


# Does the Public Hold Governors Accountable for Policy Outcomes?

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## Abstract

What are the origins of gubernatorial popularity? Past studies debate whether governors are substantively evaluated based on their performance in office, with some arguing that the origins of approval may be idiosyncratic to particular governors. These studies typically consider gubernatorial approval in a handful of states or patterns of approval in the aggregate. We improve on this research by drawing on a richer data source: the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. We consider both individual-level and state-level explanations of gubernatorial popularity with a sample of over 300,000 respondents across the 50 states from 2006 to 2018. We explore how party, policy outcomes, and government performance shape levels of gubernatorial approval. We show that people evaluate governors based on the ideological direction of policy outcomes in the states. When state policy outcomes align with their ideological preferences, people report higher levels of approval for the job performance of their governor. We also confirm the importance of party and state economic performance for gubernatorial approval.

## Keywords

governors, approval, gubernatorial approval, policy outcomes, public opinion

For governors, their popularity with the electorate is a valued resource. When seeking reelection, governors who enjoy high levels of public support are better able to ward off strong challengers and are more likely to secure the support of voters in their state (Bardwell 2002; Kenney and Rice 1983; King 2001; Svoboda 1995). Within state government, public approval serves as an informal power for governors (Beyle and Ferguson 2008). Popular governors are perceived as more influential by state legislators (Cohen 2018) and tend to achieve greater success at implementing their policy goals (Kousser and Phillips 2012). Within state bureaucracies, greater gubernatorial approval serves as useful informal power that grants governors greater influence over bureaucrats (Dometrius 2002; Sigelman and Dometrius 1988). In the case of state judiciaries, popular governors are more likely to see their executive power upheld by state supreme court justices (Johnson 2015).

Given the importance of gubernatorial approval in politics, we are interested in better understanding its origins. Somewhat surprisingly, prior studies of gubernatorial approval have raised doubts about whether governors are substantively evaluated based on their job performance. Some fail to find much leverage over explaining the origins of gubernatorial approval, suggesting

that roots of popularity may be idiosyncratic to particular governors (Adams and Squire 2001; Crew and Weiher 1996). Other studies disagree on whether even fundamentals like partisanship and economic performance inform gubernatorial approval (e.g., Cohen 1983; Larimer 2015; MacDonald and Sigelman 1999; Orth 2001). If governors are not evaluated based on the outcomes or performance of state government, then it raises concerns about whether citizens are able to provide a meaningful check on the elected officials in their state. To the degree to which gubernatorial popularity is used by state executives to achieve influence with state legislators and bureaucrats, it might not be a resource that has been sincerely earned by governors.

Using responses from the 2006 to 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we explore both

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individual-level and state-level factors that contribute to the popularity of governors across the 50 states. In particular, we focus on how state policy liberalism and the performance of state government influence people's appraisals of their governors. We find that when state policy outcomes are aligned with respondents' ideological preferences, they reward the governor with higher levels of approval. We also find that shared partisanship, state economic performance, and scandals influence gubernatorial popularity.

These findings suggest that origins of gubernatorial approval are not simply idiosyncratic to particular officeholders. Instead, people substantively evaluate their governors on the basis of state policy outcomes and economic performance. This is important to understanding how people assess the job performance of their elected representatives. Recent work has raised doubts about whether people really have the capacity to hold elected officials accountable for policy outcomes (Achen and Bartels 2016; Dynes and Holbein 2020). If citizens are not able to evaluate governors on their job performance, then it grants state executives leeway to stray from the demands of the electorate. However, our results demonstrate that state electorates punish and reward governors based on policy outcomes in the states.

In looking at gubernatorial elections, scholars have raised worries that governors might not need to be responsive to the particular policy needs and demands of subnational constituencies. As state elections seem increasingly nationalized, people's attitudes about state politics may have more to do with national debates rather than local concerns (Carsey and Wright 1998; Hopkins 2018; Leal 2006; Sievert and McKee 2019; Simon 1989). Our results show that gubernatorial popularity is not determined by national forces alone. We find that the outputs of state government play an important role in shaping gubernatorial approval.

Our work indicates that policy outcomes are consequential for how the public evaluates their governors. This speaks to the connection between public opinion and policy in the states. Not only are public preferences a force that direct policy outcomes (Caughey and Warshaw 2018; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993), but the public also considers the policy outcomes of state government in how they evaluate the job performance of state elected officials. This suggests the presence of a potential feedback loop between policy outcomes and public opinion. These results also speak to debates about the relative importance of governors to policy outcomes in the states. While some affirm the importance of governors to policy outcomes in the states (Barrilleaux 1999; Caughey, Warshaw, and Xu 2017; Kousser and Phillips 2012), others have questioned whether governors matter for the ideological direction of state outcomes (Dye 1984; Erikson, Wright, and McIver

1993; Smith 1997; Winters 1976). Our results suggest that state electorates are assessing governors based on the ideological outputs of state government.

Yet, while policy outcomes are central to evaluations of gubernatorial job performance, we fail to find much evidence that people are evaluating governors based on the fiscal health of the state or governors' specific performance in achieving budgetary goals. To the degree to which governors may find greater success in influencing state budgets than in achieving policy objectives (Kousser and Phillips 2012), this means that there may be some incongruities between citizens' expectations of governors and the realities of governors' influence within state government. Our results suggest that for governors looking to boost their public popularity, gubernatorial approval has more to do with ideology and the policy outcomes of state government, rather than governors' effectiveness in managing state government or their success at achieving budgetary goals.

