

# Pennsylvania's Last Hurrah

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

Is it over? Could the lights be dimming on Pennsylvania's long-playing role as a national electoral battleground?

At first blush, the question seems improbable. Certainly no one doubts the state's importance in this year's presidential election. Its 21 electoral votes make it one of the top prizes in the Electoral College sweepstakes. Moreover, Pennsylvania's role as a presidential battleground state has been a fixture of national politics for decades.

Presidential elections have been fiercely competitive in the Keystone State. Of the past seven, Democrats have won four and Republicans three. In 2004 Pennsylvania was the most visited state by the presidential candidates, and it's among the most visited in 2008. In fact, this year three of the state's TV markets have ranked among the top 20 for candidate spending in the entire country. Given these circumstances it might seem strange to argue that Pennsylvania's exalted status as a battleground state may be ending. Yet that is precisely the case.

Considering just why Pennsylvania has been a battleground state for so long is critical to any understanding of why that might not be the case much longer. One part of the equation is the state's powerhouse Electoral College vote – 21 electoral votes – all cast for the state winner. But there are other states with many more electoral votes: neighboring New York (31); Texas (34); and of course California (55). None of these are competitive states, however, because they are "safe" for one of the two parties – lead pipe, "sure things." It is the prospect of Pennsylvania becoming a sure thing for the Democratic Party that imperils its role as a battleground state in 2012 and beyond.

The most immediate danger to Pennsylvania's battleground state status is the prospect of an Obama victory this year. If Pennsylvania votes Democratic in 2008, it will be five elections in a row Democrats have won the state. A state that votes five times in a row for the same party over almost a quarter century of voting isn't purple anymore.

But a McCain loss in the state, if it occurs, is only the tip of a very large electoral iceberg menacing Republican viability in Pennsylvania. Beyond this election, several significant political trends are coalescing to move the state solidly into the "blue" column. These electoral, demographic, and socioeconomic influences may mark 2008 as the last hurrah for Pennsylvania as a battleground state. Collectively, they threaten the competitive nature of the state and could move it perilously close to tilting decisively into the Democratic column much like neighboring New Jersey.

Three trends bear particular emphasis:

- **Long Term Electoral Trends** – Since 2000 Democrats have won 14 of the 17 statewide governmental and judicial offices contested in the state, ending decisively the Republican domination of the 1990's.

The Democrats now control the governorship, two of the three statewide row offices, two of the statewide appeals courts, one house of the state legislature, one of two US Senate seats, and the congressional delegation. The state GOP has gone from hunter to hunted in less than a decade with little indication that its electoral fortunes will change soon. These electoral trends have been augmented by a spectacular 500,000 Democratic voter registration increase this year – giving the party a 1.2 million registration advantage. Should just half of these new voters turn out, that alone will exceed the Gore and Kerry margins in the state in 2000 and 2004, respectively.

- **Generational Trends** – The 2008 election may be producing a new generation of political leadership analogous to that produced by Kennedy in 1960 and Reagan in 1980. In 1960, the Kennedy movement unleashed an excitement and energy that brought many future activists into politics. These new political leaders became the next generation of Democratic leaders and set the stage for future Democratic success. Similarly, in 1980 the Reagan revolution altered the ideological and political landscape, made conservatism a viable force in American politics, and spawned a new generation of activists and leaders. The Obama campaign has generated excitement and energy comparable to that produced by Kennedy and Reagan. How many of Obama's new-found voters will stay engaged remains to be seen. The Obama campaign, however, has set the groundwork for a party renaissance that could tilt the state Democratic for a political generation.
- **Geographic and Demographic Trends** – Perhaps most ominous for Republicans, the greater Philadelphia suburbs now decide state elections – and those suburbs increasingly are registering and voting for Democrats. These voter-rich Philadelphia and Lehigh Valley communities contain the largest number of swing voters in the state, a substantial number of whom are college educated, culturally moderate women. They are the battleground regions in a battleground state. Indeed, the Democrats success in winning elections in recent years can be traced to their electoral victories in these areas. For most of their modern history, the four huge Philadelphia suburban counties (Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery) were considered rock solid Republican. Now Bucks and Montgomery have more registered Democrats, and the other two are not far behind.

If Pennsylvania does become "safe" for Democrats after the 2008 election, it won't be historically unprecedented. In fact, playing the role of "safe" state is familiar ground for the Keystone State. From the Civil War until the New Deal, Pennsylvania was a reliable vote for GOP presidential candidates. Only in the second half of the 20th century did it become a truly competitive two-party state. And only in the five decades since 1960 has it been a presidential battleground state.

Nevertheless, a solid blue Pennsylvania would constitute a seismic shift across the partisan spectrum – stretching from safe Republican to highly competitive and finally to safe Democrat. Such a shift would have enormous political implications, radically altering future Electoral College maps, thereby making it ever more difficult for the GOP to win national elections. If 2008 is Pennsylvania's last hurrah, it's a hurrah bound to echo loudly across national politics for elections to come.

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