



# WHO PICKS YOUR LEADERS?

How New Jersey Changed Its Ballot and Why It Matters to You

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Student Workshop | Grades 7 through 12

Main Source: Prof. Julia Sass Rubin, Rutgers University





# THINK ABOUT THIS...

Imagine you are running for class president. Your name is in tiny print at the bottom of the poster, while your opponent's name is in BIG, BOLD letters at the top.

**Would that be a fair election?**

*This is basically what happened in New Jersey for decades.*



# WHAT IS A POLITICAL MACHINE?



A political machine is a group of powerful political insiders who control who gets to run for office, who wins elections, and what laws get passed.

**They trade favors, jobs, and contracts for loyalty.**

## TAMMANY HALL

NYC's famous political machine ran the city from the 1800s to the 1960s. It was known for bribery, rigged elections, and corruption.



Most states got rid of political machines by the 1970s. New Jersey did not. NJ political machines held power for decades longer than anywhere else in the country.

# THE SECRET WEAPON: THE COUNTY LINE

In every other state, primary ballots list candidates under the office they are running for (like President, Senator, etc.).

But in New Jersey, 19 out of 21 counties organized ballots around a "county line" where the party's chosen candidates were grouped together in one row or column.

## EVERY OTHER STATE

Candidates grouped by office.  
All candidates for Governor listed together.  
Fair and easy to compare.

## OLD NEW JERSEY

Candidates grouped by party bosses.  
Chosen candidates on the "line" together.  
Others scattered in hard-to-find spots.

**Most NJ counties and legislative districts are dominated by ONE party, so winning the primary = winning the election.**



# WHAT THE OLD BALLOT LOOKED LIKE

## ESSEX COUNTY 2021 REPUBLICAN PRIMARY BALLOT

Governor | State Senate | Assembly | Sheriff | State Committee | Mayor

Row E: CIATTARELLI | PENNACCHIO | DeCROCE | PANSINI | TANELLA | TREAMONT | GASPARINI

*THE COUNTY LINE: All party-endorsed candidates in one neat row*

Row F: LEVINE (Governor only, rest of row EMPTY)

Row G: RIZZO (Governor) ... gap ... WEBBER, BARRANCO (Assembly)

Row H: SINGH (Governor) ... gaps ... MASTRANGELO, EDELSON, BYRNE, PENNA (scattered)



**Notice: Party-chosen candidates fill one complete row. Everyone else is scattered across half-empty rows.**



# WHY THE COUNTY LINE WAS SO POWERFUL



## PRIME POSITION

County line candidates were always in the first or second row/column. Easy to find.



## FAMOUS NAMES HELP

Well-known candidates (like senators) were at the top of the line, lending credibility to everyone below.



## OPPONENTS HIDDEN

Non-endorsed candidates were scattered in random spots, sometimes separated by blank columns or rows.

*Parties even sent mailers telling voters: "Just vote Column A!"*

# THE NUMBERS DON'T LIE

NJ Legislative Incumbents in Competitive Primaries (2003 to 2023)

**ON the County Line**

**1.4%**

LOSS RATE

206 won, only 3 lost

**OFF the County Line**

**80%**

LOSS RATE

Only 2 won, 8 lost

**On average, being on the county line gave candidates a 38 percentage point advantage.**



# REAL EXAMPLE: SEE THE COUNTY LINE EFFECT

2020 Republican Primary, 3rd Congressional District: Kate Gibbs vs. David Richter

## BURLINGTON COUNTY

Gibbs ON the county line

**Gibbs**  
**57%**

Richter  
43%

## OCEAN COUNTY

Richter ON the county line

Gibbs  
22%

**Richter**  
**78%**

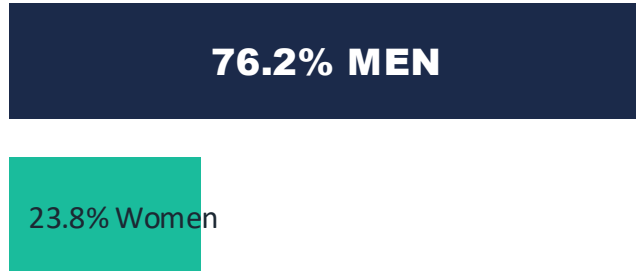
**SAME TWO CANDIDATES. Different counties. Different county lines.**  
**Each gained 35 percentage points when they had the county line advantage.**



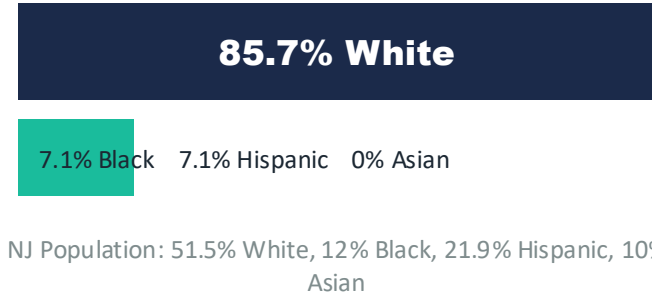
# WHO WERE THE PARTY BOSSES?

County party chairs decided who got on the county line. Here is what they looked like:

## GENDER



## RACE



A small group of mostly white, mostly male insiders decided who could run for office in NJ.



# THE FIGHT FOR FAIR BALLOTS

**2020**

Lawsuit filed (Conforti v. Hanlon) challenging the county line as unconstitutional

**2023**

Senator Menendez indicted for corruption. Rep. Andy Kim announces run for Senate.

**FEB 2024**

Andy Kim files his own lawsuit to end the county line

**MAR 2024**

Federal judge rules: the county line is unconstitutional!

**MAR 2025**

Governor Murphy signs law requiring fair "office block" ballots for all NJ primaries





# WHAT HAS CHANGED? THE RESULTS ARE IN.

**6 to 9**

Viable candidates for Governor in 2025 (vs. few before)

**27.5%**

Assembly seats contested in 2025 primary (was 11.3% in 2023)

**21%**

Voter turnout in the 2025 primary (highest since the 1980s)

**10**

Counties where party-endorsed Governor candidate LOST

**The end of the county line is already making NJ more democratic!**





# ACTIVITY TIME!

## Mock Primary Election

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**Round 1: Vote using an OLD-STYLE county line ballot**

**Round 2: Vote using the NEW office-block ballot**

**Then: Compare your results!**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Did the ballot design change how you voted in the mock election? How?

2

Why do you think so many candidates dropped out before the primary when the county line existed?

3

What does it mean for democracy when a small group of insiders picks the candidates?

4

Why is it important that ballots are designed fairly?

5

If you could design the perfect ballot, what would it look like?



# WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

## **Your future is shaped by elections**

School funding, college tuition, housing costs, environmental policy... all decided by elected officials.

## **You can vote soon (or already)**

17-year-olds can pre-register to vote in NJ. At 18, you can vote in primaries and general elections.

## **Fairness in elections is never guaranteed**

NJ citizens had to fight in court for years to get a fair ballot. Staying informed protects your rights.

**Register to vote at [vote.nj.gov](https://vote.nj.gov)**





# THANK YOU!

*Let's work together to make democracy work.*

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Source: Prof. Julia Sass Rubin, Rutgers University

Additional research from NJ Division of Elections

Full reference list: <https://www.agardresearchassociates.org/ballot-power-and-democracy-in-nj>



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