

Four Democrats, two Republicans file for U.S. Senate seat

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Four Democrats and two Republicans filed to run in the special August primary election to decide the major party candidates who will battle for the late Frank Lautenberg's U.S. Senate seat.

Newark Mayor Cory Booker, Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver and Congressmen Rush Holt and Frank Pallone filed Monday to run for the Democratic nomination. Former Bogota Mayor Steven Lonegan and Somerset physician Alieta Eck filed to run in the Republican primary.

Lautenberg, a liberal Democrat, died last week from complications related to viral pneumonia, and Gov. Chris Christie ordered both a special party primary and special election be held to fill the seat for the remainder of the term, which ends January 2015.

The special primary election is scheduled for Aug. 13 followed by the special election to fill the seat on Oct. 16.

In the meantime, Republican Jeffrey Chiesa was appointed by Christie to fill the seat until residents pick a replacement. The former state attorney general was sworn in Monday.

Two polls released Monday gave Booker a big lead in the crowded Democratic field. The Rutgers-Eagleton poll had Booker ahead, with 55 percent of registered Democrats and Independents likely to vote for him in the August primary, followed by Pallone with 9 percent and Holt with 8 percent.

The poll was based on a telephone survey of 888 New Jersey residents, including 364 registered Democrats, between June 3 and Sunday and did not include Oliver, who was a late entry into the field. The poll has a margin of error of 5.1 percent for the Democratic primary question.

"Even with Oliver in the race, Booker is currently the odds-on favorite," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton poll and a political science professor 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 off anyone just yet," Redlawsk said.

A separate poll by Quinnipiac University gave Booker 53 percent of the vote in a Democratic primary, followed by Holt with 10 percent and Pallone with 9 percent. It also did not include Oliver.

The poll gave Booker a lead of 54 percent to 27 percent in a hypothetical general election matchup against Lonegan, the better known of the two GOP candidates.

The poll was based on a June 7-9 survey of 858 New Jersey voters and 306 registered Democrats. The Democratic primary results had a margin of error of 5.6 percent.

Other political watchers said Booker's status as the front-runner in the Democratic primary is less surprising than the lack of more recognizable names on the Republican ballot.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr., Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick and previous U.S. Senate candidates Joe Kyrillos and Diane Allen all opted against running in the special party primary.

"An open Senate seat is a rare commodity. You would think more Republicans would be willing to take the chance," said Daniel Douglas, director of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Douglas said Booker's fame may have scared off some GOP contenders as well as the condensed time frame that favors a deep-pocketed candidate with an established campaign organization.

History also favors the Democrats since New Jersey hasn't elected a Republican to the Senate since 1972.

"It's been a blue state that only turns red occasionally for governors, like Christie and Christie Todd Whitman," Douglas said.

Christie's decision to hold the special primary in August and the special election in October drew jeers from Democrats, who pointed to the estimated price tag of nearly \$24 million for both, as well as some Republicans, who hoped the governor would appoint a Republican to fill the seat until 2015.

In the Quinnipiac poll, 50 percent of voters approved of Christie's decision to order the October election, compared with 40 percent who did not approve. However, 62 percent said they believed the decision was based more on politics than principle.

Douglas agreed that the October election was a shrewd political move because it keeps Christie's re-election race against Democratic gubernatorial nominee Barbara Buono at the top of the ballot for the Nov. 5 general election.

"I think the governor recognized a fundamental fact about his political future," he said. "He only has a future if he wins big in New Jersey, and this mitigates the risk."

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