If Romney Wins, Does Corbett Lose?
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Ironies abound in politics. Some are amusing; others are just bizarre. But few top the one now brewing in the Keystone State. Paradoxically enough, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett seeking to banish Barack Obama from the White House, may instead be sowing the seeds for his own re-election defeat two years later.

In short, if Romney wins in 2012, Corbett could lose in 2014.

Understanding this peculiar electoral enigma requires familiarity with Pennsylvania’s famous (or infamous) “eight-year cycle.” This is the sixty-year pattern in gubernatorial elections that witnesses the Republican and Democratic parties switching control of the governor’s office every eight years. From 1954 through (at least) 2010, Republican governors have followed Democratic governors like clockwork, two terms apiece, eight years apart.

Statistics indicate persuasively that the eight-year cycle is not a fluke. The probability that this string of fifteen gubernatorial elections is just a random occurrence is less than 0.000141%. That’s about equivalent to shooting a hole-in-one, being struck by lightning, or earth being in a catastrophic collision with an asteroid in the next century. It could happen, but it won’t.

So something “causal” is responsible for this remarkable cycle continuing election after election. But what?

Over the years a legion of scholars, journalists, pundits, and even politicians has provided a copious supply of explanatory theories ranging from the mildly absurd to the reasonably plausible.

Three theories are most popular:

- The incumbency effect observes that the party switches occur only when Pennsylvania’s term-limited governors can’t run again, concluding that the powerful presence of an incumbent on the ballot creates the eight-year cycle.
- The anti-Washington effect emphasizes that state voters are long-term ticket splitters who tend to vote for a gubernatorial candidate who is not a member of the president’s party. Put another way, a Republican president in Washington almost always produces a Democratic governor in Harrisburg, and vice versa.
- Normal two-party competition attributes the cycle to rivalry between the Republican and Democratic parties. One party holds power until gradually losing favor with voters, allowing the opposition party to win until losing favor themselves, perpetuating an endless in-and-out cycle.

It seems likely that multiple factors cause the cycle, including the economy and the power of incumbency. But the evidence is strong for some sort of anti-Washington effect in state elections. The incumbent president’s party has actually lost the last fifteen state gubernatorial elections, excepting one cliffhanger in 1982. Moreover, Pennsylvania voters are notorious ticket splitters and have been for some fifty years. It is incontrovertible that state voters like divided government when they can get it.
So if Romney does win in 2012, the Pennsylvania electorate in 2014 will confront an incumbent governor of the president’s party for only the second time in sixty years. The other time it happened was Republican Dick Thornburgh’s re-election race in 1982. That election was the closest contest involving an incumbent governor in modern times. It was such a nail biter that a major network first called it for Thornburgh’s opponent, only reversing its call late on election night.

Could there be an encore in 2014?

Certainly conditions in the economy will matter greatly. Full or partial recovery by 2014 and a Republican in the White House getting credit for it should help Corbett immensely.

Conversely, a still-struggling economy by 2014 and a Republican in Washington might threaten a second Corbett term. It was, in fact, a dismal economy under Reagan in 1982 that hurt Thornburgh most.

The economy, however, is not Corbett’s only problem. Currently, his crucial approval rating registers an anemic 32% (Public Policy Polling), making him one of the least popular governors in the nation. He still has time to turn this around; indeed, there are signs he is doing so. But he has his work cut out for him.

Some of his political wounds are self-inflicted, hence remediable. But the draconian spending cuts he has made will continue to squeeze his support unless he breaks his pledge against raising taxes or the economy rebounds, increasing state revenues. His options are few with regard to taxing and spending.

Finally, there is the question of who might challenge him in 2014. No Pennsylvania incumbent governor has drawn major opposition in modern times, largely because possible rivals have perceived incumbents as unbeatable. Already, however, Harrisburg insiders are speculating on a possible heavyweight Democratic challenge in 2014.

So a Romney win in 2012 might set up a classic gubernatorial confrontation in 2014. It’s an irony many will find bizarre but not all will find amusing.

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