

The Eight-Year Cycle - Believe It!

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Some believe in it. Many doubt it. Most don't understand it.

The "it" in question here is Pennsylvania's so-called eight-year cycle - the octennial oscillation in state politics going back to 1954 that regularly registers an eight-year party switch in the governor's mansion.

The problem may be in the nomenclature itself. The phrase "eight-year cycle" doesn't roll off the tongue. It just doesn't have much pizzazz or drama to it.

And that's a shame. It's a shame because the cycle is no statistical fluke, no mere arcane trivium of state politics. Indeed, it is a statistical reality in the sense that a series of elections alternating parties every eight years - going back almost 60 years - could not have happened by accident. More importantly, it is real because the cycle tells us much about Pennsylvania's gubernatorial politics, how it has played out for more than a half century, and how it might play out in 2010.

A little political history is helpful here. With rare exception, the Republican Party in the state dominated the governor's office from the end of the Civil War until the mid-1950s. But a genuine two-party system did finally develop in Pennsylvania in the wake of the New Deal. In 1954, Democrat George Leader was elected governor and was followed in 1958 by Democrat David Lawrence. Then, in 1962, Republican Bill Scranton won the governorship and was succeeded in 1966 by Republican Ray Shafer.

This eight-year alternating pattern of consecutive party change has continued for almost 60 years, right up to Democrat Ed Rendell, and has spanned 14 elections. The Republicans have won six and the Democrats have won eight.

The statistical evidence makes a compelling argument that the cycle is no fluke. Mathematical probability tells us that 14 elections beginning in 1954 are extremely unlikely to produce the alternating eight-year cycle simply by chance. The probability is less than 0.000141% that this string of 14 gubernatorial elections could have happened simply by coincidence. Put differently, the odds are more than 5000 to 1 against getting such an alternating string of election results, unless something meaningful has been occurring to produce the pattern. This is solid and persuasive statistical evidence.

But what causes the eight-year cycle? It's a good question that has generated much debate.

1. One popular notion is the "ins and outs" theory. This theory argues that the cycle is caused by the "in" party losing political support over time, resulting in a political opening for the "out" party. The "outs" then become the "ins" for eight years, until, alas, they too lose support and become the "outs" again.
2. Other plausible explanations are offered. One has been called the "Washington boomerang effect." It holds that state voters often vote for governor against the party in power in Washington. Indeed, the party in

power in Washington has lost every Pennsylvania gubernatorial term in the 14-election string, with the sole exception of Dick Thornburgh's second term victory in 1982.

3. Another explanation is incumbency. The influence of incumbency in the eight-year cycle likely looms large. For the last 38 years of the cycle, incumbent governors could run for a second term. All have and all have won. It is only when incumbents cannot run that the parties switch control of the governor's office.
4. And there are other possible answers - including the health of the economy. Voters often hold governors responsible for economic conditions. The economy was likely the reason Dick Thornburgh only narrowly won re-election in the 1982 recession year.

Obviously, many factors could matter. It is, in fact, most likely that the eight-year cycle is caused not by a single factor, but by a multiplicity of factors. Collectively, they may explain the cycle, but none alone is sufficient to do so.

So, the eight-year cycle is real. A pattern like it could not have happened by chance. But no one can predict with confidence that the cycle itself will continue. It might. It might not.

What if anything does this forecast about 2010? Should Republicans start their inaugural planning? Or should the ill-fated Democrats get an early start with the moving vans? The answer is an emphatic NO to both questions!

The eight-year cycle is not a crystal ball or the modern equivalent of sacred entrails used to predict the future. It tells us much about our politics and explains much about what has mattered in past elections. But there is nothing mystical about the eight-year cycle. It is, statistically speaking, a trend line (a rather impressive one at that), but one easily explainable by several causes. And those causes could always cease to operate in the 2010 election.

To sum up, the eight-year cycle neither anoints state Republicans nor condemns state Democrats. It does, however, point to certain compelling factors in state gubernatorial politics - factors that have mattered now over some 14 past elections. Whether they continue to matter is likely to determine the outcome of the 2010 gubernatorial election.

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