

The Morning Call
Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion

The 2006 United States Senate Race
In Pennsylvania:
Santorum vs. Casey

KEY FINDINGS REPORT

September 26, 2005

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1. With just over one year left before the 2006 elections, Democrat Bob Casey Jr. leads Rick Santorum for the U.S. Senate seat, with over a third of commonwealth voters undecided on their preference.
2. The race is marked by stark partisan divide, with strong Republican support for Santorum and solid Democratic backing of Casey.
3. Among non-affiliated voters Casey appears to have a lead over Santorum, although a large portion of this key voting block is undecided.
4. .Pennsylvania voters are very divided on Senator Santorum's job performance, with high levels of partisan separation on the way that he is handling his role as the commonwealth's junior Senator
5. Likely Democratic nominee Bob Casey Jr. maintains a solid favorable to unfavorable ratio, but most voters in the state have not set an opinion of Casey at this time.
6. Attitudes towards George W. Bush appear to be important in predicting voter preferences in the Senate race, with voters disapproving of the President overwhelmingly opposing Santorum..

METHODOLOGY: The following key findings report summarizes data collected in a telephone survey of 477 voters in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania between September 18 and 25, 2005. Individual households throughout the state were selected randomly for inclusion in the study. The sample of phone numbers used in the survey was generated by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, PA. Interviewing was conducted by the staff of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion and PMI of Easton Pennsylvania. This number of completions results in a margin of error of +/- 4.5% at the 95% confidence interval. However the margin of errors for sub groups (i.e. women, Republicans) is larger due to smaller sample size. Percentages throughout the survey have been rounded to the nearest percentage, thus many totals in the results will not equal 100. The survey questionnaire was designed by Christopher Borick, Ph.D. of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion in consultation with staff members of the *Morning Call*. Analysis and report writing were completed by the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion under the direction of Dr. Borick.

ANALYSIS

With the 2006 U.S. Senate elections just over one year away, the most recent Morning Call/ Muhlenberg College survey finds Democrat Bob Casey Jr. leading incumbent Republican Rick Santorum among registered voters in the commonwealth. As may be expected for a race over a year away, about 1 in 3 voters is undecided about their

preference at this time. In a pattern reminiscent of the 2004 Presidential campaign in the state, partisanship appears to be a significant component of the Senate race.

UNDERLYING LEVELS OF SUPPORT

Election outcomes are often impacted by general perceptions of the candidates from voters. Therefore before gauging public preferences in a head-to-head match-up, we asked voters their overall job approval of the incumbent, and favorability of both the incumbent and challenger. In terms of incumbent Senator Rick Santorum's job approval rating we find Pennsylvania voters are quite divided. More specifically, while 40% of commonwealth voters approve of the way the two-term Republican is handling his duties, 36% disapprove of his work. In addition about 1 in 4 voters in the state are not sure about their views on Santorum's efforts in Washington D.C. As may be expected with a political figure that is often considered polarizing, voter attitudes towards Santorum's job performance are highly tied to partisan affiliation. The survey finds 69% of Pennsylvania Republicans approve of the way Santorum is handling his job compared to only 21% of Democrats in the Keystone State. In the important non-affiliated voter category only 17% of respondents gave Santorum a positive job appraisal, with 53% disapproving and 31% unsure. Interestingly, the state's junior Senator's approval ratings are similar between men and women, with disapproval ratings standing at 36% for both sexes.

In terms of overall attitudes to the candidates the survey finds strong division towards Senator Santorum, and generally neutral attitudes towards Bob Casey Jr. For the incumbent Republican commonwealth voters were almost evenly split, with 40% viewing Santorum favorably and 37% maintaining unfavorable perceptions. Only about 1 in 4 voters in Pennsylvania were neutral or unsure about the Senator, with 1% indicating they haven't heard of him. In contrast to Santorum, Pennsylvania State Treasurer Casey has a fairly strong favorable to unfavorable ratio of 29% to 12%, but a majority of commonwealth voters were either neutral (57%) or (3%) hadn't heard of him at all. These findings portray some interesting aspects of the race in these early stages. In particular they demonstrate that most Pennsylvanians have set positions on Rick Santorum, with those positions being quite divided. Casey on the other hand remains popular among the 40% of the electorate that rated him, yet he remains fairly undefined for most of the state's voters. This undefined status is a key for the Santorum campaign which contends that Casey will struggle with voters once he is forced to take stands on controversial issues.

U.S. SENATE RACE

In an early snapshot of the 2006 Senate race Democratic challenger Bob Casey Jr. leads Republican incumbent Rick Santorum by eight points, 37% to 29%. While a large percentage (32%) of commonwealth voters remain undecided on this race, Casey's lead in the survey confirms other polls which show him as the early frontrunner in the much anticipated battle for the seat held by Republicans since 1994.

