Governors Matter
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An impertinent question occupies the mind as we brace for the final two frenzied months of Pennsylvania's gubernatorial campaign -- a campaign that is expected to collectively cost in excess of $50 million, virtually dominate statewide media into November, and drive us all a little crazy with at least a gazillion radio and TV commercials.

Is this kind of campaign really all that important? Does it really matter? Is the next governor, Mike Fisher or Ed Rendell, really going to matter all that much?

The short answer here is yes; it is really important, and yes, the next governor will matter. The long answer is a little more complicated. How much it matters will be determined by how well the next governor uses the powers of the office. And history suggests that it is very hard to predict how the power of the office will be used.

Some background is helpful. Some of the reasons a governor matters derives from the office itself -- what political scientists refer to as the "institutional" factors, and some come from the personal characteristics of a specific governor or the time in which he or she serves. The latter are often called "personal" factors.

Institutional powers are the formal ones. They are found in state constitutions and statutes, and include items such as a governor's appointment, budget, and legislative powers, including the veto. In Pennsylvania, the governor's institutional powers are not regal in nature but they are awesome. In only a handful of other states, for example, New York, New Jersey and Ohio, do the institutional powers of governors exceed that of Pennsylvania's.

Consider these significant powers:

APPOINTMENT POWER - A governor's appointment powers illustrate the breadth of institutional power. If extensive they allow the governor to influence policy direction in virtually every area of public life. In many states, however, voters elect education chiefs, public utility commissioners, consumer advocates, civil service boards, and many other officials. But, in Pennsylvania, the governor shares little power with other statewide elected officials. Instead, the Pennsylvania governor appoints (often subject to Senate confirmation) the heads of at least 35 major boards and commissions. Collectively, these agencies have powers -- breathtaking in scope -- over the daily lives of citizens.

LEGISLATIVE POWERS - The legislative and veto powers of Pennsylvania's governor are no less awesome. In highly partisan Pennsylvania, governors expect and get from their party in the legislature the kind of support for their legislative program that would make presidents envious. After a successful gubernatorial election, and an agenda that the new governor translates into an agenda approved by the voters, the legislature moves with dispatch to take up the governor's legislative program.
Not only take up the agenda, but also pass most of it. During his seven-years as governor, Tom Ridge won one legislative victory after another, and of his big items he failed only to get the legislature to approve a school voucher law and to sell the state owned liquor stores. His immediate predecessors were similarly successful.

LINE ITEM VETO AND EXECUTIVE BUDGET - Pennsylvania governors have responsibility for the Commonwealth's budget, meaning in practice they recommend how much the state spends and what it is spent on. In addition, governors have broad veto powers that enhance a governor's influence over both ordinary legislation and appropriation bills.

True enough, the legislature retains customary power over the purse, but veto overrides are as rare as dodo bird sightings. Particularly important is the governor's line item veto. The line item provides the authority to eliminate a budget amount or reduce specific dollar amounts in appropriation bills. It is arguably the governor's single most important power. As a consequence of the line item veto, legislative leaders have to give governors most of what they want, and bargain with him for their own priorities.

If institutional powers were all that mattered, the influence and importance of any particular governor could be reduced to a fairly mechanistic formula. Add up the institutional powers, plug in a walking, talking, breathing elected governor, and you can predict how things will go.

But, alas, political life is rarely so simple. Focusing only on the institutional powers ignores the potent impact of a host of non-institutional or personal factors that determine how powerful a governor in practice turns out to be. Personal factors include ingredients such as approval ratings, electoral success, and personal and leadership style.

The formal or institutional powers frame the possibilities, but the informal or personal powers govern success or failure in realizing those possibilities. A governor's influence cannot rise above the possibilities inherent in the institutional powers - but it can fall considerably short of those possibilities if the personal factors are weak.

These are the major informal factors:

APPROVAL RATING AND POPULARITY - A governor's power is often linked to job performance and approval rating as measured by the polls. Governors who have high ratings are more able to push their policy agenda and otherwise get what they want from other political leaders. Low or declining ratings undercut a governor's influence and encourage challenges and even contempt from other political leaders.

STYLE AND CHARISMA - Governors--like ordinary people--range in personality from deadly dull to perfectly charming. Some, but very few, possess that ineluctable quality of charisma. Generally dynamic personable governors exercise more power and influence while the personality challenged have less. There are exceptions, however. Sometimes dull fits the states political culture better. But in all cases leadership matters, and the willingness to understand how bold and aggressive a leader must be varies from leader to leader.

ELECTORAL MARGINS - The size of electoral victory matters. In general, governors that win comfortably have more clout with interest groups, the media, and legislative leaders. Their electoral "mandate" gives them more legitimacy Those that win narrow majorities or worse only pluralities usually struggle more with their
agendas and exercise less personal power. But there are exceptions, especially when the times dictate a change agenda and/or when one party controls both the governor’s mansion and the legislature.

LEGISLATIVE CONTROL - Which party has it and how solid is it-- are the criteria here. Governors like Ridge with uninterrupted party control in both chambers are enormously advantaged. Governors like Casey who had split control are still often able to forge bi-partisan consensus on key issues. Governors like Shapp who faced united Republican opposition during part of his two terms struggle.

So, the formal institutional powers frame the possibilities, and the informal personal powers govern the extent to which those possibilities are fulfilled. The institutional powers are the ceiling and the personal powers are the floor.

Does it help us to predict which of the gubernatorial candidates will be more successful using the powers of the office to make Pennsylvania better? Probably not! Advocates for each candidate can argue the merits of their respective champion. And there are some interesting arguments to make.

But the truth is that we are not very good at predicting how well or badly someone will perform once elected. Some good candidates make bad governors, and some good governors have not been great candidates. History suggests that we must wait to find out for sure. Let the commercials commence.

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