Being smart in politics is usually necessary but rarely sufficient--one also needs some luck along the way. Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Arlen Specter, now safely re-nominated to a record fifth term, has certainly been smart over a long political career stretching back almost 40 years.

In fact, a case can be made that Specter's cerebral capacities are unmatched among contemporary Pennsylvania politicians. Arlen Specter has been called a lot of things, but no one has ever called him stupid.

But on primary election day, it was more luck than smarts that got him across the finish line barely ahead of his opponent, Lehigh Valley Congressman Pat Toomey. And there is delicious irony here. Pennsylvania's quintessential politician, who has prided himself on controlling people and mastering his own fate, ended up betting his political survival on people he didn't control and fates he did not master.

Whatever might be said about Arlen Specter in the future, nobody is going to say he wasn't lucky in 2004.

Specter was lucky in several ways. The importance of his Pennsylvania Senate seat in national politics is a prominent example. National Republicans now have only a slim 51-vote hold on the U.S. Senate. And that margin is shaky.

In Alaska, appointed Republican U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski has her share of problems in seeking a term in her own right. Worse, perhaps, national Republicans have three open seats to defend--and one of them, the Illinois seat, will be difficult to defend.

If the GOP loses the Senate, they also lose de facto control of Congress, even though as seems likely, the House remains Republican.

And loss of Congress means the scrap heap for much of the Republican agenda; even should President Bush win reelection. Rarely in American history has a single seat in either House attracted more national attention or mattered more than Specter's seems to now. And the defection of Vermont Senator James Jeffords in May 2001 serves to remind many Republicans just how tenuous control of congress can be.

Risking the Specter seat in a primary fight--even one for the heart and soul of the party struck many Republican leaders as sheer madness. This fear of losing the Senate in turn brought vital money, endorsements, and other national resources to Specter in his race against Toomey.

It also brought Pennsylvania's reigning conservative, Rick Santorum, to Specter's defense. Without Santorum and the national resources, Specter would not have won re-nomination.

There is more than a little irony here. Under the current Bush, Specter has been the Republican Senator with the highest percentage for voting with the other party. Never a party loyalist, i.e. someone who works tirelessly
for party causes, Specter's win to a great extent comes from last minute appeals, calling on the party faithful to vote for Specter out of party loyalty.

But Specter was even luckier in his political timing--standing for re-election in the same year that George Bush was running for re-election. Had Specter's Senate term expired two years ago, or two years from now, George Bush would have taken far less personal interest in Specter's electoral fate.

But what a difference a year makes! This year Pennsylvania is among a handful of states crucial to Bush's reelection recognition attested to by Bush himself who has returned to the state now some 27 times, more than any other state other than his home in Texas.

Many believe Bush cannot win re-election without Pennsylvania in his column. And most agree Bush's chances to win Pennsylvania are better with moderate Arlen Specter on the ballot to shore him up in the vote rich suburbs of Philadelphia--an area where Bush is weak and Specter is popular.

So Specter has been lucky first lucky that the U.S. Senate seat he holds could determine the balance of power in the next congress, and lucky again because the President running for re-election needs him on the ballot in Pennsylvania this fall.

Specter's razor thin win over Pat Toomey doesn't guarantee Republicans will win the Pennsylvania Senate seat in November, or that the GOP will continue to control the U.S. Senate next year. And it doesn't guarantee that George Bush will win Pennsylvania's electoral votes or that he will be re-elected to the presidency.

But had Specter not won the primary, the Pennsylvania seat would be very much at risk--continuing GOP control of the U.S. Senate would be uncertain--and George Bush's re-election hopes might be considerably less promising.

In the end Arlen Specter's good luck has also brought good luck to his Republican Party. We will find out however as this political year plays out if they are smart enough to know what to do with it.

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