May 16 Post-Mortem
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The old adage, notwithstanding, hindsight is not always 20-20. But in politics, post election hindsight, a.k.a. electoral analysis, is always safer than pre-election speculation. Before Election Day, the outcomes are unknown and the possible scenarios are numerous. After the election, however, we know what happened and the problem is only to make some sense of it.

Still, making sense of it has its own problems. Electoral post-mortems must deal with two tricky questions: why and what--why did it happen and what does it mean. In appraising the May 16 primary election in Pennsylvania the why question is certainly the most obvious to ask. How do we explain the virtually unprecedented defeat of incumbent state legislators that included two of Pennsylvania’s most powerful legislative leaders, as well as 15 rank and file incumbents? Why did Pennsylvania have a political earthquake on May 16?

• VOTER ANGER--The most obvious explanation is voter anger. A stunning number of legislative leaders, and rank and file incumbents were defeated as a consequence of raging voter anger over last July’s stealth legislative pay raise. The anger, fanned by talk show wrath, strident web bloggers, and scores of caustic and derisive editorials, was palpable, sustained, and widespread. The pay hike revolt spawned at least four organizations bent on kicking incumbents’ out of office and promoting a reform agenda.

• GOP SCHISM--But pay raise anger alone did not produce the incumbent carnage visited on Pennsylvania’s political establishment. Intra party strife within the Republican Party contributed importantly to incumbent causalities. The Pennsylvania GOP is undergoing a virtual civil war between its increasingly disparate wings--moderate and establishment Republicans, on the one hand, and fiscal restraint, anti-establishment, populist oriented, Republicans on the other.

• EMERGING REFORM COALITION--A third factor operating in the election was less tangible, but not necessarily less important. Across the state a still small but growing reform movement is taking shape, whose agenda is singularly driven: to change fundamentally the nature of Pennsylvania government. Yet to congeal into a coordinated platform, its elements include reducing the size of the legislature, term limits, lobbyist registration, campaign finance reform, reigning in the power, pay and perks of lawmakers, and calling a state constitutional convention to overhaul dramatically the entire state government.

So, pay raise protestors, Republican insurgents, and reform-minded activists all played important roles in Tuesday election. The pay raise anger was necessary to light the fuse, but not sufficient alone to explain the outcome. Why Tuesday turned out as it did can only be understood if the roles of GOP infighting and reform activists are also factored into the explanation.

Beyond why it happened, what it all means may not be so easy to discern. Still, it is possible to produce a first rough draft of what Pennsylvania’s political future looks like post May 16.
• **REFORM SURVIVES**--Certainly the reform movement in Pennsylvania is alive and well. A critical mass necessary to support meaningful reform might be reached with as few as 40 new members, and certainly 50 would do so. That is now likely with 17 new members nominated in the primary, the 30 retirements already announced, and the prospects that some incumbents will fall in November.

• **SHARP GEOGRAPHIC SKEW CONTINUES**--The protest-reform movement in Pennsylvania is deep rooted, but not widely branched. Its center of gravity continues to be located in the central and southeastern areas of the state with isolated pockets elsewhere. The geographic skew to the protest vote means that the movement continues to be regionally based.

• **REPUBLICAN ORIENTATION DEVELOPS**--The politics of protest are so far being played out disproportionately within the state’s Republican Party. Because its roots are in the more conservative Republican rural areas of the state, it lacks widespread support elsewhere and fewer Democrats have embraced the reform agenda. This may change, but the spread of the reform agenda across party lines is far from certain.

• **COMPETITIVE GAP REMAINS**--Despite the real competition experienced in many of the primaries, state legislative elections remain uncompetitive. Only 56 of 198 legislators on the ballot were challenged in the primary, leaving almost three quarters of incumbents with a worry free primary. The general election will provide another opportunity to test the resurgence of competitive elections in Pennsylvania; yet, the stark reality remains--real competition in legislative races between the two major parties has been rapidly disappearing over the past two decades.

• **LEGISLATURE BECOMES MORE CONSERVATIVE**--Both the legislature’s composition and its ideological bent will change. Many of the Republican challengers were social conservatives and supply siders endorsed by Pat Toomey, Operation Clean Sweep, and conservative Internet activists. They railed against big government, big spending, and too much government regulation, while complaining about the support given by Republican legislative leaders for Governor Rendell’s expansive state spending programs, gaming legislation, and income tax hike. These new conservative members will join a House Republican caucus whose fiscally conservative members earlier this spring revolted against their own House leadership on property tax relief.

Finally, a post-script to both the why’s and what’s of May 16: for more than three decades since Milton Shapp’s election in 1970, new Pennsylvania governors have sailed into office campaigning against Harrisburg and promising to change the culture. Each of them became the unwilling victim of Pennsylvania’s inexorable resistance to change, and each largely left the state’s institutional and structural relationships in place.

Could 2006 be different? Certainly the voters are restive, anti-incumbency is the order of the day, and a political climate supportive of change prevails.

But neither Rendell nor his opponent, Lynn Swann, has embraced the reform agenda. In fact, Rendell was one of the architects of the ill-fated pay raise, though he has hinted that the legislature is too large and has said the time has come for a constitutional convention. Swann, as well, has been a reluctant reformer. He has called for a change in the culture while offering no reform specifics. He even endorsed legislators’ who led and voted for the pay raise.
This could change. Certainly Swann, as the outsider, has little to gain from defending the status quo. And Rendell could benefit from attacking a legislature--with a 20-percent approval rating that so far has been unable to pass property tax relief.

Reform is at a critical crossroads--many paths are open to it--but it will go forward. Which road it takes, how fast it travels, and its final destination, might now all depend mightily on gubernatorial leadership?

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