Table 1

U.S. Senate Race in Pennsylvania

	Percent of Voters
Bob Casey Jr.	37%
Rick Santorum	29%
Undecided	31%
Neither/Other	3%

Looking closer at the demographics of voters we see that there are some age effects in terms of voter preference in the senate race . While the race is quite close in many of the younger to middle-aged categories, older Pennsylvania voters are leaning to Bob Casey Jr. Given the strong record of voting turnout and Pennsylvania’s aging population (2nd oldest in the nation), Santorum’s relatively poor performance in this demographic may be seen as problematic to his campaign. It may also help to explain his recent proposal to guarantee Social Security benefits, which is considered as an attractive option for older citizen’s concerned about the effect of Social Security reform on their benefits. A full age breakdown is presented in Table Two below:

Table Two

U.S. Senate Race by Age Category

	Santorum	Casey Jr.	Neither/Other	Not sure
18-34 years old	28%	32%	4%	35%
35-44 years old	29%	32%	0%	40%
45-54 years old	29%	33%	7%	32%
55-64 years old	28%	38%	4%	31%
65 or older	30%	42%	0%	27%

In terms of partisan support this race is taking on the familiar stark party division seen in recent campaigns. Among registered Democrats, Casey Jr. leads 59% to 11%, with 27% of Pennsylvania Democratic voters undecided. Among registered Republicans, Santorum leads 55% to 14% with 29% of voters undecided. Most independent voters have still not committed to a specific candidate with 44% of them reporting they are undecided at this time. That being said, Casey Jr. does hold a lead among independent voters by a margin of 33% to 14%.

Table Three

U.S. Senate Race by Party Registration

	Santorum	Casey Jr.	Neither/Other	Not sure
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Democrats	11%	59%	2%	27%
Republicans	55%	14%	3%	29%
Independents	14%	33%	8%	44%

THE ‘BUSH EFFECT’

During the last year President George W. Bush’s popularity in Pennsylvania has seen a steady decline. In particular, a majority of voters in the commonwealth now have an unfavorable personal impression of the President. This 51% disapproval mark is the culmination of a steady decline in his popularity in the Keystone State that is observable in Table Four.

Table Four

“Is your impression of George w. Bush favorable or unfavorable.”

	November 03	March 04	May 04	October 04	September 05
Favorable	54%	51%	47%	49%	42%
Unfavorable	37%	44%	49%	47%	51%
Neutral/Not Sure	9%	5%	4%	4%	7%

The President’s sagging popularity has been speculated as a possible liability for Santorum’s reelection bid. In particular, because of his strong affiliation with the White House and a number of key policy initiatives (i.e. Social Security Reform), Senator Santorum may be prone to a campaign that links him to a politically weak White House. The survey results provide evidence that attitudes towards the President are closely aligned with stated preferences in the Senate campaign. In particular, only 9% of Pennsylvania voters who disapprove of the way the President is handling his job expressed intent to vote for Senator Santorum. Meanwhile, Casey is the preference of 57% of Pennsylvania voters dissatisfied with the President’s job performance. Conversely, 57% of voters that approve of Bush’s handling of his job plan to vote for Santorum, with a mere 9% supporting Casey. In essence these findings demonstrate that a voter’s position on President Bush are even more important than their party affiliation in predicting who they support in the upcoming Senate race.

The Abortion Issue

The Santorum-Casey campaign is notable for the fact that both candidates hold Pro-Life positions on the abortion issue. Given the importance of this issue for many voters, the lack of difference among candidate positions poses interesting possibilities. It has been speculated that Casey’s Pro-Life position may be detrimental to Santorum because it may

draw off some individuals who lean Democratic on many issues, but vote Republican on the abortion topic. Conversely, the argument has been made that Casey's pro-life position may alienate Pro-Choice voters and diminish turnout. While it is difficult to determine the effects of this issue at such an early date, the survey results show some interesting effects. First, among pro-life voters, Santorum leads Casey by a margin of 41% to 26%, with 44% unsure of their preference. Conversely, among pro-choice voters Casey leads Santorum by a margin of 48% to 14% with 36% undecided. These results suggest that Santorum remains the preference of a plurality of Pro-Life voters, but he does not dominate this block of voters likely many conservative Republicans have done in recent years. Meanwhile Casey remains the overwhelming choice of Pro-Choice voters at this time. However, the strong Pro-Choice support levels may mask the more important issue of turnout among this group. If this group is not energized by a Pro-Choice standard bearer it may hurt Casey in November of 2006.

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