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The Gubernatorial Advantage?

Evaluating Gubernatorial Experience as a
Presidential Campaign Strategy

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Introduction

The 2024 presidential campaign trail and election unfolded before the eyes of stunned Americans, resulting in one of the most divisive elections in the history of the United States. From incumbent President Joseph R. Biden exiting the race after the first debate in response to in-party opposition, to Vice President Kamala Harris running an abbreviated 100-day campaign and being the first Black and South Asian woman to be a major party nominee, to former President Donald J. Trump surviving two assassination attempts and ultimately clinching the presidency in an astounding comeback, this campaign was anything but conventional.

While much of this campaign is worthy of further study, one aspect of the cycle that I found particularly fascinating, although its significance fell to the sidelines amidst the chaos, was Harris's necessarily brief process of selecting a vice presidential candidate. In July 2024, after Biden announced his resignation from the Democratic ticket and promptly endorsed Harris, it was clear that she would need to move quickly on several fronts to have a chance of running a successful campaign despite starting so late in the game. And indeed, there was immediate talk of who her vice presidential pick would be. What I found so immediately compelling was how nearly the entire list of front-runners were state governors. Would she nominate Josh Shapiro, Governor of Pennsylvania, a swing state where she needed an advantage? Or perhaps Andy Beshear, the Governor of Kentucky, could signify unity as a Democratic leader of a red state. Or maybe Gretchen Whitmer, Governor of Michigan, is a formidable politician, but would having two women on the ticket be more harmful than helpful? This conversation fascinated me. Why was it assumed that the vice presidential pick would automatically be a governor? Surely, gubernatorial experience is a bonus but not a prerequisite for the job. Donald Trump's former Vice President Mike Pence, for example, was also the Governor of Indiana, but while that may have helped in the 2016 election, it did not lead to success in 2020. Ultimately, Harris did choose a governor to be her running mate, nominating the incumbent Governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz. Although their campaign was ultimately unsuccessful as the Republican ticket secured both the electoral college and the popular vote, Walz leaned heavily on his experiences as governor on the campaign trail in an attempt to fill gaps on the ticket. But the result only raised more questions: why was the tactic unsuccessful?

Historically, United States presidential and vice-presidential candidates have held varied resumes. For some, experience as a former senator, congressman, or even mayor is listed under "prior experiences." But for many, their most indispensable prior experience includes state Governor. Numerous governors have run to be Commander-in-Chief, some successfully and some unsuccessfully. In fact, out of 48 U.S. presidents, 17 were former governors. It seems clear that gubernatorial experience is seen by the American public as a legitimate experience for the presidential office and elevates a candidate's chances in the presidential election.

During the 2024 Vice Presidential debate between Walz and the Republican candidate, Ohio Senator J.D. Vance, Walz mentioned the state of Minnesota 28 times.¹ He supported almost every one of Harris's policies with evidence from Minnesota. When asked about climate change, he spoke about how Harris's infrastructure laws would bring relief to drought-ridden farms of Minnesota. When asked about affordable healthcare, he said that Harris's housing plan had already caused a 12% increase in available homes in Minnesota. When asked about reproductive healthcare, he declared that under his governorship, Roe V. Wade had been restored in Minnesota, and that the state was now ranked first in healthcare. It appears that Walz intentionally presented himself to the American people as the Governor of Minnesota, hoping to prove to them that if he can get progress done in Minnesota, he can get it done for the country. While this strategy ultimately proved to be unsuccessful in electing the Democratic ticket, he is not the first executive branch candidate to structure his image around his gubernatorial experience.

Many election cycles have been dominated by state governors looking to make the jump to federal office, either as President or Vice President. What about being a former governor resonates with American voters? Conversely, for those former governors who ran for president yet lost, what was it about their gubernatorial experience that caused their failure at the polls? To explore this phenomenon, this study will look at four governors who became presidential candidates, two of whom ran successful campaigns and eventually became president of the United States, and two who failed to win the highest federal position. For each candidate, this study will assess three components of their campaign: speeches, debates, and advertisements, and how they used their gubernatorial experiences in each. This study aims to discover how governors pursuing the Oval Office can successfully utilize their gubernatorial experiences on the campaign trail.

