April 23rd is the birthday of James Buchanan, the 15th president of the United States. Not noted on many calendars, Buchanan’s birthday is, nevertheless, a day of note in Pennsylvania. He was the first and so far only president elected from Pennsylvania. No other Pennsylvanian has ever lived at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Some attribute that unpleasant fact to Buchanan’s presidency.

Certainly Buchanan was a classic example of being the wrong man in the wrong place and at the wrong time. As well prepared for the presidency as anyone entering the office, he was also spectacularly unlucky. Elected in 1856, he was president when the Union dissolved and the Civil War began. Scholars criticize both his policies and his inaction leading up to the war.

True, not everyone bashes Buchanan. He does have his defenders and a revisionist historian or two have even argued that the Lancaster man’s reputation is unfair. Still, most historians consider him a failed president.

Worse perhaps, Buchanan's doubtful legacy has come to inhere much more than Buchanan himself—to what scholar Pierce Lewis has referred to as the "Buchanan effect"—the notion that Pennsylvania itself is a land of political hacks and third-rate political mediocrities.

Quoting Lewis: “The 'Buchanan effect' is particularly striking when Pennsylvania's political figures are compared with the legion of distinguished statesman from several large, old eastern states nearby. With the exception of Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania never produced a (great) political or intellectual leader.... Only on rare occasions have Pennsylvania's governors or U.S. senators exerted much influence or commanded much respect beyond the borders of the state.”

Lewis's views find painful support in the historical record, especially with regard to the presidency. In fact, the dismal record of Pennsylvania in producing presidents is one of the enduring riddles of American political history. Compared to large neighboring states such as Virginia (eight presidents), New York (four presidents) or Ohio (seven presidents), the Pennsylvania record (one president) is wretched.

Even presidential candidates have been in short supply. One has to go back 125 years to find the last time that a Pennsylvanian was even nominated by a major party. In modern times, Pennsylvania's most serious presidential bid was made more than 40 years ago, in 1964. Then, Gov. William Scranton challenged for the Republican nomination. Since Scranton's time; however, Pennsylvania has been mostly an asterisk on the roster of serious presidential candidates.

Nor has the "Buchanan effect" been limited to the presidency. For a state of its size and historical prominence, Pennsylvania has produced a modest number of national leaders. Pennsylvania’s famous political names evoke not the Daniel Websters, the Henry Clays or the Robert La Follettes. Instead, they belong to colorful but disreputable political bosses like the legendary Simon Cameron, Boise Penrose and Matthew Quay.
Political bosses, in fact, represent the major way that Pennsylvania has exercised national power--covertly and carefully. The notorious Cameron, Penrose and Quay are the historical prototypes. They projected Pennsylvania power into national politics, brilliantly from the Civil War until well into the 20th century. But they did so behind the scenes--more interested in patronage and contracts than policy and government. Later political leaders, namely David Lawrence, William Green, and Drew Lewis in the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s also exercised considerable influence on national politics--again mostly behind the scenes.

Numerous hypotheses have been advanced to explain the paucity of national leaders produced from Pennsylvania. The prevailing and persuasive answer is that Pennsylvania's "political culture" going back to William Penn bears major responsibility for the state’s poor showing. Strongly localistic, thoroughly pragmatic and consistently utilitarian, government in Pennsylvania has been viewed as just another job to get done, and not necessarily a job that required the greatest lights to do it.

A few years ago the Almanac of American Politics described Pennsylvania’s sordid political history succinctly: "(Pennsylvania) was a state where important people were in business, and politics was left to faintly disreputable leaders." One of Pennsylvania’s more infamous congressmen once summarized his own scurrilous philosophy of government as "money talks and bull---- walks." That view would not have been unique among many state politicians of earlier times. But this often venal and tawdry past may no longer augur Pennsylvania’s future. Politics in the Keystone State is changing, and changing for the better. As we observe the birthday of Pennsylvania's only president, it may be worth noticing why that is so.

To begin, the state’s economy has been undergoing transformative change--now decades removed from the industrial-based economy that historically characterized the state. Only about 20-percent of Pennsylvanians remain employed in traditional manufacturing.

As the economy changes, the political culture also evolves. Reform, for example, long a dirty word in Pennsylvania politics, now gets a respectful hearing in the state's political dialogue.

Patronage is mostly a practice of the past, while corruption, long the _bete noire_ of Pennsylvania politics, has been reduced dramatically. Not since the 1970’s has there been a major scandal in the executive branch of state government. Moreover, the state is now politically competitive. Neither national party can take Pennsylvania's electoral vote for granted, as was amply and often demonstrated last fall when both major party presidential candidates repeatedly visited the state to campaign.

Equally important, more of the best and the brightest are now going into Pennsylvania politics. From the state legislature, to the congressional delegation, to the U.S. Senate, the list of emerging leaders has expanded in recent years. Increasingly smart, aggressive Pennsylvania politicians are developing a mastery of public policy and the legislative process that clearly separates them from the typical state politician of earlier eras.

National prominence, so long elusive for Pennsylvania politicians, is more common. Pennsylvania leaders now get respect, and often more than respect. Former Governor Dick Thornburgh was considered as a running mate for George Bush, the elder. Governor Casey gained national prominence for his efforts to broaden the base of
the Democratic Party during the Clinton era. Senator Arlen Specter is a major political figure in the nation on whose skills may well rest the success of President Bush’s Supreme Court nominees.

Most stunning of all, Pennsylvanians are now regularly mentioned as serious presidential candidates. Former Governor Tom Ridge is believed by some to be a contender for the presidency. Likewise Senator Rick Santorum is widely believed to be a presidential candidate. And current Governor Ed Rendell is on almost everyone’s short list of prospective Democratic nominees for President in 2008. In fact, probably at no other time in Pennsylvania history has the state produced a larger number of potential presidential candidates than now.

So, change is coming to Pennsylvania--not as fast as some would like, but faster than many realize. And change, finally and blissfully, will also bring an end to the "Buchanan effect," Pennsylvania’s long-standing role as the Rodney Dangerfield of national politics is ending. That’s long overdue and probably no one would appreciate it more than James Buchanan himself. Happy Birthday Mr. President!

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2005 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.