

South Jersey Dems move to support Scutari for Senate presidency

By Sam Sutton

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South Jersey Democrats have started to coalesce around Sen. Nick Scutari to replace outgoing Senate President Steve Sweeney in the next legislative session, multiple sources told POLITICO on Thursday.

Scutari, whose district includes parts of Union, Middlesex and Somerset counties, is the current chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the primary sponsor of legislation that legalized and decriminalized marijuana in New Jersey.

Two sources with knowledge of the intra-party negotiations around the Senate presidency said Scutari, of Linden, has also aligned support within Hudson County's delegation, which could give him as many as eight votes in a caucus whose official headcount is expected to land at 23, down from 25 after Tuesday's elections. It will take 12 votes to secure the presidency.

The official count backing Scutari for the Senate's top post is unclear, and his path forward is hardly set in stone.

"Everything could be fluid," former governor and current Sen. Richard Codey (D-Essex) said in an interview Thursday morning.

Several candidates were floated after it became clear Sweeney, the most powerful lawmaker in New Jersey for more than a decade, would be upset by Republican truck driver Edward Durr. The Democrat's [shocking defeat](#) in the 3rd Legislative District stunned party leaders, prompting a flurry of phone calls and negotiations among lawmakers and bosses to determine who would take over for Sweeney in the next legislative session.

Incoming Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex) and Budget and Appropriations Chair Paul Sarlo (D-Bergen) are also said to be angling for the Senate presidency, though both face stiff headwinds within the caucus. Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex), the Health Committee chair, was effectively eliminated from contention when district mate Craig Coughlin [secured a third term](#) as speaker of the General Assembly on Thursday.

Democrats usually have regional power-sharing agreements in legislative leadership. This will likely be the first time in 15 years neither the speaker nor Senate president is from South Jersey.

Scutari could face obstacles as well.

He's been stung by [comments he's allegedly made](#) about domestic violence and issues involving his [work absences](#) while a municipal prosecutor in Linden. He's engaged in several feuds in his capacity as chair of Union County's Democratic Committee, including with Sen. Joseph Cryan (D-Union) — who's viewed by some as a longshot candidate for Sweeney's job.

His combativeness — a trait that's hardly in short supply around the Legislature — has sometimes found its way to the Senate floor. As prime sponsor of the state's marijuana legalization and decriminalization laws, Scutari [fought openly](#) with Sen. Ron Rice, a former chair of the Legislative Black Caucus, over the state's bid to become the first regulated cannabis market between Washington, D.C., and Boston.

There was also almost [a physical confrontation](#) between the two men during one caucus meeting.

Rice (D-Essex), who opposed marijuana legalization, declined to comment on Scutari's candidacy in an interview with POLITICO, adding the Senate's Black caucus hasn't been actively consulted.

“I know Sarlo’s name is out there as well, and I know he would make a good Senate president,” Rice said. “Some I would never support and some of my members wouldn’t support either. We’re not going to put names out there [of those candidates].”

Scutari did not respond to requests for comment.

As of Thursday afternoon, Sweeney [had not conceded](#) the election, though it’s been called by the Associated Press.

“The results from Tuesday’s election continue to come in, for instance there were 12,000 ballots recently found in one county,” Sweeney said in a statement. “While I am currently trailing in the race, we want to make sure every vote is counted. Our voters deserve that, and we will wait for the final results.”

Katherine Landergan and Carly Sitrin contributed to this report.