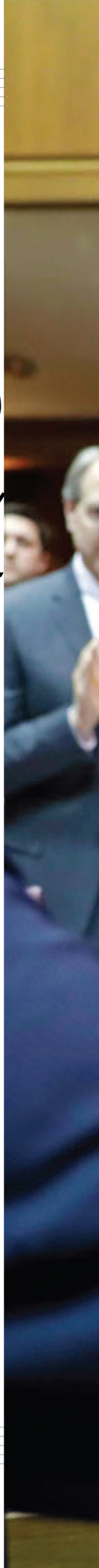


Mr. Nice GUY

Indiana's governor
doesn't scream,
doesn't threaten, and
doesn't even complain.
He just wins. **By Alan Greenblatt**





Gov. Eric Holcomb

Building a road north and south through the vast middle of the country, cutting all the way from Mexico to Canada, has been a national dream dating back to the 1950s. It's always fallen short. Driving south from Canada, you can only get through Michigan before you run out of road. Indiana, the self-described "crossroads of America," has issued endless studies about how to complete the proposed Interstate 69, but it's never managed to accomplish the feat.

Finally, about a decade ago, construction began in sections from the southern part of the state heading north.

The process has continued to have serious hiccups. Five years ago, the state entered into a contract with a company to build a section of I-69 south of Bloomington. The company lacked both the expertise and the financing to get the job done. Subcontractors weren't getting paid, and construction ground entirely to a halt. Then, shortly after taking office in 2017, Gov. Eric Holcomb tore up that problematic contract, bringing the job back in-house at the department of transportation. Less than two years later, the work was done. Now Holcomb is proceeding with the next section of highway, running from Martinsville to Indianapolis. This particular section is considered the most complicated, due to the number of bridges, overpasses and underpasses involved, but the state is on track to get it done by 2024, which would be three full years ahead of schedule.

It's just one project among dozens that Indiana's governor has underway. Last fall, he announced a billion-dollar infrastructure plan that will create new interchanges on other highways, provide a big investment in rural broadband and offer substantial dollars for biking and hiking trails. Much of the package will be funded by an increase in tolls for truckers, most of whom conveniently are just passing through the state and aren't otherwise Indiana taxpayers. But in his first months in office, Holcomb convinced the legislature to increase the state's broader gas tax by a dime—something that had eluded his predecessor Mike Pence, now the nation's vice president. Holcomb recently launched a website that tells residents of all 92 counties—and outside business locators—which projects are scheduled for completion locally over the next five years.

Holcomb has the great good fortune of serving as Indiana's governor at a time of plenty. A state that was mired in perennial debt when the century began is now running sizable surpluses. Some of that has to do with financial fixes put in place by his predecessors, but the current economy has been a big help. During the recession a decade ago, unemployment in Elkhart County, a recreational vehicle manufacturing hub, topped 20 percent. Now, it's below 4 percent there. Indiana as a whole seems to set a new record for low unemployment every month.

Holcomb is trying to turn the fruits of the current economic moment into investments for the future. His main focus is on job creation and training. Indiana is the nation's leading manufacturing

state on a per capita basis, and Holcomb recognizes that the state's strength in manufacturing and logistics makes it one of the most vulnerable when it comes to artificial intelligence and robots taking human jobs. The governor says this is his state's Achilles' heel.

With 3 percent unemployment statewide, people aren't thinking much about jobs evaporating, but Holcomb is trying to make sure that once entire job categories are eliminated, the people who'd been in them can transition smoothly into something else, rather than being left unprepared. Over the next decade, between economic growth and baby boomer retirements, Indiana is expected to have a million jobs that will need filling. "The only thing keeping us from booming bigger and louder is the lack of people with the skills that we need," says Kevin Brinegar, president of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce.

Like other governors, Holcomb is looking to narrow the skills gap that leaves employers unable to fill many jobs they have open. He convinced the legislature this year to double its amount of funding for job training programs, while shifting authority over federal job training money from the department of education to the governor's workforce cabinet, which was created last year in hopes of ensuring a less siloed, more seamless approach. Workforce training grants have gone out to 450 different companies, resulting in new training for 7,000 individuals. Holcomb now is trying to share his state's success stories nationwide, serving on the new White House Workforce Policy Advisory Panel.

