The Pennsylvania Brand Name Game

May 8, 2001

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

Political brand names, like private brand names, are big business in Pennsylvania. In commerce, it’s U.S. Steel, Mellon Bank, Gulf Oil, Mack Truck, H.J. Heinz, York Barbell, Lebanon Bologna, Piper Cub, Crayola Crayon, and Hershey Foods--Pennsylvania name brands all. In politics, it’s Casey, Fisher, Flaherty, Hafer, Rendell, Thornburgh, Scranton, Schweiker, and Specter--Pennsylvania political name brands all

Like commercial name brands, political name brands are brands people recognize, associate with a certain quality, trust to some degree, and prefer over non-name brands. The process is familiar to any shopper. You go to the store looking for bread. On the shelf is a name brand and Brand X. The name brand costs a little more, but you choose it, ostensibly because it’s better, but actually (secretly we all know this) because we recognize the name. The process for political name brands is about the same, except that the average consumer probably spends more time contemplating the bread decision than the average voter does the voting decision.

Name brand politics were not invented in Pennsylvania. The Kennedy and Rockefeller families are recent examples in national politics, and in earlier times, recognizable names included the Adams, Roosevelt and Taft families, among others. Brand name politics actually started later in Pennsylvania than in other states, probably because of the combination of one-party rule and the constitutional restriction on governors seeking reelection (repealed in 1970).

But once started, the state made up for lost time. One has to go no further than the impending gubernatorial election to observe the prominence of political name brands in Pennsylvania.

In 2002, the likely Democratic combatants are State Auditor General Robert P. Casey and Edward G. Rendell, the former mayor of Philadelphia. Now wait a minute. Isn’t this the same cast of characters who sought the Democratic nomination in 1986? Well, yes and no. The same Rendell but not the same Casey. The Casey in 1986 was former Auditor General Robert P. Casey, the father of the Robert P. Casey Jr., the current auditor general. Rendell lost to the elder Casey who went on to become governor, fulfilling a lifelong dream.

The elder Casey, who had served in the state Senate, had run for governor on three previous occasions (1966,1970, and1978) and had been elected auditor general twice, once in 1968 and again in 1972. By the middle of the 1970s, the Casey name was worth its weight in gold as a political commodity.

Valuable enough that in 1976 an obscure Cambria County official, named Robert E. Casey, ran for State Treasurer against the endorsed candidate of the Democratic Party. Spending only $1,000 dollars (a sum not likely to deliver a decent size Philadelphia ward), he coasted to a primary victory and won the general election in the fall. His victory prompted Robert E. to quip:” I took a chance on a Rolls Royce and won.” Robert E. had discovered the power of brand names

The brand name game continued in 1978 gubernatorial politics when fourteen Democrats sought the party’s nomination for lieutenant governor. Leading the pack were some of the party’s rising stars, along with a
Pittsburgh schoolteacher who hawked ice cream as a sideline. The ice cream salesman’s name was Robert P. Casey, the exact namesake of the future governor. Meanwhile the “real” Robert P. Casey was in the throes of his third gubernatorial try. Now the Democratic primary voters had an interesting selection before them—the original brand name Robert P. Casey running for governor and a knock off brand name Robert P. Casey running for lieutenant governor.

In this instance, the counterfeit brand won and the “real” Bob Casey lost. The “real” Bob Casey never forgot the loss or the reason he thought he lost, the evident voter confusion. His 1986 victorious campaign operation was called “The Real Bob Casey Committee,” and with good reason. The new governor finally patented his brand.

The entrance of Bill Scranton III onto the Pennsylvania 2002 political stage illustrates yet another contemporary example of name brand politics. Bill Scranton, the son, should not be confused with Bill Scranton, the father, who served as governor in the 1960s and sought the Republican presidential nomination in 1964. Scranton, the son, with no previous political experience, emerged as the 1978 Republican lieutenant governor victor largely because of voter association with his father’s name. In 1986, the younger Scranton was serving out his tenure as lieutenant governor, and became the Republican candidate for governor.

Wait! There’s more. Scranton’s running mate in 1986 was Mike Fisher, a state senator from Allegheny County. The Scranton ticket lost to, guess who, the “real” Bob Casey, and, in 1996, after losing a bid for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1994, Fisher was elected attorney general. He is one of the current front-runners for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. Scranton, the son, is being courted by a bevy of Republican leaders to enter the 2002 governor’s race.

Still another political name brand is current state Treasurer Barbara Hafer, who won during the 1980s and 1990s four statewide elections. In 1990, she was her party’s nominee for governor, an election she lost to Robert P. Casey. Here we go again. No, she did not lose to the current Auditor General Robert P. Casey Jr., but to his father, the “real” Bob Casey, who was running for his second term.

Still with us? Then consider how brand name politics could play out in the 2002 gubernatorial cycle:

1) Ticket mates in 1986 Scranton and Fisher could run against each other in the Republican primary, giving new meaning to the term “team effort.”

2) Casey, Jr. and Rendell will probably run against each other in the Democratic primary, giving Rendell an opportunity to avenge his earlier loss to Casey, Sr.

3) Should Scranton and Casey win their primary elections, Scranton can redeem himself from his earlier loss to Casey, Sr., by defeating Casey, Jr.

4) Should Hafer and Casey win their primary elections, she can try to avenge her defeat at the hands of the “real” Bob Casey by defeating Casey, Jr.

And so it goes in other political races, as well. It is an unusual election year in which at least one name brand is not running. Last year, for example, a typical Pennsylvania election year, brand names dominated the ballot--
an Eisenhower, a Casey, a Fisher, a Hafer—all appeared on a statewide ballot. Granted, much of this can be confusing enough. Undoubtedly, voters themselves have sometime been confused by it. But name brand candidates also undergird Commonwealth politics with a certain durability and stability. It may take millions to win a statewide election, but nothing trumps the power of a Pennsylvania political brand name.

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 © 2001 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.