

Tom Corbett's Problem

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Attorney General Tom Corbett has a problem. More precisely, he had a problem. More about that in a moment!

Corbett's problem was the same problem confronted by each of his predecessors since the Office of Attorney General became elective in 1980: how to leverage his statewide office into an electoral springboard capable of catapulting him into the governor's chair.

It might seem that Corbett's problem shouldn't be a problem at all. His office is one of only three independently elected statewide offices, aside from state treasurer and auditor general. It is certainly more visible than the other two. And for reasons best known to the state's voters, it's an office the GOP can't seem to lose. Every attorney general since 1980 has been a Republican. Across eight consecutive elections encompassing 28 years - from 1980 to 2008 - the winner has been the Republican nominee.

Moreover, being elected attorney general in a number of states has traditionally been the fast track to gubernatorial nominations and to the governor's office itself. Voters like their attorneys general. And in Pennsylvania, they love their Republican attorneys general. Indeed, when making the office elective was first considered back in the 1960s, many assumed that future office holders would become heir presumptive to the governor's chair.

In Pennsylvania, it hasn't turned out that way - but not due to lack of trying. Corbett, in fact, becomes the third consecutive attorney general to seek the governorship.

But the electoral fates have not been kind to Pennsylvania's top law enforcement officers running for higher office. So far for them, the position has been an electoral dead end.

This is - or was - Tom Corbett's problem.

On the one hand, the Office of Attorney General has been since its inception a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party. Republicans can't seem to lose these races and Democrats can't seem to win them. On the other hand, winning has been its own reward, since the GOP has been unable to translate the office into a base for governor or any other elective office.

For Corbett and anyone else pondering this puzzle, the question has been baffling. Why does an office that should be a major source of future governors fail to produce any at all?

Not surprisingly there has been no shortage of theories attempting to explain why being attorney general has been an electoral career ender for its incumbents. The most popular of these has been the argument that Pennsylvania voters just aren't interested in electing Harrisburg incumbents as governor. In fact, not since 1966 has a Pennsylvania governor been elected directly from another Harrisburg job.

But there is another persuasive explanation for it all - and one that Tom Corbett clearly subscribes too. Call it the "law and order theory." This is the notion that voters expect the attorney general to be a crime buster pursuing criminals and prosecuting public corruption.

By and large, Pennsylvania attorneys general have not pursued this law and order role very vigorously, and corruption in particular has not been a priority. Heretofore, virtually all public corruption prosecutions against state officials have been pursued by the feds operating through U.S. attorneys.

Until Corbett!

He has, unlike earlier attorneys general, positioned his office as a crime fighter and corruption buster, bringing a record number of prosecutions against state elected and appointed officials. Now less a Judge Judy and more a Sam Waterston, he is the first attorney general in modern history to vigorously prosecute public corruption. In the process he has also become a target of both his Republican and Democratic gubernatorial opponents - opponents who charge him with conflicts of interest for pursuing the prosecutions while running for governor.

So, Corbett has brought a new type of law and order to his office. Now the question is will law and order bring Corbett to the governor's office?

It might!

Certainly, the prosecutions have raised Corbett's profile dramatically, giving him a significant edge for the GOP gubernatorial nomination next May. But they will be no panacea for him. Corbett may be running in a political climate hostile to all insiders. Moreover, his Democratic opponents are expected to produce a competitive field of candidates. As a result, the 2010 gubernatorial election may be the most competitive in memory.

In the end, Corbett's bold move to corruption buster will matter little if he fails to convey a larger agenda. Amidst the continuing economic gloominess pervading Pennsylvania, he must demonstrate that he has both policies and programs to combat the state's economic travails. A law and order profile could be a game changer for him, but only if he remembers what game he is in. Running for governor in 2010 is about the economy, budgets, and taxes. Ultimately, voters will care more about his plans to tackle these issues than anything he did as attorney general.

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