness to vote for candidates of color in statewide elections, including both its U.S. senators, [Robert Menendez](#) and [Cory Booker](#) — a former Newark mayor — and [Barack Obama](#) in his 2008 presidential bid and re-election in 2012.

But Baraka faces several challenges, including a list of several well-known Democrats either running or weighing bids; steep fundraising gaps opened up by rivals who declared their candidacies long before him; traditionally low turnout among Black and brown voters likely to support him; and the absence of a Black governor or Democratic nominee in the state before him.

Whoever wins the primary to succeed Murphy will have to overcome New Jersey's history of not electing either a Democrat or Republican following a two-term governor of the same party since 1961, when [Gov. Richard Hughes was elected](#) to succeed fellow Democrat Robert Meyner.

So, does Baraka have a chance? Political observers say he does, though his odds rise or fall depending on certain variables, including the size of the field at election time and turnout among voters of color.

Baraka's remarks at the law school to an audience of academics, policymakers and business people were in contrast to the fiery speech he gave on Feb. 19 in Trenton, which he culminated with a

rhetorical crescendo [announcing his bid for governor](#). Speaking as if he were an ancestor talking to his childhood self, he said, “You, too, can stand here at the Trenton War Memorial and say, ‘I want to be the governor of the State of New Jersey!’” The speech left the almost all-Black crowd of fellow fraternity brothers and sisters on its feet cheering.



Political observers say Baraka's bid to become the state's first governor of color could boost turnout among Black and brown voters. Amanda Brown| For NJ Advance Media

But even in his much more subdued appearance at the law school, Baraka once again brought the crowd to its feet, this time with warm praise for Rutgers-Newark’s popular outgoing chancellor and Newark booster, Nancy Cantor, which he and she capped with an embrace. And like his Trenton speech, Baraka’s brief Newark remarks also addressed current racial inequities as a function of historical racism.

The two events illustrate what political observers and everyday people say is Baraka’s ability to win the hearts and minds of distinctly different audiences using different language and levels of intensity while delivering essentially the same message of the need for social justice.

“He’s a dynamic speaker,” said Arlene Warner, a Newark resident

and small-scale housing developer attending the conference. And it was clear, Warner said, that Baraka “has a very special love for this city.”

Who is Ras J. Baraka?

Baraka grew up in Newark’s South Ward, the son of the late writer, social critic and civil rights activist [Amiri Baraka](#), a former New Jersey state poet laureate who with his wife, Amina Baraka, worked to elect Newark’s [Kenneth Gibson](#) the first Black mayor of a major Northeastern U.S. city in 1970. Gibson, who died in 2019, headed Ras Baraka’s mayoral transition team in 2014. The mayor’s brother, [Amiri Baraka Jr.](#), known as Midi, is his chief of staff.

Baraka attended Newark public schools before earning a bachelor’s degree in political science at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and then a master’s in education supervision at St. Peter’s University in Jersey City. He taught history and was principal of Newark’s Central High School while serving stints on the City Council and as deputy mayor starting in 2002.

He and his wife, [Linda Baraka](#), have a son and a daughter, and he has three children from a previous relationship.

Baraka is a spoken-word artist who appeared on [The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill](#), the 1998 eponymous solo album by the Fugees singer, after he had appeared on the group’s album, [The Score](#). His poetry collection, [Black Girls Learn Love Hard](#), was inspired by his late sister, Shani Baraka, who was fatally shot in 2003. [Audible](#), one of Newark’s biggest employers, published an audio memoir by the mayor, [The Book of Baraka](#), in February

2023.

He has attracted national attention from Obama for [reducing violent crime](#) by treating “hot spots” like viral outbreaks and from the current White House by [replacing 23,000 lead service lines](#) ahead of schedule and at no cost to property owners.

In the early run-up to the June 2025 primary, what remains unclear is whether Baraka’s dynamic style, progressive policies and blunt discussion of discrimination’s legacy will have statewide appeal in a contest that includes two other candidates with big head starts in declaring their candidacies and raising money.

Those two, Jersey City Mayor [Steven Fulop](#) and former state Senate President [Stephen Sweeney](#), could be joined by other big-name Democrats said to be weighing bids, including U.S. [Reps. Josh Gottheimer](#), D-5th Dist., and [Mikie Sherrill](#), D-11th Dist.

Too early to tell?

Some veteran observers of New Jersey’s ever-shifting political landscape say it’s too soon to tell whether Baraka has a chance in next year’s primary or general election races for governor, especially with this year’s presidential election and the contest for the U.S. Senate seat now held by Democrat Robert Menendez still to come.

