In many governmental systems, the calendar drives politics. Budgets, elections and other signal events are all scheduled months, years, and even decades in advance. The political calendar determines not just when things happen--but also what matters. The calendar is king.

Pennsylvania is different. The calendar plays only a supporting role in the ongoing Harrisburg political melodrama. It determines when things happen, but it is politics that determine what matters. And no political consideration matters more than a looming big stakes election.

A case in point occurs this month in Harrisburg. By the calendar, February is budget time. Accordingly, Governor Ed Rendell delivers his third budget message to the Republican controlled state legislature.

All budget proposals contain extensions of old programs and some new initiatives. But by the third year of any governorship, and, especially this year, the gritty details of the 24 billion dollar state budget will be faint competition for the growing obsession with the approaching 2006 gubernatorial election. Rendell's spending plan may be on the calendar, but it is Rendell's future that is on the minds of many state politicians. Budgets, smudgets--the Harrisburg pols want to talk gubernatorial election.

Why this is so needs some explanation, especially given Pennsylvania's widely followed "eight year cycle" theory of gubernatorial elections. According to the eight-year cycle, Pennsylvanians change governors and therefore parties every eight years. Not about every eight years, or approximately every eight years, but exactly every eight years.

This is good news for the out-party (currently Republicans), after eight years of an in-party (currently Democrats), but not so good news after only four years of the in-party. Cutting through reams of statistics and history, the eight-year cycle has predicted gubernatorial elections in Pennsylvania since the 1950's. Moreover, in modern times no incumbent Pennsylvania governor running for re-election has ever lost.

The questions than is: if you are a Democrat, why worry: and if you are a Republican, why bother. The short answer to both questions is "because"--because Ed Rendell has not been exactly a text book Pennsylvania governor, and because there are a trio of gubernatorial wannabe's among Republican candidates that are individually and collectively too impressive to write off.

The gubernatorial wannabes engage our attention. Three serious contenders are emerging as candidates for the Republican nomination. Each has a different appeal to Republicans:

- State Senator Jeff Piccola--the candidate of the conservative wing--is a bona fide conservative from a red county, Dauphin, who will appeal to hard line conservatives and Christian evangelicals. He's likely to have appeal in the south, north and central heartland of the state: color these counties solid red. Piccola is part of the Senate leadership that has tried to halt the Rendell agenda. No Republican leader has been more critical or outspoken against Rendell's spending and state government
expansion. He is also smart and aggressive. Piccola's challenge is to convince doubters that someone from the rural mid state can win it all.

- Former Lt Governor Bill Scranton--the champion of the moderate wing--ran for and lost the governor's race in 1986. After returning from his self-imposed exile in California to manage the family's activities, Scranton has been energetically pursuing the Republican nomination, starting first by helping his party's leaders at home in Lackawanna County. Scion of a famous political family, the blue blood moderate Scranton hails from the old Rockefeller wing of the party, has money, and a certain cache that should have appeal in the blue southeastern counties. Scranton's challenge is to convince doubters that he wants it bad enough to do it right this time.

- Former Steelers wide receiver Lynn Swann--the celebrity candidate--is that rarest of birds in Pennsylvania politics: the non-politician. Swann is a bona fide star, with TV experience and exposure whose appeal might stretch beyond conventional politics. He is also without a day's experience in elective politics. Swann's rock star image evokes comparison with Rendell's own charisma He's a legend in blue counties in the southeast, especially Pittsburgh. Swan's challenge is to convince doubters that he is ready to lead and that Pennsylvania is ready for the non-politician candidate.

All three would-be challengers think Rendell is vulnerable. Understanding why is worth a few words. The initial two years of the Rendell governorship were marked by big debates over Rendell's big ideas-property tax reform, education innovation, and economic development.

Overall, Rendell has won much of his agenda, substantially because he has compromised. He wanted statewide property tax reform paid for by an increase in the state income tax. Instead, he got an optional local plan, funded by a major extension of gaming.

He wanted more than 600 million for his education initiatives and 2.2 billion for economic development; instead, he got one third and one half, respectively. Additionally, he conceded significant control over the decisions of the operations of gaming and economic development to legislative leaders.

Moreover, Rendell's quirky governing style has not sat well in the staid old state capitol. Rendell himself may be buttoned down but he's never buttoned up. He has logged more miles, addressed more groups, and been more accessible than any other governor in recent history.

His critics in the legislature say he's been disengaged from some of the major policy debates and he's sent conflicting signals to them--which has left legislative leaders more than a bit flummoxed at times.

All of this might not matter much to the state's voters who seem to care little about how the sausage is made in Harrisburg--only how it tastes. Recent polls indicate Rendell sausage still tastes pretty good to most voters. Moreover, in recent gubernatorial elections, the out party has struggled to find a viable opponent to take out the incumbent. True, this time it might be different--certainly three attractive candidates are an auspicious start. But barring a personal scandal or a major economic downturn--neither of which are likely--Rendell will be hard to beat. Republicans want to see the moving van parked outside the governor's residence in January 2007. To achieve that, they have some heavy lifting to do between now and then.

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