

THE ROAD TO WISNIEWSKI

100 Years of Democratic State Chairmen

On January 27, 2010, the New Jersey Democratic State Committee elected John S. Wisniewski, an eight-term Assemblyman from Sayreville, as their new party chairman. Wisniewski is the 27th chairman since 1910, the year Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton University, was elected governor. Wisniewski, 47, becomes the first Democratic State Chairman from Middlesex County since David Wilentz held the post more than 70 years ago.

New Jersey's Democratic State Chairs:

JAMES NUGENT

(1908-11)

Known as the "Big Boss," Nugent was the Essex County Democratic Chairman from 1903 to 1925. Along with former U.S. Sen. James Smith (D-Newark), Nugent recruited Woodrow Wilson to run for governor in 1910; Nugent and Wilson became political enemies when Wilson cast party bosses aside after taking office.

EDWARD GROSSCUP

(1911-19)

The Gloucester County Democratic Chairman was Woodrow Wilson's pick to replace James Nugent. He later served as State Treasurer.

CHARLES MCDONALD

(1919-22)

McDonald was a two-term Democratic Assemblyman, elected in 1903 and 1904, from Englishtown and onetime Monmouth County Democratic Chairman.

HARRY HEHER

(1922-32)

His decade as Democratic State Chairman was the longest tenure in state history. Heher was the Mercer County Democratic Chairman from 1915 to 1922. He was appointed to the state Supreme Court (then the Court of Errors and Appeals) in 1932, and became an Associate Justice in 1948; he served until he turned 70 in 1959.



MARY T. NORTON

(1932-35, 1940-44)



The first woman elected to represent New Jersey in the U.S. House of Representatives, Norton was a

Congressman from 1925 to 1951. A staunch ally of Jersey City Mayor Frank Hague, she was also the first woman to serve on the Hudson County Board of Freeholders, the first woman to chair a full congressional committee (she chaired the Veterans Affairs, the District of Columbia, and Labor committees), and the first woman to chair a major political party in New Jersey.

WILLIAM KELLY

(1935-38)

Kelly led a movement to deny Harry Truman the Democratic presidential nomination in 1948 and sought to draft Gen. Dwight Eisenhower. When the GOP nominated Eisenhower in 1952, Kelly endorsed him. An ally of Frank Hague, he was the Essex County Democratic Chairman "off and on" from 1930 to 1951, and was the state Banking Commissioner from 1931 to 1935. For a time he held two posts, Democratic State Chairman and Regional Collector of the Internal Revenue Service.

DAVID WILENTZ

(1938)



The longtime Middlesex County Democratic boss, was one of New Jersey's most powerful political leaders.

As state Attorney General in 1936, he prosecuted Bruno Richard Hauptmann for the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's son. He built a major New Jersey law firm, and his son became the Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court.

CRAWFORD JAMIESON

(1939)

Jamieson was the State Senator from Mercer County from 1936 to 1942, and a Public Utilities Commissioner from 1942 to 1945. When Charles Edison split with Frank Hague after his election as governor, Jamieson became a staunch Edison ally.

THE ROAD TO WISNIEWSKI

100 Years of Democratic State Chairmen

EDWARD HART

(1944-53)

A Frank Hague ally, Hart spent twenty years (1935-55) as a Congressman from Jersey City. His nine years as Democratic



State Chairman came while serving in the House. Hart chaired three House committees (including the Un-American Activities Committee). He didn't run again in 1954, and then served as a Public Utilities Commissioner from 1955 to 1960.

GEORGE BRUNNER

(1954-61)

Brunner was the Mayor of Camden from 1936 to 1959, serving six four year terms. He was the Democratic nominee for U.S.



Senate in 1946, but lost 59%-40% to Republican H. Alexander Smith. He did not run for re-election as mayor in 1959 and his slate lost control of the local government – the first defeat for the Brunner machine in 24 years.

ROBERT BURKHARDT

(1965-69)

A native of Chicago and a former president of the New York Young Democrats, Burckhardt came to New Jersey to work for Adlai Stevenson in



1952 and became Executive Secretary (Chief of Staff) to Gov. Robert Meyner in 1954. He was New Jersey Secretary of State from 1962 to 1970. In 1972, he pleaded guilty to taking a \$300,000 bribe to help deliver a state contract connected to the second span of the Delaware Memorial Bridge in 1964. He received three years probation.

CHARLES HOWELL

(1953-54)

Howell was elected to the State Assembly to represent Mercer County in 1944, and was elected to Congress in



1948. He gave up his House seat, and the state party chairmanship, to become the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senator in 1954; he lost the general election to Republican Clifford Case by less than 3,000 votes. He went on to serve as state Banking and Insurance Commissioner from 1955 to 1969.

