# The American State Administrators Project:

# A New 50-State, 50-Year Data Resource for Scholars*

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**Short Bios**

Jason Webb Yackee is a professor of law at the University of Wisconsin Law School.  His research centers on business law, international transactions, and administrative law and politics. Yackee's work has been published widely in journals, such as the *Journal of Politics* and *George Washington Law Review*. An earlier paper with Susan Yackee, published in *JPART*, won a "best paper" award from the Midwest Political Science Association.

Susan Webb Yackee is a professor of public affairs and political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She also serves as the Director of the La Follette School of Public Affairs. Yackee's research focuses on the policymaking process, public management, and regulation. She won the 2019 Herbert A. Simon Career Contribution Award from the Midwest Public Administration Caucus for her scholarly contributions.

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**Abstract (Word Count=146)**

We present the American State Administrators Project (ASAP), a decades-long survey of state agency leaders. This remarkable dataset provides a 50-state chronological portrait of state administrative leaders, what they think, and what their agencies do. The dataset has traditionally been closely held but is now being shared with the broader scholarly community for the first time. We use this article to demonstrate the dataset's potential to advance theory and knowledge of the modern administrative state through the example of principal-agent theory. As we show, the ASAP data allow us to reorient scholarship away from an empirical focus on how the president/governor, legislature, and other political principals try to influence the bureaucracy and toward a fuller appreciation of how bureaucrats formulate and administer public policy in a political environment. Such a refocusing is critical because it better recognizes the "agency" held by bureaucratic agents within modern governance.

**Evidence for Practice**

- This Viewpoint provides an overview of—and makes publicly available—the extensive American State Administrators Project (ASAP) data. This dataset explores the attitudes, views, and experiences of state agency leaders in all fifty states from 1964 to 2008.

- The dataset contains over 11,500 survey responses and provides the evidentiary basis to explore numerous theoretically and practically oriented questions about state administration, including those related to the evolution of federal-state relations, to the contracting out of government services, and to sources and patterns of influence over public policy decisions.

- The dataset will be of great interest to scholars and students seeking to expand knowledge regarding how the on-the-ground experiences of state agency leaders have changed over time.

One of the odder things about many applications of principal-agent theory to the public bureaucracy, both at the federal and the state level, is that agency officials rarely make much of an appearance. Who they are, what they think, and what they do all too often get subsumed into abstract models or are left unmeasured in empirical studies that emphasize the desires of their political principals. Professor Deil Wright, an eminent and beloved scholar who spent most of his career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had other ideas. Bureaucrats mattered, and, what's more, they were *interesting*. In one of his last articles before his death in 2009, Professor Wright cheekily nodded to the assumption that to study state agency decision-making was to be exiled in "dullsville" (Brudney and Wright 2010). For him, it was anything but dull, and indeed he devoted his entire professional life to carefully compiling a remarkable survey-based dataset of state agency leaders that allows us to trace the evolution of the modern bureaucracy over time, across agencies, and across all 50 states.

That dataset—the American State Administrators Project (ASAP)—is the subject of this article. Much of Professor Wright's published work using the ASAP data was co-authored, either with faculty that he brought into the project or, more frequently, with graduate students, whom he would invite to serve as co-authors or to use the ASAP data in their own research. Professor Wright was especially generous in using ASAP as a mechanism to mentor women and international graduate students. Those students—now accomplished scholars in faculty and administrative positions across the globe—share his passion for the empirical study of the bureaucracy, and they owe their success, in part, to Professor Wright's mentorship.

That legacy is an important one, but Professor Wright hoped that after his death ASAP would continue and the data would be more widely shared and used. In accordance with his wishes, we implemented a new survey in 2018, inspired by ASAP but including some

modifications to reorient the survey toward new academic questions and concerns while also maintaining a significant degree of over-time continuity. We also cleaned and collated the first 10 waves of the ASAP survey data and, with the publication of this article, we are releasing the 1964 to 2008 data, along with extensive documentation, to academic researchers and students. This is the first time that the ASAP data has been made available for use outside of Professor Wright's small community of collaborators and students. The 1964 to 2008 ASAP dataset contains over 11,500 observations from state agency leaders and more than 700 survey questions. It includes information drawn from all agency types and from both politically appointed and civil service state agency leaders. In short, these data allow for the most comprehensive account of state agency administration available today.