“It’s too early,” said [Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo](#), a North Jersey Democratic power broker who leads Baraka’s home county.

Democratic State Committee Chairman LeRoy Jones, who has remained neutral in the governor’s race, called Baraka’s chances “as good as anyone else’s” at this point.

Whether or not Baraka has the edge over his Democratic rivals, Jones characterized him as a charismatic, progressive candidate who will “focus on justice, equality, diversity and inclusion,” and is likely to be particularly popular among voters of color.”



Observers say Baraka's progressive record on affordable housing creation through inclusionary zoning and crime reduction through violence prevention could appeal to progressive white voters.

Amanda Brown| For NJ Advance Media

“He brings up a very solid, progressive agenda and a very solid and progressive point of view to the campaign, to the overall discussion of governance,” said Jones, of East Orange, who also chairs the Essex County Democratic Committee. “He’s an exciting voice that has its own unique perspective that I think is going to attract voters, particularly Black and brown voters.”

Jones added that Baraka’s appeal may extend to poor white voters.

“I think it also has an attraction to those that are marginalized in terms of the wealth and equity gap that exists in our state,” he added. “There’s other issues that he has championed, such as fair and equitable housing, and the education gap that exists across the state. There’s gaps pretty much up and down the spectrum.”

Others said Baraka could have an advantage over his primary opponents if certain unknowns go his way, including a strong turnout among minority voters and progressives.

‘You don’t need 50%’

The primary winner doesn’t need a majority of all the votes cast. Only the highest total among the candidates running is required.

“You don’t need 50%,” said Dan Casino, a professor of government and politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison and executive director of the FDU Poll. “If there’s six candidates running, and you’ve got 20%, that’s a pretty good advantage going in.”

Last month, Fairleigh Dickinson released poll results indicating that 51% of Newark residents identifying as registered Democrats or Democratic-leaning would support Baraka in the primary. Among the 1,120 residents polled from April 10 to May 8, 47% said he would make a good governor, versus 25% who said he wouldn’t. At 57%, Black residents were most likely to think Baraka would make a good governor, versus 38% of Hispanic residents and 35% of others — mostly whites and Asian-Americans. Fulop and Sherrill each received 5% support, while Sweeney and Gottheimer received 2% and 1%, respectively.

Casino said Baraka’s support among his current constituents represented “a strong base” for him, though his challenge is to extend that support beyond his hometown. Newark’s 71,975 registered Democrats account for 2.9% of the party’s 2,492,598 registered voters statewide.

Baraka took the poll numbers in stride.

“It’s what to expect at this point,” he said.

Newark residents who don’t support Baraka include longtime community activist Debra Salters, who waged an unsuccessful effort to recall the mayor and city council last year. Salters said enthusiasm for Baraka’s candidacy is likely to wane as voters scrutinize the city’s still-lagging income levels, homelessness and other conditions apart from the attention Baraka has received for his efforts to address them.

“If they look at his track record and not the rhetoric or the photo ops, they will clearly see if he has a chance or not,” said Salters, [one of 12 candidates](#) in a July 16 special election to fill the 10th District congressional seat left vacant by the death of Donald Payne Jr. in April. “Follow the facts, not the hype.”

In terms of the party’s statewide demographic makeup, 49% of registered Democrats or voters who lean Democratic are people of color, including 21% Latino, 17% Black, 8% Asian, and 3% of mixed or other groups, according to the [Pew Research Center](#) in Washington, D.C.



Whether it's Baraka or another Democrat who wins the 2025 primary to try and succeed two-term Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy, observers note that they will have to overcome New Jersey voters'

decades-long history of not electing candidates of the same party in three consecutive races. Amanda Brown| For NJ Advance Media

Assuming that Baraka is likely to do well among voters of color, Casino said, “The fact [that] he’s got that constituency already does give him a leg up.”

The potential absence of a so-called [“county line”](#) on gubernatorial primary ballots next year could also factor into the race, after a federal judge blocked the practice of grouping together candidates endorsed by their county party organization on ballots in this year’s June 4 primary.

Micah Rasmussen, director of the Rebovich Institute of New Jersey Politics at Rider University, said that when factoring in white progressives who may identify with Baraka’s approaches to affordable housing creation and violence prevention, his candidacy looks all the more viable, at least in the primary.

“It doesn’t mean that he’s the *only* viable candidate. It doesn’t mean that he’s the *most* viable candidate,” Rasmussen said. “But I think he’s viable.”

