

Chris Matthews: Ready to Play Hardball in PA

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Now no longer the center ring for the traveling Democratic presidential nomination circus, Pennsylvania's inventive political community has discovered a new favorite political parlor game to while away the brisk springtime evenings: will Chris Matthews, the irrepressible host of MSNBC's Hardball, step down from his pundits perch to run for the US Senate against Arlen Specter in 2010? To a remarkable degree, speculation abounds over this possibility in the Keystone State.

The indications that Matthews will run are abundant. His MSNBC contract runs out next summer, and both he and the network show signs they might be ready for a break from each other. In addition, journalists are reporting that Matthews has been seeking advice privately from key Democrats across the state about his chances against Specter. Reportedly these contacts have included discussion with Governor Rendell concerning campaign resources.

Publicly Matthews has done little to disguise his interest in the race. Asked if he was running on a recent Colbert cable show, Matthews said this: "Did you ever want to be something your whole life...? When you grow up, some kids want to be a fireman. I want to be a Senator... There's a difference between being a celebrity and working for the people. And it's a greater thing to work for the people than being on television."

If Matthews does run he will not be a stranger either to Pennsylvania or to politics. Born and raised in Philadelphia, he ran and lost a quixotic bid for Congress in 1974. This led him to staffer jobs on Capitol Hill and in the White House, ending his Washington career as a key aide to Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill during the Reagan years.

What to make of the Matthew prospects. Certainly one factor in his candidacy would be his status as a genuine celebrity. Matthews is known to millions through his television appearances which include a nightly stint on Hardball and a weekend show as well. In some states, celebrity status has garnered political advantage. Think Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jessie Ventura, Al Franken, etc. But celebrity kudos has not translated well in Pennsylvania.

The most recent example was the one-sided gubernatorial race between incumbent Ed Rendell and celebrity sports star/commentator Lynn Swann. But state politics have never been kind to celebrity politicians. Party leaders in the modern political era have tried to recruit golfing great Arnold Palmer and football coaching legend Joe Paterno to run for governor. They both declined.

In the spring of 1991, Governor Bob Casey attempted to persuade Lee Iacocca, the renowned chairman of the Chrysler Company, to replace Senator John Heinz but to no avail. Even Senator Arlen Specter tried the celebrity route when he approached David Eisenhower, the grandson of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, to challenge U.S. Senator Harris Wofford in 1994—he declined as well. The score sheet for celebrities running in Pennsylvania is stark: a few are called, some run, and none win.

And Matthews cannot ignore his opponent. Arlen Specter is, it is true, now the aging war horse of state politics. But he is also a politician who has led more charmed lives than Houdini, dispatching every opponent sent against him—both primary and general election foes—since 1980. Specter is one tough, resourceful politician who has always found some way to win. Moreover, he has largely inoculated himself from the more toxic effects of Bush policies, while gradually moving left of center on a range of foreign policy and domestic issues.

To the challenge of beating Specter is added the special difficulty Democrats have had winning Senate seats in Pennsylvania. It is true that Pennsylvania is trending blue. Democrats have won the vast majority of recent statewide elections and now sport a million edge in party registration. But historically Democrats have struggled to win U.S. Senate seats in Pennsylvania despite huge registration advantages. Back to Joe Clark in 1962, Democrats have won only one regularly scheduled Senate election and that took the combined magic of political maestro Rendell and the mystical Casey name to prevail over a very unpopular incumbent.

Still Matthews will have some formidable strengths against Specter. One widely respected political consultant, Neil Oxman, rates Matthews's chances high—arguing that his name recognition, ability to raise money, and ethnic (Irish Catholic) roots would allow him to do well among blue collar voters, while his outspoken liberalism would earn him support in the Philadelphia suburbs. Oxman has compared Matthews to Pennsylvania's incumbent governor speculating that Matthews "would become a cult figure the way Ed Rendell did."

Matthews' timing is also good. At the moment there is no logical Democratic opponent to challenge Arlen Specter. Equally important, the election will occur in an open seat gubernatorial year because Rendell is term limited. Consequently most of the current Democratic big-wigs are lining up to replace Governor Rendell—with little apparent interest being shown in the U.S. Senate race.

But Matthews also comes with some potential weaknesses. He is much more liberal than most Pennsylvanians, and, in fact, probably most Democrats. Then, too, he attracts controversy—a quality useful perhaps in his role as an on-air pundit, but potentially toxic to a politician. Zell Miller challenging Matthews to a duel at the 2004 convention is the stuff of legend. Matthews has also been in trouble with women's groups for suggesting that Hillary Clinton was only elected Senator because Bill had "messed around." All in all, not the normal resume items for an aspiring politician.

Matthews' most serious challenge may simply be running statewide as a rookie in a state where rookies rarely win. Running statewide in Pennsylvania is no easy chore. The state's size and diversity poses formidable electoral challenges. Moreover, with some notable exceptions, the state's voters have a penchant for the familiar and the comfortable. Pennsylvanians don't require their politicians to be dull, but it doesn't always hurt either.

Finally, there's the "Matthews persona." Ideologically liberal and given to provocatively candid outbursts, his ability to relate to voters outside of the Southeast remains an open question. If he runs he would be the first celebrity politician in modern times to move back into the state to seek statewide office.

For all that, Matthews is likely to run, and if he runs he will start the race well known, highly motivated, and well financed. He deserves to be taken seriously. No one who knows Arlen Specter doubts that he will be.

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