THORN LORD

(1961-65)

New Jersey's U.S. Attorney from 1943 to 1945, Lord was elected to the Lawrence Township Committee in 1947 and became



Mercer County Democratic Chairman in 1948. He became a Port Authority Commissioner in 1957, and was the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in 1960; he lost to incumbent Clifford Case, 56%-43%. He became State Chairman in 1961 when his law partner, Richard Hughes, became governor. In 1965, separated from his wife, Lord committed suicide, hanging himself at the home of a friend.

SALVATORE BONTEMPO

(1969-73)



A key New Jersey Democrat for three decades, Bontempo began his political career as the Newark purchasing director from 1933

to 1942. He was elected to the Newark City Commission (City Council) in 1953, briefly sought the Democratic U.S. Senate nomination in 1954 (against Charles Howell), and served in Gov. Robert Meyner's cabinet as Commissioner of Conservation and Economic Development (DEP) from 1958 to 1961. He served in John F. Kennedy's State Department as director of the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs, considered running for governor, and was Chairman of the New Jersey Highway Authority.

THE ROAD TO WISNIEWSKI

100 Years of Democratic State Chairmen

JAMES DUGAN

(1973-77)



Dugan was 33 when newly-elected Bayonne Mayor Francis Fitzpatrick made him the city's law director in 1962.

He was elected to

the State Assembly in 1969 and to the Senate in 1971 and 1973. Brendan Byrne picked him to become Democratic State Chairman in 1973. By 1977, Dugan and Byrne were feuding and Byrne replaced him after winning a crowded Democratic primary. Dugan lost his State Senate seat to Walter Sheil in the '77 primary after a slate aligned with Jersey City Mayor and gubernatorial candidate Paul Jordan collapsed.

RICHARD COFFEE

(1977-81)

One of the state's most venerable Democrats, Coffee was elected to the State Senate in 1967, at age 40, after serving as a



Mercer County Freeholder. He was a longtime Mercer County Democratic Chairman, briefly sought the Democratic nomination for governor in 1973, and amassed considerable insider clout during a second legislative stint as the Executive Director of the Assembly Democratic Office. Gov. Brendan Byrne picked him as State Chairman after the divisive '77 primary – a race Coffee briefly considered entering.

JAMES MALONEY

(1981-85)

When Jim Florio won the Democratic nomination for governor in 1981, he picked his law partner and campaign manager, Maloney, as Democratic State Chairman. After Florio lost to Republican Tom Kean by an extraordinarily close 1,767 votes, Maloney stayed on and helped the state party retire a massive debt and make gains in the 1983 legislative contests – although his relationship with Florio ended in early 1982. He helped bring professional baseball to New Jersey as the first owner of the Trenton Thunder. He died young, of a heart attack, in 1994, at age 49.

RAYMOND DURKIN

(1985-90)



Durkin served as Essex County Democratic Chairman from 1980 to 1992, where he was an ally of Essex County Executive Peter

Shapiro. Shapiro named him State Chairman when he won the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1985; the stress of that campaign – a GOP landslide for Republican Gov. Tom Kean – led to the deterioration of the relationship. In 1986, Durkin shed no tears when Democrat-turned-Republican Nicholas Amato unseated Shapiro. Durkin lost the chairmanship to County Executive Thomas D'Alessio in 1992, not long before then-Assistant U.S. Attorney Kim Guadagno prosecuted D'Alessio on federal corruption charges. Durkin remains influential in Essex politics, where his son, Christopher, is the County Clerk.

PHILIP KEEGAN

(1990-92)

Keegan was a political prodigy, serving as national executive director of the Young Democrats, winning a seat on the Essex County Board of Freeholders in 1971, at age 29, and two years later winning a seat in the State Assembly. He walked away from the State Assembly after just one term, in order to make some money. He eventually founded The PMK Group, a politically active engineering firm. Gov. Jim Florio picked him to run the Democratic State Committee; his tenure included two tough years for Democrats, 1991 and 1992, when his party got slaughtered after Florio raised taxes by \$2.8 billion. He died in 1998, at age 56.

RAYMOND LESNIAK

(1992-94)



An Army veteran and lawyer, Lesniak was elected to the State Assembly in 1977, and moved up to the State Senate in 1983 when John Gregorio was ousted following his criminal conviction. Gov. Jim Florio brought Lesniak in as State Chairman in 1992, as Democrats sought to comeback from the massive GOP landslide of 1991. Bill Clinton carried New Jersey in 1992, and while Democrats lost the governorship in 1993, Florio came with 26,000 votes of winning a second term. Lesniak has become one of the most powerful politicians in the state, with a firm grasp over Union County (where Republicans haven't won since 1994) and as one of the state's leading legislators.

