

Solid Campaign Carried Sestak to Upset Win

To say that the stars aligned for Joe Sestak last Tuesday, when -- in a major upset for the Washington establishment -- he beat out long-time Senator Arlen Specter for the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate, would be something of an understatement.

For nearly his entire campaign, which he officially launched last August, Sestak trailed Specter in the polls -- sometimes by as much as 20 points; less than two months before the election, in late March, he was still unknown to more than 60 percent of his party.

Despite a ground campaign that took Sestak to every county in Pennsylvania (many of them more than once) his opponent drew endorsements from the major labor unions, Philadelphia's Black clergy, the Pennsylvania Democratic Party and most of its elected members, Governor Ed Rendell (who last spring famously said Sestak would get "killed" if he ran) and not least of all, President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, both of whom appeared in Specter ads.

When we caught up with Sestak in early April, his prospects were looking increasingly dim. And yet the candidate never once wavered in his belief that come election day, the voters would see in Specter what he saw: a lifelong Republican who only changed his party to keep his job.

It turns out he was right. On May 18, the nation watched as Sestak gave Specter a run for his money, beating the veteran senator by eight points, winning 64 out of 67 Pennsylvania counties.

If you didn't know better, you might think the two-term congressman and retired three-star vice admiral is charmed. In 2006, he overcame similar odds to beat Republican Curt Weldon for the House seat he currently holds in Pennsylvania's 7th District, which covers most of Delaware County.

But Sestak has one more bridge to cross: the November general election against GOP candidate Pat Toomey. And while he's jumped right into that race, barely skipping a beat after defeating Specter, there are still some people scratching their heads and wondering just how he pulled it off.

To look back, things really started to turn around for Sestak in late April, when, under the direction of The Campaign Group's Neil Oxman -- the veteran political strategist (some say genius) who helped both Ed Rendell and Michael Nutter get elected -- he unleashed a television campaign that drew national attention.

"I think what happened is he had a brilliant media campaign the last month. With a million dollars spent a week, they made the most effective argument they could make," said Terry Madonna, director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College.

“Sestak had been making these same arguments for months and months but not penetrating to the Democratic vote base, but once they took to the airwaves the game changed.”

The air campaign started with a biographical ad called “Meet Joe” that focused on Sestak’s time in the Navy and his tenure in the Clinton White House. Sestak’s brother and campaign manager Rich attributes the ad with helping turn Sestak from a virtual unknown into a viable candidate.

Then they shifted gears, going after Specter directly. Speaking to the National Review Online after Specter’s defeat, Oxman said his strategy involved focusing as much as possible on the incumbent.

“This race was not about Joe Sestak. It was a referendum on change and Specter,” Oxman said. “While Sestak is a terrific alternative — congressman, three-star admiral, Harvard Ph.D. — in the end, it was all about Specter. That’s who we made this campaign about.”

The ad that made the most impact, “The Switch,” did just that. It shows Specter hobnobbing with President Bush and Sarah Palin, and ends with the newly minted Democrat saying he switched parties so he “could get re-elected.”

For 12 days before the election voters were reminded again and again that Specter spent most of his 30-year Senate career in the GOP and only became a Democrat when it looked like he would lose his party’s primary. Madonna says it’s a message that Specter never adequately countered.

“I don’t think that Specter had a set of commercials that really effectively communicated why he changed parties, which I think he had to explain,” he said.

Madonna also points to the low voter turnout as a bonus for Sestak. Just 24 percent of registered Democrats braved sporadic showers to vote, a constituency that Madonna says would have been comprised mostly of party diehards of the kind least likely to buy Specter’s party switch as genuine.

Without discounting the power of television or the anti-incumbent sentiment that accompanied much of this election season, the Sestak camp chalks up the win to the significant legwork of campaign staffers and the candidate himself, who according to Rich Sestak attended more than 650 campaign events between January 2010 and the election.

“It’s easy to look at what happened at the end of the race and jump to conclusions, but the foundation of this win was laid over months of on-the-ground campaigning in all of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties,” said Rich Sestak via e-mail. “We won counties like Mercer and Tioga that are not in Pennsylvania media markets and the voters there didn’t see any TV ads.”

The final nail in Specter's coffin, ironically, may have come from President Obama himself, a Specter supporter.

At the beginning of May the president chose Elena Kagan as his nominee to replace Justice John Paul Stevens on the Supreme Court. In 2009 Specter voted against Kagan's appointment to her current position as Solicitor General.

Specter responded to the nomination almost immediately with a statement saying he would keep an open mind, but for the next several days Specter's "No" vote on Kagan was blasted over the airwaves and dissected again and again by pundits.

According to Madonna: "It forced him to go on the defensive and more importantly it reminded democratic voters that Specter really hadn't been one of them."

Perhaps more than Specter's flip-flopping, or his negative ads, or his Kagan vote, in the end voters decided that after five terms spanning four decades it was simply time for the senior senator, now 80, to move aside.

"Frankly, I just think that Arlen Specter was an idea whose time had gone," Cliff Wilson, the Democratic Party chairman in Sestak's home county told the *Delaware County Times*. "There's a million theories out there about the anger, the public ... the bottom line is 30 years and people wanted a change."

Whatever the reason, the defeat opens the door to a uniquely partisan general election that will pit a dedicated progressive on the left of his party against a staunch conservative and Tea Party supporter that sits on the right of his.

In his victory speech on election night, a slightly overwhelmed Sestak thanked Specter for his service to Pennsylvania and the nation and called his tenure in government a "legacy to be proud of."

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