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Incumbent vulnerability and entry in gubernatorial elections: The case of former governors[☆]

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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.¹ 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.² However, Adams and Squire (1997), Squire (1989, 1992), and Bardwell (2002) find that it does not.³

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

² 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).

³ 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).⁴

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.⁵ 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).⁶ 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 of 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.⁷

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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

We include control variables in the analysis that research finds affect entry. Most candidate entry studies analyzing entry in general elections assume that a similar potential-candidate pool exists for each governor's seat. However, we expect that as the number of eligible former governors increases, so does the probability that one of them will enter the election. For this possibility, we include a variable for the number of former governors who might plausibly run in each election. To determine whether a former governor is eligible, we consider former governors' age, party, term limit status, whether they are suspected or arraigned on corruption charges, and their current office (if any). Age determines whether many candidates are young enough to run again for governor. We determine the age of the oldest governor who has won office again, 74, and exclude those over that age. Term limited governors are not counted. Pool size does not include former governors holding a senate seat or high court position (Jacobson & Kernell, 1981; Rohde, 1979; Schlesinger, 1966). Corruption, scandal, and incarceration rule out others.⁸ In incumbent races, the pool consists of the number of former governors eligible to run again from the party out of power. We exclude former governors from the incumbent's party in this instance. If there is no incumbent, former governors from the Republican and Democratic parties make up the pool.

We also include a control variable measuring campaign spending. Raising sufficient campaign funds indicates quality candidates are mounting a serious campaign (Abramowitz, 1991; Squire, 1992). Local and national conditions amplify fundraising (Brown & Jacobson, 2008) and affect high quality candidates' determination whether to enter an election (Maestas & Rugeley, 2008). We do not expect former governors will enter unless they raise comparable campaign funds. Funding comparable to that of other candidates in the race is necessary to seriously contest an election. We measure relative campaign resources as the absolute difference between Democratic and Republican spending for that election. We then divide the difference by the state population for that year in order to account for the difference in campaign spending per capita (Partin, 2002).⁹ The closer, and thus more competitive, campaign spending per capita is, the smaller the value for our campaign spending variable (Jensen & Beyle, 2003).¹⁰

about incumbent vulnerability. The results are available from the author by request.

⁸ This pertains to governors whose subordinates or associates have been formally charged with corruption, or there are personal corruption charges with indictment, trial, conviction, or unequivocal historical report of conviction.

⁹ Instead of state population, Partin (2002) uses the number of eligible voters as reported by the Statistical Abstract of the United States. However, these data are only published once every two years, which forces us to take averages from the year before and after the election for the five states which have off-year gubernatorial elections. Moreover, there is no data for 1984. As a precaution we estimate the model using Partin's (2002) measure and find it produces the same results as the model we present in this study using overall state population.

¹⁰ The information is obtained from the Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database (<http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html>).

Based on our theoretical expectations of incumbent vulnerability, we code the presence or absence of an incumbent, an incumbent's electoral support in the previous election, the number of other quality candidates in the primary, and economic conditions. Elections with an incumbent are coded one, otherwise they equal zero. The absolute difference between Democratic and Republican vote share in the previous election indicates support for an incumbent in the previous election.¹¹ Preliminary examination of the independent variable distributions shows the previous vote distribution data are heavily skewed and could bias results (Fig. 1). To compensate, the natural log of vote spread is used to estimate our model.¹²

We measure how many quality candidates are in the primary with a count variable based on Squire's (1992) quality candidate measure. In order to accommodate the variable's count nature, we code quality candidates as any candidate in the race who currently or previously holds statewide elected office.¹³ We indicate economic conditions with the change in unemployment beginning two years prior to the election when candidates must commit to running for office. A negative value indicates employment is improving and the governor is less vulnerable. A positive value indicates rising unemployment, which indicates the governor is more vulnerable.

Finally, our hypotheses require three interaction terms. To create these terms we multiply the relevant measures, the number of quality candidates, previous vote margin, and unemployment, by the incumbency variable. It is important to note the quality candidate variable is included in the overall model not because it is a part of a stand-alone hypothesis, but because interaction terms become biased if their constituent terms are not included in the model (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006).