We use this article to illustrate the ASAP data's potential to significantly contribute to the advancement of theory about and knowledge of modern public administration and management from an agent- *and* a state-focused perspective (1). To do so, we focus on the dataset's question bank addressing political influence on agency leaders. However, it is important to recognize that ASAP contains a large amount of data relevant to other fields of inquiry, such as public budgeting, public service motivation, and intergovernmental relations. We provide a list of the dataset's scope of coverage below. We hope that scholars across a wide range of disciplines— public administration, public policy, political science, and law, among others—will explore and use the ASAP data to inform and enhance their own research on the modern and historical functioning of the administrative state, sensitive, as was Professor Wright, to the central role played in it by public administrators themselves.

**A Brief History and Description of ASAP**

Professor Wright administered the first ASAP survey in 1964 and administered additional waves on a twice-a-decade schedule in 1968, 1974, 1978, 1984, 1988, 1994, 1998, 2004, and 2008 (2). Professor Cynthia Bowling of Auburn University co-directed the 2004 and 2008 surveys. Professor Wright's death in 2009 and a lack of funding stymied a planned 2014 survey. The current authors, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, implemented an ASAP-inspired survey of state agency leaders in 2018. The 2018 version maintains continuity with many earlier ASAP survey items while also adding several new question banks that address modern concerns and our own scholarly interests (3). We plan to release the 2018 data to scholars and students by the end of 2021 and will describe it in detail in a future publication. The remainder of this article, and our present data release, will primarily concern the 1964 to 2008 ASAP survey waves.

From the beginning, ASAP aimed to survey all leaders of major state agencies across all 50 states. The survey is not, and has never been, a sampling exercise. Thus, unlike most surveys, ASAP was intended to solicit the responses of the entire population of theoretical interest. Technically, then, the ASAP data is a census of state agency leaders' perceptions, informed opinions, and experiences. Professor Wright's recognition of the special value of this kind of data was, in 1964, precocious. Despite historical caricatures of state bureaucrats as mindless paper-pushers (or worse), it is widely recognized today that state administrative agencies, and the personnel who lead them, play a prominent and often positive role in our federal system of governance (Teodoro 2011). Agency leaders are uniquely situated to influence policy design and execution. Survey data collected through the ASAP project provides an important window into the realities of this essential administrative practice across the decades.

The ASAP project used the Council of State Governments' (CSG) *State Directory* to identify the census population for common state agencies. The *State Directory* provided the names and business contact information for state agency leaders, both elected and appointed, in the 50 states. Entries included leaders of large umbrella departments (such as the state Department of Transportation) and important subsidiary agencies located within those departments (such as the state's roads and highways agency). Over the years, state government has grown in scope and complexity, and the number and types of state agencies have grown as well. The *State Directory*—and thus the ASAP dataset—reflect this growth: later volumes contain more agencies and types of agencies than earlier ones.

Professor Wright organized the ASAP survey responses around what he called "functional categories," which reflected the *State Directory*'s organizational scheme. Functional categories served to aggregate agencies with similar policy foci and/or administrative missions across all of the states. Table 1 lists each of the ASAP functional categories. We also include example agencies within each category and the percentage of total survey responses that each category makes up in the aggregate dataset.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

The ASAP survey was implemented by mail from 1964 to 2004. In 2008 and 2018 the surveys were implemented by mail and the Internet. To maximize response rates, the survey administrators initiated multiple contacts with the survey targets during each wave. Figure 1 displays the number of observations and response rates over time. Unsurprisingly, response rates have trended down over time (in line with response rates to elite surveys more generally). That said, the 2018 administration enjoyed a notable rebound in the response rate. Moreover, the response rates, even in the least successful years, are still quite robust. Overall, response rates

range from 20% to 68%, with an average of 43%. Each survey generated hundreds of responses distributed across the 50 states. Aggregating across the years, the largest number of respondents are from North Carolina (338 observations, or 2.61%) and the smallest from New York (170 observations, or 1.31%).

