

# 1996 Row Office Elections

## May 2000

Pennsylvania elects relatively few statewide officials. Appellate court elections aside, only three state officials are elected other than the governor and lieutenant governor. These officials-- auditor general, attorney general, and treasurer--are important political as well as government leaders. Many of them use their statewide name recognition and influence to seek either a governorship or a U.S. Senate post.

For example, then Auditor General Barbara Hafer ran for governor in 1990 against Bob Casey. Casey himself had served as auditor general before he was elected governor in 1986. Former State Treasurer Catherine Baker Knoll sought the governorship in 1994. In 1986, Auditor General Don Bailey ran for the U.S. Senate and lost in the Democratic primary.

The elections for these "row offices" take place at the same time as the presidential elections. The term for each office is four years, and an incumbent is constitutionally limited to serving two terms. The auditor general ensures that public revenues are deposited and spent according to their legal purposes. In 1996, the office conducted approximately 6,500 audits of various state and local school district operations. The treasurer handles the revenues of the Commonwealth, deposits them in approved state depositories, invests some assets in short-term securities, and disburses Commonwealth funds to those properly entitled to receive them. The attorney general empanels grand juries, oversees criminal and civil prosecutions, and prosecutes consumer, public corruption, and drug cases.

To set the stage for the 2000 "row office" elections, an analysis of the 1996 campaigns and elections appear below. This assessment is part of a general series of monographs, produced by the Center for Politics & Public Affairs, dealing with recent Pennsylvania politics and elections.

### The Nomination Stage

By far the most reported and watched row office primary election race in 1996 was the Democratic contest for auditor general. The likely nominee was Bob P. Casey, Jr., the son of former two-term Governor Robert P. Casey. Casey Jr. argued that his experience as a lawyer in private practice and his nonpaid work with his father made him qualified to serve as auditor general. He stressed the importance of more public communication, "to let the people know the office is there and what it means to them." (Pittsburgh Post Gazette, April 17, 1996). At 35, he was the youngest of the Democratic candidates, and the only one with no formal governmental experience. His father's popularity among the state's voters and his political connections were enormous assets for Casey Jr. Over a span of the past thirty years, the elder Casey had been on a state ballot 16 times; he ran in eleven primaries and general elections for auditor general or governor. So popular and well known has been the Casey name that imitators have used it shamelessly. In 1976, Robert E. Casey, the Treasurer of Cambria County, running a shoestring campaign, won election as state treasurer and two years later a different Robert P. Casey, an Allegheny County teacher and part-time ice cream salesman, won the Democratic nomination for Lieutenant Governor.

The other major contestant, Tom Foley, had been a major player in the "real" Bob Casey's cabinet; he served as Secretary of Labor and Industry. During the 1980s, he worked in various congressional staff positions, but Pennsylvanians knew him best because he had been the Democrats failed 1994 Lieutenant Governor candidate. As a candidate for auditor general in 1996, Foley championed performance audits; he insisted his priority would be a job assessment based on these audits. Politically, he had certain other practical advantages, namely the endorsement of the Democratic State Committee and a variety of labor groups. These advantages were offset by the assistance Casey received from Philadelphia's two most powerful Democratic political leaders, Mayor Ed Rendell and State Senator Vincent Fumo.

The other Democratic candidates were State Representative William R. Lloyd, a House member from rural Somerset County, and Sandra A. Miller, a county commissioner from Bucks County. Both Lloyd and Miller lacked the resources to run effective statewide campaigns. Despite having very little opportunity to win the nomination, the state's two largest newspapers--The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Pittsburgh Post Gazette--endorsed Lloyd's candidacy. The Inquirer cited Lloyd's legislative career claiming, "he is a tireless advocate who loves to master complex issues." The paper referred to his mastery of mind-boggling matters such as utility rate-setting and reform of workers' compensation." (Philadelphia Inquirer, April 14, 1996).

Foley aired television commercials that attacked Casey. He tried, though not very successfully, to argue that Casey could not audit his father's gubernatorial administration without people "rightly or wrongly casting doubt on those audits" (Herald-Standard, April 17, 1996). And the price tag for using outside auditors, as Casey said he would do if elected, would exceed \$12-million, according to Foley. Casey responded in kind with a hard-hitting television advertisement, referring to Foley as a political "lapdog," and suggesting that Foley "sold access to government." (Philadelphia Daily News, April 19, 1996).

