Irony abounds for Pennsylvania’s upcoming April 24 Republican presidential primary. The greatest perhaps is that Rick Santorum, a former state politician brutally dumped by voters just six years ago, returns to the state as the first Pennsylvanian in half a century to contest seriously the presidency. Moreover, notwithstanding his defeat of historic proportions in 2006, he seems likely to win the Pennsylvania contest.

The ironies don’t stop there. Even though Pennsylvania possesses immense national political importance, it has compiled perhaps the most anemic record of any major state in producing either presidents or presidential candidates. The state’s sole president was James Buchanan back in 1856, and the last Pennsylvanian considered a serious candidate for the presidency was William Scranton in 1964.

Yet in 2012, there will not be just one or even two Pennsylvanians on the ballot, but three. Santorum, although born in Virginia, represented Pennsylvania in Congress for 16 years; Ron Paul was born in western Pennsylvania; and Newt Gingrich was born in central Pennsylvania.

Perhaps the final irony is that the Pennsylvania primary—despite the trio of “Pennsylvania candidates”—will matter little to the outcome of the Republican nomination contest. Pennsylvania has an impressive 59 delegates at stake on April 24, but the state cannot be decisive in delivering the magic 1,144 necessary to nominate a candidate. That’s because the GOP battle has now become a knockdown, drag-out fight for delegates certain to go on regardless of the Pennsylvania winner.

All of this raises an interesting question: has Pennsylvania ever been important in influencing a presidential nomination?

Actually the answer is, yes. Many times in the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, state political powerbrokers played major behind-the-scenes roles in selecting the nominees of both parties. But in modern times, especially since the emergence of meaningful primaries and caucuses, Pennsylvania’s role in party nominations has been modest.

In fact Pennsylvania’s late-April primary has meant that both party nominations have been clinched by the time Pennsylvania voted, the notable exception being the Obama/Clinton slugfest in 2008. Consequently there have been only two Republican nomination contests in the state in the past 40 years that had more than passing interest.

The first was in 1976 when Ronald Reagan opposed Gerald Ford. By the Pennsylvania primary, Ford was the front runner but by no means had the nomination wrapped up. The contest between Ford and Reagan had descended into a street brawl.
Ford had wrapped up the state’s Republican establishment, including U.S. senators, 10 of 13 Republican congressmen, and virtually the entire cadre of elected officials. Reagan countered by shocking the nation when he broke with tradition and named a surprise running mate before the national convention. That running mate was Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Richard Schweiker. Schweiker, who had stunningly high liberal and labor group ratings, drew the ire of many conservatives who reacted with alarm and dismay.

Reagan’s bold gamble flopped miserably as GOP leaders across the state overwhelmingly rejected the Schweiker ploy. Reagan only made it worse by failing to campaign in Pennsylvania, assuring the state’s delegation would solidly support Ford. In the end, Pennsylvania cast its convention votes for Ford, who squeaked out a narrow first-ballot victory, 1,187 to 1,070.

The only other time the Pennsylvania primary mattered to Republicans was 1980. Unlike 1976, Reagan was the front runner that year as the April primary approached. His main opponent was George H. W. Bush, for whom Pennsylvania had become a must-win state.

Coming into Pennsylvania Reagan had won 11 of the first 14 primaries, and Bush needed to carry the state to have any reasonable chance of overtaking him. Fortunately for Bush, the moderate Republican voters in the state found him attractive. In addition, Bush campaigned aggressively, becoming virtually omnipresent in the state. He also attacked Reagan for his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and for his proposal to allow the states to administer the nation’s welfare program.

Reagan, on the other hand, paid little attention to the state, campaigning in Pennsylvania for only four days. He did, however, have a bevy of supporters, including Schweiker; Bill Meehan, the powerful Republican Philadelphia City Council chairman; and Drew Lewis, who later would become a member of Reagan’s cabinet.

In the end, Bush won the Pennsylvania popular vote but Reagan surprised many by doing fairly well in the state. He attracted 525,000 votes, losing to Bush by only 100,000 votes after being outspent about 10 to 1.

The dénouement came in May. Despite Bush’s win in Pennsylvania, Reagan soon wrapped up the nomination, propelling himself to an easy first-ballot victory at the Detroit convention in July. But the Pennsylvania victor was on the ballot too. Reagan chose Bush to be his running mate. Bush went on to serve two terms as Reagan’s vice president before winning the presidency for himself in 1988.

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