

Where Have All the Conservatives Gone?

PHILADELPHIA — If you want to feel warm and gentle check the Web sites of Rick Santorum, one-time firebrand of the political right.

On his Senate homepage there are nine issues mentioned, but not one reference to tax cuts. He's up for re-election this year, but his separate campaign site also includes only a brief mention of tax cuts.



Politics & People

By Albert R. Hunt

The Pennsylvania Republican says Americans are "overtaxed and deserve a tax cut." This takes 75 words. By contrast, the same site offers a 1,584-word chronicle of Rick Santorum and African-Americans, including his work with Carol Moseley-Braun on transportation for inner-city residents.

This is the new "moderate" Rick Santorum. He was a right-wing poster boy six years ago when he toppled incumbent Democrat Harris Wofford in industrial Pennsylvania, running as an avowed opponent of government. The tough, confrontational Mr. Santorum, who attacked Democrats while a House member, urged Keystone State voters to "join the fight" against Washington; he rarely trimmed his sails. It was a great Republican year and he won.

When he got to Washington, he left no doubt he was different from moderate Pennsylvania Republicans who had served in the Senate. Almost daily he attacked Bill Clinton, and when Senate Appropriations Chairman Mark Hatfield voted against a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget, Mr. Santorum led an unsuccessful effort to take away his committee chairmanship.

Sen. Santorum continues to carefully court conservative activists and pundits in the nation's capital and is one of Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's kitchen cabinet of insiders. He has few Democratic friends or allies in the institution. Confident of victory in November—he's outspending his Democratic opponent Rep. Ron Klink by 10-to-1—he's already mapping plans to climb into the GOP leadership next Congress.

But Pennsylvanians are hearing little of these conservative connections, at least from Mr. Santorum. He boasts of his backing for the National Endowment of the Humanities and of his support for a higher minimum wage. This onetime foe of wasteful spending reminds voters of all the pork he's bringing home.

"About two years ago Santorum realized he should move to the center, better to become Mr. Moderate," says Terry Madonna, a political scientist at Millersville University in Pennsylvania. Mr. Madonna says that his conversion and new emphasis on Pennsylvania projects is in keeping with the state's political tradition: "He has retreated to what Pennsylvania politicians often do—go after pork. We're not a state that produces leaders on the great issues of the day. We identify with guys who bring home things for their constituents."

The one-time conservative paragon makes clear that he's no longer encumbered by ideology. "You take the far left ideas and the far right ideas," he told the Boston Globe's David Shribman last month, "and you see neither is right."

Rick Santorum may be more blatant than most, but Pennsylvania illustrates the changing political realities of today's dozen or so competitive Senate races. They are being fought on the Democrats' turf; Republicans are scurrying to the center.

In Florida, Bill McCollum, the

staunchly conservative impeachment advocate in the House, is a Senate candidate this year. There are days this straight-laced conservative looks like he's wearing love beads. After toeing the line for the gun lobby and social right in the House, he now backs some gun controls and embraces hate-crimes legislation in a news conference with gay activists.

In Nevada, former Rep. John Ensign lashes out at HMOs and demands patients have a right to sue these predators, never mind that as a House member he voted opposite. In Montana and Michigan, incumbent GOP Sens. Conrad Burns and Spence Abraham are spending millions attacking their opponents' support for prescription drugs for seniors, contending that they really would provide more affordable and accessible drug benefits for the elderly. Earlier this year, conservatives insisted this was a bogus issue.

The Republican response is more than just rhetoric. In Rhode Island, the Republican Senate Campaign Committee ran an ad in which Sen. Lincoln Chaffee brags that he "voted against his own party" in supporting a "real" patients' bill of rights and affordable prescription drug benefits under Medicare. Michigan's Sen. Abraham voted with Democrats to delay any tax cut before a prescription-drug benefit was enacted.

Or take the huge George W. Bush proposed tax cuts—\$1.3 trillion over 10 years, \$1.6 trillion counting interest. Most Republicans look like Marion Jones in dashing away from the Bush tax cuts. Several

weeks ago the Journal's Jerry Seib surveyed the eight most competitive Senate races and found that none of the GOP candidates embraced the Bush plan save one: Sen. Santorum. A few hours later, however, the Santorum campaign called back to correct the record: The senator felt the Bush tax reductions were "too big."

The next week, conservative columnist Robert Novak called Mr. Santorum to check out any heresy. The Pennsylvania Republican apparently had an epiphany: "I'm not familiar with every jot and tittle of his plan," he told the journalistic champion of tax cuts. "But I believe in across the board tax reductions—for all taxpayers, not just those who do what the government wants them to do."

Shortly after this column appeared, Mr. Santorum's press secretary reiterated to reporter Seib that the senator does not endorse the Bush tax-cut plan, and that he thinks it is "too big." The well-funded Santorum campaign-advertising effort apparently has yet to include any TV ads on tax cuts.

Mr. Santorum reflects a change in the national political environment. He's never been a captive of principles. He switched from passively pro-choice to passionately pro-life on abortion in the early 1990s to win important backing from conservative activists. He advocated a cap on punitive damages in medical malpractice cases, then his wife sued her chiropractor for double the ceiling he proposed for others.

The "new moderate" Mr. Santorum will probably succeed in November. The pro-life, economically liberal Rep. Klink is having difficulty raising funds from cultural liberals that dominate Democratic Party givers. But if so, on Nov. 8, let's not hear about conservatives prevailing even in Pennsylvania. As far as the voters here know, there are none running this year.



Rick Santorum