Governors remain in the forefront of activity in the 21st century. While the governorship was not the stepping stone to the White House for President Barack Obama - as it was for the country's two previous presidents, Democratic Gov. Bill Clinton from Arkansas (1993-2001) and Republican George W. Bush from Texas (2001-2009) - governors continue to be in the middle of addressing the problems facing the country's weak economy. The demands on governors to propose state budgets and then keep them in balance have increased greatly during the current recession as severe revenue shortfalls have hit the states. This has placed severe limits on states' abilities to address the many growing needs of people trying to live through tough times. Politically, this has led to fallout from unhappy voters as they vent their anger and frustration towards leaders on election days.

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2011 Gubernatorial Politics

The three Southern states—Kentucky, Louisiana and Mississippi—which traditionally hold gubernatorial elections in the year before a presidential election, had a fourth state—West Virginia—join them in 2011. West Virginia held a special election to decide who would succeed Gov. Joe Manchin, who nominated himself to fill the U.S. Senate seat vacated after the death of Robert Bird in late 2010. State Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, who had been serving as interim governor, defeated Republican Bill Maloney by a 2.3 point margin.

This margin compares poorly with the margins in the three Southern races. In Louisiana, incumbent Gov. Bobby Jindal won a second term by a 47.9 point margin, while in Kentucky, incumbent Gov. Steven Beshear won his second term by a 20 point margin. The new Mississippi governor, Phil Bryant, won his first term by 22 points. The political makeup following the 2011 elections was no different than the makeup following the 2010 elections, with 29 Republicans, 20 Democrats and one Independent serving as governors.
Gubernatorial Elections
As seen in Table A [3], incumbents were eligible to seek another term in 437 of the 576 gubernatorial contests held between 1970 and 2011 (75.9 percent). In those contests, 341 incumbents sought re-election (78 percent), and 259 of them succeeded (75.9 percent). Those who were defeated were more likely to lose in the general election than in their own party primary by a 3-to-1 ratio. In 2010, Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons was defeated in the Republican primary, the third such loss since the 2000 election, and the 21st since 1970.

Democratic candidates held a winning edge in 308 of the 576 elections (53.5 percent) held between 1970 and 2011. In 222 of these races (38.5 percent), the results led to a party shift. But these party shifts have evened out over the years so that neither of the two major parties has an edge in the past four decades of gubernatorial elections.

Between 1970 and 1992, Democrats won 200 of the 324 races for governor (62 percent). Then, from 1993 to 2003, Republicans leveled the playing field by winning 85 of the 145 races for governor (59 percent). From 2004 to 2011, there has been a virtual tie in which party has won the 106 governor’s races, with Republicans winning 54 (51 percent), Democrats winning 51 (48 percent), and an Independent winning a single race (1 percent).

Another factor in determining how many governors have served in the states is the number of newly elected governors who are new to the office as compared to those who are returning after complying with constitutional term limits or after holding other positions. Of new governors taking office over a decade, states dropped from a rate of 2.3 new governors per state in the 1950s to 1.9 in the 1970s and to 1.1 in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the rate began to move up a bit to 1.4 new governors per state. In the first decade of the 21st century, many new faces filled governor’s mansions. From 2000–2009 alone, new governors were elected in 61 of the 118 elections (51.7 percent). Nine new governors succeeded to office upon the incumbent vacating the office from 2000 to 2009. So, during the first few years of the previous decade, 70 new governors were sworn into office, continuing the 1.4 rate per state.

In the 2010 and 2011 elections, considerable turnover among governors continued. In 2010, 26 new governors were elected in 37 races, and two other new governors succeeded to the office upon the resignation of the incumbent to take over as one of the state’s new U.S. senators. In 2011, one new governor was elected in one of the four races —Mississippi’s Phil Bryant. As noted earlier, in a 2011 special election, West Virginia’s successor Gov. Earl Ray Tomlin was required to win the voters’ approval to fill out former Gov. Joe Manchin’s remaining term, which he did by a narrow margin. And in the two other elections in 2011, both incumbents won their second terms. In sum, in the 41 governor’s elections in 2010–11, 27 new governors were elected (65.9 percent), while 14 incumbent governors won another term (34 percent).

