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Hanabusa builds lead in Senate primary

Democratic voters know little about U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz, the incumbent, according to a new poll

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U.S. Rep. Colleen Hanabusa has a gap over U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate, a new Hawaii Poll has found, and a quarter of voters interviewed did not know enough about Schatz to form an opinion about the senator.

Hanabusa was at 48 percent and Schatz was at 40 percent in the poll of Democratic primary voters. Eleven percent were undecided.

In a potentially promising development for Hanabusa, the congresswoman led among union, senior and Japanese-American voters who historically vote in higher proportion in primary elections.

Hanabusa also had a 62 percent favorable rating, the second highest — behind U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard — of all the politicians tested.

Schatz's favorable rating was 51 percent. More importantly, 13 percent of voters had never heard of the senator, while 12 percent had heard of him but did not know enough to draw a conclusion.

Schatz, who was appointed by Gov. Neil Abercrombie in December 2012 to replace the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, has a fundraising advantage over Hanabusa. Strategically, the young senator may have to use the campaign money soon to better define himself for voters before Hanabusa has the chance to write the narrative.

Julia Neumann, a retired bookkeeper who lives in Kaneohe, maintains Hanabusa is capable.

"She's a fighter," she said. "She doesn't back down. She makes her stand and she goes for it, even if it's unpopular.

Lance Wendel, a retired firefighter who lives in Kula, Maui, is leaning toward Schatz and thinks he has done a good job.

Wendel said he did not know a lot about Schatz — the former lieutenant governor, state party chairman and state lawmaker — before he was appointed to the Senate.

"My initial reaction is he seems to be doing OK, but I'd have to learn a little more," he said.

Rebecca Ward, the president of Ward Research Inc., which conducted the Hawaii Poll for the Honolulu Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now, said she is not surprised that a quarter of voters interviewed were not familiar enough with Schatz, given the short amount of time he has been visible as a senator.

Schatz has an opportunity to tell his story during the campaign.

"And then it's really a matter of where those folks line up once they become more familiar," she said.

The poll of the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate was taken by telephone landline and cellphone from Feb. 1-11 among 528 primary voters statewide. The margin of error was 4.3 percentage points.

Favorable ratings for the candidates were based on interviews with 642 voters statewide. The margin of error was 3.9 percentage points.

The demographic breakdown showed a pronounced difference in voter support for the candidates based on race and ethnicity. Fifty-five percent of Japanese-American voters preferred Hana-busa, who is Japanese-- American, while 36 percent liked Schatz. Sixty-one percent of white voters backed Schatz, who is white, while 26 percent sided with Hanabusa.

Race and ethnicity have always been factors in Hawaii politics, but more as an undercurrent and less as a barrier, particularly in statewide elections. (Four of the seven governors since statehood, for example, have been white.)

"I think it's more striking than we've seen in other recent elections," Ward said.

The split among union voters in the poll also was interesting.

Fifty-three percent of union households supported Hanabusa, while 38 percent went with Schatz. The senator has earned several important labor endorsements that could potentially blunt the anticipated union sympathy for Hanabusa, a former labor attorney.

The poll found that 18 percent of voters planned to participate in the Republican primary. Nine percent of voters had a favorable impression of Cam Cavasso, a former state lawmaker running in the GOP primary, while 61 percent had never heard of him and 19 percent had heard of him but did not know enough to form an opinion.

Hanabusa said she was humbled by the findings but also knows that polls capture only a snapshot in time. Just 3 percent of voters said they had never heard of the congresswoman, and 8 percent had heard of her but did not know enough.

"We are going to continue to do what we feel has brought us here, which is to continue to listen to people, continue to take back their message and — the most important thing — to earn their trust and to continue to deserve their support," she said.

Several national political analysts have given Schatz the advantage in the primary, mostly based on his superior fundraising and endorsements. Local political analysts have cited that no incumbent U.S. senator

in Hawaii has lost an election since statehood, with the caveat that Schatz was appointed, not elected.

"Like I've always said," Hanabusa said, "there's optics in Hawaii and there's optics in D.C."

The Schatz campaign publicly released an internal poll on Saturday that showed the senator with a narrow edge over Hanabusa. The Mellman Group poll, paid for by the Schatz campaign, was taken in early- to mid-January.

Schatz also informed supporters about the internal poll results in a fundraising appeal on Saturday.

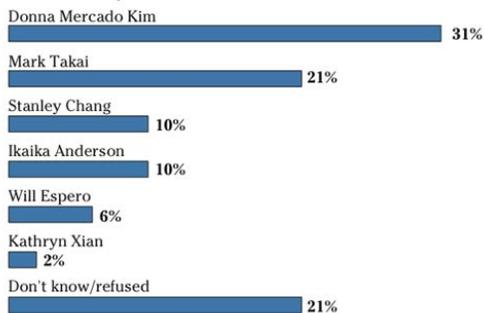
"Elections aren't decided in February, though, and we know this is going to be a hard campaign," the senator wrote.

Clay Schroers, Schatz's campaign manager, said in an email that the internal poll "shows that the voters of Hawaii are increasingly supporting Senator Schatz as they embrace his hard work to increase Social Security benefits for Hawaii's seniors, promote a clean energy economy, and fight for equal pay legislation to ensure women are paid the same as men for doing the same job."



Since Colleen Hanabusa is running for U.S. Senate, her seat in the U.S. House of Representatives will be vacant. If the Democratic primary for the 1st Congressional District were held today, who would you vote for?

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Poll was conducted among 272 Democratic primary voters in the 1st Congressional District by telephone (landlines and cellphones) Feb. 1-11 by Ward Research. The margin of error is plus or minus 5.9 percentage points. Numbers do not total 100 percent because of rounding.

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