Gubernatorial Genealogy
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With the Spring Primary over, Pennsylvania’s 2002 gubernatorial campaign looms ever closer. Now, as we prepare to look to the future and the election of a new governor, it might be interesting to consider briefly what history can tell us about past gubernatorial candidacies. Where have former Pennsylvania governors come from? What kinds of backgrounds have they typically had – and what implications for next year’s election are in that historical record?

Let’s start with the where -- where have Pennsylvania governors come from? Well, to begin, they come from Pennsylvania, at least most of them. Of the 43 elected governors, only six (14 percent) were born outside the state. On average, every 40 years or so, Pennsylvania elects a governor who has not been a native son.

And they tend to come from a handful of counties. Of the native sons (37 governors), the majority was born in just six of the state’s 67 counties. If your aspiration were the Pennsylvania governor’s mansion, you would want to be born in Allegheny County. It has produced four native born governors -- more than any other county. Almost as good would be Berks, Chester, Montgomery, or Philadelphia counties--the birthplace of three governors each. And Centre, Lancaster, and Westmoreland Counties get honorable mention with two native-born governors each. Significantly, the vast majority of Pennsylvania counties (46 of 67) have not been the birthplace of even a single governor.

So mostly governors are Pennsylvania natives born in a handful of state counties. Now to the “what” questions. What are the backgrounds most likely to turn up on the resumes of Pennsylvania’s governors and wanabee governors? Is there any way to forecast if you or that bright kid you just outfitted with $3,000 braces might one day live in the big Harrisburg mansion, just off Front Street.

Actually there is--but you might be surprised at what augurs a gubernatorial future.

First the obvious: governors tend to be male; in fact, the probability of that is exactly 100 percent. They also tend to be white, again a 100 percent probability; ethnic status, however, does provide some diversity--Irish, English, German, etc. -- as long as western European is diverse enough for you.

What about other specific background factors, such as age, profession, social groups, and so forth? Middle age, mid 40s to 50s, is most likely for a first term Pennsylvania governor. Pennsylvania governors have always been nominees of a major political party (no third party candidate has ever won), and likely to have been a lawyer. Most governors have been financially comfortable and a few wealthy.

Perhaps the most prominent background factor is the “base office” held by the future governor. Base offices are the stepping-stones in political careers, the offices from which politicians launch statewide or even national careers. The offices that are considered base vary from state to state. The office of state representative is a traditional base office for congress in many states, the office of U.S. representative is a base for statewide office, and U.S. senators have often been governors.
So what are the base offices for the Pennsylvania governorship? A little history provides background here. Since 1955--roughly the beginning of modern Pennsylvania politics--both major parties combined have awarded a total of 24 gubernatorial nominations to 19 nominees.


The nominees have been an eclectic lot, but for major party nominations, it’s best to be a lieutenant governor or at least a U.S. congressman if you are a Republican--and a big city mayor or a businessman if you are a Democrat. Across both major parties being either a lieutenant governor or a businessman is your best bet for nomination.

What about the general election? Elected governors since 1955 have included two congressman (Bill Scranton and Tom Ridge), one big city mayor (David Lawrence), one lieutenant governor (Ray Shafer), one businessman (Milton Shapp), one auditor general (Robert Casey) and one federal prosecutor (Dick Thornburgh).

Surprisingly there is no pattern here. Since 1955, exactly two elected governors have had the same base office (both Scranton and Ridge were congressman). Every other governor has been elected from a different base. The base backgrounds of Pennsylvania’s governors are, in fact, remarkably dissimilar. Pennsylvanians apparently care little about the occupation of their new governor - as long as he has not been pursuing his line of work in Harrisburg.

The most consistent feature in the background of modern Pennsylvania governors is that they have mostly been from outside the Harrisburg political community, when first elected. In modern times, exactly one Harrisburg incumbent Republican won the governorship (Ray Shafer in 1966) and one Harrisburg incumbent Democrat (George Leader in 1954). All the others have been Harrisburg outsiders. That outsider status seems to be as close to a common background characteristic as Pennsylvania gets for its governors.

So if you or that bright kid of yours, with the expensive braces, aspires to be governor one day, don’t worry too much about the job title on the resume. Just make certain, the zip code isn’t Harrisburg.

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