State Education Leadership and Exit Examination Policy: A Study of Centralization and Partisanship

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State Education Leadership and Exit Examination Policy:  
A Study of Centralization and Partisanship

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from  
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by

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Accepted for__________________________________
(Honors)

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Abstract

Specifics of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 compel at least one assessment to be given in high school, but it remains the duty of each state to decide how and when to administer that and other standardized assessments. Some states have chosen to require proficient performance on standardized tests in order to receive a high school diploma, and such a policy is more commonly known as an exit examination. In this project I address the following question: under which forms of state education governance do states choose to adopt a standardized high school exit exam? In this research I explore both how the bureaucratic structure of state education governance and the role of partisan politics may impact the creation and establishment of education policy. Results reveal that centralized governance has a negligible impact on exit examination policy but partisan control - specifically Democratic partisan control - is strongly correlated with the presence of exit examination policy. Implications and further applications of this research are discussed in the concluding section of the paper.
Introduction

Standardized testing is the most widely used quantitative measure of student performance in the United States. As an expected consequence, the testing industry overall has grown to reach unprecedented proportions. Federally mandated policies, exemplified most notably by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB], have required standardized assessments of all public school pupils in the country. Specifics of NCLB compel at least one assessment to be given in high school, but it remains the duty of each state to decide how and when to administer this and other standardized assessments. According to Robert Linn (2008: 3), “[a]ssessing high school students poses greater challenges than assessing elementary and middle school students because of the often substantial differences in course taking patterns of high school students.” Yet of the 50 states, 30 have thus far elected to administer a standardized test that explicitly bases the ability of a student to graduate upon performing at a state-defined level of proficiency. The policy of mandating a certain level of assessment performance in order to receive a high school diploma is more commonly referred to as an exit examination. An exit examination may take one of many forms, testing a variety of subjects or influencing a student’s ability to graduate by determining the awarding of credits or singlehandedly regulating social promotion to the next grade level. Exit examinations, despite their variations across states, nonetheless all have in common the fact that they directly impact a student’s ability to receive a high school diploma.

For the purposes of this study, the 30 states mentioned above refer to all states that have passed an exit examination policy at some point in their history, regardless of
whether that policy is still active. Figure 1 indicates the prevalence of these policies across the United States where they have been passed.

**Figure 1 Here**

States have traditionally been at the helm of education policy in the United States but there exists considerable variance in how each state establishes its education governance structures. Paul Manna and Timothy Harwood (2011) demonstrate this variance by examining the respective roles of the governor, the state chief of education, and the state board of education within each state. I intend to expand this research by focusing on high-stakes education policies in particular and the role of partisan politics (Republican or Democratic) within these policies. Specifically, I seek to determine under which of the aforementioned conditions – nature of education governance and nature of political leanings – states are more likely to adopt a standardized exit exam as part of their education policy agenda.

Since their inception in Florida in 1976, exit examinations as a policy trend have grown steadily and linearly (see Figure 2). Between the years of 1976-2012, state leaders

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1 The term “exit examination” refers only to a standardized test that requires students to reach proficiency in order to receive their high school diploma. States without an exit examination policy might use their high school standardized test results for district interventions or merely as a data source to report state progress to the federal government. Utah and North Carolina are the only two states that have rescinded their exit examination policy after having passed it.

2 The United States Constitution does not define a federal role for education leadership and explains, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” States, therefore, have absolute power to govern education as long as they do not infringe upon Constitutional mandates or federal law.

3 The term “high-stakes” refers to any policy with consequences for students, teachers, or schools. Many examinations are used exclusively for data purposes, such as district diagnostic skills and school board reporting figures, and are not high-stakes. An exit exam, because students must perform at or above a certain standard in order to receive their high school diploma, is high-stakes.
enacted an average of one new exit examination policy every 1.2 years. While the consistency in exit examination growth history suggests continued adoption of these policies throughout the other states, my research centers on the policy environment of the states that have thus far led the charge. Based on the research results, it may be possible to predict future patterns in state exit examination policy adoption. If certain characteristics of governance and partisanship appear to be strongly correlated with exit examination policy, then it will be possible to articulate a relationship between these variables and chart a likely course for future United States exit examination policy activity.

