in Arkansas in matters affecting compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Overt, obvious forms of discrimination have almost disappeared. The attitude and desire of State people generally to achieve a nondiscriminatory treatment of people were gratifying.\textsuperscript{71} Much of the progress made by Rockefeller was done despite attempts by other politicians, particularly state legislators, to stop it. Even before Rockefeller became governor, Arkansas and Mississippi were the only states in their region without state human relations commissions.\textsuperscript{72} But the legislature refused to create one, so Rockefeller formed his own. In 1967 the legislature refused to consolidate the segregated state juvenile training schools despite the threatened loss of federal funds. So in 1968 the Juvenile Training School Board integrated the girls’ schools without legislative authorization. The legislature protested, with one state senator remarking, “They’re not going this fast in the public schools.” But the schools remained integrated, without incident.\textsuperscript{73}

Certainly Rockefeller could have done more to improve race relations in Arkansas. But considering the political climate in Arkansas and Rockefeller’s own aversion to both big government and affirmative action, he accomplished a great deal. And most importantly, he did make racial toleration “acceptable and respectable” in Arkansas. This was a tremendous legacy in and of itself. In 1987 Robert McCord wrote that Arkansans have “made much of the fact that Arkansas never experienced the violence that occurred in so many other American cities during the civil rights struggle. . . . The credit for this goes to Winthrop Rockefeller, who brought blacks into the mainstream of our society for the first time.”\textsuperscript{74} The credit rightly belongs primarily to those people who fought year in and year out to improve race relations and civil rights. What makes Winthrop Rockefeller so unique and so important is that he was the first major political figure in Arkansas to listen and try to help.

\textsuperscript{71} J. H. Bond, regional director, to W. Rockefeller, December 12, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 420, File 1.

\textsuperscript{72} Report, U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, August 1965, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 84, File 3.


\textsuperscript{74}Arkansas Gazette, September 27, 1967.
Dickey in the Fourth District, Tim Hutchinson in the Third) and Democrats (Blanche Lambert Lincoln in the First District, Ray Thornton in the Second). Republican Mike Huckabee, first elected lieutenant governor in a special 1993 election, was resoundingly reelected with a comfortable 59 percent majority. Republicans picked up two seats in the State Senate, two in the State House, and seventeen in assorted county contests. However, compared with what was happening elsewhere in the South, these were marginal rather than momentous gains. Arkansas remained firmly in Democratic hands.

Democratic Governor Jim Guy Tucker, despite a vigorous campaign attempting to discredit his fitness for office, carried all but two counties and was reelected with 60 percent of the vote. Since neither U.S. Senate seat was at stake in 1994, those remained Democratic as well. Indeed, Arkansas is the only state never to have elected a Republican to the U.S. Senate. Of the five other statewide elected positions (attorney general, secretary of state, auditor, treasurer, and land commissioner), all five were filled by Democrats, the latter two uncontested and the others being won by margins, respectively, of 80 percent, 53 percent, and 64 percent. Democrats also remained in firm control of both houses of the General Assembly with eighty-eight of one hundred House seats and twenty-eight of the thirty-five seats in the Senate. In other words, while Democratic majorities were being dramatically reduced or reversed elsewhere in the South, the traditional—some would say tyrannical—grip of the Democratic party in Arkansas continued to diminish at incremental rather than torrential speed.

The reasons for Arkansas’s ongoing resistance to Republicanism have been explored at length elsewhere, with particular emphasis on the state’s long Democratic history combined with contemporary demographic characteristics. These and other factors, such as the state’s continuing failure to fund party primaries, undoubtedly have important explanatory value. Still, they do not quite suffice. Other southern states have at least some of the same components in their historical traditions, demographic profiles, and political structures, but they have moved much further down the path to realignment than has Arkansas.

What will be suggested here is that an additional factor may help to explain Arkansas’s atypical ongoing attachment to Democrats, and that is the extraordinarily long run of three individuals who became the “Big Three” of late twentieth-century Arkansas politics: Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, and Bill Clinton. All three served as governor of Arkansas: Bumpers from 1971 to 1975, Pryor from 1975 to 1979, Clinton from 1979 to 1981 and again from 1983 through 1992. All three were elevated by the Arkansas electorate from the governorship to national office: Bumpers was elected to the Senate in 1974, Pryor to the Senate in 1978, and Clinton to the presidency of the United States in 1992.

None of the Big Three had a political career of absolutely unbroken success. Bumpers, in fact, lost his very first bid for office, a try for the Democratic nomination for state representative in 1962. Pryor’s unsuccessful 1972 attempt to capture the Democratic nomination for the Senate away from venerable incumbent John L. McClellan failed so narrowly (Pryor got 48 percent in a runoff) that his political viability was sustained rather than terminated. Similarly, Bill Clinton’s 48 percent loss to incumbent Third District Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt was perceived as an amazing accomplishment for a twenty-seven-year-old law professor with no office-holding experience, and actually advanced rather than arrested Clinton’s future political career. Governor Bill Clinton’s 1980 loss to challenger Frank White, however, was a crushing defeat and one of the biggest upsets in Arkansas political history.

