One-Term Tom? Maybe Not!
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The news hasn’t been good.

Indeed it’s been downright ominous. Tom Corbett’s political stock has taken a nosedive. Elected in a near landslide just five months ago, the voters now have gone sour on Pennsylvania’s new governor. Corbett gets an anemic 34 percent approval rating in the latest Public Policy Polling report. Worse yet, voters are having a serious case of buyer’s remorse, with most saying they wouldn’t vote for Corbett again if given the chance.

Clearly Tom Corbett has not made a good first impression on the voters. Wildly popular, he is not.

So is it time to start writing Corbett off as a fallen star, a failed politician, and a spent force?

Probably not! That’s because first impressions of new governors are usually not lasting impressions for most Pennsylvania voters. In fact, Corbett seems to be playing out a familiar script in his first year in office. With few exceptions, Pennsylvania governors in recent history have had a rocky first year in office, always fail to impress the voters that first year, and are always reelected three years later.

That’s right! Strangely enough, it doesn’t seem to matter how poorly a new governor does in his first year of office. That first year simply doesn’t forecast how successful he will be throughout the remainder of his term(s). Not only does the initial year in office not matter, but the evidence suggests a new governor may do better long term if he has a bumpy first year.

Since 1970, all but one modern governor has had a turbulent initial year in office—a year so tempestuous each of them was labeled a one termer early on. Yet each of them was also reelected comfortably. The only governor to have a tight reelection campaign, Dick Thornburgh, was also the only governor to have a solid first year.

Corbett’s most recent predecessor, Ed Rendell, illustrates the pattern. An activist governor, the first from Philadelphia in a century, Rendell constantly ran into conflict from a Republican legislature opposing his initiatives and a go-slow political culture resisting much of his agenda. By the end of his first year, allusions to “one-term Ed” were regularly heard across capitol corridors. Yet Rendell easily won a second term and went on to transform state economic development and education policy.

Rendell’s predecessor, Tom Ridge, had a similar ride. Ridge pursued an unpopular school choice agenda and supported a legislative pay hike while subsequently denying health care coverage for 250,000 working poor. His poll numbers sank, and “one-term Tom” seemed sunk with them. Ridge too, however, was easily reelected to a second term and left office with a 60 percent approval rating.

Ridge’s predecessor Bob Casey fared much the same. State Republicans blocked confirmation of some of Casey’s key appointments, stymied his legislative agenda, and in general made his first year a genuine baptism
byfire. It wasn’t hard at all to find political types willing to bet that Casey was a one termer. Yet Casey too was handily reelected to a second term.

But no one had a rougher first year than Milton Shapp in 1971. He took office with the state facing the biggest fiscal crisis since the Great Depression. For a time in August 1971, the state had no power to spend any money, and state employees were not paid. Shapp had to guide two state income tax bills through the legislature within a six-month period because the state supreme court ruled the first one unconstitutional. But he too was easily reelected.

Only Dick Thornburgh, elected in 1978, had a solid first year—due less to his agenda and more to his ability to manage a crisis. Only ten weeks into Thornburgh’s first term he faced the Three Mile Island nuclear crisis. Widely applauded for his handling of the crisis, Thornburgh ended his first year a popular state figure, with a well-earned national reputation. Yet Thornburgh, caught in the 1982 recession, nearly lost his reelection effort to a political unknown three years later.

The pattern is clear: governors with the roughest starts—Shapp, Casey, Rendell, and to a lesser extent Ridge—won reelection relatively easy, while the governor with the best first year, Thornburgh, had the hardest time winning reelection. Counterintuitive as this seems, it actually does make sense. These governors all got the “bad news” out early, then concentrated on rebuilding their support in the final years of their first term. Voters have notoriously short memories. What happens at the end of a term usually matters much more than what happens at the beginning.

Still, it must be acknowledged that Tom Corbett in 2011 is pushing the envelope, advocating unprecedented cuts in spending while supporting a wide range of reform proposals in a state that historically is uncomfortable with change. His approval rating is probably lower than any modern governor at this stage in office and there is still much bloodletting to come. Corbett could yet become the exception to the rule. He may dig himself a hole too deep to escape. That clearly is an argument some will make. Anyone making it, however, gets little support from modern state history.

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