A Certain Uncertainty
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The sun rising in the morning, inevitable death, and inexorable taxes: these are among the certitudes of life. To these unavoidable experiences might be added one more sure thing—the persistent reelection of political incumbents. In fact, the habitual re-election of incumbents in Pennsylvania and across the nation comprises one of the fixities of modern life.

Election statistics back up this impression. Nationally House congressional incumbent reelection rates have exceeded 95-percent for almost two decades. In recent election cycles, fewer than ten percent of House seats (about 30 of 435 seats) are considered "competitive." In Pennsylvania, state legislative incumbents have been reelected even more consistently, presently averaging 98-percent. At most, seven of the state’s 203 state house seats are truly competitive in any election cycle.

Studying incumbent success has become a cottage industry among political scientists. It is well understood why incumbents win with such consistency. Inherent in incumbency are enormous advantages over challengers: including name recognition, constituent service operations, experience in office, and money to fund campaigns. Incumbents also win because voters tend to prefer the status quo unless events seem to be going badly.

The dominance of incumbents, in fact, has become such a given that a serious contest here or there draws statewide and even national interest. It is news if an incumbent is even seriously challenged and big news when the occasional incumbent is knocked off.

But some big news might, indeed, be in the forecast. Several recent polls, notably Pennsylvania’s Franklin & Marshall College Keystone Poll, suggest the approaching 2006 election cycle may break the iron grip incumbents now have on public office. Certainly, 2006 could be a tough year for incumbents. Dare we say it: 2006 could be the year of the recumbent!

The June 2005, Keystone Poll tells the Pennsylvania story. It shows both incumbent Governor Ed Rendell and incumbent U.S. Senator Rick Santorum with soft reelect numbers and less than stellar job performance. In the poll, Governor Ed Rendell’s job rating was an unimpressive 42-percent favorable, while his critical reelect poll numbers were 38-percent, meaning fewer than four in ten voters believe he deserves to be reelected. (Political analysts generally worry about an incumbent when the reelect numbers fall below 50%.)

Senator Rick Santorum didn’t do much better. His job rating was 43-percent and his reelect numbers were 42-percent, only marginally better than Rendell’s. Moreover, Pennsylvania voters seem to be in an unhappy mood. Almost half of the electorate thinks Pennsylvania is off on the wrong track.

Neither Rendell nor Santorum is scheduling the moving truck just yet, but their job approval and especially their reelect scores should be deeply troubling to them. No incumbent wants to run for reelection with job
ratings and reelect scores that indicate some 60-percent of voters don’t approve of them and don’t support their reelection.

But Pennsylvania’s embattled incumbents are not alone in experiencing voter disdain. Recent national polls suggest that the Pennsylvania mood extends well beyond state borders. Both the New York Times poll and the Washington Post survey documented similar anti incumbency feelings in the national electorate. The Times poll characterized Americans as "in a season of discontent" and reported for President Bush "one of the lowest approval ratings of his presidency," and gave Congress "one of its lowest ratings in years." Bush’s job approval was only 42-percent and Congress’s approval rating was an anemic 33-percent. Nationally, only one in three people think the country is on the right track.

Some 60-percent of those surveyed in the Times poll said they believe the Bush administrations priorities were not their own priorities. And a striking 71-percent of poll respondents said that Congress does not share their own priorities.

The Washington Post similarly reported a dark mood among voters:

Do these low approval ratings mean trouble for individual incumbents? Not necessarily. Voters often distinguish carefully between institutions like Congress and individual members. Moreover, incumbents tend to get in trouble only under tightly prescribed conditions: specifically, instances of personal scandal; serious problems in the economy; and voter ire about taxes. None of these circumstances seem to be operating in the present voter discomfit.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that voters are in high dudgeon, and not at all in a positive frame of mind. Somewhat strangely, the voter distemper doesn’t seem aimed at a particular party. Some sort of partisan bias might be expected moving toward mid-term of a second presidential term. Traditionally, voters do grow weary with the party in power, and often mid-term contests--with some exception--cost the in-party seats in both the House and the Senate.

But both political parties seem to be in the line of fire this time. In Pennsylvania, the two most likely victims of voters’ discontent are an incumbent Democratic governor and an incumbent Republican US Senator.

Still, there is something ominous about the present voter mood and a bit puzzling too. It’s not clear why voters are so grouchy, or what might dissipate the crankiness.

The last time we saw this growing unrest with incumbents was the early 1990’s that spawned Ross Perot’s third party movement. Then, voters in unprecedented numbers began to tell pollsters they would consider voting for a third party. That discontent ultimately spread and fueled the Gingrich revolt in 1994 when the Republicans took over both chambers of Congress.

Today’s voter angst seems erringly similar to the early stages of that political cataclysm. Thus far, no Perot like character has appeared and no definitive issue like the national deficit--which propelled the Perot
candidacy forward--has materialized; but it is clear that voters are growing weary with the status quo and frustrated with incumbents.

The stage seems set for another one of those periodic disenchantments with the major parties that have occurred regularly throughout American history. Since the Civil War the major political parties have always survived these cyclical purges to remain the country's dominant political institutions; the country, however, has always been changed by them--in ways both large and small--and always impossible to anticipate.

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