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Can Jeff Bell Win in New Jersey?

By Robert W. Patterson

It has been 42 years since a New Jersey Republican has won a U.S. Senate election, and Democratic Sen. Cory A. Booker — who won election last year by 11 percentage points — is expected to extend that streak in November. Yet the odds haven't kept four Republicans from squaring off for the nomination in the June 3 primary.

With President Obama's approval ratings plunging, these Republicans are hoping to ride a wave election into office. But Booker's challengers, none of whom has held elective office, seem reluctant to veer from GOP talking points that resonate more in the Sun Belt than in the Northeast. Nor are they offering the voters, as did Gov. Christie, compelling reasons to vote Republican.

Murray Sabrin, the GOP hopeful with the most name recognition, was the gubernatorial nominee of the Libertarian Party who nearly cost Gov. Christine Todd Whitman her reelection in 1997. Reflecting the quirks of Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, his antigovernment leanings represent a poor fit for a quintessentially blue state.

Similar weaknesses haunt Rich Pezullo, a 20-year Army Reservist and the Conservative Party nominee for the U.S. Senate in 1996. Another lesser-known candidate, Brian Goldberg, a West Orange small-business owner, has garnered the lion's share of county-level party endorsements.

The fourth candidate, Jeffrey Bell, offers the most promise because of his involvement in Republican policymaking in Washington. Although he hasn't lived in the state for 30 years, Bell was the GOP Senate nominee from New Jersey in 1978, at the age of 34, upsetting incumbent Clifford P. Case in a close primary. He was also a Senate candidate in 1982. (Full disclosure: I have known Bell professionally for 16

years and voted for him in both of those races.)

Challenging better-known Republicans who were likely to win may not have been politically shrewd, but Bell has since proved to be a loyal party operative, accomplished policy wonk, and keen political theorist. In addition to working for Richard Nixon and Jack Kemp, Bell helped Ronald Reagan win the presidency and shaped his economic-growth agenda.

With the support of Sen. Bill Bradley, to whom he had lost in 1978, Bell was instrumental in passing the landmark Tax Reform Act of 1986, which equalized rates for investment and labor income. His think-tank credentials include stints at the Harvard Institute of Politics, the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers, and the Manhattan Institute.

Were Bell to become the nominee, the unassuming father of four and Vietnam veteran could run as the populist alternative to Booker, the celebrity bachelor who embodies all the contradictions of today's Democratic Party. As Daily Beast columnist Lloyd Green would say, Booker is a *Downton Abbey* Democrat, not a "lunch-bucket liberal" like FDR or JFK.

In contrast, Bell embraces social conservatism as a core of American identity and indispensable to the Republican coalition. For more than two decades, he has warned that his party loses by not defending Middle America against the sexual-liberation and multicultural agendas pushed by the adversarial class, with the aid and comfort of Democratic leaders like Booker.

Nonetheless, to exploit the incumbent's vulnerabilities, Bell needs to rebuild his economic platform. Promoting the gold standard as the antidote to all that ails the economy, favoring individually purchased health-care insurance, calling for more immigration and guest-worker permits, and seeking Puerto Rico statehood are not selling points for

a state suffering from the worst labor market in a generation.

For all his intellectual firepower, Bell has forgotten what successful Republicans instinctively grasp:

Voters expect economic tangibles in return for their support. Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt favored average Americans over financiers. Dwight Eisenhower spent on infrastructure and defense research. The Gipper strengthened Social Security and protected U.S. jobs from foreign competition. Christie has made clear that the people of his state take precedence over free-market ideology.

Bell favors a "robust energy policy," including fracking and completing the Keystone pipeline. But he should also promote investment in infrastructure and manufacturing while offering a "moon shot," like turning New Jersey into a medical-research enterprise zone — free of trial-lawyer plundering and fast-tracked for FDA approval — to find cures for debilitating conditions like diabetes and to address raging epidemics like Alzheimer's.

Unless Bell — or whoever wins June 3 — can persuade an anxious electorate that it has much to gain from voting Republican, Booker will easily ensure that Clifford Case remains the last GOP senator elected in the Garden State.

Robert W. Patterson served in the administration of Gov. Corbett.

✉ rwpaterson79@verizon.net

📧 @RWPatterson

Crisis in Ukraine

Trudy Rubin's reports from Ukraine continue in The Inquirer's Sunday Currents section.



TRUDY RUBIN
📧 @trudyrubin