The Future of the Pennsylvania Democrats
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Exactly one year ago the compelling political question in Pennsylvania was: can Ed Rendell win the Democratic gubernatorial primary? Ah, what a difference a year makes.

Back then there were a few true believers who thought he would, but many more skeptics who thought he wouldn't. As it turned out, the true believers were right while the skeptics were wrong.

Now as we begin a new year the new compelling political question is: Does Rendell's impressive gubernatorial victory augur a revival in the fortunes of Pennsylvania's moribund Democratic Party? State Senate Democratic Leader Bob Mellow has probably expressed this hope as clearly as anyone in a recent interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune: "There's a feeling that the new sheriff (Rendell) is in town, with a new philosophy, new ideals, who will help Democrats in Pennsylvania and nationally."

Again there are some true believers who predict Rendell will, indeed, bring a Democratic resurgence, but probably many more skeptics who expect the Rendell win will have little effect on the Party.

Who is right? Will the true believers once again be proven to be Pennsylvania's politically prescient ones---or will the skeptics get it right this time? Frankly we aren't sure, but we do know that Rendell and the Democratic Party have their work cut out for them.

Possibly the Democrat's most urgent need is to acknowledge that they are no longer Pennsylvania's majority party, and probably haven't been for the past decade.

The 'official' 500,000 Democratic statewide voter registration edge is fiction. Our colleague Berwood Yost's analysis of actual voting behavior reveals how misleading the official statistics are. He estimates, based on actual voting 'performance', that the state does not have a half million more Democrats than Republicans, but perhaps 250,000 more Republicans than Democrats.

The Democratic slide from majority party status has been slow but inexorable. From the 1960's through the 1980's, the state's politics was truly competitive, with either party capable of winning statewide elections--and both did. But all that has changed.

Demographics explain some of the change. Overall Pennsylvania's population has been growing at a miniscule, albeit positive rate. However, the slight growth masks vast population losses in some parts of the state as well as healthy gains in other parts. So, too, does a realignment of voters that has favored Republicans.

With some exceptions since 1970, the larger population losses have come in parts of the state that traditionally support Democrats, while the growth gains have come in Republican leaning areas. The growth in the suburbs and south central Pennsylvania, in particular, has been a bounty for the state GOP.
The electoral trend to Republicans is pronounced. Today, both US Senators are Republican, and likely to stay that way for some time. Arlen Specter has already announced for an unprecedented fifth term and Rick Santorum's term runs until 2006. Other than Harris Wofford's brief tenure as US Senator (1991-1994), the Democrats have been shut out since 1968.

In the U.S. House, the Pennsylvania delegation--long Democratic dominated--slipped away to the Republicans with Melissa Hart's victory in a southwestern district in 1998. Thanks to creative redistricting, Republican control of the state's congressional delegation--now 12 to 7--is likely to remain that way for sometime to come (unless the Democrats figure out a way to reduce the 98% reelection rate for sitting members).

The picture looks little better from the state level. There, Republicans now control two of three state row offices--Attorney General and Treasurer. Auditor General Bob Casey was until Rendell's victory, the only Democratic statewide non-judicial office holder.

In the General Assembly, Republicans prevail as well. Solidly entrenched in the state Senate for most of the time since 1980, they have for the past several elections been slowly increasing their ruling margins in the state House.

Even worse, legislative redistricting may have put Democratic control of either legislative chamber beyond reach for the balance of the decade. Nine state House seats have been shifted from Democratic areas in the western part of the state since 1980--all nine are now in Republican hands.

Nor is the appellate judiciary any oasis for Democrats. The Republicans now have elected majorities on the Superior and Supreme Courts. Only the Commonwealth Court remains Democratic. In fact, in 2001 the Democrats lost all seven appellate court races.

The point of this long and painful (to state Democrats) litany of Republican dominance is simple: Rendell's victory was quintessentially a personal one that occurred in the context of a decade long Democratic Party slide. Nothing in his victory provides any magic wand to a Democratic Party, stuck in a steep and historic decline.

But Rendell has several options--none of them mutually exclusive. He can party build at the state and county level. He can run Rendell candidates for various state and local offices. And at all time he must be cognizant that the success of his legislative program--the most important test of his success as governor--is in the hands of the Republican controlled state legislature, which surely will regard Rendell's political activities with outright hostility.

Rendell's victory brings no magic wand, however, it gives the Democrats one tangible advantage to achieve whatever options he pursues--the ability to raise cash, a lot of it. For it is cash--the presence of it for Republicans, and the absence of it for Democrats--that as much as any other factor explains the rise of the former and the decline of the latter.

We do not know how Rendell will proceed, but we do know that we won't have to wait very long to find out. An early test will be the races for several appellate court seats this year, especially the Supreme Court seat
being vacated by retiring Justice Stephen Zappala, then again in 2004 when all three-row offices holders are constitutionally banned from seeking third terms.

Pennsylvania Democrats now stand at a critical crossroad. Will the party continue its historic slide towards permanent minority party status--or more happily for them, once again will it become competitive with Republicans.

Rendell, with his drive, vision, and enormous fundraising capacity, provides them with the chance to reverse their deadly decline. But without his active involvement, it seems unlikely to happen--and even with him the challenges are formidable.

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