The Keystone State: Wither We Go in 2011
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In 2010, Pennsylvania elected a new governor, unelected an old senator, and moved decisively toward installing the GOP as the dominant political party. Now, as the new year gets underway, it’s a good time to assess where we have been, what problems lie ahead, and what opportunities beckon. Six key areas comprise mileposts from the past year and signposts to the future.

1. **Continuance of the eight-year cycle:** The eight-year cycle is still alive in Pennsylvania politics and shows no sign of ending soon. Many scoff at it, others ignore it, but for more than a half century the cycle has held. Pennsylvania voters inevitably, invariably, and without much ceremony end a party’s gubernatorial control after eight years. This year Governor Ed Rendell’s unpopularity made the switch to Republican a certainty. But eight years earlier the outgoing Republican was fairly popular, and his party still was tossed out. There is nothing mystical or even foreordained about the cycle. Nevertheless, it is about as close to a certainty as one gets in Pennsylvania politics today.

2. **Evolution of extreme politics:** Pennsylvania once was thought inhospitable to political extremes of right or left. But more and more Pennsylvania seems inhospitable to anyone not too right or left. The center, at least for the moment, has been eviscerated in Pennsylvania politics. Pennsylvania now has more conservatives running the state than at any time in modern history. More than 100 new state House members have been elected since 2005, many staunch conservatives, as well as five new conservative members to the state’s congressional delegation, one new very conservative U.S. senator, and one new conservative governor. Liberals, meanwhile, are more than ever confined to urban enclaves. The state that someone once described as “extremely moderate” is not yet extreme, but no longer moderate.

3. **An anti-Democratic surge:** The anti-incumbent trend that characterized the 2010 midterm election looks much more like an anti-Democratic trend in Pennsylvania. In fact, most incumbents won in Pennsylvania, and those few losing were Democrats. In party primaries only one of 183 state House incumbents failed to win renomination, and no state Senate incumbent was denied. Similarly, not a single one of 17 U.S. House incumbents lost a primary. It was the fall general election, however, in which Democrats took a huge hit. They lost 13 state House seats to give the Republicans their largest majority since the 1950s, while five Democratic incumbents lost their seats in the U.S. House. Clearly in Pennsylvania it was not incumbents as a class that lost, but rather Democratic incumbents that got thumped.

4. **Another interminable governor:** Had Ed Rendell left office two years ago, he would probably be remembered as a popular governor who accomplished much. But Rendell’s frustrating final two years are actually more the rule than the exception. Voters’ patience always expires long before the second term does. This familiar phenomenon of a struggling governor wrapping up his final two years is a powerful argument for the six-year term, which is widespread across American politics and includes other states as well as the presidency. Few two-term governors and even fewer two-term presidents escape the “six-year jinx.”

5. **Chronic fiscal strife:** Pennsylvania’s budget is a mess, and its tax system a disaster. Strictly speaking neither of these conditions are new. The state’s budget has been awry for years and the tax system for decades. But it was in 2010 that the state’s political establishment finally began to confront the enormity of
the fiscal challenge. And so 2011 looks like a year in which a vigorous debate will take place on proposals—some old and some new—to meet fiscal challenges such as tax reform, the privatization of the LCB, mandatory spending reform, a substantial review of existing state programs, and placement of the state’s long-term fiscal obligations on a solid and prudent footing. Any of this would be a challenge for most states. All of it is a gargantuan task for a state congenitally opposed to either change or reform.

6. At a partisan crossroads: Pennsylvania, as much as any state in the nation, reached a partisan crossroad in 2010—a product of its restless sojourn over the past several decades from Republican to Democrat and back to Republican. It was one of the most Republican states during the 1990s, then a Democratic-leaning state in the first decade of the 21st century, and now it’s abruptly veered Republican again by electing a Republican state House and Senate as well as a new Republican governor and U.S. senator. Even the state’s congressional delegation is now solidly Republican. Along the way Pennsylvania has metamorphosed from a quintessential moderate-centrist state to one increasingly comfortable with both conservative politicians and conservative policies. So far, Pennsylvania’s unique brand of schizophrenic politics seems to be neither confounding the voters nor confusing the politicians. But the perennial political pendulum swings of the past 30 years leaves unanswered, if not unanswerable, one huge question: Just what exactly is the Keystone State politically, and where is it headed?

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