

A New Report Presented by the
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**GOVERNORS AND THE
PRESIDENCY:
HOW THEY CAMPAIGN,
HOW THEY GOVERN**

Walter Shapiro

Fellow, Brennan Center for Justice;
presidential journalist and author

Jill Lawrence

National columnist for Creators Syndicate and
contributing editor to U.S. News and World Report

RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY
OF NEW JERSEY

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"No governor in the nation was more responsive to the challenge of the depression. And he combined executive decision with political address. He faced a Republican legislature hostile to public power, labor, conservation, and social reform. Yet his use of the radio to rouse the folks at home often forced legislators to accept measures they initially opposed."

– "The Crisis of the Old Order" by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

The governor, of course, was Franklin Roosevelt. Embedded in that quotation is a theory – or perhaps a myth – that has influenced American politics for the past eight decades. And that is there is no better preparation for the White House than serving as governor, preferably in tumultuous times.

Elected governor of New York in November 1928, FDR was just mastering the levers of power when the stock market collapsed less than a year later. In response to the economic crisis, he was the first governor to set up a statewide relief agency and he pioneered putting the jobless to work on state conservation projects. The seedlings that Roosevelt planted in Albany during his four years as governor flowered into the New Deal after he was elected president.

But governors lack one vital presidential credential – foreign policy experience. This explains why, through the frightening years of the Cold War, the road to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue ran through Capitol Hill. Every president between FDR and Jimmy Carter (with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower) served in Congress.

Many of the sitting governors who made serious bids for the White House during this period also boasted diplomatic experience. Both Adlai Stevenson and Nelson Rockefeller had served in the State Department. And Rockefeller, for good measure, also had Henry Kissinger on his payroll as a personal retainer. It is telling that the biggest political gaffe of the 1960s (Michigan Governor George Romney admitting that he had been "brainwashed" by briefings in Vietnam) underscored that governors were too inexperienced to defend America against the Soviet threat.

Maybe former one-term Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter wouldn't have come to power without Watergate. But the renewed political popularity of governors in presidential politics also reflected the waning of the Cold War. Since Carter was elected in 1976, four of the last six presidents (covering 28 of the last 38 years) have been governors or former governors. Two other men who served as governor of Massachusetts (Michael Dukakis and Mitt Romney) won their party's nominations for president.

Gubernatorial experience has become a validator for would-be presidents. As former Ronald Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan put it, "Two successful terms as the governor of the nation's largest state showed that Ronald Reagan was credible as – and deserved to be taken seriously as – a major political figure. Everyone knew that Reagan was charismatic and conservative. But the added credential that he could run a complicated state well made him president."

In fact, between 1972 and 2012, more than 30 candidates with gubernatorial experience announced for president. And that was before the floodgates opened for the 2016 campaign. Eleven current and former governors have declared their candidacy for president: Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Jim Gilmore, Mike Huckabee, Bobby Jindal, John Kasich, George Pataki, Rick Perry and Scott Walker on the Republican side, along with Martin O'Malley and Lincoln Chafee for the Democrats.

Small wonder that even before the debates begin, the airwaves are clogged with candidates boasting about their skill at governing. As Kasich, who spent 18 years in the House before running for Ohio governor in 2010, put it to Megyn Kelly on Fox News, "There's nothing like the experience of being a governor, Megyn, because every day you wake up and there's another thing you have to tend to...and you have to be in charge. And guess what? At the end of the day, there's a bottom line."

Perry, who served 14 years as Texas governor, contrasted himself with Barack Obama while campaigning in Iowa. "Executive experience really matters," he said. Walker, in his second term as Wisconsin governor after two elections and a recall vote, made a similar point in a radio interview with conservative host Hugh Hewitt. "When you're a governor...you've got to lead, and you've got to listen to people who hopefully are smart or smarter than you are on any given topic," Walker said. "This president unfortunately...never led anything."

Jeb Bush trumpeted his own experience as a two-term Florida governor, although he left office in early 2007. At a Republican forum in New Hampshire, Bush stressed, "Accomplishment matters; leadership matters. Who sits behind the big desk as it relates to the presidency is different than perhaps United States senator or another job." George W. Bush made the same point in blunt fashion talking about his brother's White House aspirations. "Jeb has actually run something called a state," the former president said. "That's a skill that comes in handy where you're in charge of a very complex multifaceted organization."

In a mid-May interview with Fox News, Christie, the two-term New Jersey governor, waved off a question about his lack of background in foreign policy, saying, "Listen, foreign policy is something you can learn just like anything else. You can't learn how to make decisions other than by making them."

Hearing these comments, it is hard not to feel sorry for candidates like Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders, who are mere senators. Yet while voters over the last 40 years have expressed in polls a general preference for an unnamed governor over an unnamed senator as a would-be president, the tilt towards governors is not nearly as pronounced as political rhetoric might suggest.