**Figure 2 Here**

Exit examinations are particularly salient in current debates concerning standards and accountability, as they reflect the progress of a much larger trend in education. The term “high-stakes” applies not only to exit examinations but also extends to teacher hiring and firing practices, college eligibility, and district-wide sanctions. Furthermore, all states have established specific graduation requirements of their public high school students, but exit examinations are among a small number of quantitative graduation metrics available to states. Results of my research, therefore, have salient implications for the progress of state education accountability policy in general and the political environments friendly to high-stakes quantitative student measurement in particular.

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4 This research does not explore the structural and partisan environments of states that have proposed but never enacted an exit examination. Only states that have passed exit examination policy are considered in this specific project.
**Research Question**

Stated concisely, the question this report seeks to answer is: within which organizational structures and political environments do state education leaders choose to adopt a standardized high school exit examination? Addressing this question requires first examining the existing literature on state education governance centralization and partisanship.

**Literature and Theory – Education Governance Centralization**

There is a spectrum of education governance structures among the states, ranging from exclusive appointment to exclusive election of certain key officials. In the former model, the electorate is involved in choosing the governor, but beyond that point the governor is privy to appointing the members of the State Board of Education [SBOE] as well as appointing the Chief State School Officer [CSSO], who in turn oversees the State Education Agency [SEA]. This model represents the strongest degree of centralization existing in the United States. The latter model, conversely, reflects the opposite extreme of decentralization. The most decentralized model available in this study is one in which state government decisions are made more directly by the elected governor and state legislators without the involvement of appointed officials.

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5 Depending on the state, the CSSO might be called the Superintendent of Education, the Commissioner of Education, the Secretary of Education, or another title. Occasionally the CSSO operates in conjunction with the Secretary of Education, and in these cases I have named as the CSSO the principal education leader within a given state’s governance system. Depending on the state, the SEA might be called the Department of Education, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, or the Department of Public Instruction.

6 State Legislatures are omitted in my study of centralization despite serving a vital role in education policy activity. First, all state legislatures are elected by the general voting population, and therefore do not ever exist as a part of a highly centralized structure. Second, state legislatures do not specialize in education work unlike the CSSO and SBOE.
the electorate chooses the governor, the CSSO, and members of the SBOE in separate elections. While these three entities may still interact regularly, the direction of policy and power is inevitably more divided by virtue of reduced accountability from one office to another.

Network Theory provides a concise definition of the effects of a centralized leadership structure. As Meier and O’Toole (2000) envision the term, Network Theory suggests that the nature of leadership networks can impact state policy outcomes. Specifically, leaders are best able to realize their policies when there exists high congruence between their priorities and the priorities of their partners. Within the context of state governance, this model applies to the partnership between governors and their CSSOs and SBOEs. In states where governors are able to appoint these other units, Network Theory suggests that there is a higher likelihood of overall policy production because their priorities are inherently aligned.

Mokher (2010) explores this theory in more depth in her research on Network Theory in the specific context of education. Her study indicates that governors are central to establishing a policy network, and governors with substantial appointment powers are particularly suited to this goal. Her research implies that governors in a highly centralized system are not only better suited to propose and communicate their policy goals, but their policies overall are less likely to meet opposition along the way and are therefore more likely to ultimately pass. Although policy actors in a decentralized system may share priorities and interests, the divided nature of their governance network risks delaying or obstructing efficient policy development (Wilson 1989). From the work of these scholars, it is apparent that a highly centralized
governance system is better suited to both produce and pass policy.

Literature additionally suggests that governors are, on the whole, able to exercise greater control over their state than in previous years (Hershey 2011). “Control,” in this context, translates to a certain degree of command over the direction and progress of public policy. While this particular finding is not necessarily specific to exit examination legislation, the research also suggests that gubernatorial leadership is particularly pronounced in those states with a more centralized education governance structure. In other words, where governors have a high degree of control over who becomes the CSSO and who serves on the SBOE, education leadership should be better able than governors in a decentralized state to enact education policy.

