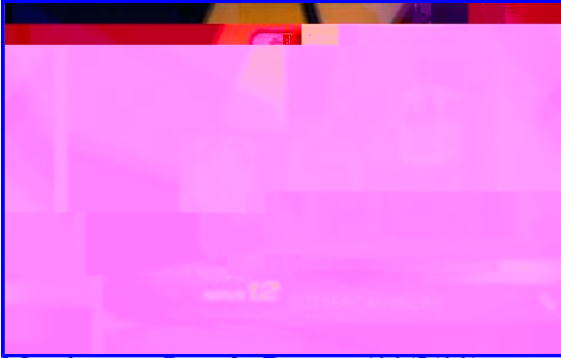
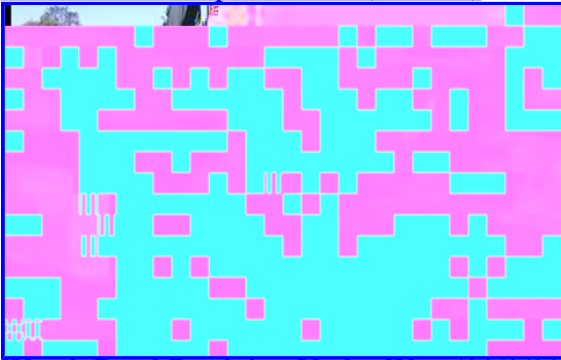


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Democrats keep edge in polls

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TRENTON — Voters — and a legislative map that makes significant changes unlikely — will decide who will serve in the

state Senate and Assembly for the second half of Gov. Chris Christie's term in Tuesday's general election.

All 120 seats in the Legislature will be decided. The state Senate terms will be for two years, as they always are in the first election after a census, meaning the whole Legislature, and the governor's office, will be up again in 2013.

Democrats currently hold a 24-16 edge in the state Senate and a 47-33 Assembly advantage. Though polls last month showed voters generally disapprove of the Legislature's performance, the polls also suggested voters want Democrats in charge — by narrow margins in the Monmouth University/New Jersey Press Media and Quinnipiac University surveys and a wider margin in the Rutgers University/Eagleton Poll.

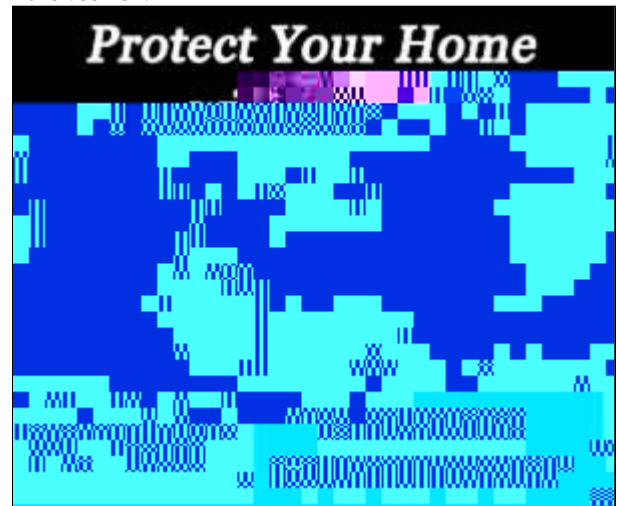
Those polls also suggest people are feeling more optimistic about Christie's performance and the direction of the state, and Republican Party spokesman Rick Gorka said that could help Tuesday.

"For the first time in seven years, New Jersey voters are happy with the direction of their state," Gorka said. "The change

Voter turnout is typically low in years the state Senate tops the November ballot, including 32 percent in 2007 and 34 percent in 2003. While interest is low and competitive races scarce, Derek Roseman, spokesman for the Democratic legislative campaign effort, said the results are important.

"I think they mean a lot because the outcome really will direct whether or not the governor over the next two years will have to, as he has in the past two years, compromise in order to achieve anything, or if he is going to have a Legislature that is just going to write him blank checks," Roseman said.

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Republicans point to historical trends in seeking to lower expectations for Tuesday's election.

Except for Gov. James E. McGreevey in 2003, seven of the last eight first-term governors have seen their party lose seats over the last half-century.

Those losses have moderated in recent history — one under Gov. Jon S. Corzine, two under Gov. Christie Whitman, three under Gov. Thomas H. Kean — except for a 21-seat loss for Democrats under Gov. James J. Florio in 1991.

The Democrats' losses in 1991 were aggravated by redistricting, as a newly designed legislative map compounded an anti-tax wave that year. Similarly, a new map in 2001 contributed to Republican losses in that year's races.

This year's elections are the first to be drawn under the map designed to rebalance districts' populations after last year's census. The boundaries that were proposed by Democrats were adopted by the map-making commission's independent tiebreaker, making major changes less likely this year.

"The map is designed not to bring about big changes," Gorka said. "Historically, even just breaking even at the end of this thing would be a very big deal. Any Republican pickups would be nothing short of historic."

Republicans said when the new map was adopted in April that while their proposal

wasn't adopted, the new arrangement gives their party more opportunities than the map from the last decade.

Roseman said Christie got more votes in 2009 than Corzine in 20 of the 40 new districts.

"He would have won half the map," Roseman said. "Republicans now may be looking at a situation where they might not be gaining in any districts and might be losing in 24 of them. That might be the statewide implication there."

More than half the state's residents are guaranteed new representation in Trenton next year, regardless of the election results.

Retirements and redistricting mean 20 percent of residents are in a district with none of their current incumbents, 12 percent in a district with one incumbent and 21 percent in a district with two incumbents.

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More than \$3 million of the nearly \$25 million spent statewide by the legislative candidates has been in Atlantic County's 2nd District, where incumbent Democratic Sen. James Whelan is battling GOP Assemblyman Vincent Polistina for the state Senate seat. Redistricting made the district slightly more Republican.

the Republicans' \$80,000. Still, a poll conducted by The Ric

Another \$3 million has been spent in the 38th District, based primarily in Bergen County. Democratic Sen. Robert Gordon is seeking re-election, but nearly half the residents are new to the redrawn district. County Freeholder John Driscoll Jr. is running for the Republicans, who gained through redistricting but still face a 30 percent to 21 percent registration deficit.

If Republicans have a superb night, they could gain Assembly seats in the 7th District.

Democrats have outspent the GOP by a 3-to-1 ratio and retain a healthy but narrower voter registration edge, but more than one-third of voters are new to the district, including its largest town, Mount Laurel.

Democrats are in position to add an Assembly seat in South Jersey, as redistricting pushed Republican Assemblyman Domenick DiCicco into a district with a full slate of Democratic incumbents, including state Senate president Stephen M. Sweeney.

More than 83 percent of the new district has never been represented by DiCicco, and Democrats have spent \$1.67 million to