In the end, the auditor general primary was quite competitive between the two, with Lloyd and Miller running far behind, as neither could raise sufficient campaign monies nor generate interest in their campaigns. Casey edged Foley by slightly more than 10,000 votes in a contest in which approximately 729,203 Democratic voters participated. Foley defeated Casey in Philadelphia and Allegheny counties, the state's most heavily Democratic regions, and in the party strongholds in the southwest. But Casey captured 52 of 67 counties, and won the northeast, his home territory, by a comfortable margin, resulting in a narrow but hard-fought victory.

The Republican candidate, Bob Nyce, a state legislator from Northampton County, ran unopposed. He had the endorsement of the Republican State Committee. Nyce, elected to the State House in 1990, had served on the Northampton Area School Board and on a municipal authority.

If the most reported and watched race was the one for auditor general in the Democratic primary, the most controversial and bitter was the Democratic state treasurer's race between Mina Baker Knoll and Franklin L. Kury. Knoll, the daughter of then State Treasurer Catherine Baker Knoll, faced unrelenting criticism from her primary opponent, Kury. The younger Knoll was trying to succeed her mother and faced harsh criticism on two charges: carpet-bagging and name changing.

Kury maintained that Knoll was a resident of New York City, where she worked as a partner for the accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche. He also charged that she changed her name from Mina J. Knoll to Mina Baker Knoll, hoping that voters would believe they were casting votes for her popular mother. Knoll stressed her experience as an accountant, and indicated a desire to have the state legislature modify its guidelines for Commonwealth investments to expand investment return. Kury, a former State Deputy Attorney General and State Senator, had his vulnerabilities as well. In recent years, Kury had become a fixture in Harrisburg's corps of lobbyists. Knoll argued that Kury's recent career consisted of lobbying for "known polluters." (Pittsburgh Post Gazette, April 8, 1996).

The third candidate in the race was Richard Orloski, an Allentown lawyer who previously had made unsuccessful campaigns for attorney general and congress. His 1992 race for attorney general produced a surprisingly close contest with eventual winner Joe Kohn, despite the fact that Orloski spent only about \$75,000 in the primary.

In the end, Knoll's advantages over her outmatched rivals were too overwhelming. She had the support of the Democratic State Committee, organized labor, Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell, not to mention her mother's favorable name recognition. She racked up more than 400,000 popular votes out of almost 670,000 votes cast. Philadelphia and Allegheny counties alone gave her 170,207 votes, more than enough votes to defeat Orloski, who finished second with 137,452 votes.

The Republican candidate for state treasurer was Barbara Hafer, who was serving her second term as auditor general. A former nurse turned Allegheny County Commissioner turned Auditor General, Hafer had a maverick campaign style. In the early days of a horrendous 1990 gubernatorial bid, she referred to incumbent governor Robert Casey as a "redneck Irishman," and more recently to State Treasurer Catherine Baker Knoll and her staff as "lying scumbags" in a fracas over audits between their departments. But Hafer's sometime outspokenness belied a voter appeal and political savvy evident in two statewide victories for auditor general. And though crushed by Casey in 1990, she warned of an impending \$1-billion plus state deficit, which proved a correct, if even understated, predication.

Neither party had a contested primary for attorney general. The Democratic candidate, Joe Kohn, who ran for the post in 1992, came from a wealthy legal family. Kohn spent more than \$2-million in a losing contest to Republican Ernie Preate. Only 35 years old in 1992, Kohn had held no previous elective office, but, with the help of a large war chest, came within 125,000 votes of upsetting the popular incumbent Preate. He spent the intervening years between his defeat in 1992 and 1996 working with the Pennsylvania Crime Prevention Initiative, a business-community partnership he founded to study and report on drug related crime issues. His Republican opponent, Mike Fisher, was a member of the State Senate, representing a district in Pittsburgh. In 1996, Fisher was the Senate's majority whip, the third highest-ranking position in the Senate. He had run for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1994, losing to eventual winner Tom Ridge. The attorney general's race took place in an unusual political environment. Incumbent Attorney General Ernie Preate had resigned the previous June, following a guilty plea for mail fraud in the U.S. District Court (Middle District) of Pennsylvania. Governor Tom Ridge appointed Thomas W. Corbett to fill out Preate's term, after extracting a pledge from Corbett that

he would not seek election to a full term. Corbett's confirmation by the State Senate was held up, but eventually secured, after Democrats were convinced he would pose no electoral challenge.

