Rendell's Raiders
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Been raided lately? Are you sure you haven't been? You may want to read on.

Raiding is one of those words we tend to associate with a particular context--either military like "Quantrill's Raiders"--or law enforcement as in drug raids--or slightly risqué as in panty raid. Where we don't usually use the word is in the world of politics.

That may be about to change. Rendell's Raiders have come to town.

As reported by Harrisburg Patriot journalist Pete DeCoursey, some 17,000 voters in southeastern Pennsylvania switched to the Democratic Party during the recent open registration period to vote for Ed Rendell. Almost all of these switchers were Republicans joining the Democrat Party. Another 49,000 voters were added to the Democratic Party's rolls as new voters, for a grand total of about 66,000 new Democrats.

Most of the action was in southeastern Pennsylvania, a region, Philadelphia aside, not exactly known as a hot bed of strength for the Democratic Party. More Democrats registering than Republicans in the likes of Montgomery and Chester Counties--yes and pigs can fly and Hades is a place to cool off. What is going on here?

What is going on here is that the Rendell campaign is shrewdly taking advantage of two key facts. One is the lack of a contest for the Republican nomination--and the other is that Rendell enjoys almost unprecedented regional support in southeastern Pennsylvania.

So, by wooing Republicans and Independents to register Democrat, he also adds voters who will overwhelmingly vote for him. These are the so-called "60-day Democrats" who will presumably switch back to the Republican Party after the Democrat primary.

In an area where Rendell is winning between 70 and 75 percent of the vote, it's a smart tactic. In an election that might be decided by 30,000 votes, it might be the winning tactic.

In other words, it's a raid.

Classical raiding is the tactic of voting in another party's primary in order to nominate a weak opponent for the general election. One of the most famous examples occurred in the presidential primaries in 1972 when President Nixon's supporters voted in Democratic primaries for George McGovern, smartly concluding that McGovern would be an easier Democratic candidate to beat in the general election.

The raid also can occur in a process known as "crossover voting," in which voters of one party will participate in the primary of another party and then cross back over to their own party for the general election.
Just one problem--it's not supposed to happen here. Pennsylvania is a closed primary state, meaning that voters must be registered members of a political party to vote in that party's primary. So if you are a Republican, you can vote in the Republican primary for governor, but not in the Democratic primary. And if you're a Democrat you can vote in the Democratic primary, but not in the Republican. Independents and third party members can't vote in either major party primary.

But the closed primary can create the very conditions that encourage raiding--particularly in years when there is no contest on one side and a slugfest on the other. This year qualifies. Republican registrants, in effect, get a free ride. They can skip their own party primary, register and vote Democratic in the spring, then come back to the Republican Party in the fall. It's the equivalent of a political free lunch.

Classical raiding is a hardball tactic orchestrated by one political party to embarrass and chagrin the other. But that's not exactly what is going on here. Yes, Republicans are having some fun watching Democrats write their fall ad copy for them, but the Democrats themselves are ruining this raid.

And if Rendell's Raiders end up being the GOP's best friend--i.e. helping to nominate someone Mike Fisher can beat--well that's not exactly the plan. In other words, raiding can produce unanticipated consequences.

Part of the problem is that old sticky wicket in politics. Voters just don't always do what is expected. And it's not always easy to know why they do what they are doing.

In fact, it's actually difficult to document crossover voting and so there is no consensus on how much of it goes on--in Pennsylvania or for that matter in other states. Voters might, for example, change their party registration for a number of reasons. To "raid" the other party is only one of them.

Not only is the extent of raiding controversial, but its effects are also in dispute. Some analysts believe that raiding and crossover voting is common and can determine the outcome of a close contest. The reasoning is that voters tend to vote in the most exciting contests and these are usually the closest races.

But other analysts discount the importance of crossover voting. They argue that those voters who do vote for a candidate of another party will also vote for that same candidate in the general election. The truth is: nobody knows for sure.

In the meantime, a gubernatorial primary election looms in the Pennsylvania Democratic Party. It's a real contest, one likely to be a cliffhanger, and one in which the outcome will probably determine the future of Pennsylvania Democrats for the next generation.

It's also a party that Republicans and Independents have been invited to crash. If enough of them do, Republican Mike Fisher may find himself running against a Democrat in the fall that has been nominated by crossover Republican voters.

And people say nothing interesting ever happens in Pennsylvania.

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