

Campaign '92

Voters hearing 2 sides of same Specter record

On women's issues, he says, no one in the Senate rates higher. A closer look, his detractors contend, shows he sometimes waffles or reverses position.

By Nathan Gorenstein
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Since this is the political Year of the Woman and since no one ever accused U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter of being unprepared, it is no surprise he has a campaign handout that trumpets, "Arlen Specter, Fighting for Women and Families."

In it, the senator, who may forever be known as the guy who grilled Anita Hill, announces:

- He has a 97 percent approval rating from Planned Parenthood.
- He co-sponsored the Violence Against Women Act that would toughen penalties for crimes against women.
- He was a legislative mover and shaker who helped obtain a 46 percent increase in federal money for breast cancer research.

As Specter is challenged by Democrat Lynn Yeakel, his aides protest that the furor caused by the Clarence Thomas hearings has overshadowed a Senate tenure that might otherwise get warm reviews.

Specter puts it more bluntly. He

says no senator has a better record on women's issues, not to mention items such as his bill to increase penalties for armed criminals, or the \$500,000 he got to help open a worker-owned Pittsburgh bakery, or the federal grants for two programs to reduce the number of low-birth-weight babies.

Of course, there is another analysis of that record. Breast cancer activists, for example, say other senators, not Specter, were instrumental in getting that federal money. Abortion rights advocates argue that Specter's work on their behalf was undone by his vote to confirm Thomas for a seat on the Supreme Court.

And aides to Yeakel say their review of Specter's voting record shows he's a waffler and flip-flopper.

Some of the Yeakel complaints, however, date back to Specter's first term. In all, their specific examples number eight.

Told of the Democratic allegations, Specter offers rebuttals to most, and then adds, "You know how many

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times I voted? Four thousand, three hundred and twenty-six times. I think it's a compliment to me that this is all they can come up with."

Specter has won two terms in the Senate by balancing the competing demands of a state that he likes to say is really "six states" in one that ranges from urban Philadelphia County to the sparsely populated counties that nestle against New York state.

It's a balancing act that has produced a senator who votes almost a straight National Rifle Association line on gun control but is considered a sure vote on most civil rights legislation. He is a senator who was praised by liberals and cursed by conservatives for helping to defeat

Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court in 1987, and then received exactly the reverse treatment for his vote on Thomas.

He is a senator who for months failed to sign on to the Freedom of Choice Act — aimed at codifying abortion rights — when he was facing a primary challenge from conservative State Rep. Stephen Freind, but then added his name in April, about the time Freind was slipping and Yeakel was looking like his likely challenger.

Specter says he signed onto the bill when Supreme Court decisions made it appear that abortion rights might be in jeopardy. "If anybody thinks that was not harmful to the primary, they are wrong," he said. Specter won the primary against Freind with 65 percent of the vote.

Specter is also a Republican who at the League of Women Voters' Citizens Juries last week approvingly invoked the name of Bill Clinton at least three times, and never once mentioned President Bush.

Typically, Specter has received high ratings from the AFL-CIO, and in some years from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action.

According to Congressional Quarterly, the nonpartisan chronicler of Congress, during the last 12 years Specter has supported Reagan and Bush about 60 percent of the time.

Paul Weyrich, president of the conservative Free Congress Foundation, said Specter tried to balance the demands of his party against his own leanings and the demands of Pennsylvania voters.

"Often times he will cooperate with the leadership in procedural questions in order to try to support them as much as he can. But when all is said and done, he is usually with the liberals," Weyrich said.

The liberal side says he's been OK, but not OK enough.

Ginny Montes, the national secretary of the National Organization for Women, complains that Specter "did run as a pro-choice candidate, but when it comes to some of the real cutting-edge issues, he doesn't vote

with us."

Others note a balancing act is necessary for disparate politics of Pennsylvania.

"Pennsylvania has a very strange political landscape, and I think he gets tugged and pulled, so it may appear he tries to have it both ways," said Katherine Michelman, president of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL).

The national NARAL organization has endorsed Yeakel — the state chapter has endorsed both candidates — but in April, Michelman said Specter "has been important in the civil rights area, he has a good solid legislative history in support of women's issues."

She also denounced him for his vote on Clarence Thomas.

Planned Parenthood says Specter's claim of a 97 percent approval rating is correct, from a purely mathematical standpoint.

Of the 61 votes it tracked over Specter's two terms, he voted Planned Parenthood's way on all but two. But one of those two is the Thomas nomination, which Planned Parenthood "weighs more heavily" than many votes on the list.

Yeakel aides say it is self-serving for Specter to say, as he does, that "it was my leadership that brought a 46 percent increase for funding for breast cancer."

The issue has become bitterly debated by aides to both candidates, who each say the other's claims are wrong or misleading.

"This did not originate with Sen. Specter," insists Janet Parrish, Yeakel's issues director, who produced an array of documents to buttress that claim.

Some lobbyists say most of the credit goes to U.S. Sen. Brock Adams (D., Wash.). "He was the one who took the lead and made things happen," said Joanne Howse of the National Breast Cancer Coalition.

Specter says that as ranking minority member of the labor, health and human services subcommittee he and U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa), the subcommittee's chairman, nego-

tiated the agreement that increased the funding.

"I, with Harkin, set the budget," he said. Aides, however, concede that it is a complex process with input from a variety of sources. They did not deny that other senators participated in the process that led to the increased funding.

Another aspect of the Specter record raised by Yeakel are his votes in favor of the original Reagan tax cut and defense buildup, policies that helped create the current enormous budget deficit, and, Democrats say, the current recession.

Does he regret those early votes?

"I think those tax cuts stimulated a tremendous economic resurgence. I think what we had to do was deal with spending at that time, and we tried to deal with spending with Gramm-Rudman in 1985," said Specter, referring to legislation intended to limit deficits. Then he adds, "I do not think it's useful to go back and analyze all the votes."

Specter said that in 1982 and 1983 he voted to limit tax cuts because of the mounting deficit.

These are some of Specter's other major votes:

- He was in favor of using force against Iraq.
- He voted for a constitutional amendment to prevent desecration of the flag.
- He voted against halting production of the B-2 bomber. Democrats wanted the savings of \$1 billion per plane for domestic needs. Specter has recently voted to cut money for the plane and said his change of heart came after the failed Soviet coup.
- In 1988, he voted to override Reagan's veto of civil rights legislation, as he did in 1990 when Bush vetoed a bill.
- He has been a longtime supporter of an amendment to the constitution to require a balanced budget.
- He voted against a proposal by U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) to require barring National Endowment for the Arts funding for "obscene art."

He also opposed a 1988 move to change federal campaign financing laws, which would have limited campaign spending and the role of political action committees. Specter is one of the Senate's most successful fund-raisers.

The senator's role in getting more funds for breast cancer research is one topic of debate.