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Jeffrey E. Cohen

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# Voters' Job Approval Ratings and State Legislator Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Jeffrey Cohen is a professor of political science at Fordham University in New York.

## **Voters' Job Approval Ratings and State Legislator Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence**

In his seminal study, *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt argues that the president's prestige with the public should affect his influence in Congress.<sup>1</sup> Voters' job approval ratings are frequently used as a measure of public prestige. The underlying logic behind this idea is that legislators care about being re-elected. Thus, they will vote in favor of popular presidents' legislative proposals, fearing that constituents will vote against them in upcoming elections if they oppose the legislative proposals of popular presidents.

Neustadt's idea linking job approval with legislative success has spawned a massive literature. Despite the intuitive appeal of this hypothesis, results have been mixed with some studies finding support,<sup>2</sup> while others find no relationship between approval and legislative success, or at best a modest one.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the volume of such research at the presidential level, there are few studies of whether the approval of U. S. state governors affects their legislative success.

It is important to apply theories and hypotheses about the president and Congress to state level. Both levels of government use separation of power systems, which facilitates comparison. Also, there are often important political, social, and economic variations at the state level, which allows us to test whether patterns and relationships found at the national level hold under these varying conditions. For such reasons, states are considered useful laboratories for testing hypotheses and ideas generated at the national level.<sup>4</sup> To date, however, there are only four works that test whether voter job approval ratings of governors affects their legislative success and only two of those studies have been published.<sup>5</sup> Like with the presidency literature, findings are mixed.

The existing research on this question generally uses some form of legislative floor voting for measuring presidential or gubernatorial success, such as whether their position won a

roll call vote or the legislature enacted the president's or governor's proposal. Floor vote measures of success are limited in several regards. First, executives may be strategic in deciding to take positions on roll calls and in submitting proposals to the legislature. For instance, they may be more inclined to take positions and or make proposals when the likelihood of success is high, and refrain from doing so when they expect to be defeated.<sup>6</sup> A second source of bias in using floor votes to measure success is that many executive proposals do not reach the floor for a vote. They may be killed in committee, ignored, or fail to reach the floor because of insufficient time in the legislative session to deal with all executive proposals.<sup>7</sup> Floor votes on executive positions and proposals constitute a biased subset of all executive preferences on public policy.

This paper extends past research in two ways. First, it adds to the meager literature on gubernatorial job approval ratings and legislative influence. Second, rather than the use of floor votes as measures of success, this study looks at legislators' perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Despite some limitations of a perceptual measure of influence, it avoids some of the problems of selection bias and strategic behavior noted above.

The question of approval's effect on legislative behavior is important for several reasons. The topic raises the question of representation. If governors are considered representatives of the people, are legislators responsive to the public's approval for their governor? If legislatures do not respond to the proposals of popular governors, the quality of representation may be degraded. Second, the question of approval and success reflects on the role of the executive in the policymaking process. Executives are expected to play a large part in policymaking, especially in the legislative arena. Yet the separation of powers hampers them from doing so, impelling them to develop and harness political resources, such as public support, to further their policy goals. However, if approval, one form of voter support for presidents and governors, does not affect legislative support, then one supposedly important source of influence is not available to them,

and suggests that presidents and governors may be wasting their time trying to cultivate high job approval ratings as a legislative resource.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section develops the electoral connection theory, followed by a review and critique of the literature on gubernatorial approval and legislative success. Then the data are introduced, followed by the analysis. Previewing the results, approval affects perceptions of gubernatorial influence in the lower, but not the upper, legislative chamber, when controlling for other factors that affect legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence. The conclusion speculates about the difference in responsiveness of the lower and upper chambers, discusses the importance of the findings and offers suggestions for future research.

#### *The Electoral Connection, Job Approval Ratings, and Legislative Success*

The legislator's desire for reelection is often cited as a linkage mechanism from voter job approval ratings to presidential and gubernatorial success on roll call votes.<sup>8</sup> The reelection motivation provides an incentive for legislators to take into account their constituents' preferences when casting roll calls. Legislators are concerned especially with the effects of their roll call votes on reelection chances in subsequent elections, which means that they try to predict the future electoral consequences of current roll call behavior. Predicting the future, however, is fraught with uncertainty because unanticipated events may occur, which may alter the political landscape, the policy agenda, and or the opinions of voters.

Given this uncertainty, legislators look for information that may help them predict their constituents' future electoral behavior. General political attitudes, such as partisanship and ideological leanings, may be relatively good predictors as they tend to be stable in the short to medium term. Job approval ratings of the president or governor may also provide legislators with relevant information regarding the future voting behavior of constituents.<sup>9</sup>

Several attributes of job approval ratings—whether they are of the president or state governor—make them a useful predictor of future constituent electoral behavior. Presidents and governors are highly visible. Nearly every voter can identify the president and the governor, and has some basic knowledge of them.<sup>10</sup> With regard to governors, in the 2006 Cooperate Congressional Election Survey, 86 percent of respondents could identify the party of the governor.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, comparable knowledge about state legislators is rare among voters. There is little direct evidence on this point, but several studies suggest that there is little news coverage of state politics, which is necessary for voters to learn about state legislators.<sup>12</sup> For instance, state legislative elections receive little news coverage.