Method

To answer these questions, I will be looking at the histories of four governors who ran for presidential office—two who won their presidential bid and two who did not. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both served as governors of southern states, Arkansas and Texas, respectively. Clinton, a Democrat, and Bush, a Republican, both went on to the White House and served as two-term presidents. Michael Dukakis was the longest-serving Governor of Massachusetts, serving his first term from 1975 to 1979 and then two more consecutive terms from 1983 to 1991. In 1988, he ran as the Democratic nominee for President but succumbed to the former Vice President George H.W. Bush. Similarly, Mitt Romney served as the Governor of Massachusetts for just one term, from 2003 to 2007, and then unsuccessfully ran as the Republican presidential candidate in 2012 against incumbent President Barack Obama. To understand both how each candidate used his gubernatorial

¹ Becket, Stefan. "Read the Full VP Debate Transcript from the Walz-Vance Showdown." CBS News, 2 Oct, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/full-vp-debate-transcript-walz-vance-2024/>.

experience on the campaign trail and the impact each candidate's gubernatorial experience had on their respective presidential races, I will compare their strategies from three campaign components: speeches, debates, and advertisements. As I dissect each area of their presidential campaigns, I seek to identify what aspects led to Clinton and Bush's success and what aspects Dukakis and Romney failed to seize upon in their campaigns. I will also answer the question of whether a running mate with gubernatorial experience could help bridge the gap for a presidential candidate who lacks such experience with domestic or state affairs. In the process, I hope to inform future governors with aspirations for the White House, whether at the top of the ticket or as number two.

Descriptions of the Presidential Campaigns

I. Debates

Presidential debates have become mainstays in election years, particularly since they first became televised in 1960. In the most recent presidential debate, between Harris and Trump, 67 million Americans tuned in to see their most pressing concerns answered live by the top candidates. For many Americans, these debates, most often occurring in the 100 days before the election, might be the most direct contact they have with the candidates and the campaigns. Experience—including gubernatorial experience—can be a key topic of conversation as each candidate attempts to make his or her case. When looking at the debate performances of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, for example, it is striking to see how their roles as governors influenced their talking points.

In 1992, Clinton participated in three widely covered debates leading up to the general election. Unusually, he went up against *two* candidates: the Republican incumbent, George H.W. Bush, who served two terms as Vice President but never served as a Governor, and Independent Ross Perot, who polled well enough to qualify for the debates despite having no political experience. During the first debate, Clinton quickly centered his identity as a formidable leader based on his gubernatorial experience. When speaking of his solutions to improving the economy, he immediately turned to the economy of Arkansas. He cited investments in manufacturing in his home state and how that increased job growth and opportunities. He declared that under his presidency, he would bring manufacturing jobs to the people across America. He said, "I live in a state where manufacturing job growth has far outpaced the nation in the last few years, where we have created more private sector jobs since Mr. Bush has been president than have been created in the entire rest of the country..."² He enforced the

² Clinton, William J. "October 11, 1992 First Half Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 11 Oct, 1992. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-11-1992-first-half-debate-transcript/>.

idea that since his job growth policy worked in Arkansas better than the federal policy worked across the 50 states, he was the best person to carry out economic growth on a national scale.

In the third debate, Bush turned the tables on Clinton's gubernatorial experience, directly challenging his credibility as a successful governor. Bush mentioned Arkansas 10 times, always in a negative sense, to highlight the high rates of poverty and low rates of job growth across the state compared to national averages. It was clear that Bush saw Clinton's gubernatorial experience as an advantage for his opponent, one that he needed to address head-on. For his part, Clinton rebutted these claims. He said, "Mr. Bush's Bureau of Labor Statistics says that Arkansas ranks first in the country in the growth of new jobs this year...4th in manufacturing jobs, 4th in the reduction of poverty, 4th in income increase..."³ At this moment, he postured himself as a governor who succeeded against difficult odds. If he could beat the sunken odds of advancing the economic status of Arkansas, then it would establish his credibility to improve the economy for the whole of America. The debate quickly descended into an argument about Clinton's gubernatorial record. Bush tried to undermine Clinton's progress, suggesting the state of Arkansas as a whole was failing. He said, "He talks about all the jobs he's created in one or two years. Over the last ten years, since he's been governor, they're 30% behind, 30% — they're 30% of the national average."⁴ Perot joined in, arguing that no matter how large Clinton's gubernatorial successes were, the state itself was not substantial enough to compare to the greater United States. He said of Clinton's record, "It's irrelevant...I could say, you know, that I ran a small grocery store on the corner, therefore, I extrapolate that into the fact that I can run Wal-Mart. That's not true."⁵ Clinton used these criticisms to his advantage. To combat Perot, he highlighted that the state budget was 4 billion dollars, so despite the small population, a budget that large could not be considered irrelevant. To rebut Bush, he emphasized that his modernization of the state economy was supported by private sector luminaries like the presidents of Apple and Hewlett-Packard, so his job growth policy was also evident in the private sector, combating Bush's main economic policy point. In the end, Clinton's debate performance solidified his presence as that of a successful governor, who took one of the poorest states in the union and boosted its job growth, which increased the average income, all while keeping government spending and taxes low. As a national recession was ongoing, his gubernatorial economic record certainly made an impression on voters, compared to Bush, whose economic record stood with the 1990 recession as the backdrop.

Eight years after these debates, the 2001 presidential campaign cycle commenced. George W. Bush, the son of the former President, took the debate stage to begin his own presidential campaign. In October of 2000, the younger Bush participated in three debates against his Democratic opponent and sitting Vice President under

³ Clinton, William J. "October 19, 1992 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 19 Oct, 1992. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-19-1992-debate-transcript/>.

