

WOFFORD/THORNBURGH: A METAPHOR FOR OUR TIMES?

By Michael L. Young

Conventional wisdom is a wonderful thing, not because it's usually right, but because it's so wonderfully flexible. For example, last summer we in Pennsylvania were assured by the conventional wisdom that former governor, then US Attorney General, Dick Thornburgh could not lose his bid to replace the late John Heinz in the US Senate. Thornburgh had money, name recognition, a strong record as governor, was an able campaigner, and a shrewd strategist. He had survived everything the Democrats had thrown against him in the 1970s and 1980s, winning re-election in the midst of a wrenching recession in 1982 and finishing his two terms with a budget surplus, credit for cutting taxes and approval ratings which stayed high years after he left office.

A Cakewalk for Thornburgh?

Surely what the Democrats were throwing at him in the 1991 special election wasn't the kind of opponent likely to keep George Bush's top lawyer from getting a good night's sleep. In fact, Pennsylvania governor Bob Casey's appointment of Harris Wofford as interim senator was the standing joke in Harrisburg. Throughout the spring and early summer Casey made it worse than it had to be, enduring an embarrassing public spectacle in which one potential nominee after another said thanks, but no thanks, to the governor's blandishments.

Finally after a humiliating public rejection by Lee Iacocca, Casey named Wofford at a May press conference attended mainly by a stunned Harrisburg press corps, and by glum State House Democrats who said things like "it could be worse," "Harris is a quick study," and "when you know him better you'll be surprised."

The conventional wisdom was helpful here, too. Wofford wasn't a serious

candidate. How could he be? The guy was wearing all the wrong labels—a traditional liberal in a state that hates liberals, a 65 year old ex-college president, ex-Kennedy aide who had never run for any office, had virtually no recognition outside the political community, and no money. Running Wofford against a heavyweight like Thornburgh might have appealed to the ancient Roman hankering for a little fun at the colosseum on a dull afternoon—but it was not the stuff of serious politics.

The Great Reversal

Of course, it didn't turn out quite that way. Thornburgh's August lead began dribbling away in September as an aggressive press corps pressed him on BCCI and other alleged malperformance at the Justice Department. Newspaper polls reported Wofford's closing the gap in late September. Then, Thornburgh's weak showing in a farcical debate moderated by Fred Friendly opened the dike. By the time heavy spot advertising began in mid-October, Wofford—for whom money was now pouring in—had his momentum established.

Even so, the result on election day stunned most observers, who were expecting a close election, as Pennsylvania statewide races often are. But Wofford, surging behind an election day organization unprecedented in modern Pennsylvania politics, won that rarest of election trophies—an "upset landslide"—trouncing Thornburgh 55-45% in heavy turnout.

What Happened?

How did Wofford do it, defying all odds to become the first Pennsylvania Democrat elected to the US Senate since 1962? The conventional wisdom is ready to be helpful here, too. Pundits assure us that there were some very deep things going on with voters: "projection" of

anger, "subliminal" anxiety about the economy, and something called "symbolic voting." All of this gets complicated, but apparently Thornburgh lost because the voters were mad at George Bush, nervous about the economy, and hostile to government. Thornburgh was just a handy target. Wofford exploited all this by linking the health care issue to voter fears about the health of the economy. Health insurance was a "metaphor" for myriad unarticulated issues driving the electorate.

Well, maybe so, but I think given the conventional wisdom's track record here, we might want a second opinion. Fortunately one is available in the data provided by the KRC-Harvard School of Public Health poll of 1000 respondents who had voted in the Pennsylvania election.

A Health Care Issue Race?

The conventional wisdom suggests the race didn't really revolve around the health care issue. But what do the polling data say? The KRC-Harvard post-election poll asked its respondents unprompted which two issues "mattered the most" to them. (Table 1). Wofford voters were far more inclined (64%) to mention national health insurance than were Thornburgh voters (39%). Many more Wofford supporters (72%) than Thornburgh backers (50%) named some set of two issues—indicating that though Wofford was the incumbent senator he had more of the challenger's typical profile. Thornburgh was, of course, the much more established political figure.

The salience of national health insurance was tested in a variety of questions. In one of these, KRC asked about the importance of the issue. ["In deciding how you would vote in the race for senator, was the enactment of a national health plan the single most important factor, one

Table 1
Which two issues mattered the most in deciding how you would vote for Senator?

Issue	Total Sample % Mentioning	% of Wofford Voters Mentioning	% of Thornburgh Voters Mentioning
National Health Insurance	50	64	39
Recession and Jobs	21	27	15
Taxes	29	29	27
Abortion	8	7	11
Education	8	7	8
Crime/Drugs	5	2	6
Defense Spending	5	5	5

Note: 17 other issues were mentioned, all by less than 5%.