## The Origins of Gubernatorial Approval

Through the 1950s and 1960s, governors were often held in little regard. In the words of one columnist, "The governors of the states, taken as a whole, are a poor lot. It is not that they are all bad, but that they are not nearly as good as they ought to be" (Reston 1962, 32). Yet, while governors were once perceived as ineffectual and passive in matters of state policy leadership, governors today are at the center of state politics. The powers of the governor have expanded—with growing staffs and professionalization of the executive office as well as increased gubernatorial influence over state budgets (Beyle 1988; Hedge 1998). The desirability of the office has increased (Rosenthal 2013) as has the quality of those who seek executive office in the states (Sabato 1978). While once described as "powerless" and "pitiable figures" (Broder 1974, 28), governors today command significantly more power and influence. Moncrief and Squire (2017) propose that governors' influence over state matters arguably exceeds the president's influence over national matters.

Despite the central role of governors in state government, it is not clear whether the public recognizes what governors accomplish in office or rewards governors based on state outcomes. In trying to explain gubernatorial approval, null effects are common. In their study of gubernatorial approval over time, Adams and Squire (2001) struggle to explain why approval varies, and conclude that the origins of gubernatorial popularity may well be idiosyncratic to particular state contexts and governors—reflecting factors such as the character of individual politicians or the unique events that play out within states. MacDonald and Sigelman (1999) fail to identify any

state-level factor that consistently predicts gubernatorial approval, while [Crew et al. \(2002\)](#) find few commonalities in the origins of gubernatorial approval across states. Instead, the factors that explain approval in some contexts seem to have opposite effects in other state contexts.<sup>1</sup> Some have suggested that the public's expectations of governors may vary from state to state ([Jewell and Morehouse 2001](#)).

Beyond these null findings, studies of gubernatorial approval often disagree on its origins. Inconsistent effects are common across studies. Even as studies of presidential approval strongly affirm the ties between economic performance and presidential popularity ([Gronke and Newman 2003](#)), this connection seems tenuous at the state level. While many confirm a link between state economic conditions and state executive approval ([Alt, Lassen, and Skilling 2002](#); [Cohen 2020](#); [Cohen and King 2004](#); [Crew et al. 2002](#); [Hansen 1999](#); [Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990](#); [Jacobson 2006](#); [Orth 2001](#)), several studies find only weak, conditional, or inconsistent evidence that governors gain approval under strong state economic conditions ([Adams and Squire 2001](#); [Crew and Weiher 1996](#); [Larimer 2015](#); [MacDonald and Sigelman 1999](#)). Even factors like partisan congruence remain contested as predictors of gubernatorial approval. While some surveys show that co-partisans are more likely to approve of their governor ([Cohen 2020](#); [Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990](#); [Orth 2001](#)), others find limited evidence of partisan effects ([Cohen 1983](#); [Larimer 2015](#); [MacDonald and Sigelman 1999](#)).

### Explaining in the Prevalence of Null Findings in Past Studies

Why are null and inconsistent findings so common to studies of gubernatorial approval? One possible explanation is tied to the nature of state electorates. As V.O. [Key \(1956, 3\)](#) noted, "The American people are not boiling with concern about the workings of their state governments." When asked about what interests them in politics, state governments traditionally play second fiddle to national politics ([Hopkins 2018](#); [Jennings and Zeigler 1970](#)). Not only are citizens prioritizing their attention to national politics over state matters, differences in media coverage also mean that news coverage of national politics is more accessible than details about what is happening in state government. Within this context, it may be the case that citizens are simply not all that attentive to the job that their governor is doing. Rather than drawing on information about the governor's successes or shortcomings in office, people may instead rely on generalized criteria, such as their affect toward national politics or national economic conditions ([Brown 2010](#); [Carsey and Wright 1998](#); [King and Cohen 2005](#); [Simon 1989](#)).<sup>2</sup>

However, we believe that observers tend to be overly cynical about the capacities of state electorates to evaluate governors based on the outcomes of state governments. While we acknowledge that citizens usually put national politics ahead of state-level political concerns, it is also the case that people remain quite interested in state politics. When asked about how interested they are in keeping up with news about state government in a 2014 survey, 38% say they are very interested, which is only slightly lower than the 44% who say that they are very interested in following news about the federal government.<sup>3</sup> And while the task of keeping up with state politics is arguably a more difficult one than keeping current with national politics, governors are typically central to news coverage of state politics ([Rosenthal 1990](#)). Compared to senators who share the same constituency, governors receive significantly more press coverage ([Kahn 1995](#); [Squire and Fastnow 1994](#)). In this, the track records of governors are arguably better observed by voters than the votes cast by members of Congress ([Jewell and Morehouse 2001](#)).

After the president and vice-president, the governor is arguably the best-known politician—more familiar than senators or members of Congress ([Delli Carpini et al. 1996](#); [Squire and Fastnow 1994](#)). When considering levels of political knowledge as assessed in the 2006–2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, 76% correctly identify the party affiliation of their governor. This is higher accuracy than is seen for identifying the partisan loyalties of representatives in Congress or party control of Congress.<sup>4</sup> To the extent to which information shortfalls do not prevent citizens from responding to the performance of their representatives in Congress (e.g., [Ansolabehere and Jones 2010](#); [Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2003](#)), then we have reason to believe that voters are more capable of meaningfully evaluating their governors than has been suggested in the past. Indeed, governors themselves typically approach their job in ways that indicate they are concerned with how voters see them. Much of the governor's time is devoted to public-facing roles—meeting with citizen groups, attending events, and working with the press ([Beyle and Muchmore 1983](#); [Rosenthal 2013](#)). Public support is seen as a resource to be cultivated ([Rosenthal 1990](#)).