(Insert Figure 1 Here)

An obvious question is whether respondents differ systematically from non-respondents, and we have reason to think not. The 1994, 1998, 2004, and 2008 surveys included a supplemental telephone survey of between seven and ten percent of the ASAP non-respondents. These non-respondents were asked a small battery of attitudinal and attribute questions, and their responses were compared to those of the survey respondents. Analysis found that non-respondents did not systematically differ from ASAP respondents.

In 2018, the survey was 12 pages long and contained 49 questions, many with multiple subparts. Prior administrations were similarly ambitious in length and scope. The fact that such large numbers of (presumably busy) state agency leaders would respond to such a daunting survey instrument is a testament to the interest that public administrators have in social science research that takes their professional experiences, perceptions, and views seriously.

The ASAP question banks are organized into 13 main categories, which are listed in Table 2. The survey's structure and content have remained relatively stable over time. Some items have been asked in identical or near-identical form in each year of administration. Other items appear and disappear as Professor Wright's interests, or the interests of his collaborators, evolved. Despite those evolutions, the dataset allows a great deal of over-time analysis of change, in some cases going all the way back to 1964.

(Insert Table 2 Here)

The dataset contains a large amount of demographic information about the respondents, including their sex, race, pay, education, age, years of service, and partisan self-identification. The survey also records agency-specific descriptive information, such as agency size (number of employees and size of budget). The ASAP data shows, for instance, that almost all state agency leaders identified as male in 1964, while the percentage of males had decreased to approximately 70% of the ASAP respondents by 2008 (4). Education is another demographic characteristic that has changed considerably across time. The average agency leader had a college degree in 1964, but a significant number had only a high school education. By 1984, approximately 75% of the respondents held a graduate degree, evidencing the growing professionalization of the field. In contrast, the mean age of the survey respondents has stayed within a somewhat narrow band— from a low of 47 years old in 1978 to a high of 55 in 2008. State agency leadership positions are and have been jobs, on average, for the middle-aged.

Another example is that we can track agency leader pay over time. Using reported mean salary adjusted to 2018 dollars, pay appears remarkably stable. In 1968, agency leaders made an average of $121,000 per year, while the lowest reported salary year is in 1974 at $111,000. Agency leaders in 2008 reported an average salary of $128,000. For perspective, the average governor's yearly salary in 2008 (again, adjusted to 2018 dollars) was approximately $157,000.

The dataset's rich demographic data are interesting in their own right. They can also be used to provide control variables in analyses of other phenomena or construct proxy variables of potentially high theoretical interest, such as expertise. For example, as Krause and Wood (2014) have speculated, agency expertise may be an important predictor of agency policymaking autonomy. The ASAP data on pay, education, and work experience would seem ideally suited to calculating over-time measures of state bureaucratic expertise, at least at the leadership level.

Professor Wright had longstanding interests in a number of important topics in public administration research, and the substantive portions of the survey's extensive question banks reflect those interests. A large number of questions deal with intergovernmental relations, public service motivation, and program expansionism. For instance, between 1964 and 2008 we see dramatic growth in the percentage of respondents who replied that their agency receives some federal aid, from just over 34% of agencies in 1964 to over 76% in 2008. Another example is a question that asks whether agency leaders believe that the receipt of federal aid leads to greater national interference in state affairs. Replies to this question (first asked in 1974) indicate that 81% of agency leaders in the early 1970s felt that federal aid led to interference, but only 44% felt similarly in 2008. The trend implies that agency leaders had become increasingly used to and comfortable with the role of federal grants-in-aid in influencing and supporting state policies.

The survey was periodically adapted to deal with of-the-moment topics. We see, for example, a series of questions in the 1990s and early 2000s concerning the contracting out of government services. The 1964 survey asks about agency leaders' political campaign contributions. "Urban" unrest makes an appearance in 1968. Questions about state-local relations begin appearing in the 1980s, and "reinventing government" appears during the Al Gore era.

