There are two distinct points of view on the subject.

One asserts that he is in trouble in 2012, running for re-election to the U.S. Senate in a state now hostile to Obama and seemingly safely Republican. In a bad year for incumbents and probably a bad year for Democrats, Pennsylvania's senior senator, so the notion goes, is fated to become an ex-senator, the victim of an angry electorate, a dismal economy, and a resurgent Republican Party.

The other very different view asserts that his re-election chances look good to excellent in a state in which he, and his father before him, almost always found a way to win despite the odds or obstacles. This version predicts an easy victory for him in a state that historically re-elects Senate incumbents and loves to split its ticket in national elections.

The aforementioned “he” in these wildly disparate scenarios is, of course, Senator Bob Casey, now running full tilt for a second term to the U.S Senate. First elected in 2006 by winning almost 59% of the vote against then-incumbent Rick Santorum, Casey became the first Pennsylvania Democrat elected to a full term in the Senate in more than forty years.

Those arguing that Casey is in trouble make several strong points. He is running for re-election in a state where Obama's job performance is lower than the national average. Moreover, Casey had been a strong Obama supporter, one of his early Pennsylvania supporters, and in fact a “basketball buddy.”

Worse, perhaps, Casey in Washington has mostly supported the president’s agenda, including the $787 billion stimulus package, the national health care law, and financial regulation of Wall Street. Inevitably, Casey will carry the burden of both Obama and his programs into the general election, while his opponents will try to paint him as an Obama stooge, part and party to the current national malaise.

So the main argument against Casey’s re-election prospects is spelled O-b-a-m-a. The senator’s personal support of a beleaguered president as well as his early support of Obama’s unpopular programs may doom Casey’s chances.

But don’t bet on it!

More likely, the Pennsylvania GOP will need more than Obama’s unpopularity to defeat Casey in 2012. For starters, they might find someone to run against him.

So far there is no formidable opponent willing to take him on. Although as many as twelve potential opponents
have signaled some interest in the race, not one of them is a current office holder or a person with a state wide persona. In short, the “big leaguers” so far are sitting this one out.

Nor is there any consensus among Republicans who the eventual challenger should be. A number of prominent Republicans, including heavyweights Congressman Charlie Dent and state Senator Jake Corman, have already turned down the race.

It’s likely that Casey’s ultimate opponent will be relatively unknown, with little organization and less political experience. In early polls, Casey is beating prospective opponents by double-digit margins.

But even if Republicans find a viable challenger, Casey won’t remain a sitting duck for the inevitable attacks on Obama and his policies. Already he has begun to move away from the president on key foreign and domestic policy issues. In the months ahead, Casey will continue to demonstrate measured independence from the unpopular Obama.

Thematically, Casey will stress his independence, evoking an image as someone who fights for the state’s vital trade interests. Casey has long been concerned about America’s free trade policies versus what he perceives as the unfair trading practices of other nations. In Congress, he has moved to establish his fair trade credentials, championing Senate adoption of an amendment to extend job training for workers hit by unfair trade practice from abroad.

Strategically, Casey will tack further center as the campaign unfolds. He will continue to pursue constituency-centered policies that demonstrate he is on top of the needs of the state—as, for example, he did with his strong support of milk producers after the market collapsed for them. And he will continue a strong personal presence in the state, as exhibited by his virtual omnipresence during recent flooding.

Equally auspicious for Casey’s re-election chances are his skills on the stump. Casey is a much better campaigner than widely believed. Long in the electoral trenches, his experience in statewide campaigns goes back to his father’s earlier gubernatorial races. Politically shrewd, if frequently underestimated, few other politicians understand state voters as well as he does.

Casey’s patented low-key style also works well in Pennsylvania. Personally disarming, he neither incurs the wrath of social conservatives nor provokes controversy. He speaks softly and rarely in partisan terms. While he inspires passion in few, he invokes visceral dislike in almost none.

Is Casey then unbeatable in 2012? It might seem so, but there are no sure things in American politics today. A worsening economy, a strong opponent, or a Casey collapse all could change the trajectory of Pennsylvania’s 2012 Senate contest, transforming a probable rout into a possible race.

Nevertheless, the odds strongly favor Casey. Over the next few months we’ll discover whether the voters do, too.

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