Election Cycles
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Tuesday, Nov. 6, is Election Day in Pennsylvania as well as across the country. It is the first election since the terrorist attack of Sept. 11 -- and the first opportunity since then to reflect on the enormous stability and consistency in American elections. In this time of change and challenge, it is reassuring to also be reminded of the continuity that characterizes much of our political process.

This constancy is not always apparent. With elections we tend to over count the trees, but undercount the forests--that is to pay great attention to individual elections, but ignore the larger patterns painted by those individual elections. The habit is ingrained. The media themselves have taken to labeling elections as "Election 2000" or "Election 2001," and so forth, and that has probably contributed to the sense we have that one election is not particularly related to another. Like fine wine every election determines its own vintage.

And there is something here as well. Each election is special and in some ways different. But scholars and political professionals also think of elections in terms of multi year cycles--some as short as two years, others as long as a decade or longer. This way of thinking about elections is important and useful because it draws attention to the many ways successive elections are interrelated to each other. It also reveals the many recurring political rhythms that lend stability and predictability to our politics.

Foremost among these is the four-year cycle. It begins with a presidential election and ends with the election immediately preceding the next presidential election. Each of the four elections in a cycle is named. Every fourth year is the "presidential year." An election held two years after the presidential is labeled a "mid-term" election, while one held one year or three years after is referred to as an "off year" or "odd year" election.

Each point in this four-year cycle produces regular recurring characteristics, illustrated by presidential elections. They usually generate the most intense media coverage--and the highest turnout of any election. Typically 20 percent or so more people vote for president then for any other office. In fact, a significant number of people vote only in presidential elections. Another regular pattern is that presidential elections normally produce electoral gains for the party of the winning presidential candidate--specifically gains in the House of Representatives and often the U.S Senate. Presidential years set the tone and frame the expectations for the remaining three years of a cycle.

Mid term elections show still more regular patterns. One is that they produce considerably less voter turnout then in presidential election years. This voting "falloff" is largely among voters who turn out only when a presidential race is held. Turnout is down even in states like Pennsylvania that elect governors in mid-term elections. Yet another characteristic of mid-terms is that their results are often interpreted as a bellwether of which way the political winds are blowing across the country. The issues that emerge from mid-terms are often the issues that propel the next presidential. And mid-terms usually bring bad news for the ruling party, which
typically loses congressional seats. One explanation is that many supporters of the president skip these elections, since the president himself isn't on the ballot.

Odd year elections feature still other regular rhythms. In odd years, voter turnout generally is lower than in either mid-terms or presidential years. It is consistently the lowest of any regularly scheduled general election. Odd-year elections usually feature local elections--mayor, council, county officials, etc. In Pennsylvania, they also include statewide judicial contests. Turnout is lowest because voters attracted only to presidential or other statewide races, such as for governor simply do not vote. These odd year races also tend to be isolated from national trends. Indeed, some states schedule their local elections in odd years to separate them from the influence of national issues.

Still other regular predictable cycles infuse our political life. The "10-year cycle" is one. It starts at the beginning of a new decade and ends in the last election in that decade. Its influence is mainly on legislative elections. There competition (and turnover) is usually greatest at the beginning of the decade, after new reapportionment maps have been drawn. Conversely, the least competition (and turnover) occurs at the end of the decade, just before the next reapportionment. Potential candidates for Congress and state legislatures often take this 10-year cycle calculus into consideration when pondering a race. It is no coincidence that the strongest and largest number of candidates appears in the first or second election of each new decade--nor that incumbents are least vulnerable to upset at the end of the decade.

Regularity and stability in elections can be observed over even longer periods. "Realignment cycles," for example, have marked out long periods of electoral dominance by one political party over the other lasting a generation or more. This was the case when the Republicans became the majority party after the realignment election of 1896, only to be replaced by the Democrats following the realignment that took place during the New Deal years in the 1930s.

Then, there are informal cycles that may be indigenous to a particular state. Pennsylvania's notorious eight-year cycle in gubernatorial elections (about which we have written earlier) is an example. Every eight years over the past half-century, the Republican and Democratic parties have exchanged the governor's office with monotonous regularity, a pattern markedly influencing gubernatorial elections. The incumbent party has minimal resistance for re-election after four years in office--and the out-party offers little competition--in part due to the eight-year cycle expectations. But after eight years in power, the ruling in-party often has trouble keeping its coalition together, while the out-party attracts strong candidates and wide support because it is expected to win.

So, as these many examples illustrate, individual elections comprise cycles, in fact, many cycles. And from these cycles we see consistent patterns that clarify and illuminate our politics and our history. Certainty it is true that individual elections are sometimes idiosyncratic events. Who, for example, could have predicted the calamitous 2000 presidential election--and who anticipated the mid term tidal wave of 1994 that swept congressional Republicans into office for the first time in 40 years? But these electoral outliers are the exception and not the rule.

The rule is that we hold elections one at a time, but we make sense of them in bunches. Only seen together do they collectively weave the mosaic of stability and predictability that underlie American electoral politics.
History doesn't repeat itself—exactly. Neither do election cycles—exactly. But so many factors exist that are regular and reliable from one election to another, and from one election cycle to another that we learn and profit from studying them. If every election, like fine wine does, determines its own vintage, the wine cellar itself is also an important place to spend some time.

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