Whether dealing with workforce development, infrastructure or the state's management operations, Holcomb has emerged without fanfare or even much publicity as one of the nation's most pragmatic, effective and popular governors. A number of other governors have higher approval ratings, in part because the previously little-known Holcomb has yet to make much of an impression with a significant portion of the electorate. But you'd be hard-pressed to find a poll showing that even a quarter of those who have an opinion about him disapprove of the job he's doing. "He's genial, he's hard-working and he's focused on the bread-and-butter issues that affect every household, as opposed to dropping insults and stirring the pot," says Robert Dion, a political scientist at the University of Evansville. "They always say that good governance is good politics, and his approval rating reflects that people are largely satisfied."

Holcomb's success is only surprising when you realize how unlikely it was for him to become governor in the first place. At 6'5", Holcomb makes for an unlikely Cinderella—he habitually wears cowboy boots, not glass slippers—but his rise to the top included as many twists and turns as a fairy tale. Holcomb has been in and around politics and government for his entire post-Navy career, serving as a state Republican Party chair and working as a top aide to Gov. Mitch Daniels, to a member of Congress and to a senator. But he'd never held elective office himself, failing at his one bid for the state House in 2000. When 2016 began, Holcomb was engaged in a run for U.S. Senate no one believes he would have won. "He couldn't get arrested in that election," Dion says. "He was on his way to being a failed candidate again."

Fate intervened. While he was driving home from a campaign event in February 2016 to catch the Super Bowl, Holcomb got a call from Gov. Pence, informing him that the incumbent lieutenant governor was leaving to run the state's community college system. Holcomb accepted the job, only to find himself thrust from an understudy role to the top of the state ticket after Donald Trump tapped Pence that July as his running mate. Pence had already won the GOP nomination for a second term, so it was up to a party committee to choose a new nominee. To win the nomination, Holcomb had to overcome considerable sentiment in favor

but it's hard to come up with a realistic scenario in which he doesn't win a second term. "He's a great governor," says longtime Republican House Speaker Brian Bosma. "I don't want to suggest my expectations were low, but he's certainly exceeded, greatly, what I expected."

If Holcomb's path to the governorship was unusual, it turned out that being a perennial staff man was good training after all. Many Republican governors across the country, for example, have adopted Daniels as their model for capable leadership. Working closely with him for a decade provided Holcomb with



Many Hoosiers are still getting to know Gov. Holcomb. But among those who do have an opinion of him, the vast majority approve of the job he's doing.

of two sitting members of Congress. But Pence pushed hard for him, and he prevailed on the second committee ballot. With the Trump-Pence ticket carrying Indiana by 19 points, Holcomb ended up winning election easily. "We had 105 days to build the airplane in flight, raise \$14 million and spend it and land safely, which we did," Holcomb says.

Now that he's midway through his third year, the Indiana political class seems almost to have forgotten how many unlikely dominoes had to fall in order for Holcomb to end up as governor. At the time of his election, plenty of people, including some GOP stalwarts, wondered whether this relatively unknown figure had enough experience to fill the job. No one is saying that now.

His trajectory toward the governorship was so unusual that no one wants to say his reelection next year is a slam-dunk certainty,

the equivalent of a Ph.D. in governing. "Some call him the staffer who won the lottery," says Mike Murphy, a GOP consultant and former Indiana legislator, "but he had the best possible training from the best mentors you could have."

As Daniels' deputy chief of staff and then as the state director for U.S. Sen. Daniel Coats (now the federal director of national intelligence), Holcomb worked on a host of important Indiana issues. And he worked with people all up and down the state. On the Daniels campaign, Holcomb's job involved coaxing support from a wide variety of different groups—everyone from teachers to "left-handed, blue-eyed fishermen from White County," jokes consultant Lou Gerig.

That effort gave Holcomb a grounding in Indiana's regional differences and his first entrée to diverse constituencies. Holcomb

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doesn't have a booming voice or a charismatic personality that can draw every eye in the room. The words people use to describe him—workmanlike, disciplined, personable, “could be your next-door neighbor”—testify to his lack of obvious flash. That's OK with most Hoosiers, who have always gone for governors who come across as homespun and relaxed but able to get things done. “I've seen each of the five previous governors really mad,” Bosma says. “I've never seen Holcomb mad. I've honestly never seen him in a bad mood or worked up about something.”

The most important task for a leader, Holcomb has found, is not setting an agenda but building a network of allies to support and promote it. He aims to hire people expert and capable enough that he doesn't have to micromanage them, and he doesn't try to seize credit or headlines for every maneuver. “Working with Mitch Daniels, I learned the importance of the basics—having a plan, sharing it, being transparent about it and building coalitions,” Holcomb says. “You get to the solution faster with more hands on deck.”