Source: Survey by KRC Communications for the Harvard School of Public Health, November 5-6, 1991.

of several important factors, or not an important factor?] Extrapolating the poll responses to Wofford's election day 55 to 45% victory allows us to "net out" the health vote for both candidates. We see that Wofford virtually buried Thornburgh with voters for whom health insurance was an important issue, scoring 45 of his 55 points there (81% of his vote), whereas Thornburgh received only 24 of his 45 points from the same voters (53% of his vote). Only among voters for whom health insurance was "not an important factor" did Thornburgh enjoy a clear edge (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Cleavages in the Electorate on Health Insurance

There are some revealing demographic cleavages on the health insurance issue with respect to income, gender, and political party. Pennsylvanians reporting less than \$30,000 income were three times more likely (30%) to say health insurance was the "single most important factor" in their vote than those reporting \$60,000 or

more (10%). Women (26%) were much more likely than men (17%) to describe it as the single most important factor.

The party-based differences on health insurance deserve some attention. The KRC/Harvard poll reported self-identified party affiliation of 42% Democrat, 36% Republican, 15% independent, and 7% other/refused. Thornburgh's decisive loss tends to obscure the fact he did about as well in his Republican base as Wofford did with his Democratic base. Thornburgh won 75% of Republicans voting; Wofford 79% of Democrats. Wofford's edge with independents, together with Democrats outnumbering Republicans, provided him his winning margin.

Party identification was strongly linked with position on the health issue. For example, in naming two issues that mattered most in voting, the Republican-Democrat gap on health insurance was 15 points: Democrats (56%) were much more likely than Republicans (41%) to say that health insurance was an issue that

mattered most. On none of the other 25 issues mentioned in the KRC/Harvard poll was the party gap more than five points, and the average gap between the parties (excluding health insurance) was just three points. Slightly more than one in four voters (28%) said health insurance was not an important factor to them. Overwhelmingly, the latter were Republicans.

Perspective

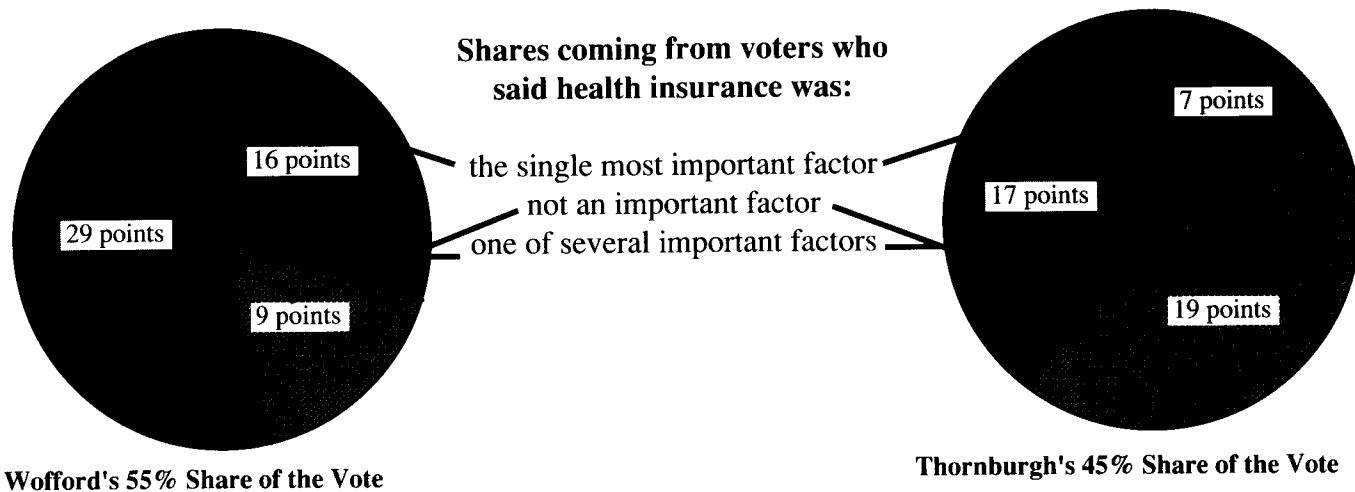
Harris Wofford made national health insurance the slogan of his dramatic come from behind campaign against Dick Thornburgh, telling voters in his ads: "If criminals have the right to a lawyer, I think working Americans should have the right to a doctor. I'm Harris Wofford and I believe there is nothing more fundamental than the right to see a doctor when you're sick." He chose this theme only after his polls showed voters by a 5 to 1 ratio favored some type of national health insurance, with more than half favoring it strongly. Moreover, Wofford's focus

Table 2
How important to your vote was the National Health Plan issue?

