Nothing seems more certain in the very uncertain world of politics than the notorious "PA Election Cycle" -- the statistically impressive trend in Pennsylvania gubernatorial elections whereby voters habitually change parties every eight years; Republicans win for eight years; then Democrats win; and so on since the 1950's. No one knows for sure why the cycle works that way, but few doubt that it reflects deep and enduring forces in Pennsylvania political life.

This particular piece of political tradition, however, is apparently failing to intimidate the three GOP candidates aspiring to end that eight year cycle by defeating Ed Rendell next year. The 2006 gubernatorial campaign is still operating well below the public radar screen, with Rendell's putative opponents wooing potential supporters at Republican meetings, receptions, private dinners and cocktail parties. But they are running, and running hard.

Could 2006 be different? Could the out party unseat the incumbent party after only four years for the first time in more than 50 years? It's much too early to know, but clearly one thing is different in 2006. The GOP thinks its Democratic opponent is vulnerable, and they have three credible candidates to back up that assessment.

As usual with PA gubernatorial races--and as always with Ed Rendell's races--money matters considerably. The governor has become Pennsylvania's version of King Midas--able to raise as much as he needs. Meanwhile, Rendell's opponents over the years have more nearly reprised some desperate Dickensian figure--always huffing and puffing to match Rendell's fundraising prowess.

The Philadelphia Inquirer has characterized Rendell's three putative opponents as" the legislator," " the brand name", and " the celebrity," referring respectively to State Senator Jeff Piccola, former Lt. Governor Bill Scranton, and former Pittsburgh Steeler and sports broadcaster Lynn Swann. And these simple typologies do sum up what most people now know about them. There is, of course, much more--each of the three has some impressive strengths as a candidate, but also some daunting weaknesses. Looking at them as a whole, one is reminded of the classic erector set game, popular with children and adults during much of the 20th century. For those not old enough to remember, erector sets were assemblages of metal beams of varied angles, nuts and bolts, together with pulleys and gears and other connections that allowed a user to construct just about anything from the raw material available.

State Republicans have the equivalent of a political erector set with this trio--more than enough material to build themselves a strong gubernatorial candidate. If Republicans could put the pieces together correctly, they would have "erected" the perfect nominee. Putting the pieces together of course is what made the original erector sets so popular.

While GOP strategists are working on that particular challenge, here's a thumbnail sketch of the strengths and weaknesses each Republican brings to the contest.
**Piccola**
He has solid credentials with the conservative wing of the party, presumably enhanced by his newly announced opposition to abortion rights. Social conservatives are likely to find his message appealing. He also has a command of the major issues likely to be debated next year. And no one has more staunchly opposed Rendell's agenda. Piccola also has strong ties to organizational Republicans and support from some important Republican interest groups.

Piccola's challenges, however, are awesome. GOP moderates win statewide general elections, not staunch conservatives, notwithstanding Rick Santorum's victories. Even more of a problem is his small political base in Central Pennsylvania. The famous Pennsylvania T is often critical in general elections when it provides crucial margins to Republican candidates running statewide. Ironically, it usually fails to deliver enough votes to carry its own candidates to party nomination. Equally important, Piccola's ability to raise campaign cash may be limited by his geographic base.

**Scranton**
Scranton enters the race as the "establishment" candidate. Experience counts in Pennsylvania politics, and Scranton has his share. He was Lt. Governor for eight years (1979-1987) and an unsuccessful GOP gubernatorial nominee in 1986.

He has a famous family name, and his father is a near legendary former governor and one time presidential candidate. By temperament and ideology, Scranton is the moderate in the race. He is more likely than the other two candidates to do well in the crucial Philadelphia suburbs, and would certainly do well in his own region, the northeast.

Scranton's flaws, however, are not inconsequential. Some speculate that he lacks the "fire in the belly" necessary to defeat a tenacious opponent like Rendell. Scranton's flirtation with candidacy four years ago has only deepened the impression that he might not be serious enough about running and winning. On the stump he tends to get philosophical, without a sharply honed message.

But Scranton's most serious weakness is left over from his tenure as Lt. Governor and gubernatorial candidate in the 1980's. Scranton, the candidate, was savaged with a series of political ads remembered collectively as the "guru spots."

Considered unfair and malicious by many, the guru ads, nonetheless, painted Scranton as an irresponsible hippie practitioner of transcendental meditation, who could not be trusted with the sobering responsibilities of state government. Scranton's current supporters believe the 1980's episodes are long behind him, but his absence from public life for almost 20 years has kept the questions alive.

**Swann**
Swann's greatest advantage may be that he is widely liked and admired, while few know much about him politically. He is best known as a Hall of Fame Pittsburgh Steeler who played during their glory days in the 1970's. Swann is now a network sports broadcaster. In his limited involvement in politics, he has impressed many, including some GOP heavy hitters, who describe him as bright, serious, and credible. At gatherings, his appearance brings an excitement and an enthusiasm rare at political events. As an African American, some strategists believe Swann could cut deeply into Rendell's solid black support in Philadelphia.
Swann is clearly a celebrity candidate, and celebrities have won in some parts of the country, notably California and Minnesota. However, celebrity candidacy is largely untested in Pennsylvania. How a celebrity politician might actually do in Pennsylvania is an interesting question—but so far an unanswered one. Certainly Rendell running against Swann would point out the latter's administrative inexperience, and challenge his management credentials.

In fact, Swann's greatest challenge may be his inexperience in politics. Running for major office in Pennsylvania has not been easy for political tyros. Few have attempted it--virtually none has been successful. Swann regularly broke records as a Steeler. He will have to break a few more to reach the governor's chair in 2006.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2005 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.