



OPINION: HUGIN LOSS WAS ESPECIALLY DEMORALIZING FOR NJ REPUBLICANS

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 8, 2018

It's nearly 50 years since Garden State voters chose a GOP candidate to represent them in the U.S. Senate. It's becoming a distant prospect



If you live in New Jersey and are 40 years of age or older, your chances of hitting the Mega Millions and Powerball jackpots in the same week are more favorable than the election of a Republican to the United States Senate in your lifetime.

Any doubt about future outcomes was erased and any hope for a Republican victory at any point was dashed with the re-election of Sen. Robert Menendez.

It's closing in on half a century since a Republican was elected to the Senate for New Jersey and with Menendez serving until 2024 and his colleague Sen. Cory Booker until 2020 — when he will surely win if he seeks re-election — Republican futility will be forever sealed.

There existed a glimmer of hope for Republicans that this year the tide would turn as a result of Menendez's federal corruption trial last fall. He was extremely vulnerable, the belief went, with daily revelations for nearly two months of allegations that he had used his office to seek favorable treatment for a Florida physician in return for paid vacations, hotel stays, airline travel and campaign contributions.

The physician, an eye doctor, is currently serving a 17-year prison sentence for defrauding Medicare of some \$73 million.

Ethical baggage, no problem

Menendez went to trial and walked out of the courthouse a free man because the jury failed to reach a unanimous verdict. The government had failed to prove its case and quickly decided to drop all charges rather than re-try the Senator.

This ethical baggage — some of it distressingly sordid — would prove too great a burden for Menendez, Republicans believed, and Democratic Party leaders would persuade him to abandon his re-election effort or, failing that, voters would rise up in righteous indignation and toss the Senator to the curb.

In addition, the Republican nominee, retired biopharmaceutical executive Bob Hugin, appeared to be a high-quality candidate and, just as importantly, was prepared to self-finance his campaign.

Menendez stoutly refused any entreaties for him to step aside and party leaders — Gov. Phil Murphy and Booker — swallowed whatever misgivings they may have had about their ethically-flawed colleague and closed ranks behind him.

Armed with millions of dollars in support from the national party, banking on a voter registration edge of nearly one million more Democrats than Republicans, and hoping the party would construct a well-oiled voter turnout effort, Menendez coasted to a 10-point victory.

