Pennsylvania has conducted some big elections lately: big presidential races, big gubernatorial races, and big congressional races. Indeed, big, important, and eventful elections have become a regular feature of the State’s political landscape.

So, it might surprise some to learn that the next big electoral contest in Pennsylvania is not a high stakes, high profile, federal or state race, but instead a local struggle for control of a few courthouses in the Philadelphia suburbs.

Just why a couple of local contests in a handful of counties weigh that heavily is a fair question. Certainly, county races aren’t usually awarded top billing in Pennsylvania. Just the opposite is true; historically these races are low cost and low interest affairs, participated in by a modest few and remembered by even fewer.

But not this year!

This year, the elections in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties have huge implications for the political future of Pennsylvania; this year what happens in the suburbs matters far beyond the suburbs.

Why is that the case?

The answer is rooted in Pennsylvania’s tradition of strong local political parties. The party that controls county government is usually able to translate that control into electoral success beyond local offices. To rule a county government often means that the party will probably be successful in state and federal elections as well.

That matters this year because, for the first time in decades, the Philly suburbs are up for grabs. One or more of the counties seem poised to jump parties--from the Republicans to the Democrats.

The consequences of this are enormous for the balance of power in state politics. For decades, support from these suburban Philadelphia counties has been crucial for GOP success statewide. To control the State, Republicans needed the suburbs. But beginning in the 1990’s, the suburbs began to tilt toward the Democrats in some very important elections.

This erosion in GOP support can be traced across presidential, statewide, and congressional elections.

- **PRESIDENTIAL:** Clinton carried three of the four suburban counties in both 1992 and 1996. Gore and Kerry also won three of the four in 2000 and 2004 by even larger vote margins. The Democrats’ increasing share of the presidential vote tell the story. Their portion of the vote in presidential elections during the 1980’s did not exceed 40 percent. But by 2000, the Democrats carried the four counties by 53 percent and in 2004 by 54 percent.
- **STATEWIDE:** In statewide elections, the Democrats also have the Republicans on the run. Governor Rendell’s election and reelection were routs in the suburbs; he won more than 70 percent
of the vote there in 2006. Meanwhile last year, US Democratic Senate Candidate Bob Casey won all four counties against Republican rock-ribbed Rick Santorum. Democrats are doing well even in low profile elections. In 2004, Casey was elected State Treasurer winning all four counties, while the same year, Democratic Auditor General Candidate Jack Wagner won two of them and lost a third by one point.

- CONGRESSIONAL: Republicans in the 1990’s at one point held the four suburban US House seats; they now hold one. Two of the losses were recorded last year. For the first time in history, the Democrats now hold the congressional district seats that ring Philadelphia.

Both demographic and ideological forces underlie the erosion of GOP support. Suburban voters, many of whose parents or grandparents adopted the Republican Party when they fled Philadelphia, have become more willing to vote for Democrats. They are boosted by in-migration from new voters, of whom many are employed in the high tech, healthcare, and financial institutions that have less allegiance to the Republican Party.

Ideological shifts have also played a role in the switch away from Republicans. Suburban voters are markedly more moderate on the great social questions of the day, especially on abortion, gay marriage, gun control, and federal funding of stem cell research. While still fiscally conservative, suburban voters have grown restive in a party often dominated by social conservatives.

These trends are as ominous for Republicans as they are sanguine for Democrats. Even more important; however, they are pregnant with political implications for Pennsylvania’s role in regional and national politics.

In particular, three consequences are likely if the trend to Democrats continues in the suburbs.

1. The Philadelphia suburbs, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties, will become the new key to political power in the Keystone State. Neither political party will be able to win a statewide election without substantial support from them.

2. Pennsylvania’s traditional role as a competitive two party state increasingly will be weakened with further Democratic gains in the suburbs. Particularly in danger could be the state’s much vaunted "eight year cycle" that has regularly allocated the governorship to alternating Democratic or Republican candidates every eight years for a half a century. Without the suburbs, the state GOP cannot hope to win gubernatorial office on a regular basis.

3. The loss of the suburbs by the Republican Party would likely mean that Pennsylvania’s critical role as a swing state in presidential elections would end abruptly. With the Philadelphia suburbs gone, national GOP candidates could not hope to win Pennsylvania, and the State would likely go the way of other northeastern states--dark blue on political maps and solid for Democrats.

So, improbably enough a handful of local races in an off year election may shape the course of state politics for some time. Should one or more of the Philly suburban counties go Democratic this year, it will portend bleak prospects for Republican hopes in future state and national elections.

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