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Cory Booker's Rivals

His primary opponents may split the vote and hand him a victory.

By Katrina Trinko

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Cory Booker

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Cory Booker should consider Representative Rush Holt his new best friend.

Booker, with his name recognition and national presence, is the favorite to win the New Jersey Democratic Senate primary on August 13. Two polls released this month showed the Newark mayor with a stratospheric lead over his nearest challenger, Representative Frank Pallone: Booker led by 43 points in a Quinnipiac poll and by 46 points in a Rutgers-Eagleton poll.

Still, without the competition from Holt, Pallone would have a good chance of beating Booker: Pallone has outraised him by as much as \$1.7 million so far. But

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Katrina Trinko

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with Holt splitting the constituencies both congressmen appeal to, there's little chance that Pallone will be able to pull off an upset.

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“The only way to overcome that type of name recognition in two months is to get organized support, to get labor groups on your side,” says Patrick Murray, director of Monmouth University Institute. “It’s not clear that’s going to happen, namely because the two labor groups not particularly happy with Booker are friends with both Pallone and Holt,” he adds, referring to the teachers’ union and the

state-employees’ union.

Murray says the teachers’ union has “basically told their teachers, ‘you can vote however you want,’ knowing that they’re going to split between Pallone and Holt, that they’re not going to have a unified front or put money into this effort.”

Doug Muzzio, a political analyst and a Baruch College professor, sees Booker as the clear front-runner. “He’s got money, name recognition, Twitter, George Norcross, Joe DiVincenzo,” Muzzio says, referring to two powerful New Jersey Democrats who have endorsed Booker. “He’s got what it takes.”

One Democratic source familiar with New Jersey politics does warn that it’s a mistake to write off Holt and Pallone completely. “You really can’t underestimate either of them,” the source says. “Frank Pallone has probably had nine lives. He’s probably the best political strategist in the delegation, so he knows how to run campaigns.” Holt has similarly beaten the odds: “Holt should never have won his first election. . . . He never should have won his first reelection.”

And, the source adds, Booker may be at a disadvantage in a low-turnout special election: “He also is very popular among Democrats who may not necessarily be Democratic-primary voters.”

Assembly speaker Sheila Oliver has also announced that she will run. “The conventional wisdom is that the party bosses encouraged her to run, thinking that another African-American candidate from North Jersey will serve to divide the African-American vote and do a little bit of damage to Booker’s numbers,” says Brigid Harrison, a political-science professor at Montclair State University. “I don’t know if that is the primary factor motivating her.”

Asked for response, Oliver e-mailed, “As I clearly stated when I filed my petitions, I believe New Jersey voters should have choices . . . and those choices should include women,” and added that her legislative experience gave her insight into what voters wanted.

Harrison thinks that Democratic-party leaders and Booker could come to an understanding, but she notes that the relationship isn’t exactly warm. “Booker is not one of the party bosses’ puppets,” she says. “He’s much more independent.”

Bill Pascrell, a Democratic strategist, agrees that Booker and the Democratic party

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The Campaign Spot

have had their disagreements, including on the issue of school vouchers. And Booker's attempt earlier this year to publicly force Senator Frank Lautenberg to announce his retirement didn't sit well with some state Democrats.

Meanwhile, New Jersey state politicians agree that Booker is sure to come under fire for his record as mayor of Newark. Muzzio says one criticism would be that Booker "promised a lot but didn't deliver much" as the leader of a "problem-plagued city."

"We know he's a showhorse," Muzzio tells me. "He's got to prove he's a workhorse."

Furthermore, Booker's pledge that he would serve out his term as mayor will likely come back to haunt him. "He said he needed to complete the job," Pascrell recalls. "That's why he didn't run for governor. Well, what's changed? That was only four, five months ago."

Booker may be a national figure, Pascrell notes, but that's not the same as having what it takes to win in a low-turnout special-election primary.

"The Twitter class, the Facebook class, are certainly enamored with Mayor Booker," he says. "He's certainly a celebrity. He's a formidable candidate, but hey, this isn't the November election. This is a primary in the middle of August."

— *Katrina Trinko is an NRO reporter.*



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