4. Results

The logit model results are presented in Table 1. The model performs well, explaining 82.4% of the variation. Overall, the results indicate former governors are strategic as to which races they enter. When an incumbent is

¹¹ In two instances, former governors ran against three or more serious candidates. In these races, we only consider the top two candidates by vote in the election. The former governor is a third party candidate in both races which were held in Alaska in 1978 and 1990. In these races we treat the former governor as a Republican since that is his original party. To determine whether this coding decision will adversely impact our results we rerun our analysis with those two races excluded. Our results are unchanged, and we accordingly keep the two Alaska elections in our dataset.

¹² We also estimate a model based on gubernatorial popularity. However, state level polls are rare and are conducted most frequently in larger states close to the election. Since former governors must commit to running for office as much as two years in advance, polls conducted just before or after the election is not useful for our purposes. Accordingly, there is a great deal of missing data which makes the results suspect. We contend our measure is the best alternative. These results are available from the author by request.

¹³ In open seat races a count of quality candidates in the primary election is not meaningful since one party's primary field can be crowded with quality candidates whereas the other is relatively empty. Accordingly, we set how many quality candidates are in the primary to zero for open seat races.

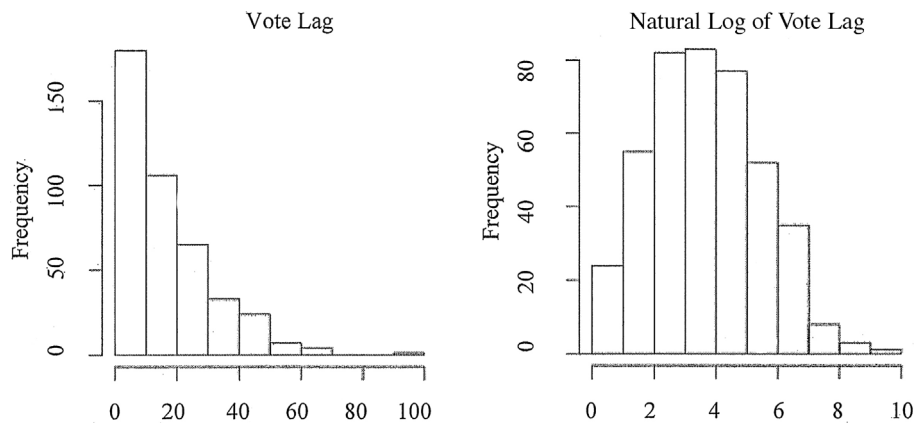


Fig. 1. Distributions of the vote lag variable.

Source: Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database at: <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html>.

Table 1

The probability a comeback governor will run in the general election.

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. err.)
Campaign spending spread	−0.008	(0.220)
Incumbent in race	−1.758 [*]	(0.878)
Quality candidates	2.261 [*]	(1.128)
Vote spread in last election	−0.403 [*]	(0.203)
Change in unemployment	0.326	(0.268)
Incumbent × quality candidates	−1.468	(1.200)
Incumbent × vote spread	−0.103	(0.333)
Incumbent × unemployment	0.698	(0.523)
Pool of eligible former governors	0.493 [*]	(0.176)
Intercept	−2.383 [*]	(0.672)

N = 419

AIC = 192.31

$\chi^2 = -86.16$

Area under ROC curve = 0.824

Sources: Unemployment data are from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; elections and candidate quality data are from the Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database at <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html> and volumes of the *Almanac of American Politics* from 1980 to 2010.

Note:

^{*} $p \leq 0.05$, two-tailed tests.

present the odds ratio of a former governor appearing on the ballot decreases by 0.828. Likewise, a one unit increase in the vote spread in the last election decreases the odds of a former governor appearing on the ballot by 0.312, which demonstrates former governors are strategic in the races which they enter. We also find the odds ratio of a former governor appearing on the ballot increases with the number of quality candidates in the primary and when the field of quality candidates in the primary is stronger.

