Highway Robbery
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On its surface, the ongoing political fracas about tolling I-80 seems simple enough. Folks in rural northern Pennsylvania don’t want to pay more to use their highway so folks in urban Southeastern Pennsylvanians can pay less for their mass transit. From the rural perspective, Rendell’s plan to raise tolls on I-80 is literally highway robbery. From the urban perspective, it’s just asking rural Pennsylvanians to pay their fair share.

But on closer inspection, a more complex picture emerges. Indeed, we are presented with a lesson in geopolitics that uncovers some of the major fault lines in state politics--including sectionalism, ideology, partisanship, and urban-rural conflict.

Of the cleavages revealed by the Interstate 80 issue, the urban-rural conflict is the most interesting and the most puzzling--interesting because it offers a rare glimpse into the disparate interests of rural and urban Pennsylvania--and puzzling because this kind of economic-based regional populism seemed to be out of style.

Not that regional strife has been historically rare. Since the Civil War, the rural-urban divide has been a major fissure cutting across Pennsylvania politics. Indeed, rivalry between the hicks from the sticks and the slicks from the city pervade the State’s political history.

Some of the antagonisms are linked to a tradition of anti-Philadelphia sentiments. To upstate voters, Philly has often been portrayed as a city run by a corrupt machine controlled by big city bosses and bleeding heart liberals, metaphorically: Sodom and Gomorrah on the Delaware. City politicians have returned fire by depicting upstate rural areas as a nest of parochial anti-urban rubes that hunt deer with flashlights and drink beer in their bathrobes--Bubba Country North.

In modern times; however, country-city clashes have tended to be more about values and ideology than about money and economics. Classical political arguments such as the Interstate 80 dust-up--who gets what, when, and how arguments--have been rare. In Pennsylvania politics, the economic pie has been divided and the accommodations made. Rural areas might think that the lion’s share goes to Philadelphia, but the tradeoff is that they also get their share of the pie.

So, instead of economics, the political debates more often are waged on cultural grounds and about issues like abortion, gun control, and the death penalty. On those issues, there are sometimes substantial differences between urban and rural areas. Indeed, the cultural discord can be more toxic than economic conflicts because the issues are often perceived as a zero-sum game.

But, if it’s the cultural and values fights that matter, why the Interstate 80 brawl? What explains why so many are so hostile to the proposed tolling?

There is more than one cook stirring this brew. Plain old state partisanship gets billing here, as do the State’s increasingly influential purveyors of free market ideology. There is even institutional rivalry weighing in--matching state government against some members of the congressional delegation.
But the dynamic driving this donnybrook is economic: the Interstate 80 proposal has violated the tacit *modus vivendi* between urban and rural Pennsylvania that determines who pays the State’s bills. Under the accepted arrangements, rural residents living around Interstate 80 don’t expect to pay road taxes to subsidize urban Pennsylvania. But that is what, fairly or unfairly, many rural residents understand the Interstate 80 tolling plan to be—an onerous and inequitable tax on rural Pennsylvanians to pay for urban Pennsylvanians. As such, it threatens to unsettle the crucial economic questions once thought to be decided—who gets what, when, and how.

It also threatens to obscure, if not obstruct, the wide and growing consensus shared by rural and urban Pennsylvania. Excepting some cultural issues, rural and urban Pennsylvanians agree on much more than they disagree.

Evidence for this is empirical. Research completed by Franklin & Marshall’s Center for Opinion Research explicitly compared the responses of rural and urban residents on more than 400 attitudinal and behavioral variables. The research found that rural and urban residents concur to a remarkable degree across a wide reach of social and economic policy domains. Even where the differences are statistically significant, they tend to be small differences, on the order of ten percent or so. Only in a handful of policy areas are the differences numerically large.

The point made by the Franklin and Marshall data is that the differences that exist between urban and rural are mostly of degree rather than of kind. These days the Country Mouse and the City Mouse have much more in common than is generally supposed—and the discord that does exist is rarely economic.

That is why the flap over Interstate 80 remains troubling. The controversy has already ignited strife where it had been absent and may unleash a sectional wave of discontent with state government where little existed before.

Worse perhaps, these dire consequences are incurred in pursuit of what is at best a dubious policy. It is true that the revenues to meet state road and bridge repairs are badly needed and equally true that the reluctance of decision makers to find a statewide dedicated source of funding makes tolling more politically palatable.

But it’s a solution that will create long-term funding problems while achieving only short term band-aid fixes. This is political expediency driving public decision making—good politics palmed off as good policy. The State’s transportation problems are both statewide and long-term. The solution must be too.

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