	Total Sample	Wofford Voters	Thornburgh Voters
The single most important factor	21%	30%	15%
One of several important factors	47	52	39
Not an important factor	28	17	43
DK/Refused	3	1	2

Source: Survey by KRC Communications for the Harvard School of Public Health, November 5-6, 1991.

Figure 1
The Shares of Wofford's and Thornburgh's Vote,
Based on Declared Importance of the Health Care Issue



Question: In deciding how you would vote in the race for senator, was the enactment of a national health plan the single most important factor, one of several important factors, or not an important factor?

Source: Survey by KRC Communications for the Harvard School of Public Health, November 5-6, 1991.

groups revealed growing anxiety among Pennsylvanians about losing their private insurance and widespread belief that health insurance was one problem that government could do something to solve.

Despite the enormous attention paid to health insurance during the campaign, the prevailing wisdom about Wofford's "upset landslide" is that it didn't matter that much. The conventional view is that Thornburgh lost it with a lackluster campaign, hobbled before it started by national economic problems which reflected on the Bush administration. Health insurance was simply a "metaphor" for Wofford, a way for him to tap into middle

class anxiety and frustration, while "sending a message" to Washington.

What Actually Happened?

But the polling data reviewed above at least suggest that Pennsylvania's special election was no proxy protest vote. It was fought over and decided by the health insurance issue. At least one in five voters considered it the "most important issue" and more than half the electorate described it (unaided) as a key issue. Moreover, poll data reveal that the health insurance issue produced some sharp cleavages in the electorate, especially between Republicans and Democrats. In Pennsylvania

health insurance became very much a partisan test.

Three things seem clear from analysis of the KRC/Harvard poll of Pennsylvanians voting in last November's special election to fill the unexpired term of John Heinz. First, issues mattered to the voters. Second, Harris Wofford won his race because he controlled the issues that mattered most. And third, the biggest issue was health insurance. Wofford made his campaign a referendum on national health insurance; his victory proved he knew what he was doing.

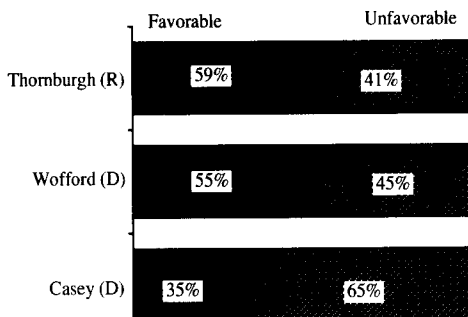
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Another View of the Pennsylvania Race

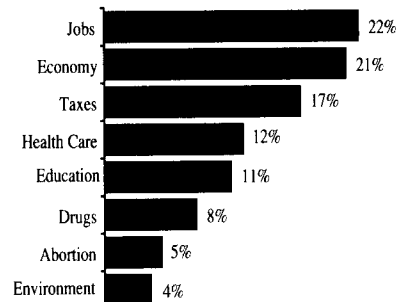
[Data from an October 25-27, 1991, survey of Pennsylvanians conducted by the Millersville University Center for Politics and Public Affairs for WHTM-TV]

The Millersville University survey strongly suggests that diffuse dissatisfactions centered around the economy, rather than health insurance, fueled Wofford's come-from-behind victory.

Question: ...Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of...?(among those who had an opinion)



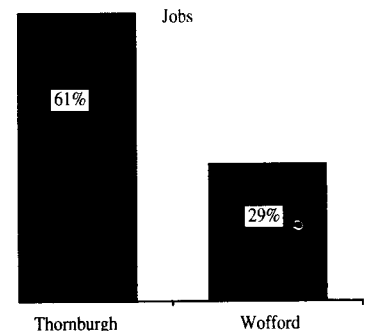
Question: ...[P]lease tell me which one is the most important issue in Pennsylvania today.



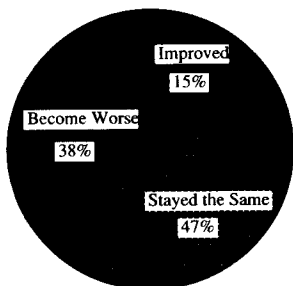
Health Care



Questions: Which candidate for US Senate do you think is better qualified to work on health care issues? ...better able to bring jobs to Pennsylvania?



Question: In the past year, do you feel your personal economic situation has improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse?



Question: In the past year, do you feel that Pennsylvania's economic situation has improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse?

