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On a Roll, or Is It a Slide?
Alaska's Budgeting Process in 2024

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Abstract

As in 2023, Alaska's politics seem to be benefitting from a more moderate and collegial policymaking environment and possibly even more sensible budgetary policy. In part, this seems due to Alaska's adoption of a new election system which in 2022 generated a more moderate set of legislative coalitions than the previous several election cycles. These moderate coalitions may be short-lived, however, as an effort to repeal the new election system is underway. And even with our relatively moderate State House and State Senate coalitions, headwinds and controversies remain, especially issues around public education funding.

Introduction

In 2024, Alaska's budgeting process was predictable, relatively sensible, and unexciting, reflecting the relatively moderate cross-party coalitions in control of both the State House and State Senate. These coalitions were themselves a result of Alaska's experiment with a new election system which includes a top-four all-party primary much like California's "jungle primary" and a ranked choice voting (RCV) general election.

As expected, Alaska's new election system generated comparatively moderate legislative coalitions in fall 2022, and the budgeting process in spring 2023 generated a middle-of-the-road budget with little drama. In 2024, legislative politics continued this trend of workmanlike budgeting, though controversies remain, notably issues around funding public education. Opponents of the top-four/RCV system placed a repeal referendum on the ballot for fall 2024, but the repeal effort narrowly failed, so all signs point to at least another two years of relatively sensible budget politics in Alaska.

The body of this article is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the state's economy in the current fiscal year; Alaska's economy is growing but that growth has little impact on the state budget. Section three discusses recent political trends and controversies, including what seems to be a more moderate and collaborative policy environment associated with the new election system and controversies around public school funding. The fourth section discusses the budgeting process. In general, Alaska experienced an uncontroversial budget with few notable changes for fiscal year 2024.

Alaska's Economy in Fiscal Year 2024

Alaska's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated in 2022, and by spring 2023 the state had returned to something like pre-pandemic normalcy. As global economic activity returned to normal, increasing demand for commodities like oil increased state tax revenues, boosted Alaska's economy (see Figure 1), and drove down the unemployment rate (see Figure 2), though high inflation rates undermined increased state GDP. The result was a relatively generous level of state government spending in Fiscal Year 2022-2023 in nominal terms, even as state agencies struggled to address the rising cost of service delivery. Though oil prices have declined since their peak in summer 2022, state revenues remain comparatively healthy and Alaska's sovereign investments have grown with the improvements in global financial markets over the last year.

