Gubernatorial campaigns raise many questions. Certainly issues, candidate personality, and leadership potential are included among them. But ultimately every gubernatorial contest comes down to just one big question--and that is the question of change: will voters vote for change in public policy and politics or will they vote to maintain the status quo? This is the essential question all elections answer.

The centrality of the change question goes to the referendum nature of American politics. Elections tend to be seen by voters as a referendum on the performance of the incumbent or the incumbent's political party--how well have incumbents handled the governments they run? How good or bad things seem to be? Should the incumbents be continued in office? Do we need change?

The party, and especially its candidates, out of power usually bears the burden of making an argument for change--while the party in power usually wraps itself in the status quo. In past gubernatorial elections, at least since Pennsylvania became a two-party state in the 1950s, the forces for change have appeared rather strongly every eight years, helping to produce the infamous eight-year cycle. With no incumbent eligible for reelection at the end of eight years, the advantages of incumbency are, therefore, mitigated, and the change environment becomes even more heightened.

The history here is fascinating. In Pennsylvania, change oriented candidates have focused on the economy and crime, but taxes have been a factor as well. In 1978, Dick Thornburgh won the governorship on a wave of voter discontent with the scandals in the administration of Milton Shapp. Thornburgh had never held an elected office, but his credentials as a crime busting U.S. attorney fit the needs of the electorate.

Likewise the voters' strong desire for change was evident when crime and the economy dominated the governor's election in 1994, when the voters elected a relatively unknown Erie congressman, Tom Ridge, over the state's Lt Governor Mark Singel.

In this year's governor's election, it has become clear which candidate is the candidate of change and which candidate will be the candidate of the status quo. But what is not clear yet is how much change, if any, the voters desire and which candidate benefits.

Since his May 21 victory, Ed Rendell, the Democratic governor candidate, has sharpened his criticism of Harrisburg, and has placed himself firmly on the side of change. His critique of the problems facing State government leaves no doubt he is the enemy of the status quo.

Curiously enough, the current recession has left the state with a $1.2 billion dollar deficit and slow economic growth. In his best outsider rhetoric, Rendell has attacked what he believes is the root cause of the problem: excessive partisanship in the halls of the state legislature, which he says is both venal and mean spirited.
A second criticism is timidity. He sees legislators and the current gubernatorial administration as hopelessly reluctant to be bold and aggressive in combating the state's economic malaise. He has called state leaders to risk political capital, even their political careers to turn the state's economy around.

Rendell is freer to attack openly the status quo, while Mike Fisher, the Republican candidate, is to a greater extent a captive of his historic position as the candidate of the incumbent party. As a Republican, he is expected to defend the past eight-year's of Republican rule, seriously limiting any change orientation.

Still, he will probably try to mix it up some. Fisher has been an independent-minded attorney general, and an effective top cop. He is going to use his record to blunt the criticism that he is an enemy of change.

But mostly, Fisher will adopt a Ridge II stance, defending the general direction of the past eight years, and adding to it. Fisher will become the value added candidate. He will make the argument that he will improve on the Ridge record, but finish the unfinished business of building a stronger state economy--giving him a way to argue for some change.

So, Rendell's candidacy will be mostly for change and Fisher's mostly for status quo. The fundamental question, however, is how much change do voters want. At the moment, the evidence is contradictory. Indeed, the nature of change itself seems sometimes contradictory. The French have an apt phrase that expresses this succinctly: "Plus Ca Change "--the more change occurs, the more things seem to remain the same. We may be on our way to a "Plus Ca Change" election in Pennsylvania this year.

Historically voters tend to opt for change at certain predictable points in the electoral cycle--in Pennsylvania mostly when the economy is lousy, or after a party is in power for an extended period, or when scandal or serious domestic policy failure has occurred. In other words, when the incumbents either screw up or wear out their welcome by staying around too long.

In some years, it is obvious that voters are looking for change, producing hard years for incumbents and good years for challengers. But in other years, it is just as obvious that voters seek stability and status quo. Not surprisingly incumbents fare well in status quo elections while challengers are usually unable to gain much traction. But this year in Pennsylvania, it is not at all obvious what is on voters' minds. The political tea leaves need some more time to dry out.

In particular, two widely used polling barometers are pointing in diametrically opposite directions. On the one hand, people in the state think we are in a recession, and worry about losing their jobs and keeping their health insurance. In fact, one in five cite personal finances as their most worrisome concern.

But, on the other hand, even as Pennsylvanian's worry about the economy, a clear majority still believes the state is moving in the right direction, and is generally optimistic. In the past, the so-called right direction-wrong direction poll question has been a solid indicator of how much change was in the air. But the current contradiction is an historical anomaly. One is tempted to conclude that we feel pretty good about our feeling that things aren't so good.

Neither Fisher nor Rendell has the luxury to leisurely work this all out. Fisher might yearn for the seven fat years of budget surpluses the state had between 1995 and 2001, and the general prosperity of the last decade.
But by November, whether the economy is perceived as good, mostly good, fair, mostly bad, or just plain bad will play a major role in deciding who will be the next governor. In any event, the candidates are trapped in a status quo/change environment that leaves much uncertainty. Whoever figures it out will most likely be the next governor of Pennsylvania.

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