The Polling Pendulum

In 1973, on the eve of the Watergate hearings with the nation still ensnared in Vietnam, the Lou Harris poll asked Americans the simplest distillation of the résumé question: "In the history of the United States, we have had some Presidents who were governors and some who were U.S. Senators. In general, do you feel being a governor is better experience for becoming President, or is being U.S. Senator better experience for becoming President?"

The answers were unequivocal: 55 percent opted for a senator while just 34 percent said a governor. This verdict may have reflected the Washington-centric nature of the era, foreign policy fears or simply that it had been 28 years since an ex-governor had occupied the Oval Office. Another possibility is that the question conjured up the vice president at the time, former Maryland Governor Spiro T. Agnew.

Over the next quarter century (until 1999) all polling questions about gubernatorial background and the presidency revolved around specific candidates. A Los Angeles Times national poll in late 1978 found that voters by a nearly two-to-one margin believed that former Governor Reagan had the character, talent and experience to be a successful president. In similar fashion, 61 percent of voters, according to a February 1988 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, agreed that "Michael Dukakis's experience as Governor of Massachusetts qualifies him to be an effective president." As late as October 1988 (with Dukakis on the cusp of flunking out of the Electoral College) 56 percent in a Harris poll still believed that his Massachusetts record offered "valuable experience."

A Harris poll earlier that year revealed a pattern that would crop up repeatedly – as soon as a polling question mentioned the words "foreign policy," voters reversed themselves and started expressing doubts about the value of gubernatorial experience. In March 1988, when Dukakis was still riding high, 54 percent of Americans agreed that the Massachusetts governor lacks "the foreign policy experience that a candidate for president should have."

Further evidence that question wording greatly matters in weighing the merits of gubernatorial experience can be found in two separate 1999 polls after George W. Bush, then the Texas governor, declared for president.

A June CBS poll inquired whether being governor of a "large state gives someone especially good experience that should train them to be president?" Not surprisingly, 61 percent of all Americans called it "good experience." But everything changed when the Pew Research Center framed the question a different way. In December 1999, Pew asked in a national sample which would be better preparation for the presidency: a governor with experience "as the head of an administration" or a senator "gaining experience in Washington and in foreign policy"?

Even though the Cold War was over and terrorism was still only a distant threat, Pew found that serving in Congress (56 percent) trumped gubernatorial experience (20 percent) in a landslide.

In 2003 and 2007, Pew posed the governor-versus-senator question both ways by splitting its national sample into two groups. When asked the simplest version of the question, Americans by a narrow margin opted to have an ex-governor as president rather than a former member of Congress. But when Pew employed different wording, once again – by a lopsided margin – Americans preferred a senator for president over a governor when they were reminded that such a would-be leader would offer "experience in Washington and foreign policy."

Since the 2012 election, however, the pendulum has begun to swing back in the direction of a governor's mansion as the best training ground for the White House. This trend may reflect the electorate's palpable distaste for Washington and the Congress. And it may also be influenced by the number of popular Republican governors and ex-governors discussed as potential 2016 nominees.

Asked in a March 2013 Quinnipiac University survey who they would prefer as president, voters across the nation chose governor over senator, 59 percent to 23 percent. Even more telling were the results of an April 2014 Pew Research Center poll. Once again, Pew asked Americans to pick between the administrative experience of a governor and the national security grounding of a senator. This time – even though the potent words "foreign policy" were included in the question – a national sample split evenly over which credential was better preparation for the presidency.

On the Trail

Just like senators, many a governor looks in the mirror and sees a president. After all, they tell themselves, they have managed and led. They are deciders. Who better to hold the most powerful job in the world?

In truth, the verdict on the performance of recent governors in the White House is decidedly mixed: Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton on one side of the ledger, Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush on the other. But what is clear – and the early skirmishing in 2016 underlines this – is that being governor is the perfect preparation for running for president.

The poll data on the political superiority of governors may be murky, yet their rhetoric on the stump is powerful. Michael Dukakis recently recalled a 1987 Democratic presidential debate in which he and Congressman Dick Gephardt squared off over executive-versus-legislative mindsets.

In what his advisers considered a key moment in the debate, Dukakis said to Gephardt, "You want a law, I want to act." Translation: You legislators talk endlessly and accomplish little. I get things done.

Gephardt for his part accused Dukakis of cramped vision. "I really think you're looking at this regionally," the Missouri legislator said. Translation: You are a provincial state official who doesn't understand the vast and glorious United States of America.

Although you wouldn't think so to hear governors talk, being a governor is not always an unadulterated plus in a race for national office. A demanding day job, a definitive record, a state image, even geography can work for and against governors aiming for the Oval Office. The same is true of their policy expertise, which is deep on the domestic side and shallow to non-existent as far as the wider world.

They do, however, boast some unquestionable assets. They have good communication skills and, in the age of the outsider, a near-universal and highly appealing aversion to Washington. Finally there is what they view as their trump card: I have run a state, therefore I am obviously the best person to run the country.

