Corbett's Chancy Re-election Chance
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Pennsylvania governor Tom Corbett expresses himself clearly on the subject: he has "no plans to break" Pennsylvania’s vaunted “tradition” of reelecting incumbent governors to a second term. Translation, should one be needed: the governor is a candidate for reelection—and he plans to be reelected.

Others apparently are not so sure, notably the numerous wannabe Democratic opponents rumored or actually already running against him. They all sound pretty sure Governor Corbett’s destined for early retirement.

Someone has to be wrong here and if we wait until November 2014, we will discover who.

But for those of a less patient bent, we posit the compelling arguments you will hear over the next two years: 1) why Tom Corbett will invariably be defeated for reelection and 2) the equally persuasive reasons why he invariably will win reelection.

WHY CORBETT PROBABLY CAN’T WIN

· **Unpopularity** - Corbett enters the race as the weakest incumbent for reelection in modern times. His positive job approval rating recently broke above 40 % (barely), thanks to good marks for his handling of Hurricane Sandy’s relief efforts. More typically, he has been receiving approval ratings in the mid 30’s, a polling score rarely seen except among the most unpopular (and endangered) of incumbents.

· **Controversial Decisions** – Much of Corbett’s unpopularity stems from his controversial budget cuts, especially to educational programs as well as the ongoing debate over how he handled the Sandusky sex abuse case. The bad news, however, is his low performance standings will be hard to reverse amid continuity fiscal austerity. Indeed, further unpopular decisions are likely in upcoming budget cycles as urgent challenges in pension reform, infrastructure development and social programs continue.

· **Ideological bent** – Corbett remains an ideological warrior committed to less government, alternatives to public education and no new taxes. Inconveniently for him, Pennsylvania remains a state not comfortable with political ideologues, either on the right or left. Corbett’s hard opposition to tax increases, for example, has painted him into a corner in a state increasingly desperate to find new revenues.

· **Political Skills** – While a very successful attorney general, Corbett’s tenure in the governor’s office has revealed a paucity of those political skills usually found in gubernatorial incumbents. Some blame his political leadership for the Republican Party’s poor statewide showing in November’s election. Worse perhaps, he has failed to move virtually any of his major agenda, despite having large majorities of his own party in the state legislature. Relatedly, he has failed to sell most of his proposals to voters and at times seemed little interested in doing so.
WHY CORBETT PROBABLY CAN’T LOSE

· Yes, But – Corbett’s problems are seriously exaggerated. Yes, he has encountered some political headwinds as have most incumbent governors combatting economic hard times. Moreover, as an incumbent, he still commands impressive organizational, financial and political resources supporting his reelection. And while his,..., polls have been underwhelming through most of his tenure, they are showing modest improvement as he enters his third year in office. For Corbett, the worst is over.

· We Have Seen this Movie Before – Corbett is not the first incumbent to look like a road kill early in his first term. In the 1990’s, Republican Tom Ridge looked like a goner into his second year in office. By the spring of 1996, Ridge’s job performance dropped into the mid 40’s. Ten years later, Democrat Ed Rendell reprised Ridge’s problems. In February of 2006, his job performance was just a nudge above 40%. Yet both won easily: Ridge by 26 points and Rendell by 21 points.

· Somebody beats nobody every time – It’s a hoary, old political axiom: you can’t beat somebody with nobody. Right now, Corbett, his problems notwithstanding, is a known quantity running against a field of relative unknowns. Only one of Corbett’s putative opponents has run and won a statewide general election. None approach Corbett’s statewide name recognition. Historically, this is a familiar pattern. With one possible exception, the out party has not produced a viable gubernatorial opponent since 1970.

· The Six Year Itch – It’s almost never good to be a candidate from the president’s party in the president's sixth year in office. Known as the six year itch, the president’s party in that sixth year almost always courts electoral disaster--losing seats in Congress, governorships and state legislatures. In 2014, it is the Democrats doing the scratching, making it doubly tough for any Democrat to take on and beat an incumbent. In addition to this powerful trend, Pennsylvanians tend to reelect governors from the party out of power in Washington.

Barring an actual tie on Election Day, these diametrically opposed arguments both can’t be correct. Corbett is going to win reelection or he isn’t. But it may matter less what either Corbett or his opponents do--and more what the economy does or does not. The only incumbent governor in modern times to almost lose--Dick Thornburgh in 1982--was the near victim of what was then the worst economy since World War II. Conversely, those incumbent governors experiencing easy reelections all benefited from running in a year in which the economy was strong or on the mend. Almost inevitably, Corbett’s fate is hostage to what happens in the economy during the next two years.

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