Pennsylvania's Political Odd Couple
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young
Will a Democrat ever win a Senate seat in Pennsylvania again? Joe Hoeffel's recent loss to Arlen Specter was just the latest in a string of regular election defeats for Democrats in this State going back to 1962. The last time a Democratic candidate won a full term in Pennsylvania, John Kennedy was in the White House, a guy named Bill Scranton had just been elected Governor of Pennsylvania, and George W. Bush was 16 years old. That was a long time ago.

But apparently not long enough for state Democrats to figure out how to beat their Republican opponents. And the list is a long one: Hugh Scott, Richard Schweiker, John Heinz, Arlen Specter, and Rick Santorum. Collectively these long serving US Senators were elected and re-elected over the better part of a half century--in spite of the fact that Democrats have been the majority party in the state for the past 40 years.

There are many theories advanced to explain why the GOP dispatches its Democratic opponents with so much consistency. Some believe it's the Republicans edge in raising funds for campaigns. Some say it's a superior organization. Others argue that Republicans simply nominate better candidates. And there are other explanations as well. But one reason is really no mystery at all; when the going gets tough, Republicans stick together.

This prominent party trait has been clearly on display lately as the furies have been unleashed on Pennsylvania's junior US Senator, Rick Santorum, for his unwavering support of the state's senior Senator Arlen Specter's bid to be selected as the next Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Controversial comments made by Specter the day after his reelection--in which he seemed to warn the White House against sending any Supreme Court nominee to the Senate who might vote to overturn Roe v. Wade--set off a firestorm that not only enveloped Specter, but Santorum as well.

Veiled and not so unveiled threats have been hurled Santorum's way--by a variety of conservative and pro-life groups--that his own reelection in 2006, and a putative presidential run two years later might be damaged by his support for Specter.

But, Santorum isn't wavering--and he will remain steadfast in his support for Specter. This might surprise some but probably not many who follow Pennsylvania politics. Not since Jack Klugman's and Tony Randall's long running, hugely popular "The Odd Couple" has a more unlikely pair engaged our attention. If Specter plays a plausible Oscar Madison, Santorum is more than convincing as Felix Unger.

Ideologically, they are a poor fit: Specter is an ardent champion of an activist federal government, while Santorum favors strengthening the private sector to promote the general welfare.

The two have huge differences on abortion and gay rights, as well as on some labor issues and many spending proposals, But they have also agreed on many matters, including partial birth overrides,
educational savings accounts, the balanced budget amendment, the line item veto, Bush's tax cuts, and the use of force in Iraq.

But it's not policy that matter the most in this relationship. More important is the practical modus vivendi, worked out between the two over the past decade. The relationship never has been described as cozy or close, and both are strong willed and out-spoken, but they have reached an accommodation with each other that has been one of the big surprises in contemporary Pennsylvania politics.

This relationship is rooted in Santorum's hard fought Senate victory in 1994 over Harris Wofford. Initially, Specter had opposed Santorum's nomination and had tried to recruit a more moderate candidate--first David Eisenhower, the grandson of President Eisenhower, then Theresa Heinz, the widow of Senator John Heinz.

But importantly, after Specter's efforts failed, he provided critical help to Santorum in the closing days of the 1994 general election campaign. Santorum's narrow victory--49% to 47%--occurred in large part because he carried the suburbs of Philadelphia with Specter's assistance.

Thereafter, each has been vigorous in support of the political efforts of the other, albeit their ambitions have been in different directions. Specter had toyed with running for the presidency in the summer of 1994, and he announced his candidacy the following year. Startling most political observers, Santorum responded almost immediately by endorsing Specter, while the state's Republican Governor Tom Ridge endorsed Bob Dole.

Santorum continued to hang in with Specter even though the latter's outspoken criticism of the religious right almost resulted in a significant, party sponsored primary challenger to Specter's 1998 reelection effort. Subsequently, Specter easily won his general election campaign over a former state legislator, Bill Lloyd, 61% to 35%. Then, when Santorum in 2000 had a tougher fight against his opponent Congressman Ron Klink, Specter returned the favor.

In Congress, the two have worked out an accommodation as well. Specter, the quintessential economic nationalist, from his perch on the Appropriations Committee has brought hundreds of millions of dollars of largess to the state. And from the Judiciary Committee he has been the commanding figure in federal judiciary appointments to Pennsylvania.

Santorum, far more conservative on federal spending and interested in gaining a leadership position in the Republican caucus, has taken a very different route to power; championing conservative causes and building close personal relationships with key Republican senators.

And so it goes: two highly ambitious, but disparately oriented politicians who--in Lyndon Johnson's memorable phrase--"go along to get along."

It's hard to know for sure what political fates might yet cross the tortuous paths of Pennsylvania's junior and senior senators. What is certain, however, is that Senators Santorum and Specter are unlikely to break up their long running act as Pennsylvania's premier political odd couple. Felix and Oscar would understand.

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