When considering the null findings and inconsistent effects that are relatively common to studies of gubernatorial approval, we believe that these have less to do with the motivations or capacities of state electorates, but instead reflect the challenges of measuring and studying gubernatorial approval using survey data. Even if many voice an interest in state politics, it never seems to attract quite the same interest from pollsters. Questions on gubernatorial approval are not common to national surveys. Among those published studies that have considered gubernatorial approval, we know of only two that look at

the individual level origins of gubernatorial approval with a nationally representative survey (Brown 2010; Cohen 2020).<sup>5</sup> Many prior studies instead consider the origins of gubernatorial approval within only one state (Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990; Larimer 2015; Orth 2001) or a handful of states (Cohen 1983; Crew and Weiher 1996; Crew et al. 2002; Hansen 1999), which limits the generalizability of findings from these studies.

Most other investigations of gubernatorial approval rely on the US Officials' Job Approval Ratings (JARs) database (Beyle, Niemi and Sigelman 2002). While the JARs dataset is an incredibly rich source of data on gubernatorial approval, it is limited in some important ways. The JARs dataset aggregates responses to multiple state polls over the years, pooling together multiple question wordings from different time points conducted by different survey houses to create state-aggregated approval measures. This high level of heterogeneity in origin and type of question makes for noisy data, where variations in approval might not be substantively related to state environments—but instead tied differences in survey administration, question wording, or the particular political conditions at the time when some state surveys were conducted. This measurement error could also contribute to null and inconsistent findings in past research.

We improve on these studies by taking advantage of responses to the Cooperative Congressional Election Study across seven surveys and 12 years. The samples in the CCES are nationally representative, with respondents drawn from all 50 states.<sup>6</sup> Because the CCES asks respondents the same question wording during the same window of time, we can better isolate how state conditions uniquely contribute to people's evaluations of their governor. The CCES also provides an opportunity to explore individual-level variations in approval, and why some people are more likely to approve of their governors than others. Most prior studies of gubernatorial approval consider public evaluations only in the aggregate at the state level. By considering individuals as our unit of analysis, we can explore how approval varies across individuals contingent on state conditions, to see how people differ in approval as a function of their partisan and ideological preferences.

## The Effects of State Performance on Gubernatorial Approval

Just as presidents are seen as the face of national government, people look to their governors as leaders of the states. As such, we expect that governors are evaluated based on economic and political outcomes in the states. We focus on the consequences of policy outcomes, party congruence, and the performance of state government as

explanations of gubernatorial approval. We first consider whether the public holds governors responsible for policy outcomes in the states. While in the past state legislators often saw governors as unimportant to the job of policy-making (Uslaner and Weber 1977), over time governors have come to play an increasingly important role in setting the state policy agenda (Beyle 1988; Rosenthal 1990). Governors invest significant energy into trying to shape policy outcomes in the states, and it is a domain where they can hold substantial influence. In a survey of governors, most reported that they felt they were able to achieve a majority of their policy goals in office (Rosenthal 2013). Rosenthal (2013) points to the example of Governor Gerald Baliles of Virginia, who sent 108 bills to the state legislature in his first year. All but one of these proposals passed in some version.

Yet, the importance of governors to policy outcomes in the states has not always been recognized in past research. When considering how public opinion contributes to state policy liberalism, Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) exclude governors, suggesting that there is little evidence that gubernatorial powers are consequential for the ideological direction of state policy outcomes. Indeed, when looking at the factors that condition how public opinion informs policy outcomes in the states, partisan control of the governor's office may not contribute much to policy representation in the states. In considering the correspondence between public liberalism and policy outcomes, Lax and Phillips (2012) find that party control of the governor's office does not promote policy congruence beyond the effects of government liberalism. While changes in public liberalism contribute to policy change in the states, Caughey and Warshaw (2018) are unable to confirm that this effect is mediated through partisan control in state government. Electing a governor of a different party may contribute little to differences in policy outcomes across the states (Dye 1984; Smith 1997; Winters 1976). To the degree to which shifts in partisan control of government may produce only minimal differences in economic and social outcomes (Dynes and Holbein 2020), then it may prove challenging for the public to evaluate governors based on state policy outcomes.

Yet, others find greater evidence that governors are important to policy outcomes in the states. Crew and Hill (1995) show that the policy proposals that governors offer in their State of the State addresses are good predictors of the kinds of legislation that emerge from state legislatures. Kousser and Phillips (2012) affirm that more often than not, governors get at least some of what they ask of the state legislature. Others also find that governors contribute to the ideological direction of state policies (Barrilleaux 1999; Caughey, Warshaw, and Xu 2017), but also note that the partisan effects of governors on policy outcomes

may be modest in size and short-lived (Caughey, Warshaw, and Xu 2017).