While our interaction term coefficients seem statistically insignificant, it is important to note interaction terms cannot be evaluated by significance levels like an additive, conventional coefficient. The traditional adage about interpreting all coefficients while holding all other values at their means does not hold here (Ai & Norton, 2003; Berry, DeMerit, & Esarey, 2010; Brambor et al., 2006). Instead, as Brambor et al. (2006) demonstrate, the full range of values of the constituent terms of interaction terms are best examined via graphical display. This method allows us to assess statistical significance as values of both *X* and *Z* vary

with each other. Within the context of the interaction plot we cannot draw upon the mean values for the interaction coefficient reported within the table to assess significance. In this case, we are not holding all other variables constant; rather we are allowing two variables, *X* and *Z*, to vary while everything else is held constant. To illustrate this point, consider we must evaluate the interaction between quality candidates (*X*) and incumbency (*Z*) when there are three quality candidates in the primary and evaluate the same term when there are no quality candidates; it is possible the interaction will be significant when there are no quality candidates, but not at three.

Interaction terms are evaluated in regard to the marginal effect of *X* on *Y* at a given value of *Z*, where *XZ* is the interaction term. A marginal effect is the independent variable's effect on the dependent variable in incremental levels, such as the number of quality candidates going from zero to one to two, and so on.¹⁴ Researchers graph the interaction term with the *X* axis denoting the marginal effect of *X* on *Y*. The *Y* axis displays the variable, which conditions the effect. The effect is plotted, along with 95% confidence intervals. Should the confidence interval include $y = 0$, there is no statistically significant marginal effect for incumbency at that particular value plotted on the *X* axis. As long as the confidence intervals do not include the origin, the effect is significant at that particular level of the conditioning variable (Brambor et al., 2006). For our interaction terms we plot the marginal effect of the presence of an incumbent in the race conditioned by the unemployment rate, the vote spread in the last gubernatorial election, and the number of quality candidates in the primary. By evaluating the point estimates and the associated confidence intervals, we are able to assess under which conditions the interaction term is significant.

Fig. 2 displays the interaction of incumbency and vote spread in the previous gubernatorial election. It shows that at no level of vote spread does incumbency condition a

¹⁴ Marginal effects are partial derivatives. They cannot be substantively interpreted in the same way as a traditional regression coefficient (Berry et al., 2010).

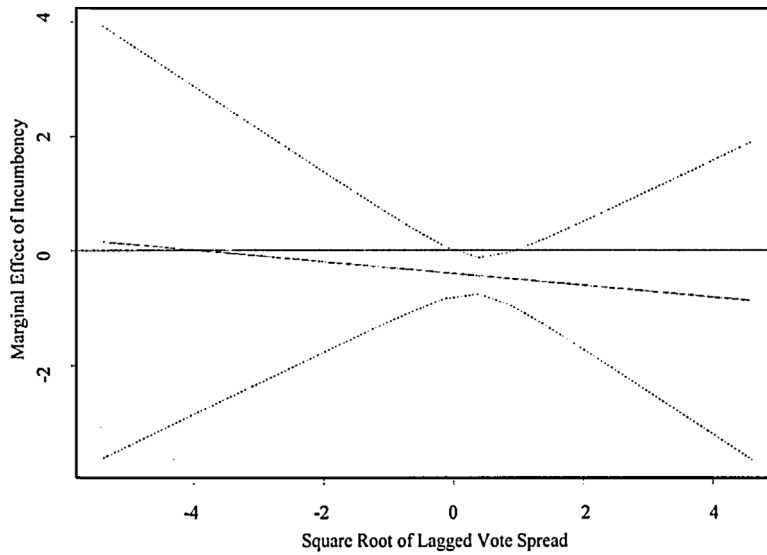


Fig. 2. Interaction of lagged vote spread and incumbency.

Source: Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database at: <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html>.

