

Commentary: Pallone, Holt would pose serious challenges to Booker

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While Newark Mayor Cory Booker remains the favorite to win the Democratic Party nomination for U.S. Senate next year, there are growing signs that he will suffer some scrapes, bumps and bruises on his way to victory lane.

Ambition and opportunism are common qualities in politicians, but Booker's critics contend the mayor has more than his share of both. They've grumbled that Booker's December announcement that he intended to seek the seat held by Sen. Frank Lautenberg, rather than challenge Gov. Chris Christie this year, was a breach of courtesy because he failed to determine the senator's plans before revealing his own intentions. And, less than 24 hours after Lautenberg announced he would not seek re-election, the mayor's finance team began making calls to donors in what appeared to be a blatant get-on-board-now warning designed to lock up money and support early.

Giving Lautenberg a few days to bask in the media sun would have made no difference, but coming as it did, Booker's actions were unseemly, and critics seized on that as further evidence of the mayor's disrespect for the senator.

After flirting with the notion of running at age 90, Lautenberg, dealing with several health issues, chose retirement. The health issues also went a long way toward dampening speculation that, if he sought another term, party leaders wouldn't support him and he'd suffer the ignominy of rejection by his own party.

A charitable interpretation of Booker's actions would be dismissing them as rookie mistakes. However, the rap on Booker has long been that he's all sail and no anchor. His actions leading up to and immediately following Lautenberg's announcement did little to rebut that belief. While Booker praised Lautenberg upon his retirement announcement, his comments seemed more obligatory than heartfelt.

Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver, D-Essex, expressing her own interest in a Senate run, expressed annoyance at Booker's attempt to establish himself as Lautenberg's heir apparent. It shouldn't be assumed, she said, that the seat would automatically fall to Booker. Newark Councilwoman Mildred Crump, a one-time Booker ally, went further, characterizing his actions as "disgusting" and urging Democrats to look for another candidate.

In the meantime, Reps. Frank Pallone of Monmouth County and Rush Holt of Mercer County emerged as serious contenders, suggesting neither would stand down in favor of Booker.

State Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester, has been mentioned, but his candidacy is unlikely. Sweeney's interest is in the governor's office, and it is to his advantage to spend the next four years as a legislative leader addressing New Jersey problems and setting up a campaign for the 2017 gubernatorial nomination, rather than getting tangled in a multi-candidate primary for Senate.

Oliver will in all likelihood opt to remain Assembly speaker rather than challenge Booker. Two African-American candidates from Essex County pose obvious unity problems for the party. Moreover, she is employed in the office of Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo who, in addition to his key role in the deal that elected Oliver speaker, expressed his support for Booker for the Senate seat weeks ago.

Pallone, who has waited patiently for Lautenberg's retirement, presents the strongest challenge to Booker. He's unbeatable in his district, has ample campaign cash and is on good terms with party leaders.

He and Holt possess a greater understanding of the national issues with which Congress must deal than does Booker, and both have been party loyalists — a crucial trait when appealing to committed party voters in a primary election.

Booker's strength is considerable, as evidenced by polls showing him to be the only Democrat within striking distance of Christie and as the favorite in the race for Lautenberg's seat. There is concern, though, that Pallone and Holt would splinter the primary vote, benefiting Booker, who would be favored by the party's minority base and, with enough support from other voting blocs, could overcome the congressmen's challenge.

Considerable pressure will be exerted on Pallone and Holt to arrive at an accommodation and allow their supporters to coalesce behind one or the other.