An Electoral Oasis
April 22, 2004

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

In a few scattered pockets of Pennsylvania, a strange and unfamiliar phenomenon is occurring as Primary Election 2004 draws near—several congressional races actually feature real down to the wire competition among competing candidates.

Shocking, as it seems, in at least three districts and maybe a fourth, genuine contests are going on to elect nominees to Congress. And in a few state legislative districts, serious races are going on for state house seats.

The competition in some of these races is intense, and two come quickly come to mind. One is the 17th congressional district, which covers a wide swath of central Pennsylvania. There, six candidates for the Republican nomination are colliding—to take on the Democratic incumbent in a redrawn congressional district with a 60/40 Republican registration.

Another competitive district is the 13th congressional district encompassing parts of southeast Pennsylvania. This one features hard fought races in both Democrat and Republican primaries, occasioned by the departure of the current Democratic office holder. These two and the other competitive congressional races are attracting media attention, as well as vast sums of money.

For voters in these fortunate few areas, the races provide an opportunity to choose among competing candidates, to vote their preferences, and to cast a ballot that actually matters. Indications are that voters in these lucky districts recognize their opportunity. Turnout for the competitive races is expected to be higher in these districts than elsewhere in the state.

But what is happy news for a few voters gloomily reminds the rest of us just how scarce competition has become in our political contests. The harsh reality is that real political competition in legislative elections is rapidly disappearing.

Evidence for this conclusion is abundant. Incumbency re-election rates tell the story most starkly. Typically, reelection rates for both the state legislature and the state's congressional delegation push 97-percent. There have been recent election cycles in which 100% of congressional incumbents running for reelection were reelected.

Nor is this pattern limited to just primary elections or even to Pennsylvania.

In the typical modern national congressional election probably no more than 5 percent of all House seats are really in play. The rest are either dominated by an incumbent or are so one-sided in party registration as to remove all doubt of who will win.

The vaunted power of incumbency explains some of the anemically low political competition. Incumbents today, once elected, normally face little or no opposition. They stay in office as long as they wish, and the advantages they have in fund raising and other resources discourage serious challengers.
Pennsylvania's congressional delegation is typical. In 16 of Pennsylvania's 19 congressional seats incumbents are seeking reelection this year. Technically, 13 of these incumbents have general election opponents. But in reality, the challenges are nominal and the challengers have little chance of winning.

The most recent election returns underscore the futility of challenging incumbents. In 2002—with a single exception—every incumbent who ran won with more than 60-percent of the vote in districts not heavily altered in redistricting.

Astonishingly, we have now reached the place in our political history where a truly competitive congressional race (that is a race that either side could win) is so rare that often as not it is carried as a national story. State legislative races show similar patterns. In the last ten years, only three percent of state legislators on average have lost reelection—while the number of uncontested primary and general elections has increased; now averaging between 40 and 45-percent in recent election cycles.

In fact, this year's number of uncontested state house elections has reached historic highs. More than half of incumbents running for reelection, 98 of 194 incumbents, have neither primary nor general election opposition.

The consequence of these trends is that competitive legislative races only occur when incumbents retire or other very special circumstances occur, as illustrated by the primary contests in the 13th and 17th congressional districts.

In the 13th district, the incumbent is retiring to run for the U.S. Senate; in the heavily Republican 17th district, one incumbent beat another incumbent in a merged district in which the boundaries were redrawn for 2002 contest (one of the few ways incumbents lose these days), and now GOP primary candidates hope to regain the seat.

So, real races such as we are seeing this season are virtual aberrations—contests that are happening because something went wrong in the normal script—or some politician wants to move up to higher office.

Should we be concerned about the death of political competition? Certainly!

Are there ready and apparent solutions? Probably not!

Incumbency dominance of electoral politics is more the symptom of the problem then the problem itself. Incumbents prevail as they do to a large extent because we have not tackled one of the important larger institutional problems that beset our electoral system: the pervasive role of money in our politics.

Incumbents, benefit enormously from the status quo, and can hardly be expected to change it. Nor is there much evidence that voters are much concerned about either the lack of competition in our politics or the role of money in our elections.

So, those of us who are able should enjoy this year's spirited competition. Few and far between, races like these are veritable oases in the dessert of electoral monopoly that politics has become.
Real contests like these will continue to be rare events--nostalgic side shows that illuminate the yawning gap between what once was--and what no longer is: electoral competition in legislative politics.

------------------

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 © 2004 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.