⁴ Bush, George H.W. "October 19, 1992 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 19 Oct, 1992. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-19-1992-debate-transcript/>.

⁵ Perot, Ross. "October 19, 1992 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 19 Oct, 1992. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-19-1992-debate-transcript/>.

Clinton, Al Gore. Before serving as Vice President, Gore served multiple terms in both the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate representing Tennessee. While both Gore and Bush were southern politicians from dynastic families (Gore's father was also a Tennessee senator), only Bush had gubernatorial experience. Further, he was the Governor of a powerhouse state that is one of the largest states in population and size: Texas. Similarly to Clinton a decade earlier, from the very beginning, Bush solidified his identity as a strong governor. In the first debate, he cited his accomplishments in education in the state. He said that he signed legislation to begin the development of charter schools and legislation to mandate state standardized testing, both of which were already improving literacy rates amongst students from the poorest and most low-performing school districts. He also identified his bipartisan support within the state. During the second debate, he said, "There's only been one governor ever elected to back-to-back four-year terms, and that was me. And I was able to do so with a lot of Democrat votes, nearly 50% of the Hispanic vote, about 27% of the African-American vote."⁶ He was telling viewers that those of minority backgrounds and those of the opposition party supported his leadership in Texas, so the people of the United States, no matter their political affiliation or racial or ethnic background, could trust him to support the interests of all, not just Republicans.

Bush took things even further than Clinton did, in terms of cultivating his image as a successful governor. During the debates, Bush explicitly compared the governorship to the presidency. During the first debate, he said, "The governor is the chief executive officer. We know how to set agendas."⁷ This statement frames the governor as a stepping stone to the presidency since being governor is basically like being president, just of the state instead of the country. He also mentioned how he had the responsibility of selecting a Supreme Court justice for the Texas Supreme Court, which is a micro-version of the U.S. President, who would select a Supreme Court justice for the U.S. Supreme Court. He is showing viewers that he already has experience in the exact duties of the president. If this were a posting for a job description, he would already meet the qualifications. Lastly, he said, "One of the things I've done in Texas is I've been able to put together a good team of people. I've been able to set clear goals."⁸

Aside from labeling his Texas governorship as a pseudo-presidency, Bush used his gubernatorial experience to separate himself from the federal workforce. During the first debate, he proclaimed, "I'm not of Washington. I'm from Texas."⁹ He was appealing to anti-elitist and all-American sentiments, especially to voters who consistently felt unheard by Washington. This was especially useful considering his opponent was the sitting Vice President. Gore's track record, and thus that of the Clinton administration, was at the forefront of viewers'

⁶ Bush, George W. "October 11, 2000 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 11 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-11-2000-debate-transcript/>.

⁷ Bush, George W. "October 3, 2000 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 3 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-3-2000-transcript/>.

⁸ Bush, George W. "October 11, 2000 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 11 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-11-2000-debate-transcript/>.

⁹ Bush, George W. "October 3, 2000 Debate Transcript." The Commission on Presidential Debates, 3 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-3-2000-transcript/>.

minds, whether Gore liked that or not. So, Bush was able to distinguish himself as both experienced, due to his gubernatorial experience, and an “outsider” with loyalty to the voters, not to Washington itself.

II. *Advertisements*

From standard TV commercials to social media posts, advertisements continue to grow in popularity as campaign fixtures. Even more important, they have continued to become more widespread as the media has grown. For instance, during the most recent 2024 presidential election, Donald Trump’s presidential campaign ran a commercial that became widely discussed during the election cycle. The commercial begins with a headshot of Kamala Harris and a 2024 quote from CNN stating, “Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners.”¹⁰ The commercial transitions to a shot of prisoners in orange jumpsuits in their bunkhouse with a 2024 PBS quote stating, “transgender operations on illegal aliens... TRUE.”¹¹ This advertisement both directly targeted Trump’s opponent and featured language meant to impassion voters by suggesting their hard-earned money was being used to pay for gender affirming surgeries on criminals who were not even American citizens. If this were true, it would be almost impossible for Harris to justify. Transgender issues became a focal point of the Trump campaign. In October alone, pro-Trump organizations spent \$95 million on advertisements, 41% of which centered around transgender issues.¹² Throughout the fall, Trump’s campaign spent millions of dollars to specifically play this commercial in the swing states of Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.¹³ This tactic proved to be successful, as Trump won each swing state in November, even though Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin had gone blue four years prior.

