

OPINION: FORGET THE LEGISLATIVE SPRINGBOARD TO THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

CARL GOLDEN | SEPTEMBER 22, 2014

Of 11 past governors, none have moved directly from the Legislature to the top executive's post



Carl Golden

In the 67 years since New Jersey's modern-day constitution was written, 11 governors have been elected. None came directly from the Legislature.

Five (Alfred Driscoll, Robert Meyner, Tom Kean, Jim Florio, and Jim McGreevey) served in either the Senate or Assembly in their careers, but all left the Legislature before mounting successful gubernatorial campaigns. The other six ascended to the governor's office either from the private sector or other elected or appointed posts in government.

This history, then, suggests fairly strongly that when choosing a chief executive, voters respond more favorably to candidates perceived as outsiders, despite their earlier legislative service. Partisan affiliation doesn't seem to weigh all that heavily either; of the 11, five were Republicans and six were Democrats.

The voter mindset seems to be that fresh ideas and perspectives are to be found in those who are not a part of the establishment, that those with varied backgrounds and experience outside of state government are better equipped to deal with the complex and difficult issues facing a chief executive.

These outsiders come to the task without political baggage, the theory goes, while incumbent legislators are viewed -- fairly or not, consciously or not -- as part of the problem.

Someone who's either been out of office for several years or has served in some other private or public capacity is free from the political accommodations an incumbent legislator finds so frequently necessary. Nor are they burdened by a record of votes and positions taken on controversial, emotional, and often divisive issues.

It is difficult, for instance, for a legislator to seek the governor's office by pledging to "clean up the mess in Trenton" -- or some equally clichéd campaign slogan -- when he or she is perceived as playing a role in creating said mess.

Legislative service, history tells us, is a springboard to a pool that's already been drained.

With the next gubernatorial election a mere three years away, the temptation beckons to test that springboard and possibly defy some eight decades of futility.

Senate President Steve Sweeney, for example, has skipped around the state from his Gloucester County base, helping raise money for county and municipal candidates while calling attention to the shortcomings of the Christie Administration on a wide array of issues.

He's weighed in on everything from the need to replenish the state's Transportation Trust Fund to the controversy over the National

His travels, news conferences, and editorial board interviews, he says, are simply all a part of fulfilling his responsibilities as presiding officer of the Senate and shouldn't be viewed as setting a foundation for a gubernatorial campaign. The number of people who accept his assertion at face value shrinks each day.

While Sweeney's had the field pretty much to himself up to this po