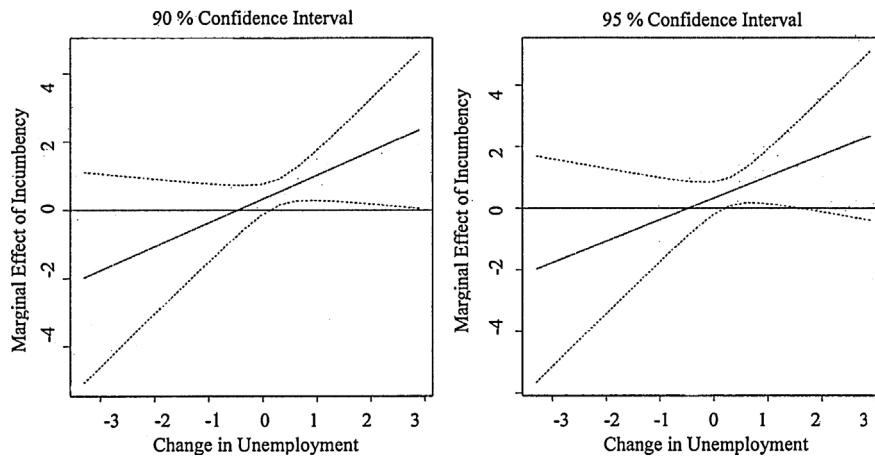


Fig. 3. The interaction of unemployment change and incumbency with 90 and 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Unemployment data are from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

former governor's decision to run for office. A close call does not motivate former governors to challenge an incumbent in the next election.

Fig. 3 displays the interaction between incumbency and unemployment. Negative values on the X axis represent decreasing unemployment and positive values represent increasing unemployment. When unemployment decreases, incumbency does not have a statistically significant impact on whether or not a former governor appears on the ballot. However, when unemployment increases by up to 1.5%, the marginal incumbency's effect on a former governor appearing on the ballot is significant. Curiously, this effect disappears when the economy declines more than 1.5%. However, it is important to note zero is just inside the confidence interval beyond 1.5%. If we graph the figure with a 90% confidence interval, displayed in Fig. 3, incumbency's marginal effect has a positive and

significant impact on a former governor appearing on the ballot at all positive values. This suggests former governors strategically evaluate economic conditions when deciding whether to run against an incumbent.

Fig. 4 presents the interaction between incumbency and the number of quality candidates in the primary. Incumbency has a significant impact on a former governor appearing on the ballot when there are no other quality candidates in the primary. However, once there is more than one other quality candidate on the ballot, incumbency no longer has a significant marginal effect on a former governor appearing on the general election ballot. This is consistent with our expectation of how quality candidates position themselves a primary challenge to a weak incumbent. Overall, our findings are consistent with past research that finds that vulnerable incumbents attract higher quality candidates and that former

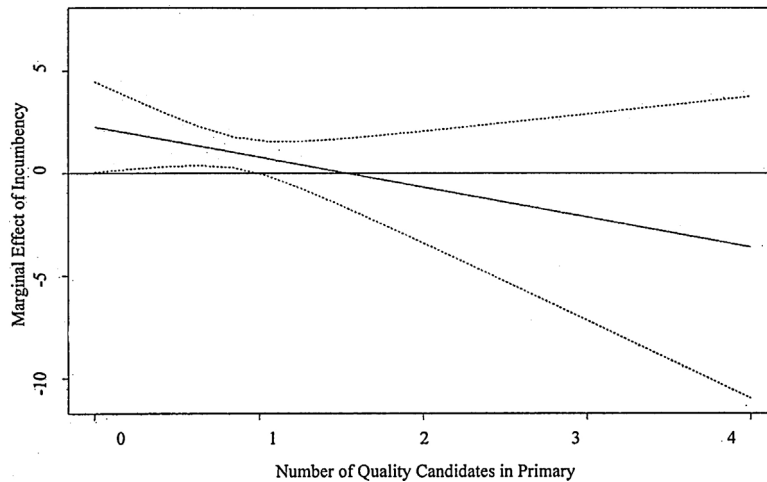


Fig. 4. Interaction of number of quality candidate and incumbency.