Campaign advertisements have the potential to sway undecided voters and strengthen the fervor of supporters. For governors who are running for president specifically, advertisements can also be utilized to establish their credentials by showcasing their gubernatorial successes. For instance, in 2012, Romney’s presidential campaign ran a commercial titled “Find a Way.”¹⁴ It began with how the country was failing, focusing on chronic unemployment and a growing national deficit. The commercial featured a photo of President Barack Obama and a quote saying, “He’s only had four years.”¹⁵ In the very next shot, the ad states

¹⁰ Bender, Michael C. “Inside a Trump Ad Ridiculing Harris Over Taxpayer-Paid Gender Transition Surgery.” The New York Times, 25 Sep, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/25/us/politics/trump-ad-anti-trans-harris.html>.

¹¹ IBID.

¹² Baldwin, Lorna and others. “Why Anti-Transgender Political Ads are Dominating the Airwaves this Election.” PBS News weekend, 2 Nov, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-anti-transgender-political-ads-are-dominating-the-airwaves-this-election>.

¹³ Davis, Susan. “GOP Ads on Transgender Rights are Dominating Airwaves in the Election's Closing Days.” NPR, 19 Oct, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/19/g-s1-28932/donald-trump-transgender-ads-kamala-harris>.

¹⁴ The Wall Street Journal. “Find A Way.” Advertisement, YouTube, 22 Oct, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2YvKdMchp0>.

¹⁵ IBID.

that four years “is all Mitt Romney needed,”¹⁶ alluding to his Massachusetts governorship. The commercial then lists all of Romney's accomplishments as governor, including lowering the unemployment rate and turning the state deficit into a rainy day fund surplus, all while working across party lines—the Massachusetts state legislature was 85% Democratic. Romney used this advertisement to highlight his successes as Massachusetts governor, especially the successes that were in the same areas that the federal government needed to address, such as the deficit. He was making the case to voters that if he could fix the Massachusetts deficit, he could fix the national deficit, something that the incumbent Obama had had four years to fix yet had not.

Additionally, by showing off the ways he has faced presidential-like challenges as governor, he is positioning himself as the “president of Massachusetts,” similarly to what George W. Bush successfully did in his debates when running for president. Bush painted his gubernatorial experience in Texas as a pseudo-presidency, even calling himself the “CEO” of Texas, which successfully positioned him to voters as a credible choice who was already qualified for the executive level.¹⁷ Romney takes a similar approach in his advertisements, attempting to convey that he has already worked like a president.

Presidential candidates need to be perceived as “presidential” by Americans. Voters need to be able to *picture them* as president. Governors, like Romney, can conjure that image for voters by showing that they've run states in the same way the president runs the country. In this case, Romney was not only showing that he ran Massachusetts like the president runs the country, but also that his governorship was comparable to Obama's presidency. He is putting himself and Obama on a level playing field, even though formally, Obama holds the higher position. This is an attempt to show voters that they are not choosing between a governor and a president but between two equally qualified presidential candidates.

Yet, Romney was ultimately unsuccessful in his presidential race. This might have been at least in part due to the advertisements that the Obama presidential campaign ran in response, which targeted not Romney's gubernatorial experience but his role before foraying into politics. The commercial run by the Obama campaign called “Stage” featured testimony of a man from Indiana who worked at a manufacturing plant, where he, alongside his coworkers, was told to build a stage.¹⁸ Once it was finished, businessmen arrived at the plant, fired all of the workers, and closed down the plant. The kicker: Romney's private investment firm, Bain Capital, bought the plant, earning Romney over \$100 million. The commercial ends with the statement, “If Mitt Romney wins, the middle class loses.”¹⁹ This deeply resonated with voters, helping Obama win the “everyman” states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Additionally, in locations where the commercial was

¹⁶ IBID.

¹⁷ Bush, George W. “October 3, 2000 Debate Transcript.” The Commission on Presidential Debates, 3 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-3-2000-transcript/>.

¹⁸ Priorities USA. “Stage.” Advertisement, YouTube, 23 Jun, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLo0Jwj03JU>.

¹⁹ IBID.

played, voters' trustworthiness in Romney went down to 11 points behind Obama. Comparatively, in places where the commercial was not played, Romney was only 5 points behind Obama in trustworthiness.²⁰

Therefore, Romney's decision to air advertisements about his gubernatorial experience was not necessarily a mistake, as it did help establish his credibility as a leader. But it did not overcome other questions about his past business practices; perhaps if he had discussed his business history head-on (as he did his gubernatorial experience), he could have had more control over the narrative.

