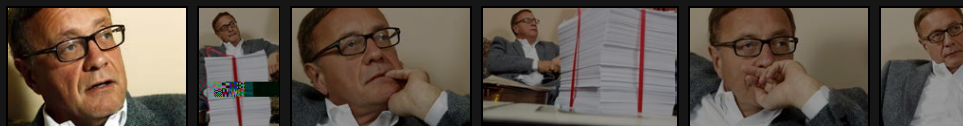


Opinion: Steve Lonegan narrowed gap in Senate race with Cory Booker with relentless campaigning



Steve Lonegan at his Bogota home on Wednesday September, 25, 2013. Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger


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By Carl Golden

It began as an all-out sprint with a clear track in front of him. After a few weeks, it became an up-tempo jog. A few weeks after that, it fell to a slow trot. Now, with less than two weeks left, Newark Mayor Cory Booker is stumbling toward the Oct. 16 special election finish line.

His once invincible 35-point lead over Republican candidate Steve Lonegan to fill the unexpired U.S. Senate term of the late Frank Lautenberg has shrunk to 12 points, and trends suggest it could fall into single digits.

While Booker and Lonegan poll well with their respective party-affiliated voters, those who describe themselves as independents are evenly divided — a potentially worrisome sign for Booker and, in all likelihood, the reason behind the mayor's latest television advertisement labeling Lonegan an extremist whose views are too radical for New Jersey.

It was unthinkable in August, when Booker rolled to an overwhelming victory in the Democratic primary to become the nominee, that he'd find himself hoping time will be his great ally and Lonegan will be unable to turn a significant number of voters to his cause in the few days remaining before the election.

Booker's campaign has been an oddly complacent one, produced, perhaps, by the universal predictions of victory.

The only debate was over how great a plurality he'd roll up.

There's been a "we've-got-this-in-the-bag" mind-set surrounding his campaign, giving rise to a level of arrogance that failed to understand the pitfalls in a remarkably light public schedule and, most damaging of all, allowing Booker to spend 10 days in California consorting with entertainment luminaries and his rich Silicon Valley pals.

A telling finding in the most recent poll was that a majority of those who expressed support for Booker also felt he was more interested in attracting national attention and personal aggrandizement than in

representing New Jersey in the Senate. That's what hanging out with Hollywood types will do.

Drawing on the indefatigability that has marked all his campaigns, Lonegan has pummeled Booker relentlessly on everything from the mayor's financial dealings to his failure to respond forcefully to an outbreak of violence in Newark, including 10 homicides in 10 days.

Because he's lagging well behind in raising money, Lonegan has made exceptionally effective use of free media, holding news conferences and scheduling public appearances to attract television cameras and generate newspaper accounts of his criticisms of the mayor.

In addition to promoting coverage for him, Lonegan's strategy led reporters to question Booker's whereabouts and ask for an explanation for his lack of campaigning.

The mayor may have badly underestimated Lonegan, convinced that voters, particularly independents, would find his conservative/libertarian views unacceptable.

To be sure, Lonegan has suffered self-inflicted wounds with some off-the-cuff and off-script comments. (He conceded he would benefit from a filter before speaking.) But he always seemed to rebound by quickly moving to a different topic on which to attack Booker.

Thanks to Gov. Christie, outspokenness is seen as a refreshing trait in politicians, an unmistakable sign that they are willing to give public voice to their genuine thoughts no matter who might be offended. For some, it's a welcome departure from the stereotypical candidates or elected officials who embrace pandering and tailor their message and responses to whomever they happen to be talking to at the moment.

Lonegan wears the mantle of blunt and brash very well, indeed. Even if he recognizes some of his views may fall well to the philosophical right of the prevailing political environment, he doesn't hesitate to express them.

"This is what I stand for," he seems to say, "and, if you disagree, vote for the other guy."

When Lonegan describes his contest with Booker as a clear choice, it rings true.

He exemplifies the warning to never pick a fight with someone who has nothing to lose. He doesn't and Booker does.

With little time remaining, Booker holds the lead, and odds are better than even that he'll maintain it. It seems likely, though, that he'll fall considerably short of expectations, and those who make a living analyzing election outcomes will work overtime telling everyone why it turned out the way it did.

A single-digit victory margin will strip some of the luster from the Booker brand and reignite the criticisms that there's little of substance behind the image. One can anticipate the description "empty suit" being thrown around in the election's immediate aftermath.

The late football coach Vince Lombardi, asked by a reporter to explain a defeat suffered by his Green Bay Packers, replied: "We didn't lose; we just ran out of time."

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