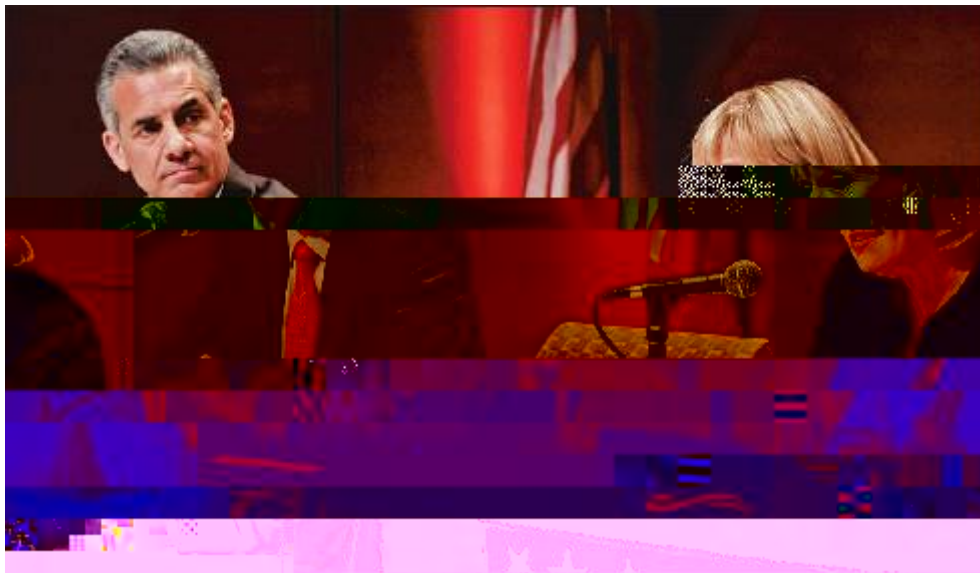


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By Maddie Hanna TRENTON BUREAU



Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli and [Lt.Gov.](#) Kim Guadagno on stage at Stockton University in the first Republican debate of the primary season. One pollster said "Christie fatigue" could be a factor in the election.

