

[The Best Job In Politics – by Alan Rosenthal](#)

By [Dean Pagani](#) on February 23, 2012



(Book Review) – It is hard to argue with the title of the book, or its conclusions.

Alan Rosenthal, a professor of public policy and political science at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, has a deep well of experience and field work to rely on as he considers the role of governors in modern American politics.

The Best Job In Politics: Exploring How Governors Succeed as Policy Leaders, should be a must read for any governor-elect, or freshman struggling through a first year, or first term in office.

What is more surprising than the lessons the book teaches, is the quadrennial frequency with which newly elected governors insist on learning those lessons, the hard way; on their own, through trial and error. Most of the rules to gubernatorial success can be culled from the book and reduced to the kind of “one pager” many governors learn to demand from their staff.

If the goal of anyone who enters elected office is to make a difference, the office of governor is the place to get it done. Rosenthal concludes that nearly every other office, from mayor to president, carries with it limitations that can lead to frustration. Compared with elected leaders in state legislatures and Congress, there is little similarity between the job of governor and a lawmaker, who must often toil for years just to win support for an amendment to a single piece of legislation.

Rosenthal cites a number of examples of governors who have moved to the more “prestigious” job of U.S. Senator only to be disappointed by the pace and limited power. Even former governors who make it to the White House seem to long for the hands on effectiveness of being governor.

Texas Governor Rick Perry(R) recounts a set of conversations he had with former President George W. Bush(R) before and after Bush became president.

Sitting in the Governor's Office in Austin before Bush won the election, Bush said, "Perry you're gonna love being governor. It's the greatest job in the world." Eighteen months later Bush called Perry from the White House and at the end of the conversation said, "Hey, Perry, you remember that conversation we had... I told you that being the governor of Texas was the greatest job in the world?" Perry said he remembered and Bush said, "Well, it is."

For his book, Rosenthal interviewed governors and former governors, asked dozens of others to respond to a survey and reviewed the memoirs of several more. The governors he focused on served in office over the period of the last thirty years.

He concludes that the election of 2010 brought about nearly a complete change in the class of governors who have led the American states – in that time period – with the possible exception of three: Jerry Brown(D-CA), Terry Branstad(R-IA) and John Kitzhaber(D-OR) who are currently serving a second time after a period of retirement.

If a new governor were to read Rosenthal's book looking for lessons in leadership, the essential take aways would be these:

- Limit your agenda to a few items a year.
- Surround yourself with competent people not necessarily political loyalists.
- Seek a collaborative relationship with legislative leaders in both parties.
- Be willing to compromise on behalf of progress and be willing to go back for more at a later date.
- Be able and willing to play both an "inside and outside game." Understand the mechanics of the process and develop an ability to use the press to get the public on your side.

Despite their best efforts, the perceived success or failure of governors is tied directly to the economy and the fiscal condition of the state they happen to be leading. If the state budget is in surplus, it's much easier to build consensus, build a record of policy accomplishments and score high approval ratings.

If the fiscal condition of the state is poor, it is harder to build consensus, and a governor's approval ratings suffer accordingly.

The other good news for governors, in Rosenthal's conclusions: It is hard to fail as governor. Or, put another way, it's hard not to have at least some success. "The tools of engagement" are rigged to allow a governor to set the terms of the public debate, to set the agenda and move the policy ball down the field on a fairly consistent basis.

In the end, there are no great secrets to success. The same rules that apply to any business relationship apply to successful politicians. Legislative contemporaries and voters respond well to leaders they can trust – who seem genuinely interested in the success of those around them. That being the case, there are common sense management skills that can be applied to create a successful administration.

In the end, perception is all that matters. Legacies are defined by the condition of the state on the day a governor leaves office. As time passes, a second look is allowed. Governors who failed to win the love of their political peers, or the voters, are often remembered fondly in later years.

Rosenthal has spent most of his career studying and writing about the legislative process. This is his first major look at the power and role of governors. It comes at a time when more power and decision making authority rests at the state level. And it comes at a time when many are frustrated with the partisan nature of the federal government and are therefore looking to the states for leadership.

The publication date for The Best Job In Politics, is March 6, 2012. Published by Sage/CQ Press. It can be ordered pre-publication at Amazon.com. \$35.00

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