We explore whether people evaluate governors based on the liberalism or conservatism of policy outcomes in the states. We expect that people view their governor as a policy leader in their state. In practice, governors are powerful actors in the policy-making process. But even more than that, governors are also symbolically viewed as the face of state government. They are elected with the support of a statewide constituency. They are the best known among elected officials in the states. As such, we expect that the ideological outputs of state government will influence how people evaluate their governor. We believe that people will be more likely to approve of their governor when the state government implements policy that better aligns with their ideological preferences. We expect that as the liberalism of state policy increases, self-identified liberals will be more likely to approve of the job their governor is doing while conservatives will be less likely to approve of their governor.

We expect that the effects of policy outcomes on gubernatorial approval will be independent of the rewards that come from shared partisanship alone. We separately consider the effects of shared partisanship on gubernatorial approval. Governors serve as party leaders in the states, whether in the legislative arena or in the fundraising and public appearances that serve the state party organization (Morehouse 1998; Muchmore and Beyle 1983). For the public, the governor can personify the state political party. We expect that partisanship is important not just to the choices that voters make on Election Day, but also central to how they evaluate the sitting governor. We expect that people will offer warmer ratings of co-partisan governors and cooler ratings of governors of the opposing party.

In addition to the effects of party and policy outcomes, we also consider the consequences of job performance for gubernatorial approval. We start by considering the most common indicator of executive performance: the health of the state economy. Economic outcomes are not only central to people's retrospective evaluations of government performance, they are also seen as a key job responsibility of governors (Andersen 2015; Atkeson and Partin 1995). When asked to evaluate the job performance of their governor, a strong state economy signals that things are going well in the state. We expect that stronger economies will be associated with higher levels of gubernatorial approval.

Governors also play an important role as administrators in the states. They oversee state bureaucracies. But are they evaluated by their constituents in terms of how well they manage state affairs? As one indicator of state performance, we consider the relationship between the fiscal health of the state and people's approval of the

governor. Governors wield important influence over state budgets (Barrilleaux and Berkman 2003; Kousser and Phillips 2012). When states run budget deficits, we expect that citizens will assign blame on the chief executive of the state. We also consider the specific effectiveness of the governor in influencing state budgets, to see whether citizens reward governors for their successes in negotiating with the legislature. Compared to the policy domain, governors tend to be more effective at achieving their goals when it comes to budgetary matters (Kousser and Phillips 2012). We consider the consequences of the governors' role in state budget politics for levels of public approval.

We also consider the professionalization of the state executive. As the role of governors has expanded over recent decades, the size of governors' staff has grown as has the professionalization of the office. In some states, governors have small staffs and state executives draw modest salaries. Other state executive branches are more highly professionalized, with greater staff, larger budgets, and the kinds of high salaries that allow for recruitment of strong job candidates. These resources are a source of power for governors—but may well be seen negatively by voters in the state. When considering how people evaluate their state legislatures, they offer warmer evaluations when they reside in states with less professionalized state legislatures (Kelleher and Wolak 2007; Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2012; Squire 1993). We expect that as the professionalism of the state executive increases, approval of the governor will fall.

Finally, we also test whether gubernatorial approval drops in the face of scandals within the state executive branch. At the national level, scandals can undercut the popularity of the chief executive, though not all scandals prove damaging to approval (Gronke and Newman 2003). To the degree to which gubernatorial approval has been viewed as having idiosyncratic or personalized origins, scandals have been named as a key factor to consider (e.g. Adams and Squire 2001; Crew and Weiher 1996). Indeed, Barth and Ferguson (2002) find that governors involved in scandals tend to enjoy lower approval. We expect that scandals in the state executive branch will also be associated with lower levels of gubernatorial approval.

## Data and Measures

To explore these questions, we take advantage of survey responses to the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, drawing on the surveys of just over 300,000 respondents administered during election years from 2006 to 2018.<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked if they approve of the way their governor is doing their job on a four-point scale from "strongly approve" to "strongly disapprove."<sup>8</sup> Across the years of the survey, respondents are about as

likely to approve of their governor as disapprove. 17 percent say that they strongly approve of the job their governor is doing, while 35% say that they somewhat approve. Twenty-one percent report that they somewhat disapprove of their governor's job performance, and 28% strongly disapprove.

To consider the effects of state policy outcomes, we rely on a measure of state policy liberalism created by [Caughey and Warshaw \(2016\)](#), updated through 2018. Their measure is based on a latent variable approach, drawing on the policy outputs of state government on 148 policies across a range of issue domains such as welfare, abortion, the environment, and education. The policy issues include number of outputs common across states, such as right-to-work laws, education spending, income tax rates, and hand gun registration. Higher scores on this latent measure indicate states with more liberal state outcomes. The strength of this measure is that it allows for comparison of states' ideological outputs on the same slate of policy domains, allowing for state-to-state and year-to-year comparisons even as state governments each take up different policy agendas. It allows us to assess whether constituents are responsive to the general ideological tenor of state outcomes when rating their governors. However, the measure is limited in that it captures state government outputs generally, rather than the particular policy priorities or policy successes championed by governors. With this measure, we are unable to assess whether people assign credit or blame for specific policy accomplishments of governors. We can only consider whether people rate governors differently contingent on the ideological direction of state outcomes.

Because we expect that the effects of state policy liberalism on approval to depend on people's personal ideological leanings, we interact respondent ideological self-placement with the ideological direction of state policy outcomes. To consider the effects of party congruence, we include an indicator of whether the respondent shares the same party affiliation as their governor, as well as an indicator of when the respondent identifies with the opposing party.<sup>9</sup> We test for the effects of economic outcomes using a measure of the state unemployment rate, seasonally adjusted, for the October of the year the survey was conducted.

