



Can Joe Sestak Buck the Odds — and His Party's Leaders — Against Arlen Specter?

By SEAN SCULLY / PHILADELPHIA Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2009



Representative Joseph Sestak in his office on Capitol Hill
Harry Hamburg / AP

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On paper, perhaps, Congressman Joe Sestak seems to be on a quixotic mission — to unseat Arlen Specter, a 30-year incumbent Senator who is arguably the most successful politician in Pennsylvania history. And he's got to do it all in nine months with less money than Specter, little name recognition outside his district in the Philadelphia suburbs and the near unanimous disapproval of the state's powerful Democratic establishment.

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Surprisingly, many of the state's veteran political observers and activists say no. "It's going to require an insurgency campaign, kind of a storming the gates with pitchforks and torches kind of campaign," says strategist Mark Nevins, who advised Hillary Clinton in

her successful primary campaign in Pennsylvania last year. "That is difficult to run but can be very effective in this kind of environment."

Most importantly, the campaign must be keyed to Specter's unexpected defection from the Republican Party last spring. On April 28, he announced he was switching parties after admitting he would lose the GOP primary to conservative challenger Pat Toomey. Specter's blunt and clinical explanation for why he switched did little to endear him to many of the Democratic partisans who will vote in the May 18 primary election. "He lost his first and best opportunity to really make people believe that it was a fundamental shift in his ideology," Nevins says. "Instead he made it sound opportunistic." **(See the top 10 political defections.)**

Party leaders, however, have rallied around Specter, starting with President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Governor Ed Rendell and going down to city and local elected officials throughout the state. They have made quite clear that they do not welcome a major challenge against the newly minted

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Democrat. Sestak, who had been touted as a Democratic challenger to Specter before his party switch, never did embrace Specter as a Democrat, immediately raising questions publicly about his commitment to Democratic values. The congressman jumped into the primary race earlier this month after touring all of the state's counties, spreading his name and testing the political temperature. Muhlenberg College political scientist Chris Borick says Sestak may be tapping into the grass-roots mood. Specter "is a Democrat by necessity," Borick says, "not a Democrat by choice. Joe Sestak is by choice. I think that's powerful in a primary."

(Read a story about what rank-and-file Democrats think of Specter's defection.)

Still, early polls aren't encouraging. Quinnipiac University reported in July that Specter would beat Sestak easily in the primary, 55% to 23%. According even to Sestak's campaign, at least 70% of primary voters don't know enough about him to even form an opinion. But the Quinnipiac poll and others also found troubling signs for Specter — his job-approval numbers statewide, for example, have fallen to their lowest point in the poll's history: 47% approve while 46% disapprove.

(Read a story about why Specter switched parties.)

Franklin & Marshall College pollster Terry Madonna says his own polling and discussions with voters suggest that Specter is on the trickiest ground of his career. "There's sort of a nagging concern voters have," Madonna says. "They're concerned about his past — voting with Bush and Reagan for Bush and Reagan tax cuts, for the war in Iraq, support for the Patriot Act." There's also an undercurrent of worry about Specter's age and health, Madonna says, although voters tend to say so only in whispers. Specter is 79 and has suffered two bouts of Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the blood.

One issue that may dog Specter is health care. In two town-hall meetings this month, he has been confronted by angry constituents who claim the current proposal in Congress tramples on their constitutional rights. At a particularly turbulent meeting in Lebanon, Pa., on Tuesday, one man yelled that "One day God is going to judge you and the rest of your damn cronies on the Hill." But it's not clear that voter anger over health-care reform will help the challenger either — Sestak is himself an outspoken backer of President Obama's efforts to reform the health-care system, so it's unlikely the angry protesters crowding Specter's town halls would see Sestak as an alternative.

Specter himself professes to be completely unconcerned. Campaign manager Christopher Nicholas says Specter is "fighting trim" physically and is politically committed to Democratic ideals. "There are folks on the extremes of either party who will never be satisfied," Nicholas says of liberal voters suspicious of Specter, "but you have to plow ahead and work with those folks who are with you and try to minimize the impact of those that are not with you."

Sestak, meanwhile, admits that the burden is on him to get his name out to the public. "It is my responsibility to make the case and be around everywhere in the grass-roots way," Sestak told TIME, "and make sure there is sufficient funding — and there will be."

For such a relatively little-known candidate, Sestak is surprisingly close to Specter in fundraising. As of the end of June, he had about \$4.5 million in the bank — much of it left over from his nearly uncontested 2008 re-election bid — and Specter had about \$7.5 million. While the state party establishment is likely to try to keep large donors away from Sestak, he can probably count on younger and more liberal democratic donors, including some nationally in what's known as the Netroots movement of progressive bloggers and Internet users — the same people that helped Democrat Ned Lamont upset longtime Democratic incumbent Senator Joe Lieberman in the Connecticut primary in 2006. Lieberman quickly switched to independent and won his seat back anyway, but Pennsylvania law would prevent Specter from doing the same if he loses the primary.

"Sestak is a proven fighter," says Markos Moulitsas, founder of the influential progressive website Daily Kos, in an e-mail. "The fact that he is bucking the party establishment to fight a righteous fight makes him even more admiration-worthy."

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