

'Sleight of hand'

It was a textbook case of a "heads, I win"

The criticism leveled against Murphy over the pace of reopening businesses and schools, for instance, gained minimal traction and muted resonance.

As conditions improved and vaccination rates increased, critics charged the governor's cautious approach resulted in needless economic damage to small businesses and the service industry in particular.

By conditioning ending his emergency orders on maintaining control through statutory authority, though, Murphy reframed the debate, moving away from his protecting public health and safety message to preserving the concentration of power in his office.

There is a crucial difference between the two approaches. While the public may accept — even grudgingly — one-person rule in the greater interest of keeping them safe, any effort to establish what could be perceived as dictatorial rule will be met with resistance.

Legislature, less than coequal?

His demand for legislative empowerment opened an avenue for Republican critics to renew and ratchet up their accusations that he was enamored with governing by fiat rather than treating the Legislature as a coequal body whose support and approval should be sought as policy is developed and implemented.

Republican legislators and Murphy's presumed Republican opponent, former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli of Somerset County, were quick to pounce on the agreement between Murphy and the Democratic leadership as irrefutable evidence that they shared a desire for partisan power and intended to weaponize the pandemic.

For a gubernatorial and legislative election campaign in which the administration's handling of the pandemic will play the central role, turning

the debate i

Rather than ride that wave of optimism and celebrate steering the state successfully through a dark and frightening period, Murphy reignited the possibility of a resurgence and insisted he retain the exclusive authority to impose restrictions and prohibitions on life once again.

In doing so, he handed his critics and his Republican opposition an issue which will resonate because it no longer is a difference of expert opinions over what steps to take — an environment which benefited Murphy — but a more clear-cut argument over whether one person will make those decisions.

Republicans will be in a position to introduce Murphy to voters with sarcasm: “Meet the new boss; same as the old boss.”