

Polls, media, and polarization have made New Jersey's Special Senate Election between Cory Booker and Steve Lonegan a must-watch

This week, New Jersey goes to the polls in a Senate vacancy election. While the Democratic candidate, Cory Booker is ahead, his path to what has been seen as a likely victory has been far from smooth, write [Ashley Koning](#) and [David Redlawsk](#). They argue that because of an over-emphasis on individual polls driven by the media, the newly focused critical lens on Booker, the divergent strategies of the candidates, and the national implications of their ideological divide, this non-event has been thrust into centre stage in an otherwise predictable election season.



This election was not supposed to happen – at least not on this day or this year. Newark Mayor Cory Booker (D) – a rising political star known for [constant tweeting](#), [heroic acts](#), and [national headline-making](#) – was on a different path five months ago. Having [decided not to challenge Republican Governor Chris Christie](#) for the governorship, Booker was instead planning a [much-criticized bid](#) to unseat fellow Democrat Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) in 2014. As for former Bogota, New Jersey Mayor Steve Lonegan (R) – a strong conservative in a “blue” state – he had been largely absent in recent state politics and was certainly not viewed as a viable 2014 candidate. Five months later, however, the two are front and center of a special statewide race with national implications and many eyes across the country watching – and a narrowing lead for Booker that has made this race more of a contest than anyone has expected.



When [Senator Lautenberg died](#) on June 3, 2013, he left behind an [accomplished legacy](#) – and a vacant Senate seat. Governor Christie – in the midst of his own reelection effort – had [multiple options](#) for filling it, all of which had some risk for both his gubernatorial campaign and a much-rumored presidential bid in 2016. Christie ultimately appointed Republican Jeff Chiesa to fill the seat until a special election later that year. Stating that the people of New Jersey needed a “[voice and a choice](#)” as soon as possible, Christie set the date for October 16, three weeks before the already scheduled November 5 gubernatorial election.

[Criticism of Christie's decision abounded](#). Some saw it as an advantage for Booker from his [bipartisan buddy Christie](#), since the shortened campaign period would limit chances for lesser known Republican candidates and would provide a seemingly easy path to victory for the very well-known and liked Newark mayor. Others saw the decision as a self-serving political calculation to prevent Booker's presence on the ballot from encouraging greater Democratic turnout in the governor's race presumably to Christie's detriment. Whatever the motivation, many expected that the odd date selected for the election would make for low voter turnout with the campaign drowned out by coverage of Christie's all-but-



