Tom Corbett and Pat Toomey, the GOP’s candidates for governor and U.S. senator this year, respectively, are undoubtedly emitting collective sighs of relief.

Earlier in the month, Governor Ed Rendell shocked many observers by opining that the Republican Party was being taken over by “wackos.”

But Rendell, always a paragon of restraint, clarified his statement a few days later, saying that “there are clearly elements of the Republican Party that are totally wacked out.” But “by no means are all Republican candidates wacked-out . . . fruit loops.” And Rendell added that he doesn’t consider either Corbett or Toomey to be in that “wacked-out fruit loop” category.

While Rendell’s belated benediction must relieve considerable angst for Corbett and Toomey, most voters seemed not to pay much attention to the governor’s latest verbal pyrotechnics. In fact, voters appear to consider neither Corbett nor Toomey to be wackos. If voters were to describe the GOP candidates this year, the word they would probably use is not wackos, but winners.

Certainly the polls thus far support that conclusion. The latest authoritative Real Clear Politics averages have Corbett up some 12 points over his Democrat opponent and Toomey up 9 points. These are impressive leads in a state where a 10-point win is considered a landslide.

Actually, Corbett’s lead only mildly surprises. With some exceptions, his candidacy and career have been well within the mainstream of the state’s centrist-moderate political tradition. Corbett hails back to a long line of Republican gubernatorial moderates, including Bill Scranton, Ray Shafer, Dick Thornburgh, and Tom Ridge. True, Corbett has moved to the right somewhat, but he is still well within what has been the ideological consensus prevailing in the state’s Republican Party.

Pat Toomey, however, is another story. To wit, four years ago, even two years ago, Toomey was generally considered too conservative to be a serious candidate. Indeed in some respects he was right of Rick Santorum, once the reigning enfant terrible of the far right.

That Toomey is very conservative is beyond debate. If he is elected, he will arguably be the most conservative U.S senator Pennsylvania has elected since before the New Deal days. Still, some of his opponents have unfairly tried to paint him as the next Jesse Helms. He is not that. Rather, he is a politician that has consistently taken a series of what could be called classically conservative “Burkean” positions on key public policy issues. Conservative he is. Kook he is not.

Toomey’s lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union is 97%; Santorum’s is just 88. Pollster.com
has ranked Toomey 98% more conservative during his three terms in Congress than all other members of Congress back to 1995. Santorum himself once called Toomey “too conservative” for Pennsylvania. Moreover, Toomey has been at the forefront of efforts to drive moderates out of the GOP.

Yet in today’s political environment, Toomey is perceived almost as a mainstream candidate, now comfortably ahead of his Democratic opponent in a state where Democrats out register Republicans by a whopping 1.2 million voters.

The obvious question: why is Toomey so well positioned some 45 days from the November election? And what does it reveal about American politics approaching Barack Obama’s first midterm election?

These are all easier questions to ask than to answer. Part of Toomey’s success lies in his opponent’s failure. Sestak, a party maverick who is often savagely critical of the Washington establishment, leads a Democratic party markedly less enthusiastic about his candidacy. Recent events suggest both the state and national parties are rallying resources to the Sestak candidacy, and the race may become closer. Toomey, however, has led a united and zealous GOP throughout the campaign, while Sestak has struggled for party support.

But Toomey’s ascendency owes more to the zeitgeist of the times, the temper of the country, and growing voter alienation from the president and his party. Conservative policies as well as conservative politicians are more in favor this year than at any time since 1994. Voters are very concerned about government spending, debt, and regulation. And they have turned sharply against much of the Obama agenda because of the administration’s perceived failure to improve the economy while spending massive amounts of money.

The electorate is out of patience, and Democrats seem increasingly to be out of time. This explains more than anything how a candidate as conservative as Pat Toomey, talented though he may be, is running so strongly in a state that historically has eschewed candidates of either right or left extremes. Toomey is such a candidate, and he does little to conceal it. And why should he? Voters seem not to care.

The shifting political tides are raising both Republican boats and conservative Republicans’ expectations. For generations Pennsylvania conservatives have been content to be the power behind the throne, influencing who gets to run and who wins.

Now conservatives want both the power and the throne. No longer content to play the wizard behind the curtain, they want to take that curtain down. Toomey is in the vanguard of that transformation. Whether he succeeds or fails will determine the trajectory of state and national politics for a long time after November 3rd.

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