Therefore, attitudes toward governors determine orientations to state legislatures. In their study of state legislative approval, E. Richardson, David Konisky, and Jeffrey Milyo find that approval of governors has a strong effect on the approval of state legislatures.<sup>13</sup> At the national level, there is evidence that attitudes towards the president affect congressional voting behavior and election outcomes. For instance, Paul Gronke, Jeffrey Koch, and James Wilson find that voters are more likely to cast ballots in congressional races for presidential co-partisans when they approve than when they disapprove of the president, and Brandice Canes-Wrone, David Brady, and John Cogan show that members of Congress do less well in elections if they supported an unpopular president.<sup>14</sup>

Still, there are important differences between members of Congress and state legislators that might uncouple the linkage between gubernatorial approval and success in the state legislature. First, and most important, the electoral connection between state legislators and their constituents appears quite weak. For the electoral connection to operate, members must want to be reelected and to develop a political career. From the data used in this study, a 1995 survey of state legislators, large percentages are somewhat uncertain that they will run for reelection. Of

state representatives, only 39 percent report that they will definitely run for reelection, with another 44 percent that say they probably will. The figures for senators are similar with 46 percent that say they definitely will run for reelection and 42 percent that say they probably will. Thus, while these state politicians lean towards running for reelection, a large fraction is uncertain.

Moreover, state legislators tend to win reelection easily. As Steven Rogers reports, about one-third of state legislators run for reelection unopposed.<sup>15</sup> In the data used in this study, state representatives report receiving on average 70 percent of the general election vote, while state senators do nearly as well at 67 percent. Furthermore, the election connection theory suggests that legislators must feel that their roll call behavior, such as support or opposition to the governor, will affect their reelection odds. This appears to be the case for members of Congress, but it does not appear to be so for state legislators. Although we lack evidence linking support and or opposition to the governor and state legislative elections, Rogers also reports in a second study that the roll call behavior of state legislators has no impact on their reelection performance.<sup>16</sup> If legislators have little to fear from voters then whether the governor is popular or not might not matter to them when deciding on the governor's policy proposals and positions. For these reasons, it is not clear that gubernatorial approval will affect executive success in the state legislature.

### *Gubernatorial Approval and Legislative Success*

There are only four studies on the linkage between gubernatorial job approval ratings and legislative success.<sup>17</sup> One reason for the paucity of such research is the difficulty of collecting data across the states. For example, only in the early 2000s did data on gubernatorial approval across a large number of states become publicly accessible with the Job Approval database (JAR), allowing a test of the hypothesis.<sup>18</sup> Still, collecting data on legislative success remains

difficult and time consuming, and there exists considerable controversy over whether gubernatorial approval affects legislative success.

Margaret Ferguson provides an early test of the hypothesis.<sup>19</sup> She identifies the position of governors on all legislation across the fifty states from 1993-1994. During those years, there are over 89,000 bills in the state legislatures. She uses the governor's State of the State Addresses to identify the governors' legislative proposals and positions, finding 1092 governor-endorsed bills. Then she matches the governor's positions to specific bills under consideration in the legislature. The bills serve as her units of analysis, with the dependent variable scored "1" for enacted bills and "0" if otherwise. She defines gubernatorial approval as the percentage of positive job rating for governors in the survey closest to the final action on the bill from the JAR data.<sup>20</sup> In her analysis, gubernatorial approval has no effect on legislative success.

There are issues with her use of the approval data. In the data, the percentage of "don't know" responses vary considerably from 45-0 percent, with an average of 7 percent. Thus, a governor may receive a relatively low approval rating due to a high "don't know" rate. Second, the time gap from the latest poll to the final action on the bill will also vary, and could be quite large. The governor approval rating may have risen or dropped from the time of the poll to the date of final action, especially if there is considerable time between the approval reading and the date of the floor action. Perhaps more important, Ferguson does not take into account issues with simple comparisons of approval ratings from the JAR dataset. The JAR data are compiled from different polling firms that use different questions and sampling frames. Before comparing JAR approval ratings across the states, it is advisable to correct or adjust for these differences, something Ferguson did not do. The way she used the JAR data may account for her lack of findings. Still, her paper is seminal as an early published test of the approval-success hypothesis in the states.



Richard Fording, Neal Woods, and David Prince utilize a different approach, and contrary to Ferguson, uncover strong approval effects.<sup>21</sup> Similar to Ferguson, they measure gubernatorial legislative preferences with the use of the State of the State Addresses in 1999, but for only thirty-seven states and restrict gubernatorial proposals to those “that represent significant changes in existing policy.” They argue that support for the status quo does not provide a test of gubernatorial influence over policy. Also, unlike Ferguson, their dependent variable is a box score of the percentage of governor-endorsed proposals that were enacted, and they define approval as the difference between positive and negative evaluations, which corrects for “don’t know” responses. They do not provide details on how they averaged polls across the year such as whether they corrected for response category, etc., or simply averaged them. Since there were no polls on seven of the governors in their dataset, their analysis with approval is on thirty states. They find quite strong effects of approval on success.

Thad Kousser and Justin Phillips go to some of the greatest lengths to measure gubernatorial success and approval, using both budgetary and legislative definitions of success.<sup>22</sup> Using the State of the State addresses like the aforementioned works, they track gubernatorial legislative proposals, but in twenty-eight states for two years (2001 and 2006) and distinguish budgetary from policy proposals for a total of 1,088 proposals. They also weigh each proposal by its significance, giving greater weight to more important proposals. In their analysis of success, like Ferguson, they use the proposals as the units of analysis, but employ a more refined measure of success that takes into account that governors may only receive some and not all of what they ask for. Thus, their dependent variable has three categories, which include complete success, partial success, and failure. Again, they use the JAR data for approval, defining this variable as “the share of survey respondents who report ‘approving’ of the job the governor is doing” for the last poll conducted before delivering the State of the State address, i.e. when the proposal was

made.<sup>23</sup> However, there are no approval data for 18 percent of the proposals.<sup>24</sup> They find as their theory predicts that approval affects legislative proposals, but not budgetary proposals, because of the institutional advantages of governors in the budgetary process.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in an unpublished manuscript Samantha Guthrie creates one of the most extensive data sets on governors, their approval, and success in the legislature.<sup>26</sup> Similar to Ferguson, she measures success for each state from 2003-2012, but her dependent variable is the percentage of proposals enacted per year. She also uses the JAR data supplemented by her own data collected for 2010-2012, since the JAR ceased data collection with 2009, and defines approval as the percentage approving of the governor. Like Ferguson, she fails to find an approval effect.