We consider the effects of budget deficits on gubernatorial approval with a measure of the difference between total state revenues and total state spending, divided by state revenues. Positive values indicate states where states spent less than what they took in as state revenues, while negative values indicate states with budget deficits where spending exceeded revenues. To see whether state constituents reward governors for their leadership in influencing state budgets, we consider the difference between the governor's proposed budget and the ultimate level of

per capita expenditures that was enacted ([Kousser and Phillips 2012](#)).<sup>10</sup> If the governor's proposed changes in expenditures matches what was enacted by the state government, the measure is scored zero. As the value increases, it signals less effective governors, with greater distance between the governor's budget proposal and the implemented outcome.

We consider the effects of the professionalism of the state executive branch using the measure proposed by [Boushey and McGrath \(2017\)](#). We average executive compensation for major state executives such as the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state as well as many top agency heads, as reported in the *Book of the States*, adjusted to US\$2016 using the Consumer Price Index.<sup>11</sup> We also include an indicator of the presence of a significant scandal or controversy involving the state executive branch during the election year or the prior year.<sup>12</sup>

To test whether gubernatorial approval responds to national moods, we include first an individual-level indicator of people's retrospective evaluations about the health of the national economy. We also include a measure of approval of the president. To the extent to which presidential approval serves as a barometer of national moods and people's general satisfaction with the direction of national government ([Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002](#)), it should capture some of the imprint of national conditions on evaluations of the governor. We also control for demographic differences, namely educational attainment, race, and gender.<sup>13</sup>

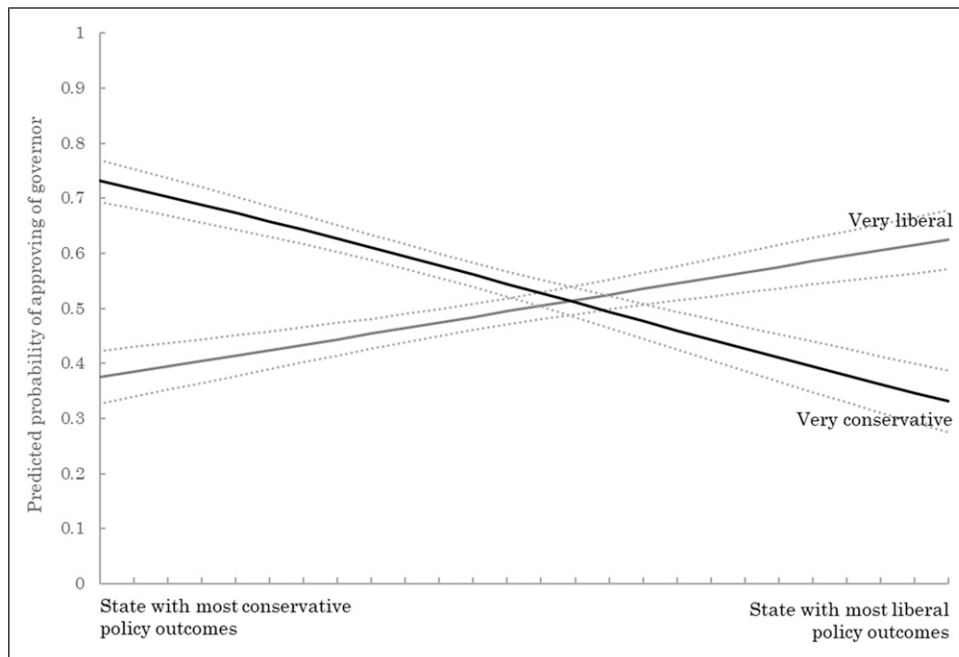
Because we are interested in the sources of heterogeneity in gubernatorial approval across individuals and states, we rely on multilevel ordered logit and a random intercept random coefficient specification.<sup>14</sup> In [Table 1](#), we report two specifications. The first column includes all of the survey years and a five-point measure of ideology. From 2010 forward, we can more precisely assess people's ideological leanings with a seven-point scale, so the second column reports the results swapping in the seven-point measure. We are also able to add a control for ideological congruence with the governor, based on the perceived ideological distance between respondents' ideological self-placements and the perceived ideological placement of the governor of their state.<sup>15</sup> This allows us to better isolate the effect of state policy outcomes on approval apart from the similarity in ideological leanings between constituents and their governor.

We find that the liberalism of public policy outcomes in the state predict people's approval of their governor, where the effects of policy outcomes are conditional on people's ideological leanings. In [Figure 1](#), we plot the predicted likelihood of approving of the governor among those who describe their ideological leanings as very liberal or very conservative across the range of policy

