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Menendez has a narrow lead, but it's Kean N.J. trusts

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The Record

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By **HERB JACKSON**
WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT



► Complete results: [The Record voter poll](#)

Democrat Bob Menendez holds a six-point lead in the race for U.S. Senate even though more New Jersey voters like and trust Republican Tom Kean Jr., a poll by The Record found.

arrowNew Jersey Sen. Robert Menendez addresses the crowd at a morning East Orange Democratic Fall breakfast at Nanina's in the Park in Belleville, N.J.

That may be because New Jerseyans, by a wide margin, want Democrats to control Congress in January, the poll also found.

"Any other political year, I think the Republicans win that seat," said pollster Del Ali of Research 2000, the Rockville, Md., firm that conducted the survey. "The only thing saving Menendez is the climate out there."

Menendez led Kean 48 percent to 42 percent in the survey of 600 likely voters taken Monday through Wednesday. Just 10 percent said they were very or somewhat likely to change their minds by Election Day.

The poll found the electorate sharply split by gender. Women preferred Menendez 52 percent to 37 percent, while Kean had a three-point edge among men. Kean also held a five-point lead in South Jersey, while Menendez had a 10-point lead in the more populous northern part of the state.

The poll's margin of error was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Menendez was appointed to the Senate in January after serving 13 years in the House, and has cast the campaign primarily as a referendum on President Bush and the war in Iraq, which he voted against in 2002. He has depicted Kean as a rubber stamp for Bush and countered attacks on his ethics by questioning Kean's fund-raising practices and votes in the state Legislature.

Kean, a state senator from Union County, has accused Menendez of lining his pockets with taxpayer money by collecting more than \$300,000 in rent over nine years from a federally subsidized non-profit organization in Union City. Federal prosecutors have subpoenaed information about the lease, but Menendez says it was approved by House ethics

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attorneys.

The poll found voters believe Kean is more trustworthy by a 49 percent to 36 percent ratio, and they personally like Kean more than Menendez, 48 percent to 33 percent.

But even among people who consider Kean more trustworthy, 35 percent are voting for Menendez, apparently because other factors are more important.

Thirty percent of voters said the Iraq war was the most important issue in deciding their vote, compared with 10 percent who said corruption. Voters also want to see Democrats rather than Republicans control Congress -- by a margin of 18 percentage points, 53 percent to 35 percent.

To control the Senate, Democrats need to pick up six seats nationwide and not lose any. Menendez occupies the only vulnerable Democratic seat, political handicappers say, and both parties have spent millions of dollars on ads here in recent weeks.

Bush is very unpopular. In the poll, 37 percent said Bush was doing an excellent or good job as president, while 31 percent said he was doing a fair job and 32 percent said he was doing a poor job.

Early in the campaign, Republicans had hoped that raising the state sales tax would make Governor Corzine unpopular and voter anger at Trenton Democrats would drag Menendez down.

But the poll found that while Corzine is not popular, he's faring far better than Bush. Forty-four percent said Corzine is doing an excellent or good job, 38 percent a fair job and 10 percent a poor job.

Voters see both Senate candidates as flawed. The poll found 41 percent have a favorable opinion of Menendez while 38 percent have an unfavorable opinion. Kean's favorable/unfavorable ratio of 40 percent to 32 percent was slightly better.

When asked how they felt about the choice of candidates, 45 percent said they were very or somewhat satisfied, while 44 percent said they were not very satisfied or not at all satisfied.

"I don't think voters are crazy about either man," Ali said. "It's like voting for the lesser of two evils. They really want Democrats to take over, but really don't like Menendez."

Menendez spokesman Matthew Miller said voters "understand the stakes are high in this campaign.

"They're rejecting Tom Kean Jr.'s smears because they want a candidate who is talking about issues that matter to them, and who they know will stand up to George Bush and change the direction of the country."

Kean spokeswoman Jill Hazelbaker said it continues to be a tight race, and argued Menendez should be doing better given the way voters feel about his party. She noted that until this weekend, Menendez had been spending more heavily than Kean on TV advertising, but the two candidates' airtime is going to be closer down the stretch.

"I think you're going to see numbers move a bit," Hazelbaker said. "We just started running some positive advertisements. As people are given more reasons to vote for Tom Kean, as they see him as a moderate, as independent, you're going to see numbers change from Menendez to Kean."

The poll found voters consider both candidates to have run equally negative campaigns, and most said TV advertising had not affected their choice. But among those who said their vote was swayed by the depictions in the ads of Menendez as corrupt and Kean as a rubber stamp, slightly more said they were inclined to vote against Menendez than against Kean.

That difference could be critical if the spread between the candidates was one or two percentage points, Ali said, "but you have to give the edge to Menendez.

"In spite of all his problems, his unfavorables, he's still ahead. If voters were going to make the jump to Kean, you'd think he'd be ahead by now," Ali said.

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