

Pennsylvania's Odd Man Out

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As a society we ask many probing questions about our politics and our politicians. Sometimes, however, we miss the obvious one - the question so self evident, so plain, and so clear that we overlook it altogether.

Case in point: one senior U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, prolific fundraiser, longest serving U.S. senator in state history, most successful state politician in modern times, former Republican now turned Democrat, and currently *acause célèbre* in the national political world.

We speak, of course, of Arlen Specter. And the "obvious" question about Specter is this: why have so many otherwise sane people wanted to run against someone who has been the political equivalent of Rocky Balboa - sometimes challenged, often bruised, but never vanquished. Everyone knows that Rocky wins in the end, and so far so does Arlen.

Then what explains the near frenetic push that began almost two years before his term expires to transform the senior senator from Pennsylvania into the former senator from Pennsylvania? Why has Specter become the pol so many love to hate?

Consider the recent challengers and would be challengers. The line-up of those who contemplated a run against Specter has been impressive. First there was TV pundit Chris Matthews who flirted with the idea before rejecting it for a new MSNBC contract. Then his old Republican nemesis former congressman Pat Toomey jumped into the race. The story of Toomey chasing Specter out of his own party by threatening to run against him is a remarkable one.

Specter's prospects got no better in the Democratic Party. Once there he was assailed by challengers for that nomination. Herculean efforts by a legion of high powered Democratic officials tried to grease the skids for Specter and clear the primary field. But they failed to drive out the most unlikely of challengers, a relatively new, little known liberal congressman from the Philadelphia suburbs named Joe Sestak. The Sestak challenge is one many political observers are taking seriously, despite Specter's formidable advantages in money, campaign experience, and organization.

Some say that Specter has attracted a caravan of challengers because he is "vulnerable," meaning he looks like he can be defeated. Polling tends to confirm the problem, revealing him to be in political trouble from both the left and the right. Specter seems to have driven into the perfect storm: Republicans have deserted him in droves since he left the party, some Democrats don't yet trust that he's a real Democrat, and independents fret that his principles have been compromised by his single-minded desire to get himself reelected.

Certainly, Specter is in trouble because he has alienated key voter groups, but his political problems have deeper roots. His troubles stem from more than a few bad moves on the political chessboard. Indeed, his predicament sets forth a cautionary tale about what is happening to our national politics and national politicians in the "Age of Obama."

Arlen Specter has inadvertently become the poster child for the accelerating ideological polarization of American politics. As a consequence he has also become the odd man out, the rogue elephant, and the politician without a polity. He is one of a dying breed of political moderates in America, and his fate raises a fundamental question for American politics. Is it any longer possible for moderate politicians to survive politically, even in a politically moderate state like Pennsylvania?

Much scholarly ink has been spilled delineating the polarization of American politics, with most of the emphasis placed on the polarization within legislative bodies. The lack of a "center" in Congress has been dutifully reported. But Specter represents not an abstruse concept or a dry statistical compilation of political trends. He is the very exemplar of a politician caught up in the narrowing of the American political spectrum.

Nowhere was this narrowing better illustrated than in the congressional stimulus vote cast last February. Senator Specter played a crucial role in its passage along with two other moderate senators. But Specter's vote on the stimulus package produced a firestorm in Pennsylvania. It motivated Toomey to run against him and galvanized conservative Republicans to oppose him, signaling the denouement for the senator as a Republican.

Specter then has become not just a bad fit in Congress. Worse for him, perhaps, he is no longer a good fit for an electorate that kept him in office for thirty years - an electorate that has become increasingly polarized along liberal/conservative lines.

The ideological divide that evolved for years in Congress is now reflected in the views of ordinary American voters. Specter has become the proverbial man in the middle, a politician without a political home in either party, and a moderate in an increasingly immoderate world.

Irony abounds in Specter's dilemma, providing further evidence of the electoral challenges that confront moderates. Across his long career he has alternately been accused by his enemies of being first too conservative and then too liberal.

In 1992 after his now famous interrogation of Anita Hill, Specter was assailed for being a pawn of conservatives. Specter's liberal opponent that year came within two percentage points of defeating him. A decade later the reverse was true. He almost was taken out by the conservative Pat Toomey in the 2004 Republican primary with the argument that Specter was too liberal and not supportive enough of the policies of President Bush.

Making Specter's quandary even more problematic, and his political survival even more tenuous, is the aggressive and transformative agenda of President Obama. Throughout his career Specter's moderation has been a source of political strength, sustaining him through five senatorial elections. It now has become a liability requiring him to move decisively to the political left. For him this is a dangerous, possibly fatal move leaving him open to charges that his voting record is based on little more than political expediency.

Nevertheless, Specter is now far more likely to become a thorough going Obama Democrat. He probably can't survive if he doesn't - and he may not survive if he does. But whether Arlen Specter survives or not, the brand of politics he practiced is not likely to do so. Moderates and moderation are all but dead in American politics, and Specter's strange ideological odyssey illustrates dramatically this new American political zeitgeist.

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