Santorum/Wofford - 1994 U.S. Senate Race

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Overview

Following the tragic death of U.S. Senator John Heinz in the spring of 1991, Governor Robert Casey appointed Harris Wofford, his Secretary of Labor and Industry, interim Senator. An election was held in November 1991 to select a person to complete Heinz's term, which expired in January 1995. Democrat Wofford stunned the political community by decisively defeating former Republican Governor Dick Thornburgh, who had resigned as U.S. Attorney General to seek the Senate seat. Wofford's victory was the first time a Democrat had won a U.S. Senate election in Pennsylvania since 1962. The Wofford race drew national attention, and his campaign emphasis on economic growth and health care reform, cast in a framework of "fundamental" change, was a harbinger of the Bill Clinton campaign for president in 1992.

Wofford's short incumbency became the crucial factor in his reelection. Early polls showed Wofford was vulnerable: He was not well known among the state's voters, nor was he very popular with those who knew him. In February 1994, only one-fourth of the state's registered voters thought he was performing well as U.S. Senator, while over half rated his performance as fair or poor. Nearly half of all voters thought it was time for a change.

A second key consideration was President Clinton's unpopularity in Pennsylvania. According to the October 1994 Keystone Poll he was viewed favorably by only three in ten Pennsylvania voters. Clinton's unpopularity in Pennsylvania, a quintessentially old-Democratic coalition state and a state he carried by nine points in 1992, was a surprise. Democratic leaders were properly concerned that under these circumstances their voters’ enthusiasm might be minimal, ultimately keeping them at home on election day.

Some Democratic candidates in other states had pulled away from Clinton: Some criticized him, but not Wofford. In fact, Wofford had made Clinton's short list as a possible vice presidential running mate, and the two were ideologically and personally close. Both Wofford and Clinton were champions of a massive overhaul of the nation's health care system. Moreover, Wofford maintained a high level of support for President Clinton's legislative agenda, voting 87 percent of the time in 1993 with the President.

The Candidates

Harris Wofford brought a first-class resume to the U.S. Senate. Best known as a former aide to John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King and one of the founders of the Peace Corps, Wofford had a long and distinguished career in governmental service. He also served as president of Bryn
Mawr College, wrote a popular book Of Kennedy's and Kings and was a civil rights activist. As U.S. Senator, he remained strongly identified with health care nationally, and, despite declining popular support for health care reform, he steadfastly championed a major overhaul of the health care delivery system. He was a supporter of gun control and Pennsylvania's Abortion Control Act (though he was thought of as pro-choice); close to organized labor, he favored a ban on striker replacements and the Family Leave bill; and he voted for Clinton's 1993 budget plan and stimulus package. Wofford ran unchallenged in the Democratic primary.

His Republican opponent was Rick Santorum, a relatively young (36), two-term congressman who represented Pennsylvania's 18th Congressional District, a largely Democratic district located in Pittsburgh. Santorum, a genuine conservative Republican, first came to national attention as a member of the "Gang of Seven," a group of freshman Republicans who helped expose the House Bank scandal. Ideologically very different from Wofford, Santorum was pro-life on abortion, supported the death penalty, opposed family leave, and voted against the 1993 Clinton budget and stimulus plans. Santorum was viewed by many in the media as part of the right wing of the Republican Party, and distant from the party's moderate leadership, especially U.S. Senator Arlen Specter and state Republican Party Chair Anne Anstine. The Republican moderate establishment, led by Specter, was decidedly unhappy with the prospect of Santorum, whom they viewed as too conservative and too pro-life. As the primary season unfolded, Specter began fishing for a primary challenger. Theresa Heinz, wife of former Senator John Heinz, David and Julie Eisenhower, and Barbara Hafer, the state's Auditor General, were mentioned as possibilities. In the end, however, Santorum received the endorsement of the Republican State Committee and easily defeated Joe Watkins, an African-American businessman and minister from Philadelphia, in the Republican primary. During the course of the general election campaign, the moderate wing of the party moved to embrace Santorum. Even two of Specter's top campaign operatives eventually joined Santorum’s campaign, and Specter’s help was a central component in the Santorum campaign.