**Table 1.** State performance and gubernatorial approval.

	Gubernatorial Approval	
	5 pt. Ideology, 2006–2018	7 pt. Ideology, 2010–2018
State policy liberalism	0.241* (0.045)	0.160* (0.041)
Respondent ideology	0.071* (0.029)	0.096* (0.017)
State policy liberalism × ideology	−0.155* (0.019)	−0.068* (0.010)
Perceived ideological congruence with governor	—	−0.553* (0.009)
Own-party governor	1.085* (0.042)	1.022* (0.034)
Opposing party governor	−0.669* (0.034)	−0.135* (0.042)
State unemployment rate	−0.065* (0.016)	−0.048* (0.015)
State fiscal health	−0.413 (0.338)	−0.039 (0.350)
Gubernatorial effectiveness	0.494 (1.058)	0.834 (1.009)
State executive branch professionalism	−0.671* (0.197)	−0.556* (0.196)
Gubernatorial scandals	−0.429* (0.135)	−0.397* (0.116)
Presidential approval	0.366* (0.109)	0.422* (0.103)
Evaluations of national economy	0.538* (0.075)	0.545* (0.075)
Education	−0.060 (0.033)	0.119* (0.037)
Female	0.032* (0.013)	−0.028* (0.014)
African-American	0.126* (0.038)	−0.006 (0.044)
Latino	0.100* (0.041)	0.013 (0.044)
Cutpoint 1	−1.964* (0.284)	−2.352* (0.291)
Cutpoint 2	−0.729* (0.284)	−0.977* (0.292)
Cutpoint 3	1.481* (0.284)	1.383* (0.292)
Variance components		
Variance, ideology	0.299* (0.027)	0.060* (0.007)
Variance, intercept	1.857* (0.171)	1.001* (0.111)
Covariance, ideology and intercept	−0.661* (0.065)	−0.209* (0.026)
N (number of state-years)	301,571 (349)	244,887 (249)

Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, 2006–2018. Multilevel ordered logit estimates, standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 1.** Predicted gubernatorial approval, by respondent ideology and state policy liberalism.

outcomes in the states.<sup>16</sup> As the liberalism of state policy outcomes increases, self-identified liberals are increasingly likely to approve of their governor's job performance. For those who identify as very liberal, living in a state with the most conservative policy outcomes is associated with a 37% likelihood of approving of the governor. For the most liberal respondents in the most liberal state, the predicted probability of approving of the governor climbs to 62%. The reverse is found among self-identified conservatives. A very conservative person in a state with the most liberal policy outcomes has a 33% likelihood of approving of their governor. For a strong conservative in a state with the most conservative policy outcomes, the predicted probability of approving of the governor rises to 73%.<sup>17</sup> We find a similar pattern of results in the second column of [Table 1](#) when we rely on a seven-point scale of ideological self-placement, results that are robust to a control for people's perceptions of ideological similarity to their governor.<sup>18</sup>

We find that the ideological direction of policy outcomes in the states informs how people evaluate the job performance of their governor.<sup>19</sup> Even though the importance of governors in shaping the liberalism of state policy outcomes has been debated ([Barrilleaux 1999](#); [Caughey, Warsaw, and Xu 2017](#); [Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993](#)), our results show that citizens are assigning credit and blame to governors based on the ideological direction of state policy outcomes. When people see state policy outcomes that are aligned with their own ideological preferences, they are more likely to say that they

approve of the job that the governor is doing. Our measure of policy outputs is limited, in that it is not fine-grained enough to distinguish governors' particular contributions to state policy outcomes from those of other actors.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, we find that state electorates are responsive to the ideological outputs of state governments, something not previously demonstrated as predictive of gubernatorial approval.

The effects of state policy liberalism on approval are distinctive from those of shared partisanship between the governor and respondent, though partisan congruence is also important to how people evaluate their governor. Co-partisans have a predicted 70% probability of approving of their governor, while those who identify with the opposing party are only half as likely (35%) to approve of the job their governor is doing. Partisanship clearly leaves its mark on gubernatorial approval. Given the rise of partisanship in American politics, it is a result that will surprise few. But it is important to demonstrate as prior studies have not always found consistent partisan effects on gubernatorial approval ([Cohen 1983](#); [MacDonald and Sigelman 1999](#)). Turning to the effects of state economic conditions, we confirm a significant negative effect for state unemployment rates on approval of the governor. When the unemployment rate is at its lowest, the predicted probability of approving of the governor is 57%. When the unemployment rate is at its highest, this drops to a 43% likelihood of approving of the governor. The economic health of a state is important to how people evaluate the job performance of their governor.



However, we fail to find much evidence that people's views of the governor are influenced by the fiscal health of the state. People's approval of the governor is unrelated to whether the state is in a spending surplus or running a deficit. Likewise, we fail to find any connection between people's approval and the governor's effectiveness in securing his or her goals in budget negotiations. This may be because voters are not tuned in enough to state politics to have a good read on the governor's effectiveness in this venue, or it might be that this measure of effectiveness is just not distinguishing how citizens evaluate the leadership strengths of governors.<sup>21</sup> While [Kousser and Phillips \(2012\)](#) find that governors are more successful in implementing their budget goals than achieving their policy goals, our results indicate that this may not translate into how they are evaluated by their constituents. State residents are more likely to evaluate their governor based on the ideological direction of state outcomes than the influence governors have on budgets.

We find that people are less likely to approve of governors when they emerge from more professionalized state executive branches. In the state with the least professionalized state executive, the predicted likelihood of approving of the governor is 59%. This drops to 52% in the case of the most highly professionalized state executive branch. While a professionalized state executive branch serves governors and affords them power relative state legislatures ([Boushey and McGrath 2017](#)), it is not something valued by constituents in the state. Just as state legislative professionalism hurts approval of state legislatures ([Kelleher and Wolak 2007](#); [Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2012](#); [Squire 1993](#)), we find that state executive professionalism fails to promote gubernatorial popularity.<sup>22</sup> We also confirm that gubernatorial scandals undercut approval of the governor, where the predicted probability of approving of the governor drops from 53% to 45% in the presence of a state executive branch scandal.