## ASAP and Bureaucratic Autonomy

In this section we provide a fuller demonstration of the ASAP project's interest and utility to public administration researchers by examining the survey data's applicability to the topic of bureaucratic autonomy from a principal-agent perspective. Our focus here is illustrative and abbreviated, but it still captures the ASAP data's rich and varied content and its suitability for any number of important research questions.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have long viewed the public bureaucracy as both essential to the functioning of the modern state and difficult to square with the deeply embedded norms of democratic legitimacy and democratic control. For instance, a great deal of work has been done on questions of why, when, and how Congress and the president delegate regulatory policymaking authority to the federal bureaucracy, and on how these political principals might or might not maintain control over bureaucratic outputs.

Readers of PAR will be familiar with the many theoretical and empirical applications of principal-agent theory to the study of the bureaucracy, and we do not attempt to review the vast literature on the subject. While that literature is extensive and sophisticated, a good deal of the leading quantitative work focuses almost exclusively on the principals' side of the principal-agent relationship. This one-sided focus is evident even in seminal works of the public bureaucracy, such as Huber and Shipan's (2002) and Epstein and O'Halloran's (1999) influential studies of how legislatures may draft statutes to be more- or less-constraining on bureaucratic autonomy. Both studies are major contributions. But, despite being ostensibly about "bureaucratic autonomy," they are really about the statutory drafting decisions of legislatures. Neither addresses the crucial questions of how bureaucrats experience, react to, or even avoid or undermine, the statutory constraints that legislatures attempt to place upon them.

The ASAP dataset contains several items that bring the agent's perspective into the principal-agent picture. For example, one question asks, "Generally speaking, do you find that the governor or the legislature exercises greater control and oversight over your agency?" As illustrated in Figure 2, agency leaders appointed by governors tend to perceive governors as exerting greater control over their agencies than legislatures. Indeed, across all ASAP survey years, there is an enormous gap by appointment type—with those appointed by the governor up

to twice as likely to view the governor as the more important political principal than the legislature. This pattern remains even when the data are broken out into periods of divided versus unified government. These findings are interesting in part because they suggest a principal-agent dynamic that may not be evident in studies of the federal bureaucracy due to less variation in appointment type at the federal level.

<div align="center">(Insert Figure 2 Here)</div>

Another ASAP question asks, "In making agency decisions it is usually possible to identify and weigh several major sources of influence. Please indicate below the degree of influence each has on the decisions your agency makes in the following areas." Agency leaders then rate the influence of the governor, legislators, clientele groups, and professional associations (and in some ASAP years, state courts and agency career officials) across four areas: total agency budgets, budgets for specific agency programs, major agency policy changes, and agency rules and regulations. Figure 3 focuses on agency leader perceptions of legislator influence on major agency policy changes, visualized as a heat map, and with responses combined at the state level. The map suggests significant state variation in the amount of perceived legislative influence—meaning that bureaucratic autonomy may also vary significantly at the state level. Perhaps the variation could be explained by differences in legislative professionalism, as a proxy for the legislature's capacity to police agency policy decision-making? As a rough cut, we correlated Squire's (2007) state legislative professionalism index by year with the 1978 to 2008 ASAP data used in Figure 3 and surprisingly found no consistent or significant correlations; a null finding certainly worthy of deeper exploration.

<div align="center">(Insert Figure 3 Here)</div>

## Conclusion

The American State Administrators Project provides a remarkable and dynamic 50-state portrait of agency policy creation and administration over a half-century. The dataset records who agency leaders are, what they think, and what their agencies do. It provides, in short, the most comprehensive account of state agency politics and policy administration available to date. While the ASAP data has generated a number of important scholarly articles, our—and Professor Wright's—sense was that the dataset's full promise was yet unachieved.

With the publication of this article, the 1964 to 2008 ASAP data are now available to academic researchers and students for the first time at:  https://asap.wisc.edu. Complete documentation, including the question wording across all survey years and additional contextual information on the survey's implementation and on the data's use, can be found online. The project's website also details how to cite the data and provides information regarding select past academic research articles that employ the ASAP data.

