

Quickie New Jersey Senate Race Takes Shape as Challengers Emerge



Newark Mayor Cory Booker speaks during a news conference on his plans to campaign for the Democratic nomination to run for the seat of late U.S. Senator Frank Lautenberg in Newark on June 8, 2013. Photographer: Ramin Talaie/Getty Images

By Terrence Dopp and Elise Young

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A four-way battle for the “heart of the Democratic Party” in New Jersey enters its first full day today as U.S. Representative Frank Pallone and state Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver jump into the race to replace U.S. Senator Frank Lautenberg, who died last week.

Pallone and Oliver joined Newark Mayor Cory Booker and U.S. Representative Rush Holt in filing papers to enter the Aug. 13 primary for a chance to run in the Oct. 16 special senate election called by Republican Governor Chris Christie last week.

“This is going to be a campaign for the heart of the Democratic Party,” Pallone, 61, said yesterday at the state Elections

Division offices. “Obviously I’m in and excited.”

The contest took shape quickly after Lautenberg, an 89-year-old Democrat, died June 3, and Christie called for a quick campaign to select a successor to fill out the remainder of his fifth term. The deadline to get on the primary ballot by handing in at least 1,000 voter signatures was yesterday. Booker, 44, was seeking the seat, as Lautenberg didn’t plan to run again. The others clarified their intentions more recently.

In a survey that offered a first glimpse of the Democratic contest, 53 percent supported Booker, followed by 10 percent for Holt and 9 percent for Pallone, according to Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut. Oliver, 60, of East Orange, wasn’t listed in the poll released yesterday. It showed 23 percent of respondents were undecided with two months to go before the party primary.

Financial Drain

The four-month Senate campaign has the potential to drain financial resources for the Democrats and may take “big-name endorsements” from state Senator Barbara Buono, 59, the party’s challenger to Christie’s re-election bid, according to Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute in West Long Branch, New Jersey. The Republican leads her by 30 percentage points, the Quinnipiac poll showed.

“The likelihood is that one of these four will become New Jersey’s next U.S. senator,” Murray said by telephone. “A lot of donors who may have been thinking about supporting Buono will probably throw their money into this race.”

“Donors like to go with winners,” Murray said. Christie, 50, has outraised Buono, a lawyer from Metuchen, by 2-to-1 ahead of the Nov. 5 general election, state figures show.

Booker Supporters

Booker has received the backing of Democratic power brokers, including Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo, who attended his announcement of his formal entry into the race over the weekend, and Camden County’s George Norcross, an insurance executive and political fundraiser who endorsed the mayor yesterday.

Pallone, who has served in Congress for 25 years, declined to compare his record to Booker’s.

“As Democrats we have to believe we can make a difference,” Pallone said. He said the governor was wrong not to set the special election concurrent with his own contest on Nov. 5, a sentiment widely shared by voters, a Rutgers-Eagleton Poll showed yesterday.

Once informed of the cost of holding a statewide balloting, at about \$12 million, more than three-quarters of respondents said it was a bad idea not to hold the special vote on the same day as the general election, the poll from the New Brunswick-based state school showed. Both should take place Nov. 5, according to 84 percent of Democrats, 79 percent of independents and 67 percent of Republicans, the survey showed.

Panned Move

“There is virtually no support for holding a special election given the price tag,” poll director David Redlawsk, who teaches politics at Rutgers, said in a statement.

Christie has said that the shortened campaign still will leave the candidates enough time to vet issues. He has declined to speculate on the outcome.

“We don’t have anybody who’s come out of the woodwork to run here,” Christie said in his Trenton office yesterday, before all the would-be candidates had filed their papers. “The people who’ve announced they’re running thus far are all people who are pretty well-known quantities in this state. So there’s plenty of time.”

Booker, announcing his candidacy on June 8, said he won’t run negative ads against fellow Democrats during the primary.

The mayor, a rising star in the Democratic party, had said in December that he was exploring a run for Lautenberg's seat instead of challenging Christie's re-election bid.

Booker Dominates

In a head-to-head matchup posed by Quinnipiac pollsters, Booker beat Lonigan, who ran for Congress in the 1990s, 54 percent to 27 percent. The June 6-9 telephone survey of 858 voters had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points, and 5.6 percentage points for Democrats in the primary.

A second Republican, Alieta Eck, 62, a physician from Somerset who practices internal medicine, arrived at the elections office to seek a place on the August primary ballot. Running on a health-care platform, she said she has a "huge amount of support from the inner city."

"The government can be a real burden," Eck said. She told reporters that she wasn't ready to give opinions on issues other than health care.

Oliver, 60, said she is running on her appeal to women. "The voters of New Jersey are entitled to have choices," she said outside the elections office.

To contact the reporters on this story: Terrence Dopp in Trenton, New Jersey, at tdopp@bloomberg.net; Elise Young in Trenton at eyoung30@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Stephen Merelman at smerelman@bloomberg.net

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