



A Difference That Makes A Difference

Contemporary Governors Are Becoming More Partisan

Republican governor Rick Scott, who was already executing prisoners faster than any Florida governor in modern times, signed a bill in 2013 designed to speed up the death penalty process. Six weeks earlier, Democratic governor Martin O'Malley had moved in the opposite direction: He signed a bill abolishing the death penalty, making Maryland the sixth state to end capital punishment in as many years.

This kind of difference is not unusual. On taxes, gun control, abortion, and a host of other issues, Democratic-controlled states are moving in entirely different directions than are their Republican-led neighbors. What is unusual is that governors are now often the ones leading the way. Traditionally, governors have been among the least partisan figures in big-league American politics, more likely to borrow ideas from their peers of other parties than ever to campaign against them. Many were willing to buck fashions in their own parties to balance their budgets or try to improve high school graduation rates. Compromise was simply part of their job description.

These days, whether fueled by their own presidential ambitions or pressured by interest groups that figure they can get more action in states than from a gridlocked Congress, governors have become more polarizing figures. "There just seems to be more of a partisan edge," said former Democratic U.S. representative Jim Matheson, whose father was a popular governor of Utah. "They seem to be infected along with everyone else, there's no question about it."

For decades, observers have talked about states as "laboratories of democracy," experimenting with ideas

that often blossom into national policy. Today, we have red labs and blue labs, with partisan governors pushing entirely different and opposite types of laws. "The vast majority of states are deeply red or deeply blue, and they reflect that," said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics. "Governors used to be the most bipartisan group, but now they're as divided as everybody else."

Traditionally, once the campaign season was over, governors knew they had trains to run. The 50 governors saw themselves as belonging to a special breed—half the number of the U.S. Senate, the "world's most exclusive club," but with twice the accountability for solving problems. They collaborated with neighbors on border-crossing matters such as the environment while borrowing ideas from colleagues around the country on an ad hoc basis or through the National Governors Association (NGA).

"Governors used to clearly learn from each other at NGA meetings and follow up on projects," said John Weingart, director of the Center on the American Governor at Rutgers University. "They'd send their staff to look at interesting things being done in other states, regardless of party."

Now, governors are more likely to openly criticize one another's approaches to pensions or tax policy. Twenty years ago, NGA was considered one of the most powerful lobbying forces in Washington, speaking with the full authority of the most important politicians out in the country. The landmark welfare overhaul law of 1996, for instance, was largely built on state-level experiments.