The Executive Edge

It's an article of faith among governors that their jobs are a practice round for life in the White House. On the eve of Richard Nixon's reelection in 1972 over a hapless Senator George McGovern, Hamilton Jordan sketched out this executive edge in the [initial memo](#) about a presidential campaign by Governor Jimmy Carter. "Since the nomination of John F. Kennedy, the Democratic Party has looked almost exclusively to the United States Senate for its national candidates and leadership," Jordan wrote in conjunction with media advisor Jerry Rafshoon. "...It does suggest, however, that the Democratic Party has been preoccupied with the United States Senate...at the expense of other sources in the party such as governors."

What you might call gubernatorial bearing can be as crucial as experience. "The big, big advantage is that you carry yourself like an executive," says former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, who ran for the Democratic nomination in 2004. "Your life as governor is about pragmatism, about evaluating situations based on the facts – which is not so common in Washington – and having confidence in your ability to talk to people from a position of authority. That's what people want to see in a president."

Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who ran briefly for the GOP nomination in 2011, says President Obama's 2008 nomination and 2012 reelection demonstrated the limits of a résumé entry. "The venting or vetting process for what the party voters at the primary level want is not highly correlated to the candidate's previous office or position," he says. Thus the Republican critique of Obama – that he was not well prepared for office because he lacked managerial experience – "is an interesting point and an important point but it's not necessarily what drives voting behavior."

Bill Richardson learned that when he tried in 2008 to capitalize on his status as a governor in a Democratic primary field of senators. “Having executive experience, being able to say that I could balance budgets and manage, was something that I had an advantage over others in the race,” he says. That idea was immortalized in an ad called [“Tell Me.”](#) “Tell me what you did as governor of New Mexico,” a bored job interviewer asks, then repeatedly interrupts Richardson’s attempts to tout tax cuts, job growth and other parts of his record. Finally he gets out a whole sentence: “New Mexico was 46th in teacher pay. Now we’re 29th!” The interviewer’s response: “For what we’re looking for, you might be a little overqualified.”

Richardson mentioned his job so often in debates that Obama, then a freshman senator, ragged him about it. “Jesus, I’m sick of you saying you’re a governor,” Richardson recalls Obama telling him. “He was kidding, but he probably meant it.”

Democratic primary voters weren’t looking for experience, Richardson says in retrospect. “They wanted inspiration. They wanted a rock star candidate.”

Furthermore, the much vaunted management expertise often turns out to be less than meets the eye. Take Texas, where the governor has few constitutional powers. “He basically has the bully pulpit and some appointments. It’s not like he’s got some cabinet system where he’s managing the whole state of Texas,” says Matthew Dowd, who was George W. Bush’s pollster. “The mayor of Los Angeles has more power than most of the governors that have run for president.”

That said, the managerial mindset is a central theme for virtually all governors who feel they should be president. It was vital to the campaigns that allowed Dukakis and Mitt Romney, another Massachusetts governor, to win their party nominations in 1988 and 2012. Competence was an element of the Dukakis campaign pitch in particular. But at least now, he doesn’t see that as paramount. “You’re not elected to be a manager. You’re elected to be a leader. And there’s a difference there,” Dukakis says. “On the other hand,” he adds, “there’s nothing wrong with being reasonably well organized *and* being a leader.”

The Outsiders

Not only can governors say they’ve run something – that something is far away from the beating heart of the Beltway. Carter’s first commercial from his quest for the 1976 Democratic nomination featured him saying, “I’m not a lawyer and I’m not from Washington.”

If the yardstick is physical distance between governors and Pennsylvania Avenue, there’s no disputing that they are outsiders. “They all have a distaste for Washington. It is in their veins,” says Joe Trippi, a media consultant who was involved in running presidential campaigns for Gephardt, Dean and former-and-future California Governor Jerry Brown.

When senators and House members go out on the campaign trail, they criticize Washington and then return to their roles in the city and establishment they are running against. Governors, by contrast, can depict themselves as outsiders without being hypocritical. “You need to be somebody that’s going to come in and ‘fix Washington.’ That’s what people have wanted in the last 25 to 30 years. Being a governor gives you the ability and the biography to have an authentic message to say that,” says Dowd.

That’s true even though states administer virtually all of the federal government’s welfare, health, education, housing and transportation activities. So governors “get the credit for all the federal money and programs,” says Clinton-era White House aide Elaine Kamarck, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. “People don’t see the linkages between the federal government and what they get that they like.”

With a former first-term senator in the White House and three more Senate freshmen running for president this year, it’s become clear that the ideal congressional career for aspiring presidents is a short one that ends before a politician forgets how to speak plain English. Often when ambitious politicians call him for advice, Trippi says, “The map in their heads is they run for a Senate seat, then run for president. I tell them they should be running for governor if that’s what they really want to do. The biggest handicap out there is being a multi-term senator or a member of Congress.”

Kamarck describes the contrast as “I fixed that because I got S. 235 out of committee” vs. “We built that road over there that you like.”

