

Senate race needs more clarity, less mud



MUDSLINGING has been a valued tradition in American politics since the beginnings of our nation. But

the U.S. Senate campaigns of Sen. Rick Santorum and state Treasurer Bob Casey have elevated the practice to an art form.

Let's hope that Thursday's debate in Pittsburgh will focus more on the issues and the substantive differences between the two candidates than the mudslinging that has characterized this race so far.

Throughout the campaign, Santorum and his Republican cronies have referred to the Democratic challenger as "Bobby Casey Jr." in order to remind voters that Casey's entire political career has come on the coattails of his father's achievements as a strong-willed, two-term governor. The Santorum campaign has also characterized Casey as a "puppet of the Left Coast Liberals" and a "flip-flopper" who has "no specifics" and "no answers" to the problems confronting the nation.

The Casey campaign has been just as dirty. The Democrats have referred to the incumbent senator as a "lap dog" for the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, a "wolf in sheep's clothing," and a "liar" who used the Penn Hills (PA) School District to pay for his children's Internet Charter School when the family lives in Leesburg, Virginia.

COMMENTARY

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The trash-talking continued during their first debate on NBC's "Meet the Press" in early September when moderator Tim Russert quickly put both candidates on the defensive over the war in Iraq and, later, on Social Security. Both Casey and Santorum scored points, but neither seemed to emerge from that debate with a clear victory.

Casey heads into Thursday's debate as the front-runner. Most polls show him up by 7 to 14 points. Santorum is getting desperate. His recent attempt to raise questions about Casey's connections to former fundraisers and donors who have since served prison time or faced federal investigation was ineffective. He will have to turn to more substantive issues in the final weeks of this campaign.

Look for three issues to dominate Thursday's debate: immigration reform, stem-cell research, and health care. Here's what we already know: Immigration reform: Santorum voted against a Senate immigration bill that would declare English the country's national language, strengthens border security by creating 370 miles of triple-layer fencing along the Mexican border, and established a complicated three-tiered system for determining

who can stay and who must leave the country. Casey said he would support the bill.

Stem-cell research: Santorum opposed Bush's 2001 decision to federally fund research on existing embryonic stem-cell lines, most of which have died or become unsuitable. Casey supports the policy but no expansion of it because he generally opposes research that would destroy human embryos.

More recently, Santorum proposed legislation that would provide funding for research methods endorsed by the 2005 report of the President's Council on Bioethics. But it's not clear whether those concepts would work and whether the methods advocated would involve destroying embryos.

Health Care: Santorum supports Health Savings Accounts. Money deposited into those accounts would not be taxed, nor would it be taxed when withdrawn from the account if used for medical expenses. Casey supports expanding government-subsidized health care programs for children and small businesses.

Hopefully, the candidates will clarify their positions on these issues during Thursday's debate. If nothing else, they will offer the voters some interesting political theater.

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