April 23rd is the birthday of James Buchanan, the 15th president of the United States--and the first and so far only president elected from Pennsylvania. He was born in 1791, and so, if you were counting, that would be 211 candles on the cake. No need, however, to check your social calendar. No large celebrations are planned.

Buchanan was president when the Union dissolved and the Civil War began. He is undoubtedly a classical example of being the wrong man at the wrong place at the wrong time. He generally gets low marks from historians who criticize both his policies and his inaction leading up to the war. Buchanan does have his defenders and a revisionist historian or two have even argued that the Lancaster man's reputation as a failed president is unfair.

Unfair it may be - but solidly entrenched it most definitely is. What's more, Buchanan's legacy has come to cover much more than Buchanan himself--to what scholar Pierce Lewis has referred to as the "Buchanan effect" -- the notion that Pennsylvania itself is a land of political hacks and third-rate political mediocrities.

Quoting Lewis: "The 'Buchanan effect' is particularly striking when Pennsylvania's political figures are compared with the legion of distinguished statesman from several large, old eastern states nearby. With the exception of Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania never produced a (great) political or intellectual leader.... Only on rare occasions have Pennsylvania's governors or U.S. senators exerted much influence or commanded much respect beyond the borders of the state."

Lewis's views find considerable support in the historical record especially with regard to the presidency. In fact, the dismal record of Pennsylvania in producing presidents is one of the enduring riddles of American political history. Compared to other large neighboring states like Virginia (eight presidents), New York (four presidents) or Ohio (seven presidents), Pennsylvania is a piker. Only Buchanan himself, elected in 1856, was born in Pennsylvania.

Not only Presidents, but presidential candidates as well have been in short supply. One has to go back more than 120 years to find the last time that a Pennsylvanian was even nominated by a major party; then in 1880 the Democrats nominated Winfield Scott Hancock, one of the heroes of the battle of Gettysburg.

In modern history, Pennsylvania's most serious presidential bid was made in 1964, when Gov. William Scranton challenged Barry Goldwater for the Republican nomination, a challenge made too belatedly to be effective. Since Scranton's time, Pennsylvania has been mostly a footnote on the roster of serious presidential candidates.

Nor has the "Buchanan effect" been limited to the presidency. For a state of its size, Pennsylvania has produced only a modest number of national leaders. For example, it has been 100 years since a Pennsylvanian served on the Supreme Court. Nor historically have a large number of Pennsylvanians served in the cabinet or provided other high profile national leadership.
Moreover, the state's congressional delegation has been mostly undistinguished. Excepting perhaps Thaddeus Stevens and Senate leader Hugh Scott, few Daniel Websters, Henry Clays, or Robert La Follettes are to be found among the roster of Pennsylvania's members of Congress. More common are colorful if disreputable figures like Simon Cameron, Boise Penrose and Matthew Quay—all legendary Pennsylvania political bosses.

The bosses in fact represent the major way that Pennsylvania has exercised national political power - covertly and behind the scenes. The aforementioned Cameron, Penrose and Quay projected Pennsylvania power into national politics brilliantly from the Civil War until well into the 20th century. But they did so sub rosa and ever so discreetly. And they were more interested in patronage and contracts, than policy and government. More recently political leaders like David Lawrence, William Green, and Drew Lewis have also exercised considerable influence on national politics - again mostly behind the scenes.

Numerous theories have been advanced to explain the paucity of national leaders produced from Pennsylvania. Pennsylvanians, after all, are not without considerable achievements in many fields, including business, industry, education, and the arts. It is in politics specifically that the gap has loomed most prominent. The question is why.

The prevailing and persuasive answer is that Pennsylvania's "political culture"—going back to the time of Penn himself—has encouraged a kind of practical utilitarian approach to public affairs. Eschewing great political theories or abstract reforms, Pennsylvania has been a place where government and politics have been seen as just another job to get done, and not necessarily a job that required the greatest lights to do it.

Consequently, the state's best and brightest have been more likely to pursue careers in business or commerce than in politics or policy. The laurels (and the financial rewards) have gone to the Carnegies, the Wanamakers, and the Mellons. Absent or otherwise occupied have been the Wilsons, the Roosevelts, and the Kennedys. A few years ago the Almanac of American Politics put it boldly in describing Pennsylvania's political history: "(Pennsylvania) was a state where important people were in business, and politics was left to faintly disreputable leaders."

But this past may not be prologue for Pennsylvania. And as we observe the birthday of Pennsylvania's only president, it may be worth pondering why that may be so.

To begin, there is abundant evidence that the state's political culture is changing along with its economy. We are now decades removed from the industrial-based economy that historically typified the state. Only about 20 percent of Pennsylvanians remain employed in traditional manufacturing.

As the economy changes and evolves, the political culture cannot remain the same. Increasingly we see evidence of change in many areas of political life. Reform for example, long a dirty word in Pennsylvania politics, increasingly gets a respectful hearing in the state's political dialogue, as in tax reform, judicial reform and land use reform.

And politics are cleaner. Patronage is mostly a practice of the past, while the "Court House Gangs" are gone or mere shells of their former existence. Corruption, long the bete noire of Pennsylvania politics, has been reduced dramatically over the past 25 years. Not since Milton Shapp left office in 1979 has there been a major corruption scandal in the executive branch of state government.
And equally important, more of the best and the brightest are now going into Pennsylvania politics. In the congressional delegation, the list of emerging leaders has expanded in recent years. These rising stars--Chaka Fattah, Jim Greenwood, Melissa Hart, and Curt Weldon, to mention four--are smart, aggressive and are developing a mastery of public policy and the legislative process that clearly separates them from the typical member Pennsylvania sent to congress in the past.

In the Senate, the break with the boss tradition began in the 1950s, with Joe Clark and Hugh Scott. Until his untimely death John Heinz was attracting national attention. And recently, Rick Santorum, who barely masks his presidential ambitions, started his second term by becoming a member of his party's leadership. His colleague, Arlen Specter, thrives in the Senate, and has mastered its arcane rules. Santorum and Specter are a clear break with the boss tradition.

And there is still more reason to believe that Pennsylvania is emerging from its long lassitude in national affairs. The state is now politically competitive. Neither national party can take Pennsylvania's electoral vote for granted. Statewide leaders increasingly get respect nationally. Former Gov. Dick Thornburgh was considered as a running mate for George Bush, the elder. More recently, Tom Ridge has emerged as a serious national leader.

Change has never come fast or easily in Pennsylvania. It probably never will. But change is coming. And with it, finally and blissfully, will come an end to the "Buchanan effect," and Pennsylvania's long-standing role as the Rodney Dangerfield of national politics. That's a long overdue birthday present probably no one will appreciate more than President Buchanan himself.

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