

Governors Uncharacteristically Lag Behind in 2008 Race

The 2008 race for president will be, as many commentators have noted, the most wide open in at least 50 years. Not since 1952 have both parties nominated candidates other than the incumbent president or vice president. And even in that year, the incumbent President, Harry S Truman, initially was a candidate before removing himself from the race. Not since 1928 has there been a presidential election where neither the incumbent president nor vice president was a serious candidate for the office.

Less frequently mentioned is another characteristic of the 2008 race which, in some ways, is even more anomalous historically. Barring a dramatic change in the polls, for the first time since the 1800s, American voters will be presented with two major party nominees who not only do not include the incumbent president or vice president, but also will not include a governor or former governor.

For generations, American voters have shown a strong preference for governors in selecting a president.

Excluding George H. Bush, whose election, in historical perspective, may be best understood as an attempt by the electorate to return President Reagan for a third term, governors won each of the last seven presidential elections.

Prior to that, the major parties also regularly turned to the nation's governors, particularly from the largest states, to head the national ticket. The governor of New York was a presumptive presidential candidate, and often the presumptive frontrunner, in virtually every election from the Civil War until the 1960s, when it lost its status as the most populous state. New York governors were nominated thirteen times over that period, winning seven. Once California overtook New York in population, it took the lead politically as well. The first census in which California had the most residents was 1970, and its governor at that time, Ronald Reagan, went on to be elected president twice by landslide margins. Governors from small states also have been formidable candidates, most notably Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. (When Carter served as governor of Georgia, the state was only 15th in population; soon—perhaps by the 2010 census—it will be seventh.) By contrast, only once since 1920 has a candidate whose prior office was senator been elected president, even though there are twice as many senators as governors.

Voters' historic preference for presidential candidates who have been governors likely is due to several factors. Governors, unlike senators, but like presidents, are chief executives, and are far more accountable for the successes and failures of government. In addition, because they do not need to act as members of a partisan caucus within a legislative body, they can more easily develop a more non-partisan image. Governors also do not have to cast thousands of votes on complicated issues—votes which later can be used, fairly or not, to bludgeon a candidate. Perhaps most of all, governors have a much easier time running against Washington, a reviled place on the campaign trail, than those who work and reside in the city. Other practical considerations favor governors. For example, because governors do not need to remain

proximate to a legislative chamber to cast votes, they are much more free to travel the country in search of political support. Also, as a general rule, governors have an easier time raising money.

Yet no governors currently are near the top in polls measuring support for candidates for the Democratic and Republican nominations. (Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (R) has routinely been included by the media among the first tier of GOP hopefuls, but he has rarely broken double digits in the polls.)

There are numerous reasons why no governor has yet emerged as a strong contender for his or her party's nomination.

- The highly popular governor of the nation's largest state, California, is constitutionally prohibited from serving as president because he is an immigrant.
- The highly popular, former two-term governor of the nation's largest swing state, Florida, though constitutionally qualified, is geneologically prohibited from seeking the White House. If someone named Jeb *Barnes* had just finished two successful terms as Florida's governor, compiling a strong conservative record while remaining popular among moderate voters, and to boot was Catholic, fluent in Spanish, and had strong roots in the Hispanic community, he almost certainly would be leading the GOP field. But Jeb *Bush* simply is not an option, even if he had the interest, which, by all accounts, including his own, he does not.
- The landslide winner of the governor's race in what is likely to be the most hotly contested swing state, Ohio, has been in office only a few months, and, as a back bencher in the U.S. House before that, has few accomplishments to present to voters. His GOP predecessor, though a two-term governor, left office with approval ratings *in the teens*, among the lowest ever recorded for any governor, anywhere.

Ironically, both the Democratic and Republican fields include highly accomplished governors or former governors from key swing states who, for various reasons, have barely registered in the polls.

New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (D) has perhaps the strongest resume of any candidate from either party: U.S. House member, U.N. Representative, Energy Secretary, and now governor. He also serves in one of only two states which voted for Vice President Gore in 2000 and President Bush in 2004. He also has special appeal to two key swing voting blocs, fellow Hispanics and residents of the Mountain states, which were once solidly Republican but have trended strongly to the Democrats in recent elections, putting the region very much in play in 2008. (That is why the Democratic convention will be in Denver.) Despite these strengths, however, polls indicate that Richardson has gotten very little traction among voters.

On the Republican side, former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson was a highly popular governor who pioneered many of the most successful policy innovations of the last 20 years, including welfare reform, school choice, and various government reform initiatives. Later, as Health and Human Secretary, he presided over the largest domestic policy Department

in the federal government. He also hails from the largest state in the most valuable cluster of swing states in the nation. Wisconsin was carried by Democrats by absurdly narrow margins in both 2000 (0.2%) and 2004 (0.4%), and the state anchors a contiguous three state region that includes two other key swing states: Iowa, the other state which went for Gore in 2000 and Bush in 2004, and Minnesota, whose significance led the GOP to make it the site of their own convention. Together, those three states have as many electoral votes as the largest swing state, Florida. Moreover, Thompson not only is from the nation's most competitive region, he is a member of perhaps its most coveted swing voting bloc: Catholics. Had John Kerry merely lost Ohio Catholics narrowly—exit polls indicate he trailed Bush among that group by a startling 20 points—Kerry would be president today. When, according to exit polls, the Catholic vote swung back to Democrats in 2006, so did, not coincidentally, control of Congress. Despite all those factors in Thompson's favor, however, he is doing far worse than even Richardson, with support levels often in the "asterisk" range.

Interestingly, the first tier candidate best positioned to run as a governor of sorts is someone who has never held that position: former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (R). Like successful governors, Giuliani earned his reputation as a "get-it-done-now" chief executive, in his case by running a city that many had regarded as ungovernable, and which is more populous than all but 11 states. Nonetheless, Giuliani's electoral appeal, especially among a GOP primary electorate which may bristle at some positions he took as mayor, is perhaps more akin to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952—a national hero who exhibited great leadership, composure, and resolve in the face of great perils.

The absence of a governor on the GOP or Democratic tickets would alter the tone of the 2008 race, likely for the worse. The petty squabbles and bitter partisanship which mark maneuvering on Capitol Hill, where votes are sometimes held for no other reason than to launch misleading attack ads, would be more likely to set the tone for presidential campaign rhetoric as well. More importantly, however, the lack of gubernatorial experience could adversely affect a president's ability to govern. Justice Brandeis famously observed a century ago that the states were the "laboratories of democracy", where new ideas could be conceived, refined, and implemented. Without that experience, it will be that much harder for the next president to engage in the innovative thinking needed to address many of our nation's thorniest problems.

