If the Pat Toomey-Joe Sestak Pennsylvania Senate race was a movie, it would be a cinch for an Academy Award nomination. It's an electoral show that has everything: two controversial, compelling opponents; crucial national significance; real and acute issues; unique ideological visions; and more plot twists than an Alfred Hitchcock film.

The race landed squarely in the national spotlight during Sestak's successful challenge to five-term incumbent Arlen Specter. It's staying there for two key reasons: It's one of the pivotal matchups that could determine whether Republicans recapture the Senate, and the outcome will be unequivocally interpreted as a referendum on the policies of the Obama administration.

The script for both campaigns could have been written in Hollywood. In the opening scene, conservative Pat Toomey, the GOP's ideological warrior, finally finds a way to beat Arlen Specter for the Republican Senate nomination. Reprising Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, Toomey effectively told Specter to get out of town on the next train. Specter obliged, boarding what he expected to be the Democratic Express to a new nomination and sixth term in the Senate.

The plot twists, however, when enters a little-known, two-term congressman named Joe Sestak, better known for his maverick instincts than electioneering skills. Warned by friends and foes alike that he "couldn't beat Arlen," Sestak not only beat Specter, he beat him convincingly. He did so marching to his own drummer and despite opposition from virtually every important figure in the Democratic Party.

And thus, Pennsylvania, arguably still among the most moderate-centrist of the large states, becomes host to an ideological shoot-out between one of the most conservative candidates nominated for a Pennsylvania Senate seat in modern times and one of the most liberal candidates nominated for the Senate in modern times.

This campaign will feature no namby-pamby, "I voted for it before I voted against it" insipidness so often heard in congressional campaigns. Both candidates apparently like each other, but they disagree on virtually everything else: health care, energy, the stimulus package, the auto bailout, social security reform, abortion, etc. Usually general election candidates tack to the middle, wooing the so-called "median voter," but there is no middle here.

Who's ahead? Currently the RealClearPolitics index of public polls reports Toomey ahead slightly (about 2 points). Toomey is benefiting from the electorate's present preference for Republicans as well as its ongoing hostility to Obama and his agenda. Toomey leads a united Republican party into the fall campaign, and he is helped by a more energized Republican base in the state.

Toomey's early advantages noted, most national handicappers still rate the election a tossup. In mid-June, this race is yet to be run.

Sestak enters the battle with fewer advantages than Toomey but perhaps more opportunities. He has largely taken the incumbency issue off the table by defeating Specter. Moreover, despite his support for the Obama
agenda, there is no love lost between the White House and Sestak. In addition, Sestak hails from the voter-rich Philadelphia suburbs, lately friendly to Democrats. Finally, he is a dogged and driven campaigner. Nobody having watched him demolish a five-term incumbent in the primary will write off Joe Sestak.

More problematic for Sestak, however, is his lone wolf, take-no-prisoners campaign style. His highly published, ongoing tiff with the White House over a job offer during the primary made him few friends in high party circles. More recently, his relationships with the state party remain strained. Reports that he has meddled in the selection of a new state party chairman have only exacerbated matters. Worse perhaps, no serious effort has been made to heal the breach from a bitter primary.

Ultimately, what will decide it? Both candidates confront serious challenges. Toomey is a bona fide ideologue pitching an electorate rarely receptive to ideological pitches. Sestak, on the other hand, must swim upstream against a powerful GOP tide. The conventional wisdom has no entry for this one. The contest pits a Republican once thought too conservative to win his party's nomination against a Democrat once believed too liberal to win his party's nomination. Both candidates can't lose, yet many wonder how either can win.

The last time Pennsylvanians had a choice between such stark opposites occurred in 1994, when conservative Republican Rick Santorum defeated liberal Democrat Harris Wofford. The parallels between then and now are striking. Santorum, like Toomey today, was thought to be too polarizing to be elected. But Wofford, like Sestak today, was seeking election against a backdrop of voter unrest with his party. In the end, Wofford could not overcome the voters' anger at Washington. Santorum won the election, rapidly rising to national leadership within the GOP.

Will this same script play out in 2010? It could. If anything voters seem even angrier this year than in 1994. Still, Sestak is not carrying the incumbent baggage Wofford did in 1994 and Toomey has yet to prove he can appeal to a statewide electorate. The election seems Toomey's to lose. But few are willing to bet this early.

Like a good Hollywood movie, the race will probably surprise us to the end, and like a good old-fashioned Pennsylvania election, it's apt to be a nail biter, undecided until the final days.

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