A Rudy Rage in Pennsylvania
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For Republicans, it appears to be a gloomy picture. They have won only one in five of the last four presidential elections in Pennsylvania, losing the last four in a row to Messers Kerry, Gore, and Clinton (twice), respectively. Moreover, state Democrats have just regained control of the State House for the first time in a decade, have just elected their first US Senator in 44 years to a regular term (Bob Casey), and have just re-elected uber politician Governor Ed Rendell to a second term in a landslide election.

To add insult to injury, all of this is happening while Republican president George Bush records an anemic job approval rating of 29 percent, his lowest ever. The Iraq War weighs heavily against Republicans as well.

To those reading the tea leaves, this brew of Democrat success and Republican woe suggests the 2008 presidential election in Pennsylvania should be a cake walk for the Democrats and whoever they nominate. Happy days are here again!

But the Democrats’ exuberance may be premature.

Recent polls counsel caution for Democrats and offer optimism for Republicans. The last Franklin & Marshall College Keystone Poll, for example, reports that either of the leading GOP candidates--Rudy Giuliani or John McCain--would beat either of the leading Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, if the election was held today. Giuliani’s support looms the most impressive; he would beat Clinton by 17 points and Obama by 20 points.

The surge for Giuliani fits Pennsylvania’s tradition of electing moderates and centrists--a tradition stronger now than at any time within the recent past. Pennsylvania’s tilt to the center is illustrated not only with a string of moderate governors, including Tom Ridge and Ed Rendell. It also includes an impressive lineage of moderate US Senators, interrupted only by Rick Santorum and going back to Hugh Scott.

The Pennsylvania results are also consistent with a spate of national polls. Nationally, the former New York Mayor narrowly leads his Democratic opponents, while he has opened up a substantial double digit lead over his most serious party rival, John McCain. The national polls also show Rudy running well in the northeastern states.

These polling results surprise many political analysts who follow national politics. In conventional thinking, candidates like Giuliani are considered non-viable in GOP caucus and primary contests. Most assume that Giuliani’s pro-choice, pro-gay rights, and pro-gun control positions doom his prospects among bed rock social conservative voters. Nor do his messy marriage situations (married three times) enhance his standing among conservatives. In short, Rudy loses the nomination before he starts the campaign.

Giuliani’s electoral predicament is not a new one among Republican moderates seeking the presidency. In fact, it has been the classic dilemma for centrist Republicans since Reagan and the social conservatives took control
of the party in the 1980s. Moderate/centrist Republicans who are fiscally conservative but socially progressive have been unable to get much traction in GOP primaries.

But Giuliani may be re-writing the rules, and he may turn out to be a different sort of moderate--one who not only has broad appeal to the general electorate, but also one who can win Republican primaries.

To do so he must conjure up the Houdini-like political magic necessary to appeal to moderates and progressives while not alienating conservatives. His strategy to accomplish this seems clear. It is also straightforward. His campaign will ground on his two great strengths: crime fighting and handling of the horrible 9/11 tragedy. It is a strategy that demonstrates a profound understanding of American political history.

Back to Lincoln, war and rumors of war have turned upside-down the verities about what is and is not important in presidential politics. Historically, urgent problems in foreign policy and national security trump the domestic agenda. The cultural issues and the economic issues matter less when issues of war and national security loom. And Giuliani’s strengths are precisely in those areas: the war on terror and his performance on 9/11, together with his impressive bona fides as a crime fighter while Mayor of New York and earlier as US Attorney. These provide enormous political capital for him on the issues Americans now care most about.

Giuliani’s current standing at the moment in a bellwether state, such as Pennsylvania, offers important clues as to how Republicans might capture not only Pennsylvania but also other key states of the northeast, something they have been unable to do in recent presidential elections.

Successful presidential candidates in Pennsylvania as well as other key states win four key groups: big city suburbs, Catholics, moderates, and independents. So how does Rudy score with these groups in the latest Keystone Poll?

He leads Hillary Clinton statewide (53 to 37 percent), and he defeats her in the Philadelphia suburbs handily (53 to 38 percent). Independents give him a 48 to 45 percent edge, and among moderates the lead is 52 to 36 percent. Rudy is also ahead among Catholic voters (51 to 36 percent).

The former New York Mayor beats Barack Obama even more impressively, by a margin of 52 to 32 percent statewide. Rudy’s lead in the suburbs against Obama is 55 to 28 percent, and among Catholics the margin is 54 to 30 percent. Independents give him a 51 to 33 percent lead, and among moderates he leads by almost 20 points (51 to 32 percent).

By any measure Giuliani would be a formidable presidential candidate in Pennsylvania.

Certainly, there are weaknesses in Giuliani’s candidacy; two important ones are money and time. The Giuliani campaign badly trails McCain in fundraising and in organization. These are critical resources in these early days and even more important later on. Also important is how voters react as his personal life and social positions are given greater scrutiny.

Giuliani may also be the wrong candidate for the times. Newsweek journalist Jonathan Alter argues that voters for a new president often reject the leadership style of the old president. In 2008, voters may be looking for the anti-Bush and may not be eager to trade in a “Texas cowboy” for an “urban cowboy.”
So Giuliani may well falter. But the larger point is that Giuliani or another Republican like him--moderate on the social issues, conservative on fiscal matters, and strong on national security and defense--is well positioned to win Pennsylvania in 2008. Republicans probably can’t win Pennsylvania unless they nominate a moderate, and they may not be able to lose Pennsylvania if they do.

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