Two transcendent influences pervade American electoral politics. One is that only winning really matters; second place is last place in our system. The other is that incumbents usually win and challengers usually lose. These two apparent iron laws of contemporary politics have profound consequences not just for our politics, but also for the way we interpret and construe our politics.

Because only winning matters and most winners are incumbents, we tend to remember past elections from the incumbent’s perspective. Challengers loom as the electoral phantoms of American political history.

This is regrettable. Even when they lose, challengers have much to teach us. No better example exists than the coterie of challengers that have taken on Pennsylvania gubernatorial incumbents in modern Pennsylvania history.

Since 1974 when Pennsylvania governors could succeed themselves, there have been four elections featuring a major party challenger pitted against a gubernatorial incumbent. These have produced four distinct challenger types:

1. **Businessman Challenger** - In 1974, Democratic Governor Milton Shapp sought reelection in the post Watergate period. Republicans had a number of choices to face Shapp, including golfing great Arnold Palmer, football coach Joe Paterno, and basketball star Tom Gola. They chose instead Drew Lewis, the head of Snelling and Snelling, the largest private sector employment agency in the world. Interestingly, Lewis, like Shapp, was a very successful businessmen—who had not sought public office before 1974. But Lewis was also bland, bordering on dull, and more importantly he was trapped in a national campaign environment he could not control. The legacy of Watergate overwhelmed Republicans. Shapp clobbered him by some 300,000 votes.

2. **Congressman Challenger** - In 1982, Republican Governor Dick Thornburgh stood for reelection in the midst of the greatest economic downturn in the state since the Great Depression. Democrats were optimistic about their electoral chances, but chose as their nominee a little known congressman, Allen Ertel, from north central Pennsylvania. Ertel remained a mystery to voters throughout the campaign and suffered from anemic fundraising as well. Still the recession was the most significant aspect in the election and Thornburgh squeaked out a narrow 51-percent to 48-percent victory. This race, like its predecessor in 1974, was influenced considerably by national trends—in this case the economy which worked against the incumbent.

3. **State Elected Official Challenger** - In 1990, Democratic Governor Bob Casey faced Barbara Hafer, the first women nominated by a major party. Hafer had been an Allegheny County Commissioner and was the Auditor General of the state. A staunch pro-choice candidate, she barely won the Republican primary against a pro-life candidate and had trouble unifying her party. Casey, on the other hand, took a united party into the contest while the economy of the state, though not robust, was strong enough to produce balanced budgets without tax hikes. Hafer was somewhat gaffe-prone during the campaign; at one point she called Casey a "Red Necked Irishman." Casey went on to a stunning 68-percent to 32-percent victory, the largest in modern times.
4. **State Legislator Challenger** - In 1998, Republican Governor Tom Ridge sought reelection; the national and state economies were good, the state budget had been balanced easily for the previous four years, and most of his first term agenda had been passed by the legislature. Ridge’s opponent was an obscure state House member, Ivan Itkin, who had served in the House for more than two decades and was his party’s minority whip. Itkin had impressive professional credentials (as a mathematics PhD and as a physicist), but he had virtually no statewide recognition, campaign funds, or party organizational support. He was left to his own devices and Ridge easily defeated him, winning 57-percent of the vote.

Four observations emerge from this brief foray into recent electoral history:

1. **National political forces and economic trends almost always influence gubernatorial races.** In 1974 and 1982, they were major factors in the outcome--once helping the challenger, the other time hurting. In 1974, the challenger, Drew Lewis, was hindered by the post-Watergate political environment and his party suffered in a year that nationally produced a Republican rout; but in 1982, Allen Ertel, the challenger was helped by the severe national recession that made incumbents vulnerable across the country.

2. **Finding a challenger type to run successfully against gubernatorial incumbents has been elusive.** Each of the challengers profiled above represent distinct candidate types drawn from varying walks of life. But none of them has won as challenger even though several of the same types, i.e., businessman, congressman, and statewide official, have won in non-incumbent years. So far no ideal challenger type has emerged to run and win against incumbents.

3. **Challengers don’t control the political environment in which they run.** Many factors crucial to determining victory or defeat can not be influenced by challengers. These include: the incumbent’s record in office; the presence or absence of scandal; and prevailing national trends. When incumbents lead scandal-free administrations, accomplish a large part of their initial campaign agenda, and are not hindered by the national economy or political trends, it is very hard for challengers to get traction running against them.

4. **Challengers generally have a limited political life span after their runs.** Barbara Hafer is the great exception. After her loss in 1990, she went on to win three statewide elections. But she is virtually alone. Drew Lewis did achieve cabinet rank in two different presidential administrations, but never again ran for office. Alan Ertel subsequently ran unsuccessfully for statewide office. Ivan Itkin retired from politics after his challenge. Only Hafer was ever considered again as a serious gubernatorial candidate.

Does any of this offer insight for the impending 2006 battle between incumbent Ed Rendell and challenger Lynn Swann?

Obviously it suggests Swann has his work cut out for him. It also offers some clues as to what factors might make victory possible--a juicy scandal or two in the Rendell administration wouldn’t hurt, nor would the appearance of a dark cloud over the state’s economy. Swann can even hope for a sharp turn in the national mood against incumbents. Any or all of this would help. But in the end, Swann needs to make the case that Rendell has failed in office and that he as challenger would be a needed improvement. Rendell, running for re-election with a 700 million dollar surplus and a shiny new budget of goodies for almost every major constituency in the state, isn’t making that easy.