



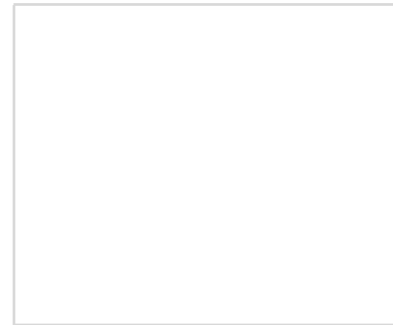
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Opinion: Seeking the Senate

BY CARL GOLDEN
THE RECORD

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THE SCREENPLAY was written in June by Governor Christie and, in the end, no one deviated from the script: Newark Mayor Cory Booker ran roughshod over three opponents to secure the Democratic nomination to fill the unexpired U.S. Senate term of the late Frank Lautenberg, while two-time gubernatorial candidate and conservative activist Steve Lonegan coasted to the Republican nomination over a footnote challenger.

Neither campaign is entitled to gloat over the outcome of what was arguably the most non-competitive statewide primary election in memory involving major party candidates of some stature and prominence. Both Booker and Lonegan led wire-to-wire, maintaining double digit leads from the day nominating petitions were filed.

By defeating two incumbent congressmen — Frank Pallone and Rush Holt — and the speaker of the New Jersey Assembly, Sheila Oliver, Booker's victory with 60 percent of the vote would normally be considered the more impressive. The challengers, though, were never really in the race.

Neither Pallone, who finished second with 20 percent, nor Holt, who ran third with 17 percent, were able to gather any significant support outside their congressional district bases, while Oliver, with less than five percent, spent most of her campaign trying to explain why she became a candidate in the first place.

Favored to win

Booker enters the two-month campaign the decided favorite over Lonegan. History is on his side (New Jersey Republicans haven't elected a U.S. senator since 1972), and unlike the Democratic gubernatorial candidate Barbara Buono — the party is united behind him.

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Former US diplomat in Iran for talks on Syria

Probe of 50 Auschwitz suspects near complete

The extent of Christie's involvement has already become an intriguing question amid speculation that the governor may wish to avoid identifying too closely with Lonegan while in the midst of his own reelection effort.

Creating space

While the governor, come September, will face a full campaign schedule, there are suspicions he'll use scheduling conflicts as a way to create space between himself and Lonegan. At the same time, Lonegan hasn't displayed any great desire to campaign with Christie, either.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Barbara Buono seized on Lonegan's overwhelming win by linking him with Christie and announcing she intends to run against the Christie-Lonegan ticket. An understandable and predictable strategy, certainly, but its long-term value is problematic.

The national party is guardedly optimistic about its odds of picking up enough Senate seats to win control and will target states where incumbent Democrats are either retiring or where Republican challengers are within striking distance. In the party's calculations, New Jersey doesn't qualify as a battleground state.

It's not that the state is reliably and lopsidedly Democratic in statewide contests by any means. For instance, of the eight governors elected since the end of the Richard Hughes administration in 1969, four were Democrats (Brendan Byrne, Jim Florio, James McGreevey and Jon Corzine), and four were Republicans (William Cahill, Tom Kean, Christine Whitman and Chris Christie).

And, of the Democrats, only Byrne served two terms, while Kean and Whitman won reelection and — if the current trend holds up — Christie will be the third to do so.

It's been the inability of Republicans to win a U.S. Senate race since the election of Clifford P. Case in 1972 that has been the party's most frustrating series of losses.

Half-century of futility

If, for instance, Booker wins the Oct. 16 special election and is successful in a bid for a full term in 2014, he'll serve until 2020. If his colleague, Sen. Robert Menendez, seeks and wins reelection in 2018, he'll serve until 2024. At that point, Republicans will have endured more than a half-century of futility.

Voters will be able to choose between dramatically divergent political philosophies in a Booker vs. Lonegan contest. It's doubtful the two will agree on any issue of significance, but rather will offer sharply competing visions of the role of the federal government and the future direction of the nation.

While Booker's campaign speeches have an evangelical touch about them, Lonegan's message frequently comes wrapped in brass knuckles.

He'll pummel Booker over Obamacare and accuse him of being another big-government, free-spending liberal of the sort responsible for the country's \$16 trillion dollar deficit.

Even in the days leading up to the primary, Lonegan — while not yet the candidate — tore into suggestions by Booker — also not yet the candidate — for new or expanded government investments in education, nutrition, child care and assistance to middle-class workers.

He described Booker's ideas as an unwelcome and undesirable expansion of the welfare state, based on the outdated belief that government can solve all society's problems by throwing money at them.

Gun control, abortion

The two are divided as well on gun control, access to abortion and same-sex marriage; Booker in support of all three and Lonegan equally as firmly opposed.

Booker will also promote his own record as the chief executive of the state's largest city, depicting himself as someone who grappled effectively with taxes, spending and crime while promoting economic development and growth.

Lonigan is a colorful campaigner who doesn't shy away from controversial or politically touchy issues. He faces an uphill task against Booker, but there's no doubt his climb will be exciting to watch.