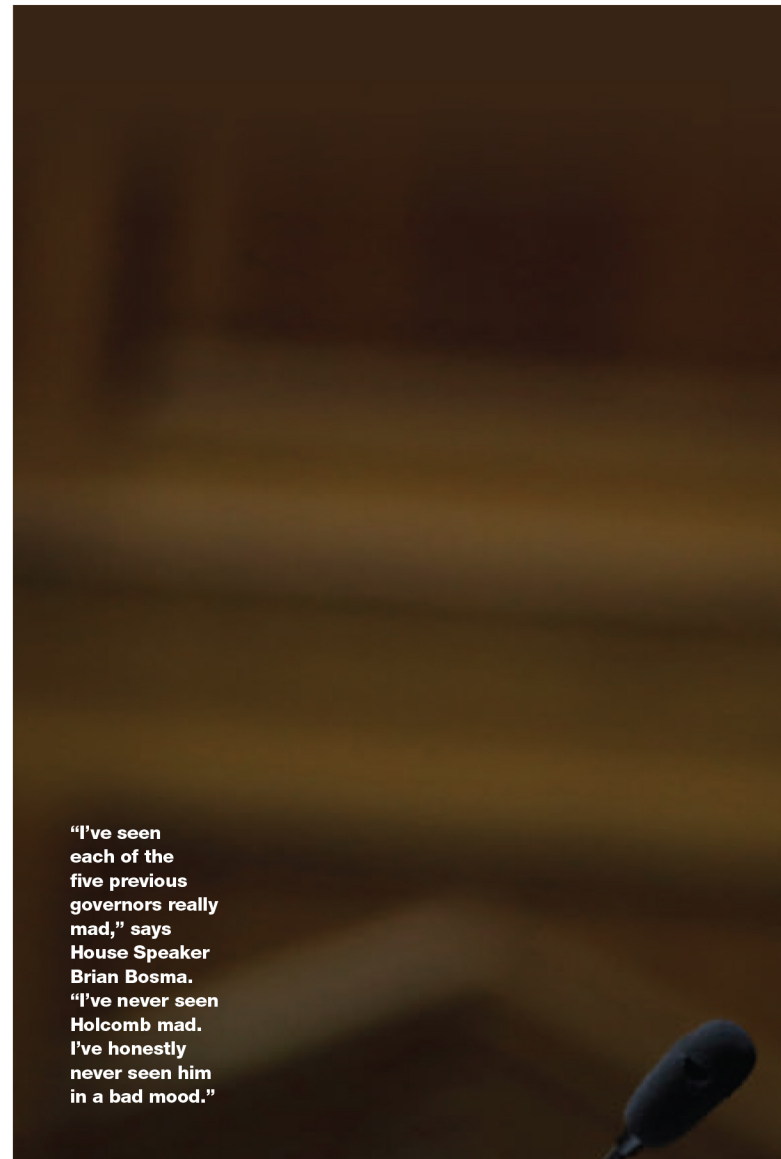
Democrats are a largely irrelevant minority in Indiana, but Holcomb has given them their say, accepting their input on several important pieces of legislation and taking them along on trade missions. He recognizes that the Democratic mayors of the state's larger cities represent his constituents, too, says Karen Freeman-Wilson, the mayor of Gary, who has emerged as a surprising ally. “I have had a great time working with him,” she says. “I'm not saying he's not partisan, but he does not allow the partisanship to get in the way of doing his job and understanding that he should be engaged with people who did not vote for him.”

Daniels chose as governor essentially to call a truce on social issues, arguing they were an unproductive distraction from the nuts-and-bolts concerns the state had to get right. Mike Pence didn't share that philosophy. When a religious freedom bill was introduced that some saw as allowing discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, Pence didn't duck from its defense, emerging as a national lightning rod on the issue. Before Trump picked Pence for vice president, there was real doubt that the governor would win a second term. Holcomb, for his part, hasn't allowed himself to get bogged down in many controversial matters.

Despite having his gubernatorial predecessor serving in the White House, he has managed to keep himself off of cable television and out of the national controversies that dominate political discussion. “Call it lack of bandwidth to focus on other people's jobs,” he says, perhaps a bit coyly, “but I focus on my job.”

The governor's natural preference is to stick to five simple but crucial subjects—economic growth, job creation and training, infrastructure, public health, and improving government services. “He's perceived by most people as concentrating on commonsense issues,” says former Fort Wayne Mayor Paul Helmke, “the things most people want politicians to concentrate on.”

