



A Difference That Makes A Difference

From State House to White House: Translating a Governorship Into a Presidency

How big of an advantage is it to run for the presidency as a sitting governor, as opposed to some other position? For more than a quarter century prior to Barack Obama's election in 2008, it looked as though this advantage was about as big as they come. "If you live under a governor, you mainly care about his or her ability to govern," writes political scientist Larry J. Sabato. "If you don't, and you're in the political community, you primarily want to know whether a governor is presidential timber."^a

Four of the previous five presidents had been governors: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. The one exception was George W. Bush's father, George H. W. Bush, who came to the Oval Office after serving as Reagan's vice president. Seventeen presidents in all had served earlier as governors.

Lately, though, governors have had bad luck. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney lost to Obama in 2012, after beating Texas governor Rick Perry and former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, among other opponents, in the GOP primaries.

Many recent presidential aspirants from among the gubernatorial ranks have seen their popularity plummet at home as they went courting voters in early-voting states such as Iowa and New Hampshire. Once his name began being floated regularly ahead of the 2016 campaign, Indiana governor Mike Pence sought to make clear that the Hoosier State remained his top priority. "Anytime I'm mentioned or talked to about the highest office in the land is deeply humbling, deeply humbling to me and my family," he told the Associated Press. "But my focus is Indiana."^b

Obama's first race had been dominated by senators, including John McCain, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Obama himself. (Obama had served 4 years in the U.S. Senate when he was first elected, after spending 8 years in the Illinois Senate.) They outpolled a large number of gubernatorial contenders that included Romney, Bill Richardson of New Mexico, Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, and Mark Warner of Virginia. Sarah Palin was serving as governor of Alaska when McCain picked her as his running mate (she resigned her post in Juneau the following year).

But if their recent track record isn't so great, compare governors to holders of other offices. No sitting U.S. senator before Obama had been elected president since John F. Kennedy in 1960. No member of the U.S. House has been elected since James Garfield, all the way back in 1880.

What makes governors such attractive candidates for the nation's most powerful office? And what makes legislators usually so *unattractive*?

For one thing, governors are the only politicians aside from presidents who have run governments that are anywhere near as complicated as the federal government. True, governors do not formulate foreign policy, but they do have to become experts in running departments that cover everything from taxes and education to public health and public safety. Governors have to run things. Members of Congress just vote. "Because the presidency is no place to begin to develop executive talents, the executive careerist clearly is preferable to the legislator," writes Sabato.^c