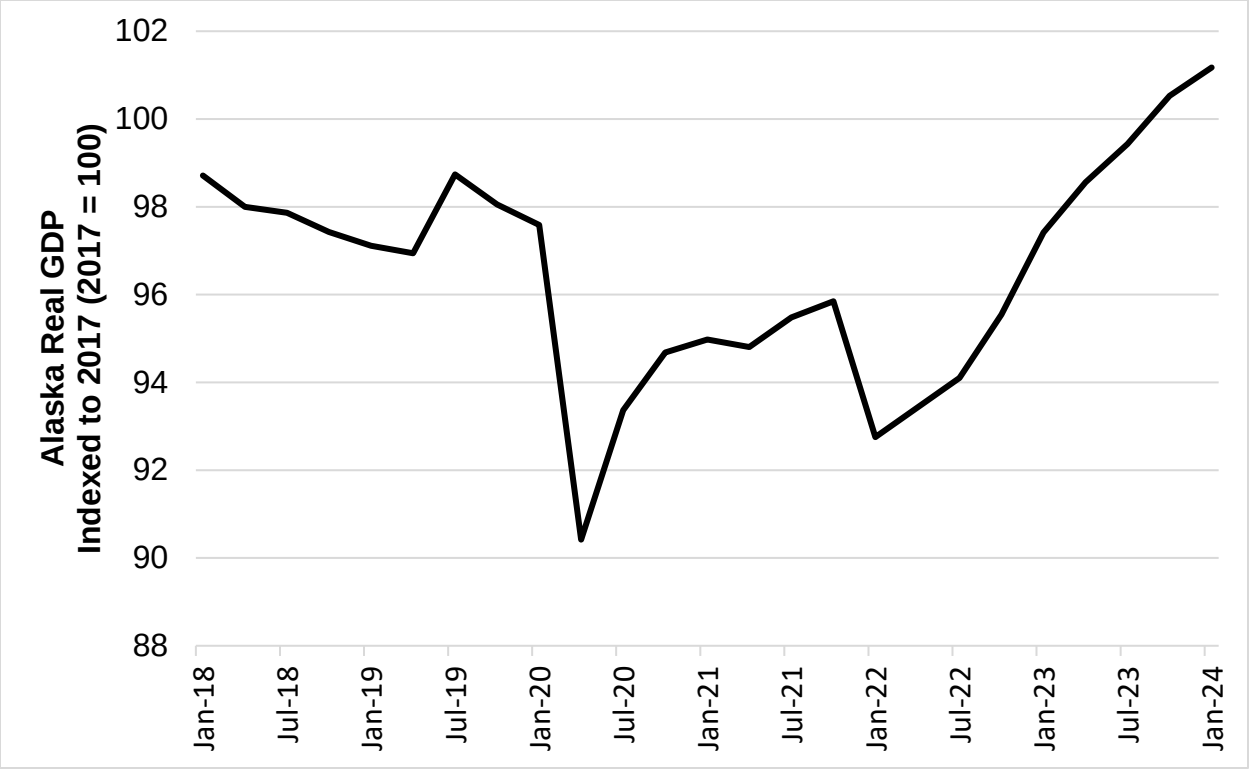


Figure 1: Alaska state GDP. *Alaska's recovery from COVID-19 was accompanied by substantial increases in global oil prices and other commodities, leading to substantially higher state GDP, but inflation has undermined these increases*[1].

Russia, Ukraine, and Alaska's Oil

Soon after the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System began moving oil from the Alaska North Slope in 1977, Alaska repealed its state income tax, relying instead on taxes on the fossil fuel industry. These oil industry tax revenues have often been around 90% of the state's tax receipts. Because of the state's reliance on oil for its tax revenues, Alaska's budget expands when oil prices and oil production are high. When production and prices are low the state government's revenues and expenditures contract. Alaska has experienced several periods of low oil prices since the 1980s, the last of which started in spring 2014 and continued until spring 2020. Alaskan oil has also long since passed peak production—back in 1988—and is now in a period of extended decline (see Figure 3). While oil producers have discovered significant new deposits on Alaska's North Slope in the last few years and the federal government has recently opened new federal lands to oil production (Friedman 2023), it is unlikely that Alaska oil production will rise much above the current level—around 25% of the 1988 peak.

Driven by rebounding global demand for energy, however, prices for Alaska North Slope (ANS) crude increased from around $12 per barrel in April 2020 to around $75 per barrel in November 2021 (see Figure 4). In late June 2022, driven by the international crisis in Ukraine, daily first purchase prices for ANS crude oil spiked to about $112 per barrel, and high oil prices framed budget discussions in spring 2022. These higher oil prices were good news for Alaska, and very good news for Alaska's incumbent governor, running for reelection in fall 2022. Unfortunately for Alaskans, prices quickly declined after the election and rested around $75 per barrel as of

[1] FRED: Federal Reserve Economic Data. https://fred.stlouisfed.org/ Retrieved March 20, 2024.

September 2024. Though lower than some past cycles, this is a healthy price and Alaska is much less reliant on oil than it was a decade ago.

Other Resources and Revenues

Historically, Alaska's economy has been based on natural resource extraction, including timber, fish, and mining. Timber has not been a significant contributor to the state's economy for nearly three decades. Mining and fishing are still important industries in Alaska but contribute little to state revenues.

