Continuity & Change: Pennsylvania in the New Century
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New centuries can be messy affairs to chronicle, often taking a decade or longer to hit their stride. By any measure, however, the 21st century is now well under way. It seems a good time, therefore, to assess the leading trends exhibited in Pennsylvania politics early in the new century.

What's new and not so new in state politics? And where does the state seem to be heading?

One way to answer these questions is to examine six macro trends that now dominate state politics. Certainly Pennsylvania's major trends comprise a blend of old and new. Three of them point toward continuity with the state's sometimes rigid political heritage, while three others point to transformative changes now underway.

1. **Continuing Resistance to Change:** Certainly the slow-to-change, innate conservatism so familiar to state history remains an important dynamic in state politics. Pennsylvania has been an anti-reform state throughout its modern history, and although the currents of change flowed sometimes vigorously over the past decade, the state's standpatters continue to be influential.

2. **Continuing Urban-Rural Fault Lines:** Also familiar across the state's political landscape is the continuing rivalry between rural and urban areas. The state still has one of the largest rural populations in the nation, while its two urban behemoths, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, are among the nation's largest cities. The consequent urban-rural fault line continues to polarize state politics as it has for more than a century and a half.

3. **Continuing Divide Between the West and the East:** Back to the days of Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania has been almost two distinct states: one western, rural, more sparsely populated, and more politically conservative; the other eastern, urban, more densely settled, and less politically conservative. Western Pennsylvania is more culturally akin to the Midwest, while eastern Pennsylvania is more culturally similar to the East Coast. These historical distinctions now include major demographic and economic differences. Increasingly the east is growing and prospering economically, while the west's population growth is stagnant amid a struggling economy. These sharpened differences have produced a geographic dimension in state politics that often plays out in statewide elections as well as in Harrisburg policy battles.

4. **Growing Dissatisfaction with Government and Politicians:** Historically, Pennsylvanians have often exhibited indifference verging on apathy toward state government—but no longer. Indeed, the first decade of the new century unleashed a dramatic new awareness bordering on contempt for Harrisburg and its politicians. Pennsylvanians discovered state politics and by and large didn't like what they saw. An ill-advised legislative pay hike, succeeded by a series of legislative public corruption scandals, drove some of the dissatisfaction. And part of the rising dismay is attributable to a darkening national mood of frustration and anger, in part caused by the current recession. As Pennsylvania approaches the second decade of the new century, its citizens are arguably as dissatisfied with state government and its politicians as any period in modern times.

5. **A Rising New Generation of State Politicians:** Through much of state history well-known politicians trading on famous family traditions dominated statewide elections. Particularly prominent in modern times have been fabled family names like Casey, Flaherty, and Scranton. But the 21st century has seen a gradual
movement away from familiar names in the state's electoral politics. Increasingly throughout the decade, a new generation of state politicians emerged in the congressional delegation as well as in legislative and gubernatorial politics. Probably nothing portrays this changing of the guard more than the 2010 governor's race. Indeed, the upcoming gubernatorial primaries largely feature electoral contestants unknown to most voters.

6. **Legislative Turmoil and Pressure for Reform:** The new century has brought both drama and trauma to the legislative branch. Perhaps the signal event of the decade was the abortive pay raise that occurred in July 2005. The resultant furor brought 31 legislative retirements and 23 incumbent defeats in 2006. The pay hike also unleashed a plethora of protest movements, shaking the normally placid legislative culture to its foundations and generating a reform impulse not seen in state politics in more than a century.

Compounding this, Attorney General Tom Corbett announced in 2008 the first of 25 prosecutions in the so-called "bonus gate" public corruption scandals, inevitably raising the question of whether systematic corruption had returned to Harrisburg. Amid the turmoil, repeated calls were made for reform, perhaps even a constitutional convention, to comprehensively restructure state government. Should a general constitutional convention be convened, it would be the first in nearly a century and a half.

Yet, unclear amid the mix of continuity and change is where the new century ultimately leads. Not in more than a century has there been more agitation for change and reform in the Keystone State. Nevertheless, the forces for the status quo still loom powerfully. What does seem clear is that the new century will continue to witness the institution shaking conflict seen so often in the last ten years-conflict likely to continue long after the new century isn't so new anymore.

This article has been adapted from Madonna & Young's forthcoming book *Political Pennsylvania: The New Century.*

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