The ubiquitous public polls tell the story, and if you are Governor Ed Rendell, it’s a stark story indeed. Up for re-election for a second term, the governor’s job is in jeopardy. In the vaunted "horse race" between him and Lynn Swann, he is barely ahead of a candidate who has never sought government office before. Worse perhaps--in the polls' fine print--the percentage of voters who have a favorable opinion of him are just above 40 percent, his job approval hovers around 45 percent, and his "re-elect" scores (the proportion of voters who thinks he deserves re-election) are about 40 percent.

Perhaps most problematic for Rendell is the timing: it is happening at precisely the point in the political cycle it is not supposed to happen. Under Pennsylvania’s celebrated "eight-year cycle," Rendell, as a first-term incumbent, should be entering the re-election period as a prohibitive favorite destined to win a second term just as incumbent governors or incumbent parties have for more than half a century.

Why Rendell is not now the runaway favorite is worth trying to unravel--not only because it provides insight into the political career of one of the nation’s most fascinating politicians, but even more important for what it reveals about Pennsylvania’s politics and policy in these strange times.

The theory of an eight-year cycle in gubernatorial politics is critical context here. It is based on an almost clockwork-like pattern established during the past half century of elections in which Pennsylvania voters have ousted the incumbent party from the governor’s mansion every eight years. The cycle began in 1954, and since then, we have consistently had a pattern of eight years of Democrats followed by eight years of Republicans.

Since the 1970s when governors could succeed themselves, the typical re-election in the eight-year cycle, with one exception, has been a cakewalk. Milton Shapp easily dispatched Drew Lewis in 1974, Bob Casey clobbered Barbara Hafer in 1990, and Tom Ridge easily beat Ivan Itkin in 1998. The only tough race was Dick Thornburgh’s 1982 squeaker--that occurred during the most vigorous recession since the Great Depression.

The alternating pattern of eight years in and eight years out has been now elevated to the status of an iron law used to predict the outcome of gubernatorial elections in Pennsylvania. Under its assumptions, the Democrats should win the 2006 governor’s election.

And they well might. But just now things seem iffy and for the first time in modern times the much ballyhooed eight-year cycle could be in danger, and with it, Rendell’s re-election.

Several reasons best explain the competitive nature of this gubernatorial election:

- **Mood of the Electorate**--Rendell faces a growing anti-incumbency mood, fueled in part by last year’s legislative pay hike and reinforced by a drumbeat of negative stories about the culture and lifestyle in the state capital. Nationally, Bush’s low approval rating could help Democrats, but the anti-incumbency sentiment in Pennsylvania might prove to be an even bigger liability for the Governor.
Rendell’s Base in the East--The seeds for the closeness of the race lie in the way Rendell won the 2002 race. He did so despite losing 49 of 67 counties, pulling off this feat of legerdemain by winning 60 percent of the vote from the Lehigh Valley and Southeast where 40 percent of the voters in the state live. Rendell is still "Beast of the East," but he has largely been unable to extend his base beyond the eastern part of the state.

Weakness in the West--In 2002, Rendell convinced voters that he had the leadership to move the state forward on the basis of his extraordinary success as mayor of Philadelphia. But that claim has become a double-edged sword for him. He’s so identified with the City of Brotherly Love that he’s alluded to facetiously by some as the "Governor of Philadelphia." At the same time, his approval rating in the western part of the state remains weak. This is potentially a huge problem for him, given the still vigorous anti-Philadelphia sentiment alive and well in many parts of the state.

Some Policy Failures--It is true that Rendell has delivered on much of his agenda, but some of it has been controversial, such as the slots gaming law and Act 72, the ill-fated effort to get school districts to accept gaming money for property tax relief. Conversely, the political credit he claims for increased economic development monies and education funding has been undermined by failure to get property tax relief enacted into law. Then, too, the pay hike fiasco--in which Rendell was intimately involved--continues to damage him politically. Both property tax relief and the pay hike are huge issues in the southwest, where the political damage to the governor is the greatest.

A Viable Opponent--Rendell has an opponent who arguably is more formidable than any gubernatorial challenger in modern times. Moreover, in Lynn Swann, he has drawn a candidate very popular in the region of the state that Rendell is the weakest. The race is now virtually even--something unprecedented in earlier eight-year cycles. The Swann-Rendell contest--a match up of heavyweights--is both attracting enormous state and national attention. With each candidate's ability to raise millions of dollars, this election will be like no other in the eight-year cycle.

So, is the venerable eight-year cycle about to be retired? The answer to this question must be a firm maybe. Rendell is probably facing one of the toughest elections of his career. But Swann has some weaknesses of his own. And Rendell is a superbly skilled politician who has demonstrated winning ways, honed in the rough and tumble of Philadelphia politics.

Certainly the eight-year cycle will be tested like never before; its amazing 50-year streak may end. State politics may never be quite the same. But there are caveats not to be ignored by the prudent or wise; Pennsylvania’s unbroken string of party changeovers has been no fluke or quirk --- the eight-year cycle has worked for a very long time. And for an even longer time, Pennsylvania politics has been confounding those who would try to bring change to it.

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