

The Endangered Republicans

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What a difference a few years can make! Earlier this decade (2001) we wrote an article that resonated widely with observers of state politics. It was entitled "The Endangered Democrats" and described the travails then savaging the Pennsylvania Democratic party. A paragraph from that article captures its flavor:

State Democrats have been in an electoral freefall for most of the past decade. Although nominally the majority party in the state...the Democrats can't seem to win an election. In fact, since 1992 only one Democrat has won a statewide non-judicial race. The scope of the debacle is breathtaking. Democrats now control a single statewide office while Republicans control virtually everything else. The governor and lieutenant governor are Republican. So, too, are the attorney general and the state treasurer. Ditto the state legislature - a slim majority in the state House and an overwhelming majority in the state Senate are Republican. The congressional delegation is now majority Republican...and both U.S. senators are Republican.

We went on to speculate, only slightly tongue in cheek, that state environmentalists may soon have a new cause because Democrats were becoming endangered species in the state.

Not anymore!

Today it's the Republicans who seem on life support and the Democrats who thrive. That difference was starkly underscored last week when five-term U.S. Senator Arlen Specter abruptly left the GOP. Specter's party switch, obligatory GOP denials notwithstanding, was a body blow to Republicans hoping to recover their electoral footing in a state they once dominated.

But bad as the Specter defection was, it is only the latest setback for Republicans in a lengthening list of mishaps and reversals.

The new century has been a veritable feast for state Democrats. They control the governorship, the congressional delegation, two of the three statewide row offices, two of the three appellate courts, one chamber of the state legislature, and now, for the first time since the 1940's, both U.S. senators are Democrats. Altogether Democrats have won 14 of the past 19 statewide elections - a string of victories that completely reverses the Republican domination established a decade earlier.

Republicans in Pennsylvania have become the Pennsylvania Democrats of a decade ago - a party on the ropes with uncertain prospects and huge challenges lying ahead.

But why has the GOP fallen so far so fast - and can it recover?

Five underlying factors seem critical in explaining what is happening:

1. **Normal Cyclical Political Fluctuations** - The normal cyclic rhythm of partisan politics explains some of the Republican decline. Over time the fortunes of either political party tend to ebb and flow in the

combative struggle of competitive two-party politics. Today you are up, tomorrow down. That said, however, Pennsylvania Republicans are encountering problems that reach deeper than mere cyclical fluctuation in the party's fortunes. Indeed, the shift in voters now underway might preface a more fundamental realignment that could well transform the state's politics and policies for generations.

2. **The Shift Away from Values Voting** - A great deal of GOP success in the 1990's (and Democratic failure) can be attributed to the trend to values voting. Back then voters were less inclined to vote their pocketbooks, and more inclined to vote their values. Issues such as gun control and abortion held sway. These so-called "cultural issues" determined voting behavior for many. But not today! The current recession has moved pocketbook issues front and center for most voters. True, the cultural issues still resonate for some voters, but as economic issues have risen in salience the values voter has become less common. This has helped Democrats who do well on the pocketbook issues but fare badly with the values voter.
3. **Outbreak of Civil War within the GOP** - In the past decade, Republicans have faced a series of challenges that has left the party in internal disarray. Long running cultural debates have been reinforced by arguments over the Iraq War and the policies of the Bush administration, producing deep tensions between Republican social conservatives and moderates. These conflicts burst forth most venomously in the final years of the Bush administration. Many Republicans faulted their own party for failing to follow its own principles, especially on spending and deficits. These tensions between moderates and conservatives are fracturing the party along both ideological and geographic lines.
4. **Transformation of the Philadelphia Suburbs** - Southeast Pennsylvania and the neighboring Lehigh Valley were historically home to the lion's share of the state's moderate Republicans. Early in this decade, moderate Republicans began a slow migration to the Democratic Party, a migration that became a stampede by the end of the Bush years. The dramatic shift in voter registration and voting habits has redefined Pennsylvania politics, making the Philly suburbs the most important political battleground in the state. In recent years Democrats have welcomed as many as 200,000 Republican Party switchers to their ranks. This mass migration has helped the Democrats take command of voter registration in Bucks, Montgomery, and Dauphin counties, once considered impregnable electoral citadels for the GOP.
5. **Rendell and His Impact on Democrat Success** - Rarely does a single politician so mark his time that one can look to his legacy to explain broad political transformation. But Ed Rendell does so. He was wildly popular in the Republican Philadelphia suburbs during his eight-year tenure as mayor. Later he would rack up huge majorities among those suburban voters in his two statewide races for governor - first as the recipient of Republican cross over voting and then in getting Republicans to convert permanently to the Democratic Party. While Rendell alone is not responsible for the Republican conversions, the Democrats emergence as the dominant party in Pennsylvania cannot be imagined without him and the impact he has had on state politics.

Can the GOP recover? Undoubtedly!

Will it recover? That's less certain.

The party still holds onto much of its base in central Pennsylvania. And pockets of old "Reagan Democrats" still survive in the southwestern part of the state. Then too Republicans continue to hold the state Senate - a significant locus of power in Pennsylvania.

But these loyal outposts are not likely to be enough to outweigh the surging Democratic support in eastern Pennsylvania. What state Republicans most lack is a coherent message that galvanizes Pennsylvanians deeply concerned about the state's economic challenges. The party still has another time or two at bat, but time may be running out for them. Indeed, the next two election cycles - governor in 2010 and president in 2012 - augur as the most important series of Pennsylvania elections since the New Deal years.

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