While our results show that people's evaluations of their governor are responsive to state economic conditions as well as policy outputs, approval is not determined by state factors alone. Both of our indicators of assessments of national politics are significant predictors of gubernatorial approval. Positive ratings of the president's performance are associated with higher ratings of governors, where moving from the lowest level of presidential approval to the highest is associated with about a seven-point increase in the predicted probability of approving of the governor.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, retrospective evaluations of the health of the national economy are also predictive of gubernatorial approval, independently of the effects of state unemployment rates. Moving from the most pessimistic view of the national economy to the most optimistic is associated with about a ten-point increase in the probability of approving of one's governor. In this,

people's general affect toward current national political conditions informs how they evaluate the performance of state officeholders.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusions

Throughout the years, scholars of state politics have often raised doubts about the degree to which citizens meaningfully evaluate the politicians and institutions of state government. From [Key's \(1956\)](#) early skepticism about citizens' motivations to follow state affairs to persistent debates about the nationalization of state politics ([Rose 1973](#); [Hopkins 2018](#)), many have raised doubts about whether state officeholders are held responsible for state performance. Indeed, when surveying past studies of gubernatorial approval, there are reasons to worry about whether the power that governors draw from their popularity is necessarily tied to how they perform in office. Across studies of approval, null effects are common and predictors of approval often have inconsistent effects depending on the study.

In considering more than 300,000 survey responses across the 50 states from 2006 to 2018, we establish that the origins of gubernatorial approval are not simply idiosyncratic. Instead, gubernatorial approval is responsive to state outcomes. We find that state policy liberalism, partisanship, and economic performance are all important explanations of gubernatorial popularity. Our finding that policy outcomes inform gubernatorial approval shifts how we think about governors. In the past, governors have not always been seen as ideological actors in state politics ([Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993](#)). One former governor, Parris Glendening of Maryland, commented, "I don't think governors are driven primarily by ideology" ([Kousser and Phillips 2012](#), 20). [Muchmore and Beyle \(1983\)](#) echo this claim, noting that many governors in their survey say that ideology has little to do with how they approach the job.

Yet, we show that ideology is important to how constituents evaluate the job performance of their governors. When people live in states where state policy outcomes are well-aligned with their own ideological leanings, they are more likely to approve of the job their governor is doing. Others have argued that the public looks to governors for policy leadership ([Beyle 1988](#); [Kousser and Phillips 2012](#)). Our results provide support for this idea. Policy outcomes inform the public's rating of their governors. In this, the power that governors draw from their public popularity has substantive origins, connected to the outputs of state government.

The importance of ideology to evaluations of governors may well reflect changes in state political environments compared to decades past. Given the increasingly partisan and ideological nature of state politics ([Jensen](#)

2017; Shor and McCarty 2011), it perhaps is not surprising to find that the ideological outputs of state governments contribute to gubernatorial popularity. But against a literature that has often described gubernatorial approval as idiosyncratic, we show that governors are substantively evaluated based on the policy outputs of state government. While others have proposed that economic conditions are more important than political conditions for gubernatorial evaluations (Jacobson 2006; King and Cohen 2005), our results highlight the importance of state outcomes beyond economic performance.

Moreover, these findings speak to the capacities of state electorates and the prospects for political accountability in the states. In recent years, doubts have been raised about citizens' ability to hold elected officials accountable for political outcomes (Achen and Bartels 2016; Dynes and Holbein 2020). Our results suggest that voters may be better equipped to evaluate governors on substantive outcomes than has previously been suggested. Governors may be selected primarily based on partisan criteria, but they are evaluated on more than just partisanship. Policy outcomes contribute to gubernatorial popularity, as does a strong state economy. The public is responsive to the outcomes of state government, and uses these outcomes to inform their evaluations of elected officials in their state. Others have shown that public opinion informs the policy outputs of state government (Caughy and Warshaw 2018; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Lax and Phillips 2012). We show that there is also public feedback in response to those policy outcomes, where reactions to the liberalism of state policy inform how people evaluate their governors.

While political outcomes in the states inform gubernatorial approval, we also find that governors may be held responsible for national political conditions that fall outside their control. Consistent with past work on the nationalization of state politics (Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989), we find that retrospective evaluations of the national economy and presidential approval contribute to how people rate their governors. Gubernatorial approval is not fully nationalized, in that it responds to state conditions as well. But we confirm that governors likely benefit from favorable national conditions that are beyond their specific political influence.

We fail to find much evidence that governors are evaluated by their specific job performance in the day-to-day business of governing. We do not find evidence that people punish or reward governors for the fiscal health of the state or governors' successes in budget negotiations with the state legislature. Kousser and Phillips (2012) find that governors find greater success in budget negotiations with state legislatures, rather than in accomplishing items from their policy agenda. But this is not something that

seems to matter to citizens in the states. Economic outcomes and policy outputs matter more than the specific performance of state government for how people evaluate their governors. This may reflect the relative salience of economic and ideological outcomes to citizens, as well as the accessibility of information about these outcomes. Given the declining coverage of state government in the news (Smith 2009), people may struggle to assess governors based on how they handle state finances. For governors looking to boost their popularity, they have more to gain from the pursuit of policy successes than their budget prowess. But to the extent to which there are limits for what governors can do to direct policy outcomes in the states (Kousser and Phillips 2012), citizens may be holding governors accountable for outcomes that might not be fully in their capacity to control.