Later in the campaign, Romney's team released an advertisement targeted at the swing state of Ohio, in which one in eight voters works in the auto industry. This commercial claimed that the Obama administration drove Chrysler into bankruptcy, so they were forced to be bought out by an Italian company going to manufacture Jeeps in China. While this ad attempted to paint Obama as stealing the jobs of hardworking Americans in favor of cheaper, international labor, voters quickly recognized the falsehood of these claims. The commercial spurred Ken Lortz, the Ohio Director for the United Auto Workers, to make a public statement: "Romney's campaign going up with this ad has only angered Ohioans even further," he said. "We knew he wasn't on our side when the economy and the industry were on the brink, but the fact that he would lie to our faces and try to deceive us is just too much."²¹ Obama's team also responded through a commercial stating that Jeep planned to add over one thousand jobs in Ohio, leaving Romney's team with little space for firing back.²² When Romney used ads to flaunt his gubernatorial successes in Massachusetts, it worked well, showing him to be an effective leader, especially on the economy, with bipartisan support. When he veered off from that into directly attacking the Obama administration, or when his work as a venture capitalist was brought into the spotlight, it changed his image from a trustworthy governor to a rich and greedy businessman which the majority of Americans could certainly not relate to, nor would they be inclined to support. Romney almost certainly would have been better served to stick to his gubernatorial script. Running on his achievements as governor may have led to a more favorable outcome.

Similarly, almost 25 years before Romney's campaign, another Massachusetts Governor waded into the presidential race. In 1988, Michael Dukakis was the Democratic nominee for President against then-Vice President George H.W. Bush. As the longest-serving governor of Massachusetts, it was a natural choice for Dukakis to use that experience to give him the necessary credibility to run for president. Dukakis served for three terms as governor, though only two were in succession. His first term began in 1975, on the heels of the Arab oil embargo, which detrimentally impacted Massachusetts residents. The unemployment rate in the state was the highest it had been since the Great Depression. Dukakis pushed for a tax raise to mitigate the problem, but, unsurprisingly, this was unpopular amongst voters. So, in the 1978 democratic primary, Dukakis was

²⁰ Garnett, Adam. "Watch this: The Killer Ad that Crushed Romney's Campaign." MSNBC, 12 Nov, 2012.
<https://www.msnbc.com/hardball/watch-the-killer-ad-crushed-romney-msna15895>

²¹ Welna, David. "Obama Campaign Slams Romney's Jeep Ad." NPR, 30 Oct, 2012.
<https://www.npr.org/2012/10/30/163929215/obama-campaign-slams-romneys-jeep-ad>

²² IBID.

beaten out by Massachusetts Port Authority Executive Director Edward J. King, who campaigned on lowering taxes on all fronts. However, by 1982, the Massachusetts economy was still flailing, largely due to the national recession that developed in response to the Federal Reserve's disinflation policy. Massachusetts voters were angry with high prices, higher taxes, and a high unemployment rate, so they voted King out and voted Dukakis back in with his new pro-business stance and his silence on tax policy. During his second round of the governorship, Massachusetts climbed out of the recession faster than any other state in the Northeast, and the state economy improved due to a technological boom, which benefited many companies and institutions in the state, including those from Harvard and MIT. Dukakis used this economic boom that he dubbed the "Massachusetts Miracle" to support his presidential campaign, highlighting himself as a financially prosperous leader. Ultimately, though, this was not enough to persuade voters who could not overlook his faults as Governor; faults were exacerbated by advertisements from the Bush campaign.

Attack ads are, of course, common in any political campaign and can be a deciding factor for undecided voters; we saw this, at least in part, in the 2024 presidential campaign. For Dukakis, while he managed to bury his hardships as governor that got him unseated following his first term and instead focus his presidential campaign on his second and third term records of cultivating financial prosperity, Bush used advertisements to showcase Dukakis's failures as governor to prove to voters that if he could wreak havoc in his state he certainly would if leader of the nation. The most notorious advertisement that supporters of the Bush campaign ran—and one of the most notorious negative ads in U.S. political history—was the "Willie Horton ad." This title refers to a thirty-second commercial that ran on cable nationwide for 28 days. The commercial was not run by Bush himself: it was produced and run by the National Security Political Action Committee, a PAC that supported Bush's campaign for president. The ad focused on both nominees' stances on crime, first showing Bush as the pro-death penalty candidate and Dukakis as opposing it. The ad then said that Dukakis "not only opposes the death penalty, but he also allows murderers to have weekend passes from prison."²³ This was meant to garner fear and anger from viewers. The ad ends by telling the story of Willie Horton, a Black man and a Massachusetts prisoner. The ad details the violent murder he was convicted of, earning him a life sentence, but says that he received 10 weekend passes to leave prison during his term of incarceration. During one such leave, he allegedly fled the state, made it as far as Maryland, kidnapped a man, stabbed him repeatedly and raped his girlfriend. It was a deeply disturbing story that, in the way in which it was told, energized voters to think it could have been prevented if Horton had been barred from leaving prison or if he had been sentenced to death under the death penalty. But the ad noted that, under Dukakis's governorship, prisoners were allowed these weekend passes, and the death penalty was not an option. This ad painted Dukakis as a weak Governor who led with his heart instead of his mind, which resulted in a preventable rape and violent assault.

²³ Blakemore, Erin. "How the Willie Horton Ad Played on Racism and Fear." History, 2 Nov, 2018. <https://www.history.com/articles/george-bush-willie-horton-racist-ad>.