The General Election Campaign

The campaign pitted an old style New Deal liberal, Wofford, against a young ideological conservative, Santorum. Rarely in Pennsylvania politics had such a clear ideological line been drawn. Wofford charged Santorum with supporting for the Republican Contract with America, which he said would take the nation back to the Reagan-Bush policies that landed Pennsylvania in economic distress, causing job losses, unemployment and a stagnant economy. Santorum struck back calling Wofford a champion of big government liberalism. Santorum cited Wofford's sponsorship of a government-run, single-payer health care system, with a substantial bureaucracy that would institutionalize the nation's healthcare system.

Santorum received strong and enthusiastic support from the Christian Coalition, the gun lobby, and sportsmen’s associations. He called for smaller, leaner government, lower taxes and less regulation, and tapped into public dissatisfaction and disaffection with government. Wofford, nurtured on New Deal and Great Society programs, genuinely believed that government could make a positive difference in people's lives. He drew support from liberal women's groups, labor unions, and pro-government activists.
Though an incumbent, Wofford had no decided advantage over Santorum in name recognition or popularity. Before the campaign began, less than two-thirds of the state's voters recognized Wofford. (Arlen Specter at the same time was recognized by 87 percent of Pennsylvania voters). When the general election began in earnest, Santorum was practically as well known as Wofford, and by the end of the campaign he was as well known.

An argument can be made that Wofford's short incumbency might have harmed his candidacy as much as it helped him. Throughout the nation, Democratic incumbents were facing difficult challenges, primarily because of Clinton's unpopularity. Wofford was no exception. Nationally, 1994 was a bad year for Democratic incumbents. Wofford's short incumbency did not provide much time for him to establish roots with voters, while his association with an unpopular Bill Clinton damaged his popularity. His relationship to Clinton helped drive his favorability scores lower.

Also, Wofford's candidacy did not excite voters; his support never increased among voters between April and November; in fact, it declined. The Wofford campaign never managed to articulate themes that struck responsive chords with voters, nor was he able, except at the end of the campaign, to find any momentum. Wofford's core issue, health care reform, had been derailed in Congress, and had become a symbol of big government liberalism. While only a small number of his constituents were less likely to vote for him because of Congress’s failure to pass health care reform, the failure of passage became an important symbol for Santorum who reminded voters that Wofford was just another big-spending, liberal Democrat. By campaign's end, Wofford appeared headed for a trouncing; the Keystone and Pennsylvania Polls showed Santorum with a double-digit lead. The press speculated that the lingering death of health care reform in Congress had effectively destroyed Wofford, since he spent valuable time in Washington working on its passage and not tending to his constituents.

Riding the national surge and tremendous personal momentum, Santorum appeared ready to overwhelm Wofford. But, in the eleventh hour, two campaign flaps, one minor and one major, almost derailed the Santorum campaign. The minor flap involved Santorum's November 2nd statement on an Erie talk radio show that Theresa Heinz, the wife of deceased Senator John Heinz, had failed to endorse him because she was romantically involved with U.S. Senator John Kerry, Democrat from Massachusetts. Santorum was responding to remarks made the week before by Theresa Heinz when she told a University of Pittsburgh audience that Santorum was "the antithesis of John Heinz," and she was not going to vote for him. Though the story had a relatively short shelf life, it did occupy considerable media attention, particularly in Pittsburgh, the home of both Heinz and Santorum.

Of greater consequence was Santorum's speech to students at LaSalle College in Philadelphia, in which he said he would support raising the social security retirement age to 70 or higher. Santorum's speech was videotaped by a Wofford campaign aide. Wofford wasted no time calling the Santorum statement the "defining" one of the campaign, and attacked Santorum in a 30-second commercial. Santorum was presumably now vulnerable because his suggestion that he would vote to raise the social security retirement age made him anathema to Pennsylvania's elderly population, the nation's second largest. These events helped Wofford close the gap in the waning days. According to a Pittsburgh Tribune Review survey conducted at the height of the
social security debate, Wofford and Santorum were deadlocked. Neither event was, however, sufficient to produce victory for Wofford.