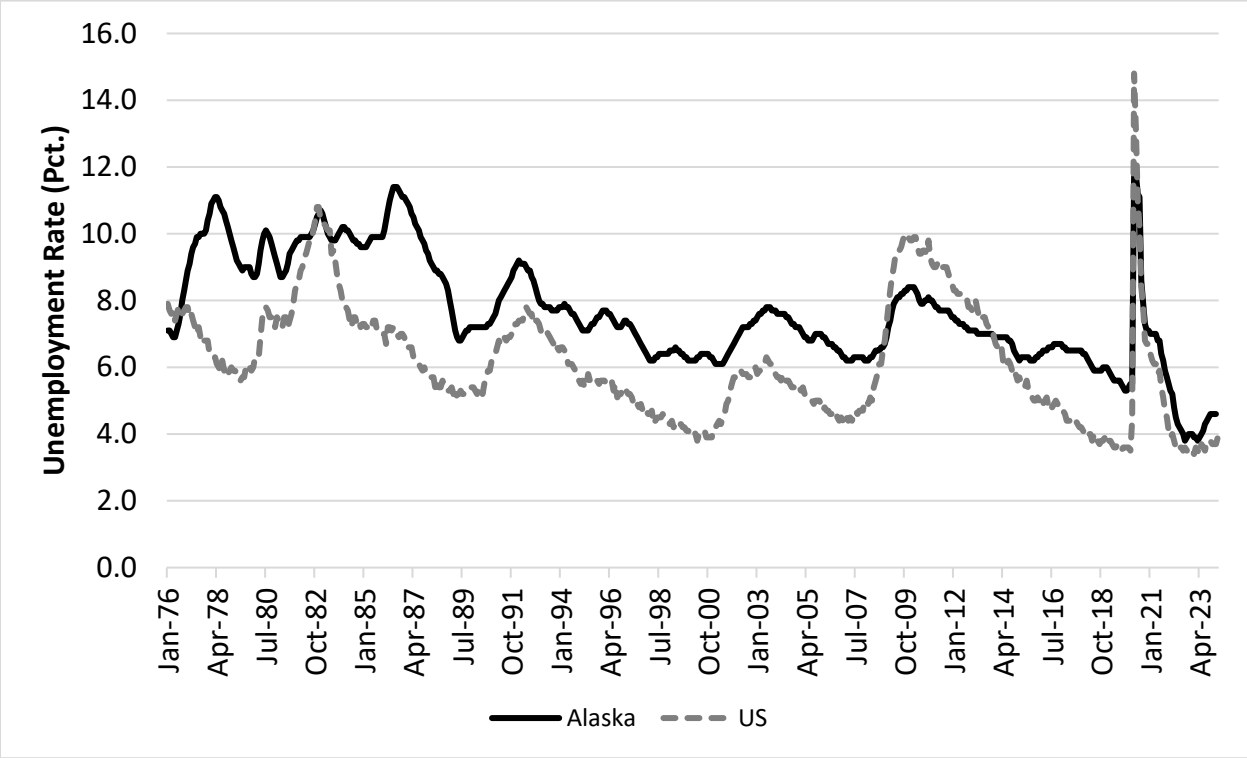


Figure 2: Alaska and U.S. unemployment rates. *Unemployment declined rapidly in Alaska in the wake of the COVID pandemic, and unemployment in spring 2024 remains historically low*[2]*.*

As recently as the 1990s, timber harvest was a mainstay of Alaska's economy. However, Alaska's timber industry collapsed in the '90s as a result of high costs, underinvestment, international competition, and changes in federal forestry policies (Beier, Lovecraft, and Stuart Chapin 2009). Today, timber is no longer a significant employer in any part of the state and does not contribute in a meaningful way to state revenues.

In general, Alaska's commercial and sportfishing industries are healthy. In 2022 (the most recent year for which data is available), commercial fisheries landings declined by about 400 million pounds over the previous year. This places landings well below the higher levels of the previous decade, but Alaska's fishing yields remain high by historical standards and substantially higher than the period before 1990 (see Figure 5). Conservationists and fishers have expressed concern about particular species in some areas including Bering Sea and Bristol Bay crab fisheries, and several salmon fisheries (Friedman 2023; Rogerson 2022; Rosen 2022; Ross 2022). However,

[2] FRED: Federal Reserve Economic Data. https://fred.stlouisfed.org/ Retrieved March 21, 2024.

fisheries remain an important employer in Alaska and contribute much to the state's economy, especially locally in some coastal areas. Even so, fishing contributes little to state government revenues—state government generates only around 1% of its revenue from taxes on Alaska's fisheries (Alaska Department of Revenue 2023, 202).

