

Lots of election potential in a 'full Grassley'



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(Photo: Special to the Register)

Never underestimate the power of the "full Grassley."

Iowans' perception that their governor is working hard — including embarking on the 99-county tour named for an Iowa senator — is political gold that could mitigate an adverse political climate. That's one takeaway from a fascinating new research project on gubernatorial popularity in Iowa, scheduled to be published early next year.

Chris Larimer, associate professor of political science at the University of Northern Iowa, examined job approval ratings of Iowa governors from Republican Robert Ray in 1969 into the third year of Gov. Terry Branstad's current term, 2013. He combined data analysis with interviews from 23 "politicos" from around the state, including myself. He shared a draft of his findings in advance of publication.

Ray was by far the most popular Iowa governor, followed by Branstad and Democrat Tom Vilsack in a near-tie, Larimer found. The least popular during that time, as you might expect, was the only Iowa governor in half a century to lose after only one term: Democrat Chet Culver.

"Iowa governors faced declining economic conditions, shared party affiliation with unpopular presidents, and, at times, had unified control of state government," Larimer wrote. "Yet, despite research that says all these factors will contribute to a significant drop in popularity, Iowa governors were regularly reelected, with the exception of Governor Culver in 2010."

One explanation that Larimer said stood out as a broad consensus in his interviews, regardless of party lines, was Iowans' expectation of a personal relationship with their governor. "There was this expectation that governors almost behave like presidential candidates at caucus time; governors are supposed to be out shaking hands and talking to people on a regular basis," Larimer said in an interview.

That's where the "full Grassley" comes in. Iowa's senior senator started visiting all 99 counties in Iowa on an annual basis as a way to stay in touch with voters. Branstad adopted the practice, as have many candidates for statewide office. My clever Register colleague, Jason Noble, coined the name. Vilsack employed a similar tactic in different form — an annual "Walk Across Iowa" that combined exercise with grassroots politics.

Culver was partly a victim of circumstances. He was the same party as an unpopular Barack Obama, which tends to drag down gubernatorial popularity. The national economic collapse took its toll on state finances. Both chambers of the Legislature were controlled by Democrats, which seems desirable for the governor's agenda but it concentrated blame for voter dissatisfaction. But past governors had overcome a negative political environment to win re-election.

"I don't know if Culver would have done a walk across the state or had done more to visit the counties other than in that last election year if that would have put him over the top, but it seems like voters like it," Larimer said.

Both Branstad and Vilsack said in interviews for the book that voters' perception of hard work from the governor earned forgiveness when things inevitably went wrong.

If Iowans "get a sense (you're) not working as hard as you should, they're not going to give you benefit of the doubt," Vilsack said, according to Larimer's draft.

Branstad notes, "Iowans feel if you have someone that's honest and hardworking and is doing a reasonably good job, there's no reason to change ... it's kind of like the old saying, if it ain't broke don't fix it."

No one in Larimer's research accuses Culver of slacking, and I think it would be unfair to do so. But it was widely perceived that Culver failed to keep up with expectations set by previous governors of regularly and publicly connecting with Iowans. None of that likely would have saved him once Branstad emerged as his opponent — but a less vulnerable incumbent likely would not have lured the former governor out of his political retirement.

Branstad, by the way, goes into his re-election campaign on the positive side of nearly all the factors that research shows tend to enhance popularity. "Absolutely, everything is pointing his way," Larimer said. Branstad is the opposite party of an unpopular president, Iowa's economy is measurably better than the national average, and he has split control of the Legislature to help offset responsibility.

Plus, he and Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds recently completed the "full Grassley" for 2014.

About the book

University of Northern Iowa professor Chris Larimer's research was funded by a [grant from the Center on the American Governor](http://governors.rutgers.edu/on-governors/academic-research) (<http://governors.rutgers.edu/on-governors/academic-research>) at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. It will be published in a chapter he wrote for a new volume, "The American Governor: Power, Constraint and Leadership in the U.S. States." The book will be edited by Rutgers' David

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