



Democrat powers like South Jersey leader George Norcross, Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo and Newark sachim Steve Aduato Sr. all are close to Christie and were not pleased at the prospect of damaging their power-sharing accommodation by going all out for a Booker candidacy.

Indeed, within minutes of the mayor's statement, DiVincenzo announced his support for a Booker challenge to incumbent Lautenberg. Presumably, Aduato and Norcross share his enthusiasm — particularly Norcross. Earlier this year, he tore into Lautenberg after the senator expressed his opposition to a proposed merger of Rutgers and Rowan universities, a Norcross pet project.

Lautenberg has hinted that he intends to seek re-election in 2014 despite reaching age 90 by then, but a well-financed and well-organized Booker challenge could be more than he could handle.

There's speculation that the party hierarchy is considering presenting a stark choice to the senator: retire gracefully and go out a winner or face the indignity of being kicked to the curb by his own party.

For Booker, the decision wasn't difficult. He didn't wrestle with his conscience. He didn't wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat of indecision.

He knew he'd be the odds-on favorite in a run for the Senate, but for governor, not so much. A primary contest for the Senate nomination remains a possibility, but the party would almost certainly coalesce around Booker.

Republicans, who haven't won a Senate election since 1972, face a grim 2014. Their bench is sparse and no Republican in the state's congressional delegation has expressed any interest in trying to reverse 40 years of futility.

Booker's decision leaves the Democratic Party in something of a muddle as it goes about settling on a candidate to oppose Christie. Even though the governor's job approval rating has soared into the uncharted territory in excess of 70 per cent, it will decline as issues of governance — like the state's onerous property tax burden — become prominent next year.

Christie is, though, in as commanding a position going into his re-election year as Tom Kean was in 1985 when his landslide established a record 750,000 vote plurality and 70 per cent of the ballots cast.

Middlesex County State Sen. Barbara Buono is the only announced Democratic candidate, but the prospect of her upending Christie is bleak. Next to Sweeney, the most mentioned potential candidate is Richard Codey, the Essex County state senator and former acting governor — although he's highly unpopular with the Norcross-DiVincenzo-Aduato troika.

The second tier includes Camden County Assemblyman and Majority Leader Lou Greenwald, U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone and Elizabeth Mayor Chris Bollwage.

As for Booker, if he truly wants to be governor, he can win a Senate seat, wait until the 2017 gubernatorial election, keep his post in Washington, and run for the open seat in Trenton.

