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THE POWERS OF ALASKA'S GOVERNOR

by

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The governor's "power" depends on what the state constitution says he (or she) can do, on specific conditions of government in Alaska, and on the personal abilities of the individual who fills the office. In this discussion, we will concentrate mainly on the constitutional powers of the office of the governor because they remain the same no matter who fills the office. Also, to get a better idea of how strong the constitutional powers of Alaska's governor are, we will compare them with powers of governors in other states. Finally, we will discuss how Alaska conditions affect the governor's powers.

Constitutional Provisions

Alaska's constitution grants several kinds of power to the governor, but four of them are especially important:

1. Power of Tenure. This refers to the length of the governor's term in office and the number of times he may be reelected. This power determines the governor's ability to "put his mark on" state government. He needs adequate time to do this, and, if he is eligible for reelection, he has even more time to build his power. He can also put off the day that he becomes a "lame duck"--a governor known to have only a short time left in office and, therefore, with little or no influence over future events. Alaska's governor holds office for a four-year term (Alaska Constitution, Article III, Section 4), and he may not serve more than two terms in a row (Article III, Section 5). This latter provision limits the governor's ability to accumulate power over time.

2. Power of Appointment. This gives the governor control over the top officials in the state administration. All heads of executive departments--such as Natural Resources, Public Safety, Revenue, Health and Social Services, and ten others--are appointed by the governor with the approval of the legislature. They also serve at the governor's "pleasure," which means he may fire them for his own reasons (Article III, Section 25). The constitution also states that "Each principal department shall be under the supervision of the governor" (Article III, Section 24). This provision further strengthens the governor's control of his administration.

3. Power of the Budget. Alaska's governor exercises this power in two ways: First, he prepares an annual budget, or spending plan, and he submits it to the legislature (Article IX, Section 12). Although the legislature can change the governor's budget, it is his

budget that gets priority attention. Second, if the governor does not like the way that the legislature changes his budget, he can veto the legislature's spending bills; he can even pick out specific things he does not like and veto them individually. This is called a "line item" veto (Article II, Section 15). Further adding to the governor's budget power is the requirement that not just a majority but three-fourths of the legislature must vote to override or reverse the governor's veto of any money bills (Article II, Section 16).

4. Power of Legislation. The governor has certain legislative powers over all state policies, including money matters. He can write legislative bills and see that they are introduced before the legislature (Article II, Section 18). He can veto any bills passed by the legislature, and, for non-money bills, the legislature has to muster a two-thirds vote to override a veto (Article II, Section 16). Finally, if the legislature adjourns without taking action on an issue that the governor wants resolved, he can call the legislature back into session to act on it (Article II, Section 17).

Comparisons with Other States

We can now review each of the above powers of Alaska's governor, comparing them briefly with the powers of governors in the other states.

1. Tenure. Alaska's governor stands in the middle ranks of the states on this power. At least seventeen other governors with four-year terms have no limits on reelection, while the governor of Alaska is restricted to two successive terms. But the governors of about twenty other states have either shorter terms than Alaska's governor or are not even allowed second terms.

2. Appointment. The power of Alaska's governor to control his officials and direct his administration puts him in the top twenty governors on this measure. In a few states, the governor has complete powers of appointment and removal of top officials, with no legislative confirmation required. But in most states the governor shares these powers with others: the legislature, other elected executives, and the people. In many states, the people elect an attorney general, a treasurer, a superintendent of education, and other executive officials.

3. Budget. Most governors now have budget and line-item veto powers similar to those of Alaska's governor. This means that most states' governors, like Alaska's, have a very strong voice in deciding how state money will be spent. About a third of the fifty governors do not have similarly strong controls over money matters in their states.

4. Legislation. Most of the states' governors have powers of legislation like those of the governor of Alaska. The powers of Alaska's governor to initiate and veto legislation and to convene the legislature place him on a level with the majority of governors.

5. General Ranking. In combination, the tenure, appointment, budget, and legislative powers of Alaska's governor place him in the ranks of the more powerful of the nation's governors--about in the top third. Alaska's constitution gives the governor full control of his administration, strong budgetary powers, and an important legislative role.

Special Alaska Conditions

So far, we have discussed only the formal, written powers of the governor that are found in the constitution. How do Alaska conditions affect the governor's power? Much could be said about this, but we will make just two basic points:

First, though growing fast in recent years, Alaska and its state government are still relatively small. Alaska's governor, therefore, has a better chance to manage the state administration than do the governors of much larger states. Also, Alaska's governor can talk directly and personally to most, if not all, of the prominent leaders of public and private organizations in the state. This condition makes his power more effective.

Second, state government plays a very large role in the economy of Alaska. In fact, state government spending directly and indirectly supports about one-third of all Alaska jobs and family incomes. Thus, the governor, using his budget and other powers, can be a major force in shaping Alaska's economy.

Summary and Conclusion

Alaska's constitution establishes a strong office of the governor. His formal constitutional powers place Alaska's governor among the top third of the nation's governors. Most significant are his control of the administration and his power over the budget. An important limit on Alaska's governor is that he can hold office for no more than two terms in a row. This limit on the governor's ability to accumulate power may be a wise one in view of the unusual influence that state government and its chief executive can have on the lives of Alaskans.