What It All Means
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Normally we should be skeptical of efforts to predict statewide or national trends from off-year election results; in fact, there is no hard evidence that off-year elections mean anything in particular--that voters say anything specific, or that there is any special message being sent. Off-year elections are quintessentially about local issues and personalities; only rarely can they be used to interpret broader trends or forecast future elections.

But rare is not ever--and this year’s Pennsylvania election may be the rare exception to the rule that off year elections don’t tell us much. Indeed, in the aftermath of this off-year election a veritable prairie fire burns across two major regions, South Central and South Western Pennsylvania. The ousting of Justice Russell Nigro and the near ousting of Sandra Shultz Newman has shaken the political establishment to its roots.

Apparent as well in election results was an anti-incumbent sentiment, evident in some counties and municipalities: several local officials seeking reelection unexpectedly lost or were in close elections in races where incumbents were expected to win handily; a few trial court judges up for retention in prairie fire counties were in surprisingly close retention elections, in cases where no discernable reason other than voter discontent with incumbents could possibly explain the closeness of the retention.

There is little mystery about why voters are upset. It is now clear that the state legislature’s notorious hike of its own salaries and the salaries of other state officials has ignited a firestorm of popular protest--a firestorm that has now pushed the legislature to a reversal unmatched in modern Pennsylvania history--the repeal of the pay hike by a stunning 248 out of 253 combined votes in both legislative chambers.

More ominously, perhaps, voter outrage has spawned a statewide reform movement with two broad goals that go far beyond the limited goal of repealing the pay hike. The first is to remove all incumbents from the legislature and the second to bring about permanent reform in the way Pennsylvania government conducts its affairs. Detailed components of the reform agenda have not yet congealed, but reducing the size of the legislature, term limits, proposals for direct citizen involvement in the passage of state legislation, and even the possibility of a constitutional convention have been mentioned.

It seems clear that voters--at least voters in some parts of the state--are in a state of high dudgeon and ready to extend their antipathy beyond one election and a couple of incumbent judges. Reformers are preparing for all out war against legislative incumbents.

The key political questions now are: can the momentum be sustained into 2006 and can the enormous political energy generated in this off-year election be continued into next year’s primary and general elections, during which all 203 members in the House, half the Senate, and a governor are to be elected? The issue here is not merely whether the passions and angst will survive the winter, nor even whether voters will still remember by next spring or fall.
If remembering was all that mattered, the *Pennsylvania Revolution of 2006* would be assured--many legislators would be advised to start looking for other work, and Harrisburg moving vans could anticipate some brisk business. But alas for the reformers it is not that simple. To win in 2006, reformers must organize and fund campaigns against incumbents--incumbents with awesome advantages in place, including fundraising, organization and experience. These advantages have produced reelection rates the past decade over 95%. By any measure, reformers have a daunting task before them.

Then, too, reformers must expand their geographic base of support considerably. It’s possible to argue that the low turnout in the 2005 election, just 16-percent of the state’s 9.6 million voters voted in the fall election, produced an atypical voter turnout. Certainly the protest movement has not reached substantial portions of the state. In Southeastern Pennsylvania, for example, Nigro and Newman won handily, and little pressure exists there to either reform legislative practice or chuck out incumbents.

Nor are incumbents going to remain sitting ducks. Legislative strategists have ample opportunities to change the conversation by passing popular legislation --namely property tax relief, a minimum wage hike, spending caps on budget appropriations, and an income tax reduction.

So, significant challenges continue for the reformers and their movement: 2005 was the equivalent of spring training in the grapefruit league. The reformers looked very impressive, but 2006 will take them into the big leagues, against many more opponents, against much tougher, battle hardened, well-financed adversaries, and against a political establishment that has stacked the deck against them shamelessly for years. Huge incumbent fundraising advantages, aided and abetted by decades of gerrymandering, and compounded by a maze of incumbent protection election laws have atrophied meaningful competition in electoral politics.

Nor are the challenges faced new ones. As we observed back in 2002 when discussing the dearth of political competition in Pennsylvania:

In political life competition is rapidly disappearing; indeed, has disappeared in many jurisdictions--and our elected officials regularly exploit opportunities to limit it further…. Fewer and fewer state legislative and congressional districts feature serious competition between the Republican and Democratic parties. Either one party or the other is so dominant the other has virtually no chance to win. Typically, reelection rates for both the state legislature and the state's congressional delegation push 98 percent … If American business stifled competition the way American politicians have, there would be rioting in the streets across the country. But the collective public reaction to the ongoing strangulation of political competition seems to be a collective ho hum.

Perhaps, it is this legendary Pennsylvania apathy and resistance to change, this vast sense of inertia, this visceral ho hum about politics and policy, that the reformers must reverse most of all. Historically, nothing has stifled reform efforts in the Keystone State more than the dogged, relentless, and unending ennui registered by state voters when asked to vote for change.

Fall 2005 was a great exception to that historical record of apathy and indifference--at least as measured by the retention vote. Change was on the ballot in 2005, and a majority voted for it in at least one critical judicial retention election. Passivity did not prevail; lassitude was surmounted; and some voter detachment was overcome.
But next year Pennsylvanians are going to have a chance to vote for change again. That, more than anything, is what election 2005 meant--change and reform are going to remain on the ballot. In 2005, we found out that there were more voters prepared to support change than almost anyone believed. In 2006, we are going to find out just how many that is.

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