May 16th
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The number one reason leaders in the Pennsylvania legislature leave office is retirement. This fact is unremarkable enough, but becomes more interesting if one looks at the number two, three, and four reasons: number two is death; number three is resignation after legal problems; and number four--and last--is defeat at the polls.

In fact, the electoral defeat of a legislative leader is the rarest of political events. Leaders are literally more likely to die or go to jail than be defeated. The last leader toppled in an election was way back in 1964 when long time President Pro Tem and party boss Harvey Taylor was beaten in a Republican Party primary.

All of this institutional lore has considerable contemporary relevance as we head toward the May 16th primary election day in Pennsylvania--for in this election not one or even two, but three legislative leaders are in the voters’ crosshairs, confronting challengers who may end their legislative careers prematurely. The three marquee races include: Senate President Pro Tem Robert Jubelirer (R); Senate Majority Leader Chip Brightbill (R); and Democratic Whip Mike Veon.

Pennsylvania’s emerging reform movement led by Russ Diamond’s Clean Sweep, Tim Pott’s Democracy Rising, and Gene Stilip’s energetic activism are in large part responsible for these challenges. Already the reformers have scored some early triumphs. Spectacularly successful in defeating an incumbent Supreme Court justice last November, they have also generated an impressive agenda of broad based reforms, and produced a horde of challengers willing to take on entrenched incumbents.

But they have been less successful at electoral organization; many of the original 100 challengers have failed to properly file their nominating petitions, and others have not waged vigorous campaigns. At the moment only about 40 primary challengers from Clean Sweep remain active approaching the May 16 primary. Moreover, internal dissent within Clean Sweep has raised questions about its long-term viability.

So May 16th looms as critical for the reformers. They need to defeat a sufficient number of incumbent legislators to sustain their momentum--and success is increasingly defined as bagging some of the legislative leadership seeking re-nomination.

Just why the protest groups have targeted the legislative leadership deserves some brief discussion. Pennsylvania’s legislature is one of the most leadership-dominated in the nation. The party caucus leaders in Pennsylvania run the show. They influence key committees, control the legislative agenda, administer large budgets, and raise and distribute campaign money. And they were the architects of the infamous pay raise. Perhaps most important, the leaders every ten years redraw the legislative district boundaries.

So the legislative leadership symbolizes the legislature itself, indeed, embodies the institution they so thoroughly dominate. Those who would change the legislature must first change the leadership.
But how many leaders—or for that matter, rank and file members—need to lose for the results to have political consequences? How many incumbents have to be causalities to make the election meaningful? Stating it this way is a little callous, but close to the political calculus that will be made after the election. Different people will do the math differently, but the following four scenarios cover the possibilities:

- **A BITTER END ELECTION**—If no leaders lose and few incumbents are defeated, the game is just about up for the reform movement and its agenda. True, brave words will try to make the best of it, but the great Pennsylvania voter revolution will have died an inglorious early death. If incumbents are overwhelmingly re-nominated, then the reform movement is dead. The legislature will have no incentive to change the current culture if voters show no inclination to change the legislature.

- **A CRYPTIC ELECTION**—Another possibility is a muddied picture with a few incumbents losing and maybe one leader. If this happens, there will be a tendency to rationalize the losses as local in nature, and unconnected to voter anger or reform movements. That will leave the reform movement in painful uncertainty. Reformers will say the movement lives, but incumbents will view the reform movement as dead.

- **A CONDITIONAL ELECTION**—A third possibility would occur if either a large number of incumbents lose or if two or more leaders lose; then, reform of some sort becomes likely. Certainly the reform movement would continue. A tipping point toward reform might be reached with as few as 40 new members, and certainly 50 would do so. That is not unreasonable since 30 new members are now guaranteed owing to retirements—27 in the House and three in the Senate.

- **A CONCLUSIVE ELECTION**—A final scenario has a substantial number of incumbent legislators losing while several of its leaders are beaten; in this case the floodgates may well open for reform. At least some of the reform agenda promulgated by the protesters, from lobbyist registration to campaign finance reform, will have some prospect of being enacted.

At this point it is not possible to forecast which of these electoral scenarios will materialize, but it is abundantly clear that it matters a great deal. The consequences transcend a single election or even the legislature itself. What happens May 16th is going to affect state politics for a long time.

The gubernatorial election will certainly be affected. The erstwhile leader of Clean Sweep, Russ Diamond, is now running for governor and, though he is not likely to win, May 16th might well determine whether he can bring the reform agenda into the gubernatorial election.

If a number of leaders fall, then Diamond will have legitimacy and his agenda, along with the more comprehensive reform agenda of Tim Potts’ Democracy Rising, will inevitably be part of the gubernatorial campaign. However, if neither leaders nor rank and file incumbents fall in impressive numbers, the reform movement will be in tatters—and unlikely to have salience in the gubernatorial election.

The impending election is both high stakes and high drama. It is a crucial fork in the road for Pennsylvania, and no matter which fork is taken, it will be a momentous turn. Down one path is change and reform—down the other is stability and continuity. Historically, Pennsylvanians forced to choose have chosen stability and continuity over change and reform—and they may again. But the real possibility that a different verdict will be rendered this time has made May 16th prospectively one of the most important elections in modern Pennsylvania history.