The above body of literature emphasizes that governors are increasingly powerful overall, and governors in a centralized system are perhaps even more powerful than their decentralized counterparts. Henig (2009) corroborates Hershey’s research in his article on “education executives” – or state-level education leaders. Specifically, Henig articulates two important points regarding education governance trends. First, the governor’s leadership role in education has grown overall, particularly since the 1983 publication of A Nation At Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This has implications for educational leadership centralization and is reflected in part in the sustained growth of exit examination policy across the states. Second, in those instances where executive (in this case, gubernatorial) leadership has been strongest, there may be a greater chance that policy enactment will follow general policy discussion. Overall, Henig’s (2009) findings take Mokher’s one step further by suggesting increased education policy production specifically in those states where governors have
considerable appointment powers over their bureaucracies.

Discussing education policy in particular, Manna and Harwood (2011: 486-487) write that “a governor empowered to appoint the state education agency leader and board members is likely to enhance accountability by providing a single point for citizens and administrative agents in local school districts to focus their concerns.” Additional research reveals some support for the claim that centralized education governance is more frequently correlated with accountability policy than decentralized governance (McDermott 2003). These studies suggest that increased education leadership cohesiveness enables political actors to promote greater standards and accountability in public policy. Explained differently, highly centralized states may be better positioned than their more decentralized counterparts to enact policies with a greater focus on accountability. Exit examination policies, due to their high-stakes nature, fall squarely into the category of accountability policies.

According to a recent Center on Education Policy report, several states that have failed to put into practice a statewide exit examination have faced a series of policy challenges closely tied to a lack of centralized governance (McIntosh 2012). Political disagreements and changes in state leadership, for example, have hindered the production of exit examination policy. Furthermore, opposition from key education stakeholders within the state serves as an additional hurdle (McIntosh 2012: 4). McIntosh’s study lends support to the conclusion that each of these factors – political disagreements, changes in state leadership, and opposition from other education stakeholders – is more likely to exist in a state lacking a centralized gubernatorial appointment system. First, when a governor is able to appoint other members of state educational leadership, these
appointees will likely align with that governor’s policy ideals. The risk for political disagreements, in other words, is greatly reduced by the nature of a centralized appointment governance system. Second, a governor’s appointment ability controls for changes in state leadership and opposition from other education stakeholders in the state. These factors would, for example, present a much greater risk in a state that holds separate elections for the educational leadership parties.

Two principal themes emerge in the extant literature on state governance centralization: an increased likelihood of policies passing overall; and an increased likelihood for accountability policies specifically, including exit examination policies. These notions inform my first hypothesis, which is:

1) **States whose governors operate in a highly centralized education governance system are more likely than states whose governors operate in a less centralized education governance system to enact a standardized high school exit examination.**

**Literature and Theory - Education Governance Partisanship**

Partisan politics impact the direction of public policy immensely (Erikson, Wright, & McIver 1994). In discussing the role of partisanship on state exit examination policy throughout the states, I first explore the growing nationalization of each party and how it influences state-level governance. A trend of party unification across the states will
allow for generalizing findings across the country and will have implications for predicting future policy direction within different states. Second, I present the specific policy goals held by the Republican and Democratic parties and form a hypothesis relating the influence of partisan state education governance on exit examination policy throughout the United States.

There exists some literature on the role of state partisanship in the United States that presumes a greater likelihood for partisan state leaders to identify with state-level or regional party concerns before national partisan concerns. Under this model, it is exceptionally difficult to infer the direction of multi-state partisan decisions based on results from individual states. While there exist some compelling findings on this localized partisanship theory (Dulio and Nelson 2005: 46) the vast majority of recent literature supports the opposing theory, noting in particular a recent behavior of partisan state leaders subscribing progressively more frequently to their national party’s beliefs (Hershey 2011; Paddock 2005: 187; Berman 2000: 39). This second theory claims that while regional differences exist, partisan state leaders bear more similarities than differences across the country. This model allows for party-wide conclusions throughout the United States and thus adds a degree of generalizability to the results of my second hypothesis.

