

# voting block

Dec. 4, 2017

Phil Murphy  
Murphy For Governor  
One Gateway Center Suite 511  
Newark, NJ 07102

Dear Gov.-elect Murphy,

For the past several months, 28 news organizations across New Jersey banded together to report on the governor's race through the lens of local neighborhoods as part of the Voting Block project.

Our plan was simple at first: We'd gather neighbors together to talk politics over a meal, and report on what they discussed. (You attended one of these events in South Orange earlier this year.) But the depth of what we built together from that point on showed that collaboration — both between journalists, and between journalists and communities — can be incredibly powerful when done intentionally and with an open mind.

The 28 news organizations involved in Voting Block brought well over 100 neighbors together for more than two dozen meals to discuss politics in a civil and respectful manner, and produced nearly 70 stories from communities around the state. The stories are thought-provoking and diverse, rooted squarely in the political priorities and perspectives of the neighbors who participated; you can read them all at [www.votingblocknj.com](http://www.votingblocknj.com).

We also worked with art galleries, libraries and students to host potlucks across the state. Montclair State University and Rutgers each had a class focus on Voting Block projects. The Wall Newspaper brought together homeless New Jerseyans in Trenton. ArtWorks Trenton hosted a potluck with the city's artistic community. And Newark Public Library hosted a meal with library patrons in the Ironbound neighborhood.

Throughout Voting Block, we knew that one of the outcomes we wanted to create for the project was the creation of a **People's Agenda**: an agenda that we could present to the new governor that was built entirely upon what New Jerseyans said they wanted to see happen in their state.

In the weeks before and immediately after the election, we asked New Jersey residents and our Voting Block neighbors what they wanted to see the next governor focus on as top priorities once he or she got into office, and we compiled the nearly 400 responses into the People's Agenda below.

Gov.-elect Murphy, on behalf of those residents and Voting Block, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue shaping your transition and laying plans for your time in office.

## The People's Agenda

*The following items were compiled from Voting Block participants and residents who responded to our text-message based survey asking about their preferences for the next governor's top priorities in office. Some of the quotes have been edited for clarity.*

### TAXES

Property taxes were by far the biggest issue that voters wrote us about. We heard many stories of people who said it was becoming unaffordable for them to stay in New Jersey, and several wrote of plans to move as a result.

#### **On considering a move because of rising taxes:**

*"It's an expense that continues to rise. I'm looking to my future and feel that the taxes will hold me back from a comfortable retirement in New Jersey. It will force me to sell and move to a better financial situation."*

–voter from Hawthorne

*"Our property and school taxes are so high it's becoming unaffordable for residents to stay here. I would like to see a plan where our tax rates become more realistic for what an average middle class American can afford without compromising our precious public schools."*

–voter from Ringwood

*"High taxes are driving retired taxpayers out of the state in order to survive on a fixed income."*

–voter from Wayne

### EDUCATION

Two main themes emerged from the voters who cited education-related issues as their main priority: the need to fully fund public schools in the state and address inequality among school districts. Here's a sampling of the perspectives we heard:

#### **On finding wasteful spending and reallocating money to public schools:**

*"The disconnect between NJ's tax rate and our ability to fund services vexes me, and it's been my experience that as the state underfunds schools, local property taxes get raised to balance the school budget."*

–voter from Hackettstown

#### **On education funding:**

*"Fully funding the school funding formula will achieve two goals: better educational opportunities and reduced reliance on local property taxes."*

–voter from New Milford

#### **On inequality among public schools in New Jersey:**

*"I have seen firsthand the vast difference in student and teacher experience, resources, and educational outcomes at public schools across NJ. A zip code should not determine the quality of public education a child receives,"*

–voter from Verona

## **ENVIRONMENT**

Several different issues related to the environment emerged in the responses we heard, from New Jersey's polluted air and waterways, to the coastline's vulnerability to rising sea levels and climate change.

### **On New Jersey being a leader in environmental policy:**

*"NJ was once out front on instituting policy to protect our environment. We have slipped badly under Christie. We need to look forward and protect future generations. And it's good business to advocate and promote clean energy."*

–voter from Edison

*"I want to live in a state that prioritizes clear air, clean water, natural spaces to explore, and acts proactively to rising seas."*

–voter from Madison

### **On New Jersey's vulnerability to environmental disasters:**

*"This region of NJ is its engine of economic and population growth. We're extremely vulnerable to flooding and other disasters resulting from climate change. Hurricane Sandy illustrated that."*

–voter from Jersey City

## **HEALTH CARE**

Both the high cost of health care and a lack of coverage and services were top issues for many respondents to our survey. We heard several testimonies from people who were struggling to afford health coverage and others in support of expanded funding for mental health services and Planned Parenthood.