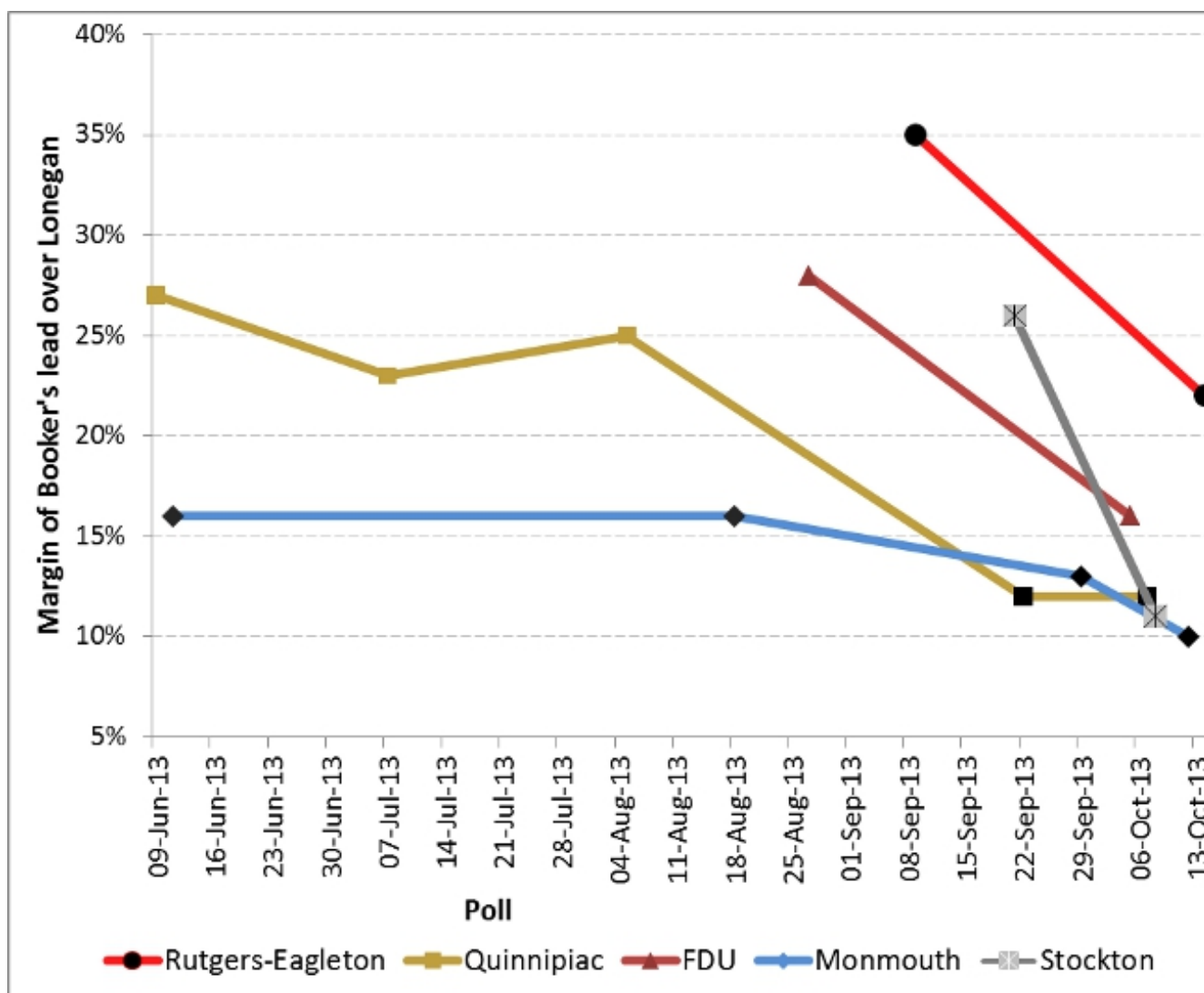
Democratic candidate Cory Booker Credit: Janelle Bouie (Creative Commons BY SA)

inevitable re-election.

Fast-forward to today, the Senate race has become major front-page news. The race has evolved into a battle of stark ideological differences, fierce campaigning, and a closer margin than expected. Why? The answer may be a combination of things – especially the unpredictability of election polling, the perhaps not-so-minimal effects of the media and campaigning, and the increasing polarization seen nationwide in the United States.

Polling during elections often seems to move around. Different polls reporting different results with different samples at different times can all make for confusion over where the race really stands. A significant challenge for any poll is determining who is most likely to vote come Election Day. This is especially true for a special election on a date other than the traditional day after the first Monday in November. Polls can develop good models of “likely voters,” but these models depend on a set of assumptions that are often opaque. Each pollster seems to use a different formula to determine who is most likely to vote, and the resulting vote margins can vary by more than a few points, as seen with the disparities of polling on this race, as shown in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1 – Booker’s Lead Over Lonegan in the New Jersey U.S. Senate Race, June – October 2013

