

# Newark mayor favored in New Jersey Senate race

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Democratic and Republican party primaries will be held in the state of New Jersey on August 13, in preparation for a special election scheduled for October 16 to fill out the remaining 15 months in the term of Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg, who died last month at the age of 89.

The maneuvers to succeed Lautenberg, a millionaire liberal who served for most of the past three decades, illustrate the continued rightward trajectory of both capitalist parties, and underscore the disenfranchisement of the working class under the existing political setup.

While New Jersey voters will be asked to choose between candidates who faithfully defend the interests of the corporate and financial elite, unemployment in the state remains at 8.7 percent, significantly more than the national average. Newark, Camden and Paterson, to name three of New Jersey's larger cities, are among the poorest in the US. Newark has a poverty rate of close to one-third, about the same as Philadelphia's. Paterson's rate is 37 percent and Camden, with a current population of about 77,000, is by some figures the poorest city in the US, with fully 45 percent of its population below the poverty line.

None of the candidates to succeed Lautenberg have any serious proposals to address this social disaster or any of the crises facing the vast majority, including home foreclosures, the decay of public education or the skyrocketing cost of higher education.

When Lautenberg died the *Nation*, the leading voice of the decrepit Democratic Party "left," called him "the last New Deal Senator." The label is revealing, considering that Lautenberg, far from fighting for social reforms like unemployment insurance and Social Security, was best known for legislation against drunk driving and a few other relatively uncontroversial

measures.

The special election will be held only three weeks before Election Day, both in New Jersey and throughout the US. The special vote will cost the state an extra \$24 million, but it has been set by sitting Republican Governor Chris Christie in order to avoid a vote on his reelection bid on a day when larger numbers of Democratic voters might endanger his victory or at least cut into his victory margin. Christie has been positioning himself for a run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016.

The field to replace Lautenberg includes four Democrats—Newark Mayor Cory Booker, Congressmen Frank Pallone and Rush Holt, and State Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver. On the Republican side, Steve Lonegan, the former mayor of the northern New Jersey town of Bogota and an unabashed extreme right-winger backed by Tea Party groups, is expected to win the nomination easily, but is not given much chance in the succeeding election.

Ever since he announced that he would run, Booker has led in various polls by extremely wide margins. A Monmouth University poll this past week shows Booker with 49 percent of likely Democratic primary voters, compared to 12 percent for Pallone, 8 percent for Holt and 3 percent for Oliver.

Booker's lead has been ascribed to "celebrity" by the same big business media outlets that have systematically built him up ever since he took over as mayor of Newark seven years ago. In this they have been taking their cue from the ruling elite as a whole. The 44-year-old Booker is a "new-style" African-American politician much favored by big business, in the mold of mayors like Dave Bing in Detroit and Michael Nutter in Philadelphia, and of course Barack Obama in the White House.

These figures are notable for dispensing with the few remaining left phrases used by some of their predecessors to “keep hope alive” (in the words of Jesse Jackson) in the Democratic Party. Instead, politicians like Booker openly sing the praises of Wall Street and base themselves on more privileged layers of the middle class, white as well as black. The fact that Booker is able to raise many millions of dollars also helps him to achieve “celebrity” status.

The Newark mayor raised \$4.6 million for his campaign in the second quarter of 2013, bringing his total to \$6.5 million. This is many times the amount raised by his rivals put together. Last week Booker made a trip to Washington, DC, where he was expected to add a lot more to his campaign coffers. Among the lobbyists hosting him in Washington was Lanny Davis, the veteran of a number of Democratic administrations who became notorious for his role as a lobbyist for the Honduran military regime that ousted elected president Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

Booker caused something of a stir during the 2012 election campaign when he implicitly criticized Obama on one of the rare occasions that the president, as part of his campaign against Republican candidate Mitt Romney, made some verbal criticisms of the banks and hedge funds. Appearing on the television program “Meet the Press” in May 2012, Booker said the Democrats’ attacks on Romney’s record at the Bain Capital hedge fund were “nauseating to me ... [and] to the American public.”

Booker is known for his close friendship with Republican Governor Christie. He appeared together with Christie and Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” a few years ago to announce a donation by Zuckerberg of \$100 million to the Newark schools. Booker is an active proponent of school vouchers. He is associated with the Democrats for Education Reform, a group that has actively supported charter schools and other attacks on teachers and public education.

The candidate’s record in Newark rests largely on statistics showing significant declines in the crime rate in recent years, but this has also been the case in most cities and metropolitan areas. Although Newark remains the state’s largest city, it has, like most older industrial cities, lost more than one-third of its population in the past half century.

Newark’s unemployment rate is greater than 13.1 percent, and about one-third of its residents live in poverty. Like some other cities, it has seen its downtown core revive slightly, but the vast majority of the population has seen no improvement in their lives. To avoid discussing his record on jobs, poverty and social conditions, Booker has become adept in public relations techniques, such as living on a food stamp budget for a week, letting victims of Hurricane Sandy stay at his home and saving a woman from a house fire.

Booker’s opponents in the August primary have absolutely no fundamental differences with him. Pallone, who has served in the House of Representatives for 25 years, is the best known of the other candidates, and has received the endorsement of the Lautenberg family.

The Senate campaign and the role of Booker in particular underscores the treachery of all the pseudo-lefts who argue that the Democrats can be pressured to defend the interests of the working class. Voter turnout for the special election is expected to be far below 50 percent.



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