

Conservative in fight for political future in Pennsylvania

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By MARC SANDALOW

There is probably no one the left would rather see defeated this November than Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum.

The two-term Republican is a reliable ally of President Bush on matters from Iraq to confirming judges. He is a religious conservative who has spoken out against abortions, gay unions and contraception. He is a liaison to the business community and a consistent vote against environmental regulation. He is No. 3 in the GOP's Senate hierarchy.

By most measures, he is the most vulnerable incumbent in the Senate.

With just more than two weeks remaining before Election Day, Democrat Bob Casey Jr. leads Santorum in surveys by anywhere from 5 to 13 percentage points. Democrats regard Santorum's seat as the surest bet of the six GOP seats they need to win a Senate majority. And there are signs that Republicans are pulling back resources in an acknowledgement that there are other battles they are more likely to win.

The travails of a brash 48-year-old conservative who has talked about someday running for president draw unrestrained delight from liberals around the country, who hold the same contempt for Santorum that many conservatives hold for Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy or California Sen. Barbara Boxer.

"No one is further to the right in the Senate than Rick Santorum," said Ralph Neas, president of the liberal advocacy group People for the American Way. "If he had his way, the constitutional clock would be turned back about seven decades."

"Gays would be thrilled and overjoyed" at a Santorum loss, said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "He's been so overtly and gratuitously homophobic."

Yet Santorum's troubles stem less from his cocksure conservatism - he has blamed radical feminists for weakening families and compared homosexuality to bestiality, for instance - than from the same disenchantment with the war in Iraq and President Bush that is threatening Republicans across the country.

Asked how a 12-year veteran of the Senate who served four years before that in the House could be in danger of losing re-election, Sen. Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania's other Republican senator, responded wryly: "You may have heard that there is a war going on in Iraq."

Santorum's unwavering defense of the Iraq war, of Bush and of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are not playing well in this politically moderate Eastern state, which has elected

Republican senators in the past five elections, but voted for Democratic presidential candidates in the past four.

Polls show Pennsylvanians overwhelmingly disapprove of Bush and his Iraq policy, and are concerned about the direction of the country.

The same sentiment endangers the seats of at least four House Republicans from Pennsylvania, and Democratic strategists hope such attitudes will swing the state from being a battleground in recent presidential elections to one that is reliably Democratic in 2008.

Santorum has praised Bush as a "terrific" president and Rumsfeld for doing a "fine job," in comments that are circulated widely by his opponents. Voter confidence in Santorum's judgment was probably not helped last week when he used an analogy from J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" to explain the wisdom of keeping terrorists occupied in Iraq.

"As the hobbits are going up Mount Doom, the Eye of Mordor is being drawn somewhere else," Santorum told the editorial board of the Bucks County Courier Times, a comment that has proved irresistible to late-night television comedians.

"It's being drawn to Iraq, and it's not being drawn to the U.S. You know what? I want to keep it on Iraq. I don't want the eye to come back here to the United States," Santorum explained.

Liberal voters in Philadelphia roll their eyes when they discuss Santorum's well-known utterings, such as his declaration that abortion is worse than slavery, his observation that society frowns on homosexuality just as it frowns on "man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be," or his assertion that it is "no surprise" that the Catholic Church's sex scandals are centered in Boston, "a seat of academic, political and cultural liberalism."

But liberals didn't vote for Santorum in the past two elections. The difference this time is that millions of independent and swing voters appear ready for a change.

"Iraq is the No. 1 issue in the state," said Terry Madonna, director of Franklin & Marshall College's Keystone Poll, whose September survey showed Casey leading Santorum 45 percent to 37 percent.

Madonna said Santorum's "confrontational, in-your-face style" has a polarizing effect on the electorate.

"A lot of people despise him," Madonna said, though that has not been enough to defeat him in the past.

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