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**Footnotes**

1. For a recent call for theoretical and empirical investigation into state agencies and their policies, see Thrower (2019).

2. For an article further describing ASAP's origins, see Herbert, Wright, and Brudney (1992).

3. In order to keep the 2018 version tractable and the response rate high, the addition of new material necessitated the deletion of certain questions contained in past ASAP surveys.

4. Such trends led Professor Wright and his students to use these data to write about a "glass ceiling" in public administration (Bowling et al 2006).

**Table 1. ASAP Functional Categories**

| Code | Functional Category | Example Agencies | Percent of Total Survey Responses |
|------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Elected Officials | Treasurer, Secretary of State, and Attorney General | 5.28 |
| 2 | Staff-Fiscal | Revenue, Administration, and Comptroller | 6.70 |
| 3 | Staff-Non Fiscal | Personnel, Planning, and Information Systems | 6.44 |
| 4 | Income Security and Social Services | Aging, Unemployment Insurance, and Welfare | 9.44 |
| 5 | Education | Education, Higher Education, and Special Education | 5.15 |
| 6 | Health | Health, Mental Health, and Agency Medical Services | 6.17 |
| 7 | Natural Resources | Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and Soil Conservation | 10.71 |
| 8 | Environment and Energy | Environnemental Protection, Solid Waste Management, and Energy | 7.44 |
| 9 | Economic Development | Commerce, Economic Development, and Lottery | 7.20 |
| 10 | Criminal Justice | Corrections, Juvenile Rehabilitation, and Parole and Probation | 9.41 |
| 11 | Regulatory | Banking, Food and Drugs, and Securities | 12.12 |
| 12 | Transportation | Highways, Mass Transportation, and Motor Vehicle Registration | 6.12 |
| 13 | Other | Emergency Management, Libraries, and Public Works | 7.82 |

Notes: Data from 1964 to 2018. See text for additional detail.

**Table 2. ASAP Question Banks**

| Question Bank | Subject | Summary Content |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Position & agency | The respondent's individual appointment, salary, time management and agency size |
| 2 | Programs, priorities & performance | Program expansion, priorities, influences, constraints and state comparisons |
| 3 | Agency budgets & fiscal austerity | Agency budget methods, procedures, response to changes, cause of changes |
| 4 | Agency relationships | Influences on the agency, oversight, policymaking |
| 5 | State governmental & intergovernmental contacts | Frequency and nature of contacts with local, state, and federal offices |
| 6 | Federal aid issues & state-national relations | Federal aid awards and management, state and federal responsibilities |
| 7 | National-state regulatory relations, devolution, & 9/11 | Relationships with national officials, federal funds and mandates, impacts of September 11, 2001 |
| 8 | Receipt of federal aid | Categories of aid, changes in aid amounts, federal involvement in aid expenditures |
| 9 | State-local issues & relationships | State aid to local governments, state mandates, state standards for local governments |
| 10 | Career & professional experience | Respondent's career history, reasons for accepting position, public service values |
| 11 | Background characteristics & education | Age, gender, race, ideology, level of education and training |
| 12 | Reorganization, reform, contracting & collaboration | Contracting organizations, government reform, agency goals, purpose of reorganization |
| 13 | Exceptional questions | Miscellaneous questions only asked on select survey years |

Notes: See text for additional detail.