The Big Three, then, had their stumbles, but their setbacks were far outnumbered by their successes. A brief summary of their political careers and major accomplishments provides important context to the larger thesis here: In providing attractive models of progressive public service and thereby perpetuating their own tenure in public office, the Big Three did much to sustain and prolong the popularity and dominance of the Democratic party in Arkansas.

First on the political scene was David Pryor. Born and raised in Camden, Pryor’s initial venture into politics began when he was elected to the state legislature in 1960 while he was still in law school. He was reelected in 1962 and 1964. When longtime Congressman Oren Harris resigned in 1966 to become a federal judge, thirty-two-year-old Pryor defeated four Democrats and one Republican to win the Fourth Congressional District seat, to which he was reelected without opposition in 1968.
and 1970. With a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee and
reams of favorable publicity from his exposés of abuses of the elderly in
nursing homes, Pryor could easily have extended his stay in the House.
He chose instead to challenge Senator John L. McClellan in the 1972
Democratic primary. He lost by a narrow margin. In 1974, however, he
successfully sought the governorship, first defeating six-time governor
Orval Faubus in the Democratic Primary, (by a 51 percent margin, thus
avoiding a runoff), then Republican Ken Coon (by 66 percent) in the
general election.

Pryor served four undramatic but accomplished years as governor.
In his first term he continued his longstanding, unsuccessful battle for
thoroughgoing reform of Arkansas’s 1874 Constitution, and saw to the
establishment of the Department of Local Services, the Department of
Natural and Cultural Heritage, a statewide energy conservation plan, and
an overseas office (in Belgium) of the Arkansas Industrial Development
Commission. Presenting a tightly budgeted but forward-looking record
to the electorate, Pryor carried all seventy-five counties and 59 percent
of the electorate in his reelection bid in 1976. In Pryor’s second term,
the legislature did not enact his proposed Arkansas Plan, designed to
shift taxing powers and responsibilities from the state to the local level,
and lawmakers repealed his anti-litter tax shortly after its adoption.
However, Pryor’s gubernatorial appointments were widely applauded,
especially his breakthrough appointments of blacks and women.1 It was
a fiscally prudent, scandal-free gubernatorial record which Pryor
presented to the electorate in 1978 when he faced and defeated two
attractive opponents (U.S. Representatives Jim Guy Tucker and Ray
Thornton) for the Democratic nomination for the Senate.

There he joined Dale Bumpers, who in 1974 had parlayed an
extraordinarily successful two terms as governor into a decisive primary
victory over thirty-year incumbent J. W. Fulbright for the Democratic
nomination to the Senate. Fulbright’s towering national and international
reputation and years of attentive service to Arkansas might have made

1 For additional details on Pryor’s record as governor see Diane Blair, “David
Hampton Pryor,” in The Governors of Arkansas, ed. Timothy P. Donovan and Willard
him invincible to ordinary challengers. Bumpers, however, had swiftly moved from obscurity to legendary status as a giant-killer.

After nearly twenty successful years practicing law and doing good (teaching Sunday school, serving as city attorney and as school board and chamber of commerce president) in Charleston, Bumpers in 1970 announced what at first seemed a quixotic quest for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Three prominent Democrats (former Governor Orval Faubus, Attorney General Joe Purcell, and Arkansas House Speaker Hayes McClellin) were joined by five unknowns (whom Bumpers was classified) in a very crowded contest. Surprising the Democratic establishment with a second-place finish in the Democratic preferential primary, Bumpers next dispatched the once-invincible Faubus with a healthy 59 percent victory, and then, against one of the most expensive campaigns in Arkansas’s history, defeated incumbent Governor Winthrop Rockefeller with 62 percent of the vote. Bumpers’ attractive personality, masterful use of television, and untainted record struck all the right chords with the Arkansas electorate, grown weary of Rockefeller’s gridlock with the legislature yet wary of a return to the Faubus era.

Bumpers’ two terms as governor were equally marked by success. In four years he extensively reorganized the executive branch of state government, modernized the budgetary process, and effectively depoliticized the state’s personnel system. He persuaded the necessary three-fourths of the state legislature to make the state’s income tax both more progressive and more productive, then used the increased revenues for a variety of essential state services such as state-supported kindergartens for preschoolers, free textbooks for high school students, improved social services for elderly, handicapped, and mentally retarded citizens, and an expanded state-park system for all. Despite extensive changes and hefty tax increases, neither usually associated with political popularity in Arkansas, Bumpers’ gubernatorial performance earned him easy reelection in 1972 (by 67 percent in the Democratic primary, 75 percent in the general election) and an astonishing 90 percent approval rating at the end of his second term.4

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Once in the Senate, both Bumpers and Pryor continued to serve in distinctive and distinguished ways. Bumpers promoted health programs for the poor, aid for rural development, arms control, deficit reduction, and reform of oil and gas drilling rights on federal lands. He opposed deregulation of oil and natural gas prices, attempted to block expensive defense and science projects such as the Star Wars initiative and the Supercollider, and repeatedly attempted reform of the 1872 Mining Act so as to require payment of royalties for mining on federal lands. Pryor continued his attention to the elderly by chairing the Special Committee on Aging and crusading against excessive prices on pharmaceuticals. He won passage of a Taxpayer Bill of Rights, guarded the interests of Arkansas agriculture, attacked government waste, exposed and limited excessive payments to private defense “consultants,” and instituted reforms of inefficient Senate scheduling and procedures.  

