It’s been a mystery worthy of Sherlock Holmes. How does Pennsylvania do it? How does a state that has long been a political colossus in national elections and hugely important in presidential politics fail so dismally, election after election, to produce presidential aspirants?

Pennsylvania’s first, only, and maybe last president was James Buchanan, who held the office leading up to the Civil War. Historians still argue about how effective or ineffective he was. Let’s just say you are unlikely to see many statues of him littering the capitol grounds the next time you visit Washington. After Buchanan, there was one resident Pennsylvanian nominated by a major party, Winfield Scott Hancock in 1880. Hancock, abona fide Civil War hero, veteran of Gettysburg, and widely respected military commander, was defeated by James Garfield in the closest popular vote in presidential election history. Since then it has been slow going for would-be presidents from the Keystone State. By any calculus, it’s a rare event that “Pennsylvania” and “presidential candidate” are used in the same sentence.

From the Civil War through the late New Deal, machine politics and patronage mostly occupied politicians in the state. “Making” presidents was far more interesting than becoming president during those times, and few Pennsylvanians found themselves even mentioned as presidential contenders.

There have been some exceptions, mostly favorite sons or other dark horse candidacies. U.S. Senator Philander C. Knox was a Republican candidate in 1908. In 1920, Governor William Sproul had some support at the GOP convention, as did Attorney General Mitchell Palmer at the Democratic convention. And Governor Arthur James was a dark horse candidate at the Republican Convention in 1940. All four were Pennsylvania natives.

In addition, there have been runs by Pennsylvanians born in other states. Governor William Scranton made a serious run for the GOP nomination in 1964. In the 1970s, Governor Milton Shapp made a short-lived effort to capture the Democratic nomination. In the 1990s, Senator Arlen Specter launched a bid for the Republican nomination, and Rick Santorum is a likely candidate in 2012. Scranton was born in Connecticut, Shapp in Ohio, Specter in Kansas, and Santorum in Virginia.

So it’s been more than 70 years since a native Pennsylvania resident made any kind of run for the presidency—and more than 130 years since a native Pennsylvania resident was nominated by a major party. The careful reader will notice a certain parsing of the phrase “native Pennsylvania resident.” That’s because there really has been no great shortage of Pennsylvania natives running for president—just a shortage of Pennsylvania residents.

That’s right! Plenty of Pennsylvania natives run for president. But none of them happen to live in Pennsylvania at the time. The 2012 cycle is illustrative. At least three native Pennsylvanians are now being seriously discussed as major candidates for the Republican nomination: Mitch Daniels, former governor of Indiana (born
in Washington County); Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the U.S. House (born in Dauphin County); and Ron Paul, current Texas congressman (born in Allegheny County).

The 2008 cycle produced a similar bumper crop of native Pennsylvanians running from adopted states. Ron Paul ran that year, too. Joining him were Pennsylvania natives Joe Biden, then U.S. senator from Delaware (born in Scranton), and Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa (born in Pittsburgh).

Further back, you will find Orin Hatch, U.S. senator from Utah (born in Pittsburgh); Alf Landon, governor of Kansas (born in Mercer County); and James G. Blaine, U.S. senator from Maine (born in Washington County). The latter two, Landon and Blaine, were actually nominated by the GOP—Landon in 1936 and Blaine in 1884.

So, as Sherlock Holmes might say, “It’s elementary, my dear Watson.” (Holmes never actually uttered that infamous phrase, but you get the idea.)

If you were born in Pennsylvania and want to run for president, you might also want to move to another state.

It needn’t be far. Joe Biden just slipped over the border into adjoining Delaware. But for most, the further the better. Texas, Kansas, Iowa, or even Indiana all work just fine.

This jarring conclusion—that native Pennsylvanians need to become expatriates to run for president—begs an explanation. Unfortunately, there really isn’t any. Or more precisely, there isn’t any that’s very convincing. Political scientists and historians have argued for some time that Pennsylvania’s nitty-gritty political culture, machine politics, and pervasive corruption just doesn’t attract the best and the brightest to state politics. That may account for some of the paucity of state presidential candidates in earlier times, but it is less helpful in recent decades.

Some of Pennsylvania’s draught of presidential candidates may be just bad luck. John Heinz, before his tragic death in 1991, was believed by many to be a future presidential candidate. Former Governor Dick Thornburgh came very close to being named to the national GOP ticket as George H.W. Bush’s running mate. Similarly, former Governor Tom Ridge was on many short lists for vice president.

But be it bad politics or bad luck, the lesson is the same. If you were born in Pennsylvania and plan to run for president, you probably need to do some traveling first.

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