

## The World According to Brian

# Republicans' Pennsylvania Delusions

The truth about the Keystone State

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Bloomberg and Axios both reported this week that Dave McCormick, wealthy former CEO and husband to Dina Powell, a former top Trump aide, is considering another Pennsylvania Senate run, this time against Sen. Bob Casey in 2024. McCormick lost the GOP Senate primary to Mehmet Oz in 2022, before Oz lost to Sen-Elect John Fetterman in the general election.

The very idea that a Republican would be jumping in against Casey this early belies the political reality of Pennsylvania: Republicans can win there in federal races, but it's exceptionally hard. I mentioned this in my election preview, but I wanted to delve further.

Since 1988, Republicans have won the presidential contest in PA a grand total of once — Donald Trump's narrow, surprise victory in 2016, in which he secured a mere 48.17% of the vote. To represent that visually:

Democratic presidential wins: 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2020

Republican presidential wins: 2016

Number of times Republicans have topped 50%: Zero.

Then you get to the Senate.

Pennsylvania is weird in that it actually has had exceedingly few conservative Republican OR liberal Democratic senators in modern times. Instead, for decades, it was the bastion of popular liberal to moderate Republicans — Hugh Scott, Richard Schweiker, John Heinz, Arlen Specter. How popular was this political archetype? So popular that Schweiker won his first election by beating a Democratic incumbent even as Hubert Humphrey was carrying the state in 1968 and then getting reelected despite Republicans' Watergate disaster in 1974. Or

check out Heinz and Specter's percentages in their reelection contests: for Specter: 56.4%, 49.1%, 61.3%, 52.6% (which was deceptive because his opponent only got 41.9%) and for Heinz: 59.3% & 66.5% before his tragic death in a plane crash. So that's one close reelection out of six.

By contrast, only two conservative Republicans have won Senate races in PA in the modern era — Rick Santorum and Pat Toomey. And their electoral history shows how tough things are for conservative Republicans in federal races in Pennsylvania.

**Santorum:**

Beat an incumbent senator in the Republican wave of 49.4% to 46.9%

Won reelection 52.2% to 45.5% in 2000 against a weak Democratic opponent.

Got eviscerated by Casey 58.6% to 41.3% in 2006, an astonishingly poor showing for an incumbent.

**Toomey:**

Narrowly won an open seat 51-49% in the Republican wave of 2010 after Specter switched parties and lost in a Democratic primary.

Got reelected against a weak opponent: 48.8 to 47.5% in the good Republican year of 2016.

Retired and watch Fetterman beat Oz by 4.9%.

The sum total of these five elections reveals that conservative Republicans can win in Pennsylvania in Republican wave elections, and then, as incumbents, can beat weak opponents. In 2000, for example, Santorum beat Rep. Ron Klink, whose pro-gun and anti-abortion rights stances repelled voters in the populous Philadelphia suburbs. Klink received more than 300,000 votes less than Al Gore did in carrying the state. And in 2016, a devastating and memorable ad campaign branded Toomey's opponent, "Shady Katie McGinty."

Even so, the high water mark for these two Republicans over five elections was Santorum's reelection in 2000 with 52.2% of the vote. They only topped 50% twice.

By contrast, two liberal Democrats have won Senate races in PA since the era of moderate Republican dominance ended with Specter's party switch: Casey and Fetterman.

In 2006, Casey crushed the incumbent Santorum.

In 2012, he got reelected 53.7% to 44.6%.

And in 2018, he got reelected 55.7% to 42.6%.

Then Fetterman won in 2022, 51.2 to 46.3%.

Now granted, all four of those were Democratic years (at least in PA in the case of 2022). But still. All three of Casey's victories exceeded the best showing for Santorum or Toomey.

Or consider another data point: since Specter's last reelection — which portended things to come when, despite support from President Bush, the veteran senator only held off Toomey in a GOP primary 50.82% to 49.18% before crushing Democrat Joe Hoeffel in the general election — Republicans have gotten more than 51% in exactly **ONE** Senate, gubernatorial, or presidential contest in Pennsylvania: Tom Corbett's 54.5% in the wave election of 2010. Corbett turned around and lost reelection in a good GOP year in 2014. Meanwhile, Casey surmounted that number 3x, Fetterman narrowly cleared it in 2022, Democratic governor Tom Wolf cleared it twice, new-governor elect Josh Shapiro topped it, and so did Barack Obama twice.

Sensing a pattern?

Yes, PA can be competitive for the GOP in the right environment. But increasingly, it looks like 2016 was somewhat of a fluke deriving from Donald Trump's unique strength in the state. And that strength still wasn't enough to win the state in 2020. A certain type of moderate Republican once dominated state politics. But the conservative base never really liked Specter-type Republicans, and once they fully took over the party in the 2000s, it made statewide victory exceedingly difficult for the GOP. Put simply, the sorts of candidates who can win general elections can't get through Republican primaries, and the sorts of candidates who can win primaries are ill-suited to win general elections.

In a lot of ways, Pennsylvania is a mirror of Florida — a state that often produces narrow margins, but almost always leans in one direction. Democrats have a high ceiling, whereas Republicans' ceiling is barely eking out wins when a weak opponent or the right circumstances emerge.

The problem for the GOP in 2024 is that Casey is anything but weak, and Biden maintains real strength in the land of his birth. That makes PA squarely a leans blue state at the presidential level, and maybe a likely blue state in the Senate race.