



In the era of Trump, Wolf and Casey shouldn't take 2018 for granted: Charlie Gerow

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It's hard to imagine that the 2018 campaign has already kicked off, especially since we're not yet six months past the bruising 2016 election.

But Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf and U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., both of whom are up for re-election next year, are now in full campaign mode. And a host of Republicans looking to unseat them have either announced their candidacies or they're waiting in the wings.

If you though thought the media and the pollsters wouldn't be far behind, you'd be right.

last week, [respondents to an early Morning Call/Muhlenberg poll](#) gave both incumbents mixed reviews.

In fact, the approval ratings of all the major office holders were tightly bunched together.

Wolf led the pack with a 40 percent approval rating. President Donald Trump was a point behind at 39 percent. Republican U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey clocked in at 36 percent, and Casey got 34 percent.

For Casey that represents a drop of 4 percentage points from a similar poll taken a year ago.

After nearly a dozen years in the Senate, Casey gets, at best, lukewarm ratings.

While roughly a third of the electorate approves of the job he's doing, a quarter disapproves, with the remainder expressing no opinion.

That's not good news for Casey.

No doubt, he's an honorable man who entered public service for the right reasons.

But as a senator, he doesn't have much of a record. After more than a decade, what's the signature piece of legislation of Bob Casey? That's a question bound to be asked repeatedly over the next year.

The other problem for Casey, further accounting for the growing dissatisfaction with the job he's doing, is that he has strayed far from the moderate image he worked hard to cultivate as a state official.

While Casey touted his "independence" in each of his previous Senate campaigns, once in Washington he was an acolyte for President Barack Obama. Casey voted with Obama more than 95 percent of the time.

Casey's recent vote against confirming new U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch (an eminently qualified jurist who was supported by Casey's Democratic "leadership" when he was confirmed for the circuit court of appeals) is further evidence of how far into left field he has strayed.

Now he's frequently launching *ad hominem* attacks against Trump, perhaps overlooking the fact that he's in a state that Trump carried just a few months ago.

He's one of 10 Democrats in that category. Most of them are not moving ever leftward, but are searching for ground in the middle.

Meanwhile Republicans increasingly view Casey as vulnerable.

Already state Reps. Rick Saccone, of Allegheny County, and Jim Christiana, of Beaver County, have announced their candidacies against Casey.

Southeastern Pennsylvania businessman Jeff Bartos has also jumped into the race. And another candidate, Paul Addis, is ready to join the fray.

Last week Congressman Lou Barletta's name was floated as a possible candidate. And Congressman Mike Kelly, a popular Republican from the northwest part of the state, is also said to be considering a run. Ditto for state House Majority Leader Dave Reed.

Republicans always face uphill battles in a state where they are often outnumbered by Democrats by 1 million votes.

But as Toomey has proven recently and other Republicans, from Rick Santorum to Arlen Specter, have through the years, Republicans can win Senate seats in Pennsylvania with the right candidate and issues. Next year looks like that kind of year.

Meanwhile, Wolf quietly gears up for his re-election bid with four in 10 voters approving of his performance - higher than it has been in the past.

While Casey has been consistently moving to the left, Wolf has tried to move closer to the middle.

In Wolf's case it was the only direction he could go. There wasn't any more room to the left.

Eighteen months ago the Huffington Post highlighted a survey proclaiming Wolf "the most liberal governor in America."

That took some work considering that the "competition" consisted of Governors Brown of California and Cuomo of New York, among others.

More recently the Cato Institute did a "Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors."

Guess where Wolf ended up? If you picked "dead last," you are correct. By comparison, Andrew Cuomo got a "B," finishing in the top 25 on that report card.

Ten Democrats scored above 40 percent, while Wolf finished with a dismal 24 percent.

Wolf's repeated attempts to raise the taxes of hard-working Pennsylvanians isn't something he can easily run away from.

Nor is the 2015 budget debacle prompted by his stubborn refusal to acknowledge that the people of Pennsylvania simply aren't with him on his grandiose tax and spend proposals.

There are also a host of high-quality Republicans ready to vie for the right to take on Wolf in the general election.

State Sen. Scott Wagner, R-York County, has announced his candidacy. Businessman Paul Mango is set to join the race in a few days.

House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny County, is a likely top-tier candidate.

Pittsburgh attorney Laura Ellsworth is also eyeing a potential run. Some GOP leaders have talked about urging Kelly to run for governor should he turn down a Senate run.

It may be 18 months away, but the 2018 race is already on--and the gate has only cracked open.