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Poll: Menendez up 22 points on GOP challenger

By Josh Lederman - 02/28/12 10:47 AM ET

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Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) has a wide lead over the top Republican aiming to unseat him in November, besting state Sen. Joe Kyrillos (R) by 22 points, a new poll showed.

Menendez is at 44 percent to Kyrillos's 22 in a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released Tuesday. His approval rating is also holding steady at 37 percent, with 24 percent saying they disapprove.

But Kyrillos could close the gap as more voters learn who he is. Eight in 10 New Jersey voters have no opinion of Kyrillos or are unsure about him. Four in 10 say the same about Menendez — a surprisingly high number for an incumbent senator.

"We certainly expect that the numbers will tighten as the campaign develops, but Menendez starts off in a good position," Rutgers pollster David Redlawsk wrote in a polling memo.

A stalwart ally and close friend of Gov. Chris Christie (R), Kyrillos announced in early February he would run against Menendez. Christie quickly endorsed Kyrillos and has already made an appearance at one of his fundraisers.

Kyrillos campaign manager Chapin Fay called Menendez's approval ratings "anemic" and pointed out they were similar to those of former Gov. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.), who lost his reelection in 2009 to Christie.

"When voters learn how Joe Kyrillos helped Governor Christie turn New Jersey around, they will support his effort to do the same in Washington," Fay said.

The poll of 914 registered voters was conducted Feb. 9-11 and had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

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