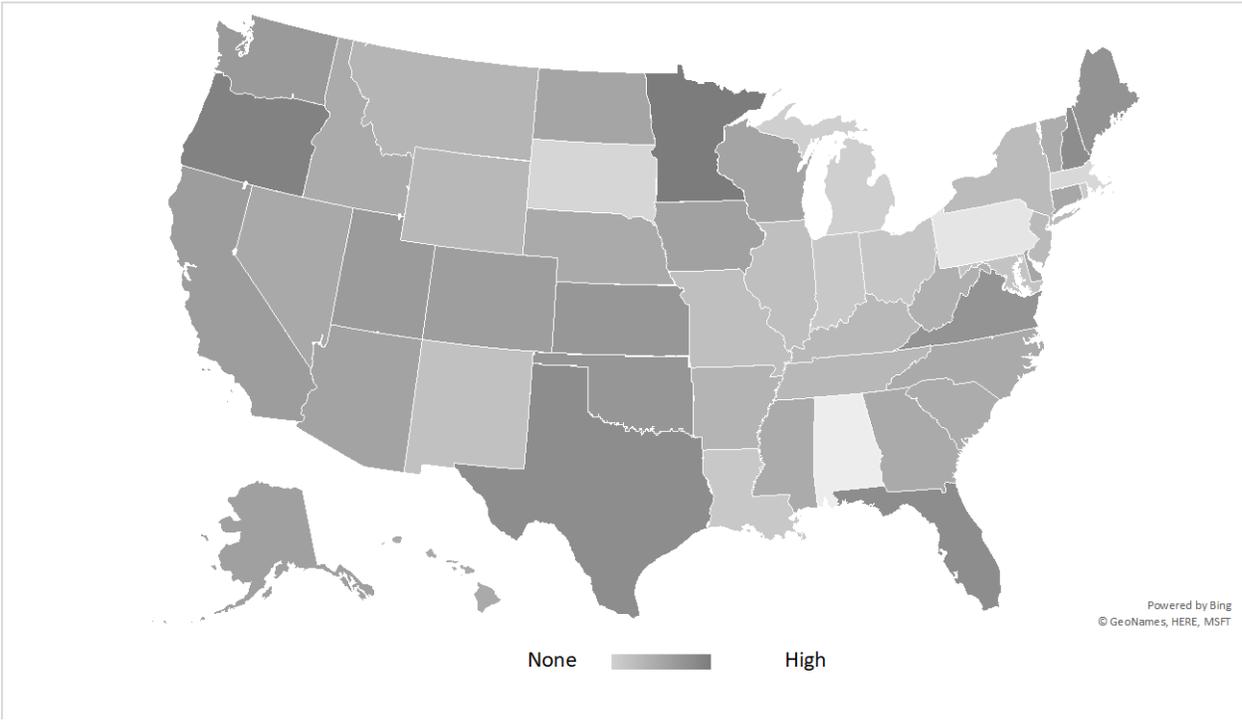**Figure 1. ASAP Responses and Response Rates Over Time**
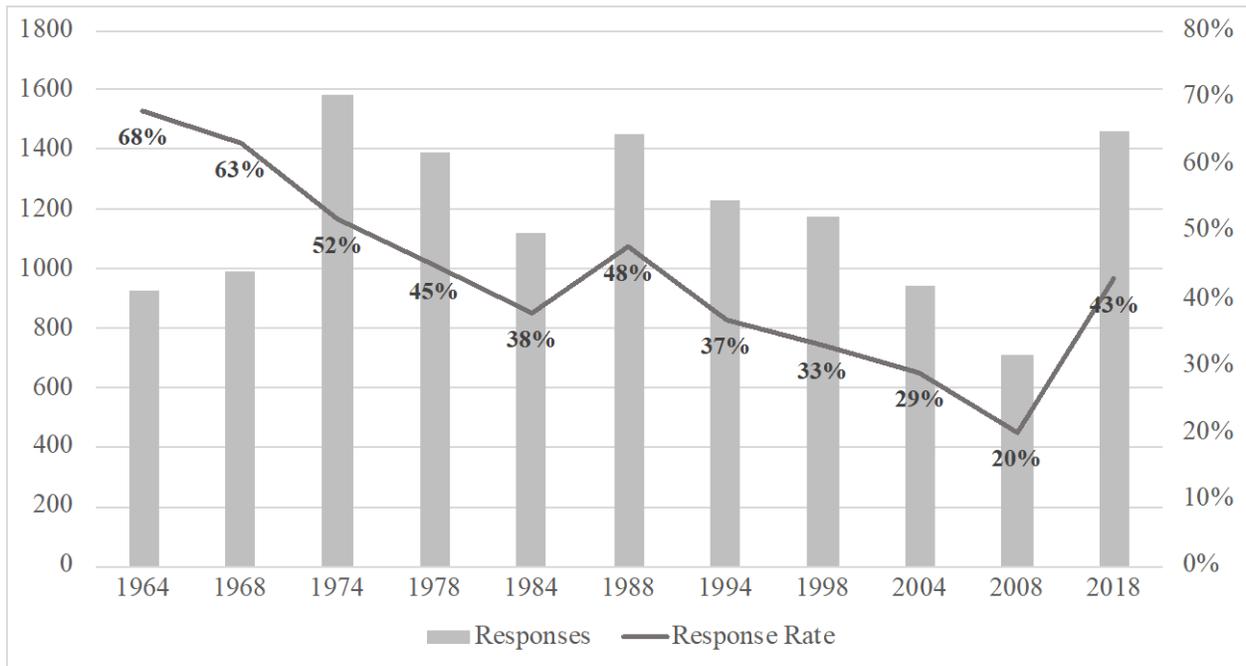


