

Pathways and Powers: The Office of Lieutenant Governor

By Julia Nienaber Hurst

Is the office of lieutenant governor a springboard to higher office? Research shows the office may be key to becoming governor. Attention to duties and pursuit of opportunities can help propel these officials to higher office. The list of duties and powers for the office is diverse, impressive and growing.

The most frequently asked question about the office of lieutenant governor is whether the office is a springboard to higher office. History reveals there is no clear or singular path to the office of governor or beyond, but lieutenant governors have become governor more often than any other local, state or federal officeholder. Anecdotally, historical trends indicate a lieutenant governor's attention to the office's specific powers and inherent opportunities may be key to advancement.

Historical Pathways

Among the lieutenant governors that rose through the ranks, President Calvin Coolidge served in the Massachusetts House, then state Senate, later becoming Senate president. He ran for and won the office of lieutenant governor, and was later elected governor, then went on to the vice presidency, followed by six years as president. Claude Fuess wrote in *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* that Coolidge's "years as lieutenant governor were of steady, unspectacular devotion to duty." His duties in the lieutenant governor's office included state administration, oversight of appointments, and review of operations and finances.

When the nation entered World War I in 1917, then-Massachusetts Gov. Samuel W. McCall also appointed Coolidge to committees and fundraising related to the war, and Coolidge frequently served as acting governor. "One should not trouble about getting a better job, but one should do one's present job in such a manner as to qualify for a better job when it comes along," Fuess quoted Coolidge as saying.

Other lieutenant governors across history also aimed for the presidency. Many shared similar traits in their attention to the work and the opportunity available as lieutenant governor.

Illinois Sen. Paul Simon served in the statehouse, state Senate and then as lieutenant governor. He was later elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, and he ran for president in 1988.

He is Illinois' only lieutenant governor to serve with a governor from the opposite party. *PS: The Autobiography of Paul Simon* recounts Simon's support of gubernatorial initiatives that produced the state's first income tax and the state's 1969 constitutional convention. The new constitution implemented several changes, including a requirement for the lieutenant governor and governor to run and be elected on a joint ticket—an idea suggested and agreed to by both Simon and the governor.

U.S. Sen. John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee, was lieutenant governor prior to his Senate service. The *Boston Globe* reported that in addition to his assigned duties as lieutenant governor, Kerry became interested in acid rain during his time as lieutenant governor. Following a European fact-finding mission, Kerry took a resolution on the topic to a meeting of six Northeast governors and several Canadian premiers resulting in the first international agreement on acid rain controls.

Two presidential hopefuls, Howard Dean in 2004 and Mike Huckabee in 2008, shared a similar path to presidential aspiration. Both men were lieutenant governors when the governors of their states, Vermont and Arkansas, vacated the office. The common duty of all lieutenant governors is to become governor through succession when the office is vacated. Both Dean and Huckabee were later elected to terms as governor in their own right. After leaving the governor's office, both entered the presidential selection process.

This sampling illustrates that attention to the duties of the office such as succession and attention to the opportunities of the office such as taking initiative in areas of interest, can be a springboard to higher office opportunity.

Traditional Springboard

Recent studies indicate lieutenant governors move on to higher offices at significant rates. In 2006, the National Lieutenant Governors Association commis-

LIEUTENANT GOVERNORS

sioned research that found nearly 25 percent of the nation's governors from 1980 to 2006 had first served as lieutenant governor. During that time, an average of one in every four people who served as governor at one time had served as lieutenant governor or in the position first in line of gubernatorial succession. That study supplemented work from a 1996 publication, "Lieutenant Governors: The Office and its Powers," which found that a "significant 23 percent of governors between the years 1900–1980 served at one point as lieutenant governor." The work, in total, showed that for more than 100 years, about one in every four governors once served as lieutenant governor or first in line of succession.

