The Pennsylvania Paradox

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During his first run, a presidential candidate visits a certain state 23 times, more than any other state. Four years later as a reigning president, he travels into the same state a record 44 times campaigning for re-election. The same year, the same state holds the most noticed US Senate primary in the country; it features a razor thin race many believed would influence the US Supreme Court for a generation.

A few years earlier in 1992, the same state hosted another US Senate race that defined gender politics in the US, and in 1991 the state staged a Senate race that may have presaged an incumbent president’s defeat.

Now in still another political year, this state’s voters are in the bull’s eye once again—about to experience the most watched national battle for a U.S. Senate seat—as well as a gubernatorial race featuring a national celebrity who is the state’s first African American to win a major party nomination pitted against one of the country’s most prominent politicians. Are we describing California perhaps New York maybe or even Florida? Actually none of these—welcome to Pennsylvania politics, circa 2006.

Whether this rendition of contemporary state politics seems normal or abnormal to you probably depends on when you came of political age: if it was before 1991 or so, Pennsylvania’s flurry of high profile campaigns and intense national attention probably seems a little strange. But if politics started for you after 1991, it all seems ordinary.

That is because Pennsylvania is now and has been since the early 1990’s in a period where acute national interest is routinely focused on the state’s politics and candidates. Why this is so and how long it might last are provocative questions. Paradoxically, Pennsylvania’s moment in the national spotlight comes during a long term decline in the state’s importance due to broad economic and demographic trends now powerfully underway. Why Pennsylvania is ground zero in so many elections, despite long-term decline, is the Pennsylvania paradox.

A modest historical discursion is necessary. Modern Pennsylvania politics can be dated from the Civil War period. Three eras predominate. The first, from the Civil War itself to mid-twentieth century, the state was largely taken for granted politically—not quite ignored—but rarely critical in political wars and hence far from the center stage of national events or interest. During this interval of plunder and spoils, the state was the mirror image of the solid south, except solid for the R’s, and consequently bypassed in almost every way politically.

The second era from the 1960’s to the 1990’s was Pennsylvania’s bellwether era: electoral politics largely tracked national trends—a solid two party state, competitive in most national elections, and tending to vote with the country as a whole. In popular votes, it went with the winner in every election, except for Hubert Humphrey in 1968. In general during this period, Pennsylvania was interesting, but rarely crucial.
During the third and present era, one that began in the 1990’s, the state changed dramatically. Pennsylvania regularly became ground zero in national elections. In fact, we can date Pennsylvania’s accession to national stage rather precisely, April 4, 1991, the day one of the state’s most popular political figures, US Senator John Heinz, perished in the mid-air collision that took his life. Heinz’s tragic death set off a chain of events and consequences still reverberating through PA politics today. These include the thrilling 1991 Senate race between Harris Wofford and Dick Thornburgh, the gripping 1992 Senate race between Arlen Specter and Lynn Yeakel, and the rise to prominence of US Senator Rick Santorum.

Since 2000, the trend toward more and more national attention for Pennsylvania has been accelerating. The 2000 contest between Gore and Bush received unprecedented coverage; then four years later in the 2004 battle between Bush and Kerry, the Pennsylvania coverage was once again intense. The same year Senator Arlen Specter had perhaps his toughest race in his own party primary, and now again in 2006 the state is the focal point of two of the most important and reported races in the country.

Much of this is well known to even casual observers of contemporary political life; the great question is why has Pennsylvania increasingly becomes center stage in national electoral politics and what forces or factors impel Pennsylvania to become more and more important at the very time the state is losing population and electoral votes? What explains the Pennsylvania paradox?

It’s a complicated question that yields no simple answers; however, four factors loom prominently as explanations for Pennsylvania’s time in the national limelight.

• **COMPETITIVENESS**--while much of the country has become polarized into stable red or blue states, Pennsylvania has remained a competitive two party state in national elections as illustrated by the closeness of presidential elections in the state. Competitive politics in a time in which competition is declining nationally distinguishes Pennsylvania from almost every other large state. Of the competitive states, only Florida has more electoral votes making Pennsylvania the second most coveted Electoral College prize.

• **KEY NATIONAL RACES**--since 1991, the state has showcased several of the most prominent national races, including the sensational Harris Wofford-Dick Thornburgh race, used by political guru James Carville to introduce the issues--heath care and the economy-- that he later used in the 1992 presidential election to help elect Bill Clinton. Wofford also was featured three years later in a contest with Rick Santorum, a key election that helped usher in the Republican dominance of Congress. Earlier in 1992, and growing out of the sensational Clarence Thomas hearing that featured Specter’s tough questioning of Anita Hill, the Specter versus Yeakel race came to symbolize nationally the "Year of the Women" in American politics. More recently in 2004, the Specter primary battle against Pat Toomey was largely read as a fight for the soul of the Republican Party. And currently both the 2006 governor’s race and the 2006 US senate race are receiving rapt national attention. From these several contests, Pennsylvania has become accustomed to being in the national spotlight; equally important, the nation has become used to Pennsylvania being there.

• **REPUBLICAN DOMINANCE**--Democrat governors bookend the era from 1991, and Democrats have won seven of the last ten statewide elections, but Republican hegemony in the state has been a central characteristic of the period: the US Senators are Republican, the state legislature is Republican, and two of the three Appellate Courts are Republican. And Republicans used their
control over the legislature to redraw the congressional boundary lines in 2001 to increase their majority in the delegation by four members. Until recently, Pennsylvania, despite its Democrat tilt in presidential elections, has been one of the most Republican states in the nation. This period of Republican hegemony largely has coincided with national Republican control of Congress and the White House, projecting state politicians like Arlen Specter, Tom Ridge and Rick Santorum onto the national stage in highly visible roles. Pennsylvania was increasingly noticed because they were noticed.

- **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**—since 1991, the state has produced an unusual number of nationally prominent high profile politicians. These include former governors Bob Casey, Sr. and Dick Thornburgh, and more recently Ridge, Santorum, Specter and Rendell—all leaders involved in the debate over major national issues or who have run in closely watched races, or who have been selected for national leadership. Santorum is the number three Republican in the Senate while Specter is chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee at a time of high profile judicial controversies. Rendell is a national Democrat spokesman and former national Chairman and Ridge was the first Secretary of Homeland Security. All of them are national leaders, not because of mere longevity, but because of substantial sustained leadership, honed in Pennsylvania and now exercised nationally.

The toughest question remains: how long will the trend last, how much longer will the state be basking in the political klieg lights? No one knows for sure, but there is little evidence that Pennsylvania is becoming less competitive, or that the nation is becoming less polarized. As long as those conditions continue to prevail, Pennsylvania likely will continue its political prominence. There is abundant poetic irony here. For decades during its ascendancy, Pennsylvania was nicknamed the "keystone state" because of its central location among the original states. Now no longer ascendant, it plays that role once again as arguably the key state in American electoral politics.

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