Both senators also earned considerable national attention and acclaim. Bumpers was deemed one of the ten best senators by the national press and seriously mentioned as a likely presidential candidate for both the 1980 and 1984 contests, with columnist Mary McGrory describing him as the “Senate’s premier orator” and Sen. Paul Simon expressing the opinion that he “would have more support in the U.S. Senate than any other candidate.” Pryor was elevated by his colleagues in 1989 to the third highest position in the majority leadership ranks, secretary of the Democratic Conference.

Despite repeated attempts by election opponents to characterize Arkansas’s senators as too liberal and too leftist for their constituent’s tastes, their records were apparently highly acceptable to the electorate: Bumpers was reelected by 59 percent in 1980, 62 percent in 1986 and 69 percent in 1992; Pryor was reelected by 57 percent in 1984 and in 1990.

Bumpers, Clinton, and Pryor

became the first U.S. Senator since 1976 to escape opposition in both the primary and the general election. In 1993 the senators were joined in Washington, D.C., by another Arkansas political phenomenon, President Bill Clinton.

Born in Hope, raised in Hot Springs, educated at Georgetown University, Oxford University, and the Yale University School of Law, Clinton returned to Arkansas in 1973 with a faculty position at the University of Arkansas Law School in Fayetteville. His 1974 attempt to unseat Third District Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt failed. However, in 1976 Clinton defeated (by 56 percent in the Democratic primary) a former secretary of state and a deputy attorney general to become an active and visible attorney general. In 1978 he overwhelmed opponents in both the Democratic primary and the general election to become, at age thirty-two, the second-youngest governor in Arkansas history.

Clinton’s first regular session was action-packed and highly successful as he proposed and persuaded the lawmakers to enact an ambitious and wide-ranging legislative package initiating new programs in economic development, education, conservation, health, and roads. National news magazines hailed him as a “rising star” and his fellow Democratic governors elected him to chair the Democratic Governors Association. However, the major mechanism for financing the road-building program (hefty increases in vehicle registration and license fees) proved highly unpopular, especially in rural areas, and Clinton’s popularity further declined when Arkansas was selected by President Carter as a resettlement site for thousands of Freedom Flotilla Cuban refugees. These and other circumstances led in 1980 to Clinton’s narrow but stunning defeat by Frank White, a businessman and former Arkansas Industrial Development Commission Director. Clinton became only the second twentieth-century Arkansas governor to be denied his bid for a second, sometimes called courtesy, two-year term, and the youngest ex-Governor in Arkansas (and American) history.


The most thorough treatment of Clinton’s first gubernatorial term is in Phyllis F. Johnston, *Bill Clinton’s Public Policy for Arkansas: 1979–80* (Little Rock: August House, 1982). A summary of Clinton’s subsequent gubernatorial record and extensive bibliographic guide to additional materials can be found in Diane D. Blair, “William
In 1982, however, having apologized to the Arkansas electorate for past “errors” (especially the car tag increases and some controversial commutations) and perceived insensitivity, Clinton fought a vigorous, closely contested, ultimately successful (and in Arkansas unprecedented) campaign to recapture the governorship. Against both primary and general election competition he was reelected governor in 1984, again in 1986 (to Arkansas’s first twentieth-century four-year term), and again in 1990, becoming only the second governor in Arkansas history (the first was Faubus) to win more than three terms.

Clinton not only re-established his credentials with the Arkansas electorate, but was increasingly turned to by his fellow governors to be their spokesman and leader. He was elected chair of the National Governors’ Association in 1986, chair of the Education Commission of the States in 1987, and chair of the Democratic Governors’ Association in 1988. He led the governors’ attempts to restructure national welfare laws in 1988 (securing approval of the Family Support Act of 1988), and, as co-chair of the President’s Education Summit in 1989, played a critical role in drafting the National Education Goals. In 1987 a survey of practitioners and observers of state politics conducted by U.S. News and World Report found Clinton to be one of the nation’s six best governors, citing particularly his “striking accomplishments” in education in a state lacking prosperity and his reputation as “probably the best-liked chief executive among his peers.”

In 1991 a poll of all the nation’s governors by Newsweek ranked Clinton “the most effective” governor in the country.9

In October 1991 Clinton declared his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for President. Clinton’s record as governor came under exhaustive scrutiny during both the Democratic nomination battle and the three-way general election contest between incumbent Republican George Bush, independent billionaire businessman Ross Perot, and Democratic nominee Clinton, with Bush and Perot competing by campaign’s end as to who could portray Arkansas in the most unflattering light. Opponents

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9Newsweek, July 1, 1991, 27.
charged that despite 128 tax and fee increases during Clinton’s governorship, Arkansas still ranked last or next to last in family median income and average weekly wages, in literacy rates, teacher pay, infant health, and environmental quality. In the third and final presidential debate, Bush said that what worried him most was for Clinton to “do to America what he did to Arkansas . . . We do not want to be the lowest of the low.”

