The Message

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Pundits love to dissect election returns to discern what hidden message the voters might have left behind as they departed the polling booth. But, the message to be taken away from many elections, especially off-year elections, is that there was no message at all. These contests seldom provide a referendum on anything more profound than which candidate had incumbency at work, had the best advertising, had bored the voters the least, or had made the fewest mistakes. The November 6 contest in Pennsylvania was no exception. An election in which 75% of the voters were AWOL sends no great message.

But it certainly raised a lot of questions:

Here are four of them--all four will be asked again and again--as we head into the 2002 midterm election cycle. Warning--some of the answers proffered provide revealing glimpses into why this column is called Politically Uncorrected.

Q. Do we still have a competitive two party system in Pennsylvania or are we reverting back to earlier times when Republicans dominated state politics so completely that Democrats rarely won an election?

A. The two party system in Pennsylvania hangs by a thread. And that thread is the Democrats hope that they can rebound with a victory in next year’s gubernatorial race. If they don’t, it is just about time for the full figured lady to begin to sing.

The scope of the debacle suffered by state Democrats over the past decade is breath taking. They have by individual office lost 20 of the last 25 statewide elections. Democrats now control exactly one statewide row office, while Republicans control virtually everything else.

The Governor and Lieutenant Governor are Republicans. Ditto the state legislature, where the Republican’s have solid majorities, 105 to 98, in the State House and in the State Senate, 29 to 21. The congressional delegation is now majority Republican, 11 to 10, and both U.S. Senators are Republican. To add insult to injury, the State Supreme Court, for almost 30 years in Democratic hands, is now Republican by a slender four to three majority, and they continue to hold onto the State Superior Court. The Democrats are left with a narrow five to four majority on the Commonwealth Court.

Against this backdrop, Republican victories in this year’s statewide judicial races were stunning. Seven of seven elections went to the GOP, including one Supreme Court seat, three Superior Court seats and three Commonwealth Court seats. The election itself offers dramatic evidence of Republican ability to win statewide.

But more profoundly, these results point to the fragility of two party competitions in Pennsylvania. In the context of a seemingly endless string of GOP wins going back to 1994, it is now time to ask whether the
Democratic Party has become a permanent second party in Pennsylvania? And what must Democrats do to become competitive once again?

Q. Does party registration have any relevance at all to the outcome of elections?

A. Not much—and apparently less every year. Partisanship is alive and well in the State, but there seem to be fewer and fewer partisans around if one measures partisanship by voter registration. The Democrats have an official voter registration edge that has hovered between 450,000 and 500,000 thousand for the past decade, but it is meaningless.

In fact, when actual voting behavior rather than registration is measured the evidence is now overwhelming that the State has about 250,000 more “behavioral “Republicans. The election of 2001 may come to be remembered as the election that revealed a truth both dreaded and deplored by political party professionals. Party registration is at best a weak indicator of voting in statewide contests.

Whether local politics will eventually follow the statewide trend is unclear at this point. But the trends are present. Certainly voter registration is less important than at any time since the emergence of the 2nd party system in the 1830’s. Witness the ability of Republicans to win in Democratic strongholds in the southwest: Or check out the party registration of the County Executive (Republican) in “Democratic” Allegheny County or look at the party registration of the woman (Republican) who holds the congressional seat in “Democratic” Beaver County.

Or ask the Republicans what happened to their candidate for State Senate in a special election last week in heavily Republican Montgomery Country. She lost. What is clear is that a voter’s registration card provides less and less information about how that voter will actually vote.

Q. Why is turnout so low in our elections? Why don’t more people vote?

A. There is no truth whatsoever to the rumor that we call these elections “off-year” because most voters take the election itself off. That said, turnout in last Tuesday’s election was dismal—about 25% statewide, and much lower in many areas. The low turnout set new records in Pittsburgh and in Philadelphia. In fact, only a few areas of the state managed to struggle above the 30% turnout level.

But some perspective is helpful here. Historically voter turnout varies considerably across the four year voting cycle. The year after a presidential election—with its emphasis on local and judicial races—typically produces low turnout. This year, that pattern was exacerbated by the events and aftermath of September 11. Many candidates suspended campaigning for several weeks after the attacks, and, even after campaigning resumed, media coverage of candidates and races was sparse. Very probably, thousands of those voters who didn’t show up at the polls didn’t even realize there was an election. And it might not get better for a while. The evidence from earlier periods is that voting rates do not go up during wartime. Indeed, sometimes they go down.

Q. Why do state Republicans do better at getting their core supporters to the polls? What’s wrong with the Democrats base?
A. November 6 reaffirmed the efficacy of the most reliable strategy of electoral politics: turn out your base. The Republican Party does this consistently election after election--while Democrats do it only inconsistently, a fact largely responsible for Republican hegemony across Pennsylvania.

The GOP advantage is part organization and part demographic. The Republicans have stronger state and local party organizations that have adapted better to the new technologies of voter targeting. And their base is made up of voters whose educational and financial attainments make them more likely to vote, giving the GOP a decided edge in the turnout department.

State Democrats have a harder time. They have not matched the organizational and financial resources of the Republicans. And demographically Democratic core voters are not as likely to vote as Republicans.

But it's easy to make too much of Republican success here. If baseball is a game of inches, politics is a game of percentages, often-tiny percentages. The GOP typically has turnout percentages only 5% to 10% higher than Democrats. And most state elections where incumbents are not involved are still settled by 5 or 6 percentage points, sometimes less. These are small numbers that make big differences. Republicans are really not blowing state Democrats away. It just seems that way.

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