During Pennsylvania’s last open seat gubernatorial cycle in 1994 some two dozen candidates ran for governor or lieutenant governor. Many were running in their first statewide race. The 2002 field may well have more veterans, but it’s likely that some candidates will be circling the statewide track for the first time. That will certainly be true for the lieutenant governor candidates.

These rookies actually do pretty well in open seat races. A fellow by the name of Tom Ridge was one of them in 1994, as was his running mate Mark Schweiker. Ditto Tom Foley who won the Democratic primary for lieutenant governor in 1994. Earlier open seat cycles in 1986 and 1978 likewise produced several winners among candidates running statewide for the initial time. In 1978, for example, Dick Thornburgh won the Republican gubernatorial nomination and the general election his first time out, as did his running mate Bill Scranton III. But win or lose, what will these first timers remember about political Pennsylvania when it’s over? What will they learn? What could the grizzled old vets of political battles past tell them about the way it really is – running statewide in Pennsylvania?

Probably no two candidates (or no two consultants for that matter) would answer these questions exactly the same. But with apologies to David Letterman, here’s one top ten list of what’s important to know about electoral politics in Pennsylvania.

#10. EXPECT TO BE UNDERWHELMING: Pennsylvania voters as a whole are likely to be underwhelmed by you and your candidacy. Nothing personal you understand, but government and politics occupy peripheral space for most state voters. Knowledge levels about public affairs are low and interest in public policy is episodic. Voting turnout rates reflects the disinterest: 25 percent and lower for primaries, 50 percent and lower in general elections. To you, your candidacy and ideas are paramount, but to the average voter yesterday’s ball scores or tonight’s TV schedule are much more important.

#9. BEWARE THE CURSE OF PHILADELPHIA: Anti-Philadelphia sentiment is a stock element of statewide electoral politics. For “upstate” politicians, it is popular to run against Philly and all that it represents. What it represents to many is a corrupt political machine of big city liberals, scheming to steal and spend taxpayer money—Sodom and Gomorrah on the Delaware. The favor is returned by Philadelphians who see upstate as a nest of parochial anti-urban, gun toting rubes – Bubba country north. The political arithmetic here puts Philadelphia candidates running statewide at a severe disadvantage. It’s been 40 years (1962) since a Philadelphian was even nominated to run for governor, and nearly 100 years (1906) since one won the office.

#8 DON’T BE A REFORMER: Change sells, but reform doesn’t. To the average state voter, a change of officeholders or political parties – or even “changing the way things are done in Harrisburg”-can sound good. But that same voter cools quickly if the change proposal becomes institutional as in “local tax reform,” or “judicial merit reform,” or “campaign finance reform.” Pennsylvania voters are cynical of reform and tend to be suspicious of it and negative toward it. As a candidate you may well think state institutions could use some reform. Keep it to yourself.
#7. CORRUPTION IS FORGOTTEN, BUT NOT GONE: Corruption is something of a paradox in Pennsylvania. Religion and morality themes have long played roles in state politics; yet, corruption is an old tradition. It's spirit was captured pithily by political boss Simon Cameron who remarked famously that an “honest politician” was one that when bought stayed bought. Macing, which means paying the party for your government job, if not invented in the state was certainly perfected here, and modern day stories of “street money” and “assessments” remind us that all vestiges of political corruption are not gone. Political corruption today is not the norm, but the expectation of it seems deeply rooted in the state’s political culture.

#6. GEOGRAPHY MATTERS: Pennsylvania is a state of enormous size and scope. Almost one in 20 Americans is a Pennsylvanian, about 12 million people in all. Just the physical logistics of running statewide is daunting. The state is spatially immense, running some 300 miles east to west and some 200 miles north to south. The sheer number of municipalities compounds its size--there are over 2400 of them -- and by the multiplicity of state media markets -- there are six of them, including two of the largest (and most expensive) in the nation. If you run for office in Pennsylvania, you run a lot.

#5. URBAN-RURAL CONFLICTS PREVAIL: A political fault line exists between rural and urban Pennsylvania. Despite boasting two urban behemoths, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, the state also has the largest rural population in the country, spread out over 65 counties between Philadelphia and Allegheny. This big city-small town combination has been the source of endless cultural conflicts over issues like abortion, guns, education and welfare. Increasingly growth in the suburbs frames political issues in Pennsylvania. But, the rural-urban still divide defines much that is important about Pennsylvania politics.

#4. KNOW YOUR BASE: Base politics is still important in Pennsylvania. Both major parties maintain their traditional geographic areas of voter support, albeit they are sometimes wobbly. The Republican base is in the Philadelphia suburbs, central Pennsylvania, and the so-called “T,” the geographic expanse running north and south along the Susquehanna and east to west across the northern tier from Ohio to New Jersey. The Democrat base consists of Philadelphia proper, plus Pittsburgh, and large areas of the southwest. The Lehigh Valley and sometimes the northeast are the swing areas in statewide elections. In recent elections Republicans have been much more successful than Democrats at “winning the base,” which largely explains how they have come to dominate state government despite having some 500,000 fewer party registrations.

#3. AVOID IDEOLOGY: Ideology and ideologues are a hard sell in Pennsylvania. True, both abortion and guns have been rending issues. But mostly neither right wing nor left wing zealots do well here, in a state where even third party candidates try to run toward the center. Politics is pragmatic rather than doctrinaire – more concerned with who wins and who loses rather than with great ideas or soaring rhetoric. Run too far to the right or too far to the left, you will certainly lose. Moderates who hide their ideology amidst a plethora of positive policy programs do the best.

#2 WEST IS BEST: Regional cleavages significantly influence the outcome of statewide elections. None of these is more important than the west vs. the east slugfests that regularly are featured in state elections. Historically, economically, culturally, and, to some extent, demographically east and west are distinct areas of the state. These differences play themselves out politically in two key patterns: the tendency for westerners to vote more than easterners in state elections; and the tendency for westerners to disproportionately vote for other westerners over easterners. You don’t have to be from the west to win an election, but it helps a good deal you are.
#1.COMPETITIVENESS IS KEY: Pennsylvania is a competitive two party state, a point that needs to be reinforced in this period of Republican hegemony. Party competitiveness means that for any given election, either party can win. In fact, a high proportion of statewide elections are 53-47 or 55-45 affairs. Landslides are rare, even with popular incumbents running. Count on a close election. Generally it will be.

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