By the end of the 20th century, political parties had begun to aggressively promote a national platform as a means of mobilizing a more coherent image of their party and in order to target potential voters more effectively (Shober 2010). Emergent pronounced differences between Democratic and Republican voter opinion reflects this trend. While regional variance in political party platforms remains, in recent decades both major
parties have actively pursued and promoted their national image.

Stonecash (2010: 3) writes that “partisanship is on the rise.” Hedge’s (1998: 55) research points to “heightened levels of national-state party integration.” Similarly, Walker (2000) contends that partisan politics have become more nationalized, as opposed to more regionalized, since the 1970s. These trends make possible a multi-state analysis of partisan affiliation, because we may assume that Democrats in one state bear significant similarities to Democrats in any other state. The 1970s is an important landmark period because the first exit exam legislation in the United States passed in Florida in 1976. Because the Democratic and Republican parties have each assumed a more significant national role since the 1970s, it is possible to compare patterns of partisan governance across every state that has at some point in its history adopted an exit examination policy.

Liscio and Stonecash (2010) conclude that governance systems united under a particular party are best able to enact policy change, which bears considerable similarity to much of the centralization outcomes mentioned in the previous section. This finding suggests that in order to increase their chances for passing a given policy, state party affiliates are increasingly welcoming the partisan role as set forth by their national party affiliates.

Theories of partisan governance unity (Shober 2010) influence not only the effect of a centralized leadership system, but also the effect of partisanship on policy. Shober suggests that significant legislation\(^7\) is more likely to pass under a unified government,

\(^7\) Shober never explicitly defines “significant legislation” but because exit examination policy represents high-stakes accountability and impacts the graduation eligibility of all students within certain states, it is reasonable to assume that exit examination policy falls within the realm of “significant legislation.”
which he defines as party congruence among the governor, the state legislature, and the CSSO (if elected). To expand this discussion, I now turn to the policy goals of the Republican and Democratic parties.

Within the Republican Party, there exists a trend in favor of small government and placing high levels of deference to state and local leaders (Manna and Harwood 2011). Democratic state leadership, conversely, tends to outline more statewide guidelines, such as smaller class size (Shober 2012) and higher per pupil spending (Fusarelli 2002) for all students under the assumption of equity for all students. While these partisan generalizations are just that – generalizations – it is significant to note these distinctions among states when they are supported with robust data from several state leaders.

In Arizona, for example, state Senator Thayer Verschoor (R) cosponsored legislation designating the state’s current high school-level standardized test as a diagnostic instrument rather than as an exit examination necessary for graduation. “This should not be mandated by big government and a state school board,” he contended (FairTest 2005). Similarly, Texas Education Agency Commissioner Michael Williams (R) has invited 23 school districts from around the state to join a consortium that will inform the direction of assessments, among other issues. Williams’ focus on “various methods of measuring student progress” and “reliance on local input” (Texas Education Agency 2012) imply conflict with an exit examination mandate, as an exit examination necessitates one primary measure of student progress and reliance on standards set by the state itself.

On the other end of state education partisanship, Governor Gray Davis (D) in
1999 spearheaded a proposal for a California state exit examination. Throughout his
tenure as governor, Davis was an outspoken proponent of “legislation to hold schools
accountable for their performance” (California Office of the Governor 1999). An exit
examination proposal fit naturally into this statewide accountability policy.

Generally speaking, exit examination policy squarely challenges the Republican
ideals of small government and high local control. First, establishing an exit examination
is a mandate that, in addition to risking high implementation costs, inherently requires
administrative oversight at the state level – or, in other words, an expansion of state
government. Second, a statewide exit exam policy necessarily overrides a local district’s
ability to label its own students as proficient to graduate.

Effectively exploring the influence of partisanship on state exit examination
policies requires evaluating the partisan affiliation of key players in the state education
arena. What follows is a discussion of the growing roles of the governor and the
legislature\(^8\) in state education politics. The goal of this discussion is to assert that the
governor and legislature in each state are the two most important partisan participants in
education policy development, and thus that examining these entities and their partisan
affiliations will render a conclusive perspective on a given state’s education policy
environment.

