6-3-2004

Hail to the Governor

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Hail to the Governor

In recent times, it seems that most of the people who have gotten elected president were governors. Has that always been the case?

There have been 54 presidential elections in our nation's history. Examining the last 215 years, we notice some interesting things about major party candidates. First, there are remarkably few platforms that catapult ambitious men into a position to run for president. Americans like candidates to come from the ranks of governors, vice presidents, generals, and senators -- in that order. Notice the considerable advantage to those with high-level executive -- as opposed to legislative -- experience.

More specifically, in 27 of our 54 contests -- exactly half -- one or more governors were on the ballot; in 20 contests, the sitting or former vice president was on the ballot; in 14 contests, one or more generals were on the ballot; in just 11 contests, a sitting or recent U.S. Senator was on the ballot.

Taking a closer look, we see who was actually winning the top spot. In 18 of the 54 presidential contests, the winner had recently been a governor; in 12 the winner had recently been a general; in 11 the winner had been vice president; in 3 a U.S. senator; and in 6 a high-level government official. Abraham Lincoln is truly the oddball, as he was a practicing lawyer for a number of years prior to his election.

Governors rule. Governors do well, and sometimes governors from particular states do particularly well. Imagine being an American in the mid-twentieth century -- say, in 1952. That election year that American would have looked at the ballot and wondered if something seemed out of order: not since 1924 had there been a campaign without a New York governor!

So your hunch about governors is right -- they do relatively well, attaining the presidency in much higher numbers than any other group, including vice presidents and generals. Because of their executive experience, they do much better than senators. And because they must run state-wide campaigns, they learn to reach out to a variety of constituents -- good training for a national election.

To learn more about the strength of governors as presidential candidates and nominees, see Christopher DeMuth, "Governors (and Generals) Rule," American Enterprise 15 (January/February 2004): 26-29.

(Question from Mike K. of Grand Rapids, Michigan)

* Full question: In recent times, it seems that most of the people who have gotten elected president were governors -- Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush. Has that always been the case?