

Rutgers-Eagleton Poll shows Booker with wide lead in Democratic Primary

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Fifty-five percent of registered Democrats and independents leaning Democratic would vote for Newark Mayor Cory Booker in the Aug. 13 primary, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, released today

Trailing far behind are U.S. Reps. Frank Pallone at 9 percent and Rush Holt at 8 percent, according to the poll.

The poll did not include state Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver, who is expected to file to run today.

The Republican primary race was not polled, as only former Bogota Mayor Steve Lonegan had announced a run while the poll was under way.

“Even with Oliver in the race, Booker is currently the odds-on favorite,” said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers. “Booker has the most visible statewide profile by far among the Democrats running, and name recognition is critical in such a short campaign. At the same time, we surveyed registered voters, and special election turnout is notoriously difficult to predict. We shouldn’t write anyone off just yet.”

When told the \$24 million cost of holding both a special primary and general election, New Jersey voters strongly oppose New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie’s call for a Wednesday, Oct. 16 election. Only 12 percent agree with Christie that the Senate election should be held separately from the Nov. 5 gubernatorial and legislative elections. Instead, more than three-quarters say the elections should have been combined.

Following Christie’s appointment of Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa to fill the Senate seat temporarily, voters had a change of heart about what they wanted in an interim senator. Ahead of the announcement, 43 percent wanted the seat to be filled by a Democrat, reflecting Lautenberg’s party. Fifty-seven percent also preferred an appointed senator who would also run for the seat in the special election. But following the June 6 announcement, opinion shifted strongly in Christie’s direction, with support for a Senate placeholder doubling from 32 percent to 64 percent, along with an 11-point decrease in support for a Democratic appointment.

“The power of the governor to set the agenda is clear in these numbers,” said Redlawsk. “In a blue state, it’s not surprising most voters initially wanted a Democrat appointed, but once Christie made the appointment, many voters took their cues from his decision.”

Results are from a poll of 888 New Jersey adults conducted statewide among both landline and cell phone households from June 3-9 with a margin of error of +/- 3.3 percentage points. The subsample of 763 registered voters reported in this release has a margin of error of +/- 3.6 percentage points. The Democratic primary ballot test includes a subsample of 364 registered Democrats and Democratic leaners with a margin of error of +/- 5.1 percentage points.

Senate Democratic primary

Booker’s massive lead comes at least in part because he is much better known than his opponents. Booker is viewed favorably by 56 percent of all Garden State voters, compared to only 12 percent who feel unfavorable toward him. One-third of voters have no opinion or do not recognize his name. Pallone and Holt, on the other hand, are barely known at all: 71 percent have no opinion or do not recognize Pallone, while 72 have no impression of Holt. Among those who venture an opinion on Pallone, 21 percent are favorable, and 8 percent are unfavorable. For Holt the numbers are 18 percent favorable and 10 percent unfavorable.

“Booker’s net favorability rating among all voters is a positive 44 points,” noted Redlawsk. “This not only suggests a potentially strong primary showing, but puts him in good position for the general election. It will take substantial effort by his opponents to change that in just a couple months.”

Booker also has much stronger favorability ratings compared to Pallone and Holt when only Democrats and Democrat-leaning voters are considered. Sixty-six percent of these voters feel favorable toward Booker, while 28 percent are favorable toward Pallone and 22 percent toward Holt. Only 25 percent do not have an opinion of Booker, compared to 68 percent for Pallone and 70 percent for Holt.

Special election and temporary appointment

Democrats and Republicans disagree with Christie’s decision to hold a special election. Eighty-four percent of Democrats, 79 percent of independents and 67 percent of Republicans say the election for the Senate seat should have been scheduled Nov. 5.

“There is virtually no support for holding a special election given the price tag,” said Redlawsk. “Republicans are upset because many had hoped an appointed Republican would serve until November 2014. Democrats don’t like it because they expect it will lower turnout in the November 2013 election, leading to an even bigger win for Christie and the possibility of Republican legislative gains. And voters will have to keep track of two separate elections, remembering that the special election is on a Wednesday, not a Tuesday.”

Prior to Chiesa’s appointment, voters decidedly favored a Democrat’s appointment as Lautenberg’s successor (43 percent to 26 percent for a Republican). But sentiment shifted

in response to the appointment, so that across the full sample, 36 percent wanted a Democrat, while 31 percent preferred a Republican. Another 28 percent volunteered that the party of the appointee would make no difference.

Not surprisingly, partisan preference for Lautenberg's appointed successor divides across party lines: 56 percent of Democratic voters say Christie should have appointed a Democrat, while 60 percent of Republicans wanted a fellow Republican. Independents are split – 24 percent preferred a Democrat and 28 percent a Republican, but 41 percent said it makes no difference.

While initially preferring that an appointed senator be willing to run for the office, voters warmed to the idea of a temporary fill-in following Chiesa's appointment. Across the full sample, both before and after the announcement, 53 percent of both Democrats and Republicans support appointment of an interim senator not running for the office himself, while 56 percent of independents agree. Women are slightly stronger supporters than men, 56 percent to 51 percent. Redlawsk noted that much of the change came because Democrats became more in favor of a temporary fill-in once a Republican was appointed.

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