Immersion in what Trippi calls “the Washington soup” proved the undoing of veteran Senator John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. George W. Bush, in his book *Decision Points*, said Kerry had “the process-oriented mindset of a longtime legislator.” He was ready to pounce when Kerry infamously said that “I voted for the \$87 billion before I voted against it” (a reference to a pair of slightly different bills on war financing).

Governors do not speak to C-SPAN cameras in empty chambers. They don’t get tangled in parliamentary procedure or accustomed to talking without time limits, as Senate rules allow. They are in constant dialogue with state residents on practical matters that hit close to home. “The governors are in everybody’s life several times a week. They are much more there in people’s lives than a senator or congressman,” says former Mississippi governor Haley Barbour, who came close to running in 2012.

A governor’s constituents “have the sense of a personal relationship with you whether they know you or not,” Dukakis says. Though he’s known more for reading a book on Swedish land use planning during a beach vacation and less for Bill Clintonesque empathy, like many governors, Dukakis was an accomplished retail politician.

“Mike Dukakis took the T to work. He had a very very good sense of how to connect with people in politics. For all the talk of how he was wooden, that wasn’t true,” says Matt Bennett, a Dukakis campaign communications aide who is now senior vice president for public affairs at the center left think tank Third Way. “He was really good in house parties in New Hampshire, in stump speeches in Iowa. He was good at that because he had come up in a retail way, the way governors tend to do. He had shaken a lot of hands and looked a lot of people in the eye.”

That makes the nomination process, and its slow start in Iowa and New Hampshire, a natural fit for governors. “You’re on very comfortable ground because you’re operating at the state level,” Dukakis says.

On the Record

The primaries are also where a governor’s record tends to matter most, if it’s going to matter at all. It provides evidence of a candidate’s priorities and ability to achieve them. It’s where the party faithful who turn out in primaries can discern whether a candidate is on their wavelength.

If Republican hopefuls are telling voters that “I’m a conservative, here’s what I stood for, here’s what I fought for, here’s what I did,” their records can be useful as validators, says Pawlenty. By the same token, “if you say you’re conservative and your record is not, that can punch a hole in your boat.”

As Massachusetts governor, Mitt Romney solved the problem of uninsured “free riders” on health care by signing a law that later became the template for the federal Affordable Care Act. That hardly fit his self-described “severely conservative” narrative for 2012, and he rarely brought it up. But Stuart Stevens, Romney’s top strategist, points out that was also an incentive to bring up the rest of the Massachusetts record. “Arguably, we talked about it more because if the one thing voters knew about his Massachusetts record was health care, that was bad,” Stevens says. “So it was important to inform people about other aspects of it.”

Dean’s record in Vermont, which included expanded health coverage and the first civil unions law in the nation, fit well with typical Democratic priorities. But the year, 2004, was not typical. “The activists in the rank and file of the Democratic Party were desperately hungry for someone to stand up to George Bush” on Iraq, Trippi says. “Dean with his forceful stance against the war, that’s what was driving the candidacy.”

That singular clarity may have been rooted in Dean’s status as the only Democratic hopeful who never had a top-secret national security briefing, a theory Kamarck has advanced. But while it did set him apart in the field, some of his early advisers were unhappy. They were convinced that leading what amounted to a single-issue anti-war movement would negate his gubernatorial

advantage. “Governors are not hot. Governors are steady, they’re capable, they’re managers,” says Rick Ridder, Dean’s original campaign manager.

Dean’s “scream” to his supporters the night of the Iowa caucuses epitomized his transformation from manager to crusader. Trippi says he was making an ad about Dean’s record and how it would be the basis for his first 100 days in office, and planned to run it after the Iowa caucuses. But then Iowa “unraveled on us,” he says. Dean came in third and went on to lose the New Hampshire primary. The window to showcase him as a successful governor had faded. “I still kick myself” about not making that pitch earlier, Trippi says.

In 1988, by contrast, Dukakis won the Democratic nomination with an assist from “the Massachusetts miracle” – shorthand for the state’s economic revival during the 1980s. Unemployment was sharply down, personal income was sharply up, and notoriously high state and local taxes had plunged from the top of the national list to near the bottom. “It was very useful for him to winning the nomination,” says Susan Estrich, who was Dukakis’ campaign manager. “It was a short simple answer to the key question everybody was asking, which is what are you going to do about jobs.”

Four years later, Democratic nominee Bill Clinton’s record as governor of Arkansas was decidedly not useful. George H.W. Bush and the GOP branded him “the failed governor of a failed state,” a slogan that even turned up on buttons worn by convention delegates. In [one Bush ad](#), a narrator said that after 12 years of Clinton, Arkansas was the 45th worst state in which to work, the 45th worst for children and the worst for environmental policy, and had seen the biggest increase in rate of serious crime.

Exercising one of the political perks of being a governor, Clinton tapped into his network of fellow Democratic governors to counter the assault. At an August 1992 press conference, 14 governors praised him as an effective education and welfare reformer who was lifting his state. “I’m working very hard in New York to fail the way Bill Clinton has in his state,” Mario [Cuomo said](#). Ultimately the GOP tactic failed. In a Los Angeles Times poll in October, 29 percent said Clinton’s gubernatorial record made it more likely they would vote for him and 48 percent said it would have no effect. Only 20 percent were less likely to vote for him because of his record.