Thus, there is disagreement over whether gubernatorial approval affects legislative success. There are several problems and issues with the extant literature. First, the studies indiscriminately use the percent of approval rating, despite the fact that different polling firms asked different questions, and had different sampling procedures and response categories. These may make it difficult, if not inappropriate, to make simple comparisons of approval levels across states and polls.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the JAR data, which the studies rely on, do not contain polls for each state for each year, and there are systematic differences in the types of states with and without polls. For instance, there are few or no polls in smaller states, but numerous polls for larger states. In effect, the sample of states used for analysis is biased towards larger states and against smaller ones, thus making generalizations to all governors problematic. Besides, political processes and practices may differ between small and large states. The analysis below uses a statistical technique, the Heckman Selection Effects model, to correct for this problem.

Third, each of these studies, like most comparable research on the presidency, suffers from endogeneity, that is, the independent variable (i.e. approval) and dependent variable (i.e. success) affect each other. To estimate the true effect of approval on success, a method is needed to purge or remove the effects of *expected* success on approval. All of the studies use gubernatorial proposals, but governors—like presidents—may decide to submit a proposal to the legislature or not, depending on expectations of eventual success. They may refrain from submitting proposals that they think are destined for defeat, except for when there are other political reasons for doing so, such as to repay groups for their election support or to paint the legislature as out of touch with the public, i.e. a presidential blame game.<sup>28</sup> Governors and presidents may be more inclined to submit proposals to the legislature when they are popular than unpopular, reckoning that popularity provides them with some additional influence in the legislature that they can leverage. Rather than using proposal data, this study uses legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence to test for the effects of approval in state legislatures.

*Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence: The 1995 State Legislator Survey*

The question of legislative success is actually a sub-question of the broader question of the sources of executive influence. The assumption is that influence leads to greater success rates on average. As noted, endogeneity may affect measures of legislative success that use floor votes because executives may adjust their list of legislative proposals based upon expectations of success, and expectations of success may in part be a function of the popularity of the executive. Thus, popular executives may include some controversial legislative proposals in the belief that their popularity among voters will lead to their enactment, whereas less popular executives may not submit controversial proposals. This will have the effect of reducing the success rates for popular executives because some subset of controversial proposals will not be enacted, whilst boosting the success rates of unpopular executive who only submit proposals with a high

likelihood of enactment. In effect, there is less difference in the success rates between popular and less popular executives than if they submitted proposals based on their policy preferences.

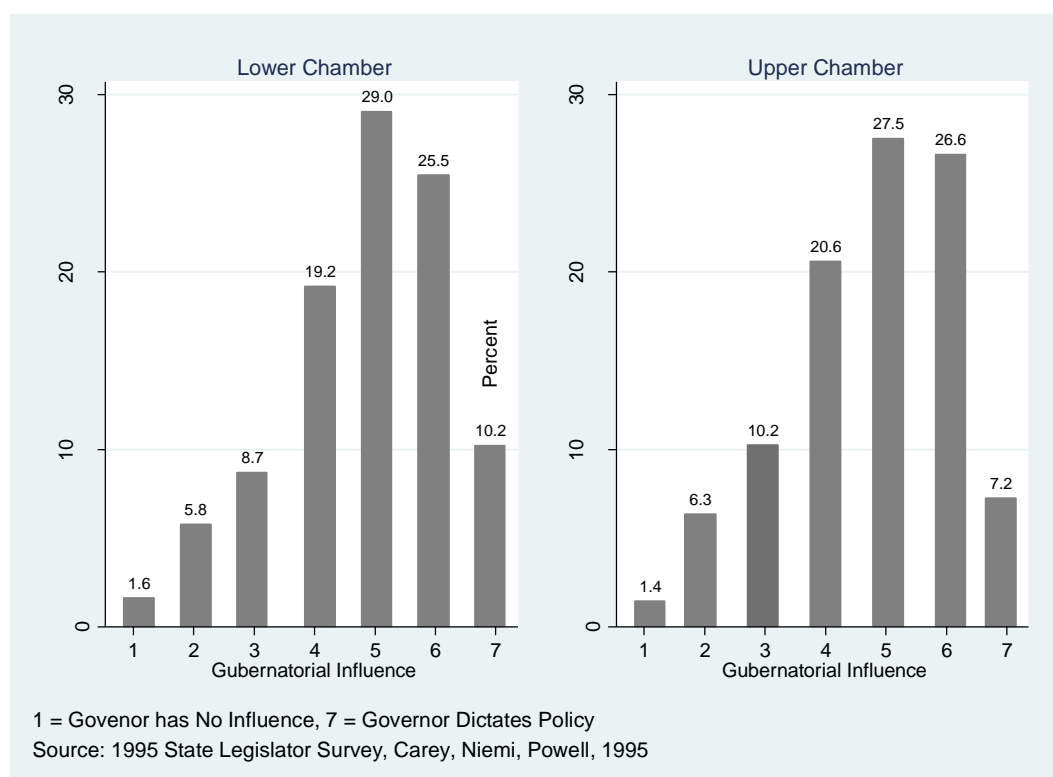
Data for this study are from the 1995 survey of state legislators.<sup>29</sup> Even though the data are now two decades old, surveys on state legislators are rare or not publicly available, and even rarer are questions on gubernatorial influence.<sup>30</sup> Despite their age, the data are unique and provide a different perspective on the measure of executive success, which overcomes some of the problems with floor measures, as discussed.