Notes: Data from 1964 to 2018. See text for additional detail.

**Figure 2. Governor Exerts Greater Control Over Agency Than Legislature**
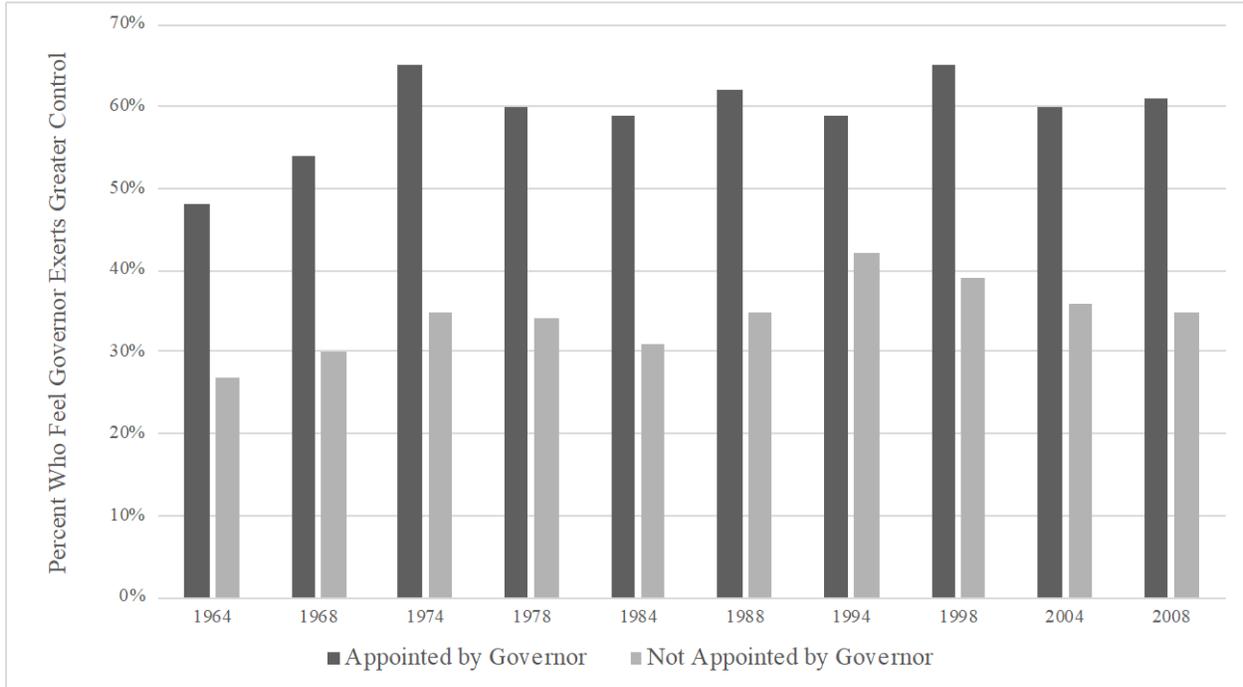


Notes: Data from 1964 to 2008. Responses of "Each the Same" are not included. See text for additional detail.

**Figure 3. Legislative Influence on Major Agency Policy Changes**



Notes:  Data from 1978 to 2018. See text for additional detail.