THE ROAD TO WISNIEWSKI

100 Years of Democratic State Chairmen

TOM BYRNE

(1994-97)

The son of former Gov. Brendan



Byrne became State Chairman after Raymond Lesniak left in 1994, taking over a Democratic Party that was

clearly out of power: Republicans held the governorship, majorities in both houses of the Legislature, and a majority of the state's county governments. Byrne presided over resurgence by N.J. Democrats, picking up Assembly seats in 1995, and re-electing Bill Clinton in 1996. Byrne had ambitions to run statewide: he was in the race for U.S. Senate in 2000, but got edged out by Jon Corzine. He reportedly thought about challenging Frank Lautenberg in the 2000 Senate primary – he had a poll in the field – but didn't run.



THOMAS GIBLIN

(1997-2001)

Giblin came from a prominent Essex County political family: his father, John J. Giblin, was a labor leader, Freeholder and State Senator. In 1973, at age 26, he ran a strong race for State Assembly in a Republican district against Tom Kean and Jane

Burgio. He won a seat on the Essex County Board of Freeholders in 1977, and was elected Essex County Surrogate in 1990, beating GOP incumbent Bob Cottle. He lost Democratic primaries for County Executive in 1994 (the race ended in a tie and was decided by a judge in August) and 2002, and was the Essex County Democratic Chairman from 1993 to 2003. James E. McGreevey picked Giblin as Democratic State Chairman after Giblin gave him the Essex organization line in the '97 gubernatorial primary. In 2005, 32 years after his first try, Giblin won a State Assembly seat.



JOSEPH ROBERTS

(2001-02)

A member of Jim Florio's congressional staff, Joe Roberts was 24 when he won a seat on the Bellmawr Board of Education, 25 when he won a Council seat, and 28 when he was elected to the Camden County Board of Freeholders. He went to the State Assembly in 1987 after Francis Gorman died, beginning a 22 year legislative career. A feud with Minority Leader Joe Doria led Roberts and the rest of the South Jersey Assembly delegation to drop out of the Democratic Caucus. He became State Chairman in 2001 as gubernatorial nominee James E. McGreevey sought the backing of

South Jersey Democrats. He became Majority Leader when Democrats took control in 2001, and played a key role in a place coup that helped Albio Sires beat Doria in the race for Speaker. One of the most powerful Majority Leaders in state history, Roberts moved up to Speaker after the 2005 election. He left the Legislature in January.



BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN

(2002-06)

Like many of her recent predecessors, Watson Coleman came from a powerful political family. Her father, John Watson, was an Assemblyman, and her brother, Bill Watson, was a Trenton political insider. After spending twenty years in state government, Watson Coleman won a State Assembly seat in 1997. She impressed party leaders enough to become Gov. James E. McGreevey's pick to be Democratic State Chair in 2002 – the only African American and the second woman to hold the post. She also chaired the Assembly Appropriations Committee. When Joe Roberts moved up to Speaker after the 2005 election, Watson Coleman easily secured the Majority Leader post. Watson Coleman's political career faltered in 2009; she had just two declared votes in the race to succeed Roberts as Speaker.

THE ROAD TO WISNIEWSKI

100 Years of Democratic State Chairmen



JOSEPH CRYAN

(2006-10)

Cryan grew up in the rough and tumble of Essex County politics: his father, John Cryan, born in Ireland, was a two-term Assemblyman and four-term Sheriff who came close to winning a Democratic primary to become the first Essex County Executive in 1978. He moved to Union Township, where he became Democratic Municipal Chairman and turned the town once politically competitive town into a Democratic stronghold. Redistricting created a new Assembly seat in 2001 and Cryan won it with little difficulty. His strong political skills and fierce partisanship made him a favorite of Democratic insiders, and he became State Chairman in 2006, at the urging of Gov. Jon Corzine. Democrats had three strong years under his stewardship, and he won points in 2009 for his considerable loyalty to Corzine. He is the new Assembly Majority Leader, and is clearly on the road to be Speaker if Democrats keep control after the next round of redistricting.

JOHN WISNIEWSKI

(2010-present)

A lawyer and the Sayreville Democratic Municipal Chairman, Wisniewski won a seat in the State Assembly on his second try in 1995, at age 33, when he and Arline Friscia unseated two-term Republican incumbents who had won in the Florio-related GOP landslide, Steve Mikulak and Ernest Oros. He amassed some clout as Chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee,



and was taken seriously as a candidate for Assembly Speaker when he secured the endorsements from the Middlesex County delegation. He quickly – almost in a predetermined way – dropped out of the race and backed Sheila Oliver for Speaker. As part of the deal, Wisniewski became the leading candidate for Democratic State Chairman. He demonstrated enough political skill to hold his commitments of support for nearly four months, even as some Democrats openly shopped for an alternative. He now becomes the first State Chairman from Middlesex County since the legendary David Wilentz had the job in 1938.