

Governors Aren't All That

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Governors running for president are a mixed bag, both in the election and in office.



Don't flatter yourself.

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You may have gotten the idea somewhere that this is the year of Donald Trump. [Nine Republicans and two Democrats](#) are here to tell you, however, that it's actually the year of the governor. And they are no slouches in the category of immense self-regard, even when measured against the master.

The 11 past and present governors running for president consider themselves the obvious heirs to the presidency and aren't shy about telling you why. With this week's kickoff of debates, forums and associated drinking games, in fact, here's an easy way to guarantee a constant hangover: Hoist a glass every time someone says "ran a state" or "executive experience" or "got it done" or "less [yapping](#), more fixing." Yes, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush really did use the word "yapping."

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The aggressive sales pitches cry out for fact-checking. Is there a public clamor for governors? Do they have an edge in

nomination races and general elections? Are they better at being president than the sorry saps who never were governors? In short, is the gubernatorial superiority complex rooted in reality or delusion?

My colleague [Walter Shapiro](#) and I talked to six former governors and a raft of campaign and White House aides in exploring those questions for the Center for the American Governor, part of the [Eagleton Institute of Politics](#) at Rutgers University. Our findings have just been published in a paper called "[Governors and the Presidency: How They Campaign, How They Govern.](#)"

Sorry to say, governors of the 2016 field, you are overshooting the mark.

For a start, the public doesn't have an ingrained preference for governors or senators. Polls dating to 1973 show that they go back and forth on the generic choice. It depends on the wording of the poll question (support for governors drops off when the specific phrase "foreign policy" is mentioned) and it also depends on the times. Are voters more upset about jobs or war or "Washington"?

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In a spring interview on Fox News, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie dismissed foreign policy as "something you can learn just like anything else" (a set-up, of course, for his next, classically governoresque sentence: "You can't learn how to make decisions other than by making them"). Yet foreign policy grounding appeared to matter a great deal during the Cold War years. All but one president between Franklin Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter had served in Congress. The exception was five-star General Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II.

Governors do have an understanding of federal domestic policy and its impact on states, and some though by no means all have experience with incompatible legislatures. Their clearest cut edge, however, is on the campaign trail. They often have better communication skills than veteran lawmakers immersed in what Democratic strategist Joe Trippi calls "the Washington soup," and they are outsiders (at least geographically) in a time when that persona holds prime appeal.

If the governors are located in states with major airports, national media and a wealthy donor class, all the better. Better still if their states rank well on education, jobs, income and other national metrics. And if their records are a match with party priorities, that's gold in primary elections. Of course, if they don't have any of those advantages – if they're from a sparsely populated Western state, or they're a Republican who governed from the middle in a liberal state, or they're from Arkansas or Mississippi and stuck in the metrics cellar – they've got challenges.

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It's also possible to get too comfortable. Michael Dukakis, the Massachusetts governor and 1988 Democratic nominee, told us an amusing anecdote (or a tragic one, depending on your politics) about how then-New York Gov. Mario Cuomo advised him to ignore attacks by then vice president George H.W. Bush. On the Thursday before the November election, Dukakis was campaigning with Cuomo in Queens. And Cuomo said ruefully, "That's the worst advice I ever gave anyone." What were they thinking? They were popular governors in overwhelmingly liberal states, who tended to ignore their critics. "In retrospect," Dukakis told us, "I was crazy."

The governors' strongest suit on the campaign trail is their one-size-fits-all executive talking point: We are deciders and managers, ready to run the country on day one. Yet even here there's often less than meets the eye, given the size of the federal government and the limits on many state leaders. "The mayor of Los Angeles has more power than most of the governors that have run for president," Republican strategist Matt Dowd told us. And voters choose in mysterious ways. As former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty put it, "The venting or vetting process for what party voters want is not highly correlated to the candidate's previous office or position."

Bill Richardson of New Mexico, a former congressman, diplomat and Cabinet secretary, discovered that in 2007 when he was the only governor in the Democratic race. He mentioned his job so often, he told us, that freshman Sen. Barack

Obama joked about being sick of the governor schtick. Voters weren't interested, either. "They wanted inspiration," Richardson said.

[[LINK: Can Donald Trump Appear Presidential?](#)]

Only four governors have actually made it to the White House since FDR, and the emerging verdicts on their performances are mixed: Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton on one side of the ledger, Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush on the other. Their disparate records, moreover, reflect their times and temperaments -- not an entry on a resume.

Still, being a governor confers instant credibility on a White House hopeful. It's what makes former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore, the 17th and possibly lowest profile entrant into the GOP race, a "major" candidate. It is what makes former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley " [obscure but not implausible](#)," in the words of Chicago Tribune columnist Steve Chapman. It is what convinces governors that they have what it takes – whether they do or not.