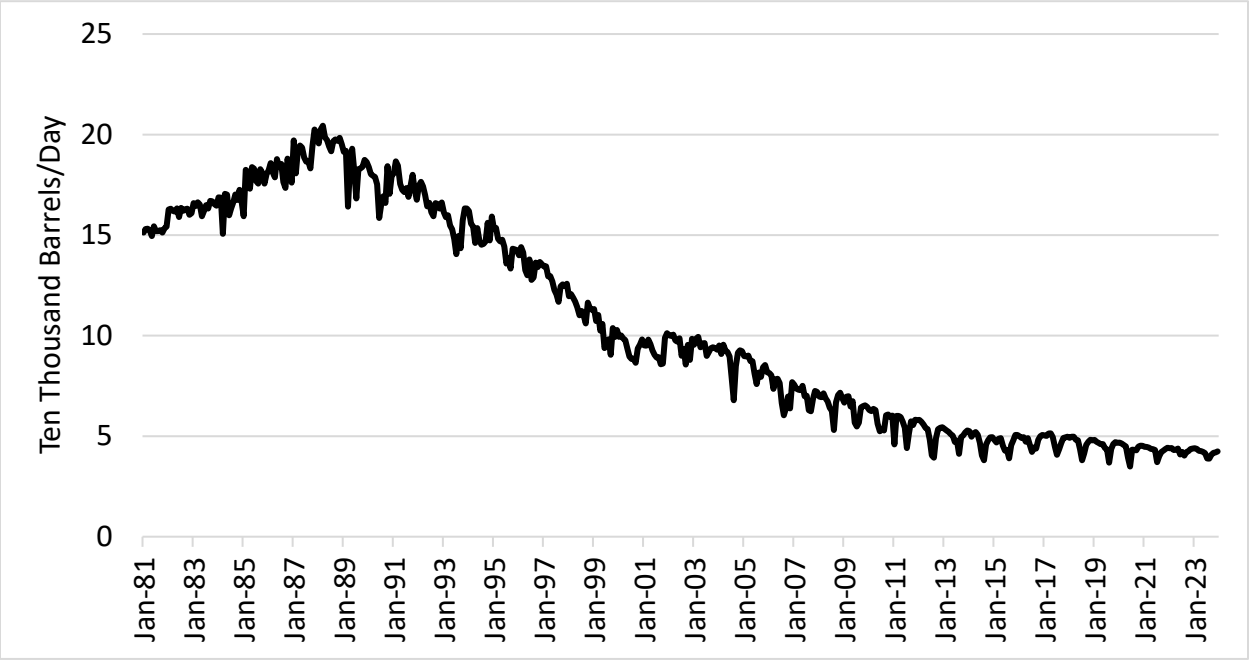


Figure 3: Alaska oil production. *Alaska's oil production peaked in 1988 and has been declining ever since. Current production levels are less than 25% of the 1988 peak*[3].

Tourism

Tourism has historically been a very important part of the Alaska economy, although it also contributes little to state government revenues. Cruises to Alaska—the largest source of tax revenue in tourism for the state—were cancelled entirely in 2020, greatly harming many communities in coastal Alaska. The cruise season for 2021 also started quite late because of COVID-19's impacts on the cruise industry (Brooks 2021; Stremple 2021; Yeginsu 2021). However, early projections for a strong 2022 season proved accurate, with cruise ship visitation nearly recovering to pre-pandemic peaks (Juneau Port Director reports final 2022 visitor tally 2022). Other forms of tourism also boomed, with independent travelers visiting in record numbers. 2023 had an even busier summer tourism season, with cruise ship visitation increasing more than 20% over pre-pandemic highs (Brooks 2023a).

[3] U.S. Energy Information Administration. http://www.eia.gov Retrieved March 21, 2024.



Figure 4: Alaska North Slope crude first purchase price (dollars per barrel). *Oil prices spiked in 2022 due to a recovering global economy and the crisis in Ukraine, but have now returned to lower levels*[4].

For purposes of state budgeting, however, cruise ship visitation is not important. Cruise ship visitors on larger ships (more than 250 berths) pay a state head tax of $34.50 per person and the state taxes income from gambling on passenger vessels at around 33%. However, the legislation under which these taxes were passed specifies that most of these revenues are transferred to municipalities to provide services to the cruise industry, and the State of Alaska only generated about $18.6 million from head taxes in 2019 (Spanos 2020). In addition, the State of Alaska generates revenue from the Alaska Railroad, the state ferry system, vehicle rental taxes, and other taxes, but even as tourism breaks new records in 2024, total state revenues from tourism will not be a significant proportion of Alaska's state government budget.

Alaska's Reserve Funds

Although Alaska is not unique among U.S. states in its ownership of sovereign wealth funds, Alaska's investment funds are uniquely large. The most well-known of Alaska's several investment funds, the Alaska Permanent Fund, is currently valued at roughly $78 billion[5]. The second-largest, the Constitutional Budget Reserve (CBR) was once substantial as well, but spending has depleted the fund's balance, from around $12 billion in 2013 to about $2.8 billion in 2024 (see Figure 6).

For many years, The CBR was used as a rainy day fund to cover annual deficits and the Permanent Fund was used only to pay the famed Alaska "Permanent Fund Dividend" or PFD. For the last several years, however, the state has used revenues from the Alaska Permanent Fund

[4] U.S. Energy Information Administration. http://www.eia.gov Retrieved March 21, 2024.
[5] Real-time data on the Permanent Fund is available at apfc.org. This figure retrieved on March 21, 2024.

to fund state government operations. These revenues have been greater than revenues from taxes on oil, though one result has been smaller dividends, a politically unpopular choice.

Although much of the principal of the Permanent Fund is protected in Alaska's Constitution, there is no restriction on the legislature's ability to use fund earnings. On the other hand, the Permanent Fund dividend is very popular and is viewed as an entitlement by many Alaskans (Goldsmith 2012b). Arguably, this is consistent with the goals of the dividend program—some have argued that the PFD was primarily a tool to create a constituency which would fight to protect the permanent fund (Hammond 2012). Certainly, the PFD has been fabulously successful if this was the goal (Goldsmith 2012a). In addition, there is also some evidence that PFDs have had a stimulatory effect on Alaska's economy and are an important factor in reducing economic inequality in Alaska, which is currently the lowest of any state. Recent work also strongly suggests that the PFD has significantly reduced poverty in Alaska, especially child poverty (M. Berman and Reamey 2016).

