Gubernatorial Archetypes
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Does history repeat itself? Are there regularly occurring cycles and patterns in historical events? The question itself is provocative. Adherents of history as deja vu point to rhythms in human affairs that seem to suggest consistency and regularity—but others disagree and argue that historical time unfolds without regard to predictable patterns or cycles. Both sides make some good arguments.

But both camps also often find some common ground in the notion of historical archetypes—generally understood as prototypical figures that appear and reappear across historic eras. Pennsylvania political history in particular has produced a rich mix of gubernatorial archetype candidates.

In modern times there have been five gubernatorial archetype candidates that have appeared again and again.

- Businessman as Candidate
- Prosecutor as Candidate
- Statewide Official as Candidate
- Big City Mayor as Candidate
- Congressman as Candidate

Since 1970, and including this year, there have been five open seat gubernatorial elections. Collectively, they illustrate all five archetypes. No one archetype seems to confer an absolute electoral advantage. Instead, electoral success is situational—dependent on how well a particular archetype fits the times and the dominant issues. The brief accounts that follow demonstrate these patterns.

1970: BUSINESSMAN AS CANDIDATE VS STATEWIDE OFFICIAL

In 1970, the economy of Pennsylvania was in shambles, as the state wrestled with its perennial problem—a large state budget deficit and high unemployment. The outgoing Republican governor Ray Shafer proposed an income tax, but the Republican candidate in 1970, incumbent Lieutenant Governor Ray Broderick, opposed it. His solution to the budget crisis was to lay off the state’s work force and cut waste from the budget. Broderick’s Democratic opponent was Milton Shapp, a Montgomery County businessman, who had never held an elected public office. He used his success in business to argue persuasively that it would take a businessman to get the state out of debt, its leadership problems solved, and the economy jump-started. Shapp equivocated on the tax question, blurred his liberal position on social questions, and relished his outsider image. Taxes, jobs, and the stability of state were the issues that Shapp rode to victory. Shapp’s big point that it was time to elect a businessman was not lost on the voters. He easily beat Broderick by some 500,000 votes.

1978: PROSECUTOR AS CANDIDATE VS BIG CITY MAYOR

No year was better for a crime busting gubernatorial candidate than 1978. Between 1970 and 1978—the years of Shapp’s governorship—almost 400 Pennsylvania politicians were indicted, convicted or pleaded no contest to a variety of criminal and civil charges. No single issue has dominated a governor’s campaign the way in
which political corruption did in 1978. And never did the background of a candidate fit the issues of the moment better.

The Republican nominee in 1978 was Dick Thornburgh who, as US Attorney in Western Pennsylvania, had won 40 convictions of politicians in both parties. His campaign against the corruption in state government was unrelenting. True, he received help from the inept campaign run by his opponent Pittsburgh Mayor Pete Flaherty, but few could deny that political corruption was the dominant issue in 1978, and that Thornburgh’s credentials were impeccably suited to take advantage of the issue. He was the crime-fighting prosecutor, and the electorate responded. He won by slightly more than 200,000 votes, despite a 900,000 thousand Democratic voter registration advantage.

1986: STATEWIDE OFFICIAL AS CANDIDATE VS STATEWIDE OFFICIAL

Personalities, leadership, and character dominated the 1986 governor’s election—to a degree unmatched in any other open seat governor’s election in recent times. The Republican candidate, Lieutenant Governor Bill Scranton, faced a series of accusations that he had used “recreational” drugs as a young man, dodged the draft, and was a practitioner of transcendental mediation.

The comparison between the youthful Scranton, who was also portrayed as failing to show up for his job as presiding office of the State Senate, with his seasoned and more mature opponent, Bob Casey, was readily apparent. Casey, who had been elected twice as Auditor General and had sought the governorship three previous times, was viewed as more mature and ready to govern than Scranton.

Without any overriding or critical issues, voters looked at personalities, leadership, and character, and Casey, whose campaign James Carville brilliantly ran, was viewed by voters as more competent and ready to govern than his opponent. In the end, voters chucked out the incumbent party, and voted, though narrowly, for the more seasoned and experienced statewide candidate, Casey. His 80,000-vote margin was the closest gubernatorial election in modern times.

1994: CONGRESSMAN AS CANDIDATE VS STATEWIDE OFFICIAL

No clear issue advantage accrued to either major party’s candidate, as the 1994 gubernatorial got under way. Crime and the economy were the major issues, but neither Democratic candidate Lieutenant Governor Mark Singel nor Republican candidate Congressman Tom Ridge had an edge with voters on how to reduce crime or improve the Pennsylvania economy.

Singel failed to obtain the support of his boss, Governor Bob Casey, which was actively exploited by the Ridge campaign. But Singel was weathering that storm when an unexpected turn put his campaign on the ropes.

A parolee from the state prison system, Reginald McFadden, released on the recommendation of the Pardons? Board, headed by Singel, was charged with rape and murder. The Ridge campaign immediately began a series of attack commercials accusing Singel of being soft on crime and of bad judgment for recommending the pardon. The McFadden incident was lethal for the Singel campaign, as his popularity plummeted.
Simultaneously the Ridge campaign began to trumpet the congressman?s early, but limited career as an Erie County prosecutor, a part of his resume largely seen as irrelevant before the McFadden news. In the end Ridge was elected by fewer than 200,000 votes. His credible, tough rhetoric against criminals, buttressed by his credentials--slim though they were, proved the deciding edge in a tight race.

2002: STATE OFFICIAL AS CANDIDATE VS BIG CITY MAYOR

The 2002 gubernatorial election provides the voters with a match up of two different archetypes: an elected state official running against a big city mayor. This is the fifth time since 1970 in a non-incumbent governor?s election that a statewide official has won a major party nomination and the second time for a big city mayor.

Both candidates for governor, Ed Rendell and Mike Fisher, are superbly qualified to lead the state. But different archetypes produce different experiences. Fisher?s experiences are in dealing with state issues and problems, while Rendell?s are with running the state?s largest city--different challenges, different skill requirements, different archetypes. How voters finally view these archetypical experiences will go some way in deciding who becomes the state?s next governor.

This review of gubernatorial archetypes also suggests two other patterns that will be fascinating to watch as the campaign plays out. One of these seems to augur well for Ed Rendell, the other for Mike Fisher.

Auspicious for Rendell is the dismal win record of statewide officials running for governor--since 1970, only one victory in four attempts. But, Fisher should find some solace in the bleak history of big city mayors as archetype candidates. Since 1958, the big city mayor is the only archetype that has never won an election.

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