Corbett's Rookie Year

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One year ago, Governor Tom Corbett entered office in the midst of a stubborn recession, riding a tough no-new-taxes pledge and pushing an ambitious reform agenda. As Corbett prepares to begin his second year in office, the obvious question is, how’s he doing?

A fair appraisal is that he is doing okay—maybe not great, but definitely okay. So far he has avoided new taxes, notwithstanding the worst recession in modern times. Moreover, he successfully shepherded his first budget through the legislature on time, despite the biggest deficit in state history.

True, his draconian and widely unpopular budget cuts to education hurt his approval rating for a while. But that has now stabilized around 50%, much improved from earlier ratings in the 30% range and above most of his fellow governors around the nation. Since the budget battles, Corbett’s one miscue was his ill-advised support for the scheme to manipulate Pennsylvania’s presidential Electoral Vote. Otherwise, he has avoided serious conflicts while pursuing a low-key style. Even the ugly Penn State controversy, despite some criticism, has not dragged him down.

Not that challenges don’t remain for him. Corbett’s biggest fiscal challenges may still lie ahead. Currently, his administration is projecting a $500 million dollar shortfall in the current year budget.

Also worrisome, most of his reform agenda—vouchers, liquor control board privatization, transportation funding, and regulation of Marcellus Shale drilling—remains unresolved. Corbett’s large majorities in the General Assembly have so far not produced working arrangements with the legislative leaders who have moved his big agenda items. Corbett and the Republican leadership in the Legislature are not on the same page and, in truth, may not even be reading the same playbook.

In sum and substance, Corbett’s rookie year has been solid if not stellar. Surprisingly, however, this tells us little about how the next three years will go or about his re-election prospects.

In fact, modern gubernatorial history suggests the initial year in office doesn’t seem to matter much in terms of predicting a governor’s ultimate fate. There is even some evidence that unmixed success in the initial year may auger re-election problems.

Back to Milton Shapp in 1970, all but one new governor has had a rocky first year in office—a first year so bumpy that each of them was labeled a “one termer.”

Yet each of them was re-elected. In fact, the only governor to have a tight re-election campaign, Dick Thornburgh, was also the only governor to have a solid first year.

Corbett’s most recent predecessor, Ed Rendell, illustrates the pattern. Rendell urged a 10% income tax his first
year and never got a budget passed on time. Yet he cruised to a huge re-election victory in 2006.

Rendell’s predecessor, Tom Ridge, actually started his governorship with a successful special legislative session dealing with crime legislation. But then he pursued an unpopular agenda, including tuition vouchers, and signed a legislative pay hike. His polling numbers sank, and "one-term Tom" was sunk with them, or at least that’s what many believed until his landslide re-election in 1998.

Ridge’s predecessor, Bob Casey, had an even more difficult initial year. State Republicans were enraged by campaign ads run by Casey campaign consultant James Carville in 1986. Consequently, the GOP blocked many of Casey’s key appointments, stymied his legislative agenda, and generally made his first year an ongoing ordeal.

But no one had a rougher first year than Milton Shapp, first elected in 1970. He took office with the state facing the biggest fiscal crisis since the Great Depression. Shapp had to get not one but two state income tax bills through the Legislature after the state Supreme Court ruled the first bill unconstitutional. For a time in August 1971, the state had no power to spend any money, and state employees were not paid.

Only Dick Thornburgh, elected in 1978, had an untroubled first year. And it was not his agenda or political skills that made it successful, but his ability to manage a crisis. Just ten weeks into Thornburgh’s first term, he faced the Three Mile Island nuclear crisis. Widely applauded for his handling of the crisis, Thornburgh ended his first year a popular state figure with a well-earned national reputation. Yet Thornburgh nearly lost his re-election effort three years later to a political unknown.

The lesson seems clear. The first year forecasts little in terms of whether a governor will be re-elected. One compelling reason for this is the acute importance of timing in politics. What a politician does is often less important than when he or she does it. Experienced politicians usually pursue their most ambitious plans and take the greatest political risks in their first year. They make their mistakes and take their lumps early.

This indisputably is the experience of Pennsylvania’s governors before Corbett. What has mattered most for a new governor is not how well the term begins but how well it ends. Like his long line of predecessors, Corbett’s fate too will be determined much less by what he did or didn’t do in his first year than what he does and doesn’t do in the next three.

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