The dependent variable for this study is based on a question in the survey that asks legislators about their perception of the governor's influence in their chamber, i.e. "What do you think is the relative influence of the following actors in determining legislative outcomes in your chamber? . . . Governor." The question has seven response categories with only the extreme poles labeled i.e. "no influence" (1) and "dictates policy" (7). Legislators were asked to check the box that best represents their perception.

As noted above, most past research looks at the success of presidents and governors, usually measured as the percentage of roll call that the president's or governor's side won. The question here asks about influence. As Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher detail, success and influence are not the same, although they may be related.<sup>31</sup> Influence is the ability of the governor (or president) to persuade or convince a legislator to vote with them. However governors may win on a roll call, not because they persuaded legislators to vote with them, but because the legislator and the governor already agree on the issue. The wording of the question posed to state legislators, although not explicit, appears to lean toward influence as persuasion.

Figure 1 presents a histogram of legislator perceptions. The distribution of perceptions is quite similar across the lower and upper legislative chambers. On average, state legislators view governors as relatively influential with scores of 4.9 and 4.8 for the lower and upper chambers,

respectively.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the distribution of perceptions is similar across the two chambers with standard deviations of 1.4.



**Figure 1: Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence in State Legislatures**

Yet there is an inkling in the data that public approval may not affect perceptions. Since legislators were surveyed at the same time within each state, each legislator is reporting on the same governor. Thus, we would expect legislators in the same state, and especially the same chamber, to have similar perceptions of the governor. Still there are reasons to suggest that legislators should not hold identical perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Besides the ambiguity and measure error in the question on gubernatorial influence, certain individual characteristics of legislators may lead them to hold somewhat different perceptions. For instance,

the position that a legislator holds may affect his or her participation in and observation of legislative processes, and the role of the governor in the processes. Thus, whether a legislator is a party or institutional leader and is of the majority or governor's party, the committees on which he or she serves may affect perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Moreover, more professional legislators may be more attuned to what is going on, and be more realistic in assessing the influence of factors on legislative processes and outcomes.

These ideas can be formally tested. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics on perceptions by state and chamber. There is notable variation within the chambers of the states in perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Despite this, within state-chamber variation, the state in which the legislator serves affects perceptions of gubernatorial influence. For instance, a regression of these perceptions on dummy variables for the states accounts for 18 percent and 23 percent of the variance in legislator perceptions.<sup>33</sup> Variance is a statistical measure of how much difference there is in a variable, in this instance, legislator perceptions. Thus, the legislators state accounts for from about one-fifth to one-fourth of the difference in legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of State Legislator Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence by Chamber

State	Lower Chamber				Upper Chamber			
	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Alabama	4.2	1.4	1	6	5.0	1.0	2	6
Alaska	4.4	1.5	1	7	4.6	1.3	2	6
Arizona	5.2	1.0	4	7	5.6	1.0	4	7
Arkansas	5.3	1.2	2	7	5.4	1.6	1	7
California	4.0	1.8	1	6	4.4	1.7	1	6
Colorado	4.0	1.5	2	7	3.7	1.1	2	5
Connecticut	5.1	1.2	3	7	5.0	1.1	3	7
Delaware	4.3	1.6	1	6	5.2	0.9	4	7
Florida	4.2	1.2	2	6	3.8	1.6	1	7
Georgia	5.4	0.9	3	7	5.2	1.3	1	7
Hawaii	5.3	1.2	3	7	4.9	1.0	4	7
Idaho	5.3	1.0	4	7	5.4	0.9	3	7
Illinois	4.8	1.6	1	7	5.2	1.3	2	7
Indiana	3.9	1.3	1	6	3.6	1.7	1	7
Iowa	5.0	1.0	3	7	4.3	1.1	2	6
Kansas	4.8	1.0	1	6	5.2	1.0	3	7

Kentucky	4.6	1.1	2	7	4.2	1.4	1	6
Louisiana	5.4	1.3	2	7	5.5	0.8	4	6
Maine	4.3	1.5	1	7	4.4	1.4	2	7
Maryland	4.7	1.4	1	7	4.2	1.4	2	7
Massachusetts	4.2	1.2	2	6	5.5	1.2	3	7
Michigan	6.2	0.7	5	7	5.7	1.8	1	7
Minnesota	5.0	1.0	3	7	4.6	1.3	2	7
Mississippi	3.7	1.2	2	7	3.6	1.5	2	7
Missouri	5.4	1.0	3	7	5.0	1.2	3	7
Montana	5.3	1.1	2	7	5.4	1.1	3	7
Nebraska	--	--	--	--	4.5	1.1	3	7
Nevada	4.8	1.3	3	7	4.5	1.1	3	6
New Hampshire	5.2	1.4	2	7	5.4	1.4	2	7
New Jersey	5.9	1.3	1	7	5.9	1.1	4	7
New Mexico	4.3	1.6	1	7	3.3	1.6	1	6
New York	4.8	1.7	1	7	5.6	1.2	2	7
North Carolina	4.1	1.3	1	6	4.4	1.4	2	6
North Dakota	4.5	1.2	1	7	4.1	1.3	2	7
Ohio	5.2	1.3	2	7	4.8	1.0	3	6
Oklahoma	3.9	1.5	1	7	3.9	1.1	2	6
Oregon	4.5	1.4	2	7	4.2	1.1	2	6
Pennsylvania	5.4	1.3	2	7	5.3	1.1	3	7
Rhode Island	4.0	1.4	2	7	3.7	1.5	1	6
South Carolina	5.2	1.3	2	7	4.8	1.1	3	7
South Dakota	5.7	1.5	1	7	6.2	0.8	5	7
Tennessee	4.8	1.3	3	7	4.9	1.2	3	7
Texas	4.3	1.3	1	6	3.9	1.6	2	6
Utah	5.6	1.0	3	7	5.4	0.8	4	7
Vermont	4.6	1.1	1	7	4.6	1.0	2	6
Virginia	4.7	1.3	2	7	5.3	1.1	3	7
Washington	3.9	1.5	1	7	4.3	1.3	2	7
West Virginia	5.1	1.3	2	7	5.2	1.3	1	6
Wisconsin	6.0	1.1	1	7	5.7	1.0	3	7
Wyoming	5.2	1.1	2	7	5.3	1.0	3	7
All	4.9	1.4	1	7	4.8	1.4	1	7

**Source:** 1995 State Legislator Survey. Nebraska is unicameral. Following convention, its legislature is considered an upper chamber.

