Asking the Right Question
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One year ago, Governor Ed Rendell came into office with the most ambitious agenda of any governor in at least a generation—a agenda that took on some of the most politically tenacious problems confronting Pennsylvania in modern times, including property tax relief, education reform, and economic development.

Now as Rendell begins his second year in office, the inevitable question is being posed—how's he doing? Is his political stock going up or going down? Even more pointedly, what does his first year in office tell us about his re-election chances?

This persistent query is virtually an ongoing parlor game among Harrisburg insiders, as they assess the political score in a political town virtually obsessed with political power. But measuring Rendell's success or failure at the end of his first year—whether he is "up" or "down"—is probably the wrong question to ask. A better question might be: does it matter?

Does it matter how well or poorly a rookie governor does in the first year in office? Does the first year predict how successful a governor will be throughout the remainder of his term, or how historians will evaluate a governor's record?

A close examination of modern gubernatorial history suggests a provocative answer to this question: not only does the initial year in office not seem to matter in terms of predicting a governor's ultimate fate; but there is even some evidence that unmixed success in the initial year may augur re-election problems.

Back to Milton Shapp in 1970, all but one new governor has had a rocky first year in office—a first year so bumpy that each of them was labeled a "one termer" largely because of that tough first year in office.

Yet, each of them was also re-elected comfortably. In fact, the only governor to have a tight re-election campaign was also the only governor to have a solid first year, Dick Thornburgh, who was universally hailed for his performance during the TMI nuclear accident.

Rendell's most recent predecessor, Tom Ridge, illustrates the historical pattern. Who shall forget the constant allusions to "one-term Tom" that made the rounds of the state capitol during the end of his first year in 1995 and into his second year? Ridge had actually started his governorship with a successful special legislative session dealing with crime legislation and a tax cutting state budget adopted in a timely fashion.

But then he pursued an unpopular agenda, namely tuition vouchers and he signed a legislative pay hike. This was followed by a decision in the spring of 1996 to deny health care coverage for 250,000 working poor. His polling numbers sank, and "one-term Tom" was sunk with them, or at least that's what many believed.

Ridge's predecessor Bob Casey didn't fare much better in his early days. Probably, he had an even more difficult initial year. State Republicans were furious at Casey's hard fought victory over Bill Scranton in 1986—egged on considerably by the rage at the campaign run by Casey campaign consultant James Carville.
Since they controlled the Senate, the bitter GOP was able to block confirmation of some of Casey's key appointments, stymie his legislative agenda, and in general made his first year a genuine baptism by fire. It wasn't hard at all to find political types willing to bet that Casey was a "one termer."

But no one had a rougher first year than Milton Shapp, first elected in 1970. He took office with the state facing the biggest fiscal crisis since the Great Depression.

Shapp had to get not one but two state income tax bills through the legislature, courtesy of the State Supreme Court that ruled the first legislatively approved tax unconstitutional. To Shapp's dismay, this occurred within a six-month period in his first year. For a time, in August 1971, the state had no power to spend any money, and state employees were not paid.

Only Dick Thornburgh, elected in 1978, had a sound first year. And it was not his agenda or political skills that made it successful, but his ability to manage a crisis. Only ten week's into Thornburgh's first term he faced the Three Mile Island nuclear crisis.

Widely applauded for his handling of the crisis, Thornburgh ended his first year a popular state figure, with a well-earned national reputation. Yet, Thornburgh nearly lost his re-election effort to a political unknown three years later.

The pattern seems clear: governors with the roughest starts--Shapp, Casey, and to a lesser extent Ridge--won reelection relatively easy, while the governor with the best first year, Thornburgh, had the hardest time winning reelection.

Counterintuitive as this seems, it actually does make sense. After all, the frustrations and failures of the early days amount to so much "inside baseball" to most voters--who simply don't pay that much attention to the day-to-day activities of state government.

Certainly voters don't evaluate new governors on the basis of success or failure in early legislative battles. It's an open question whether they are even aware of them.

But an even more compelling reason the first year seems not to matter very much is the acute importance of timing in politics. What a politician does is often less important than when it is done. Experienced politicians usually pursue their most ambitious plans, and take the greatest political risks early in their terms.

They make their mistakes and take their lumps before most voters are watching or care. Clearly, such is the experience of Pennsylvania's governors before Rendell.

And the implications of that experience seem equally clear. Rendell's record and chances for re-election are going to be determined much more by what happens in the next three years than what happened in the last year.

What matters for a new governor is the totality of the record, not how well the term begins, but how well it ends.