Holcomb readily concedes that he talks so often about his “five pillars” that he can sometimes sound like a broken record. But figuring out the problems the state needs to address and determining the appropriate level of resources needed to deal with them turns out to be a good formula for staying out of political hot water. “Every governor wakes up every morning with an equal



opportunity to step in it or become distracted,” Holcomb says. He has managed, so far at least, to avoid stepping in it.

Holcomb's personal hobbies are simple but turn out to be voter-friendly. During his 2016 campaign, he made a point of stopping to shoot baskets in high school gyms in nearly every county he visited. He eats at McDonald's so often that he carries a gold card from Indiana franchise owners in his wallet. (Speaker Bosma still sounds a bit chagrined when he recalls how the governor insisted on stopping repeatedly at McDonald's during a European trade mission.) Holcomb's dog has turned into a bit of a social media star. His wife Janet is a certified shooting instructor, which doesn't hurt the governor among the state's sizable NRA fan base.

Holcomb, who turns 51 on May 2, is enough of a history buff



that he's collected autographs of every American president, save George Washington. He has a newspaper clip from 1948 profiling his great-grandfather, who had started a blacksmith's shop in southern Indiana back in 1895. A half-century in, shoeing wasn't the same business as it had been during the 19th century, but the article confidently predicts that his 5-year-old grandson—the future governor's father—might be doing smithing one day, since he was already building things with his hands. Neil Holcomb went on to build airplane engines for Rolls-Royce.

Unsurprisingly, the governor views this bit of lore—his own family's progress from the horseshoe business to helping make airplanes fly higher and faster—as a parable about how technological change can be positive. He recognizes that all the state's industries, from limestone quarrying to RV manufacturing, have changed profoundly and will continue to change in the years to come. Toward that end, he wants to get Indiana's people to prepare,

starting in the lower grades but if necessary as adults. It's state government as employment counselor, offering training, advice and apprenticeships in practically any field you can name.

Infosys, the Indian technology company, recently broke ground near the Indianapolis airport for an education center that will train its U.S. workforce, creating 3,000 jobs locally and, as a side benefit, helping Indiana teachers learn to teach coding at every level statewide. At the other end of the socioeconomic scale, Holcomb has adapted a program from California to teach coding to prisoners. Thus far, participants in this program have a recidivism rate of exactly zero. The demand is so great that some prisoners are now in a position to interview with prospective employers before they get out. "I know change can be abrupt," Holcomb says. "It can be difficult and hard. The alternative is, there's so much opportunity out there to double or triple your salary."

Holcomb refers constantly to where he wants his state to be in 15 years. That explains his attention to infrastructure and human capital. It also explains what might be the most controversial issue Holcomb has taken on as governor.

One of his top legislative priorities this year was passage of a hate crimes bill. Indiana already tracked hate crimes sufficiently to be able to meet federal reporting requirements. The governor argued that it only made sense to include protection against hate crimes in state law as well. He has no trouble making a moral argument, but he tends to frame the issue in his usual pragmatic terms. Indiana for years has been one of only five states without a hate crimes law, which Holcomb and his allies said was causing companies to pass the state by. "We have to remove any barriers from companies and particularly individuals from coming here," says Brinegar, the chamber president. "We are in an intense battle for talent and we have to look outside our borders."

It proved to be a tough sell. A majority of Indiana legislators represent rural areas where hate crimes are not considered a major concern. They fielded calls not only from the governor but from the heads of big employers—longstanding Indiana companies such as Eli Lilly and Cummins and relative newcomers including Salesforce—but not all were convinced that the state was on some kind of naughty list that it needed to get off. "I served in the legislature—they're often proud to be the last people to do some things," says Murphy, the GOP consultant. "People in Indiana are tired of being told what to do." The bill looked lost for dead, but Holcomb lobbied hard for it with legislators on an individual basis. In the end, a compromise was approved last month that left age, gender and gender identity off the protected list.

Holcomb recognizes that no matter how ardently people want to preserve the past, the future is coming anyway. The era of blacksmithing is over and the manufacturing jobs that depended on brawn more than brains are going away as well. No matter how well the state is doing in any given area, Holcomb sees that constant tweaks, at the very least, are needed for it to remain in good shape. He likely has a few more years in his unexpected role as governor to prepare his home state for the new day that's coming. "Time is moving faster and the world is getting smaller, simultaneously," Holcomb says. "My message is, it's an exciting time." **G**

Email agreenblatt@governing.com