TRENTON, N.J. — New Jersey has a well-earned reputation as a home to backroom political dealing.

But advocates hoping to break the boss-dominated culture in this Democratic stronghold say the ongoing [*corruption case*](https://apnews.com/article/menendez-federal-bribery-indictment-136e45051b074dbe1a366214cee2634f) against Sen. Bob Menendez might have opened the door to a new era in Garden State ***politics***.

Many progressives were cheered this weekend when Tammy Murphy withdrew from a closely watched Senate primary, since they viewed her as someone who was benefiting from a system they argue gives party leaders undue influence. The well-connected wife of New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy [*dropped her bid to succeed*](https://apnews.com/article/tammy-murphy-new-jersey-us-senate-menendez-6157bad8de90950d9504153331c097ba) Menendez, who had said days before that he [*wouldn’t seek another term*](https://apnews.com/article/menendez-bribery-senate-new-jersey-7a8cd625f5be3d2f2c4c1f2c2a72ff9e) as a Democrat, in the blue-tilting state.

Murphy's departure followed closely on the heels of a hearing in a New Jersey courtroom on Rep. Andy Kim’s [*lawsuit to topple*](https://apnews.com/article/new-jersey-election-law-senate-kim-murphy-menendez-a028ba64f536fb9921b5200ff7bb9365) that system. Hours before the hearing, the state’s attorney general said New Jersey’s longstanding way of putting names on the ballot — known informally as the “county line” — was unconstitutional.

“It’s a New Jersey spring,” said Sue Altman, a progressive candidate for Congress, one of many Democrats who crowded into the courtroom. “I would say I think people in New Jersey are ready for change.”

Murphy’s departure from the race left Kim in a strong position to win his party’s nomination for the seat, a must-have for Democrats in the closely divided U.S. Senate but one some Democrats worried could be in play after Menendez was indicted on corruption charges last year. Republicans are still expected to contend for the seat, but Kim is more likely to avoid a nasty intra-party fight for the Democratic nomination.

“The tide in New Jersey has shifted,” said Antoinette Miles, director of New Jersey Working Families, who was also at the hearing and has argued for abolishing the balloting system. “I think the line is on its way out.”

Kim's lawsuit aiming to put the state's ballot design system — widely perceived as favoring candidates with the backing of party leaders — is before U.S. District Court Judge Zahid Quraishi. The judge is considering whether to temporarily halt the state's primary ballot system, which in most counties lists party-backed candidates in a column and those without such an endorsement in what's commonly called “ballot Siberia.”

When the judge will rule in the suit isn’t clear, and he’s given parties time to respond to the news that Murphy dropped out.

The dynamic had been expected to figure prominently in the June 4 primary to succeed three-term senator Menendez, in part because Tammy Murphy's candidacy came along with the backing of big-county political party chairmen, giving her the perceived boost from having her name more prominently displayed. But Kim — until now better known as the soft-spoken congressmen who was seen cleaning trash out of the Capitol after the Jan. 6 insurrection — tapped into a yearslong sense of frustration among progressives who chafe against party bosses deciding who nominees will be when he sued to stop the system.

Kim, who had won the advantage in a number of counties himself, said that even if he's the front-runner in the Democratic primary now, he's still pursuing his lawsuit because he thinks the practice is unfair.

“This is is not a system I want to participate in," he said in a Sunday call with reporters. “I think it’s unfair and that’s why I’m trying to change it.”

Faced with the prospect of a bruising fight, Murphy opted to bow out. Her intent, she said, was to keep the party together given the enormity of the stakes in this year's election.

“It is clear to me that continuing in this race will involve waging a very divisive and negative campaign, which I am not willing to do,” she said in a video posted Sunday on social media. “With Donald Trump on the ballot and so much at stake for our nation, I will not in good conscience waste resources tearing down a fellow Democrat.”

A first-time candidate who was a Republican until just before Phil Murphy's first campaign for governor, Tammy Murphy had focused on gun control and women's access to abortion as key issues. With little policy differences between them, Kim stoked the party's base over the county ballot issue and seemed to gain traction.

“Tammy Murphy’s a smart woman,” said Montclair State University political science professor Brigid Harrison. “I'm going to assume that her ability to read the room meant that she understood what was happening at the grassroots level."

Still, even if the ballot system is changed, county political party leaders won't be without influence — the ability to decide how to fill local jobs, for instance. And Kim's push on the ballot design might relieve other efforts at broader political reforms, said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

“What happened with this particular race was just a perfect confluence of events with a champion in Andy Kim, who stepped out early,” he said. “The pressure is now built up so much that they’re going to have to do something to release it, to give the progressives something that they can claim as a victory and the county line might be it.”

The county line helped sustain New Jersey's incumbents, including Menendez, for years.

He's pleaded not guilty to federal prosecutors' charges that he took bribes of cash, gold bars and a luxury vehicle in exchange for helping a businessman get a lucrative meat-certification deal with Egypt. A later indictment said he helped another associate get a deal with Qatar. HIs wife, also charged in the scheme, has pleaded not guilty, as have two of three business associates. The third has pleaded guilty and agreed to be a witness in the case.

Menendez last week said he won't run as a Democrat in the primary but didn't rule out seeking a fourth full term as an independent Democrat in November.

The GOP contest features southern New Jersey businessman Curtis Bashaw, Mendham Borough Mayor Christine Serrano Glassner and former TV news reporter Alex Zdan.