

ISER RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Alaska Government and Politics

A short quiz on state government and politics in recent years: What was the first state in 50 years to consider impeaching its governor? Where did a coalition of Democrats and Republicans overthrow the incumbent Democratic leadership of the state house in a sudden, late-session move that was characterized by one representative as “beneath contempt?”¹ Where did a state constitutional provision guaranteeing “the right of the people to privacy” lead a state supreme court to legalize the possession of marijuana for personal use?

The answer to all these questions is of course Alaska. Alaskans may love their state government or hate it, depending on the circumstances of the moment, but they are always interested in it. We pay close attention to state government in Alaska partly because it so heavily influences the state economy but also because our small population means that individuals can still affect the course of government. And many other Americans also find government and politics in Alaska fascinating and unpredictable.

Until now there has been no single book that comprehensively describes state government and politics in Alaska. The University of Alaska Press has just published the first such book—*Alaska State Government and Politics*. It is a textbook in the sense that it describes the authorities, organization, and functions of state government, but it also discusses the people and events that put life into government operations. It talks about the private forces that influence government, including the press, public opinion, and interest groups.

The 400-page book was edited by Gerald A. McBeath, professor of political science with the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and Thomas A. Morehouse, professor of political science with the University of Alaska-Anchorage's Institute of Social and Economic Research. Chapters for the book were written by the editors, nine other political scientists, and one historian, all of whom now teach or previously taught at the University of Alaska. Several of the authors have also been directly involved in state government.

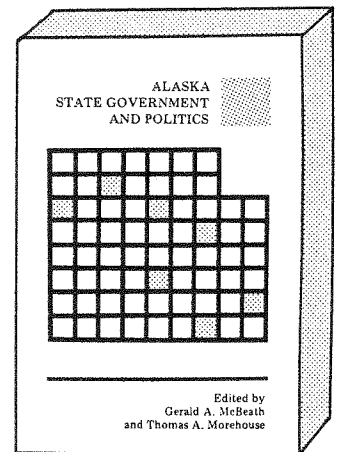
¹Quoted in Chapter 10, “The Alaska Legislature,” by Stephen Johnson, p. 248.

The book includes a range of perspectives and vantage points on state government rather than a single, unified point of view. However, the broad theme of similarities in and differences between Alaska state government and other state governments runs throughout the book.

The basic structure of government laid out in Alaska's constitution closely resembles that of other states, but includes some innovative provisions that many of the older states have in recent years partly or completely incorporated in their governments: a unified court system, concentration of executive power in the governor's office, and wide grants of authority to local governments, among other things.

Rapid economic and population growth in Alaska in the 1970s and 1980s pushed Alaska society and politics toward the American mainstream. In Alaska and other states in recent years, elections have commonly resulted in one party's controlling the legislature and the other party's controlling the governor's office. Coalitions of Democrats and Republicans have increasingly controlled Alaska's and other state's legislatures in recent years. Political parties have lost strength in many states, including Alaska—perhaps more in Alaska than in any other state. The power of interest groups has grown nationally and in Alaska; evidence suggests that interest groups in Alaska are among the most powerful in the nation.

Yet despite these similarities, much remains that is unique to Alaska state government. That uniqueness is largely rooted in the state's geographic isolation, vast size, widely-scattered settlements, small population, urban-rural differences, and the relative newness of its government institutions.



Alaska politicians are still more accessible to their constituents than are politicians in states with larger populations; as one observer put it, "If a California legislator has his home phone listed, he's crazy; if an Alaska legislator doesn't, he probably won't get re-elected."²

Regional factors still influence Alaska politics more than is true in states where regions are more closely linked by geography and culture. For example, the largely Native residents of rural areas and the primarily white residents of urban communities have been divided in recent years over allocation of hunting and fishing rights and over distribution of government services and grants.

For a number of reasons—including the fact that the state government owns the giant Prudhoe Bay oil field—state government in Alaska plays a much bigger economic role than do other state governments. Federal-state relations loom large in Alaska, because of the federal government's huge land holdings and numerous military installations here. The existence of Native governments in many Alaska villages also adds an extra dimension to federal-state relations in Alaska.

The newness of Alaska state government institutions also sets them apart from those of most other states. Established in 1959, less than 30 years

ago, Alaska's government has often reflected the individualism of Alaskans and promoted innovative and progressive politics.

But weaknesses in Alaska's young institutions were revealed with the large and rapid economic changes in the state in the past decade, particularly with the sudden appearance of huge state petroleum revenues in the early 1980s. The traditional budget process broke down, conflicts between the executive and legislative branches increased and became more bitter, the power of interest groups grew substantially, and the state bureaucracy expanded rapidly.

How Alaska institutions will handle the equally sudden drop in state revenues that began in 1986 remains to be seen. But the book concludes that Alaska's tradition of progressive, and in many cases innovative, politics could serve it well in the austere years ahead.

Authors other than the editors are: Claus M. Naske, Victor Fischer, David Maas, Carl Shepro, Clive Thomas, Richard Ender, Richard Fineberg, Stephen Johnson, Gordon Harrison, and Andrea Helms. Alaska State Government and Politics is available from the University of Alaska Press, Signers' Hall, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-1580; softbound copies are \$17.00 and hardbound copies \$27.00, plus \$1.50 for postage and handling.

²Quoted in Chapter 7, "Interest Groups and Lobbying in Alaska," by Clive Thomas, p. 164.

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