Poll shows Rep. John Adler with narrow lead over ex-Eagle Jon Runyan in congressional race

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Matt Friedman/Statehouse Bureau

file photos

 Former Philadelphia Eagle football player Jon Runyan, left, is challenging U.S. Rep. John Adler, right, a Democrat, in the November general election in the 3rd District.

A Rutgers University-Eagleton institute poll released this morning shows freshman U.S. Rep. John Adler (D-3rd Dist.) with a narrow lead over his Republican challenger, former Philadelphia Eagles tackle Jon Runyan.

Among all registered voters, Adler leads Runyan 35 percent to 28 percent, according to the poll.

The race, in a traditionally Republican South Jersey district that runs from the Ocean County coast to the Delaware River in the West, is expected to be the most hotly contested in the state this year. In 2008, Adler became the first Democrat to win the district since the 1880s.

The controversial candidacy of self-styled tea party candidate Peter DeStefano, who South Jersey tea party groups disavow and who Runyan's campaign has accused of being a plant by Democrats to sap conservative votes from the Republican, appears to have a negligible effect on the race. DeStefano gets four percent of the vote – within the poll's margin of error. But the poll did not label him a "tea party" candidate, instead just calling him an independent.

"Despite the debate over the DeStefano candidacy, our polling suggests that he is not currently much of a factor, and if anything, affects Adler slightly more," said pollster David Redlawsk. "It seems unlikely that DeStefano's presence on the ballot would greatly affect the dynamics of the race."

With DeStefano included, Adler's lead over Runyan is 31 percent to 25 percent.

Among voters who are paying the most attention to the race, Runyan pulls just about even with Adler, leading him 36 percent to 35 percent. Adler's lead expands to 10 percentage points with voters who consider themselves likely to vote, but Redlawsk warned that it's too early to come up with an accurate likely voter model.

"While likely voters put Adler up strongly, it's more realistic to analyze those who follow the election news," said Redlawsk. "In a midterm election, these are the voters most likely to turn out. If that pattern holds, then the race is essentially a dead heat."

Rutgers-Eagleton surveyed 421 registered voters by telephone from Aug. 5-8 and the poll has a margin of error of 4.8 percentage points.