

Newark Mayor Booker has early lead for New Jersey Senate: polls

By Nicholas Wapshott



Newark Mayor Cory Booker announces his plans to run for the U.S. Senate seat during a news conference in Newark, June 8, 2013.

Credit: Reuters/Eduardo Munoz

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TRENTON, New Jersey (Reuters) - Newark's Democratic Mayor Cory Booker holds a substantial early lead in the race to fill the state's open seat in the U.S. Senate, according to the first statewide polls on the race since Senator Frank Lautenberg's death last week.

Booker, one of the state's best-known Democrats, was one of the first to enter the race but faces a growing field of party rivals as Congressman Frank Pallone and State Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver, both of whom formally announced their candidacies on Monday. The field already included Representative Rush Holt.

More than half of the New Jersey voters polled by Quinnipiac University said they had a favorable opinion of Booker, who has been in office since 2006.

That popularity is not lost on Democrats, who have criticized Governor Chris Christie, a Republican, for calling an October 16 special election, rather than waiting for November 5, when voters will be voting on a number of issues including Christie's re-election bid.

New Jersey voters polled by Rutgers-Eagleton criticized Christie's decision to hold the special election so close to the general election. The special August primaries and the October general election will cost a combined \$24 million to administer.

Booker holds a commanding lead over his rivals in the August 13 primary, according to the Quinnipiac poll released on Monday. It showed 53 percent of Democratic voters supporting Booker, compared with 10 percent backing seven-term Congressman Holt, 9 percent backing Pallone and 23 percent undecided.

Quinnipiac polled 858 New Jersey voters June 6 through 9, concluding Sunday night, before Oliver tossed her hat into the

ring.

"It's Newark Mayor Cory Booker in a runaway in this first look at the special election," said Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. "The record shows that Congressmen Frank Pallone and Rush Holt are big in their districts, but, state-wide no one knows them."

DEMOCRATIC EDGE

Booker also performed well against Republican Steve Lonegan, a conservative activist who four years ago lost to Christie in the Republican primary for governor and also suffers from low name recognition. In a potential general election match-up, Booker would beat Lonegan 54 to 27 percent, the poll found. Holt and Pallone would also beat Lonegan, but by a smaller margin.

The Rutgers-Eagleton Poll released later on Monday showed Booker with a similarly wide lead. Among registered Democrats and independents leaning Democratic, 55 percent backed Booker, while Pallone trailed with 9 percent and Holt had 8 percent.

In announcing his candidacy on Monday, Pallone acknowledged his long-shot chances, but touted his progressive record. The 13-term congressman from Long Branch, a Jersey Shore community badly hit by Superstorm Sandy last fall, has been a strong supporter of the Affordable Care Act and mass transit funding.

"I have never backed down from a fight, regardless of how long the odds are and I will continue to stand firm in my fight for New Jersey," he told a news conference at the state capitol.

The special election will pose another opportunity for Republicans, who currently hold a minority position in the Senate, to gain seats ahead of 2014 midterm elections. Republicans currently hold 46 seats in the upper chamber -- including a Republican who Christie appointed to hold Lautenberg's seat on an interim basis.

On June 25, voters in Massachusetts will pick a successor to Democrat John Kerry. Polls in that race show Democratic Congressman Edward Markey with a solid lead over Republican and former Navy SEAL Gabriel Gomez.

(Reporting by Edith Honan and David Jones, additional reporting by Hilary Russ; Editing by Scott Malone and Bob Burgdorfer)

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