

San Francisco Chronicle

Santorum — nemesis of left — in trouble

Sunday, October 22, 2006

— Marc Sandalow, Washington Bureau Chief

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.

"Pennsylvania has elected pro-life and pro-choice officials, pro-gay rights and anti-gay rights. We're not California," Madonna said.

In combination with the sour national mood, however, Santorum has found himself unable to rise above 40 percent in polls, a remarkably low number for a two-term incumbent.

Pennsylvania provides a case study of voters running not so much toward Democrats but away from Republicans.

Casey, Santorum's challenger, is a colorless state treasurer, who is best known for being the son of the popular governor who served from 1987 to 1995. Like Santorum, Casey is against abortion

rights and gun control, and supported the confirmation of Bush Supreme Court nominees John Roberts and Samuel Alito.

Since fending off challenges from the left, Casey has run a quiet campaign, presenting himself as a credible alternative to a conservative who is outside Pennsylvania's mainstream. Casey has portrayed Santorum as a Bush lapdog, running television commercials that advertise Santorum's 98 percent voting record in support of the Republican president.

In the course of an hourlong debate in Philadelphia last week, Casey could not provide details of how he'd balance the budget or identify specific lines that North Korea or Iran would need to cross for him to vote a war resolution. But he accused Santorum of offering "more of the same," four separate times.

Santorum, by contrast, is never accused of not speaking his mind. Asked in the same Philadelphia debate why he insists on describing the enemy as "Islamic fascists" even as the State Department refuses to do so, Santorum responded: "I'm sure that we offended a lot of Germans and lot of Japanese and lot of Italians when we called a spade a spade in World War II."

Most nonpartisan analysts believe Casey's low profile and moderate stances will be enough to prevail in a state that has grown weary of the status quo.

"Casey is a pro-life, pro-gun Democrat, and that zaps Santorum's ability to demonize him as a Ted Kennedy or Nancy Pelosi Democrat," said Christopher Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion.

The prospect of a Santorum loss has drawn national attention.

The League of Conservation Voters has placed Santorum on their "dirty dozen list," making him among the top 12 targets of the 435 House and 33 Senate races. Democrats from around the country have traveled to Pennsylvania to campaign against Santorum, including gay sex advice columnist Dan Savage, who headlined a recent anti-Santorum fundraiser, telling one interviewer that "from his perch in the Senate (Santorum has) waged a war against gays and lesbians, and we have returned the fire."

Santorum has used the attention as a rallying point for his loyalists.

"If you're conservative and have the audacity to stick your head out of the foxhole, you're going to get harassed," Santorum told Sean Hannity on Fox radio last week.

"The national Democrats made it clear it will not be a successful election day unless they beat Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania," he said.

But there is concern on the right that a Santorum loss will signal a change beyond state lines.

National Review's John Miller wrote last week that "there may not be a more important election for conservatives" than this one.

A Santorum defeat, Miller wrote, "would cost conservatives one of their most talented warriors" and could be seen as "a repudiation of conservatism itself."