### Keystone Poll

At the beginning of the general election races for Pennsylvania's row officers, many voters were undecided, according to the Keystone Poll completed in September 1996. In the attorney general race, more than half the potential electorate had not made a decision (54%), although Mike Fisher led Joe Kohn, 27% to 20%. A third (34%) of the electorate remained undecided in the auditor general contest, but Robert Casey held a thirteen-point margin over State Representative Bob Nyce, 40% to 27%. In the state treasurer race, fewer voters were undecided than in the other statewide contests, but slightly more than a quarter (27%) of the state's voters had not made up their minds. Barbara Hafer held a six-point lead, 40% to 34%, over Mina Baker Knoll.

### The Fall Campaign

Millions of dollars were spent by the statewide candidates. Television commercials, many of them negative, filled the air, but voters showed little interest in the row office elections. Republican Treasurer candidate Barbara Hafer accused Knoll for her accounting firm's involvement in the savings and loan scandal in the 1980s. Knoll accused Hafer of living by the code of a "hack politician." Bob Casey, the Democratic candidate for auditor general, claimed his opponent Bob Nyce was "handpicked" by Republican party bosses. Joe Kohn criticized Mike Fisher for accepting contributions from "big tobacco." But voters seemed not to care (Harrisburg Patriot, November 7, 1976.)

The treasurer's race was the hardest fought and the most intense of the fall campaigns. Knoll's residency became the central feature of the campaign. Hafer contended Knoll was guilty of "voter fraud or perjury for lying about her residency." Knoll responded with her own claim that Hafer dunned her own department's employees to the tune of \$175,000 for campaign contributions. (The Morning Call, October 2, 1996). As in the attorney general's race, the race for state treasurer also had some regional voting. Barbara Hafer, like Fisher, was able to perform well in Allegheny, Washington, and Westmoreland counties, where Democrats normally hold sway. Hafer was also able to win decisively in the traditionally Republican southeast. Knoll's strength came out of Philadelphia County, which she won by 242,304 votes, and Lackawanna and Luzerne counties, which she won by 34,064 votes. Hafer secured 50 of the state's 67 counties to win a close election (47.9% to 45.6%).

Kohn and Fisher traded barbs in the attorney general's race. Fisher stressed his experience as a prosecutor in Allegheny County from 1970-74 and his 16 years in the state senate, pointing out that Kohn had no criminal trial experience, nor any public service. Kohn responded by saying Fisher was a professional politician not a professional attorney. Fisher was aided by a number of endorsements, namely the Fraternal Order of Police, the State Troopers Associations, Chiefs of Police Association, and the National Rifle Association. In the final voting outcome, the regional appeal of the candidates threw off the expected normal distribution of Democratic and Republican votes. Kohn carried Philadelphia by nearly 300,000 votes. But Fisher only lost to Kohn by 3,000 votes in Allegheny County, normally the state's other large cache of Democratic

voters. Fisher did well in Washington and Westmoreland counties, also Democratic strongholds. On the other hand, Kohn was able to hold his own in traditionally Republican counties located in southeastern Pennsylvania—Bucks, Delaware, and Montgomery. In the end, Fisher triumphed by 62,002 votes (49.6% to 48.2%), primarily on the strength of his performance in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The auditor general race was the most one-sided in the 1996-election cycle. Bob Casey's name recognition made him the virtual winner before the votes were tabulated. Bob Nyce was quick to point out that even his own polling showed Casey with a wide name recognition lead, large enough to give Casey a substantial victory. Not helpful to Nyce was his inability to match Casey's fundraising capability, who maintained a big fundraising edge throughout the campaign. Casey was sufficiently confident to skip the annual state League of Women Voters television debate, something few candidates had been willing to do. The auditor general's race ended as a lopsided Casey victory. Casey beat Nyce by 660,925 votes (56.1% to 40.4%). Casey won 45 of the state's 67 counties, and performed well in many traditionally Republican areas in the central and southeastern parts of the state.

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