Moreover, this ad played into the racial biases of voters, which further hurt Dukakis's gubernatorial record. The PAC that created this ad intentionally placed Horton's mugshot in the commercial, so while the narrator was listing out his crimes, viewers were made to associate them with a Black man. Using the story of a Black male prisoner was completely calculated, as was the decision to tie Horton to Dukakis as closely as possible. Bush's campaign manager, Lee Atwater, said, "By the time we're finished, they're going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis' running mate."²⁴ This used Dukakis's experience as governor negatively, positioning him as a "radical" liberal governor, which gave the conservative side more ammunition to paint him as extreme, and gave independent and moderate voters less common ground between them and Dukakis. The Bush campaign itself went on to run multiple ads using the Willie Horton example and Dukakis's liberal stance on crime. In the end, Dukakis' gubernatorial record—portrayed in this way, at least—proved to be sufficient in giving voters a reason not to vote for him. Bush swept the presidency with almost 80% of the electoral votes, leaving Dukakis to finish his governorship and then step away from politics for good. The Willie Horton ad has several legacies in politics, including paving the way for a new type of attack ad, one that uses race to create fear amongst voters. But it also showed how a candidate's previous executive experience could be turned against him, underlining the importance of a candidate framing his gubernatorial terms himself instead of allowing his opponent to do it for him.

III. *Speeches*

Before the modern era, in which televised debates and digital advertisements have begun dominating presidential campaigns, speeches were the main event. Some would argue that even today speeches are the most efficient way for a candidate to connect with voters: stand before a crowd, tell voters why they should vote for you, and give them a glimpse into your personality, especially considering that, if elected president, you would no longer be putting out advertisements or debating other politicians. But you would be expected to speak to the country often and confidently. Regardless, speeches have been the longest enduring facet of presidential campaigns and are widely influential in swinging voters.

While on the road during a presidential campaign, candidates give countless speeches in countless cities. During each stop, candidates often tailor parts of their speeches to match the population of the crowd they are speaking to that day. For example, if addressing a crowd of college students at Rutgers University, it would probably be more beneficial to talk about concerns regarding young voters like the job market or the environment, whereas if speaking to residents of retirement communities in Florida it's probably more relevant to talk about Medicare costs and Social Security benefits. Nonetheless, these are small tweaks that can be added or removed to any speech. So, each presidential candidate will write and memorize a stump

²⁴ Keller, Bill and others. "Willie Horton Revisited." The Marshall Project, 13 May, 2015.
<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/05/13/willie-horton-revisited>.

speech, which is a concise and fairly short speech articulating their key points that have built the foundation for their campaign. The most attention this speech will garner is probably when a lengthier version is delivered at the national party convention. This is the first time the candidate will give a speech as the official party nominee, and so it will be the first time voters are hearing from them directly. After that, the candidates will give a variation of this speech at each campaign stop to the extent that it will become almost formulaic. This is to avoid media scrutiny every time they give a speech, since it will lose its newsworthiness the more it is repeated. These stump speeches are what many voters end up remembering at the polls, and even more during the actual presidency, to hold the victor to his promises. They are, in other words, one of the key policy and campaign documents of any contest.

Many presidential candidates have had a way with words, including President Clinton. Clinton was not always well recognized for his presentation skills, however. In fact, at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, in his first appearance on a national stage, he performed alarmingly poorly. However, things changed ahead of the 1992 presidential election. Using public appearances, Clinton could appeal to voters in part because of his forceful tirades against then-President H.W. Bush's economic policies. In his almost one-hour-long speech at the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Clinton railed against the top 1% and Bush in a well-received speech. He began the speech discussing his mother, who was a single mother who had to work and take care of her children, also fighting breast cancer with high medical costs later in life. He talked about his wife, Hillary, a working mother, and then segued into the high cost of living for all parents who, even when working full-time, struggled to make ends meet. He declared that Washington had failed its people by making the American dream unattainable under Reagan's trickle-down economic policy. He closed this opening with a direct call out to his opponent: "And so I say: George Bush, if you won't use our power to help America, step aside. I will."²⁵ He continued his speech in this same format and began to give more concrete details about how Bush and Washington elites, and the private sector, were all keeping the majority of the working class under oppression for their benefit.