The Clinton campaign issued data-filled documents arguing to the contrary: that Arkansas had the second lowest state and local tax burden in the country, with taxes as a percent of personal income actually lower than when Clinton took office; that by July 1992, due in part to Clinton’s numerous economic development initiatives, the state ranked fifth nationally in job creation and ninth in wage and salary growth, with median income growing twice the nation’s generally; that as a result of Clinton’s education reforms, Arkansas had achieved the highest high-school graduation rate in the region, was sending 34 percent more students to college than it did ten years previously, and that Arkansas teachers received the highest percent salary increase in the country the preceding year; that Arkansas’s infant mortality rate had declined 43 percent from 1978 to 1990 to virtual parity with the national average, while over 60 percent of the state’s children were being served in free preschool programs resulting from Clinton initiatives; and that Arkansas, one of only eight states meeting all federal standards under the Clean Air Act, had developed some of the most progressive water quality standards in the nation and was among the top ten states in wetlands protection and energy research.

Perhaps most telling was the behavior of Arkansans themselves. They traveled by the hundreds with and for Clinton around the country, volunteered by the thousands at the campaign’s national headquarters in Little Rock, dug deeply and contributed generously (Arkansas ranked first in per capita contributions in the 1992 presidential election campaign cycle), gave Clinton his single biggest majority (53.8 percent in a three person race) of any of the fifty states, and celebrated wildly with him on election night when he claimed victory and thanked the people of “this wonderful, small state” for their support.

Returning now to the central assertion of this article, that in sustaining their own appeal to the Arkansas electorate the Big Three helped prolong the appeal of the Democratic label, the sheer numbers tell a significant part of the story. Between 1970 and 1994 this trio of Democrats presented themselves to statewide electorates thirty-six times, and won in thirty-four of those instances. The average percentage received in those thirty-six contests (which included several crowded Democratic primaries and two losses) was an impressive 59.5 percent. Looking only at those seventeen instances when Bumpers, Pryor, or Clinton faced a Republican opponent, the average percentage of the vote received was an astonishing 64.1 percent. If Clinton’s 1976 attorney general win and Pryor’s 1990 return to the Senate, both without Republican opposition, are calculated in, the average winning margin over Republicans is an even higher 67.8 percent. From 1970 (Bumpers’ first election to the governorship) to 1992 (Bumpers’ fourth election to the Senate and Clinton’s presidential victory) at least one and often two of these three familiar names were on the ballot every two years (except in 1988, when Clinton was in the middle of his first four-year term and neither Bumpers nor Pryor was up for reelection to the Senate).

Until Clinton’s favorite-son candidacy brought Arkansas back to the Democratic column, Arkansas, like the rest of the once solidly Democratic South, had begun voting Republican in presidential contests. Unlike the rest of the South, however, as noted above, Arkansas Republicans had made little progress below the presidential level. What is being suggested here is that the cumulative draw of the Big Three at the top of the ticket sustained and strengthened the popularity of the

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11 Analyses of the validity of such charges and counter-charges include Jerry Dean, “Bush hits Clinton at home, but is he on target?” Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, September 17, 1992; David Lauter and James Gerstenzang, “Accuracy of Bush, Clinton Accusations,” Los Angeles Times, October 11, 1992, A36, A38.

12 On campaign contributions see Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, December 29, 1992, B1; Clinton’s election night comments in Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, November 4, 1992, A15.
Democratic label in Arkansas, thereby withstanding the general southern trend toward Republican realignment. But what were the particular characteristics of the Big Three which gave them such strong appeal to the Arkansas electorate? In the presence of many possible alternatives, why did Arkansans so repeatedly and decisively demonstrate their preference for Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton? What did these men offer to the electorate in apparently greater measure than did their many opponents? Interestingly, while each of these men followed a very singular career path, the three also possess some striking similarities.

The ability of some people rather than others to elicit electoral support remains, perhaps fortunately, more mystery than science. Still, the most obvious and perhaps best explanation for the extraordinarily long run of The Big Three is that their accomplishments in office, briefly reviewed above, convinced the voters that these politicians were as interested as were their constituents in producing a better life for most Arkansans. Their devotion to public service seems self-evident. Why else would talented lawyers who could (and did) make much more money in the private sector seek an office, such as the governorship, which paid so little? (The Arkansas governorship paid ten thousand dollars annually until 1976, was increased by constitutional amendment to thirty-five thousand dollars annually until raised by constitutional amendment in 1992 to sixty thousand dollars annually.) As governor, all three proposed ambitious initiatives for economic development, educational and health improvements, environmental protection, and government reform, and secured passage of well over three-fourths of their proposals. Additionally, as they solidified and strengthened the reform style of state government begun in the Rockefeller years, all three ran scandal free administrations. Good government producing a better Arkansas is a fairly obvious common key to the Big Three’s electoral success.