Source: Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Database at: <http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/guber.html> and volumes of the *Almanac of American Politics* from 1980 to 2010.

governors act strategically when entering a race with an incumbent.

5. Conclusion

Our results comport with studies finding vulnerability is important for explaining quality candidate entry in state elections (Carson, 2005; Lazarus, 2008a; Lublin, 1994; Stewart, 1989) and are consistent with progressive ambition theory and the rational actor model of candidate entry predictions. In all elections there is some chance, albeit very small, that a former governor will stand for election. However, vulnerability is important for understanding when former governors will enter in a race with an incumbent. The results show former governors challenge vulnerable incumbents when state economies falter or when other quality candidates do not enter the primary. These results speak to the utility of declining economic conditions as an incumbent vulnerability indicator and the strategic entry of former governors when they feel the primary will be relatively easy in state level elections.

The fact that the number of quality candidates in the out-party primary interacts with incumbent elections is particularly interesting. Former governors are more likely to appear in elections with incumbents when there are no other quality candidates in the out-party primary. In the relatively few races former governors enter, other quality candidates are scarce. This makes sense if the field of candidates considering a run for governor against an incumbent defer to the strongest candidates. King (2013) finds entry order in out-party primaries for U.S. Senate races affects the number of quality candidates appearing on the ballot. It seems plausible that in the case of former governors other quality candidates wait to enter until it is clear the former governor is not going to run. When the former governor does run, the other quality candidates are less likely to enter. While our research design does not allow us to test this directly, anecdotal evidence suggests this may well be the case. For instance, former California Governor

Jerry Brown shows interest in coming back as early as 2008 and forms an exploratory committee in 2010. Brown runs against six amateur candidates winning with over 80% of the primary vote. Alternatively, after months of media speculation, former Illinois Governor Jim Edgar decides in late September 2005 he is not running again for governor in 2006 against popular incumbent Rod Blagovich. Just over a month later Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka announces she is not seeking reelection as treasurer in order to run for governor. State Senator Bill Brady also enters the primary.

By focusing our incumbent vulnerability test on former governors, we find support for this theory at the state level. Indeed, former governors are unquestionably more effective in defeating incumbents and our findings show it is because they are strategic in assessing vulnerability. We are then left to ponder the extent to which mixed results in other state level election studies may stem, in part, from treating quality candidates similarly rather than allowing for the possibility that strategic circumstances can vary for different candidate quality types. It may be the case that time and energy invested in establishing their legacy and record sets former governors apart from the other quality candidates (Rosenthal, 2013). The impact of losing on former governors' sense of accomplishment and legacy rivals, if not exceeds, the cost incurred by other quality candidates. So, it is also not surprising most governors do not run again. Many may be content with their accomplishments or simply lack favorable enough circumstances to consider another bid for office. Regardless of the motives, the risks are high. Win or lose, running again likely has a substantial impact on legacy, and this causes former governors to be very sensitive to factors affecting their comeback chances.

Our findings have other interesting implications. Unlike previous studies, the current analysis measures how many former governors are available to run again. When more governors are available to run, the probability of one of them actually entering the election increases. Perhaps future analysis might expand on this finding and directly

test whether circumstances pertaining to governors themselves, such as whether term limits or defeat ended the governor's previous term in office, affect the probability of appearing on the ballot again. Finally, our current research design cannot speak to the difference that presenting voters with higher quality choices on the ballot, or electing high quality experienced former governors to office, makes for important issues such as political accountability and policy. Perhaps future research can investigate these important questions.¹⁵

As sophisticated political actors, former governors take care to run only when winning is likely. Whatever motivates former governors to make another run for the statehouse, the findings show they challenge incumbents strategically. Based on the interaction terms in the model, it is unlikely that former governors will respond to public or party pressure under any but ideal circumstances. Our results indicate the importance of context in a former governor's decision to mount another campaign.

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¹⁵ Flavin (2012) provides an illustrative application regarding the significance of varying levels of electoral turnout.