Not Everyone’s Cup of Tea
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Even if one doesn’t buy tea, drink tea, or even like tea, the well-steeped tea leaves from Pennsylvania’s April 24th presidential primary still make for some fascinating reading. Together they vividly portray contemporary currents in state electioneering while portending some dynamic changes in future politics and policy.

Here are five take-aways from the voting. Not all are everyone’s cup of tea, but all are likely to influence Pennsylvania politics long after the November presidential election enters the history books.

**Party endorsements aren’t worth much.**
Governor Corbett and the Republican Party failed to deliver the U. S. Senate nomination to their endorsed candidate Steve Welch, showing once again that endorsements often mean little in modern statewide politics. This is a lesson state Democrats also have painfully learned over and over in past elections. In modern politics, with self-financed candidates, sophisticated media campaigns, and 24 hour news coverage, endorsements only matter if they bring significant financial and organizational resources. Increasingly state parties lack the heft to back up their candidate choices. In the future, party endorsements will certainly play much less of an important role.

**Ideological polarization continues in both parties.**
The focus this time was on the Democratic Party with two powerful “blue dog” conservative congressman going down to defeat at the hands of more liberal opponents. Both Tim Holden, the most senior of Democratic candidates and Pittsburgh area’s Jason Altmire are only the latest casualty of a seemingly inexorable trend to hard-edged ideological politics from both parties. A parallel trend in 2010 produced similar results for the state’s Republican Party, adding five strongly conservative Republicans to the state’s delegation. When the new Congress meets in January 2013, the state’s congressional delegation in Washington will be more polarized along conservative-progressive lines than any time in modern history. Significantly, so is the state legislature in Harrisburg.

**Democrats might finally have figured out how to be competitive for Attorney General.**
Since its inception under the amended state constitution, the office of Attorney General has been held continuously by Republicans. Voters appear to be more comfortable with GOP attorneys general explaining some of the reasons Republicans have dominated the office. But state Democrats have aided and abetted the problem by often failing to nominate AG candidates that appealed to the electorate’s preference for a take-no-prisoners prosecutorial style candidate. Now in nominating Kathleen Kane, an experienced state prosecutor, who can and, in fact, has financed her own campaign, the stage may be set for a hard fought closely contested fight for attorney general this fall. Certainly Democrats seem to have a better shot at winning the office than any time in recent memory. Real competition between the two parties for the office is more important than ever since future attorneys general are more and more likely to continue to be future gubernatorial candidates.
Continuing dominance of legislative incumbents.
Several marquee races resulted in the defeat of five state House legislative incumbents as well as a couple of closer than expected contests. These isolated elections, however, almost all featured unique local conditions. The much bigger picture is the huge number of incumbents that ran without opposition in the primary or face opposition only in the November General Election. Altogether more than 40% of state House members and 20% of state Senate members face no opponents at all this year. Only a miniscule eight percent of senators and 14% of House members faced opposition in the primary. Of those with opponents in the fall, many face only token opposition. We are a long distance from the watershed 2006 anti-incumbency election in which 54 new members were elected. This year neither anger nor antipathy has morphed into a serious anti-incumbency fervor. The 95% reelection rate for incumbents of past years may not be returning yet, but we are far from enjoying truly competitive legislative elections in Pennsylvania.

A curious combination of apathy amid continuing anger prevails among voters.
Even as voters continue to fulminate at their politicians and their policies, turnout Tuesday hovered in the low 20% range. Part of the problem with turnout is the dearth of competition in many state races. Voters simply don’t have enough choices. In the recent primary only four senators and 28 House members had any challengers. Even the two incumbent congressional losses were the result of decennial redistricting rather than genuine competition. We face an interesting moment in history--low turnout despite the anger and the angst--how does that work for the fall? Democrats show slightly more enthusiasm than Republicans in the national polls, but neither party’s voters seem deeply motivated. Will voters also just stay home in the fall as they did in the spring? An angry voter with an agenda for change is a positive thing; an angry voter, alienated from participation in the system, is a dangerous thing.

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