It makes sense why this speech and the versions of it he subsequently delivered impassioned voters, even those undecided. Clinton articulated the anguish that the majority of Americans were feeling at the time, dealing with the aftermath of an economic recession and the rising costs of raising a family. He painted a clear perpetrator in Bush and his upper-class backers. He then offered himself as an alternative: a southern man from a middle-class background who understands the hardships of single parenting, expensive medical bills, and the emerging working parent class of the new millennium. His southern drawl and ability to speak appealed to voters, too, as so many politicians speak beautifully and even poetically but neglect to get their

²⁵ Clinton, William J. "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York." U.C. Santa Barbara, 16 July, 1992.
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-new-york>.

point across to the average person. Clinton declares that under him, there would never be a divide but only a cohesive “us.”²⁶

What is interesting, though, is that, unlike in his debates, he rarely, if at all, mentions his governorship. During this entire speech, Clinton almost entirely ignores his gubernatorial experience of running the state of Arkansas, rarely using it as justification for why he is the right candidate. The only notable instance of his mentioning Arkansas is at the end, when he says:

“How do I know we can come together and make change happen? Because I have seen it in my own state. In Arkansas, we are working together, and we are making progress. No, there's no Arkansas Miracle, but there are a lot of miraculous people. And because of them, our schools are better, our wages are higher, our factories are busier, our water is cleaner and our budget is balanced. We're moving ahead. I wish I could say the same thing about America under the incumbent President. He took the richest country in the world and brought it down. We took one of the poorest states in America and lifted it up.”²⁷

While this does show how Clinton has improved the livelihoods of Arkansians, he never uses that language but actually gives most of the credit to the “people.” Thus, it was certainly more his policy goals and attitude that swayed voters through his speeches than his experience as governor.

Similarly, during the 2012 presidential election, Governor Mitt Romney organized his speeches in the same manner, mostly ignoring his gubernatorial experiences. At the 2012 Republican National Convention, Romney began by painting an emotional scene of the optimism Americans felt at the start of Obama’s term and ended by declaring that Obama had failed. He continued talking about the glories of the American people, like going to the moon, the booming automobile industry of the Midwest, and how the fabric of America relies on people finding friendship despite differences in religion, politics, or race. This was his way of extending an olive branch to independent and Democratic voters who strongly swung Obama’s way four years earlier. He then gave details on his own backstory to characterize himself as a middle-class man from the middle of the country, perhaps in part to counteract images of him as a wealthy businessperson. He explained that his father was a refugee from Mexico who fled to the United States and who, despite never having the privilege to go to college, successfully worked in manufacturing, and eventually was elected Governor of Michigan. His mother gave up her dreams of being a Hollywood actress to marry his father and move to Michigan; she also had ambitions of serving the nation, running for a Senate seat in the 1970s. These, certainly, are all true

²⁶ IBID.

²⁷ Clinton, William J. “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York.” U.C. Santa Barbara, 16 July, 1992.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-new-york>.

statements, though they are a bit misleading. Romney's father only lived in Mexico because they were living in a Mormon polygamist community there, while Romney himself was raised in an affluent neighborhood and not a working-class community. However, Romney chose to characterize himself in this way to appeal to working-class voters who strongly supported Obama in the previous election. Interestingly, though, during this entire discussion of his background, he never mentions his own governorship.

In fact, like Clinton, during this almost forty-minute speech, Romney barely acknowledges his role as Governor of Massachusetts at all, let alone expands upon it. The only time he does mention it is to say that as Governor, he supported women's political leadership; "As Governor of Massachusetts, I chose a woman lieutenant governor, a woman chief of staff, half of my cabinet and senior officials were women, and in business, I mentored and supported great women leaders who went on to run great companies."²⁸ While this was most likely geared towards enticing feminist voters, it was fairly nondescript. It did not give any information about the actual policy decisions he made as governor, which he chose to emphasize in his advertisements.

Moreover, while he avoids discussing his political experience, even though he is now vying for a more senior political position, he does mention his experience as a businessman. He said that President Obama failed to create a prosperous nation because he only had experience working in government and not working for a business. Romney said, "I learned the real lessons about how America works from experience," and continued to talk about how he founded the investment firm Bain Capital, which funded successful businesses like Staples and Steel Dynamics.²⁹ It is not clear that this would help Romney grasp the middle-class vote. Bain Capital is a private investment firm that funds big corporations, so while Romney and the owners of these big businesses are earning from this endeavor, the everyday workers at these companies are only earning enough for their bare necessities. Working class Americans likely did not see this so much as a small business owner chasing and winning the American dream, but as a wealthy financier who could not possibly relate to the struggle of the everyman. Perhaps, if Romney had highlighted how his gubernatorial policies improved the Massachusetts economy, and thus the livelihoods of each Massachusetts resident, he would have resonated more with middle-income, Midwest voters.

It is unclear precisely why both Clinton and Romney—one a successful candidate and the other unsuccessful—chose to downplay their gubernatorial experiences in speeches while emphasizing that part of their resumes in debates and ads. Perhaps it is in part because speeches, like rallies, are designed to play to the emotions of the audience. Candidates typically deliver speeches to a live audience that already supports their candidacy and their policy positions. While speech clips may be circulated in the media and seen by undecided or opposing voters, the immediate audience tends to be the candidate's base. Therefore, speeches are

²⁸ Romney, Mitt. "Transcript: Mitt Romney's Acceptance Speech." NPR, 30 Aug, 2012.
<https://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160357612/transcript-mitt-romneys-acceptance-speech>.