Counter-intuitively, one of the political virtues of Arkansas’ low rankings in virtually every measure was that it didn’t take much to show vast improvement. The voiceover in a Clinton [campaign ad](#) aired in the final weeks of the 1992 campaign declared, “For 12 years, he battled the odds in one of America’s poorest states and made steady progress. Arkansas is now first in the nation in job growth.” Mandy Grunwald, Clinton’s media consultant, explains the political potency of that commercial: “We were running in the middle of a recession. So to prove that he knew how to create jobs was an incredibly important thing.”

Even the most solid record, however, is just one part the larger electability equation. Three-term Texas Governor Rick Perry had bragging rights on job growth but he started late after back

surgery in 2012 and, oops, Republican primary voters deemed him unprepared for a national race. Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman cut taxes, revived the economy and even persuaded legislators to loosen liquor laws in his conservative Mormon-dominated state, but never achieved liftoff.

“Anyone who can reform the liquor laws in Utah can certainly help the country on a broader stage,” Huntsman says he used to tell New Hampshire audiences. But like Perry, Huntsman entered the campaign late. He also had trouble winning over conservatives, who found it hard to accept his recognition of climate change and service in the Obama administration as ambassador to China. Some also found it hard to accept his Mormon background. “There is a religious component there,” he says. “You usually don’t fit the evangelical box.” He staked his bid on New Hampshire and quit when he came in third.

A record can be counterproductive if a governor fails to defend it or to move on to the bigger picture. Several Dukakis advisers say he relied too heavily on the Massachusetts miracle theme. “We never intended nor did it ever serve to be a substitute for a national message,” Estrich says. “It’s the beginning of a message. It’s the first sentence. But it isn’t an answer to ‘What’s your national platform?’ I don’t think he ever got there.”

The Dukakis record, as commendable as it was, provided plenty of fodder for George H.W. Bush, the vice president. And the attacks went unanswered because Dukakis had determined he would stay positive. His campaign anticipated the fusillade about Willie Horton, a prisoner who kidnapped a couple, stabbed the man and repeatedly raped the woman while on a weekend furlough, and had done focus groups about how to respond. “The campaign had examples of other crimes in other states, people who were out on work release who committed horrible crimes. They just never got used,” says Dan Payne, the Dukakis media adviser.

In trying to fathom his thinking, Dukakis recalls a meeting with Mario Cuomo, then governor of New York, early in the campaign, just after the Republican attacks on his Massachusetts record had begun. According to Dukakis, Cuomo recommended, “Don’t pay any attention to those. Just brush them aside.” On the Thursday before the November election, Dukakis was campaigning with Cuomo in Queens. And Cuomo said ruefully – recalling the damage the Willie Horton ads had done – “That’s the worst advice I ever gave anyone.”

What were they thinking? They were popular governors in liberal states. They were used to getting their way and campaigning their way. Estrich says that may be why Dukakis was resistant to the fundamental compromises required of a national candidate. “He was used to making a decision and having that be the decision,” she says. “Part of the problem of the national campaign was that he couldn’t do it his way. He was going to stay in Massachusetts for the summer, run a positive campaign and not go negative. It wasn’t going to work.”

Dukakis admits as much. “You spend very little time as governor mixing it up with your opposition and your critics. You tend to ignore them,” he says. Looking back, however, he is baffled by his choices. He knew that there was a furlough program under the Reagan-Bush administration and that federal prisoners had killed people while out on furlough. “None of which I said. In retrospect I was crazy,” he says. Dukakis also says, “What I probably should have done is greeted Bush when he showed up at Boston harbor and asked him why his administration was doing nothing about harbor pollution.” It was, he says now, “ridiculous to let this guy get away with this stuff.”

The National Security Dilemma

The gaping hole in a gubernatorial resume is usually national security. Journalists covering the 2000 race were fond of counting up the (very small) number of times George W. Bush had been outside the United States. One even gave him a pop quiz on live TV, asking him to name the leaders of four hot spots around the globe. Not surprisingly, [Bush flunked](#).

Yet trying to address the deficit can backfire. Romney gaffed his way through a 2012 trip to England and Israel, suggesting among other things that London was not prepared for the Olympics. And in a famous misstep that produced an ineffable image, Dukakis climbed into a tank wearing a helmet that made him look like Snoopy, the beagle in the Peanuts comic strip.

Payne owns up to suggesting a tour of the tank factory – as a way to establish Dukakis as a candidate willing to defend America. “I’m not taking the blame for the helmet,” Payne says, but adds he understands how the debacle occurred. Dukakis was conscientious about rules and especially about helmets, because his brother was killed in a bike accident after hitting his unprotected head on a curb.