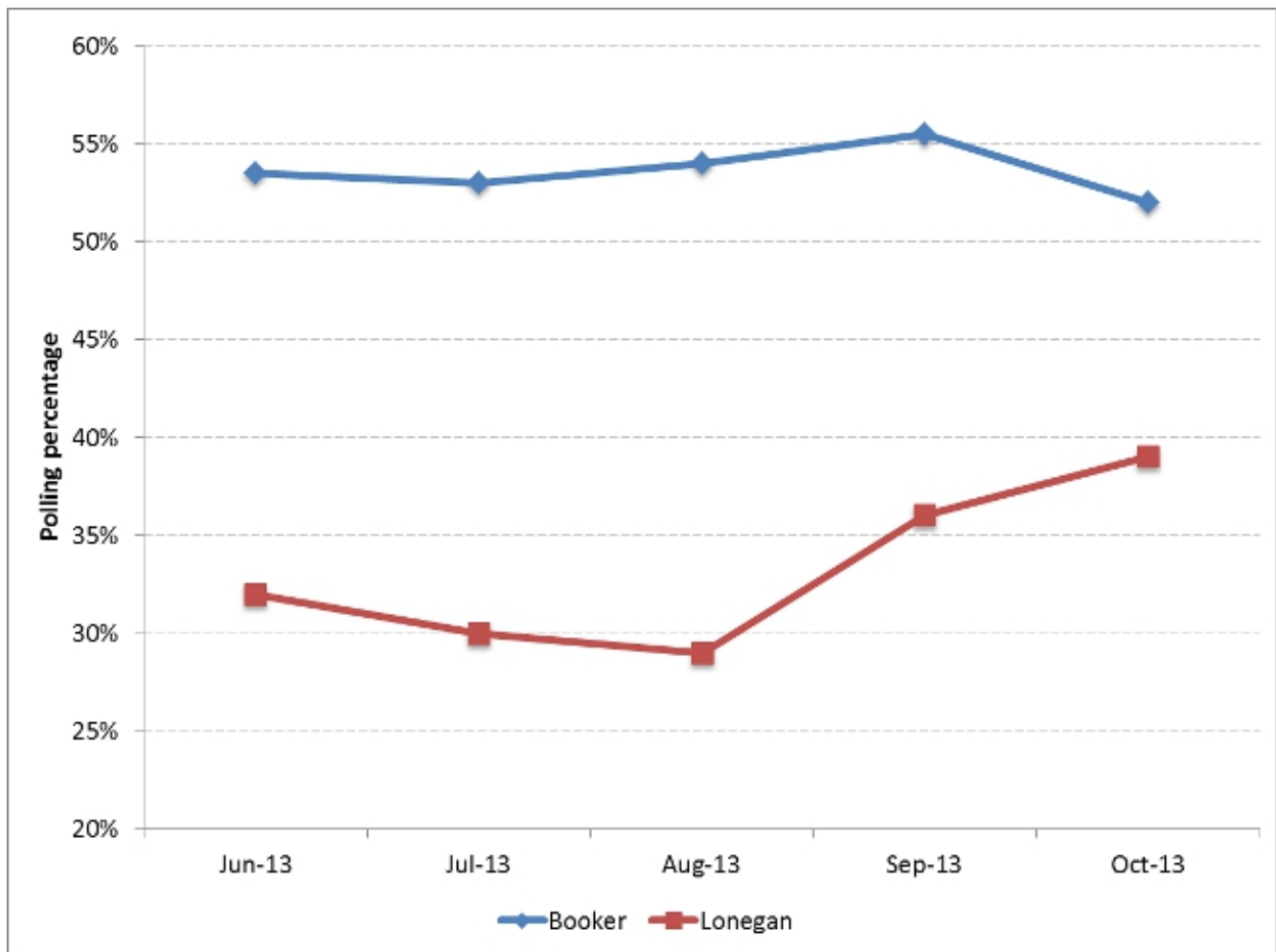


Note: Likely voters denoted by black markers, registered voters otherwise. Data Courtesy of Real Clear Politics, Rutgers-Eagleton Poll 2013. Figure Credit: Caitlin Sullivan.

Booker’s margin over Lonegan with likely voters has been as high as 35 points and as low as 12 points from polls taken within the same month. Some polls have even forgone likely voter models due to the unpredictability of the special election. Even as recent numbers seem to have steadied, the focus on Booker’s margin throughout the campaign and the over-emphasis of individual polls misinterprets the purpose of election polling, which can at

best give us snapshots in time. The lesson here is to not take any single poll all that seriously, but rather [look at them all as a group](#), as in Figure 2 below (which shows a median ‘smoothed’ measure of monthly polls), to get a better sense of the direction of the election. And right now, that direction is still toward Booker.

Figure 2- Booker vs. Lonegan poll medians, June – October 2013



Note: Data courtesy of Real Clear Politics. Rutgers-Eagleton Poll 2013.