However, there is only modest evidence that legislator involvement in legislative processes affect perceptions of gubernatorial influence, which is tested with two variables. The first variable used to test the legislator involvement hypothesis is an index of the amount of time spent on eight legislative activities. The eight activities include studying proposed legislation, developing new legislation, campaigning and fundraising, building coalitions within own party to pass legislation, building coalitions across parties to pass legislation, keeping in touch with

constituents, helping constituents with problems with government, and making sure own district gets fair share of government money and projects. Legislators were asked how much time they spent on each of these activities on a 5-point scale from “A Great Deal” (5) to “Hardly Any” (1). The index can range from 8-40, but in actuality it ranges from 3-32 with a mean of 19.7 in the lower chamber, and 7-32 with a mean of 20.4 in the upper chamber. The second variable asks whether the legislator thinks of “politics and public office as a career.” Those who answer “Yes” are scored “1” and all others (e. g. “No” and “Don’t Know”) are scored “0.” There is little evidence that these two variables have an impact on perceptions of gubernatorial influence when controlling for the state dummies. In the lower chamber, neither of the two variables is statistically significant, and only the time spent on legislative activities is significant in the upper chamber.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Measuring Gubernatorial approval in the States*

The JAR database used in the studies reviewed is also used here to measure gubernatorial approval in the states, which is the primary independent variable. There are several issues in using the JAR data. First, the state-level polls come from a variety of survey organizations that likely used different sampling techniques and question wording, and administered the polls at different times across the years. Further, the number of polls varies across the states, from only one in some instances to eleven in Connecticut by 1995, the year of the survey of state legislators. Thus, the polls across states are not perfectly comparable.<sup>35</sup> Second, there are no polls for seven states: Alaska, Delaware, Maine, Missouri, South Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia. Other than Missouri, these are all smaller states. Most of these states without gubernatorial polls are small, suggesting a bias for polling for gubernatorial approval in larger states.

To deal with these issues, first, a adjusted approval percentage score was created, defined as the percentage approving divided by the summation of the percentages approving and



disapproving,  $\{ \text{approval \%} / (\text{approval \%} + \text{disapproval \%}) \}$ . This adjusts for the varying percentage of “don’t know” responses. Then the adjusted percentage approval score is regressed on: 1) dummy variables for survey organization, 2) number of response categories, 3) dummy variable for type of voter (e. g., registered versus all voters). The dummy variables for survey organization are scored “1” for a survey organization and “0” otherwise. There is a separate dummy variable for each survey organization. From the regression, predicted approval percentage scores are collected, and finally, the predicted scores are averaged across polls within states. Across the states, the predicted scores range from a low of 28 percent to a high of 86 percent, with a mean value of 60.5 percent. This means that on average, governors in 1995 were popular, but that there is also considerable variation in their popularity across the states.

*Does Approval affect Perceptions of Influence?*

Table 2 presents initial results of the effects of public approval on state legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence. The analysis uses STATA 14.0. For both chambers, the analysis begins with a simple regression of perceptions on influence. Results indicate that more popular governors are likely to be perceived as being more influential than less popular governors. For the lower chamber, a 10 percent shift in approval corresponds to about a 0.18 step increase on the 7-point scale of influence perceptions, while a 10 percent increase in approval in the upper chamber leads to a 0.11 increase in influence perceptions. {Recall, the 7-point legislator perceptions question range from “no influence” (1) to “dictates policy” (7)}. In the lower chamber, the least popular governor will be scored 4.2 compared to 5.3 on the 7-point scale for the most popular governor. For the upper chamber, the least popular governor is scored 4.2 compared to 5.0 for the most popular governor. Initially, it appears that there is a relationship between popularity and perceptions of gubernatorial approval.

Table 2. Impact of Gubernatorial Approval on Legislator Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence

VARIABLES	(1) Lower Chamber	(2) Upper Chamber
Approval	1.84*** (0.38)	1.11** (0.51)
Constant	3.72*** (0.23)	4.06*** (0.32)
Observations	1,487	744
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.01
F	24.15	4.775
Rmse	1.390	1.421

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05

There are several issues with this initial analysis. First, it does not take into account the varying number of legislators across the states, which is mostly due to some states having large legislative bodies and others smaller ones. This needs to be controlled for. Second, the perceptions of influence for one legislator in a state-chamber may affect perceptions of another legislator. Perceptions, thus, are not necessarily independent observations as required in regression analysis.<sup>36</sup> Third, the initial analysis does not take into account the small state bias in having or not having a poll. And finally, the results may be spurious, hence we need to control for other factors that may affect perceptions of gubernatorial influence.