A second NLGA study in December 2006 showed the office of lieutenant governor as the most successful springboard to become governor of any elected local, state or federal office. An analysis of the background of every U.S. governor serving between 1980 and 2006 revealed the most prevalent offices previously held by governors were those of state house, lieutenant governor and state senate. "The analysis showed that for the period studied, 25 percent of lieutenant governors became governor while about 1 percent of state house members rose to that same office," said NLGA researcher Morgan Mundell. "Fifty-six of approximately 225 lieutenant governors in the period became governor, while 96 of the more than 5,000 state house members, adjusted for turnover, became governor."

The 1996 publication noted the office of lieutenant governor is not a stepping stone to the governor's office. There is no singular path to governor or other higher office. However, these studies and anecdotal evidence indicate a trend that the office of lieutenant governor is more key than any other single office or background in achieving the governor's office.

Current Powers

The duties and initiatives performed in the office of lieutenant governor are often overlooked or dismissed. Yet, holders of this office are the only state officials with specific powers in both the legislative and executive branches. Lieutenant governors are the second highest-ranking officials in every state and territorial government. Nearly every lieutenant governor pursues or ushers a legislative package. Nearly half the lieutenant governors preside over the state senates and cast tie-breaking votes, and nearly as many act as governor in various circumstances. Most have other constitutional or statutory duties. Many have additional duties assigned by the governor. Finally, lieutenant governors indepen-

dently take initiative on issues of concern to them or their constituents.

Duties

The level of responsibility varies among lieutenant governors. For example, the Indiana lieutenant governor has 42 statutory duties, the most of any lieutenant governor in the nation. Indiana Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman oversees the state Department of Agriculture, the Office of Community and Rural Affairs, the Office of Energy and Defense Development, Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority and the Office of Tourism Development. She also chairs the Indiana Counter-Terrorism and Security Council. Other lieutenant governors also lead departments within state government. Ohio Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher runs the Development Department and lieutenant governors Sean Parnell of Alaska and Gary Herbert of Utah oversee elections.

Three lieutenant governors oversee commissions that cut across several departments or agencies of state government. The idea is to provide authority to a board that cuts across affected agencies on an issue of high importance, such as children or rural communities. New Mexico Lt. Gov. Diane Denish and Florida Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp chair Children's Cabinets in their respective states. The Indiana lieutenant governor chairs the Office of Community and Rural Affairs.

As noted in "The Lieutenant Governor's Level of Activity in State Policymaking: Chairing Commissions as a Key Factor," by Dr. David Winder, lieutenant governors also derive significant power from chairing commissions. Nebraska Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy chairs the Information Technology Commission, which directs state efforts on technology in education, health care and government. At the start of 2008, Missouri Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder was a member or chair of 11 boards or commissions, while California Lt. Gov. John Garamendi sat on or chaired a half-dozen boards. All three also preside over their state senates and have the power to cast tie-breaking votes. Nevada Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki chairs the state Tourism Commission and Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu oversees the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism.

Referendums

Lieutenant governors play other roles of importance to their states. Hawaii's Constitution empowers its lieutenant governor to place the question of a constitutional convention on the ballot if a decade passes without the legislature putting the question

before voters. Hawaii Lt. Gov. James “Duke” Aiona invoked that power by placing the question on the November 2008 ballot. He urged support of the convention as an opportunity to shape public policy and state government itself. “I believe it is appropriate that (the voters) be given the right to shape the future of our state. I cannot overstate the tremendous opportunity that we have before us,” Aiona said. The Hawaii lieutenant governor also oversees certain administrative and business filings. In addition to these duties, Aiona assumed the lead on drug eradication, strengthening families (including adoption and mentoring), and certain emergency preparedness and public safety efforts. He filed papers for a 2010 gubernatorial run.