Still, while most New Jerseyans expect Booker to win, Lonegan appears to have made a real race of it, no matter what poll you watch. This is probably a result of his “relentless” attacks on Booker, which have caught on with the media. The result is some not-so-minimal effects on this campaign. Even if Booker wins, the media have had a significant impact on the Senate race, regularly fueling the fire of speculation by interpreting each poll as indicative of Booker’s ultimate fate on Election Day. The media has continually highlighted the horserace and the spectacles of each candidate instead of the issues, while depicting the race as [much closer](#) than it really is. After all, even if Booker’s lead is “only” 12 points, in political science terms (and in real politics) that’s normally thought of as a solid win, if not a landslide.

But such a win for Booker won’t be enough in the media’s eyes. The media, seemingly tiring of the Booker-as-hero meme, has regularly featured Lonegan as a tough challenger and an underdog who won’t go down without a fight, despite Booker’s double-digit lead. And perhaps rightfully so. Through [effective campaign tactics and attacks](#), Lonegan has fed the media an unflattering portrayal of Booker throughout the campaign and has devotedly kept to his anti-Booker talking points, calling the Newark mayor a “[tweeter](#)” instead of a “[leader](#)” and criticising his regular absence from the campaign trail and the state to raise funds in places like Hollywood.

To be fair, Booker’s own campaign efforts have been accurately labeled by the media as “[lackluster](#)” until recent days when he began to aggressively attack Lonegan. A [critical spotlight](#) has been put on the mayor during a time of [increased murders and crime in Newark](#), again aided by smart Lonegan tactics. These tactics have earned

Lonegan the kind of attention he can't possibly afford to buy through TV advertising. Deconstructing Booker's heroic exterior through a [salacious Twitter "scandal,"](#) his [financial dealings with his former law firm,](#) and his [record as mayor](#) has become all the rage. This is in sharp contrast to the weeks immediately following the August primary, when Lonegan was mostly portrayed as an extremist prone to wacky ideas as he [questioned Booker's masculinity](#) and made [racially tinged jokes about Newark.](#) But as the polls appear to have tightened, that story seems to have disappeared, making Booker's once smooth path to victory unexpectedly rocky.



Republican candidate Steve Lonegan Credit: Nick Step (Creative Commons BY)

The Senate race has also reflected the increasing ideological polarization in Congress. Rarely has "blue"

New Jersey, a state that has not elected a Republican to the Senate since 1972, seen such diametrically opposed candidates. [Booker and Lonegan have taken vastly different stances](#) on almost everything, sharing little common ground and presenting two very different outlooks for how they would represent New Jersey and the nation as a whole. Both have attacked each other as ideological "extremists" in their heated debate exchanges in the week before the election: Lonegan has continually tied Booker to Obama, calling him Obama's "[Hollywood stand-in,](#)" while Booker has likened Lonegan to the "Tea Party fringe" causing the shutdown in Washington.

Perhaps this very impassioned and heated partisan rhetoric used by Booker and Lonegan is rallying their respective liberal and conservative bases in New Jersey, perhaps driving more voters than expected to pay attention and vote in a race that has potentially very important consequences for both the state and the country. Because this is an off-year for national elections, this race allows New Jersey voters to see Booker and Lonegan as proxies for President Obama and the Tea Party and to register an opinion on not only the candidates but also ideological polarization in Washington.

While few expect a real October surprise, it is not the destination but the journey that has proved noteworthy. A race that should have received little attention and interest, and should not have been so hotly contested, has taken center stage in an otherwise predictable election season. Due to an over-emphasis on individual polls driven by the media's penchant for the horserace, the newly focused critical lens on Booker, the divergent strategies of the candidates, and the national implications of their ideological divide, this non-event has become an event. At a minimum, this is a good lesson for candidates in never taking a campaign or an opponent for granted, and always running the race as if from behind. This is also a good reminder to voters that their decision has serious consequences for what is happening in Washington. Though Booker will most likely prevail in this Senate battle, [he will not come out unscathed.](#) But perhaps those battle scars will be a good reminder to him that being a political superhero is hard work and not always as simple as typing 140 characters.

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