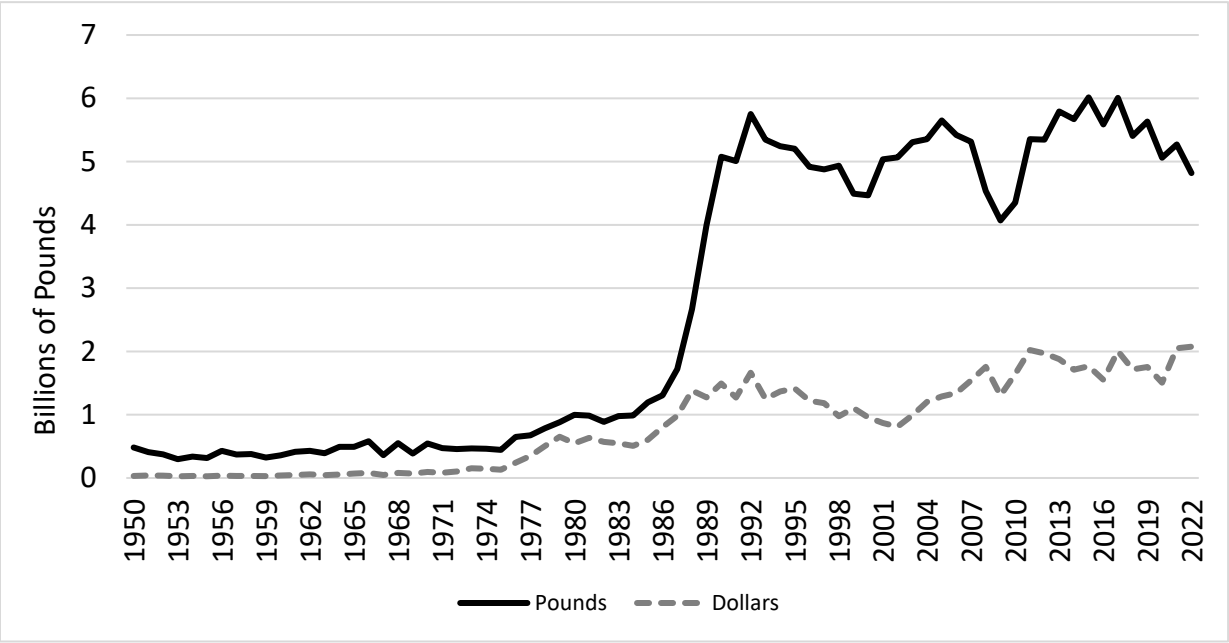


Figure 5: Commercial fisheries landings in Alaska. *Though landings remain lower than the decade before 2019, landings remain at healthy levels, especially compared to the period before 1990. Landings values are in nominal ex-vessel US dollars*[6].

Benefits of a large PFD notwithstanding, for the last several years the legislature has used a substantial proportion of fund earnings to pay for state government operations, reducing the funding available for dividends. Generally, legislators now seek to withdraw around 5.25% of the fund's value each year, then split that withdrawal between appropriations for state government operations and Permanent Fund Dividends. Typically, the split has been around 25% for dividends and 75% for state government. Though the use of Permanent Fund revenues for government operations remains controversial and a few politicians continue to publicly call for a "full statutory PFD," most legislators now apparently assume that the use of some fund earnings for government operations is necessary though publicly unpopular. The remainder of the state's

[6] National Marine Fisheries Service Commercial Landings data. https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov. Retrieved Mar. 27, 2023.

budget expenses have been largely paid for with a combination of taxes on oil and federal government transfers (Groh 2019).

PFD amounts tend to fluctuate from year to year. The 2022 PFD was unusually large, around $3,200 per person, the 2023 dividend was smaller, around $1,300 per person (Early 2023; LaPonsie 2022). For 2024, Alaskans will receive a slightly larger PFD at $1,600 per person (Maguire 2024)

