The Challenger Two-Step
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Pity the poor challengers in American electoral politics! They have their work cut out for them. Not only must they first convince voters to fire the incumbent, but they must then persuade those same voters that they can do the job better.

Call it the challenger two-step; it’s an electoral dance maneuver every successful challenger must master.

Step One—getting voters to the point they are prepared to render a thumbs down on an incumbent—is necessary but not sufficient; the critical second step required to defeat an incumbent is to provide a viable alternative. Being "anybody but" an unpopular incumbent gets the challenger early, even respectful attention from the electorate. But to close the deal, said challenger must convince said voters that they will do better. And that’s not always easy.

The now sizzling Rick Santorum-Bob Casey battle for a US Senate seat in Pennsylvania illustrates this maxim. To this point in the race, virtually the entire focus of attention has been on the personality and record of Santorum. Much has been made of Santorum’s social conservatism and his confrontational style, and virtually every aspect of his life has been written about. Bob Casey, his opponent, until very recently only has had to be anybody else but Santorum.

But no longer! Three public polls conducted within the past month now show the Pennsylvania Senate race to be tightening. From earlier this year, Santorum has closed the once formidable gap between Casey and himself. He has done this with a vigorous and hard hitting campaign that has made Casey less popular with voters while failing to increase his own popularity.

This is an important point. Though Santorum has spent, perhaps, five million around the state in positive commercials, his own popularity has not grown. In the February Franklin & Marshall College Keystone Poll, Casey led Santorum 50 to 39-percent. In late August, Casey had fallen to 44-percent, but Santorum remained at 39-percent.

A running metaphor helps here. Santorum and Casey are two long distance marathoners. Casey had been running five minute miles while Santorum was lagging behind at six minute miles; now they are both running six minute miles. Santorum is really not running much faster, but Casey is surely running slower.

It’s been in part the interest group ads that have slowed Casey down. These and the unrelenting internet and email campaign have raised questions about Casey’s positions and fitness for office. They have worked because Casey, according to the Keystone Poll, is still a remote figure to almost one in three voters— who indicate they don’t know enough about him to have a view of him, one way or another. This vagueness has allowed the Santorum campaign to describe Casey in often harsh and unflattering terms, arguing that Casey has no specific
solutions to the major problems confronting the nation, that he seeks one political job after another, and that he has failed to perform the duties of his state offices.

Casey’s relative obscurity to so many voters seems puzzling, given his now decade long tenure in high state office and his stature as the largest vote getter in state history. (Casey won just short of 3.4 million votes in his last election for State Treasurer.)

Part of the reason Casey is fuzzy to voters is that he shares a name with his father, the fabled Democratic Governor Bob Casey who held office from 1987 until 1995; the father, once touted as the "Real Bob Casey," was so well known that a small army of wannabes surnamed Casey were able to trade on his celebrity to run for office. The memory of the elder Casey has assumed almost legendary proportions in the politics of Pennsylvania.

The younger Casey followed and participated in his dad’s career with vigor and enthusiasm, and even today can recount past events and personalities like a seasoned reporter. It has been said that the son inherited an extra gene for politics, and there is no doubt that he has been a successful politician.

Still his public persona has evolved mostly in the arc of obscure state agencies that carry on their activities largely below the radar line. Casey’s natural temperament— he tends to be unassuming and even retiring— has reinforced his ambiguous public image. Bob Casey Jr. has become the famous son of a famous father without a significant number of Pennsylvanians knowing much about whom he is or what he believes.

All of this now plays out in the remaining days and weeks of the campaign. A race that started out as a referendum on the incumbent has now become equally a referendum on the challenger.

None of this should surprise. Voters don’t dump incumbents often, but when they do they always make sure the successor is good to go. Disliking the incumbent is not enough. Voters also have to like the challenger and understand how he is different, even in races involving unpopular presidents and an anti-incumbent national mood.

And it’s always a two step process; in this race Pennsylvania voters have now made up their mind about Santorum (first step), but not yet about Casey (second step). A large percentage of voters would like to jettison Santorum and they will do so if they decide Casey is prepared to be Pennsylvania’s next US Senator. But they will reluctantly vote for Santorum or not vote at all if they continue to have reservations.

It’s a question of whether Santorum continues to define Casey or Casey begins to define himself. For Casey, now the crucial task is to fill in the blanks with some specifics for the roughly one third of the electorate for whom he remains an enigma. Many of them could support him, but they won’t until they know more about him and what he would be like as senator.

And right now this race has become tight just because many of them are not so sure. Who Bob Casey is and what he stands for has now become the burning question in the race. How that question is answered will determine the outcome of this race.