A Heckman selection model is used to correct for the bias in having or not having a poll. The Heckman model is a two-stage procedure. In the first stage, state population and population density are used to predict whether a state has a poll. The results of the first stage essentially weight the likelihood that a state is included in the second stage, i.e. has a gubernatorial approval poll. In the second stage, two variables are used as controls, i.e. whether the governor's party controls the chamber, and legislative professionalism. Professional legislatures are those for which the job is full time rather than part time, and thus, tends to pay legislators more. Also,

professional legislatures tend to have large and more expert staffs.<sup>37</sup> A large literature finds that party control increases executive success both at the state and the national levels, and studies find that governors are more successful with professional than with amateur or less professional legislators.<sup>38</sup> To correct for the violation of independence of observations, the estimation clusters on states. Table 3 presents results of these revisions, using the Heckman selection estimation.

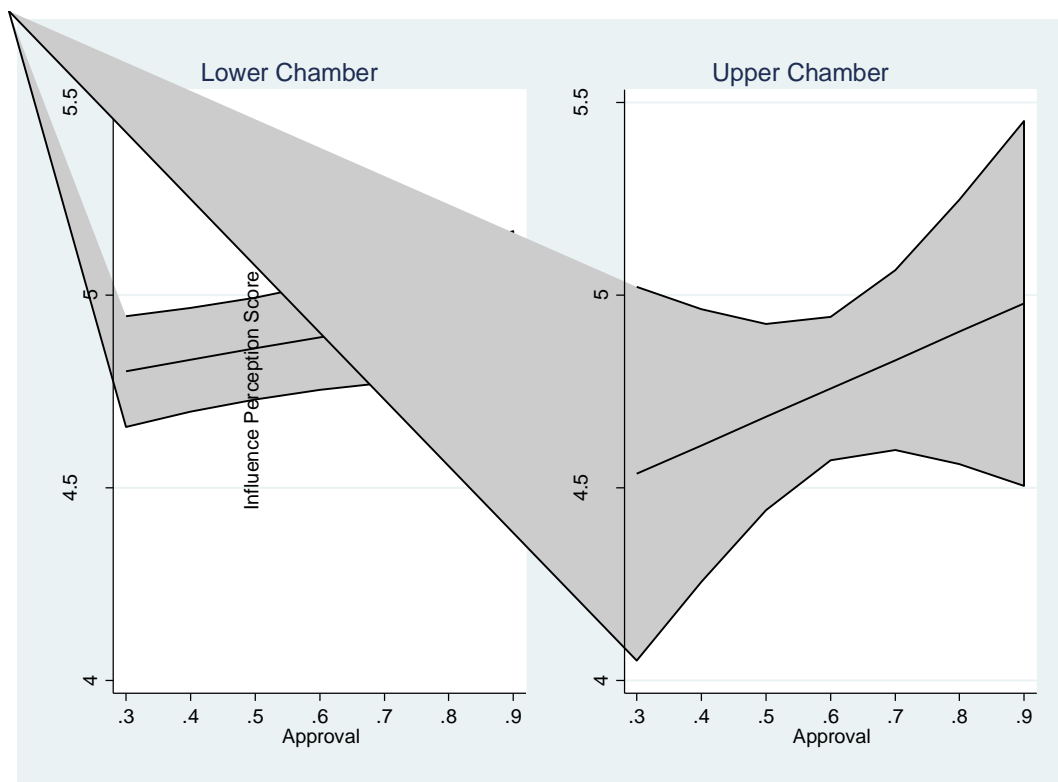
Table 3. Impact of Gubernatorial Approval on Legislator Perceptions of Gubernatorial Influence, Heckman Selection Model, Clustered on State		
VARIABLES	(1) Lower Chamber	(5) Upper Chamber
<i>Gubernatorial Influence</i>		
Approval	0.30** (0.16)	0.74 (0.75)
Chamber control	0.72*** (0.14)	0.65*** (0.19)
Legislative Professionalism	0.44* (0.24)	0.65** (0.26)
Constant	4.14*** (0.21)	3.76*** (0.49)
<i>Selection</i>		
Population	-0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)
Population Density	--	-0.00** (0.00)
Constant	1.96*** (0.09)	1.98*** (0.11)
Athrho	-17.33*** (0.05)	-16.06*** (0.14)
Lnsigma	0.32*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.03)
Observations	1,511	752
Log likelihood	-3123	-1197
Chi <sup>2</sup>	121351	13787
Prob. Chi-sq.	0.000	0.000

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

These results indicate that approval affects perceptions of influence in the lower, but not the upper chamber because the relationship between approval in the lower chamber and perceptions is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. For the lower chamber, each 10 percent increase in popularity leads to a 0.03 step increase on the influence perception scale. With the corrections to the estimation and the added control variables, this represents a massive decline in the impact of approval on perceptions compared to the simpler model on Table 2. For the upper chamber, approval is not a statistically significant predictor of perceptions of gubernatorial influence, which is in contrast to the significant impact that the results from Table 2 indicated. Interestingly, the coefficient size for the effect of approval is much larger in the upper (0.74) than the lower chamber (0.30), but also is the standard error.

Figure 2 plots the impact of approval on perceptions in the lower and upper chambers from a low approval rating of 30 percent to a high of 90 percent, along with the 95 percent confidence interval band for each approval reading. The difference in the two panels on the figure are dramatic, although the slope for the upper chamber is steeper than for the lower chamber, the confidence band is also much wider as should be the case if the variable's effect is statistically insignificant.



