The GOP Shows Some Cleavage
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Many GOP state legislators anticipate their biggest problem in next year’s general election will be lingering voter outrage over the pay raise controversy. Maybe so! But there’s increasing evidence that by election time, Republican lawmakers may wish for such a problem.

Indeed, the pay raise contretemps of 2005 may seem a trivial distraction compared to the party shaking schism of 2006 now being threatened within the state Republican Party.

True, the pay raise firestorm has been a bi-partisan affair—directed at both parties and coming from both ends of the political spectrum. Certainly, Democratic leaders, including the Governor and his party’s legislative leaders, were part of the decision-making that led to the pay hike. But the reaction from Democrats and their coalition partners—though critical in part—has not led to the revolt now evident in the Republican Party.

And revolt seems not an immoderate term to use. The opposition to the pay hike from the right has been strident, aggressive, and militant, portending a large and potentially damaging set of political consequences for Republicans. This fury from conservatives has uncovered major cleavages, gaping cracks in the GOP coalition that augur ominous political implications for Republicans far beyond the pay hike controversy and far beyond 2005.

First some history: beginning in 1994, the state has been a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Republican Party. Except for the cyclical party turnover of the governor’s office every eight years, Republicans have controlled the state legislature, the federal House and US Senate delegation, two of the three state appellate courts, and for most of the time two of the three state row offices.

Republican prosperity has been underwritten by solid and dependable party organization, augmented with a reliable base vote that has more than overcome the GOP’s nominal voter registration deficit. Internally, the Party’s organizational structure, both county and statewide, has been mostly coherent and effective. Party squabbles, when they occurred, have been settled most often quietly, far out of public view. Most of the time ideological differences, power struggles, and petty personality differences have been subjugated to the overall goal of defeating Democrats.

But now that all could change decisively, because long simmering and sharply defined antagonisms within the party between conservatives and moderates threaten to erupt in what the President of Pennsylvania’s Commonwealth Foundation has described as a "civil war" about to "break out into the open."

Like most civil wars, the causes are complex. Analysis suggests that the pay raise controversy itself is a convenient, but proxy cause of the conflict; deeper and older frictions in the state GOP explain the underlying ferocity that has emerged. In effect, a long running modus vivendi between conservatives and moderates has broken down. Conservatives seem no longer satisfied to stay in the background while moderates exercise power and determine policy.
Three key Republican constituencies have assumed high profile roles in the emerging party battles:

- **YOUNG CONSERVATIVES:** These are young, conservative Republicans, among them many Internet bloggers who have gone well beyond Internet chatter to lead a full scale rebellion against those who voted for the pay hike, including the leaders of their own party. Many of these bloggers express anger and hostility at the Republican establishment, safely ensconced in the seat of power in the state capital. Earlier political battles motivate some of these young conservatives. In particular, those active in the Young Conservatives of Pennsylvania still nurse anger at Senator Rick Santorum’s lead role in supporting Arlen Specter’s reelection effort against conservative champion Pat Toomey.

- **IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS:** A second challenge has come from ideologically-based groups that increasingly have become disenchanted with Republican legislative support for higher state government spending that includes Growing Greener II, the state’s environmental initiative, and a variety of education and economic development programs. These major ideological organizations include: the Pennsylvania Leadership Conference; the Commonwealth Foundation; the Allegheny Institute; the Lincoln Institute; and the Pennsylvania Club for Growth. The collective argument of these groups is that Republicans in Harrisburg now act like big spending Democrats. Many of them have expressed outrage and dismay over the deals made between Republican leaders in the legislature and the Rendell administration. To some, the final indignity was delivered when Republican legislative leaders agreed that business taxes would not be reduced this year, prompting acrid criticism from a variety of traditional Republican-oriented business groups. The disaffection among the ideological groups has spawned the candidacy of one of their own for the Republican nomination for governor, Jim Panyard, who hopes to ride this disenchantment to a victory in the Republican primary next year.

- **GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS:** The third group joining these disaffected Republicans are best described as grassroots activists. Legislators pressured to repeal the pay hike have felt their impact. Grassroots insurgents were in abundance at the recent GOP state committee meeting where some members lobbied furiously for a resolution condemning the pay raise, though they did not prevail. The grassroots efforts, however, have been effective. Although some Democrats have rejected the hike, more Republicans have done so. Altogether more than 119 legislators have now announced they will not accept the un-vouchered expenses, a device offered as a way around the constitutional ban on salary increases taken in the term in which they are enacted. Talk radio, with its heavy concentration of conservative and Republican listeners, has been a leader in the tax hike repeal, promising to keep the heat on until next year as well, and priming the pump for challenges to legislators who voted for the pay hike.

The necessary question here is how much does any of this matter in the long run. Has the pay hike sprung open a Pandora’s Box of mischief and division that will weaken the Republican coalition, and allow the Democrats to reverse a decade of decline, or more sanguinely for Republicans will this anger and angst slip away as Election Day nears, and contests with Democrat opponents become urgent?

Both scenarios can be argued. In fact, state Republicans have dominated Pennsylvania electoral politics by always finding a way to come together, united against a numerically larger political foe.
But this time, Republican unity does not seem assured. The divisions are real, sometimes bitter and increasingly personal. Moreover, neither Republican moderates nor conservatives seem poised to compromise. Continuing confrontation between rival wings of the party is all but certain.

Moreover, history teaches that aging party coalitions, such as the GOP’s, often begin to fray after a decade or so in power. Governing has its benefits, but also its costs, and for political parties those costs tend to increase the longer a party is in power.

None of this guarantees Republican decline or even erosion of power in Pennsylvania. Even a weakened GOP might still be more than a match for the enfeebled state Democrats. But almost certain is the prospect that state Republicans are entering new and uncharted political waters. They have achieved their daunting successes as a minority party united against a common foe. They are still a minority party, but they are no longer united.

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