

## How Liberal is Tom Wolf?

**August 31, 2015**

G. Terry Madonna & Michael L.Young

Recently the Huffington Post published a list of the most liberal governors in the nation compiled by the website Inside Government. Surprising some, Pennsylvania's Tom Wolf topped the list as the most liberal governor in the country.

Well-known liberals like California's Jerry Brown, New York's Andrew Cuomo, and Virginia's Terry McAuliffe were mere wannabees on the list.

Some might quibble with Inside Government's methodology for creating the list – they used among other things public statements, press releases and platforms for the ranking. But there is no doubt that Tom Wolf is pretty liberal, if by liberal one means holding a political philosophy that looks to government to solve problems and create a better society.

Perhaps a more interesting and useful question, however, is this: how liberal is Wolf compared to past Pennsylvania governors - back to New Deal times?

We limit our analysis to Democrats on the premise that most if not all liberal governors have been Democrats. Admittedly this is arguable since several Republican governors in modern times have pursued liberal policies, notably on a willingness to spend state dollars on economic development and raise taxes.

Altogether there have been seven Democratic governors elected since 1934. Here are the seven Democrats with their respective election dates:

- George Earle (1934)
- George Leader (1954)
- David Lawrence (1958)
- Milton Shapp (1970) (1974)
- Robert Casey (1986) (1990)
- Ed Rendell (2002) (2006)
- Tom Wolf (2014)

Perusing the public record of each of these suggests several generalizations.

All were economic liberals energetically using the tools of government to promote the economy and increase spending on health care, education, and economic development. They all were fiscal activists, with no hesitation to use new and old taxes to fund programs. They also were enthusiastic for infrastructure development as they faced enormous challenges dealing with the decline of Pennsylvania's aging industries.

But not all were social liberals. Earl was and so too were Shapp and Rendell. But Casey had a mixed record as a social liberal, while Leader focused on modernizing state government.

Finally, all of these Democratic governors were liberal; as the term was understood while they were in office – some more liberal than others.

So, could these seven be rated on their liberalism? As the Huffington Post called Wolf the most liberal governor in the nation, can we identify the most liberal Pennsylvania governor in modern times?

Perhaps! But rankings are subjective and political ideologies are difficult to quantify. What can be done, however, is a provisional ranking together with some historical evidence to support it.

Below we offer such a provisional ranking, from most to least liberal.

Most Liberal Rank	Governor	Reason for Rank	Major Themes
#1	George Earle	Most expansion of state government in state history.	Implemented Pennsylvania's "Little New Deal." Passed the state's first civil rights bill.
#2	Milton Shapp	Pushed through first permanent income tax, created the state lottery, established Sunshine Law.	Oversaw consumer rights legislation and welfare reform.
#3	Ed Rendell	Legalized gaming, pushed tax relief for homeowners, and increased the state income tax.	Presided over record spending on projects from sports stadiums to convention centers.
#4	George Leader	Modernized state government. Started the Industrial Development Authority.	Expanded state civil service. Reformed state mental hospitals.
#5	Tom Wolf	Called for tax increases on broad based sales and income tax, and new tax on extraction industry.	Championed major property tax reform.
#6	Robert Casey	A firm believer in using the state to promote economic development. He invested \$3 billion in various programs.	Advocated health insurance for children (CHIP program, which he signed into law), hazardous site clean-up and recycling legislation.
#7	David Lawrence	Passed anti-discrimination laws, environmental regulations.	Raised sales tax, expanded betting at harness and the state's Fair Housing Act.

Surprises? A few.

Pennsylvania's most liberal governor was in office more than 80 years ago while Tom Wolf, called the most liberal in America today, ranks no better than the fifth most liberal historically in Pennsylvania.

Ed Rendell, seen by some as the epitome of a tax and spend liberal, is only third on the list behind both George Earle and Milton Shapp.

Finally, how liberal a governor one is may not tell us everything about the trajectory of a political career. David Lawrence finished last on our list making him Pennsylvania's least liberal Democratic governor in at least 80 years. Yet he was highly influential in getting the civil rights plank into the 1948 national Democrat Convention – a turn in national politics some believe the most important since the Civil War. He did it, however, ten years before being elected governor.

-----  
 Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly, and previous columns can be viewed at <http://www.fandm.edu/politics>. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2015 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.