Of course, that doesn’t explain why Dukakis was climbing into the tank as opposed to observing it. “When you’re losing, you’re reacting,” Bennett explains. George H.W. Bush had ridden in a tank two weeks earlier, and he had also recently sat in a cockpit at an F-16 production facility in Fort Worth. “Our Boston campaign office wanted that kind of image,” Bennett says.

The irony is that candidates who have deep experience in the security and international arenas often can’t make it work for them. In fact, that is what happened four years later to Bush, a World War II veteran, a former U.N. ambassador, a former CIA director, and a sitting commander in chief who waged the highly popular 1991 Gulf War to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. After crushing Dukakis in 1988, he lost to Bill Clinton – the governor of Arkansas – in 1992.

By then, worries about the recession had superseded Bush’s widely praised war performance. Grunwald, the Clinton adviser, says it mattered more that Bush “seemed aloof and disconnected

from the realities of people's lives and economic straits.” In contrast, she says, people viewed Clinton as a hands-on governor, “in touch” with them and “engaged in the process of solving problems. And that was very different than the feeling they had about President Bush.”

The same disappointing dynamics played out for accomplished foreign policy hands in the next few presidential cycles. Al Gore had been steeped in foreign and defense policy for decades as a House member, senator and vice president – yet Texas Governor George W. Bush squeaked by him in 2000. Richardson had been a congressman, a United Nations ambassador and U.S. energy secretary, and had negotiated with dictators including those in Iraq and North Korea, before becoming governor. In another one of his classic ads, the same bored job interviewer recites Richardson’s full resume then [asks](#), his mouth full of his lunch, “So, what makes you think you can be president?” And that pretty much summed up the reaction of Democratic primary voters.

Huntsman had been a U.S. trade representative and U.S. ambassador to Singapore before going to China. The idea was that “a conservative problem-solver with foreign policy credentials would stand out in a rather mundane field,” says John Weaver, who was Huntsman’s top strategist. In his view Huntsman was right to accept Obama’s request to serve and right to stress his foreign policy credentials, but should have put more emphasis on his “pro-business conservative record” as governor. “For whatever reason, he was uncomfortable embracing that,” Weaver says.

The State of the States

Like unhappy families, each state is potentially unhelpful in its own way. Huntsman cites many reasons other than Utah for his failure to launch, but it’s clear that the state and its dominant Mormon religion are not an easy sell. “There continue to be some deep misunderstandings” about the religion, Huntsman says. California’s image as a New Age refuge for hippies and self-help enthusiasts, meanwhile, only served to reinforce Jerry Brown’s Governor Moonbeam nickname in 1992.

Both Dukakis and Romney had to cope with the political implications of their overwhelmingly liberal state. George H.W. Bush scored points by questioning Dukakis’ patriotism. Romney, meanwhile, “looked and felt like a moderate,” says Stevens. “He was wealthy, he was Ivy League, while the Republican Party is increasingly Southern, evangelical and populist. And that was not Mitt Romney.” Romney moved right on gay rights, abortion rights, health policy and immigration in his efforts to distance himself from the state he had governed.

Southern governors have their own problems. “Thank God for Mississippi” – the refrain in states which but for Mississippi would rank dead last in education and other rankings – sums up what Barbour would have faced had he decided to run in 2012. That was definitely part of his planning process. “It would have been an obstacle,” he says. “You have to manage through it.”

The prescription in such cases is to emphasize improvement. Barbour had such metrics at the ready had he run, just as Clinton did in 1992. But progress is slow and gradual, and not enough to forestall attacks. As Marilyn Quayle put it at the 1992 Republican convention, “Do we want our country to look like Arkansas?”

The Incumbent as Campaigner

Governing while running poses multiple challenges for governors of sparsely populated Western states. It’s hard to travel to and from their states. They don’t have a national press corps or the money spigots found on the two coasts. Also, any time zone but Eastern is the wrong time zone. “You have a very distinct advantage, the closer you are to the New York media market,” Huntsman says. “You can labor long and do all kinds of interesting innovative things, as I did as chair of the Western Governors Association ... and it doesn’t get much air time just because of geography.”

Richardson, based in a small capital (Santa Fe) in a small state, says his first problem was where to declare his candidacy to attract the most attention. He decided on Los Angeles because “it was Hispanic and Western and a media center.” But it didn’t work, he says, because he wasn’t considered a top-tier candidate and “presidential coverage on the West Coast is not the same as Washington, New York or even the Midwest.” Once he started campaigning, “just to get to Iowa from New Mexico commercially was not easy.” The path was Albuquerque to Dallas to Des Moines. He didn’t have the money to fly private.

Richardson nevertheless spent four and a half days each week in Iowa and New Hampshire, and overdid Iowa because it was closer. “I pretty much ran the state by phone,” he says. Four phone calls, totaling an hour, by cell or sometimes stopping at a supporter’s home to use a landline. “It was manageable,” he says, but not ideal.

