All Politics Is Local--Except When It Isn't

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All politics is local, the late Tip O’Neill famously remarked. To which must be appended a necessary caveat: except when it isn’t. And it definitely isn’t in 2010. Case in point: Pennsylvania’s ongoing contest for governor and U.S. senator.

The election is certainly being held in Pennsylvania. Any citizen with a TV and a slow mute button can attest to that as both campaigns wage a furious battle of dueling television spots across the state. But while the campaigning is all in the state, little of it is about the state. Instead both races have been thoroughly nationalized with issues, rhetoric, and anger focused laser-like on Washington and Obama.

The Toomey-Sestak U.S. Senate race illustrates vividly just how thoroughly state issues have become an inconvenient afterthought in 2010. Toomey has relentlessly focused his campaign on Obama, repeatedly raising the specter of dreaded liberals taking the country off the cliff, while consistently condemning profligate spending and debt expansion.

He has artfully made Sestak a leading villain in the drama, citing Sestak’s 100 percent support of the Obama agenda, charging that Sestak is “more an Obama Democrat” than Obama himself, and criticizing Sestak’s health care policies and frequent calls for more stimulus spending.

Sestak, swimming against the enormous national tide engulfing him, has tried to make some lemonade from the lemons bequeathed to him. Unable or unwilling to distance himself from the unpopular Obama, he nevertheless clearly understands how toxic Obama has become. Rather than change his politics, however, he has tried to change the subject, styling himself as a populist outsider, more the battle tested former admiral and less the two-term congressman he has been.

But even Sestak, despite the risk, has had to accept the nationalization of the race. Accordingly, he has aimed his guns at Toomey’s Wall Street connections and his onetime advocacy of derivatives. Toomey, according to Sestak, represents the interests of Wall Street, not Main Street. Sestak has also pounded Toomey with still another national issue, arguing that he would privatize social security.

The ideological battle lines formed by this fight are sharply polarized. According to the most recent Franklin & Marshall College Poll, released on September 29th, fully half of Toomey’s voters choose him because they oppose Obama and Democrats in Congress, while slightly more than half of Sestak’s voters support him for precisely the opposite reason—because they support Obama and Democrats in Congress.

To a remarkable extent then, the Pennsylvania U.S. Senate election has become a referendum on Obama and his agenda, with the respective candidates acting as surrogates. Obama is the text, while Toomey and Sestak are very much the subtext.
In the gubernatorial race the nationalizing effect is similar. Gubernatorial races traditionally focus exclusively on state issues and local concerns. Only rarely are they significantly influenced by national trends. Not so this year. Instead the 2010 Pennsylvania governor’s race is playing out in a parallel universe to the U.S. Senate race, with the same hostile environment to spending and deficits as well as to Democrats in general and Obama in particular.

Consequently, both Democrat Dan Onorato and Republican Tom Corbett have staked out de minimis positions on the expansion of state government. Neither supports a general tax hike and both have pledged economies in state government.

Normally gubernatorial elections feature ambitious competing agendas crafted by both Democratic and Republican candidates. But this year nothing even close to big-ticket items is on the table. Big is out and small is in, clearly reflecting national trends and national issues.

Neither candidate is misreading the voter. The Franklin & Marshall College Poll cited earlier showed that a large plurality of voters are most concerned about rising taxes, cutting spending, and reducing outstanding debt. Sensing this mood, both candidates have run as reformers that will oppose tax increases and cut spending.

In this environment the Democrat Onorato struggles. Like U.S. Senate candidate Sestak, he finds the lurking presence of an unloved incumbent dragging down his own support. The job performance of once-popular Rendell rivals that of Obama. It’s an anemic 35 percent positive, a consequence of the recession, compounded by consecutive large budget deficits and Rendell’s persistent call to raise taxes.

Not surprisingly, gubernatorial GOP candidate Corbett has ripped a page right out of Toomey’s campaign plan. He is running against Rendell as much as he is running against Onorato, just as Toomey is running against Obama as much as he is running against Sestak.

Both Republicans are hitching their candidacies to the powerful national trends sweeping the nation.

By early October these trends have become increasing clear. Not so clear, however, are the implications beyond November. Little but gloom and doom appear to await the Democrats. Still, history counsels caution in too quickly consigning Obama and the Democrats to political oblivion.

In 1994, Clinton and his party faced challenges equal to or greater than now. In fact, Democrats endured an electoral carnage in 1994 that saw both houses of Congress swing to the Republicans. But Clinton reacted to that disaster by moving to the political center, sponsoring popular legislation and instituting bipartisan government in Washington. The result: he was reelected overwhelmingly in 1996.

No one is predicting that Obama can do the same. Nevertheless, Americans are wise to be mindful how rare such totally nationalized elections really are and how unpredictable the consequences can be.

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