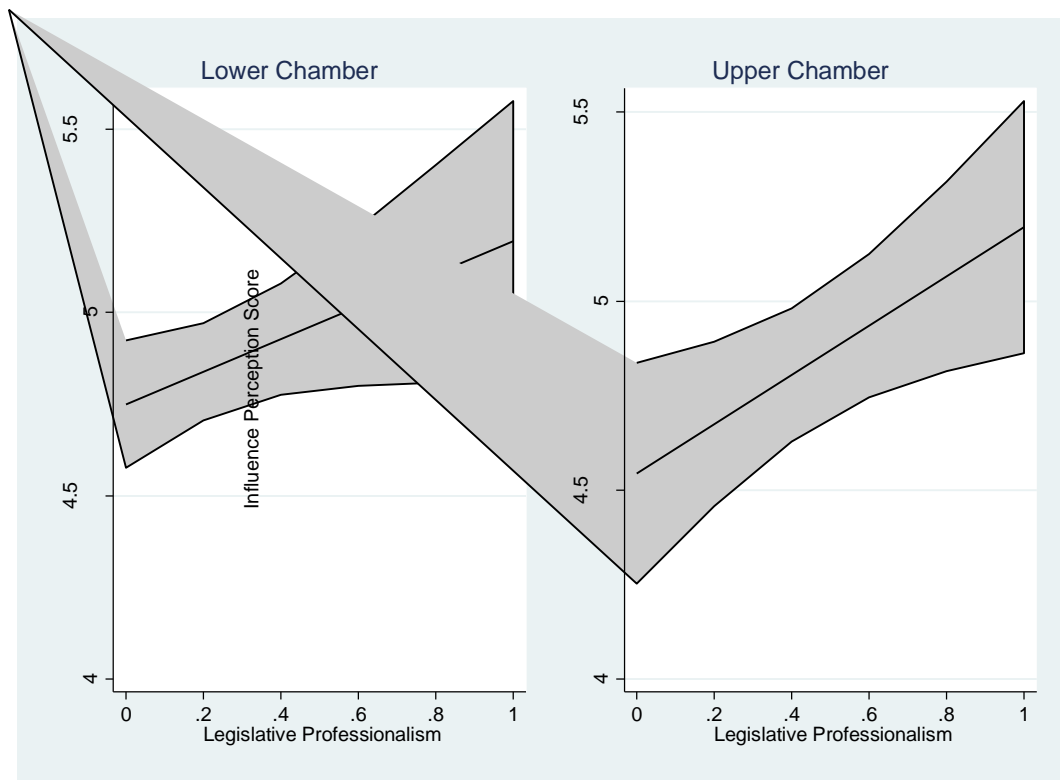
**Figure 2: Gubernatorial Influence Perception Scores as a Function of Approval, Lower and Upper Chambers.**

*Note:* Based on results of Heckman Selection Model on Table 3.

Nonetheless, even for the lower chamber, the effect of approval gains on influence perceptions are substantively modest, albeit statistically significant. A radical improvement in approval, from the least to the most popular governor, will only move a governor's influence score by less than 0.2 steps, i.e. from about 4.8 to 5.0. Thus, substantively, the results are consistent with the bulk of the research, which contends that approval has a modest effect on success.<sup>39</sup>

The analysis also shows that in both chambers, governors are perceived as less influential when the governor's party is in the minority in that chamber, but more influential in more professionalized legislative chambers. These effects are relatively large. For both chambers, majority governors are perceived to be approximately 0.7 steps more influential than minority governors, which accounts for about one-half of the standard deviation in such perceptions. The

legislative professionalism scores range from 0-1, with a mean of about 0.3. Figure 3 plots the impact of legislative professionalism on perceptions of gubernatorial influence with the 95 percent confidence intervals. The figure clearly shows the similarity in the effects of legislative professionalism on perceptions. The slopes are similar as are the influence perceptions scores at the same level of professionalism. Governors with the least professional legislatures can expect a perception score of 4.5-4.7, but about 5.2 for the most professionalized legislatures.



**Figure 3: Gubernatorial Influence Perception Scores as a Function of Legislative Professionalism, Lower and Upper Chambers.**

*Note:* Based on results of Heckman Selection Model on Table 3.

### *Conclusion*

This paper analyzed whether approval of the governor affects state legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Looking at legislator perceptions differs from most of the existing literature, which investigates the impact of approval on floor votes. Thus, it adds to both the literature on the effects of executive approval on legislative success and the sub-literature on

gubernatorial approval. Extending this research to the state level is important, as the states all have separation of powers systems like the federal government, but may vary in other important political, economic, and institutional dimensions. As a result, states have been viewed as laboratories to test propositions developed at the national level so as to identify whether relationships unearthed at the national level can be generalized to other related settings.

This study turned to state legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence for several reasons. First, floor voting indicators of success are limited to those issues that both reach the floor and for which the executive takes a position. Floor votes may be a biased representation of executive policy preferences. For instance, strategic executives may not take positions or offer proposals for legislation that they expect to be defeated. Unpopular executives, for fear that their lack of public support limits their bargaining position with the legislature, may as a consequence refrain from taking position on some issues. Plus, many executive legislative proposals do not make it to the floor for a vote. They may die in the early stages of the legislative policymaking process for a variety of reasons, such as overloaded legislative agenda, opposition from other strong actors in the legislative process, or lack of political resources by the executive, which include the public support to move legislative proposals to the floor. In sum, floor outcomes are at best an incomplete indicator of executive success in the legislature.

Therefore, this paper turned to rare, and never before analyzed data on state legislator perceptions of gubernatorial influence. Such measures of perceptions overcome the noted issues with floor vote measures of executive legislative success, as legislators may incorporate their broad knowledge about the governor's interactions with the legislature in assessing the influence of the governor.

Results of the analysis show that approval affects legislators' perceptions of gubernatorial influence in the lower chamber, but not in the upper chamber, because the relationship between

approval in the lower chamber and perceptions is statistically significant. It is not clear why gubernatorial approval affects influence perceptions in the lower and not the upper chamber. Perhaps, more importantly, the effects in the lower chamber are of substantively modest magnitude, which is similar to the existing research that finds approval to have at best small effects on executive success in both national and state legislatures. Still, and despite the age of the original data used, this study shows the value of legislator perceptions for analyzing questions about the influence of governors in the legislative policymaking process.