Dukakis, based in Boston, had a press corps, a fundraising base and – one reason Massachusetts produces so many presidential hopefuls – a Boston media market that blankets heavily populated southern New Hampshire. He also had good transportation options. “If the truth be known, I won the nomination on long weekends,” Dukakis says. He says he’d do night events Monday through Thursday after leaving his office, then head to Iowa or other states on weekends. “If I’ve got anything going for me it’s that I’ve been a successful governor, so I’m surely not going to shirk that,” was his reasoning. “I spent 85 days in the state of Iowa. But always on long weekends.”

Though there are logistical hassles, there are also compensations to running while in office. “It’s easier to raise money as a sitting officeholder,” says Pawlenty, whose tenure was over by the time he ran. It’s also easier, he says, to raise money in New York, Chicago, California, Texas or Florida. “If you’re from one of those states, that’s a huge advantage,” he says. “If you’re not, you

have to have a pre-existing network or brand or impact.” Otherwise, he says, you’re in for “a very uphill experience.” Pawlenty knows that personally.

Occasionally, a sitting governor running for president makes a decision that can be viewed through a prism of cynicism. In January 1992, in the midst of the Jennifer Flowers scandal, Bill Clinton returned to Arkansas to preside over the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, who had killed a police officer and then turned the gun on himself, leaving him brain damaged. Despite a liberal clamor for mercy on the grounds that Rector no longer even [understood what death was](#), Clinton refused to sign an order of clemency. As then-Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos recounts in his memoir, *All Too Human*, "Had Clinton broken precedent and spared Rector, I would have been proud, but the devil on my shoulder would have whispered that we were handing the Republicans a huge issue."

The Gubernatorial Difference

There is a temptation to offer glib conclusions about the governors who have made the successful transition from the governor's mansion to the Oval Office. The problem is that with only four examples since FDR's first inaugural address ("The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"), it is difficult to identify and isolate the Governor Factor.

For a start, the records of these presidents on foreign policy are wildly disparate, reflecting their times and temperaments. Carter presided over the Camp David accords, yet also allowed his presidency to become consumed by the Iranian hostage crisis. Reagan, for all the fears that he would trigger-happy as president, instead proved masterful in handling relations with Mikhail Gorbachev during a time of epic transition. Clinton, after failing to act to prevent the genocide in Rwanda and dithering on Bosnia, eventually played the primary role in bringing peace to the Balkans. And George W. Bush came into office widely expected to follow the prudent foreign policy of his father – and instead, of course, led the nation into the disastrous war in Iraq.

Their relations with Congress were similarly diverse. Three of the modern four governors who served as president came from the South where the two-party system, if it existed, did not resemble partisan battle lines in Washington. The Georgia legislature, for example, when Jimmy Carter was governor and state senator was dominated by the two factions of the Democratic Party – integrationists and unrepentant segregationists. Bush when he ran for president in 2000 stressed his close working relationship with Democratic lieutenant governor Bob Bullock. But not only does the governor of Texas have less statutory power than his counterparts in almost any state, but Bullock was also more conservative than almost any congressional Democrat in Washington.

A strong case can be made that Ronald Reagan is the only president since Roosevelt who administered a state government that might be regarded as a microcosm of Washington.

"Both FDR and Reagan had plenty of experience dealing with legislative bodies that had a number of really good professional pols in them – and were not about to roll over for the governor," says Lou Cannon, who is a Reagan biographer and was a long-time Washington Post reporter, who covered the Gipper's eight years as governor. "Reagan himself in all my interviews with him said that he really benefited from being governor as president, particularly in his dealings with Congress. [Speaker of the California Assembly] Jesse Unruh was a more fearsome leader than Tip O'Neill and was just as good in terms of getting things done and having his own agenda."

In contrast, Arkansas was obviously a backwater. Elaine Kamarck, who headed the reinventing government project in the Clinton White House, pointed out to the president that the federal workforce was larger than the population of Arkansas. But in his grasp of domestic policy, Clinton was more influenced by his time as governor than any president since Roosevelt.

"He was amazing with governors," says Matt Bennett who, as deputy assistant to the president, served as Clinton's liaison to the 50 states. Clinton would tell the governors, according to Bennett, "I sat where you sat. I know what you're dealing with."

Mack McLarty, who was Clinton's first White House chief of staff, stressed that the president (schooled by a dozen years submitting budgets in Arkansas) understood the tradeoffs in every line of that document. As McLarty puts it, "I think he understood his policies and how they affected people directly."

Bruce Reed, who headed domestic policy in the Clinton White House, offers a tangible example of how these years as governor informed Clinton's decisions as president. At the core of the 1995-1996 battles with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, which led to governmental shutdowns, were Republican demands to turn both welfare and Medicaid into block grants to the states. Clinton would agree to the first but not the second.

"Anyone looking for ideological consistency or a partisan point of view could never reconcile these two positions," says Reed. "But to Clinton it was as clear as day. He knew that block granting welfare had no practical impact on poor people because states could lower their benefits as much as they wanted to already."

The president, in contrast, unalterably opposed providing states with a fixed block grant for Medicaid. Clinton's rationale flowed from his years as governor: Such a block grant would set up a struggle for budgetary dollars between health care for the poor and nursing home services for the elderly, many of whom were formerly middle-class. "It would be nursing homes versus poor kids," says Reed, "and poor kids wouldn't stand a chance."