In addition to policy responsiveness, successful politicians must also be able to connect with people, to provide some bonds of empathy and identification between the citizen and the office-holder. Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton all possess the gift for connecting in abundance. Perhaps this partially reflects a common element in their backgrounds: all were born and raised in small towns where they attended the public schools. As many other eminent Arkansans can attest, such beginnings provide a superb training ground for future success. Small town life exposes one at an early age to the whole spectrum of human accomplishment and failure, the lives of the few who are affluent, the ways of the many who live carefully and modestly, and the needs of those who are still struggling to survive. Pryor, Clinton, and Bumpers were all deeply impressed with and grounded in the particulars of ordinary, everyday life in Arkansas, and they clearly drew deeply upon this motherlode of observation and understanding to inform their subsequent political decisions.

All three were also raised in households where issues and ideas were discussed and where public service was presented as a desirable undertaking. In numerous public addresses Bumpers told audiences that he had been taught by his father that “public service was the noblest of all professions.” Pryor’s father and his grandfather and great-grandfather on his mother’s side all served as sheriff of Ouachita County, and Pryor often referred proudly to the fact that his mother, Susie, was the first Arkansas woman to seek an elective county office (circuit clerk in 1926). Clinton’s mother, a hardworking nurse, still found time to debate ideas with her son and encouraged him to share her interest in public affairs.

Furthermore, all were raised in households that were unashamedly Democratic. This is unsurprising in a state where almost everyone, and certainly everyone who “did” politics was a Democrat. Pryor recalls accompanying his father to the post office to collect the mail and, upon inquiring about the identity of someone across the room, being told: “You don’t want to know him, son. He’s a Republican.”


14A recent example is in Senator Bumpers’ commencement address at Arkansas State University, August 5, 1994.

15Telephone interview with Sen. David Pryor, January 2, 1995. Notes in author’s possession. When Pryor’s brother took the daughter of Ouachita County’s only known Republican, Skidmore Willis, to the movies, Pryor’s father brought him home with a
However, unlike many Arkansans who were Democrats purely by reflex and tradition, in these three instances there was a philosophical underpinning as well. Bumpers, for example, often recalled how his father had sent him and his brother to get a glimpse of Franklin D. Roosevelt when the President was making a whistle-stop appearance nearby. Bumpers never forgot what the New Deal and later governmental initiatives had meant to his family:

Born poor, but to devout and loving parents, my father was a small-town merchant whose business was barely surviving when REA came to the rural southland. It enabled him to start selling electrical appliances to a new market. In a small town where we choked on dust in the summer and bogged down in mud in the winter, where sewage ran down the ditches from overflowing outhouses and a few septic tanks, it was a caring Government in the 30's that gave us loans and grants to pave our streets and build a waste treatment facility. And when I returned from three years in the Marine Corps following World War II, it was a thankful and magnanimous Government that allowed my brother and me to attend the best universities in this Nation on the GI Bill—without which I would not be standing here today. And when Betty and I returned to our little hometown to begin my law practice and small business, and raise our beautiful children, we raised them free of the fear of polio and other childhood diseases that had been conquered because of vaccines developed with Government grants.16

Clinton also “grew up in the legacy of Roosevelt, where people talked about what government could do for people. My grand-daddy ran a little country store and fed hungry people before the advent of food stamps. He thought he was going to Roosevelt when he died.”17 Pryor was also imbued with the “superior” traits of a Democratic party which incorporated the best of the populist tradition. He ascribed the strength of that tradition in large part to Huey Long’s whirlwind campaign through Arkansas in 1932 in which he successfully engineered Hattie Caraway’s reelection to the Senate.18 The governing philosophy all three men eventually brought to office might be called progressive populism—a willingness to use the power of government to counter-weight the power and privileges of the economic elite, or in other words, a partiality toward those striving to climb the economic ladder rather than those who had already arrived at the top. This identification with the underdog, with its suspicion of concentrated wealth and the use of government to right the balance, is a powerful part of the Arkansas political tradition and one of the most recurrent themes in the rhetoric and careers of the Big Three.19

Clinton’s first gubernatorial inaugural address in 1979 articulated themes which continued to characterize his political career and those of Pryor and Bumpers as well:

For as long as I can remember, I have believed passionately in the cause of equal opportunity, and I will do all I can to advance it.
For as long as I can remember, I have wished to ease the burdens of life for those who, through no fault of their own, are old or weak or needy, and I will try to help them.
For as long as I can remember, I have been saddened by the sight of so many of our independent, industrious people working too hard for too little because of inadequate economic opportunities, and I will do what I can to enhance them.20

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16Speech by Sen. David Pryor delivered to the Old State House Museum Associates, Little Rock, November 18, 1988, in author’s possession.
17The depth and strength of the progressive, populist Arkansas tradition is described and explained in Roy Reed, “Clinton Country,” New York Times Magazine, September 6, 1992, 32. See also Blair, Arkansas Politics and Government, 93–95, 270–272.
18Gov. Bill Clinton’s Inaugural Address, January 9, 1979, in author’s possession.
Clinton, Bumpers and Pryor share not only a common political philosophy but uncommon political skills. By late twentieth century, success in achieving and maintaining major political office in Arkansas depended partially on the same sophisticated, professional paraphernalia that had become the hallmark of politics everywhere: skilled pollsters, paid media consultants, computer-generated mailings, and phone banks. Bumpers, as noted above, was the first Arkansas gubernatorial candidate to demonstrate how one could use television to reach voters directly, over the heads of unfriendly local bosses and a hostile political establishment. By the time Clinton left the governorship he had demonstrated the effectiveness of the new high-tech politics in governance as well as campaigns: building public support for gubernatorial initiatives, advertising what had been accomplished at the end of a legislative session, and testing a variety of messages for making a program more acceptable and popular.