The National Governors Association [NGA] writes, “education policy is a
constitutional responsibility of states, and governors play a leading role in efforts to

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\(^8\) The legislature is included in this portion of my research because partisan identity is often
central to legislative policy discussions and behavior. While not limited specifically to education
policy, state legislatures demonstrate the most overt connection between partisan affiliation and
policy enactment.
improve education” (National Governors Association 2012). As a part of their response to this leading role, the NGA targets support through the NGA Center for Best Practices. The center works with governors across the country to provide technical assistance, policy analysis, and other types of aid through research and projects (National Governors Association 2012). Through the NGA governors have access to increasing amounts of state education data in addition to policy databases in various educational issue areas, policy action plans, online portals, and funding for governors to attend NGA events focused on a variety of educational policy areas. Beyond the mere availability of these resources, the NGA boasts growing affiliations and projects with individual state governors, indicating that the governors themselves are recognizing a substantial responsibility in education and pursuing the additional resources available to them in the educational policy area.

Beyond the structural support of the country-wide NGA, in recent years the governors in various states have pursued actions that have increased their individual roles in education. A 2011 report by the Education Commission of the States [ECS] reflects upon recent policy changes that have allowed governors to more actively engage in, or even direct statewide education policymaking. These changes include increasing gubernatorial appointment power, establishing a gubernatorial education advisory board, proposing a greater oversight role for a state superintendency, and the consolidation of educational leadership entities under partial or full gubernatorial purview (Zinth 2011). Governors are heavily involved in education policy overall and this involvement only shows signs of expanding.

Although many of the increases in gubernatorial power have emerged in recent
years, the role of the governor in education policy has historically been one of great significance. The term “education governor” garnered noteworthy attention in the 1980s in particular, and it evolved from the earlier term “good schools governor” prevalent in the beginning of the 20th century (Krotseng 1987: 3-4; Kuralt 1986: 243). Importantly, Krotseng explains that beyond merely serving as a compelling rhetorical title, the concept of “education governor” has been consistently and strongly linked to education policy outcomes (1987). Regular and commanding participation in legislative and budgetary concerns demonstrates that while governors are not always as central to education policy discussion as state legislatures, their role has nonetheless historically proven both significant and highly visible. Governors are thus central to this and other research analyzing state policy patterns.

Exit examinations require a significant financial investment for the development, publication, dissemination, and grading processes, and being a state-ordained initiative, this investment originates in each state's overall budget. A major focus of state legislatures throughout the United States is reviewing and approving state government budgets, so a proper analysis of policy development must necessarily incorporate the role of state legislatures.

It is unproductive to assume, however, that each state legislature serves a comparable function in education policy development and approval, or that these intricacies are not relevant to the scope of this research. A legislature that appoints or confirms the members of the state board of education will, of course, possess much higher potential for influencing the direction of state education policy than a legislature
that is simply responsible for approving the state's education budget (as a portion of the overall state government budget). Rather, it is important to note that all state legislatures are involved with at least the budgeting process and therefore ultimately connected to the success of exit examination policy. Despite the possible idiosyncrasies distinguishing the state legislatures across the United States, the overarching strength of the state legislature and of the governor in the education policy arena remains noteworthy.

Furthermore, results of a six state comparative study reveal that state legislatures are the most influential actors in the educational policy arena overall (Marshall, Mitchell, & Wirt 1989). Key to this conclusion is the notion that the United States political system bestows upon the legislatures a certain legitimacy that interest groups and local institutions lack. Added involvement in state budgetary matters renders the governor similarly powerful in the education policy arena, since education overall is the single largest state expenditure across the board (Marshall, Mitchell, & Wirt 1989: 32). Overall, both the legislature and governor are vital and central to a state’s public policy environment.

