Santorum - Can He Win?
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The looming 2006 Pennsylvania US senate election raises two contingent questions of some considerable importance. Both questions are nationally consequential, both have pressing significance for Pennsylvania, and both deal with Senator Rick Santorum. The first and most fundamental of the two: Can Santorum under any reasonable scenario win his race against Bob Casey Jr.--or is his candidacy hopeless given the political circumstances he is confronting?

Those political circumstances can be succinctly stated. Santorum, running for a third term, has made himself a virtual lightening rod for controversy on a wide variety of social and cultural issues, running the gamut from gay rights to working women to pedophile priests. Along the way, he has sometimes alienated key conservatives in his own party, while generally angering moderates and enraging liberals.

At the same time he has managed to allow unpleasant questions to be raised about his own integrity in allowing his children to receive education benefits they were arguably not entitled to, and equally embarrassing questions about his judgment in supporting a lawsuit brought by his wife that seemed to compromise his public position on tort reform.

In addition, he has been strongly criticized for his role in the Terry Schiavo case, while his support of Bush’s Social Security proposals has become a political liability for him. As if this did not create enough problems for him, he is facing an opponent, Bob Casey, who in 2004 became the leading vote getter in the state’s history.

A quantitative summary of Santorum’s re-election woes is contained in recent Keystone Poll ratings. His job approval among voters stands at a dismal 37-percent, the proportion of people that regard him favorably stand at 38-percent, and the percentage of voters who think he deserves re-election is only 36-percent. In a multitude of polls reported this year, he runs behind Bob Casey between 10 and 15 percentage points. Under the most indulgent reading of his political situation, Santorum’s electoral problems are imposing, his prospects dismal.

So to the question, can he under any circumstances win? Or is it time for the full figured lady to start her song? Certainly a lot of knowledgeable national analysts, including more than a few of Santorum’s own party, think that the race is over.

But this belief ignores Pennsylvania political history, and grossly misreads the nature of contemporary state politics. In fact, there is no doubt that Santorum could win reelection. How he might do that is another question we get to momentarily. But first here are four compelling reasons that support the conclusion that Santorum could still win:

1. Incumbency--He is the incumbent, and incumbents win in Pennsylvania--not sometimes or mostly, but virtually all of the time. Only one incumbent U.S. senator, governor or, for that matter, any other state constitutional officer has lost a re-election bid in modern times, and he lost to Rick Santorum.
2. **Resilience**—Santorum may have seemed like a politically inept politician the last year or so, and his public statements on some controversial social issues have appeared needlessly provocative. But much of the “Rick is toast mentality” is based on the untenable assumption that he will continue the same klutzy politics through the campaign. He won’t. Santorum is a smart, resourceful, and crafty politician, who finds a way to win.

3. **Resources**—He has never lost an election before. Moreover, he has access to virtually unlimited resources, both money and surrogates to run his campaign. Santorum’s story has so far been mainly mediated through a wary, if not critical press. Advertising can change that and it will.

4. **History**—Finally, and most fundamentally, he can yet win because Pennsylvania is still a very competitive two party state in which candidates of both parties win big elections, in which voters notoriously split their tickets, and in which many elections are close contests—often undecided until late on election night. There’s a reason Pennsylvania politicians seldom have fingernails; they bite them off.

So, Santorum can win. Now to the tougher second question: how could he do it? First, the obvious, it won’t be easy. He is running against a seasoned and determined opponent. Casey will not repeat mistakes from earlier campaigns nor will he sit on an early lead. Against Santorum, he is likely to be deft, aggressive, and tough.

Still there are some things Santorum can do to make it close, and even win:

- **Exploit Democratic disunity**—One obvious opportunity is the divisiveness in the Democratic Party, driven by the abortion issue. Casey’s primary opponents from the left have marked out the ideological fissures among state Democrats—and they are not insignificant. Republicans win elections in Pennsylvania when Democrats stay home. And Democrats not voting in the senate election is probably Casey’s greatest danger and Santorum’s biggest opportunity.

- **Recapture the GOP base**—Hardly less important for Santorum, the consummate conservative, is to re-connect with that “other Republican Party,” the moderates living in the Southeast and the Lehigh Valley who have increasingly become uncomfortable with him. Comprising some 30-percent of the electorate, no Republican can win statewide without support in the Southeast. Santorum doesn’t have it now and he has to find a way to get it.

- **Get off the Defensive**—Incumbents who become the issue also become ex- incumbents. Unless Santorum turns the scrutiny from himself to Casey he will likely lose. In his early advertising as well as press relations, he has started to do that—pointing out Casey’s shortcomings and planting seeds in reporters’ heads about Casey not stating his positions. But it is late and he has much ground to make up.

- **Get on the Offensive**—Santorum’s political strengths are impressive; he is an excellent speaker, an effective campaigner, and a prolific fundraiser. Now he has to turn a positive spotlight on his achievements in office, especially the largess he has brought home in economic and community monies. So far, he has made Casey’s task easy with ill-considered interviews and strident positions on controversial issues. Santorum’s outspokenness has been so pronounced at times that some analysts have concluded he really doesn’t want to be re-elected. That’s nonsense, but it does underscore how sloppy he has become.

Arguing that Santorum can win is different from concluding he will win. Possibilities are not probabilities. And politics is very much a game of probabilities. Running in the most watched senate race in the country, Santorum is far behind--facing a formidable opponent, and a cranky electorate. Still one senses this race is one for the history books—a fork in the trail that will forever change things no matter which road is taken.
If Santorum wins, his meteoric rise in national politics will continue, and perhaps, as some believe, will include a run for the White House. If Casey wins the scion of the state’s marquee political brand name, he will have entrenched himself--perhaps for a generation--as a central figure in state politics. Neither candidate will survive this epic contest unchanged. Nor will Pennsylvania.

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