However, while all of the Big Three demonstrated their mastery of the new mass media politics, they also demonstrated their grasp of and incomparable proficiency at the personal, almost intimate aspect of Arkansas politics, which remains equally important to success. Pryor’s remarks announcing his bid for reelection in 1990 simply but eloquently capture this familiar flavor:

It was . . . thirty years ago this month that I first asked the people of Ouachita County for one of the most precious possessions they owned . . . their vote. I wanted to be their State Representative.

As spring came and summer engulfed, the election to that job became our life. Barbara and I divided up the neighborhoods, then the county, and together we literally went door to door and person to person. Even then, this type of “electioneering” was branded as “old-fashioned” and “out of step.” But for us it became the rhythm and poetry of what America is all about. From the oil fields in the south to the Red Hills of Chidister and Reader and White Oak, we asked for every vote. On Friday and Saturday nights there were pie suppers and political speakings. On Sunday afternoon there was gospel singings and cake raffles.

Dee, our oldest son, was just a baby. We carried him everywhere we went in a wicker basket. And we still have that wicker basket.

. . . America is not about Presidents or Congress or Senators. It’s not about statistics, policies, or programs, or even politicians like me. It’s about neighbors, whether across the street or across the ocean. People who want to educate their children . . . people who need health care . . . farmers who want a chance . . . elderly who crave dignity . . . taxpayers who deserve fairness . . . and people who want to be free.

I want to help.21

All of the Big Three became personally acquainted with tens of thousands of their constituents and made them feel like part of an extended family—calling them by name, inquiring about their jobs and health and parents and children, offering hugs as well as handshakes. All graced the stage at hundreds of high school commencements (even the smallest of which, according to Bumpers, takes the same length of time as the largest, as the achievements of each and every graduate are recounted).22 All made the constant round of civic club speeches and community festival appearances and groundbreaking ceremonies and political rallies. And they managed to do so with a good humor and grace and gusto suggesting that there was nothing else they would rather be doing.23

Furthermore, they frequently used these personal appearances to advance their programs and defend their records in language that Arkansans easily understood and appreciated and with a style that invited listeners’ attention and admiration. As the author has observed elsewhere:

21 Remarks Made by Senator David Pryor on Saturday, February 17, 1990, Announcing His Bid for Re-election to the United States Senate, in author’s possession.
22 Related by Bumpers to William R. Kissaid on stage at Fayetteville High School commencement, May, 1964, notes in author’s possession.
Continuing longstanding southern and Arkansas traditions, the present “Big Three” of Arkansas politics... are all superb storytellers, who rarely use a prepared address, who quote easily and effectively from Scripture, and who can bring down the house with wry, self-deprecating humor. They have very different oratorical styles: Clinton lists debating points against invisible opponents; Pryor chats and charms; Bumpers educates and preaches. All however, quickly establish a strong rapport with the tens of thousands of Arkansans they encounter each year, thereby building powerful insulation against challengers’ suggestions that they are “too intellectual” or “too liberal” or of dubious patriotism.  

It was, of course, more than well-liked programs and engaging styles which established and sustained the political lives of the Big Three. In building the large circles of friends, supporters, and contributors essential to sustained political success, they were able early in their careers to make excellent use of the gubernatorial appointment power.

Each Arkansas governor, it is estimated, makes approximately one thousand appointments a year to various boards and commissions. While some positions may seem obscure and unimportant, most are highly prized, as they afford opportunities to have some impact in a particular sphere of interest and carry a connotation of inside status. Counting the combined gubernatorial years of the Big Three translates into a conservative estimate of ten thousand people who, by virtue of their appointments, felt some tie to their benefactors, some obligation to work for and contribute to their continued political success, and perhaps, some partisan loyalty.

All governors in all states have always used their appointive power to political advantage. However, one very distinctive aspect of the appointments made by the Big Three was its deliberate use to advance and empower two groups which had been traditionally excluded from Arkansas’s political power structure—blacks and women. Governor Winthrop Rockefeller had made some significant breakthrough appointments of blacks to such boards as Correction, Pardons and Paroles, and Public Welfare. Bumpers, Pryor and Clinton, however, took this practice to new levels and literally changed the face of Arkansas government.

Bumpers appointed a Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1971, which reported to him that only 10 percent of those serving on state boards and commissions were women, and most of those dealt with such traditionally women’s areas as nursing, cosmetology, and the arts. By the time Bumpers left office, women filled many more appointive slots and did so on boards ranging from Correction to the Board of Higher Education. Pryor appointed additional scores of women, including appointments to such previous all-male bastions as the Highway Commission, the Industrial Development Commission, and the Arkansas Supreme Court. As for Clinton, women managed most of his campaigns; his longest tenured chief of staff (Betsey Wright) was a woman; and women served prominently in his cabinet including the directors of the Departments of Education, Health, Pollution Control and Ecology, Parks and Tourism, and Natural Heritage. Furthermore, all of the Big Three supported the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Black voters have become an indispensable component of contemporary Democratic victories in Arkansas; but in the late 1960s, while Democrats (like Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey) were overwhelmingly favored for President, it was Republican Winthrop Rockefeller who arduously and successfully courted, nourished, and attracted black voters at the state level. A sizable and overwhelmingly Republican black vote was critical to Rockefeller’s gubernatorial victories in 1966 and 1968 and loyally remained with him against Bumpers in 1970.