The New Governors
During the 2008–11 gubernatorial elections and resignations, new governors took several routes to office. Twenty-one had previously held an elective office. These include:

- Five attorneys general: California Gov. Jerry Brown (who also served as governor from 1975 to 83), Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo—all Democrats; and Pennsylvania Gov.
Tom Corbett and Virginia Gov. Robert McDonald—both Republicans;

- One secretary of state: Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, a Republican, who succeeded to office upon the resignation of Gov. Janet Napolitano in 2009;
- Three U.S. senators: Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, a Republican; Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton, a Democrat; and Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee, an Independent;

Fourteen new governors had previously held elected or appointed sub-state offices. These include:

- Three state legislators: South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, a Republican state representative; and Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin and West Virginia Gov. Earl Ray Tomlin, both Democratic state senate presidents;
- Two county officials: New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, district attorney, and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, county CEO—both Republicans.

Six new governors followed a unique path to the governorship:

- Three former federal attorneys or judges: New Jersey Gov. Christopher Christie, a former U.S. attorney; Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, a former federal district court judge; and Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead, a former U.S. attorney, all Republicans;
- Two businessmen: Florida Gov. Rick Scott, a health care company executive, and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, a venture capitalist in computers, both Republicans;
- One doctor: Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley, a dermatologist, Republican.

Two of these new governors have a family heritage tied to the office, as their fathers also had served as the state’s top executive. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is the son of former Gov. Mario Cuomo, elected in 1982, 1986 and 1990. Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee is the son of former Gov. John Chafee, who was elected in 1962, 1964 and 1966.

In the 466 gubernatorial races between 1977 and 2011—the last political step taken prior to this election—among the candidates were 117 lieutenant governors (33 won), 102 attorneys general (29 won), 35 secretaries of state (eight won), 29 state treasurers (eight won), and 18 state auditors or comptrollers (three won). Looking at these numbers from a bettor’s point of view, the odds of a lieutenant governor becoming governor stand at 3.55-to-1, an attorney general at 3.5-to-1; a secretary of state at 4.38-to-1; a state treasurer at 4.1-to-1; and a state auditor or comptroller stands at 6-to-1.

One other unique aspect about the current governors is that six women will be serving in 2012— the same number as were serving in 2010 and 2011. Three of these women were elected in 2010 to their first term, while three others will continue terms they won or succeeded to earlier. Six other women were major party candidates in the 2010 races, but they were not able to win.

Women are becoming more of a part of the gubernatorial scene from 2004 to 2011. Twenty-nine
women ran for governor either as incumbents seeking another term or as a major party candidate, with 14 of them winning (48 percent).

Cost of Gubernatorial Elections

Table B [4] presents data on the total cost of gubernatorial elections from 1977 to 2011 and reveals two very clear patterns. First is the rhythm of gubernatorial elections in each four-year cycle. In the odd year following a presidential election year, only two states hold their elections. In the mid-year between presidential elections, 36 states hold their elections. In the year before a presidential election, only three states hold their elections. And during a presidential election year, 13—now 11 states—hold their elections, as Arkansas and Rhode Island both switched to a four-year term for the governor in 1986 and 1994 respectively.

The second pattern is the consistent growth in the amounts of money spent in gubernatorial elections over the four-decade period, with only a few drops between comparable years in the cycles. These drops usually were tied to relatively uncontested races when an incumbent was successful in his or her re-election bid.

- The recent drop in the amount of money spent between the 2005 and 2009 races could have signaled the impact of the Great Recession on how much money was available for these elections. Other reasons could account for this slight drop. In 2005, both elections were open seat races in which Democrats won. In 2009, one election was an open seat race and the other saw an incumbent lose in a bid for a second term; Republicans won both races.
- The changes in the amount of money spent in the most recent mid-presidential term races is also interesting. In 2002, the total amount spent was slightly more than $641 million. In 2006, the total amount spent was down to $727.7 million. Then in 2010, it rose up to more than $920 million!

A major part of these ups and downs is tied to the number of incumbents running and the number of open seat races. In 2002, 16 incumbents ran and 12 won; the other 20 elections were open seat races. In 2006, 31 incumbents ran and 25 won; the other five were open seat races. And in 2010, 14 incumbents ran for another term and 11 won; 23 were open seat races. Other reasons may be tied to some of the specific races.

Table C [5] shows the costs of elections from 2007 through 2010. The range in cost of these races is considerable: From the high-cost 2010 race in California ($219,802,866 in 2010 dollars), to the low-cost 2008 race in Missouri ($1,192,038). Both races were for an open seat and the winner posed a shift from a Republican to a Democratic governor.