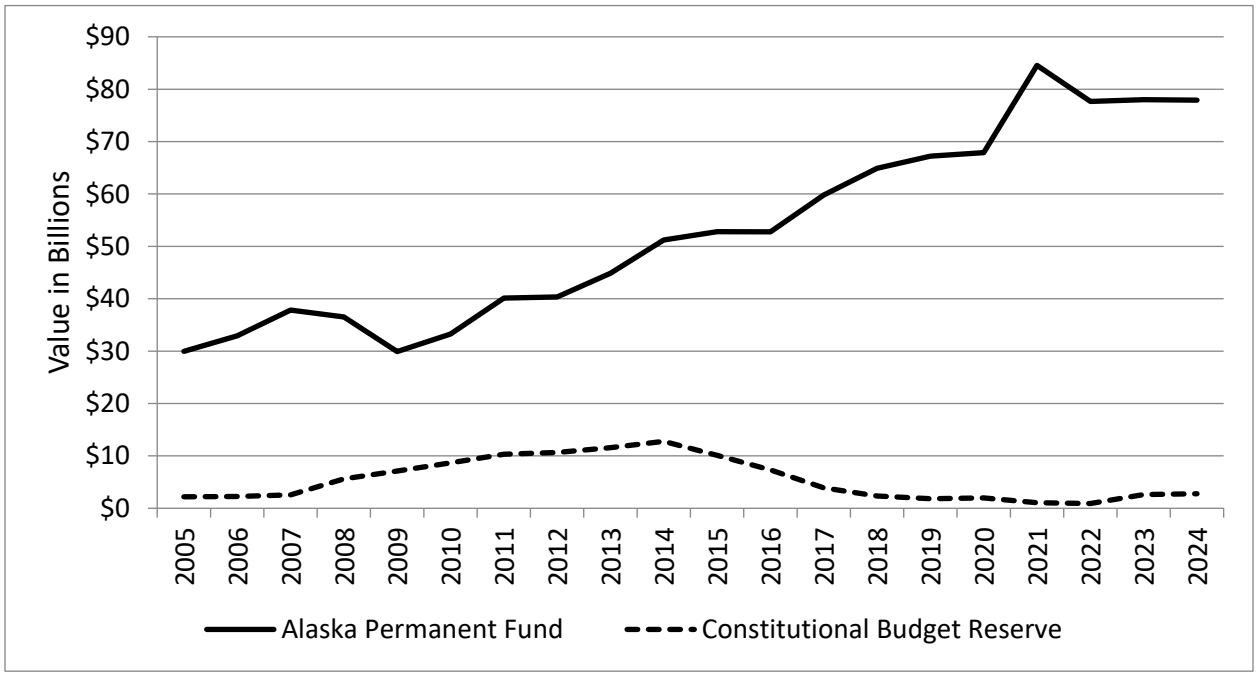


Figure 6: Alaska's reserve funds. *Though the legislature has spent much of Alaska's Constitutional Budget Reserve Fund, the Alaska Permanent Fund continues to grow, albeit with some decline in value after 2021*[7].

The second largest of Alaska's funds is the Constitutional Budget Reserve (CBR), which was seeded with surplus revenues from multi-state lawsuits against U.S. tobacco firms and Alaska's lawsuit against Exxon-Mobil in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. Alaska has used CBR funds to balance its budget most years since 2014. However, the CBR can only be spent with the approval of three-quarters of each legislative chamber. In some years, this has given legislative minorities substantial leverage. Many years, this three-quarters vote has been used by minorities to bargain for appropriations which would otherwise have been left out of the budget.

The governor's proposed budget in 2024 called for a substantial withdrawal from the CBR, about $900 million (Stone 2023). Legislators viewed this as using savings to pay for a large proposed PFD (the governor's budget called for a large PFD at around $3,300). Ultimately, the legislature chose to avoid a CBR withdrawal by reducing the dividend size.

[7] Data from the Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation, apfc.gov, and the Alaska Department of Revenue, treasury.dor.alaska.gov/Investments/Constitutional-Budget-Reserve.aspx Retrieved March 22, 2024.

Politics in 2024

In November 2020, Alaskans voted to approve a ballot referendum which introduced a new election system to all state elections. The new system uses an all-party top-four primary and ranked choice voting (RCV) in the general election[8]. Advocates of the new system believe that the result will be more moderate politics and more sensible policy. Alaska's first elections under the new system were in 2022 and because of quirks in the way Alaska handles redistricting, nearly the entire legislature (59 of 60 legislative seats) was elected or reelected using the new system. In addition, Alaska used the new election system to select the governor, one of Alaska's two U.S. senators, and their U.S. representative (McBeath 2023; Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023).

A New Election System

Alaska's post-2020 election rules involve a two-stage election process for all state and federal offices: a single, blanket primary among candidates of all parties, the top four of whom advance to a general election decided by ranked choice voting. In the subsequent RCV general election, voters rank their preferences. Winning candidates must gain an absolute majority (not just plurality) of votes in the contest; if no candidate earns a majority of voters' first choice votes, the least popular candidate is eliminated and that candidate's supporters' votes are redistributed to their second choice. This process continues until one candidate receives a majority.[9] Among other things, advocates of this system argued that it will generate more moderate results because the all-party, top-four primary largely eliminates the threat of extremist primary challenges to moderate incumbents (Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023).

In practice, the new election system did seem to generate mostly more moderate outcomes in Alaska's 2022 elections. While the very conservative incumbent governor was reelected, other statewide elections generated more moderate results (Lisa Murkowski and Mary Peltola in the U.S. Senate and House) (McBeath 2023). In state legislative races, moderates were somewhat more successful than in past election cycles (Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023).

In particular, two upset moderate Republican victories—Cathy Giessel in Anchorage and Jesse Bjorkman on the Kenai Peninsula—led to a bipartisan Senate supermajority organized around the principle of more sustainable budget policies; the Senate coalition includes all nine elected Democrats and eight Republicans, excluding only three conservative Republican senators (Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023; Samuels 2022). This majority coalition has proved to be much more moderate than the Republican majority of the 2020-2022 Senate, though the very informal rules of the conservative 2021-2022 Republican Senate majority kept the Senate on the sidelines of budget negotiations in both 2021 and 2022.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Alaska State House was controlled by a similar bipartisan coalition majority, including all the Democrats and independents in the House plus a few moderate Republicans. In January 2023, legislators announced the formation of another bipartisan

[8] Because the primary system is similar to California's top-two all-party "jungle primary," some Alaskan observers have come to call the system the "tundra primary" though the author favors "muskeg primary" as a reflection of the muddiness of Alaska's politics.

