Governor Ed Rendell will be sworn in for his second term on January 16th. As the curtain rises on Act Two of his tenure as Pennsylvania’s chief executive, the Governor confronts some imposing challenges.

Most of these are left over from the first term, like property tax reform, mass transit, highway funding, and the nagging Medicaid deficit. But there is also one ominous portent hovering over him not encountered in the first term.

History!

History has not been conspicuously kind to second termers. Rendell, like every governor re-elected before him in the modern era back to Shapp, will be fighting the curse of the second term. It has been called "secondtermitis," and it’s a political malaise almost all re-elected governors exhibit to some degree. For Pennsylvania governors, second terms, like second helpings, often seem better ideas before the fact than after.

There are some well-established reasons for second term problems. Many processes inherent in governing coalesce during second terms and tend to militate against a governor’s continued success. These include:

- **The Political Clock Runs Down**--Power in American politics is governed by the clock and calendar fixed terms of office. As a governor’s second and final term runs down, the focus shifts inexorably from him and his administration to the future--to the next election, and the next governor. It has become a truism that by midterm of the second term, the major accomplishments are over, and a governor’s opportunity for significant initiatives has expired.

- **Amorphous Second Term Agendas**--A second problem is that re-elected governors have accomplished much of their first term agenda, leaving them with modest second term goals or worse, bereft of any new ideas. Governors spend their reelection campaign touting their first term while talking little about the second term. Consequently, they begin second terms with narrower or more limited goals than the first term--and sometimes no real second term agenda at all.

- **Gubernatorial Burnout**---The third problem often manifests itself as a sense of ennui or lack of focus. Especially after the 6th year midterm, governors can lose interest in the office. Their focus turns toward future opportunities and challenges. Shapp in the 1970’s ran for president during his second term; in the 1980’s, Thornburgh’s eyes turned toward the Capitol in Washington, eventually becoming Attorney General; Casey in the 1990’s had severe health problems; and Ridge never finished his second term, resigning to become President’s Bush’s Homeland Security Advisor.

- **Staff Attrition and Stagnation**--A fourth problem is the gradual loss of key staffers. Successful governors build successful gubernatorial staffs during the first terms--and these staffs determine to a significant degree how successful a governor has been. But into a second term, the senior staff often drifts away from the governor, or if they remain, they tend to lose energy and enthusiasm.
The Accumulated Political Cost of Governing--Finally, second terms are often when the bills are due. The inevitable bad decisions, policy failures, and other missteps of the first term bear their foulest fruit during the second term. Mistakes are uncovered, ill-conceived programs become obvious, and malefactors are revealed. All of this tends to bog down a second term and erode its political capital.

How do Governor Rendell’s chances for a successful second term look in light of the historical precedents arrayed against him? Actually his prospects look pretty good. Rendell has formed a habit of beating political expectations and often turning conventional wisdom on its head. Moreover, he has some critical advantages his predecessor didn’t have. So he has a reasonable chance to avoid or at least minimize secondtermitis.

But there are some constraints. The Governor faces a radically changed political climate as he starts his second term: he will face a more conservative legislature--not just in the State House among Republicans, many of whom were elected on anti-pay hike, anti-tax increase themes --but also among many Democrats who were elected on platforms urging more fiscal restraint, and a less expansive and intrusive state government.

A second constraint is limited time. Terms run a full four years, but in practice, Rendell has to accomplish his major goals in the first two years. Midterm for a re-elected Rendell will be the equivalent of midnight for the second term. After midterm it’s all over but the shouting--and not so much of that.

But Rendell seems to understand the altered political climate. Moreover, he has already given signals that his second term agenda is going to be the exception in that it will be bold and ambitious. Indeed it may rival his first term agenda. He wants to extend health coverage to many of the 1.2 million Pennsylvanians without any coverage, deal with mass transit deficits and highway maintenance, and move toward more energy independence with energy efficient and environmentally friendly sources of energy production. These programs will be costly and might well involve a heavy dose of state regulation. They will not be enacted without significant opposition.

But, Rendell brings political resources to the table that distinguishes him from most other re-elected governors. He is at the apex of his power. He won reelection with a huge 60 percent of the popular vote, a landslide by any standard, and his popularity with Pennsylvanians is the highest since he first assumed the governorship in 2003.

In addition, he was a major factor in assisting his party win control of the State House; in fact his own campaign contributed about eight million to help Democrats win at all levels of government. Finally, but not least important, he leads a united Democratic Party into his second term.

In the end, Rendell can be the master of his own fate. The dismal history of second terms and a record littered with frustration and disappointment may come to include the second four Rendell years as it has for most of his predecessors. Certainly the prevailing forces in the political system converge in that direction. But there is an alternate scenario. For Rendell, secondtermitis can serve as a cautionary tale. If he remembers his predecessors’ experiences, avoids their miscues, and stays focused on his new agenda, he seems poised to preside over the rarest of political phenomenon--a good second act.

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