

## ***An early look at the 2025 off-year races***

Voters will head to the polls in Virginia and New Jersey.

While the attention-grabbing race for the White House is now behind us, next year's state-level elections are just getting started. Virginia and New Jersey will hold a number of statewide contests in 2025 that traditionally provide a temperature check on shifting political power in Washington. Here's an early look at next year's off-year gubernatorial and state legislative contests.

### **Virginia**

The Commonwealth—the only state where governors can only serve one term at a time—has a long history of gauging the political climate in off-year elections. The last time voters headed to the polls following a presidential election year, in 2021, Republicans scored a [major upset](#) by making sweeping downballot gains that included reclaiming both the governor's mansion and the House of Delegates.

The victories, while significant given Republicans' [losing streak](#) in statewide elections, was in keeping with tradition at the gubernatorial level. Off-year governor's races [over the last 50 years](#) in Virginia have almost always punished the president's party, [with the exception](#) of Democrat Terry McAuliffe's victory over Republican Ken Cuccinelli in 2013. This year's governor's race will be another test of that trend.

Thus far, it appears that both parties are set to avoid messy gubernatorial primaries. Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger and Republican Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears are the only major candidates in the running. While it's not impossible that additional candidates could enter the race—Rep. Bobby Scott appears to be [keeping the door](#) open on running against Spanberger—the current absence of intra-party contests is narrowing the race early.

Spanberger, who has built a reputation as a moderate Democrat [unafraid to challenge](#) her own party's [left flank](#) and [leadership](#), announced her bid [last year](#). In a [video](#) launching her candidacy, Spanberger highlighted her record in Congress—particularly on supporting veterans, small business owners, and families struggling with addiction.

The former intelligence officer is also a [formidable fundraiser](#)—a strength that inspired Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, a Democrat once gunning for the governorship himself, to drop his candidacy. Those fundraising chops will be a major asset to Spanberger, given that the 2021 contest was among the [most expensive](#) gubernatorial races in Virginia history.

Earle-Sears, meanwhile, is hoping that voters buck historic trends that benefit the party outside the White House by keeping a Republican in the governor's mansion. GOP Gov. Glenn Youngkin [has endorsed](#) Earle-Sears to succeed him. It remains to be seen whether she can replicate his path to victory, since she has [courted more controversy](#) than the [popular](#) governor. Earle-Sears may also have to navigate her vacillating embrace of President-elect Trump as she courts his supporters. Following the 2022 midterms, Earle-Sears said Trump was a “liability to the mission” of the Republican Party. She has since changed [her tune](#) and embraced the incoming president.

In addition to the governorship, control of the House of Delegates is on the line after Democrats narrowly took back the chamber and full control of the General Assembly in 2023. The party currently has a 51-49 majority, and all 100 seats of the lower chamber are on the ballot. Ahead of November, voters will also head to the polls in January to participate in [three](#) special elections—two in the state Senate and one in the state House. Of them, [two special elections](#) to fill state House and state Senate vacancies in Loudoun County have been highlighted by the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee as races that are essential to protecting their legislative majorities. The seats became vacant when two state lawmakers were elected to Congress.

“There are no off-years in state legislative campaigns. Next month, there are two must-win special elections in Virginia that will provide the first test of the mood of voters in a key battleground state following the 2024 elections,” DLCC President Heather Williams said [in a statement](#).

While it’s too early to know what the driving themes of next year’s contests will be, the campaigns provide the first tea leaves on voters’ sentiments following Republicans’ unilateral victories in neighboring D.C. The incoming Trump administration’s quest to drastically reduce the federal workforce in particular could have substantial ramifications for Virginians, with the commonwealth having the [second-highest concentration](#) of federal employees in the nation.

“A lot is going to depend on how those early months of Trump's presidency go. The key issue for a lot of Virginians, particularly in these outer-ring suburban counties, is going to be whether the ‘Project 2025’ idea of dramatically shrinking the size of the federal government creates personal challenges for those voters,” Stephen Farnsworth, professor of political science at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, told *National Journal*.

“It isn't just a matter of people who are working for a government agency," Farnsworth added. "It's also the people who sell them houses or refrigerators.”

## **New Jersey**

Unlike the largely solidified field in Virginia, the future of the gubernatorial primaries in New Jersey is as clear as mud. With Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy term-limited, candidates across both parties have flooded the field in the hopes of replacing him.

It will be the first time that Garden State voters will head to the polls after the abolition of the state’s party-line system. The controversial practice, which gave ballot preference to party-backed candidates, was [struck down](#) earlier this year.

The Democratic contest is home to [six heavy hitters](#) from a wide range of public-service backgrounds. Two members of Congress have entered the race—Reps. Mikie Sherrill and Josh Gottheimer. Both Sherrill and Gottheimer have built reputations in Washington as centrist members willing to work across the aisle. While the contest is wide-open, Sherrill and Gottheimer are considered the top candidates in the early stages of the race. Due to their high profiles in the Garden State and their ability to raise [large sums of money](#), they enter the contest with built-in structural advantages that could be meaningful in the large field. While polling of the primary has been limited, it has [consistently](#) shown Sherrill leading the early race—along with a healthy portion of undecided voters who are up for the taking.

Outside of congressional leaders, there are also a slew of candidates who come from state and local leadership—including former state Senate President Steve Sweeney, New Jersey Education Association President Sean Spiller, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, and Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop.

“The second tier is very crowded, and it's entirely possible that someone from the second tier is going to win,” said Daniel Cassino, professor of government and politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University. “All of them have, I think, reasonable paths to victory in this race, and have been able to raise pretty significant amounts of money.”

The air of uncertainty is also compounded by Republicans' [inroads](#) in the blue state in recent cycles, setting up the potential for heated general election. In 2021, Murphy had been expected to win reelection with a comfortable margin, but only [eked out](#) a win over Republican Jack Ciattarelli [by 3 points](#), after President Biden had carried the Garden State [by 16 points](#) in 2020. In 2021, Ciattarelli ran a campaign that [walked a tightrope](#) appealing to moderate conservatives without alienating Trump's base. As he runs again this year, that approach may be tested in a primary that could center on Trump's brand of politics.

Ciattarelli is joined in the GOP field by six candidates who have entered the race, three of whom have stood out so far—state Sen. Jon Bramnick, a [Trump critic](#); Bill Spadea, a conservative radio host and fierce [Trump defender](#); and former state Sen. Ed Durr, a truck driver who [famously ousted](#) Sweeney, the longest-serving state Senate president in New Jersey history.

While recent Republican successes in New Jersey—including Trump’s ability to [run up the numbers](#) in 2024—are giving the GOP reason to hope next year, Democrats still have a significant structural upper hand in the state as they hope to protect their governor’s seat and majorities in the General Assembly. The party has a 900,000-plus [advantage](#) in registered voters. The challenge is getting those voters to turn out.

“The big question is really about Democratic turnout,” Cassino said. “We saw in 2021 Essex County turnout just collapsing. And in 2024, the same thing happened, except now it was also Passaic County, where Democratic turnout went way down. It's not like Republican turnout went up; it's just that a lot of Democrats didn't show up, and we didn't quite know why.”