The most money spent by the winning candidates in these elections were in Texas (just over $41 million in 2010 dollars) by Gov. Rick Perry in 2010; in California ($36.03 million) by newly elected Gov. Jerry Brown in 2010; in Michigan ($36.3 million) by newly elected Gov. Rick Snyder in 2010; in Indiana ($28 million) by Gov. Mitch Daniels winning a second term in 2008; in Pennsylvania ($24.24 million) by newly elected Tom Corbett in 2010; in Virginia ($24.17 million) by newly elected Gov. Robert McDonnell in 2009; and in New York ($23.6 million) by newly elected Gov. Andrew Cuomo in 2010. The most money spent by a losing candidate was in California ($154 million) by the Republican candidate, former eBay CEO Meg Whitman, in 2010.

The least money spent by winning candidates in these elections was in Alaska ($513,698) by Gov.
Sean Parnell who won a full term in 2010 after succeeding former Gov. Sarah Palin; in Montana ($794,052) by Gov. Brian Schweitzer winning his second term in 2008; in Missouri ($856,117) by newly elected Gov. Jay Nixon in 2008; in New Hampshire ($1.03 million) by Gov. John Lynch winning a fourth term in 2010; in Nebraska ($1.08 million) by Gov. Dave Heineman winning his second full term in 2010; and in Maine ($1.2 million) by newly elected Gov. Paul LePage in 2010.

But looking at the amount of money spent per general election vote shows a slightly different picture. In 2007, the most expensive races per general election vote occurred in Louisiana at $33.60 per vote, and in Kentucky at $33.02 per vote. The Louisiana race was for an open seat, while the Kentucky race saw an incumbent defeated in the general election. The least expensive races per vote in 2008 were held in Missouri at 41 cents per vote, and in Utah at 97 cents per vote. The Missouri race was for an open seat, while in the Utah race, an incumbent won his second term.

In Figure A, by converting the actual dollars spent each year into equivalent 2010 dollars, the cost of these elections has generally increased over time. The actual dollars spent between 1977 and 2010 totaled $5.744 billion. When converted into equivalent 2010 dollars, the total was $7.954 billion. The starkness of the changes over this 34-year period can be demonstrated by comparing the amounts spent in the first four years involved (1977–80) with the amount spent in the last four years (2007–10). In the earlier 1977–80 cycle, those in the 54 races spent $567,758,192. In the latest 2007–10 cycle, those in the 53 races spent $1,248,141,978—an increase of $680,391,786, or 1.198 percent. Clearly, money really counts for a lot in gubernatorial politics.

The 2009–12 Cycle in Process
We are now three years through the current four-year cycle. In the 43 races held from 2009 to 2011, we saw 29 states elect new governors and five other states gain successor governors (North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven and West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin were elected to U.S. Senate seats; Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano were appointed by President Obama to cabinet positions; and Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich was impeached).

In 2012, 11 states will hold gubernatorial elections. These seats are now held by eight Democrats and three Republicans, but four incumbents—in Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire and Washington —face term limits. So, there will be at least four new governors elected in 2012.

Notes:

1 Five of these new governors succeeded governors who resigned upon moving on to a new responsibility before the end of their elected terms: Alaska (2009), Arizona (2009), Kansas (2009), Nebraska (2005), Texas (2000); four others succeeded due to problems the incumbents had and were removed from office in California (2003) and Illinois (2009), or the incumbent governor resigned to avoid efforts to remove them due to certain activities they had performed while governors in New Jersey (2010) and New York (2008).

2 In North Dakota, Lt. Gov. Jack Dalrymple-R, succeeded outgoing Gov. John Hoeven-R, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in the 2010 election. In West Virginia, state Senate President Earl Ray Tomlin-D, succeeded outgoing Gov. Joe Manchin-D, who appointed himself to fill the remaining years
of deceased Democratic U.S. Senator Robert Byrd’s term.

3 Steve Beshear-D, in Kentucky and Bobby Jindal-R, in Louisiana.


6 In California, Meg Whitman-R; in Florida, Alex Sink-D; in Maine, Libby Mitchell-D; in New Mexico, Diane Denish-D; in Oklahoma, Jari Adkins-D; and in Wyoming, Leslie Petersen-D.

7 Eleven gubernatorial elections will be held in 2012: Delaware, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia.

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