More than a century ago the English observer Lord Bryce, in his masterful The American Commonwealth, wrote a chapter entitled “Why Great Men are not Chosen President.” Bryce was commenting on the shortcomings of the American political system in the late 19th century, but he could have been writing about Pennsylvania’s long history of mediocrity in producing presidential candidates.

In fact, the dismal record of Pennsylvania in producing presidential candidates is one of the enduring riddles of American political history. Compared to other large neighboring states like Virginia (eight Presidents), New York (four Presidents) or Ohio (seven Presidents), we are pikers. Only one president, James Buchanan, elected in 1856, was born in Pennsylvanian. One has to go back 120 years to find the last time that a Pennsylvanian was even nominated by a major party; then in 1880 the Democrats nominated Winfield Scott Hancock, one of the heroes of the battle of Gettysburg.

In modern history, Pennsylvania’s most serious presidential bid was made in 1964, when Governor William Scranton challenged Barry Goldwater for the Republican nomination. Scranton became Pennsylvania’s “favorite son” during the April 1964 primary when he captured more than 200,000 Pennsylvania write-in votes. After Pennsylvania, the stop Goldwater movement picked up steam for a while, but was derailed when Senator Goldwater won the California primary. Still, Scranton had the support of former president Dwight Eisenhower, who pushed for an open Republican convention, and, despite a poor performance on national television; Scranton declared his formal candidacy for the presidency. The Republican convention, however, was all Goldwater, and Scranton could manage only 214 delegate votes to Goldwater’s 883. Goldwater won on the first ballot.

Since Scranton’s time Pennsylvania has been mostly a footnote on the roster of serious presidential candidates. Two later candidacies by Governor Milton J. Shapp and current U.S. Senator Arlen Specter were noted mostly for their lack of success. Despite almost six years of rampant corruption within his administration, Milton Shapp ran for the presidency in 1976, whereupon he received 6,000 fewer votes than “No Preference” in the Florida primary. He didn’t exactly light up the tote board in Massachusetts either, winning two percent of the popular vote. Many throughout the nation thought the Shapp candidacy little more than a joke. The Shapp campaign lasted 89 days and the nicest comment made about him was the reference in the Pittsburgh Post Gazette to Shapp as a 1976 version of Harold Stassen.

Contemporaries have been treated to the candidacy of Arlen Specter in 1996, a candidacy in which the candidate withdrew before the first vote was cast in the primary contest. Specter’s candidacy seemed less inclined to appeal to voters and more as a wake up call to his party’s moderates. In the end, neither responded favorably, and Specter’s candidacy collapsed before it had begun.

No one is quite sure why Pennsylvania, the fifth most populous state, and a state of considerable political significance, doesn’t produce more presidential timber. One prevailing theory is that the political culture of the state explains the paucity of presidential candidates. According to this view, Keystone State politicians are
schooled in compromise, bargaining, and deal making—maybe not the kind of training that forges national leaders. Unquestionably three historical factors are also important in explaining the lack of success by Pennsylvania candidates seeking the presidency:

Presidential candidates came from competitive states, not one-party states. For most of the state’s history since the Civil War, Pennsylvania was so solidly a one-party, (meaning Republican), state that national political leaders had no reason to nominate Pennsylvanians for the presidency. The Republicans would win no matter whom they nominated and the Democrats would lose no matter whom they nominated.

Similarly, until recent times, Pennsylvania political leaders were mostly interested in winning elective office, and dominating state government. They had little interest in national issues other than those that would benefit Pennsylvania’s economic future. Put another way, leaders craved patronage, ate at the pork barrel, and ran their political machines, leaving little time for pursuit of national policy issues. Most of the state’s top leaders, in fact, had no desire to become national leaders.

Localism and provincialism pervade Pennsylvania’s political history. Pennsylvania politicos have been mired in provincial politics to an extent virtually unmatched by any political environment elsewhere in the nation. Demographically, the state has been a hodgepodge of ethnic, cultural, and religious groups, held together politically by some of the most sophisticated urban and rural political machines to be found anywhere in the country. Statewide political leaders spent most of their waking hours dealing the courthouse gangs that ran the politics of the state’s 67 counties, leaving little time for the big national issues of the day.

But the past may not be prologue for Pennsylvania. For starters the state is now politically competitive. Neither national party can take Pennsylvania’s electoral vote for granted. And politics are cleaner. Patronage is mostly a practice of the past, while the Court House Gangs are gone or mere shells of their former selves. In the congressional delegation and in the state legislature, a new breed of politician is emerging, and statewide leaders increasingly get respect nationally. Former Governor Dick Thornburgh was considered as a running mate for George Bush, the elder. More recently, Tom Ridge has emerged as a serious national leader who twice has been a possible vice presidential candidate of his party. In the Senate, Senator Rick Santorum is his party’s third ranking leader and barely masks his presidential ambitions.

In life President James Buchanan has been portrayed as a lonely man. But in Pennsylvania history he may have some company before long.

-------------

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2001 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.