The Eight-Year Cycle
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The vaunted “eight year cycle” hovers ominously over the impending 2002 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election like a Damoclean sword. Damocles himself in classical mythology is said to have feasted while a sword suspended by a single thread hung over his head – and like him, state Republican and Democratic gubernatorial candidates today go blithely about their business as if it weren’t dangling just overhead.

The “it” referenced here is the popular belief that Pennsylvania voters kick the incumbent party out of the governor’s mansion every eight years like clockwork, and have done so for almost half a century. Faith in the cycle is widespread and it has been influential in political circles. But should it be? How real is the eight–year cycle? And to what extent can we rely on it to explain past elections or to forecast future elections?

A little political history is helpful here. With rare exceptions the Republican Party of Pennsylvania dominated the governor’s office from the end of the Civil war until the mid 1950s. But beginning in 1954 a Democratic governor, George Leader, was elected followed by another Democratic governor, David Lawrence, in 1958. Then in 1962, a Republican, Bill Scranton, won, and he was followed by Ray Shafer, another Republican, in 1966.

This pattern – eight years of one party followed by eight years of the other -- has now continued for almost 50 years. The Democratic and the Republican parties have exchanged the governorship every 8 years as follows: 1954(D); 1962 (R); 1970(D); 1978 (R); 1986 (D); 1994 (R); 2002, predicted (D). Over this time span, there have been 12 elections. The Republicans have won six, the Democrats six.

The alternating pattern has been now elevated to the status of a theory used to predict the outcome of gubernatorial elections in Pennsylvania. Under its assumptions, the Democrats will win the 2002 governor’s election followed by the Republicans in 2010 and so forth. According to the theory, voters collectively check the calendar every eight years, sigh with dissatisfaction, and decide to throw the “in” party “out.”

The eight-year cycle has its critics and its doubters. Some scoff at it viewing it as not much more then an interesting pattern, but without predictive or explanatory power. Others believe the string of party changeovers going back to 1954 is a statistical fluke and not meaningful. But the doubters are wrong. The statistical evidence is persuasive There is an eight-year cycle. It’s real and it’s meaningful.

Here’s the math. The subject here is a series of elections – in this case 12 of them. The laws of mathematical probability tell us that these 12 elections could not have produced the kind of outcome pattern they did produce—DD—RR—DD--RR--DD—RR---- UNLESS something was operating to cause that pattern.

The probability is 0002441 that this string of 12 gubernatorial elections could have happened simply by chance or coincidence, altering party control every eight years beginning in 1954. Put more directly, the odds are more
than 4,000 to 1 against getting such an alternating string, unless something meaningful has been occurring. This is solid statistical evidence.

But knowing that the cycle is real and not a fluke does not tell us why it is real and not a fluke. “Why” is really the issue here.

The prevailing conventional wisdom is that the eight-year cycle is caused by the “in” party wearing out its welcome every eight years and being replaced by the “out” party. The outs then become the ins for eight years, until, alas, their time arrives to become the outs again.

This is an attractive theory. It is simple, straightforward, and it broadly fits the known facts. But it is also almost certainly wrong.

For one thing, it strains credulity to imagine voters getting out of bed on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November every eight years – and collectively thinking “well it’s time to go vote the in party out for another eight years – might as well get to it.”

No, this just doesn’t happen, and common sense tells us that it doesn’t. Voters simply do not think or behave this way. True, some studies have shown some negative correlation between winning an election and being in power a long time. But, the relationship is weak and never determinant.

So we have a mystery here. The eight-year cycle for 50 odd years has been a fact. It’s not a fluke. It is virtually impossible that it could have happened just by mere chance. Something is causing it.

But what?

Some plausible explanations are available. One is politics in Washington and the political party of the incumbent president. The party not in control of the presidency has won every gubernatorial term in the 12-election string, with the sole exception of Dick Thornburgh’s second term (1982). Clearly state voters prefer governors from the opposing party to the president. This notion also fits with the well-established tendency for voters in general to go against the president’s party in mid-term elections. All Pennsylvania gubernatorial elections occur in mid-term years, as do such elections in most other states.

Another interesting plausible explanation is the factor of incumbency. Incumbency is probably the single most important influence in contemporary politics – and its role in the eight-year cycle likely looms large. For the last 30 years of the cycle, incumbent governors could run for a second term. All have and all have won. It is only when incumbents cannot run that the party’s switch control of the governor’s office.

Consider this: Of the past three governors--arguably Thornburgh, but certainly Bob Casey and now Tom Ridge--could have been elected to third terms if they had been able to seek reelection. And, of course we would have had no eight-year cycle to puzzle about.

And there are other possible answers including the health of the economy. Voters often hold governors responsible for economic conditions. Indeed, many factors could matter. It is, in fact, most likely that the eight-year cycle is caused not by a single factor – but by a multiplicity of factors in combination – what social
scientists refers to as a multivariate problem. All of them may be necessary to explain the cycle, but none by them alone is sufficient to do so.

So, to sum up: The eight-year cycle is real. A pattern like it could not have happened by chance. What is going on, however, no one knows for sure. The prevailing explanation that voters simply exchange parties every eight years is not convincing. And since we don’t know why it happens, we can’t predict with confidence that the cycle itself will continue. It might. It might not. Democrats, of course, ardently hope it will – while Republicans fervently hope it won’t.

Like Damocles finishing his meal under the dangling sword, neither should probably relax much until the election next year is actually over.

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