By 1972, however, Bumpers had demonstrated—by refusing requests from white political leaders to shut down a controversial medical clinic in Lee County—that he was not simply a nonsegregationist, but a sympathetic friend, and black voters returned their undivided strength to...
Dumphers and the Democrats. 27 Pryor, who as a young state representative had sided with the black delegates from Mississippi in a controversial seating dispute at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, was also perceived as a courageous friend. And Clinton, throughout his tenure, named blacks to his staff, to the most powerful and prestigious cabinet positions (Finance and Administration, Health, Human Services, and Development Finance Authority), and by the hundreds to state boards, commissions, and judicial posts. By the time the Big Three moved on to national office, there were few appointive positions left that had not been held by women and blacks. Those two groups had become powerful political forces in their own right.

Additionally, the Big Three attracted numerous young voters into their campaigns and causes, thereby socializing a new generation of activists into the ranks of the Democratic party. As Blytheville native Greg Simon, who was an active teen Republican and now serves as chief domestic policy adviser to Vice President Al Gore, recently observed, "Rockefeller cleaned up the system so . . . you could elect honest Democrats. When you can elect Democrats like David Pryor and Dale Bumpers and Bill Clinton, why vote Republican?" 28

Furthermore, both Bumpers and Pryor operated substantial internship programs in their Senate offices which by 1994 had involved well over seven hundred students. 29 Clinton's gubernatorial operations also utilized student interns, and his campaigns extensively employed hundreds of young people who thereby sharpened their own political skills and reconfirmed their loyalty to the Democratic party. The Big Three's combination of personal charisma, political success, and programmatic appeal, especially Clinton's decade-long emphasis on education reform in Arkansas, made the Arkansas Democratic party an attractive option for a young person wanting to be politically involved or considering a political future of his or her own. Whereas by the mid-

1980s in some southern states the baton of youthful energy and future leadership seemed to have been passed to the growing ranks of the Republican party, the Democratic party still had the look and feel of a winner in Arkansas.

In states dominated by one political party, the dominant party is less an election machine than it is a holding company, a label, under which each candidate organizes his or her own personal coalition. 30 In Arkansas, where both parties as recently as 1985 were ranked among the organizationally weakest in the nation, serious candidates realize that the parties are supplements to rather than substitutes for the candidate's own campaign apparatus. 31 Nevertheless, all of the Big Three willingly and generously performed their assorted party chores (appealing for contributions to lesser-known candidates, drawing a crowd to county rallies, speaking at Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners), most of which were of much greater benefit to down-ticket candidates than to themselves.

And whereas many Democratic candidates in other southern states by the mid-1980s were creating as much distance as possible between themselves and the party, the Big Three made no secret of their partisan affiliation. In the last weeks of the 1994 elections, both Pryor and Bumpers appeared and spoke at a Washington County fund-raising lunch for Third Congressional District Democratic candidate Berta Seitz. Pryor gave passionate praise to President Clinton's legislative achievements, as did Bumpers, who concluded: "I have never been more proud to be a Democrat." 32 It was a phrase rarely heard elsewhere in Dixie in 1994.

This episode exemplifies another trait of the Big Three which contributed to their prolonged success: an amazing ability, over more than two decades of high-powered politics, to, in most instances, work with and for rather than against each other. In the beginning there were

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27 On the importance of the Marianna clinic, see "Lee County clinic defied times," Arkansas Gazette, September 19, 1991, 1A.


29 Number estimated by Henry Woods, Special Projects and Intern Coordinator to Senator Bumpers and Senator Pryor.

30 On the organizational weakness of parties in one-party states, see V. O. Key, Jr., Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Random House, 1949), 15-18; on the particular "paralysis and disorganization" in Arkansas, see 183-204.

31 In terms of local organizational strength, Arkansas Democrats were ranked 44th in the nation, Republicans 40th, by James L. Gibson, Cornelius P. Potter, John P. Bibby, Robert J. Huckshorn, "Whither the Local Parties?" American Journal of Political Science 29 (1985), 152, 154-155.

32 From notes taken by author at event, Kelly's Barn, Fayetteville, Arkansas, October 23, 1993, notes in author's possession.
occasional and understandable tensions between the principals and among their respective supporters. When Bill Clinton first burst onto the scene, all wondered who might next become victim to his clearly lofty ambitions. In fact, there were rumors (always unconfirmed) that Clinton’s narrow margin of defeat in 1980 could have come from the Pryor camp’s wanting to squelch young Clinton early before he decided to turn his attention to the seat held by Pryor in the Senate. Many Democrats worried about a possible Bumpers-Clinton contest in 1986 and were bemused when both were mentioned as potential candidates in 1988. However, considering the agendas and aides and egos involved, what is truly extraordinary is the extent to which relations among the Big Three were not only harmonious and good-humored, but helpful.

