

Cold comfort for Corbett: He's not alone on 'endangered guvs' list

By Thomas Fitzgerald, Inquirer Politics Writer

The modern record was 1962, when voters jettisoned 13 incumbents.

Republicans such as Scott Walker of Wisconsin, Rick Snyder of Michigan and Florida's Rick Scott are threatened. Endangered Democrats include Pat Quinn of Illinois, John Hickenlooper of Colorado and Connecticut's Dan Malloy.

A combination of local political turmoil, self-inflicted wounds and a restive mood among voters is likely at the root of the gubernatorial job insecurity, analysts say.

"There's something of a revolt in these states against the status quo," said Kyle Kondik, managing editor of Sabato's Crystal Ball, the political forecasters at the University of Virginia. "One theory is that people are mad - if you look at the national polls, they don't like the way the country is going - and this is being expressed at the state level against the executive who's closest to home and on the ballot."

Some of the governors have added to their own troubles with controversial or polarizing decisions, but the economy is the underlying common denominator in many contests, said Jennifer Duffy, senior editor of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report.

"Michigan and Illinois, for instance, are not recovering as fast as some states in the country," Duffy said. "I would say that's a big part of Corbett's problem as well."

Corbett inherited a weak state economy when he took office in 2011. Early term cutbacks in education spending and the fallout from the child sex-abuse scandal that engulfed Pennsylvania State University's football program also weakened his popularity. And the tight-lipped Corbett, a career prosecutor, has never really mastered the communications aspect of his job. In that regard, at least, his garrulous predecessor, Democrat Ed Rendell, was a tough act to follow.

Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn in Illinois is staggering after tax hikes and spending cuts, including to education, enacted during his term. The state has had fiscal problems even after Quinn canceled some public-union contracts to try to save money.

In deep-red Kansas, Gov. Sam Brownback, a conservative Republican, is in deep trouble after doubling down on an aggressive series of tax cuts, which have not produced promised economic or state revenue growth, and he has had to slash state services. (The Kansas GOP is also deeply divided between moderate and conservative factions).

Though the split is less pronounced, there are echoes of that phenomenon in Pennsylvania. Corbett has been unable to get most of his agenda, including liquor privatization and pension reform, through a GOP-controlled legislature; he secured passage of a transportation-spending package only after a prolonged fight.

Democratic Gov. Malloy of Connecticut won by a few thousand votes in 2010 and is locked in a re-match with Republican Tom Foley. Malloy raised taxes and cut public-union benefits, which alienated a key part of the Democratic base. Foley is being attacked for his record as a private-equity investor.

"In 2010, a lot of open [gubernatorial] seats switched parties, and those are the people who are up for reelection now," said John Weingart, director of Rutgers University's Center on the American Governor. "Some of them won races they probably wouldn't have won if they'd run two years earlier or later, in a presidential year - and they may be vulnerable as a result."

Since 1948, incumbent governors who have sought reelection have been successful 72 percent of the time, according to analysis by Rutgers' center, part of the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

That sounds high, but it pales in comparison to job security in the U.S. House. Despite record low opinions of Congress as an institution, the overwhelming majority of representatives running for reelection win - 93 percent, on average, since 1954.

The parties have been able to draw House districts to their advantage, reducing their competitiveness in elections.

U.S. senators, like governors, have to run statewide, and they've enjoyed an average of 85 percent reelection rate since 1964.

"It's tough economic times, and that can hurt incumbent governors in the same way it does presidents," Rutgers' Weingart said. "You don't have as much good news to deliver, building projects, preserving parkland, expand education programs - there's less money to do that."

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