Major Campaign Issues

Pennsylvania's U.S. Senate races have been historically rather provincial affairs, with candidates battling over state problems and constituency concerns. Breaking with the recent past, the 1994 Senate race was much more about national than state issues. The Wofford-Santorum race became nationalized for at least three reasons: Bill Clinton's unpopularity (during the entire year Clinton was viewed more negatively than positively), the emphases on health care and social security, and the debate over the size and role of the federal government. The specific issues debated, from health care to social security to unemployment compensation to government downsizing, were all national in scope.

The focus on national issues gave a strategic advantage to Santorum. First, most voters felt the United States was moving in the wrong direction; such voters regularly cast their votes against incumbents. Further, three in five Pennsylvania voters believed the nation was moving in the wrong direction, and they voted overwhelmingly for Santorum.

Second, the Santorum campaign successfully painted Wofford as a big government advocate at a time when voters wanted smaller, less expensive government. Wofford's support of health care reform reinforced his image as a big government spender, and he failed to deliver on his 1991 campaign promise. Wofford's dilemma was reinforced by extensive national media coverage of the campaign, which often portrayed him as vulnerable and unable to push through health care reform. Although health care hurt Wofford by tying him to Clinton and painting him as a big government advocate, the 35 percent of voters who viewed health care as the most important issue in casting their Senate vote went overwhelmingly to Wofford, 64 percent to 31 percent.

There was little in the 1994 election environment that helped Harris Wofford overcome a meager job performance evaluation by voters. A stronger job performance might have helped him offset running for election in a solidly Republican year, but Wofford's job performance was consistently weak throughout the entire election cycle. By the end of the campaign, more voters disapproved (49%) than approved (45%) of Wofford's performance as U.S. Senator, sealing his electoral fate.

Postelection Analysis

Santorum won 49 percent of the vote to Wofford's 47 percent, and he carried 56 of the state's 67 counties. He won all 22 strong Republican and all 25 Republican-leaning counties; in addition, he carried one strong Democratic county, Westmoreland. Most important, he was able to carry eight of Pennsylvania's 11 swing counties (Erie, Mercer, Elk, Clearfield, Carbon, Northampton, Lehigh, and Berks). Wofford won 11 counties, eight of the nine strong Democratic counties, and three swing counties (Lawrence, Clinton, and Luzerne).
In the end, Santorum won a narrow victory, which in large measure was linked to the Republican tide that swept the nation. More Pennsylvania Republicans voted than Democrats for the first time since the 1960s, a disaster for Democrats in a state where they held a 430,000 voter registration edge. Driving the high Republican turnout was a disproportionately large conservative element, fueled in part by Peg Luksik, an independent, pro-life candidate for governor. Conservative voters went for Santorum by a huge margin, although he lost heavily among liberals and convincingly among moderates. Three other groups were also significant to Santorum's victory: whites, the middle class, and senior citizens.

Although Wofford did well among many Democratic groups, including blacks, liberals, union members, and the lowest income groups, he failed to carry two traditionally Democratic constituencies, Catholics and women. White women especially deserted Wofford. In recent times, no Democratic candidate has been successful without a majority of the female vote. Losing these important constituencies, coupled with proportionately low Democratic turnout, was decisive in Wofford's defeat. Perhaps as important as any other factor was Wofford's ties to an unpopular president. A plurality (38%) of voters felt Wofford agreed too often with Clinton on issues, and these voters overwhelmingly supported Santorum, 84 percent to 12 percent.

Santorum's margin of victory was not as great as Republican Tom Ridge's in the gubernatorial race, even though both candidates won the same number of counties. Santorum's margin of victory in the eleven swing counties was much smaller than Ridge's, and was somewhat smaller in the Republican leaning counties as well. Both Santorum and Ridge won the strong Republican counties with large pluralities.