[9] If a ballot to be redistributed lacks further rankings, it becomes inactive and excluded from the count. The winning candidate requires a majority among active ballots, which can be less than a majority of all valid ballots if many voters opt not to rank.

coalition, this one controlled largely by Republicans but augmented with several rural Independents and Democrats (George 2023). Though this coalition is considerably to the right of the Democrat-led House majorities of 2019-2022, it proved to be relatively moderate on budgetary policy, with centrist leadership and a finance committee dominated by relatively moderate voices.

The 2023 Budgeting Process

Passing an annual budget is the only constitutionally defined obligation of Alaska's legislature. Each year, Alaska's governor submits at least two budget bills to the legislature. The first of these is the operating budget which includes recurring expenditures and which is usually the larger of the two bills (in recent years, much larger). The second budget bill is the state's capital budget, which includes non-recurring expenditures, generally capital projects. Typically, the House considers the operating budget first, then the capital budget, passing each to the Senate after passage. Differences between the House and Senate budget bills are typically ironed out in a conference committee consisting of House and Senate leadership. Once both legislative chambers pass a budget bill, it is transmitted to the governor who has the power to sign or veto the budget. Alaska also has a very strong gubernatorial line-item veto power in which the governor can reduce or eliminate any budgetary line item. Budgetary vetoes and line-item vetoes can only be overridden by a three-quarters majority of both legislative chambers in joint assembly, the most difficult veto override in the U.S..

With the House Finance Committee stacked with moderates and the Senate controlled by a bipartisan supermajority, budgeting in 2024 has been relatively drama free, though with a few notable exceptions; as of late March, the major controversy had been around funding for K-12 schools.

Operating Budget

As shown in Figure 7, the governor's 2024 budget proposal to the legislature (for Fiscal Year 2025) included no major changes to agency operations compared to the previous year. Though inflation has eaten away at the real size of agency budgets in the last several years, nominal budget requests are largely similar. The small changes that did appear in the governor's proposal were mostly due to changes in funding sources for programs with some level of federal government support. Reflecting the uncontroversial nature of the governor's budget, the legislature has so far made few changes to the governor's budget proposals.

The other significant difference between the governor's budget and the late March House Finance budget had to do with the size of the Permanent Fund Dividend. Governor Mike Dunleavy proposed spending about $2.3 billion for PFDs, for a per resident payment of roughly $3,300. The legislature then reduced this amount to $1.1 billion, which translated to a $1702 dividend (Early 2024).

Increased Funding for Education?

Most funding for public primary and secondary schools in Alaska is provided through a per student allocation known as the Base Student Allocation (BSA). BSA increases have lagged behind inflation in the last several years, though sometimes bolstered with single year, onetime funding increases. Funding levels have increasingly placed pressure on local school districts—a reality dramatically emphasized by a controversial Anchorage School District proposal to close

six Anchorage elementary schools in fall 2022 (Samuels and Krakow 2023) and additional school closures in Fairbanks and Juneau in 2024 (Anastas 2024; Peterson 2024).