TOM GRALISH /

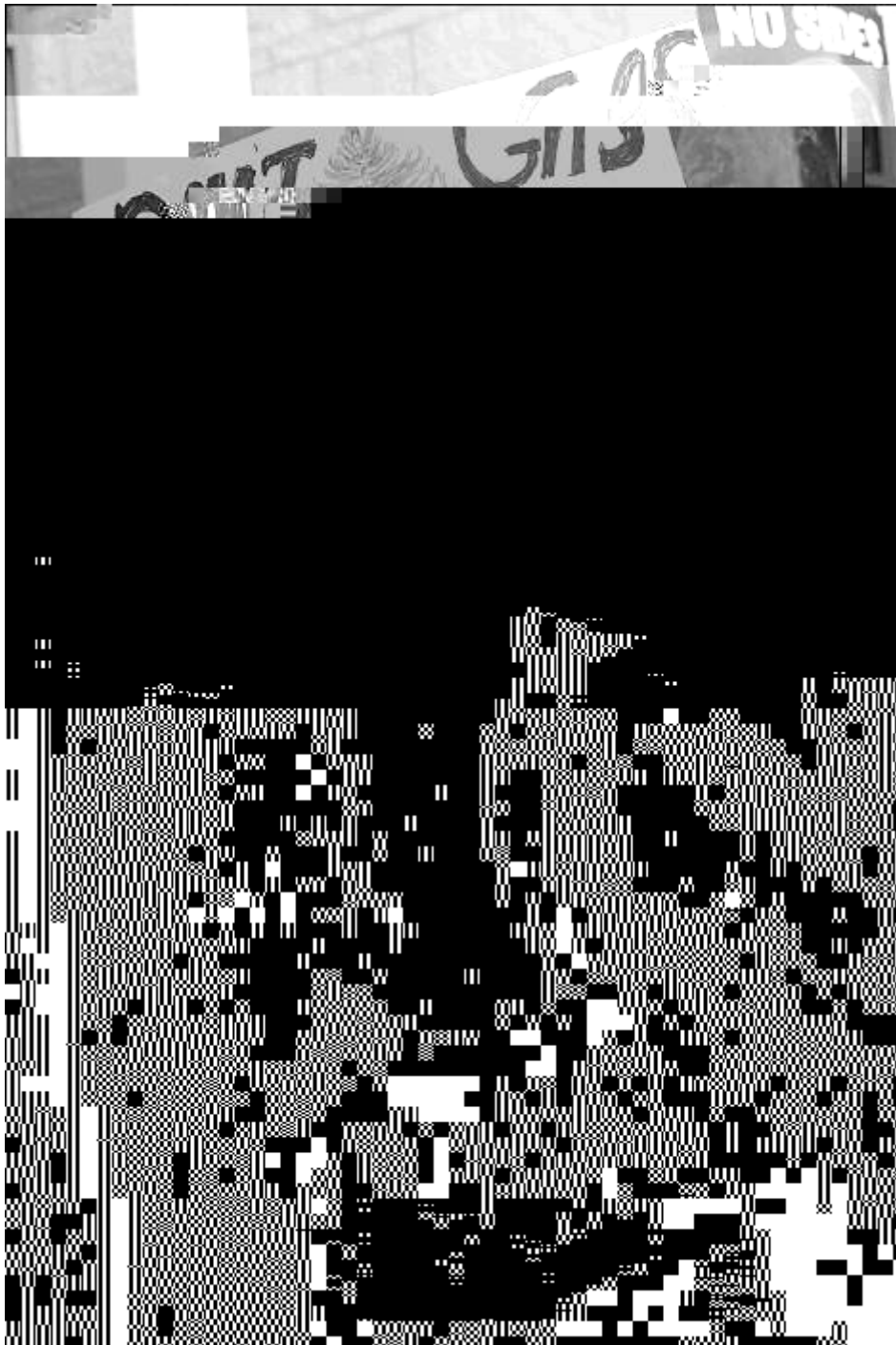
Staff Photographer

GALLOWAY, N.J. — Republican gubernatorial candidates Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli sparred over competing property tax relief plans and their political records in their first debate Tuesday, as they sought to separate themselves from a deeply unpopular Gov. Christie.

Ciattarelli, a businessman from Somerset County, accused Guadagno,

the frontrunner ahead of next month's primary, of basing her \$1.5 billion tax relief plan on "false savings and phantom revenues."

Guadagno, who says she would find savings through an audit of state government, countered that Ciattarelli's plan "fails for 600 million reasons," because he would raise that much through new income tax brackets on higher earners. Ciattarelli said his plan "doesn't



Carly DeGirolamo, 16, of West Deptford, and Georgiana Shanley, 65, of Ocean City, of the group Citizens United for Renewable Energy, protest before the Republican gubernatorial debate. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

increase anyone's overall tax bill."

The attacks in the Stockton University auditorium went beyond policy, as Ciattarelli criticized Guadagno's role in Christie's administration, arguing that "no Republican" in the state has been more critical of Christie than he had.

"I never had to say that I had to walk down the hall and ask for permission before I could disagree with the governor," he said after Guadagno said she had voiced opposition "on more than one occasion" to Christie.

Guadagno, in turn, called Ciattarelli "disingenuous at best" for voting for Christie and supporting the governor's unsuccessful presidential bid, and accused the assemblyman of

opposing the recent Christie backed gas tax increase to help his run for governor.

Political observers say it may be difficult for a Republican to win New Jersey's top job in November. "It's Christie fatigue," said Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray. "Christie has really dragged down the Republican Party." President Trump's unpopularity in New Jersey also "makes it hard for a Republican to break through," he said.

Guadagno, a former Monmouth County sheriff, has led Ciattarelli in polls — with 23 percent of GOP voters to Ciattarelli's 12 percent in a recent Quinnipiac survey — and fund raising. She has also won the party line on ballots in more counties than Ciattarelli has.

But many voters remain undecided, and "it's a lot harder" for Guadagno to separate herself from Christie, Murray said.

The battle for the Republican nomination is "not about who has the better property tax plan; it's who is more credible," Murray said. "Part of that credibility is who has been more of the Christie lapdog."

After the Republican debate, the four Democrats squared off at Stockton, also focusing on Christie's unpopular tenure.

Referring to her role in the administration — though not with her title — Guadagno said she had spent "the last 7 1/2 years as a job creator." She touted job growth and the drop in unemployment, but even so, she said people "can't afford to live here any longer."

She pledged to make property tax relief a priority. Guadagno has proposed capping the school portion of a resident's property tax bill at 5 percent of household income, giving taxpayers a credit for any amount owed in excess of that limit.

Ciattarelli argues that the state cannot deliver property tax relief without changing the school funding system and its "inequitable distribution."

Both Guadagno and Ciattarelli said they support changes to aid the underfunded state police and fire departments.

