Lately our politicians seem to be falling all over themselves calling for educational accountability and testing. So, in the spirit of that we offer our own test, a pop quiz. It's time to make this column accountable, too.

Here's the pop quiz. What state elective office draws more candidates than any other? What's the most sought for and lusted after job in Pennsylvania?

Governor you say! Nope, sorry that's wrong, close but wrong.

OK, if it's not governor, then it must be U.S. senator--with all that prestige, glamour, Washington ambiance, and national attention. No, good guess, but it's not U.S. Senate either.

Well how about attorney general--lots of lawyers around looking for work, right? Yes, that's true, but it's not attorney general. And it's not auditor general or treasurer either.

Give up? Gee, our funding could be in danger here.

Answer: lieutenant governor. The lt. governor, or L.G., or, "Lite Gov" as irreverently called by some, is easily the most sought after political office in the Commonwealth.

A daily count is prudent here, but at last check at least 13 candidates indicated they might run or were expected to run for lieutenant governor this year (and that doesn't count the half dozen or so who were putative candidates earlier but have dropped out). Nor is any of this new. In open seat years it's open season on the office of LG. Fourteen candidates ran in 1978 and 10 actually filed as candidates in 1994. The only exception to the scramble for the second spot in open seat elections was in 1986, when only four candidates sought major party nominations.

A reasonable question here is why. Why do so many apparently normal people want to spend the next year or so of their life pursuing an office with few official demands, with little or no power, and with no independent political base?

Sure the job pays pretty well. The lieutenant governor receives $119,399 annually, and the pleasure of living at Indiantown Gap. Nor are the duties very taxing. The lieutenant governor presides over the state Senate, a task that took an average of one day a week last year, chairs the Pardons board, and coordinates the activities of PEMA - the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. And if the governor dies or leaves office, the lieutenant governor becomes the governor.

But gubernatorial vacancies are exceedingly rare. In fact, in modern times exactly one lieutenant governor has succeeded the boss (current Gov. Mark Schweiker). More typically, the L.G. is a low profile waiting around sort of job. Certainly it doesn't come with many of the traditional perks that ambitious politicians seek like staff, power, and high visibility.
So, the wide appeal of the office, measured by the number of people running for it, is somewhat mystifying. But probably one explanation is the electoral uncertainty that characterizes the office. Or, to put it a little more bluntly, running for L.G. is a bit of a crapshoot.

Since lieutenant governor candidates run separately in primaries (once nominated, governor and lieutenant governor candidates run together in general elections), there has always been something of a lottery aspect to the election process. In at least one instance (1978) Democratic voters nominated for lieutenant governor someone they confused with a popular Pennsylvania political name, And in at least two other cases (1986 and 1994), lieutenant governor candidates won primaries at least in part because they had familiar political names.

But the crapshoot nature of the office isn't the only motivation. Probably more important is the growing recognition that the lieutenant governorship isn't any longer the political booby prize it once was. Things have changed for the L.G. much almost as they have for its national counterpart, the vice presidency.

Once the vice presidency was also an object of scorn - derisively referred to by one incumbent, as "not worth a bucket of warm spit." Politicians in their prime avoided the vice presidency. It was a career ending obscurity to which few aspired. Republican political leaders put Theodore Roosevelt in the office to bury him politically, and only two assassin's bullets in William McKinley's chest saved him from the political graveyard.

But times have changed. In the modern era, the vice presidency is much sought after, largely because both incumbent and former vice presidents almost immediately become leading presidential contenders. In fact, since 1960 in nine of 11 presidential elections at least one vice president or former vice president has been a major party candidate: Nixon (1960), Johnson (1964), Humphrey and Nixon (1968), Nixon (1972), Ford (1976), Mondale (1984), Bush (1988), Bush (1992), and Gore (2000).

The pattern in Pennsylvania with the office of lieutenant governor is less dramatic, but the trend is similar. Since the mid-'60s, five incumbent lieutenant governors have made serious runs for governor--1966, 1970, 1978, 1986, and 1994, and a sixth (Mark Schweiker) certainly could have chosen to do so. Their respective political parties nominated four of the five who ran.

So, since the mid-60s, lieutenant governors have been involved in five of the eight contests, impressive evidence of the new prominence of the office. But this may still understate the extent to which the lieutenant governorship has become a main entree to gubernatorial competition.

A fairer measure may be to restrict elections to those open seat years in which an incumbent was not running. Excluding those incumbent years (1974, 1982, 1990, and 1998), every open seat for governor until this year has featured the lieutenant governor as a gubernatorial candidate.

The evidence is clear. As the national vice presidency has become for the presidency, the office of lieutenant governor has become a prime base office for those making a run for the governor's office. But it is far from the only route to gubernatorial nomination. Being a businessman, a congressman or a state row officer is almost as effective.
Since the governorship of William Scranton (1963 to 1967), a total of 18 candidates have been nominated for
governor by the two major parties: four lieutenant governors, four businessmen, three row officers, three
congressmen, two U.S. attorneys, one mayor, and one state legislator.

The implications for Pennsylvania politics are compelling. If running for governor is the objective, no other
job comes close to matching the promise of future nomination or near miss that the L.G. confers.

But if actually winning the governorship is the goal then another line of employment may suit better. While
virtually every lieutenant governor since the 1960s has been a prominent gubernatorial candidate, only one has
actually won election as governor in his own right. The fact is that Pennsylvania's lieutenant governors are
often bridesmaids but rarely brides.

The root of the problem could well be cyclical. Over the past 50 years Pennsylvania voters have exhibited a
consistent disposition to switch parties every eight years. About the time the incumbent L.G. is ready to run for
governor the voters are looking for a fresh face and new party in Harrisburg.

As we have written earlier, this so-called eight-year cycle is real in the sense that a pattern of regular eight-year
party changes just could not have happened by chance. But what causes the cycle is complex and subject to
many interpretations. Nor is it certain the cycle will continue into the future.

The 2002 gubernatorial election will, of course, put the cyclical hypothesis to a stern test. In the meantime,
there are a dozen or so L.G. wannabes who could probably care less. After all, both brides and bridesmaids do
get to go to the wedding.

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