Incorporating each legislature within a larger state education governance metric helps to round out the partisan context of all states from 1975 onward. Due to the legislature's inherent role in exit examination policy development, even if not full or explicit, it is essential to consider their partisan conditions when attempting to examine the link between state party affiliation and the success of exit examination policy.
An Addendum: Party Unity

In addition to evaluating the partisan influence on exit examination policy in the states according to a Democrat-Republican dichotomy, I will also examine the effect of party unity. Rather than investigating party unity as a separate variable and potential hypothesis, I will simply explore the nuance that the literature offers with regard to unified versus divided partisan control. In its bare bones form, party unity refers to those instances where all relevant leaders are members of the same party. Divided leadership, conversely, exists where leaders belong to differing parties or exist in a state of split representation. Divided leadership may refer to equal influence of the Republican or Democratic parties, or it may refer to leadership that is majority one party but some players belong to the opposing party. In these instances, the state would be labeled specifically as being under “divided Democrat” or “divided Republican” control.

John J. Coleman (1999) offers a model for the study of party unity on a national scale, which I have adapted for the state level. Using gubernatorial and legislative partisan affiliation data from 1975-2012, I will be able to test my second hypothesis (see below) while additionally using the variables to explicate if and how party unity impacts policy development. The remainder of this section is devoted to assessing available literature on party unity and policy, with an emphasis on how party unity is significant in discussing the partisan impact on policy passage.

Partisan politics in the United States refer to a key divide between Democrats and Republicans, and because the states are universally and overwhelmingly aligned with these two parties, it is important to discuss the interplay between them in areas where
both parties hold strong (and perhaps manifestly equal) political presence. I refer to these states as having low party unity because strong interaction between the parties in a state’s leadership structure necessarily implies that no one party has obvious or even notable control.

In an attempt to offset one party’s ownership of a particular issue in a low-unity state, the other party may “lure” the other into passing a weaker version of the intended bill (Gilmour 1995: 38). The intent of this action is to introduce uncertainty as to which party is more likely to dominate a particular issue area, and therefore dominate legislative action. Because Democrats traditionally “own” the issue of education (Egan 2009: 9; Goble & Werner 2006: 7), Gilmour’s analysis suggests that a state decidedly dominated by Democrats may be able to pass more and stronger education-related bills than a state with bipartisan representation or Republican representation. Mohr (1969) similarly asserts that innovative policy is more likely to succeed in a unilateral political environment, which corroborates Gilmour’s (1995) and Coleman’s (1999) explorations of the effect of unified versus divided government on policy outputs.

Party labels, it should be mentioned, do not necessarily suggest affiliation with a particular ideology. A study on the proliferation of teacher competency testing policy reveals an important methodological distinction from my work (Nice 1993: 40-41). In an effort to narrow the scope of my research I have chosen to focus solely on the political labels “Democrat” and “Republican,” and acknowledge but largely ignore the liberal and conservative undertones of these parties. It may behoove future scholars to consider some of these ideological intricacies when analyzing the progress of exit examination policy throughout the United States, but this research delves into political philosophy; I
seek instead to examine the impact of the Democrat and Republican political labels purely in a public policy context.

In addition to Democrats being more likely than Republicans to promote legislative action related to education, it is possible to speculate that a state under united Democratic leadership will be more effective than a state under divided partisan leadership to produce strong and comprehensive education legislation. Because exit examination policy extends over the domain of every public high school student in the state and dips heartily into the state budget (e.g., the costs of developing, printing, distributing, collecting, and grading), it is reasonable to assume that exit examination legislation is firmly within the definition of strong and comprehensive legislation.

I suspect that not only does a state have to be under Democratic control in order to be likely to pass exit examination legislation, but this control must also be highly unified, or without significant Republican presence.

Informed by current party data available in the states surrounding exit examination policy and party ideologies more broadly, my second hypothesis is:

B.1) States whose governor and state legislature affiliate with the Democratic Party are more likely than states whose governor and state legislature affiliate with the Republican Party to enact a high school exit examination.