The larger moral here, according to Reed, is: "At the state level, policies intersect with each other and the tradeoffs are more readily apparent. In Washington, you could go through an entire

congressional career on one committee and know nothing about the topics of another committee."

Small wonder that Richardson, who served in the Clinton administration as U.N. ambassador and Energy secretary, recalls the president telling him, "The best job he ever had was governor." According to Richardson, Clinton went on to explain, "Billy, as governor you can do anything you want. You're the center. You set the agenda."

The presidency of George W. Bush is remembered as a time of bitter partisanship rooted in the divisions over the Iraq War. But what is mostly forgotten is Bush's initial success with Democrats in Congress in passing both his 2001 tax cuts and, most dramatically, his No Child Left Behind education legislation.

After the bitterness of the 2000 recount in Florida, Bush was particularly eager to replicate the bipartisanship that underlay his campaign pledge to be "a uniter, not a divider." Matt Dowd, his campaign pollster, points to education as Bush's path to redeeming that pledge and his own credibility. "He knew that Ted Kennedy, leader of the progressives, was interested in the issue," says Dowd. "He figured if he could get a deal on this, he could get the country to accept him as president. It was never explicit. But half the country thought he was illegitimate and didn't trust him. Part of it was what needs to get done to show ...some quick common ground."

Bush's experience working with Democrats in the Texas legislature played a role in his initial successes in Washington. Ari Fleischer, who was Bush's first White House press secretary after a career working on Capitol Hill, says, "The experience of being a governor who knows how to sway legislators – when to kiss them, when to scold them, when to bring them close, when to push them away – all that goes into being a successful governor and president."

But the president tended to see education reform through the prism of his Texas experience, and other governors soon began to chafe under the law's requirements and penalties.

Huntsman had served in the administration (as deputy trade representative) and viewed Bush as a "governor-centric manager." But Huntsman became the first governor to opt out of No Child Left Behind. The law would have automatically classified many rural schools as "failing schools" because teachers taught several subjects instead of specializing in just one. "I couldn't allow that to happen," Huntsman says.

For a governor of a Western state like Utah, policy disputes with Washington over government land and education are almost inevitable. "You do come into conflict on a semi-regular basis in both these areas," says Huntsman. "And this [law] was one of these cases."

If Bush was less than sensitive to governors in his education law, he went to the other extreme in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The president – alarmed by Louisiana Governor

Kathleen Blanco's passivity in the face of the crisis in New Orleans – was tempted to federalize the state National Guard. But he resisted the impulse.

"The big issue there was deference to a governor," says Ari Fleischer. "If a governor didn't want it, how could he just jam it down her throat?" Bush, in *Decision Points*, says he worried that "the world would see a male Republican president usurping the authority of a female Democratic governor by declaring an insurrection in a largely African American city."

Bush adhered to a "Governors Know Best" approach to the Katrina recovery. Haley Barbour, who was then the governor of hurricane-ravaged Mississippi, says the Bush administration goal was maximum flexibility: "They wanted to help. And they thought that we knew better how to help ourselves if they would give us the resources to do it."

The high marks that Barbour received for his adroit handling of Katrina brought him to the brink of entering the 2012 Republican presidential race. After all, he calls being governor "the closest job I think to being president. It's the closest thing because you're managing a large complex government."

Joe Biden and former vice presidents might disagree. But, in truth, nothing prepares a political figure for the daunting burdens of being president. Harry Truman captured that reality when he said at his first press conference after the death of Franklin Roosevelt, "When they told me yesterday what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars and all the planets had fallen on me."

Like Truman, governors are plain speakers, at least in comparison to garrulous veterans of Capitol Hill. The nature of the job of governor keeps them in close touch with real life outside of Washington -- and forces them to be pragmatists.

"It tones them down," says Ari Fleischer. "Senators can go to the floor and strike a perfect ideological sentiment about what needs to be done. Governors need to strike a tone of 'how at end of day can I bring the parties together?' So right away, they can't set out to be ideologically perfect because then it's a flip-flop. It's a cave. It tends to tone down their rhetoric more towards problem-solving than speech-giving."

Not all governors can make the transition to successful candidate (see Dukakis, Michael). Not all governors elected president because of their political skills can master foreign policy (see Bush, George W.). The presidency requires more than a résumé with a check mark next to executive experience. Temperament, intellect and luck have more to do with success in the White House than anything else.

But never under-estimate governors. Their I'm-in-charge appeal cannot be denied, even if that aura persists partly because they never stop talking about it. In the greatest political narrative of our democracy – the race for the presidency – governors always see themselves in the starring role.

For more information about the **Center on the American Governor**, contact:

Kristoffer Shields

Graduate Research Assistant, Center on the American Governor

kshields@eagleton.rutgers.edu

848-932-8467

governors.rutgers.edu

eagleton.rutgers.edu