The Arkansas Gazette, the Associated Press and other media note that Lt. Gov. Bill Halter is the first lieutenant governor in Arkansas to actively pursue a legislative agenda, in addition to his duties of presiding over the Senate, casting tie-breaking votes and serving as acting governor when the governor is out of state. His first major effort is to pursue an initiative to create a state lottery to fund college scholarships. He is helping collect signatures to place the question on the November 2008 ballot. Similarly, Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn began 2008 opposing Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s plan to expand casino gambling. Quinn is asking the question be put to the voters.

Initiatives

Lieutenant governors are also often tapped by governors to chair significant, but temporal, issues that require substantive leadership. Maryland Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown led the state’s Base Realignment and Closure Subcabinet directed to prepare the state for an influx of military personnel. The subcabinet’s initial report indicates the state will need to spend more than \$2 billion to prepare for the more than 15,000 defense-related jobs entering the state. North Dakota Lt. Gov. Jack Dalrymple was tapped to chair the state’s education funding commission with the goal to be the first state to find consensus without lawsuit.

Several lieutenant governors are involved in the effort to drive change in the presidential primary process. In this presidential election year, discussion is afoot over the best method to select presidential candidates. Ideas to reform the method primarily are emanating from officials who oversee elections, and that group includes five officeholders who are second in line of gubernatorial succession. Utah Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert and Alaska Lt. Gov. Sean Parnell run elections in their states, while secretaries of state

in Arizona, Oregon and Wyoming are first in line of gubernatorial succession.

The Office

Only five states don’t have an office officially called lieutenant governor. In Arizona, Oregon and Wyoming, the secretary of state is first in line of succession; in Maine and New Hampshire, the senate president is first in line of succession. The senate president is first in line of succession in both Tennessee and West Virginia, but in both states, the senate presidents use the title lieutenant governor in recognition of the important succession role. In 2005, New Jersey voters approved a constitutional amendment creating the office of lieutenant governor; the first person to fill that office will be elected in 2009.

Arizona lawmakers may again consider changing the title of the secretary of state to lieutenant governor in 2008. Some media accounts point out such a move may be both pragmatic and essential in response to one of the major trend-shapers in state government today—demographic shifts. People migrating to Arizona likely came from a state with a lieutenant governor and they would not recognize the significance of the individual they are choosing for secretary of state. In Tennessee, some officials say they may, in 2008, consider making the lieutenant governor a statewide elected office.

The best roles for lieutenant governors to play in their states often spark debate. In 2007, for instance, Minnesota’s use of the lieutenant governor to lead the transportation department drew criticism following the collapse of the I-35 bridge. In Kentucky, after Lt. Gov. Steve Pence announced in May 2006 he would not run for re-election with the governor, then-Gov. Ernie Fletcher removed him as head of the state’s Justice Department.

These examples illustrate the duality of the role of the lieutenant governor as both a key political figure and a key policymaker.

Changes may be afoot in several states to address questions of continuity and preparedness of state government with regard to lieutenant governors. The Rhode Island House of Representatives plans hearings in early 2008 on ways to strengthen the office of lieutenant governor. Lawmakers will consider requiring the governor to notify the lieutenant governor of out-of-state absences and to turn over power during those absences. The state’s response during a snowstorm sparked this debate. Gov. Don Carcieri was traveling in Iraq, and did not notify Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts of his absence nor cede to her any power.

LIEUTENANT GOVERNORS

Conclusion

Research and trends indicate the office of lieutenant governor is the most common office previously held by governors. Anecdotal evidence indicates attention to the duties and opportunities of the office can help propel an official to higher office. As public understanding of the office increases or as the public experiences instances of emergency response and preparedness failure, it seems the office will continue to become more codified in its powers. Likewise, the trend toward each state having an official using the title lieutenant governor seems likely to progress.

About the Author

Julia Nienaber Hurst is executive director of the National Lieutenant Governors Association (www.nlga.us). Hurst's nearly 20 years of state government experience include time as chief operating officer of The Council of State Governments, four sessions as a legislative chief of staff, and time as a multistate lobbyist.