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9 Here I define “significant” as equal or in some way serving as a rival to Democratic presence. A state with a Democratic governor and a Republican legislature is not unified in my study, nor is a state with a Republican governor and a Democratic legislature.
Without treating party unity as a third independent hypothesis, I wish to explore party unity as an addendum to, and within the context and analysis of Hypothesis B. Stated concisely:

*B.2) States whose governor and state legislature both affiliate with the Democratic Party are more likely than states whose governor and legislature affiliate with differing or split parties to enact a high school exit examination.*

Methods

This study entails a 50-state analysis of state education governance and policy. By including every state,¹⁰ this research provides an outlook on state education leadership across the country. Similarities across state models have implications for government structure and partisan policies. If the above hypotheses hold true, then one might be able to predict the direction of education policy in a state that is led with a particular structure and by a particular party. More broadly, results of this study may reveal a move toward common policy behaviors among all states, in the event of great governance and policy similarities across the country, or conversely, results may indicate a pattern of highly regionalized education governance systems.

In order to operationalize the variables more explicitly, I divide this project into two smaller research questions, each testing one of my hypotheses. In both models the

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¹⁰ I have omitted the District of Columbia from this study. While DC does have its own exam policies and its own education governance systems, the mayor holds different responsibilities from other states’ governors. Additionally, unlike in other states, the federal government directly oversees DC’s legislature, known as the Council of the District of Columbia.
dependent variable is the presence of a passed exit examination policy. Measuring this variable requires examining policy in all states in order to determine how many out of 50 have at some point in their history passed exit exam legislation.

In Hypothesis A, my independent variable is the structure of state education governance systems. The term “structure” in this study specifically refers to centralization, and Hypothesis A attempts to enumerate and analyze the degree of centralization within each state’s education governance system. In order to measure education governance I examine the chief offices and organizations driving education policy within each state. Each state’s laws regarding education governance structure are publicly available online either through the SBOE website or through the state legislature website.

Based on extant state governance literature, I have selected the following key governance players to study within each state

• The governor
• The chief state school officer [CSSO]
• The state board of education [SBOE]

The relationship among these entities varies by state, so it necessarily follows that

11 I have intentionally omitted the state legislature from this model because in every state the legislature is an elected body with no apparent avenue for significant governor influence or oversight in the realm of education. While the legislature serves a central role in policy enactment, this role is never under the direct purview of the governor in the same way that the CSSO and SBOE are in certain states. The function of the state legislature is explored and tested in the subsequent hypothesis.
the degree of education governance centralization varies by state. My first step, therefore, is to examine within each state how these three units relate to one another, whether this be through internal election, appointment, or the electorate selecting some or all of the units independently. The key to determining the level of centralization rests in the role of the governor. A governor who is empowered to appoint both the SBOE members and the CSSO represents the most highly centralized state education governance model in the United States. Conversely, a governor serving in a state where the electorate chooses the SBOE and CSSO represents the least centralized state education governance model. There exist a variety of governance structures between these extremes, and all models will appear in this study.

Using data compiled from the National Association of State Boards of Education and some supplemental research through state code as needed, I assembled the necessary data to assign each state as a value from 0-3 on a scale of decentralized to centralized. A value of 0 represents the most decentralized governance model existing in the United States. The governor has no direct authority over the selection of either the SBOE or the CSSO. The selection of these parties rests exclusively in statewide elections or in selection by state leadership bodies not under direct gubernatorial purview. States with a value of 1 are the next step closer to a centralized model but still rest handedly within a decentralized system. The governor in these states may directly appoint either the SBOE or the CSSO but the other is chosen in a statewide election. Whereas the governor has clear authority in selecting one of these entities, that authority is entirely stripped for the selection of the other.

A value of 2 offers governors a greater deal of control over the selection process
of state education officials but still does not reach the fully centralized form. Governors of these states directly appoint either the SBOE or the CSSO and indirectly affect the selection of the other. The nuanced term “indirectly” can have several forms. The governor might be one of a handful of persons to appoint members of the SBOE, for example, or the governor might have full authority to appoint all members of the SBOE, and the SBOE in turn is charged with CSSO selection. While state governance models with a 2 value can take several forms, and thus be somewhat perplexing, they are distinct from states coded as 1 because no statewide election is involved, and distinct from states coded as 3 because they do not represent full centralization and interdependence among the offices.

