Some very smart people believe that U.S. Senator Rick Santorum is poised to become ex-Senator Santorum, a casualty of his scheduled re-election contest next year with State Treasurer Bob Casey. The thinking from the smarts is that Santorum’s reactionary views mixed with his in your face brand of polarizing politics don’t wear well in Pennsylvania—a state historically comfortable with moderate politicians and centrist policies: playing Attila the Hun is not a good long term strategy in the Keystone State. Santorum is too conservative and his two-term tenure is bound to end.

Those writing Santorum’s political obituary may well be right. The state’s junior Senator might lose to Democrat Bob Casey, who will be both tough minded and well funded. Certainly the race will be Santorum’s roughest so far. A recent Keystone Poll shows the race dead even. Casey has strong support from Governor Rendell and a united Democratic Party behind him.

So, Santorum may well lose, and if he does, many are going to attribute the loss to Santorum’s alleged ideological extremism. But, how extreme really is Santorum? True, he’s the vocal pro-life champion of the Senate, whose outspoken and combative style has made him his party’s point man on hot button issues. For most of his career, he has embodied political conflict and controversy.

But with Rick Santorum, what you see is not necessarily all that you get.

In fact, a close look at the record suggests that his confrontational style and conservative rhetoric conceals more than it reveals. Too much attention has been spent on Santorum the cultural ideologue and not enough on his pragmatism and political opportunism; inside this raging bull of a conservative is a pragmatist for whom getting re-elected always trumps ideology, which may not make him any different than other politicians.

The facts are indisputable: according to the National Journal’s analysis of key U.S. Senate votes last year, Santorum has the least conservative voting record among the Republican leadership. He is not even among the 15 most conservative senators; in fact, 32 of his Republican colleagues had a more conservative voting record than his own.

The independent and much respected National Journal’s rating system cited here is probably the most highly regarded measure of its kind. What its analysis reveals is that Pennsylvania’s junior senator consistently shifts toward the center in those years just before his reelection. Santorum may continue to talk like a conservative, but he’s voting like a pragmatist. Last year, for example, according to the Journal, Santorum was actually narrowly left of the Republican center, with his votes placing him closer to Arlen Specter than to his more conservative colleagues.

Last year was not the only year he moved left. He did the same in the run up to his 2000 re-election. The year before the election, he supported a decidedly un-conservative sales tax hike in 11 western Pennsylvania counties to build new sport stadiums in Pittsburgh, campaigned for pro choice Christy Todd Whitman, and supported increasing the minimum wage. In 2000, he supported federal funding for several Pennsylvania projects, including money for aquatic habitat. He also fought to save the health care benefits of 560,000
Pennsylvanians who participated in the Medicare+Choice program. Most revealing of all, he backed off his commitment for the 1997-balanced budget act.

Similarly, this election cycle, Santorum is showing renewed interest in transportation and other Pennsylvania pork barrel appropriations. Indeed, he has now become a key player in bringing the bacon back home. He has also held high profile press conferences with John Kerry promoting a measure that would accommodate workers’ religious practices and with Hillary Clinton for money to study the effects of TV viewing, Internet and other media on children. And he is now rethinking his position in favor of capital punishment.

Santorum even now supports Clinton’s Americorps program that he once ridiculed as a colossal waste of taxpayer’s money for kids to sit around campfires singing kum ba yah.

His conservative talk and moderate walk were on display recently in key congressional budget votes. Initially, the “conservative” Santorum voted against a variety of Senate initiatives to restore budget cuts by the House--from Medicaid to Homeland Security grants, to education, and even Amtrak funding. But then on cue, the “moderate” Santorum, voted with the majority, 51 to 49, on final passage to restore the cuts to education, Medicaid, and the other domestic programs he had previously not supported.

Santorum’s penchant to talk conservative but vote pragmatist has served him well. It is the main reason that Democrats’ routinely underestimate him--and have done so since his entrance into politics as a western Pennsylvania congressman in 1990. He was first underestimated when as a wild-eyed Newt Gingrich conservative, and member of the “gang of seven,” he helped undermine the Democratic leadership in the U.S. House. Before he upset Senator Harris Wofford in 1994, few gave this unknown two-term congressman any chance at all. He was underestimated again in 2000 when he narrowly won re-election by defeating Democrat Ron Klink.

It’s important to understand why Santorum is so routinely underestimated.

His enemies view him as a culturally obtuse Neanderthal incapable of political compromise: he is outspoken on conservative hot button cultural issues; he’s vociferously against gay marriage, which he has equated to bigamy, polygamy, and incest; he’s a national crusader against abortion, a champion of gun rights, and once vigorously opposed funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities. The belief is strong, particularly among Democrats, that Santorum is so far right of center he can’t win in moderate Pennsylvania. But this focus on Santorum’s high profile rhetoric has been myopic, causing his adversaries to miss much that is important. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to Santorum’s unflagging work at his party’s grass roots; how he’s established comprehensive constituency services; how he’s worked tirelessly for Republicans--ask Arlen Specter about this--and how he has joined Specter in the Pennsylvania pork brigade. And far too little notice has been given to how he has blended his conservative zealotry with political pragmatism.

Maybe Democrats will learn the lesson taught here. Maybe they will learn not to underestimate Santorum. Maybe they will learn to watch what he does more closely than what he says. Maybe they will learn to take him less seriously as an ideologue and more seriously as a politician. And maybe they will finally defeat him next year. Maybe!