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### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. Larimer (2015) also finds a good bit of heterogeneity in the origins of gubernatorial approval across time and changes in who holds the governorship.
2. National economic conditions can affect gubernatorial approval (King and Cohen 2005), but it is less clear that national factors like presidential approval influence how people rate their governors. In several studies, presidential approval is a weak explanation of approval at best (Crew and Weiher 1996; Crew et al. 2002; King and Cohen 2004; Orth 2001).
3. The survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center from November 17–15 December 2014 with a sample of 3212 respondents. Only 15% say that they are not very interested

- or not at all interested in following news about state government.
4. In the 2006-2018 CCES, 63% knew the partisan affiliation of their representative in Congress and about 68% knew the partisanship of their senators. Fifty-seven percent of Americans can correctly identify the parties in control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate.
  5. Jacobson (2006) and MacDonald and Sigelman (1999) consider state-aggregated levels of gubernatorial approval with state surveys from the 50 states.
  6. The state samples in the CCES are also large compared to most nationally representative surveys, affording greater statistical power to detect relationships. Because of the sampling strategy used in the CCES, the state samples will also tend to be more representative of state populations than face-to-face surveys that use area cluster sampling.
  7. Replication data are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WWWADI>.
  8. The question is included in a block of items that include items about approval of other officeholders. Respondents were asked, "Do you approve of the way each is doing their job...The Governor of [state]." The question wording was slightly different in the 2006 survey wave, when respondents were asked, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [governor's name] is handling [his/her] job as Governor of [state]?"
  9. The baseline category for comparison is populated by independents.
  10. We draw on data from the biannual Fiscal Survey of the States from the National Association of State Budget Officers. In the spring of each year, they report the governor's proposed level of state expenditures. We look at the difference between that proposal and the previous level of per capital expenditures to consider how much the governor's budget proposal deviates from the status quo. We then compare that proposal with the changes realized in the enacted budget, as published in the fall edition of the Fiscal Survey of the States. Our resulting measure is the absolute value of the difference between the governor's proposal and the final outcome.
  11. Salary is a useful indicator of governors' ability to recruit talented staff to further the goals of the state executive. Salary is also the central marker among those components used to assess state legislative professionalism (Bowen and Greene 2014).
  12. The list of scandals is included in the supplemental appendix.
  13. We do so to account for one of the sources of heterogeneity in people's approval levels, but we do not have theoretical expectations for these indicators. We summarize the predicted effects of all other explanatory variables in the supplemental appendix.
  14. Random effects are associated with state-years.
  15. We take the absolute value of the difference between the two ideological placements. Those who do not place the governor on the ideological scale are assigned to the scale's midpoint in calculating this measure.
  16. The plot is based on the estimates reported in the first column of Table 1. To simplify the presentation, we sum the predicted likelihood of strongly approving and somewhat approving and present the predicted probability of approving of the governor.
  17. In the supplemental appendix, we present the marginal effects of state policy liberalism over the range of respondent ideology. For the most liberal respondents, increasing policy liberalism has a positive and significant effect on gubernatorial approval, with a smaller magnitude positive effect among weak liberals. For moderates and conservatives, increasing state policy liberalism has a significant negative effect on gubernatorial approval. For moderates, this effect is near zero, but it increases in magnitude with the strength of conservative identification.
  18. For those who self-identify as very liberal, their predicted probability of approving of their governor is 37% if they reside in the state with the most conservative policy outcomes and 54% if they live in a state with the most liberal outcomes. Those who identify as very conservative in the state with the most liberal policy outcomes have a 41% likelihood of approving of their governor, which climbs to 67% if residing in the state with the most conservative outcomes. A person who perceives that their governor shares identical ideological leanings has a 71% likelihood of approving of their governor, while someone who perceives the governor to be at the entirely opposite end of the ideological scale has only a 13% probability of approving of the job performance of their governor.
  19. We confirm the same pattern of results using an alternative measure of the liberalism of state policy outcomes created by Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008), as updated through 2016.
  20. It is important to acknowledge that our measure of policy liberalism is cumulative rather than short-term. Constituents may be responding to both recent policy shifts and the general tenor of state policy liberalism over time in evaluating their governor's job performance.
  21. We explore whether the governor's budget effectiveness was contingent on partisan congruence, but we fail to find significant interaction effects associated with the effectiveness measure and our indicators of own-party versus opposing party governors.
  22. These results are robust to controls for other indicators of gubernatorial power, as shown in the supplemental appendix. We find no evidence that governors with more institutional powers are any more popular with their electorate, though we find partial evidence that governors' veto powers and appointment powers are associated with higher approval. Our results are also robust to controls for whether

there is a gubernatorial election that year and whether the governor is up for reelection.

23. In the supplemental appendix, we report the results of an alternative specification where we consider the effects of presidential approval as conditional on whether the governor shares the same party affiliation as the president.
24. We also considered an alternate specification where we included the national unemployment rate as well as an indicator of the relative state unemployment rate, calculated as the differences between the state's unemployment rate and the national rate. In this specification, we find significant effects for the state's relative unemployment rate but not the national unemployment rate.

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