Corbett vs. Onorato: A Scheduled 15 Rounder
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Pennsylvania, in the lingo of political science, is a "competitive two-party state." In plain English, it's a state where elections are frequently close, usually hard fought, and often hard to forecast.

Lately, however, calling Pennsylvania competitive seems a stretch. Certainly recent presidential elections haven't been competitive, with Democrats capturing each of them since 1988. Furthermore, state Republicans have been taking it on the chin, losing the last two gubernatorial races, the last U.S Senate race, and two of three statewide offices. And Democratic Party registration currently dwarfs GOP registration by 1.2 million voters.

But shifts of fortune from one party to the other and back regularly occur in the Keystone State. Indeed, less than a decade ago state Republicans controlled virtually the entire apparatus of state government. And the decade before that it was Democrats in the ascendancy.

So being a competitive two-party state doesn't simply mean that the parties regularly share political control. In fact, just the opposite is more common-with one party dominant for a period only to fall from power and be replaced by the other party for a period. In Pennsylvania, ins and outs is more than a political cliché. It's a fact of life that describes much of modern state politics and elections.

This digression into the warp and woof of state politics has a purpose. Indeed, it raises a crucial if not obvious question. How competitive will this year's gubernatorial race be? Who is likely to prevail in the first "open seat" governor's election since 2002?

The conventional wisdom now maintains that the Republican nominee, Attorney General Tom Corbett, is the clear favorite to defeat his Democratic opponent Dan Onorato, the Allegheny County Executive.

Currently, Corbett holds a 14-point lead in the RealClearPolitics index of public polls. He has shown the ability to raise hefty amounts of campaign cash, achieved much higher visibility than his opponent, and moves forward with a reasonably united Republican Party.

Onorato, on the other hand, survived a more difficult primary, remains less well known outside of his political base in the Southwestern part of the state, and must replenish an exhausted campaign treasury. Furthermore, he lacks the experience of Corbett, who has successfully negotiated two statewide campaigns-including 2008, swimming upstream against Obama's 10-point victory in the state.

And the clincher for many: Corbett is leading the GOP in "their year." National polls and sentiment heavily favor Republican candidates in a midterm election that looks dismal for incumbent Democrats. Aggravating these national trends is Pennsylvania's legendary eight-year cycle, now looming ominously for state Democrats. Every eight years since 1954 the parties have exchanged control of the governorship. In 2010, it predicts that Republicans will win.
Making bad even worse, state Democrats will likely pay a political price for controlling the governorship during the recession—bringing with it late budgets and spiraling deficits.

With these many pluses one might well ask: is there any way Corbett can lose?

There might be. But Corbett himself will have to help, while Onorato can't afford major mistakes.

Already Corbett has treaded perilously close to major campaign bobby-traps. Doubtless he is the highest profile attorney general in modern state history. His prosecutions of 25 lawmakers, former lawmakers, and legislative staffers for public corruption have given him an enviable visibility.

Yet, the prosecutions have not been controversy free. His critics first argued that he was selectively charging Democrats to enhance his gubernatorial prospects. Then after he filed charges against members of his own party, he faced pressure to resign from office while pursuing the governorship. Next he participated in a much-criticized lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the just-enacted national health care law. Perhaps most controversial was his subpoena requests for the names of the operators of two websites critical of his prosecutorial activities. This latter miscue brought widespread condemnation characterizing him as an enemy of free speech.

Meanwhile, Onorato will present no easy target. He has matured as a campaigner, seasoned somewhat by the long Democratic primary. Moreover, he will have the vigorous support of Governor Rendell and his prolific group of fundraisers.

Just as important, Onorato appears to now have a campaign narrative to tell. In 2002 Rendell sold himself to skeptical voters with a compelling story of Philadelphia's revival. It was a stirring tale of Rendell's leadership in bringing the city back from fiscal insolvency, the resurgence of center city, and renewed optimism bringing suburbanites back to the city in droves. Onorato has updated the Rendell playbook with an Allegheny County story of structural reform, economic growth, and fiscal stability. He argues that he has managed the state's second largest municipality, and that experience makes him far more qualified to be the next governor than his opponent.

Onorato may also be helped by a regional effect in state elections. Western Pennsylvanians tend to vote for other western Pennsylvanians—the so-called "friends and neighbors effect." And Onorato's more of a friend and neighbor there than Corbett, even though both call Allegheny County home.

Finally, the national political environment, currently hostile to Democrats, could moderate by November. The head to head between Corbett and Onorato will certainly be influenced by the state of the economy heading into the fall.

The bottom line for the 2010 gubernatorial: Corbett is probably not as strong as he looks while Onorato is not as vulnerable as he appears. Still, the Democrat Onorato carries some significant handicaps into the race. Right now it looks like it's Corbett's to lose. Nevertheless, assuming that can't happen is assuming too much. Ultimately this one is likely to go the full 15 rounds.
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