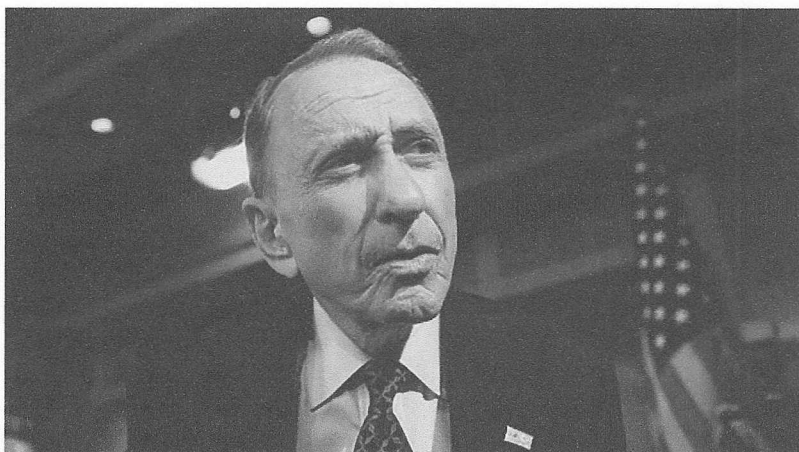


Pennsylvania Democrats Reserved on Specter

By SEAN SCULLY / PHILADELPHIA Wednesday, Apr. 29, 2009



Senator Arlen Specter held a press conference to announce that he is switching political parties from Republican to Democrat

Gary Fabiano / Sipa

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Democrats in Washington were quick to celebrate Republican Senator Arlen Specter's shocking announcement that he was switching parties. But in his home state of Pennsylvania, Specter's news received a much more measured reception from his new party colleagues. Perhaps that isn't all that surprising considering that Specter, a longtime rival, had in one fell swoop effectively won the Democratic nomination for next year's Senate race.

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"I would not have predicted what happened today five years ago or even five hours ago," said Montgomery County commissioner Joe Hoeffel, who ran unsuccessfully against Specter in 2004. "It's bigger than Senator Specter's future. It's bigger than the fate of a couple of my friends who wanted to run against him in the Democratic primary who are kind of being rudely shoved aside ... There will certainly be Pennsylvania Democrats who will not be pleased about this, but I think people will see the greater good here," Hoeffel told TIME hours after the announcement. ([See a day-by-day look at the first 100 days of the Obama Administration.](#))

It's true that only a handful of relatively low-profile state Democrats had formally filed their candidacies, including state representative Bill Kortz and Joe Torsella, the former director of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, who issued a statement on Tuesday insisting that he intends to stay in the race. ([See Mark Halperin's report card on the Obama Administration](#))

But several members of Congress were eyeing next year's contest, especially as it seemed more and more likely that Specter would lose to conservative activist and former Congressman Pat Toomey, who would be a much easier target in the increasingly Democratic state. Representatives Allyson Schwartz and Patrick Murphy were both being touted as probable candidates, though the leading contender was probably Representative Joe Sestak. Democrats say it seems unlikely now that any of the unannounced candidates will jump in; not only was Specter reportedly promised the full support of the national Democratic Party as part of his deal to switch sides — and the President himself has said he would campaign on his behalf — but also Specter enjoys a close relationship with Governor Ed Rendell, the state's most powerful Democrat, who many observers believe played a key role in persuading Specter to make the switch.

Still, while refusing to speculate on whether he or anyone else would challenge Specter in the Democratic primary, Sestak sounded a curiously cautious note in welcoming him, saying voters need to understand why the longtime Republican chose to switch at this particular moment. "If he were not running for re-election, would he have done this change? In short, is it worth any cost to hold on to one's job? Those questions need to be assessed by the citizenry," he told TIME. ([See pictures of Obama's first 100 days in office.](#))

State representative Josh Shapiro, who had been close to announcing a run for the Senate seat but backed off on Tuesday, echoed Sestak's point that Specter would need to demonstrate that he is representing the interests of Pennsylvanians, who strongly supported Barack Obama in the 2008 election. The test for Specter, he said, will be to "make sure the Obama agenda is acted upon and not stifled."

On the Republican side, Specter's departure could leave an opening for a less conservative candidate to challenge Toomey in the primary. Speculation has centered on two powerful figures — former U.S. Attorney Pat Meehan, who has been running for governor, and Representative Jim Gerlach, who has signaled he might be interested in leaving the House for statewide office. Meehan issued a statement on Tuesday saying he was "disappointed" in Specter's decision to leave. "I see opportunity and hope in Pennsylvania's future and want to fight within the party to bring discipline to government spending and restraint to taxation," he wrote. Gerlach's staff said it was too early to expect the Congressman to decide what to do about the 2010 race.

Toomey's campaign and state Republican officials didn't return calls, but the candidate issued a harsh judgment on his website, one that gave a hint of how he might campaign if he were to win the nomination. "What Pennsylvanians must now ask themselves is whether Senator Specter is in fact devoted to any principle other than his own re-election," Toomey wrote. He implicitly accused Specter of hypocrisy, saying "Senator Specter has made numerous statements about how important it is to deny Democrats the 60th seat in the U.S. Senate and how he categorically intended to remain a Republican to prevent one-party dominance in Washington."

It was no secret that Specter was facing a hostile future in his former party. Moderates had abandoned the Republicans in waves before the 2008 election, and conservatives — who had never trusted the moderate, pro-choice Specter — were outraged by his support of President Obama's stimulus package earlier this year. Polls in recent weeks showed Specter losing in a primary contest to Toomey by 20 points or more.

Just two weeks ago, Specter was at a fundraiser in Pittsburgh bemoaning his increasingly isolated status in the Republican caucus on Capitol Hill. "He was

increasingly isolated status in the Republican caucus on Capitol Hill. He was commenting, "There are only three of us left, only three Republican moderates left," said Clifford Levine, a Democrat who coordinated President Obama's campaign in western Pennsylvania and who also happens to be an active Specter supporter. "They're all retired, forced out, and the Republican Party was in effect cannibalizing itself."

Philadelphia-based strategist Larry Ceisler, a Democrat who has long supported Specter, said he had expected to see him make a bid as an independent, even though that is technically difficult under Pennsylvania law, and was taken aback by his complete switch of parties. That switch, he said, appears to be the loudest statement of disapproval Specter can make about the Republicans and not necessarily an endorsement of the Democrats. "I don't expect Arlen Specter to be any different as a Democrat than he was as a Republican ... He was a maverick Republican. He's going to be a maverick Democrat," Ceisler said.

Pollster Terry Madonna of Franklin & Marshall College said that Specter essentially had no choice. Democrats far outstripped Republicans in the run-up to the 2008 election, with a 10-to-1 advantage in new registrations and a 3-to-1 advantage in party switches, a change that drew mostly from the moderate suburban voters who had been Specter's political base. That leakage had slowed considerably since the election, but there was still a steady drift toward Democrats statewide. "It was a question of political survival," Madonna said. "Our last poll, he does better with Democrats than Republicans; he made a political calculation, apparently to save his political career, he would switch party."

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