Conventional Wisdom Revisited
December 17, 2002

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

According to Mark Twain, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

The always-prescient Mr. Twain could have been thinking about the status of conventional wisdom in the political community, circa 2002.

The conventional wisdom, AKA, the received knowledge, sustained some multiple contusions during the past political season. Before the year gets completely away it might be useful to tote up the causalities. Here's a short list of what last year we knew for sure that seems no longer to be true.

Old Conventional Wisdom--the ruling national party always loses congressional seats in mid term elections.

This rule was blatantly transgressed in 1998 during Clinton's second mid term election - and now again in 2002 for Bush's first mid term. Traditionalists argue that both these elections were special cases - 1998 due to unusual electoral reaction to Clinton's impeachment, and 2002 due to the 9/11 tragedies.

Maybe, but what looks now like two quirks in a row, may come to look like a well-established pattern in a couple more elections. More and more it seems that congressional elections are becoming nationalized--with popular presidents being able to swing key seats for their party. If this does turn out to be the new conventional wisdom it could have profound consequences across the entire political system.

Old Conventional Wisdom--Former mayors of Philly are dead political meat when running for governor.

This particular wisdom seems to be itself dead meat--or as the Washington bureaucrats might put it--"somewhat inoperative."

But an interesting question follows: what exactly do we have to replace it? Has the Philadelphia mayoralty become the de rigueur base office for future governors? Or was Rendell's victory so personal--in effect the fruits of his unique personality and unparalleled campaign--that no one after him will be able to replicate it?

Compelling arguments can be made for both points of view. Only future elections will resolve the question. In the meantime, the conventional wisdom is going to be--that there really is no longer any conventional wisdom regarding Philadelphia's role in Pennsylvania's gubernatorial politics.

Old Conventional Wisdom--Republicans do better without primaries.

Well maybe, but one Republican by the name of Mike Fisher didn't. And we suspect the old conventional wisdom here might be in for some rough sledding in future elections as well. The "big tent" Republicans like to gather under may no longer be big enough to accommodate the diversity emerging in the Pennsylvania GOP.
To some extent Republicans are victims of their own successes. As the state lurches closer and closer to one party politics, the classic schisms that occur when one party dominates politics may begin to happen here. If they do the real political battles will increasingly occur in the Republican Party itself, and primaries will be the central focus of those battles.

Old Conventional Wisdom--Tom Ridge never had his mettle tested in his tenure as governor. Given the toughest job in government, he is flubbing it up. Put bluntly, the guy is about one bad headline away from becoming another "Washington Road Kill."

New conventional wisdom: Tom Ridge still has the toughest job in Washington, but now he has the power to get it done. Don't throw away your Ridge for VEEP stickers just yet.

Ridge's transformation from a DC leftover to political star de jour is no beltway mystery. Clearly Ridge's not so secret weapon is the unflinching support of ?First Friend? George Bush. But even Bush won't be able to save him if Homeland Security doesn't get its act together soon. In fact in some ways Ridge's job is tougher now than when he first went to Washington in October of 2001. The bureaucratic challenges ahead are epic. But he is also for the first time in control of his own fate. And now the real test comes.

Old Conventional Wisdom--Pennsylvania is a vigorous competitive two party state. Either party may be down and out for a while but they will ultimately bounce back.

It's the "bounce back? part of this established wisdom that seems to be in serious doubt--notably with respect to legislative elections. With a conspicuous exception or two, Congressional Democrats are more and more pinned down in the big cities; while Democrats in the state house continue to lose ground, and Democrats in the state senate remain stuck in place as the minority party.

The new conventional wisdom now appears to look something like the following: Pennsylvania Democrats can still win an election once in a while--but Republicans own this state. Paradoxically enough, party registration still favors Democrats by a half million votes--but more and more Pennsylvania resembles a one party state. In fact, it may not be more than two or three elections away from that point where it can no longer be called a competitive two party state.

Old Conventional Wisdom--There will always be a place for mavericks and gadflies in Pennsylvania politics. In fact, they thrive here.

New Conventional Wisdom: "Remember what happened to John Lawless." Lawless, of course, is former state Representative John Lawless who narrowly lost his reelection bid after switching parties, not once but twice. Colorful, maverick, and gadfly were just some of the politer terms used to describe him. Lawless was an equal opportunity afflicter if there ever was one. Along the way he broke just about every rule in the go-along-to-get-along ambiance of Pennsylvania politics. If Lawless hadn't offended you, then, you just weren't getting out much.

By the time his constituents gave him the pink slip, a large majority of his legislative colleagues in both parties were happy to see him go. Indeed, Lawless the messenger and the Lawless message may have become so
confused that we missed some important things that he was saying. That unfortunately is the price mavericks pay in state politics. In the end, they have little lasting influence.

Finally, in the interest of fairness here's a sample of the conventional wisdom still with us as we leave 2002.

Old Conventional Wisdom--the eight-year cycle is an iron rule of state politics. It's a sure bet that the voters will elect a new governor from the "out" party every eight years--always have and always will.

Well, yes--although "always" is only from 1954 and "always will" is a very long time. But essentially this piece of wisdom is still intact. The real problem with it is that we don't really understand why it happens. It just does.

But that's good enough in a year like this one has been. We need to take our conventional wisdom wherever we can find it.

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Politically Uncorrected™ 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 © 2002 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.