**Six Key Components of the Santorum Coalition**

1. **Conservatives**

More than any other factor, conservatives paved the way for Santorum's victory. Santorum beat Wofford by 54 points among conservatives who represented 40 percent of voters, up from 26 percent of all voters in 1992. Santorum was strongly supported by many conservative groups, particularly the Christian right, sportsmen's organizations, and pro-life groups. Wofford carried liberals overwhelmingly (80% to 18%) and handily beat Santorum among moderates (55% to 40%). But conservatives represented too much of the 1994 electorate to permit for a Wofford victory.

By comparison, Santorum attracted a greater proportion of Republican and conservative voters than did Ridge. Compared to Ridge, he received more votes from gun owners (57% to 53% for Ridge), talk radio listeners (60% to 52% for Ridge) and pro-lifers (67% to 48% for Ridge).

2. **Catholics**

Democratic victories in Pennsylvania are usually accompanied by sizable Catholic pluralities. Santorum's ability to attract Catholic voters was an important factor in his narrow victory. Democratic support from Catholics dropped seven points from 1992, when Democratic Senate candidate Lynn Yeakel beat Republic Senator Arlen Specter, 55 percent to 45 percent among
Catholic voters. Both Santorum and Ridge evenly divided Catholic voters with their Democratic opponents.

3. White Men and Women

Much has been written about 1994 being nationally the year of the angry white male. In recent years, white men have been deserting the Democratic party. Although they were not all angry, white men voted heavily Republican in the U.S. Senate race (55% to 41%). Less well known is the fact that white women, the cornerstone of most Democratic electoral victories, deserted to Pennsylvania's Republican gubernatorial and senate (53% to 43%) candidates. In the 1992 Senate race, Lynn Yeakel beat Arlen Specter 52 percent to 48 percent among white women.

4. Middle Class

Santorum's messages involving the role of government and lower taxes were his most compelling and substantive arguments. Santorum consistently pegged Wofford as a big government proponent, while expressing his desire for a smaller, cheaper, less-intrusive government—a message aimed directly at the middle class. The message was heard. Representing about half of all voters in the senate election, the middle class (those who earned between $30,000 and $75,000 per year) broke for Santorum.

5. Luksik Voters

Even though she won only 13 percent of the vote, Luksik helped to bring out conservative and pro-life voters. Of her supporters, two out of three voted for Santorum (65% to 23%). Her candidacy undoubtedly provided enthusiasm and motivation for conservatives, who found Santorum's conservative image appealing.

6. Senior Citizens

Pennsylvania has the second largest elderly population in the United States. Throughout much of recent history, the elderly group cast a solid proportion of its vote for Democratic candidates in statewide elections, but that was not the case in 1994. Both Ridge and Santorum won the votes of those over 60, with Santorum beating Wofford, 50 percent to 45 percent.

Conclusion

Several factors best explain Rick Santorum's victory in 1994. A higher than normal Republican turnout coupled with a smaller Democratic vote provided his margin of victory. An overwhelming conservative surge made it possible for a U.S. Senate candidate, who was more conservative than any Senator in recent Pennsylvania history, to be elected. Santorum's message: smaller government, fewer taxes, less spending, conservative values, defined the campaign and allowed him to secure a narrow victory. Wofford was unable to convert his short tenure in the Senate into a campaign plus, one strong enough to overcome Santorum's vigorous campaign.

Sources
Much of the data cited in this analysis is taken from the Keystone Polls conducted by the Center for Politics & Public Affairs for KYW-TV, Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Daily News. The Voter News Service Exit Polls cited gives the reader keen insight into a post-election analysis of the contest. Newspaper accounts, especially from the Harrisburg Patriot, Philadelphia Daily News, Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, are excellent for a general overview of the 1994 campaign. The polls referred in this analysis are available for a small processing and handling fee upon request.