



# Incumbent vulnerability and entry in gubernatorial elections: The case of former governors<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The vulnerability hypothesis predicts strategic, quality candidates only challenge weak incumbents. House election studies support this hypothesis. State level analyses produce mixed results. We test whether incumbent vulnerability affects the entry of one kind of strategic actor – former governors. Former governors are an ideal test case. Having already served in the state's highest office, they represent the highest quality and perhaps most strategic candidates who run for state office. Our results show that performance in the previous election, one measure of incumbent vulnerability, does not affect former governor entry. However, incumbent vulnerability measured as recent economic performance and number of other quality candidates appearing in a former governor's party primary does affect entry in general elections.

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## 1. Introduction

Vulnerability motivates quality candidates to challenge otherwise formidable incumbents in U.S. House Elections.<sup>1</sup> It makes theoretical and practical sense that progressively ambitious office holders steer clear of incumbents unless additional factors are in the challenger's favor. It is not clear whether an incumbent's vulnerability figures the same way into the entry decisions of quality candidates who challenge for higher level state office (Squire, 1992; Tompkins, 1984). Carson (2005), Lublin (1994), Stewart (1989), and

Lazarus (2008a) find that vulnerability affects quality candidate entry.<sup>2</sup> However, Adams and Squire (1997), Squire (1989, 1992), and Bardwell (2002) find that it does not.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper we argue former governors present an interesting incumbent vulnerability hypothesis test at the state level. Few potential quality challengers bring greater name recognition and campaign experience to a race than former governors. Their record in defeating incumbents suggests they are strategic. No other quality challenger is more formidable and their success in defeating incumbents sets them apart from other quality candidates (Squire, 1992). From 1978 through 2006, former governors challenge incumbents in 11 elections and

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<sup>1</sup> See Lazarus (2008b) for an excellent overview of this extensive literature.

<sup>2</sup> It is notable that studies consistently find that quality candidates are more likely to appear in elections with vulnerable incumbents in congressional races (Bond, Covington, & Fleisher, 1985; Krasno & Green, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Lazarus (2008b) argues mixed findings reflect methodological problems stemming from not taking primary challengers into account and provides the strongest test to date in support of the rational candidate entry theory and quality candidate entry predictions in elections with vulnerable incumbents.

win 5 times. Other quality candidates are successful in just 6 of 31 attempts (Jensen & Beyle, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

In the ensuing analysis, we draw on ambition and strategic candidate theory to set our hypotheses about how incumbent vulnerability impacts former governor entry in gubernatorial elections. We explain how we operationalize our measures and discuss our estimation techniques, analysis, and results. We conclude by contemplating the implications of our findings.

## 2. Background

Ambition theory (Jacobson & Kernell, 1981; Rohde, 1979; Schlesinger, 1966) and the rational actor model of candidate entry (Black, 1972) posit high level quality candidates are strategic and minimize the risk of losing elected office by challenging for open seats where winning prospects are greatest. They challenge incumbents only if vulnerable (Berry & Canon, 1993; Dowling & Lem, 2009; Kang, Niemi, & Powell, 2003; Lazarus, 2008a). We hypothesize the same is true for former governors who must also balance the potential benefits of serving another term in office with the risks that losing a bid for office entails. Several factors signal vulnerability. An incumbent losing support at the ballot box is one important cue. This can be measured by assessing an incumbent's vote share in the previous election (Bianco, 1984; Krasno & Green, 1988; Lazarus, 2008a; Squire, 1992). A narrow winning margin in the previous election signals an incumbent's vulnerability and motivates other quality candidates to consider entering the next election.

Deteriorating economic conditions also signal vulnerability. Negative economic perceptions worsen an incumbent's reelection prospects via falloffs in popularity (Cohen & King, 2004; Hansen, 1999) and retrospective voting (Svoboda, 1995). Some studies question whether declining economic performance increases vulnerability (Squire, 1992) because governors have little direct control over economic factors such as unemployment. However, Carsey and Wright (1998) and Niemi, Bremer, and Heel (1999) find the public distinguishes between national and state economies and holds incumbents accountable for state economic conditions in the subsequent election. We expect declining economic conditions will increase vulnerability prior to and during the time to file for primary elections.

The number of out-party quality candidates running in a primary is another indication of vulnerability, although the relationship is little studied in gubernatorial elections.<sup>5</sup> The rational actor model of candidate entry predicts there will be more quality candidates when incumbents are vulnerable. But it is unclear how quality candidates will enter the out-party primary election under these circumstances in gubernatorial races. One possibility is the entry of a former governor in the out-party primary will deter other

quality candidates. If this is correct, just one or a few quality candidates will run in the out-party primary prior to a former governor running against an incumbent in the general election (King, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, we could expect vulnerability to attract quality candidates irrespective of when or whether a former governor enters the race. From this perspective, vulnerability improves the probability for defeating the incumbent for all quality candidates. If this is correct, more quality candidates will appear in the out-party primary prior to a general election with a former governor appearing on the ballot.

Former governors place considerable importance on their legacy and accomplishments. They are reluctant to risk losing in another bid for office (Rosenthal, 2013). Given these high stakes, their campaign experience, and success in defeating former incumbents, we expect former governors will be more likely to challenge an incumbent when the incumbent is vulnerable. Factors such as poor performance at the ballot box and declining economic conditions increase this probability. Since the literature is unclear as to what effect incumbent vulnerability has on the number of quality candidates running in the out-party primary, we set competing hypotheses. We then test whether former governors are more likely to run in primaries where quality candidates "yield the floor" to a more formidable former governor, or in more crowded primaries in which numerous quality candidates vie for the opportunity to challenge a vulnerable incumbent opponent in the general election.

## 3. Data and method

The data are characterized by rare events; of the 420 gubernatorial elections from 1978 to 2008 there are only 30 elections where a former governor appears in the general election, which constitutes just over 7% of all gubernatorial races in this time period. In order to maximize the number of observations in our dataset, we analyze former governor entry in general elections. By doing this we are not able to test plausible hypotheses concerning national level effects such as presidential popularity or national partisan mood. Including such national political factors in the model reduces the number of observations by over 50%. More importantly, including them restricts our analysis to incumbent races only and prevents analysis of the broader population of former governors entering elections with open seats. Accordingly, we exclude national level factors from the models we present here.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Figures based on data reported in Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database on Thad Beyle's web page <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/>.

<sup>5</sup> House election studies examine the interaction among candidates (Banks & Kiewiet, 1989; Canon, 1990; Lazarus, 2008b). However, these studies examine whether the quality challenger presence affects amateurs' decisions to enter an election contingent on incumbent strength.

<sup>6</sup> King (2013) finds the order in which candidates enter the primary influences whether subsequent quality candidates will enter. Anecdotal evidence suggests this may well be the case for gubernatorial races as well. Quality candidates waited for former governors to decide whether they were going to run before announcing their own intentions in such races as Illinois 2006 and Ohio 2013. Systematically testing these phenomena is beyond the current analysis' scope.

<sup>7</sup> We estimate alternative national level effect models as a robustness check. We find that national economic conditions perform substantively the same as state level effects. Models with political factors such as the partisan makeup of the presidency and Congress also do not substantively alter the results. But their estimation restricts our analysis to just those races with incumbents, reducing observations by over 50%, and precludes estimation of the three interaction terms we need to test our hypotheses

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