

# Obama's Keys to the Keystone State

March 14, 2008

---

*by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young*

David Plouffe, campaign manager for Barack Obama, recently shared his views about the upcoming April 22nd Pennsylvania Primary, calling the Clinton campaign "the prohibitive favorite," who "should win by a healthy margin given where they start.... We'll try and get as many votes and delegates as we can, but our campaign will not be defined by Pennsylvania ...."

Translation: The Obama campaign marks its chances as slim to none in Pennsylvania—the state belongs to Clinton, and they aren't going to seriously contest it.

The Obama campaign may want to rethink that hasty conclusion. Doing so may determine the remaining course of the nomination battle.

True the Clinton advantages in Pennsylvania are substantial. Many of the state's demographics (seniors, Catholics, working class, conservatives, and ethnics) fit well into the coalition Clinton has pasted together in earlier states. Moreover Clinton has personal ties and family roots in Pennsylvania that will only reinforce the favorable political fundamentals for her.

Nevertheless a strong case can be made for the scenario in which Obama wins the state outright or at least holds down her margins so that a nominal win for her will be perceived as a virtual loss.

Ironically Obama's keys to victory were first fashioned by electoral locksmith and current Governor Ed Rendell, aka, chief Clinton surrogate in Pennsylvania, during his own 2002 primary fight for the governorship. That 2002 gubernatorial primary between then Mayor Ed Rendell of Philadelphia and then State Auditor General Bob Casey presents a blueprint for Obama running against Clinton. Obama's prospective road to victory in Pennsylvania is remarkably similar to the route followed by Rendell in achieving a stunning win in 2002.

The 2002 Pennsylvania gubernatorial slugfest was a battle between two titans of the Democratic Party. It pitted the son and heir apparent of the former Governor Casey against the liberal, urban, upstart Rendell. Casey (Clinton?) was the prohibitive favorite with deep roots in state politics, a political brand name second to none in Pennsylvania (the advantage of his own and his father's victories), and widespread Democratic Party establishment support. Rendell (Obama?) was a politician of vague and uncertain outline to a majority of state voters, a brash upstart from a city many Pennsylvanians regarded as the citadel of sin and corruption.

Yet in the end and contrary to most expectations, Rendell scored an impressive victory beating Casey by some 150,000 votes. How he did it is of more than passing curiosity. In fact if Obama is going to beat Clinton in Pennsylvania, he must follow closely the Rendell electoral roadmap hacked out in 2002.

Rendell did it by accomplishing three things:

1. Massive Concentration of Effort—Pennsylvania has 67 counties, and Rendell managed to lose 57 of them. But the counties he won were the big counties, and he won them big, for a 54 to 46 statewide victory. Key was the impressive percentages he recorded in Philadelphia and the four suburban counties. He rolled up 75% in Philadelphia and more than 80% in the suburbs. Rendell ended with 300,000 votes in the Southeast, twice his necessary statewide margin.
2. Iron Control of the Swing Vote—Rendell topped off Philly and the suburbs by winning the Lehigh Valley and much of the southcentral part of the state, capturing 60% or more in many of those counties. Rendell's regional dominance in eastern Pennsylvania was critical. Nine of the ten counties he won were east of the Susquehanna.
3. Managed Statewide Turnout—Finally Rendell also was able to turnout a higher percentage of Democratic voters in the Southeast than voted in the Southwest. This was accomplished in part by increasing Democratic registration—including luring some Republicans across party lines, but mostly by exciting the voters in the Philadelphia TV market that overwhelmingly favored his candidacy.

Measured against Rendell's 2002 template, Obama's chances are not unpromising. He is positioned to emulate the Rendell strategy to a greater extent than is generally recognized. Essentially he must win the same ten counties Rendell won in 2002, while reducing Clinton's margins in her strongholds. Currently he leads in Philly and will likely win the city decisively, making the suburbs a major battleground. The Democratic voters there largely mirror the upscale, affluent voters Obama has been attracting nationally: they are the most liberal in the state, strongly oppose the Iraq War, and have a low regard for President Bush. For insurance Obama needs to join the Philadelphia suburbs to the two pivotal swing areas, the Lehigh Valley and Southcentral, where the Democrats are moderate to liberal and where he currently polls well against Senator Clinton. Beyond this managing turnout will be crucial for him.

Rendell in 2002 was able to turnout a higher percentage of Democratic voters in the Southeast than voted in the Southwest. This is central to any Obama victory. To win he must push his turnout higher in the Southeast. Here enthusiasm and Obama volunteers could make a big difference. The Obama campaign has already begun a major voter registration drive to add Democrats to the rolls. The current Democratic pickup is 65,000, most of whom will be Obama voters.

The stakes in Pennsylvania are high for both candidates—but perhaps highest for Obama. A Pennsylvania victory virtually assures him the nomination. It also would help inoculate him against an unfavorable resolution (for him) to the sputtering messes in Michigan and Florida. And a Pennsylvania victory gives the lie to the argument Obama can't win in an Electoral College battleground state.

Few people in 2002 thought Rendell could do it—lose half the state and more than 85% of all counties, run against a political icon, and still win. And few now think Obama can do it. Nevertheless many otherwise astute politicians in 2002 ended up scrubbing abundant amounts of Pennsylvania egg off their faces when Rendell's electoral map showed how it could be done. The state's 2008 egg supply is said to be healthy which is good—they might be needed again.

-----  
*Politically Uncorrected*<sup>TM</sup> is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in

this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2008 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.