A recommendation for future research is to conduct newer surveys of state legislators' perceptions of gubernatorial influence, perhaps probing more deeply into legislator perceptions of gubernatorial relations with the legislature. For instance, legislators may be queried about specific tactics governors employ, such as bargaining, working with chamber leaders, and crafting legislative proposals. Second, influence can be more precisely defined, such as convincing legislators who are undecided or opposed to the governor's proposal to support the proposal. With regard to approval, legislators may be asked about the governor's approval among the legislator's constituents, among voters of the legislator's party, as well as the governor's state-wide popularity. Despite an extensive literature on job approval as a legislative resource for executives, like presidents and governors, there remain many unanswered questions.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah M. Morehouse and Malcolm E. Jewell, "States as Laboratories: A Reprise," *Annual Review of Political Science* 7 (2004): 177-203.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Robertson Ferguson, "Chief Executive Success in the Legislative Arena," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 3 no. 2 (2003): 158-182; Richard C. Fording, Neal D. Woods, and David Prince, "Explaining Gubernatorial Success in State Legislatures," *2nd Annual Conference on State Politics and Policy: Legislatures and Representation in the United States, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May. 2002*. Samantha Guthrie, "This Used to Be My Playground: The Effect of Previous Legislative Experience on Gubernatorial Success," Manuscript, American University, 2016; Thad Kousser and Justin H. Phillips, *The Power of American Governors: Winning on Budgets and Losing on Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey E. Cohen, *The President's Legislative Policy Agenda, 1789-2002*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, budgetary bills are given priority by the legislature over other forms of legislation because states are required to pass a budget.

<sup>8</sup> Bond and Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena*; Edwards, "Presidential Influence in the House," and Edwards, *At the Margins*.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *At the Margins*.

<sup>10</sup> Michael X. Delli, Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

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<sup>13</sup> E. Lilliard Richardson, Jr, David M. Konisky, and Jeffrey Milyo, "Public Approval of U. S. State Legislatures," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 37 no. 1 (2012): 99-116.

<sup>14</sup> Brandice Canes-Wrone, David W. Brady and John F. Cogan. 2002. “Out of Step, Out of Office: Electoral Accountability and House Members’ Voting,” *American Political Science Review* 96 no. 1, (2002):127-140; Paul Gronke, Jeffrey Koch, and James M. Wilson. 2003. “Follow the Leader? Presidential Approval, Presidential Support, and Representatives’ Electoral Fortunes,” *Journal of Politics* 65 no. 3 (2003): 785-808.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Rogers, 2015. "Strategic Challenger Entry in a Federal System: The Role of Economic and Political Conditions in State Legislative Competition," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 40 no. 4, (2015): 539-570.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Rogers, "Electoral Accountability for State Legislative Roll-Calls and Ideological Representation," *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Vanderbilt University*. Available at < <http://www.stevenmrogers.com/WorkingPapers/Rogers-IndividualAccountability>, 2014, accessed April 1, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson; Fording, et. al.; Kousser and Phillips; and Guthrie.

<sup>18</sup> Thad Beyle, Richard G. Niemi, and Lee Sigelman, "Gubernatorial, Senatorial, and State-Level Presidential Job Approval: The US Officials Job Approval Ratings (JAR) Collection," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (2002): 215-229.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson and Fording, et. al.

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Fording, et. al.

<sup>22</sup> Kousser and Phillips.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> States must pass a budget, conferring important bargaining advantages to the governor. In contrast, there is no requirement to enact changes in policy, thus, governors need a political source of influence to push legislation through the legislature.

<sup>26</sup> Guthrie.

<sup>27</sup> Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen; Andrew Rudalevige, *Managing the President's Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy Formulation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> John M. Carey, Richard G. Niemi, and Lynda W. Powell, *State Legislative Survey and Contextual Data*. [United States]. ICPSR03021-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> The same question was administered in the 2002 survey of state legislators, but the public version of that dataset, available through ICPSR, does not identify the legislator’s state to protect their privacy. Furthermore, there are only twenty-five states with gubernatorial approval data for 2002, making the 2002 legislator data less useful for testing the approval-influence connection. John M. Carey, Richard G. Niemi, Lynda W. Powell, and Gary F. Moncrief, *2002 State Legislative Survey*, Data file, Ann Arbor, MI: ICPSR, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Bond and Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena*, p. ix.

<sup>32</sup> All analyses are weighted, as recommended by the data collectors.

<sup>33</sup> This and all analyses use probability weights.

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<sup>34</sup> For the lower chamber, results are,  $b$  (SE): 0.003 (0.01) Time Spent + 0.03 (0.09) Careerist; for the upper chamber 0.02 (0.01) Time Spent and -0.11 (0.013) Careerist for the upper chamber.

<sup>35</sup> Beyle, Niemi, and Sigleman.

<sup>36</sup> The inter-class correlations of perceptions within state-chambers are 0.17 (SE = 0.03) and 0.20 (SE = 0.04) for the upper chamber, both of which are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>37</sup> The legislative professionalism data used here are reported in Daniel C. Bowen and Zachary Greene. "Should We Measure Professionalism with an Index? A Note on Theory and Practice In State Legislative Professionalism Research." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 14 no. 3 (2014): 277-296. The data were accessed from Daniel C. Bowen's dataverse page, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/bowen>.

<sup>38</sup> See Jeffrey E. Cohen, Jon R. Bond, and Richard Fleisher, "Placing Presidential-Congressional Relations in Context: A Comparison of Barack Obama and His Predecessors." *Polity* 45 no.1 (2012): 105-126 for a review of the extensive research on this relationship.

<sup>39</sup> Bond and Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena*, is the most forceful proponent of this perspective.