²⁹ Romney, Mitt. "Transcript: Mitt Romney's Acceptance Speech." NPR, 30 Aug, 2012.
<https://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160357612/transcript-mitt-romneys-acceptance-speech>.

designed to elicit an emotional reaction, whether that be anger, passion, or excitement. By contrast, debates and ads are viewed by a wider audience, including undecided voters, so candidates have the chance to sway voters their way. Debates, in particular, are like job interviews in which the interviewer is the American public; candidates want to appear professional and take the time to prove themselves. During debates and ads, candidates are more likely to highlight their gubernatorial experiences to reinforce their capabilities. Candidates may benefit from discussing their gubernatorial experience in speeches. They can continue to build their credibility with voters, and this will steer them away from attacks on their opponents, which jeopardizes potential bipartisan support.

Conclusion/Recommendations

We are just over one hundred days into the second Trump presidency, meaning we are still over three years away from the 2028 presidential election. However, potential candidates are already testing the waters. A few weeks ago, former Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg appeared on the *Flagrant* podcast. During the almost three-hour interview, Buttigieg was asked questions about his time as Mayor of South Bend, Indiana. When answering, he said being Mayor was like being the “CEO” of his Indiana city.³⁰ We have heard this comparison before, such as when Bush called himself the “CEO of Texas” when touting his governorship during a 2001 presidential debate.³¹ If Buttigieg is right, and being mayor is like being a CEO, then that is even more true of governors, who are the chief executive officers of larger political structures: states. If he decides to run for president, Buttigieg can use this line of reasoning to prove that he has experience in executive leadership, like managing the budget or infrastructure of South Bend. However, if someone like Governor Tim Walz were to throw his hat in the ring, he could use this same line of reasoning but on a much larger scale, as his state of Minnesota is greater in geographic size, population, and importance in domestic politics compared to the city of South Bend. This might inadvertently be a benefit to candidates with gubernatorial experience, spotlighting someone like Walz’s qualifications for president and minimizing Buttigieg’s.

Regardless, while potential 2028 presidential candidates begin authoring their campaigns, any governor will have to decide how to both use and confront their gubernatorial record. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush used their governorships to prove they could be successful presidents. Clinton cited his success at stimulating the Arkansas economy through adding jobs and expanding manufacturing as proof that he could do the same for all Americans once elected president. Similarly, Bush used his success at increasing the literacy rate of Texas students through the formation of charter schools as proof that if elected president, he could do the same for

³⁰ Schulz, Andrew. “Pete Buttigieg on Trump Tariffs, Taxing Billionaires, and Republican Gays.” *Flagrant*, podcast video, 23 Apr, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgx7GvYSq64>

³¹ Bush, George W. “October 3, 2000 Debate Transcript.” The Commission on Presidential Debates, 3 Oct, 2000. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-3-2000-transcript/>.

the nation. In both candidates' cases, their gubernatorial records gave them credibility. Voters liked what they did as governors and believed they could do the same things as president.

On the flip side, a governor running for president must also consider how their gubernatorial record could be used against them. Michael Dukakis was featured in the most famous presidential campaign advertisement of the century when Vice President George H.W. Bush told the story of Willie Horton, an imprisoned man who, under Dukakis' policies, was allowed a weekend respite from prison. During this weekend at home, he escaped to Maryland and committed another violent crime. Bush argued that Dukakis's "weak on crime" gubernatorial policies allowed this tragedy to occur, which made voters believe he could put the country at risk of a rise in violent crime if they elected him president.

Lastly, there is Mitt Romney, whose gubernatorial experience did not seem to help or hurt his campaign for president. Romney highlighted his successes in Massachusetts, like decreasing unemployment and refinancing the state budget, to show voters he could make these same positive changes at the national level. However, Barack Obama used not his governorship but another part of his history— his career as a venture capitalist—against him. Advertisements targeted to working-class communities highlighted Romney's private equity firm, Bain Capital, and how the firm was responsible for liquidating manufacturing plants and thus eliminating jobs. Romney's story is perhaps, then, the most universal. It shows how any candidate will be subject to critique on their former actions, regardless of whether they were in government or the private sector, and that while gubernatorial experience may help, it will not offset all other parts of a candidate's background.

Serving as a Governor (or a mayor, for that matter) does not guarantee a future presidency. It has the potential of making the presidency harder to earn since every misstep or failure you made as governor will be put under a microscope and broadcast to the American public. Like Clinton and Bush, you can use your gubernatorial record to your advantage, or, like Dukakis, you can have it used against you to devastating effects. Or, like Romney, your gubernatorial record can be combined with other parts of your background by the opposing candidate to craft a compelling narrative on why you are unfit for office. Multiple 2028 candidates will likely have gubernatorial experience and each should consider how that experience may help or hurt their efforts because the lessons of the past are clear: regardless of party, the value of your experience depends in large part on how well you tell your story and how well you can spin the narrative of your opponent