### **On better access to mental health services:**

*"I'm an academic psychologist and see a real disconnect between what we know works for people with mental health problems and what's actually provided. NJ can be at the forefront of improving mental health and decreasing costs"*

–voter from Metuchen

### **On affordable health care:**

*"My spouse is self-employed and I am a paraprofessional in a local school district. We pay for our own benefits since Christie messed with the school budgets. We are both in our 60s and unfortunately, healthcare is breaking us."*

–voter from Rochelle Park

### **On funding Planned Parenthood:**

*"Uncertainty surrounding health care insurance and access in this country is dangerous for the well-being of the impoverished up to middle class. Securing access to Planned Parenthood provides services to women in a wide range of SES, allowing them to better care for their health and their future."*

–voter from Wyckoff

## **IMMIGRATION**

Voters offered differing viewpoints on immigration in our survey. We heard a greater number of responses in support of making New Jersey a sanctuary state for immigrants, and heard passionate responses from other who were not in support of increased protections for immigrants.

### **On the need to make immigrants feel safe:**

*“After President Trump's comments on immigration and DACA, many people who are immigrants in this country are terrified that they will be kicked out of this country.”*

–voter from Passaic

### **On the need to create state-driven immigration policy:**

*“Easy first move. I want NJ to have a front line of defense against Trump and Sessions' anti-immigrant policy.”*

–voter from Scotch Plains

### **On the need to comply with federal immigration law:**

*“A country that doesn't follow its own laws is not a country.”*

–voter from Midland Park

## **INFRASTRUCTURE / TRANSPORTATION**

The current state of public transportation, highways and the high cost of commuting was a common theme among responses we received. We heard from voters who described systemic problems with NJ Transit, along with poor conditions of the state's highways. One student who is set to graduate said that the increasing expense of commuting to New York is causing them to rethink how sustainable living in New Jersey will be as they look for jobs.

### **On the need to replace aging infrastructure:**

*“If we do not put modern, smart infrastructure in place we are letting ourselves live a precarious, dangerous, ignorant, backward and unsustainable life.”*

–voter from Rahway

### **On improving maintenance of public transportation and highways:**

*“We are the most densely populated state in the country. We have to be able to move our people around conveniently and efficiently.”*

–voter from Lambertville

### **On addressing transportation needs:**

*“My wife and I commute into Manhattan daily for our jobs, and NJ Transit's service quality and reliability has been deteriorating at an alarming pace.”*

–voter from Paramus

## **AFFORDABILITY / MINIMUM WAGE**

Wealth inequality and the high cost of living were a core focus for several voters: from raising the minimum wage to better supporting the middle class.

*“It is near impossible to live comfortably in New Jersey for people who are not wealthy.”*

–voter from Park Ridge

*“No one should be forced to work over 40 hours per week to afford a decent place to live and a fridge full of healthy food.”*

–voter from Bloomfield

## **MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION**

Many respondents wrote us advocating for the legalization of marijuana, citing the potential tax revenue it would bring to the state, along with its implications for criminal justice reform and addressing disparities for marijuana-related convictions.

### **On the tax benefits of legalization:**

*“It will help uplift the economy, help pay for underfunded schools, keep officers focused on actual criminals, and reduce the inmate population.”*

–voter from Freehold

### **On the inequality of marijuana-related convictions:**

*“Marijuana prohibition discriminates against non-whites. Drug convictions for marijuana charges destroys lives of people who already have the cards stacked against them.”*

–voter from Newark

## **PENSION REFORM**

New Jersey’s troubled pension fund was top of mind for many voters. While a few respondents advocated for reigning in the state’s pension obligations and benefits to public employees, the majority of responses were in favor of fully funding the pension system, particularly for teachers.

### **On fully funding public pensions:**

*“Our pension obligations are a legal liability for the state. To meet our ever-growing pension obligations, we are diverting more and more money from other important priorities like education and infrastructure.”*

–voter from Summit

*“Public workers have paid their fair share for many years, and the state hasn’t kept its promises. It’s not their responsibility to fund NJ’s other needs out of their retirement.”*

–voter from Ringwood

### **On funding teachers’ pensions:**

*“I see the daily commitment of teachers and know that many are frustrated with what has happened with the pension system. Teachers can go into other professions for a greater salary, but have stayed in teaching because it is what they love to do!”*

–voter from Haskell

## PORT AUTHORITY CONTRACTS

A contingent of respondents wrote to Voting Block about the fact that several labor unions are working under expired contracts. Several electricians for the Port Authority say they have been working without a contract for more than a decade.

*"I'm a Port Authority Employee working at the Bus Terminal. We are going on our 12th year without a contract. Our contract is from 2006 and it's impossible to stay in NJ with the current pay scale. We are living paycheck to paycheck and cannot sustain much longer."*

– voter from Essex County

*"I am a port authority electrician. I have not had a raise in 12 years, which has been a major burden on my family's way of life."*

– voter from Old Bridge

Thank you for considering these requests from New Jersey residents as you and your team finalize plans for executing your agenda in office, Gov.-elect Murphy. We'll follow up in the spring to see where things stand.

And if you'd like to read more from Voting Block, please visit [www.votingblocknj.com](http://www.votingblocknj.com).

On behalf of the partners in Voting Block,  
Sincerely,



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*Founding partners include:*

