

Pennsylvania's Dead-End Sure Thing

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For state Republicans running for it, it's a safe bet, sure thing, shoo-in; for incumbents in it, it's a dead end, brick wall, road to electoral nowhere. We can only be describing Pennsylvania's Office of Attorney General. For certainly no other office in the modern history of the state has been so completely dominated by one party, while so thoroughly lacking in any electoral future for its incumbents.

There are two strands of political history to unwind here: the first perplexingly painful to state Democrats, the second equally vexing to state Republicans.

The Office of Attorney General has been an elective office since 1980. From the beginning it has been filled by Republicans. Across eight consecutive elections encompassing 28 years – from 1980 to 2008 – the winner has been the GOP nominee.

Five Republicans in all have occupied the Office. Four of them were elected to two terms – the maximum consecutively allowed for the Office – and one was appointed to fill out an unexpired term. (The incumbent, Tom Corbett, was both appointed and elected to the Office.)

Republicans have been elected to the Office in good years for the party, such as 1980 and 1984, and in bad years such as 1992 and, of course, 2008. The prevailing political winds seem not to matter. When the office on the ballot is attorney general, the voters elect Republicans to fill it. For the GOP the Office has been an electoral sure thing.

The second historical thread dangling here is the electoral fate of Republican attorneys general once in office. The short answer is not much. Not all have sought elective office after their tenure. But of those who did none have been able to move into the governorship or any other elective office. For them, the Office has been an electoral dead end.

And let it not be thought that these men have been lacking in either ambition or political skills. Indeed, with one exception, Ernie Preate, who was convicted of mail fraud, these incumbents have been persons of impressive political accomplishments, widely respected during their tenure in office. In fact, two of them ran for governor, one losing in the party primary to Tom Ridge and one losing in the general election to Ed Rendell. A third incumbent, Tom Corbett, is considered a leading candidate for the GOP nomination in 2010, but more about this later.

And so we have a fascinating electoral puzzle.

On the one hand, the Office of Attorney General is and has been since its inception a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party. Republicans can't seem to lose these races; Democrats can't seem to win them. But, on the other hand, winning the attorney general's office has been, like virtue, its own reward, since the GOP has been unable to translate the Office into a base for governor or any other elective office.

Why voters like – nay love – Republicans when voting for attorney general, but ignore and reject those same Republicans running for higher office raises some interesting questions about state politics. And there has been no shortage of theories put forward to explain the phenomenon.

Perhaps voters see the Office as just a statewide version of their local prosecutor, the county district attorney. Maybe voters view Republicans as more law and order types than Democrats. Possibly voters just don't want Harrisburg insiders to become governor. Certainly being linked to the Harrisburg culture and policies has not been an asset for statewide candidates. The last governor to come directly from another Harrisburg job occurred in the 1960's.

In any case, none of this speculation has noticeably discouraged Republicans from running for the Office; nor has it intimidated incumbents already in office from positioning themselves as gubernatorial candidates.

We are reminded of that as the 2010 race for governor is about to begin. Because once again a Republican attorney general is preparing to run for governor – hoping to exorcise the political demons that have jinxed his party for almost a third of a century.

And Tom Corbett has to be taken seriously. Strengthened by his role in the unfolding bonus-gate scandal, lauded for his prosecution of Internet predators, and buoyed by his better than expected re-election performance in eastern Pennsylvania, Corbett will be a tough opponent. Moreover, he will be running in a year that is likely to look much better for Republicans than does the year now passing.

But, less promisingly for Corbett, he is also facing a cadre of formidable opponents for the Republican nomination. Pat Meehan, the popular and politically savvy former US attorney, lurks in the eastern part of the state. Meanwhile, Pat Toomey, a former Pennsylvania congressman and conservative champion, likewise stands ready to do battle.

Then, too, Corbett could be running in a political climate in 2010 that could be dicey for incumbents. Certainly, no one expects state Democrats to graciously exit the governor's office after the term-limited Rendell retires. They are expected to field a team of gubernatorial candidates as impressive as those of the Republican Party. Indeed, 2010 is shaping up as one of the most competitive in memory.

Still Corbett and his supporters know their history and understand their task. For almost three decades of state politics, the Office of Attorney General has been both a sure thing and an electoral dead end. Whether Corbett wins or loses, it will probably remain a sure thing for Republicans. The interesting question, however, is whether it remains a dead end as well.

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