When Bumpers announced that he would not be seeking the 1984 presidential nomination, he paid special tribute to the good counsel and supportiveness of Governor and Mrs. Clinton and especially that of Senator Pryor: “To say that David Pryor is a good friend and good colleague would be a gross understatement. He is both and more, and one of the great honors of my life is to serve in the Senate with him.” In Clinton’s darkest moments in the early 1992 presidential primaries, Pryor appeared by Clinton’s side in the snows of New Hampshire, joining him in the kind of personal contact politics they had perfected in Arkansas. By the time of the general election, Pryor had become one of the most frequent and effective surrogate speakers in the Clinton-Gore campaign arsenal and a vital bridge to congressional Democrats. When a lengthy article denigrating Clinton’s record in Arkansas appeared in the July 31, 1994, *New York Times Magazine*, Pryor and Bumpers co-authored a vehement response in praise of Clinton’s gubernatorial accomplishments. It was Pryor who became known in 1993 as President Clinton’s “Best Friend in Congress,” but it was Bumpers who took to the Senate Floor on October 8, 1994, and spoke at length to his colleagues about Clinton’s “intelligence and straightforwardness,” his “knowledge and understanding of the problems of this country,” and Clinton’s many legislative accomplishments. While the Big Three did not always see eye to eye, they tended to downplay rather than publicize their differences. With a common philosophical base and passion for Arkansas, they worked closely enough together to reduce the likelihood of some outside challenger’s penetrating the winner’s circle.

If, as John Brummett has suggested, Arkansas voters by the mid-1960s favored candidates who “would be good ambassadors for the state and representatives of a more sophisticated, intelligent culture than the one people might know from Dogpatch cartoons or the Little Rock Central High School crisis,” then the Big Three clearly fit the model. They that generally cooperated with and complimented each other rather than carving each other up added to their positive aura.

There is an additional asset with which each of the Big Three is favored: a wife who departs from the traditional “smile rapturously and say nothing” model of political wives. For each of these politicians a participating wife proved to be a significant advantage. Betty Flanagan Bumpers, during her husband’s tenure as governor, led a statewide effort to immunize “every child by two,” a program so successful that it was later used by the Center for Disease Control as a national model for other states. In 1982, drawing on her success with the immunization effort, she founded Peace Links, a peace education group, which she nurtured to life in all fifty states and in other nations. Barbara Lunsford Pryor campaigned door-to-door, sometimes alone, sometimes by her husband’s side, in all his early races. During the congressional and gubernatorial years, she was primarily occupied, between nearly constant campaigns, with raising their three young sons. As a Senate wife, however, she has been a major supporter of Arkansas artists and artisans, using both the Washington and Little Rock offices of Senator Pryor to display and promote their works.

Now most famous is First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who will be best remembered in Arkansas for the critical leadership she provided for the centerpiece of her husband’s gubernatorial accomplishments—a

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37*U.S. Congressional Record*, October 8, 1994, S15002-S15005.
significant revision and strengthening of Arkansas’s public schools. She also, however, founded Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, helped upgrade and expand Arkansas Children’s Hospital, and initiated and chaired other community initiatives to improve the lives of children and women. That she also maintained a private law practice while simultaneously performing the traditional hostessing functions of a governor’s spouse, raising a young child, and teaching a Sunday school class left an array of possible options from which future Arkansas First Ladies will be more free to choose.28

In January 1988 a light airplane in which both Bumpers and Clinton were flying to the annual Gillett Coon Supper came close to disaster, a disaster which would have dramatically altered the last decade of Arkansas’s twentieth century politics.29 Even without such a cataclysm, however, by the last decade of the twentieth century it was clear that further changes were in process or on the horizon and that sooner rather than later a genuinely competitive Arkansas Republican party would emerge. Northwest Arkansas had become not only one of the fastest growing areas in the state and nation, but as a result of the combined impact of successful entrepreneurs, affluent retirees from northern states, and religious fundamentalists, a bastion of straight-ticket Republicanism. As those with the deepest devotion to the Democratic party continued to be replaced by new generations not raised on tales of either the Civil War or the New Deal, Republican candidates all over the state became increasingly electable.

Term limits, strongly advocated by Republicans and adopted by Arkansas voters in 1992, not only guaranteed record numbers of open seats in the state legislature by 1996 (always a boon to the out party wishing to get in) but also insured that future elected executives, limited to two four-year terms, could never amass the political strength that Faubus and Clinton had. The October 1991 death of the Arkansas Gazette, which had editorially favored Democrats, and its replacement by the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, meant, according to one longtime observer, “that the real winners of the vaunted newspaper war were the Republicans.”30 The first years of Clinton’s presidential administration were both highly productive and highly problematic, bringing pain as well as pride to Arkansas, and whether either Bumpers or Pryor would seek additional Senate terms was uncertain. For nearly twenty-five years, however, Arkansas politics was dominated by three exceptional leaders, who had made many citizens proud to be Arkansans and also proud to be Democrats.

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28Ibid., 248–256. See also Rex Nelson, The Hillary Factor (New York: Galien Publishing Group, 1993).
