

1st Legislative District 'up for grabs,' as parties battle for control of the state Senate



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By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer |

Republicans in the 1st Legislative District are counting on voters today to give Gov. Chris Christie more allies in Trenton to push his reform agenda and approve his judicial nominees.

Democrats are counting on voters to keep the incumbents in place to ensure that Christie's plans don't inadvertently steamroll South Jersey.

Both parties agree a lot is at stake.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, is trying to stave off a challenge by Republican and longtime Municipal Court Judge David DeWeese.

Incumbent Democrat state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, left, and Republican challenger David DeWeese debate Wednesday evening in Cape May Court House.

"There are only four or so districts in the state where the races are really competitive," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. The 1st District is one of them, he said.

"It's still up for grabs," Weingart said. "Turnout is expected to be pretty low. The question will be who are those people? If voters are as turned off by politics as they seem on the national level, will that have an impact on who chooses to vote? There is some uncertainty."

Democrats control 24 seats to 16 controlled by Republicans in the state Senate. The state Assembly has 47 Democrats to 33 Republicans among its 80 members. Weingart said polling suggests Republicans might have a long way to go to seize control of either house.

"If the Republicans gain control of either house, it will be perceived as a huge victory for Christie," Weingart said. "He's not going to get the blame if they fail."

Weingart said a good showing by Republicans will help Christie get future state Supreme Court nominees confirmed. These are among the most influential appointments a governor will make in office.

"Were the Republicans to win control of the Senate, it could have a huge influence on the kind of Supreme Court justices that Gov. Christie would be able to nominate and have confirmed," Weingart said.

Likewise, Democrats have stymied many of Christie's proposed budgetary reforms they say would hurt public employees.

Van Drew said he thinks the election outcome will have a major bearing on the state's economy.

"These days are the greatest challenges Americans have faced since World War II," Van Drew said. "We need to move forward with fiscal policy that is structurally sound. We can't continue to borrow and spend, consume. We need a state that produces and competes and has sound fiscal policy."

Van Drew said the winners of the race will have to fight for beach-replenishment money and help launch the state's new offshore-wind industry.

DeWeese said Republicans would like to gain ground in this election, even if taking control of both houses would appear a long shot.

“A 50-50 split would be nice,” he said. “You would see things moving quickly if you had a Legislature working with the governor. A lot would be accomplished.”

DeWeese said New Jersey would see more reforms such as providing incentives for municipal and school consolidation and shared services if more Republicans win on Tuesday.

“Having a Republican governor and a Republican-controlled Legislature would give us an opportunity to get the most we can for Cape May, Atlantic and Cumberland counties.”

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