

N.J. Democrats try nudging Sen. Lautenberg out

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(Photo: Manuel Balce Ceneta, AP)

Even in politics, it is generally considered impolite to suggest someone is too old for the job. The faux pas is even worse if the candidate in question is an incumbent and a member of your own party.

But "polite" is out the window in New Jersey, where Sen. Frank Lautenberg will be 90 years old when his term ends next year. Fellow Democrats are already saying they would like his job, regardless of whether he's ready to give it up.

Newark Mayor Cory Booker – a political star who is already a national name – wants to run, as he said last month when he declined to challenge Gov. Chris Christie's re-election bid this year. A political action committee, Pac Plus, is already signing up potential Booker supporters online.

New Jersey Democratic Rep. Frank Pallone, a regular Lautenberg ally, also wants in, saying on MSNBC on Sunday: "The senator knows that I'd like to run, and I, of course, have been talking about this for a long time. It's definitely something that I'm considering and I'm interested in." But Pallone added, "I think maybe we should be worrying about this Senate race a little later. I'm not saying I can't beat (Booker). I'm just saying we need to concentrate now on getting these (Sandy relief) bills passed in Washington and deal with the Senate race later."

On Monday, Booker avoided the question of whether he would run in a primary against Lautenberg. "I want to give him the space to make his own decision," he said on CNN. "I've announced my intention to run, but the reality is, we've got a good senator. He's been loyal. He's been there for a long time. And I think he's got a decision to make."

Booker said he has tried, unsuccessfully, to set up a meeting with Lautenberg.

Ronald Reagan turned the age issue into a laugh line when the 73-year-old president joked he would not exploit his opponent Walter Mondale's "youth and inexperience."

Lautenberg, who doesn't shy from a fight, isn't laughing.

"It's all about being delicate, not jumping the gun," said Stu Rothenberg of the *Rothenberg Political Report*. "And Booker and Pallone, gosh – there's nothing delicate about it."

His fellow Democrats are expressing their political aspirations at an unfortunate time for Lautenberg -- he has been sick with the flu and couldn't publicly counter the implied accusation of frailty. He turns 89 this month.

"It's not quite Brutus and Caesar, but it can be awkward if wondering out loud is taken as callous or disrespectful. Or seen as an overly ambitious newcomer anxious to push out a fellow party member," said Ruth Mandel of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

But Booker's political career is so closely watched that when he passed on challenging Christie, he had little choice but to say what job he does want, Mandel said. "It would have been a little disingenuous for him to say 'I might be, but I don't know.' 2014 is such an obvious date in people's minds since Sen. Lautenberg's term is up."

In 2008, Rep. Rob Andrews raised the age issue in a primary challenge against Lautenberg. While a 2007 Quinnipiac Poll showed 54% of voters thought Lautenberg was "too old" for the job, he won anyway. In 2010, returning to work after successful treatment for stomach cancer, Lautenberg said he hadn't ruled out running for another term. If he wins another term, he would be sworn in two years from now, just before his 91st birthday. That would make him one of the oldest senators to take the oath of office: Strom Thurmond was sworn in at 95 in 1997 and served until he was 100.

For now, Lautenberg has declined to comment. He is "focused on passing a robust Sandy relief bill for the people of New Jersey who are struggling, and he'll turn his attention to politics once the Sandy relief package is set," said his spokesman, Caley Gray.

"Right now, it appears that Lautenberg wants to run. At the same time, I wouldn't be surprised if he changes his mind," said Jennifer Duffy of the *Cook Political Report*, a non-partisan newsletter. "If he does run, a three-way primary would be the best thing for him. It divides whatever anti-Lautenberg vote that may exist."

Lautenberg, first elected in 1982, retired in 2000. But he didn't like it. When Sen. Robert Torricelli withdrew from his re-election race facing scandal, Lautenberg ran for his seat and rejoined the Senate in 2002.

Mandel served on the United States Holocaust Memorial board with Lautenberg during his brief period out of office. "I had never seen anyone as unhappy about having made a decision to leave office," she said. "It was who he saw himself to be, and what he wanted to do. He was lost, and explicitly, openly regretted it."