Live and Learn

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Learning theorists tell us that we learn more from the mistakes we make than we do from the things we get right. Adverse learning is actually more efficient learning because we get feedback when things go wrong. Learning the "hard way" may actually be the easy way.

If that's true, the 2002 gubernatorial primary should be charging us all continuing education tuition fees. A few more similar elections and we will all become geniuses. In the meantime, here's a short list of what we have learned (or relearned) from this one.

THE NEW DEAL COALITION HAS FINALLY UNRAVELED IN PENNSYLVANIA. The old issues aren't working any more in Pennsylvania. Voters want to talk about education and property taxes--not minimum wage laws or circuit breakers. And the old constituencies don't seem to be working either. Bob Casey lost with the support of labor and older voters, gun advocates and westerners--the traditional Democratic constituencies thought necessary to win a Democratic primary. Ed Rendell won with younger voters, gun control advocates, African-Americans, suburbanites and easterners--constituencies traditionally most often on the losing side.

The New Deal came late to Pennsylvania, but it stayed longer here than almost anywhere else. Historians looking for a date to fix its final demise in the Keystone State could do worse than May 21, 2002.

THE PENNSYLVANIA DEMOCRATS STILL CAN'T DELIVER ON AN ENDORSEMENT. O.K., the state Democratic Party endorsement is not exactly the kiss of death it has been portrayed to be--but it's not exactly worth having either. Ironically, Casey himself didn't have it in 1996 when he first ran and won as a candidate for Auditor General. In losing on Tuesday, he now joins a long line of Democratic candidates who have lost primaries in spite of being endorsed by the party--the list includes Gov. Robert Casey himself, who lost two primaries to Milton Shapp after being endorsed by his party.

Compare this to the state GOP. When was the last time an endorsed Republican candidate for a major office lost the party primary? In fact, it is rare. Not since 1980, when Arlen Specter beat Bud Haabestad to win a U.S. Senate nomination, has an endorsed candidate lost.

The GOP success with endorsements goes part way to explain why Republicans so thoroughly dominate state government despite minority status among registered voters. It may be time for state Democrats to either start endorsing candidates who can actually win--or just stop making party endorsements altogether.

THE ONCE VAUNTED GUN LOBBY SEEMS TO BE LOSING ITS GRIP. First, Al Gore sneaks through in 2000. Now it's Rendell--the very archfiend of gun control. Pennsylvania may have the second largest number of NRA members, but most of them are either holed up in the Republican Party or were out turkey hunting on primary day. The numbers tell the fuller story. In the last Millersville University Keystone Poll, Rendell was actually leading (40 to 29) among those strongly opposed to gun control--and tied (33 to 33) among those moderately opposed to gun control. At this rate, the gun lobby is going to be in a close contest with the
Pennsylvania Democratic Party for the Permanent Paper Tiger Award in the category of influencing the outcome of elections.

DON’T UPSET THE PRESS CORPS: THEY ARE NICE, BUT THEY DO BITE. Perhaps the Casey campaign didn't really make as many mistakes as the pundits think during the campaign. But the mistakes they made were doosies. Near the top of the list was the "Pennsylvania Rose Garden Strategy" in which candidate Casey was kept at arms length from the press, and for that matter, until the waning days of the campaign, from the voters. When you start avoiding people, those people begin to ask awkward questions, like "what is he afraid of?" or worse, "who is he afraid of?" If those people you are avoiding happen to be journalists covering a campaign, they not only ask awkward questions, they also tend to answer those questions. And the answers are rarely salutary for your side. That happened to the Casey campaign. It was a self-inflicted wound, and one of the more grievous they suffered.

IT IS TIME TO RETIRE SOME OLD CAMPAIGN CLICHÉS. Remember this one: "Philadelphians don't win races for Pennsylvania governor." True, there is the small matter of wrapping up the General Election. But Rendell's performance was impressive. He won or came close in every area of the state except Casey's home turf. Most significant of all--there was little evidence that voters were voting against him because he was from Philly. Scratch one cliché.

And here is another: "Image trumps substance every time." Well, it didn't this time. Bob Casey may be a guy of substance, but he did not run a campaign based on substance. Rendell did. He talked about issues, put forth programs, and campaigned virtually everywhere in the state. The voters clearly responded. They liked it. They rewarded it. Scratch another cliché.

And one more: "Every candidate needs negative ads--the voters only say they don't like them, but then they vote for the candidate who uses them." Well, not this time. If there was a single reason that Casey lost, it was the lack of a clear positive message--in combination with a relentless string of negative ads against Rendell. Widely circulated polling numbers provide incontrovertible evidence that Casey's negatives failed to hurt Rendell significantly. And there is compelling evidence that they, in fact, boomeranged on his candidacy. About four in ten voters viewed the Casey negative commercials as unfair, which made Casey less popular with the voters. New cliché: voters hate unfair negative ads and they vote against candidates using them.

AIR WARS BEAT GROUND WARS MOST OF THE TIME. Most consultants believe a campaign needs a strategic balance between air forces (electronic advertising) and ground forces (phone banks, canvassers, and other workers). But what if you have to make tough choices. Which is more important?

Clearly, side with an air war. The Rendell campaign won with modest ground forces and a superior air campaign. Casey was the mirror opposite--a solid ground force with a substantial but ineffective advertising campaign. Moreover, this was not exactly the first time a superior ad campaign won out. The first time was back in 1966 when insurgent Milton Shapp bought himself a three million dollar ad campaign and showed the organization Democrats what TV was all about. His victim that year: Bob Casey Sr. Hmmm!

And a final lesson to ponder as we settle in for the long summer interregnum before the fall campaign begins in earnest.
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR. Republican strategists originally wanted a crack at Rendell in the fall. Well, now they have it, but they may wish they didn't. Yes, Rendell has vulnerabilities in a general election. And yes, there are still relevant reasons why no Philadelphian has been elected governor for almost a century. But Rendell is a superb battle tested candidate who will be well funded. Moreover, he possesses the most rare of qualities among Pennsylvania polls—he has charisma. Think Heinz, think Scranton, think Pinchot. But you can probably stop there. Charisma sightings in Keystone State politics are about a once-a-generation phenomenon. When they do occur, they are always a major wild card. Rendell is all of that.

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