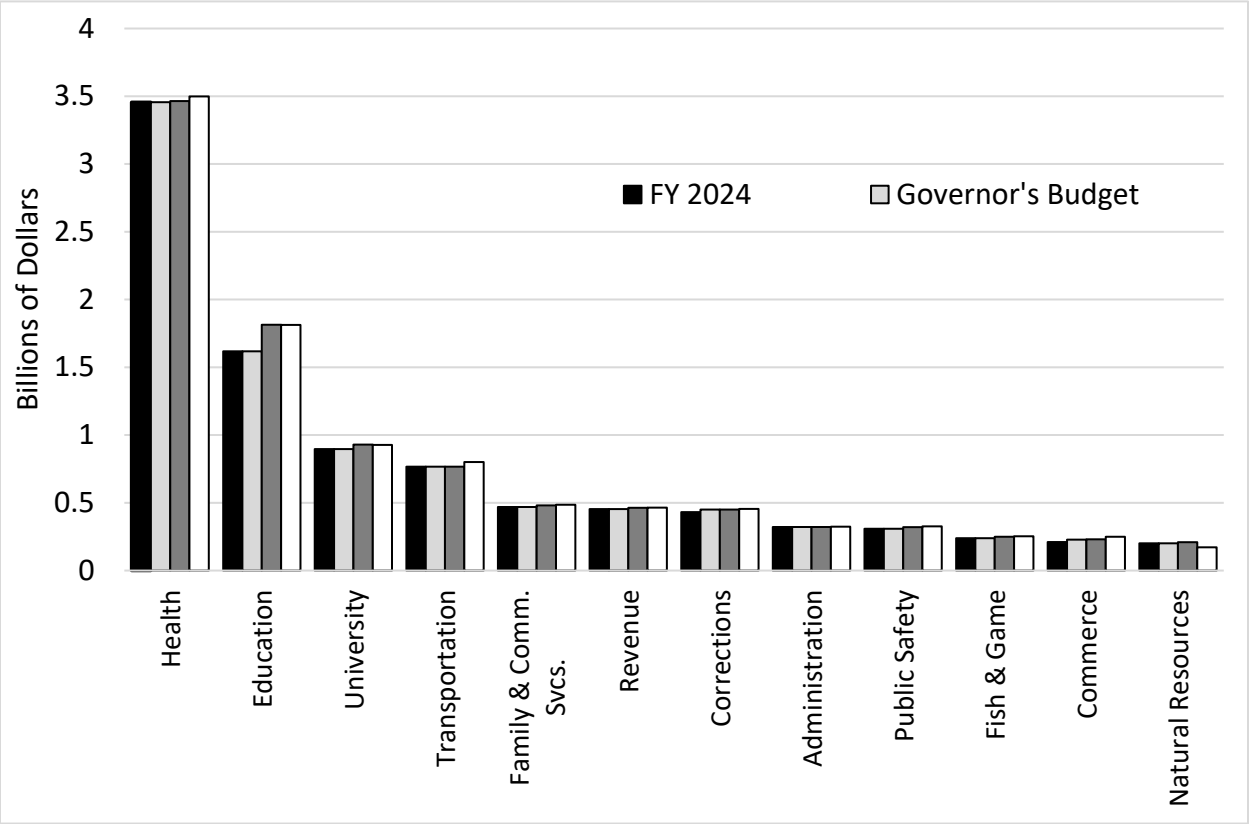


Figure 7: Agency operations budget changes from Fiscal Year 2023. *This includes Alaska's twelve largest state government agencies. In general, the Republican-led House added small increases to the governor's budget which were sustained by the Senate and enacted into law.*

In February, the House passed standalone legislation which would increase the BSA by $680 (O'Hara 2024). The Senate preferred a larger BSA increase but quickly acted to pass the House's proposal, hoping to override what they viewed as an inevitable gubernatorial veto. That veto came quickly and the legislature attempted to override on March 19 but the override fell one vote short of Alaska's strict veto override requirement (A. Berman 2024; Stone 2023). In the end, the legislature approved the same amount ($680/student) in the operating budget as a onetime funding increase and this increase was signed into law by the governor (Haugland 2024).

Capital Budget

The governor's capital budget proposal was somewhat larger than 2023's proposal at around $2.94 billion but as in recent years, almost all of this spending would be funded by federal government transfers, with only around $550 million in state contributions. The legislature added somewhat to this total and the final enacted version of the capital budget came in around $3.5 billion, a substantial increase over the last few years' expenditures but with only $590 million in state contributions. However, as in the past several years, there is little room for large projects in such a small capital budget, though the current budget includes a number of smaller appropriations for transportation (roads, bridges, airports etc.), as well as energy systems

upgrades including power grid improvements. The capital budget also provides new funding for home weatherization, improvements in rural broadband internet and rural water and sewage improvements.

We're on a Roll Now. Or Is It a Slide?

More and more, Alaska's budgeting process is being driven by sovereign investment revenues rather than tax receipts on oil and gas. Though oil remains a significant source of income for state government, Alaska's Permanent Fund revenues are increasingly the most important and most reliable source of state government funds. This shift away from oil revenues is probably desirable as it leads us less exposed to the instability of oil's boom and bust cycles.

And equally importantly, as in 2023, Alaska is experiencing the apparent benefits of our new election system—the top-four all-party primary and ranked choice voting. For the second year in a row, we seem to be experiencing a more moderate and collegial policymaking environment, and possibly even more sensible budgetary policy.

The future of top-four/RCV in Alaska was in doubt in 2024, but RCV now looks likely to survive. During the 2024 election cycle, a conservative political action committee sponsored a referendum to repeal ranked choice voting. Though that effort at one time seemed mired in scandal including allegations of fraud and violations of state election law (Brooks 2023b; Samuels 2023), the referendum to repeal top-four/RCV gathered enough signatures to appear on the general election ballot. Ultimately, ranked choice voting survived the repeal effort, but just barely. By just over 700 votes out of about 340,000 cast ballots, the "no" votes (opposing repeal and favoring RCV) outnumbered "yes" votes, keeping Alaska's experiment in electoral system reform alive for at least one more election cycle. This may be good news for Alaska, encouraging us to avoid the circus-like atmosphere of the pre-RCV period and continue with the current relatively moderate, thoughtful and sensible policy-making and budget-making processes.

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