

A Specter to Behold

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It's a specter to behold. Pennsylvania's most successful politician in modern times is on the ropes and engaged in what looks like the fight of his life.

Arlen Specter, running for an unprecedented sixth term in 2010, is in big trouble with his own Republican Party - trouble that might well extend to the state's general electorate. His woes with the Republicans look terminal: his support among the core GOP primary electorate is anemic and his chances to be renominated by that party appear problematic.

The polls are tolling his fate. A recent Quinnipiac University Poll shows him trailing his likely GOP primary opponent for the 2010 nomination by 14 points. These same Republican voters give him a 47 to 29 percent unfavorability rating - meaning that almost half of the Republican primary electorate just doesn't like him.

Nor are voters enthusiastic about his reelection chances. In the most recent Franklin and Marshall College Poll only four in ten voters believe Specter deserves reelection, while more than half of Republicans say "its time for a change." These polling numbers are dismal at best for a five term incumbent.

One obvious escape for Specter is to switch parties and run as a Democrat. But Specter has publicly ruled that out despite apparently energetic overtures from Governor Ed Rendell. Similarly, the Senator, after indicating he might run as an independent, has said he wouldn't do that either.

Thus Specter, nearing eighty but showing no inclination to retire, has maneuvered himself into a rather classic "catch 22." He won't run as a Democrat and he can't run as a Republican. Barring divine intervention - never out of the question when Specter's electoral alchemy is in play - Pennsylvania's senior Senator looks doomed in 2010.

It needs to be said that Arlen Specter has been in some tough straits before. He is a consummate master of state electioneering and perhaps the most accomplished practitioner of centrist politics on the national stage today.

Moreover, Specter's string of statewide election victories - making him the longest serving senator in the state's history - has been accomplished with relative ease. Including 1980, he has won ten consecutive contests, five primary and five general elections. In only two of these races, the 1992 general and the 2004 primary, was the outcome ever seriously in doubt.

But past victories don't ensure future successes in the increasingly polarizing national political zeitgeist pervading contemporary politics. More and more, Specter looks like the odd man out in a political climate hostile to moderates in either party. This year Republicans want a "true believer" conservative and Democrats want a "100 percent Obama Democrat." Specter at times has tried to be both, but fewer and fewer voters see him as either.

Conservative Republicans, in particular, smell blood in the water. Specter is likely to be challenged by a variety of opponents to his right, including his 2004 primary challenger, Pat Toomey, the former congressman from the Lehigh Valley and current head of the Club for Growth.

Much of the enthusiasm among anti-Specter conservatives today rests with Toomey's strong showing in 2004 - and with good reason. Toomey lost that race by a mere 17,000 votes out of more than a million cast, despite facing the opposition of the Republican state organization, as well as that of former Senator Rick Santorum and President Bush.

Equally ominous for Specter is the narrowing of the GOP base. Some 130,000 former Republicans have switched to the Democratic Party within the past two years, a large number of them Specter Republicans - moderate suburbanites - that won't be there to vote for him in 2010.

Why is Specter in so much trouble with his own party? Typically, Specter's primary opponents have fallen into three groups:

- **Ideological Conservatives** - The supply-siders who dislike his spending and tax votes.
- **Social Conservatives** - Essentially the pro-lifers who dislike his support for abortion rights and, of late, for embryonic stem cell research.
- **Party Loyalists** - Active Republicans who dislike his voting percentage with his party in the Senate (a low 60/65% lifetime record).

But Specter's more recent problems stem from the role he played in voting for President Obama's stimulus package. He was only one of three Republicans in the Congress to provide a vote for it. Even more potentially damaging to Specter was the raging controversy over whether he would vote for the proposed federal legislation known as card check - which would make it easier for unions to gain recognition and eventually bargain with employers.

He has since indicated he will vote against card check; solving one electoral problem, but exacerbating another. Both business and labor have thrown down the electoral gauntlet, each making it clear that their support depended on how he voted on card check. If Specter does vote against card check, labor leaders have made it clear that they will pull out all stops to defeat him in the general election. If he changes his mind and supports card check, business groups will abandon him. In the past, Specter has had the support of both business and labor groups. In the next election he may have the support of neither.

Can there be a happy ending in all this for Pennsylvania's longest serving US Senator? Ironically, perhaps the same polls that forecast his demise may also offer his political salvation. Specter's most serious electoral problems are concentrated in his party, and it's a party he may not need. Indeed, a party he may no longer be able to afford. The polls show that both Democrats and independents support him by much larger numbers than do Republicans. A majority of Democrats believe he deserves another term and both Democrats and independents hold overwhelmingly more favorable views of him.

This is not new for Specter. He has always had more trouble getting Republicans to vote for him in the primary than he has had getting Democrats to support him in the general election. What is different this time is that those Democrats may not have a chance to support him in the general election, if he remains a Republican. Specter has said he won't switch his party: in fact, he has argued that there is a place for centrist Republicans in

the GOP. No doubt he believes that. Unfortunately for Specter, there is plenty of doubt that most GOP primary voters still do.

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