A related benefit that Baraka’s popularity among Black and brown voters might give him, Rasmussen said, is that he could expand his base geographically beyond Newark and neighboring Essex County to areas around the state with communities of color, whether that’s Paterson, Elizabeth, Trenton, Camden or elsewhere. He said Baraka’s progressive credentials could have a similar effect for some largely white suburbs.

“In a place like Montclair. Progressive places like Maplewood,” Rasmussen said, “I don’t think he’s *not* going to do well there at

all.”

“I think he has the opportunity to make his case,” he added. “I would say that, given the factors that we have talked about, if he can capitalize on those, and if he can make the best case to those voters, I think he’s got a strong chance.”



Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, at the podium, and former State Senate President Stephen Sweeney are Democrats who have announced their candidacies for governor in the June 3, 2025 primary. Newark Mayor Ras J. Baraka is the third Democrat to formally announce his candidacy. Fulop and Sweeney appeared together for a Liberty State Park event in Jersey City in 2016. EJA

Turnout is key

After being elected with 54% of the vote in 2014 running against an establishment-backed candidate, Baraka was re-elected twice by landslide margins, taking 77% of the vote in 2018 and [83% in 2022](#).

But turnout has been low in Newark’s May non-partisan elections for mayor and city council, at just 11% in Baraka’s last race. And observers noted that turnout among voters of color generally has lagged behind the rate for whites.

Then again, the prospect of electing the state’s first non-white chief

executive could motivate Black and brown voters to go to the polls, as [increased turnout figures suggested](#) when Obama ran for president.

“Traditionally in Democratic primaries, turnout in the African American community is actually relatively low,” Casino said. “That said, is it going to be low next year? I don’t know. And nobody knows.”

One aspect of the campaign where there is some certainty, at least at present, is fundraising, where Baraka lags far behind Fulop and, to a lesser extent, Sweeney, according to [quarterly reports](#) they’ve had to file with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission, or ELEC.

Baraka’s “Ras For Governor Matching Account” April 15 quarterly report on contributions and expenditures for January-March 2024 put the nascent campaign’s “net worth,” or cash on hand, at \$95,956.

According to the report, the campaign spent just \$466.48 on a credit card payment processing service in Arizona.

By contrast, the “Fulop for Governor” report for the same period put his campaign’s net worth at \$2.71 million, which includes funds raised since the start of Fulop’s campaign in April 2023. Fulop’s total expenditures were \$197,777.

The “Sweeney for Governor” campaign reported \$1.22 million cash on hand, and expenditures totaling \$49,126.

Fulop formally [announced his candidacy in April 2023](#), 10 months ahead of Baraka and more than two years before the primary. [Sweeney announced in December.](#)

Baraka said he has raised considerably more since filing his first quarterly report and that his fundraising will pick up after this year's presidential and U.S. Senate races, which may be of more pressing interest to donors.

Baraka also noted that he is seeking public matching funds — as are Fulop and Sweeney — which limit how much the campaigns can spend. The current spending limits are \$7.3 million on the primary and \$15.6 million on the general election, though those figures may rise due to inflation.

“We’ll get there,” he said.

If he wins the primary and then the general election, Baraka would be the fifth African American governor in the United States, after Douglas Wilder of Virginia, Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, David Paterson of New York, and Maryland's current governor, [Wes Moore](#), all Democrats.

Baraka embraces his potential role as New Jersey's first Black governor, and has faith that his race it will not deter voters. But he has also expressed frustration with others' focus on race as a factor in the election, when it's his progressive approach to governing that will matter to all residents of the state.

“You know what's interesting?” Baraka told NJ Advance Media recently at Swahili, a Kenyan restaurant near the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark's downtown section. “People always ask me, ‘What do you got to do to get white people to vote for you?’ Or ‘suburban people,’ which is their code word. That's a question you should ask all Democrats — not just me because I'm Black.”

Baraka said Democratic candidates, regardless of their race, have

too often failed to attract white voters who should be drawn to the party by shying away from the most pressing issues.

“That’s a problem that the Democratic party has. Because we don’t stick to our base, our issues, or say the things that are necessary for us to say: talk about affordability in this state; deal with the housing crisis in the state; deal with the issues that Democrats really have, that people in New Jersey have, around education, crime and all the other kinds of things that we have been tackling in Newark.”



Newark Mayor Ras J. Baraka hopes to succeed fellow Democrat Gov. Phil Murphy in elections next year and become New Jersey's first governor of color. The two appeared together in 2019 amid a crisis over lead in Newark's drinking water. Michael Mancuso | NJ Advance Med

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