Finally, governors serving in a state with a value of 3 have full authority to independently appoint both the SBOE and the CSSO. Even if the SBOE may suggest a limited number of CSSO candidates, the final decision rests exclusively with the governor. Gubernatorial appointments followed by Senate approval fall into this category, as the governor retains full authority to select each candidate for consideration.

For states that have approved exit examinations I have coded them as the governance model within which they operated at the time the examination policy was passed. Among these states with exit examinations, all models exist currently as they did at the time the exit examination policy was passed with the exceptions of Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas, which have all since granted their governors a more centralized role in the selection of the CSSO and the SBOE. Using the aforementioned values from 0-3 I have classified each state as follows.
In Hypothesis B, my independent variable is the partisan affiliation of selected state education governance players, as enumerated below. This hypothesis specifically tests the partisan influence of the following two entities on exit examination policy in the United States:

- The governor
- The state legislature

I have chosen to include the state legislature in Hypothesis B because the legislature serves universally as the lead policymaking body in each state. While some degree of policymaking authority exists in other state institutions, the legislature represents the strongest available mix of policy authority and partisan influence, and is thus an essential variable in examining the impact of partisanship on state exit examination policy.

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12 Wisconsin does not have a State Board of Education, so its code is based only upon the CSSO selection process.
13 Minnesota does not have a State Board of Education, so its code is based only upon the CSSO selection process.
In an effort to maintain focus on partisan affiliation I have intentionally omitted the SBOE and CSSO in this model. Party affiliation data is not available for these entities in all 50 states, and many SBOE members and CSSOs assume their titles on an explicitly nonpartisan platform. Indeed, the Council of Chief State School Officers offers no party affiliation information on its website, which may suggest a reduced role for partisan association among all CSSOs.

My focus on the governor and state legislature highlights the most visible partisan influence on education policy in the United States. In studying this model it is essential to note the date of adoption for all exit examination policies passed in the United States. Rather than evaluating the partisan leanings of a given state in general, this study specifically seeks to assess the particular partisan environment as a state codifies exit examination policy as law. By this logic, an exit examination policy passed in 1990 requires a study of the state-level partisan environment in 1990.

Party affiliation of the governor is available from state ballots and from the National Governors Association [NGA]. State legislature party information is available from the National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL] for 2008 onward and in a legislative party history book by Michael J. Dubin (2007) for earlier years.

For the purposes of this project it is imperative to calculate total Democratic and Republican influence in both exit examination states and non-exit examination states in each year from 1975-2012. A calculation of the partisan political environment in all states for all years included in this study will provide the necessary context for testing the relationship between partisanship and exit examination policy in the United States. With
this data it will not only be possible to determine the party, if there is one, that is generally associated with passing exit examination policies, but also the likelihood of officials in both parties to pass such a policy in a state that does not yet have one. The results, as expressed in the above fashion, will therefore indicate both the past and likely future direction of exit examination policy, at least as it relates to partisan state leadership.

Finally, Hypothesis B.2 specifically merits an analysis of unified and divided Democratic and Republican presence in state governance systems. Measuring how unified or divided a state is requires using the above data from the NGA, NCSL, and Dubin (2007) and noting which states have passed exit examination legislation under full partisan control or split partisan control. I measure “unified” governance as all states that have passed exit examination legislation under a governor and state legislature of the same political party, and I measure “divided” governance as all states that have passed exit examination legislation under a governor and state legislature of varying partisan identities. Regardless of gubernatorial party affiliation, any state with a split party legislature is classified as a state under divided governance.

**Results & Analysis**

Findings suggest that a centralized education governance system is no more likely than a decentralized system to support exit examination legislation. Figure 3 represents governance strength and exit examination policy adoption by year, and it is clear in this graph that the degree of education governance centralization in a given state does not
significantly correlate with exit examination policy approval over time. Table 1 corroborates this finding, demonstrating the randomness with which states have adopted exit examinations under a particular governance structure. Table 1 additionally helps to show that this randomness has persisted over time.

**Figure 3 Here**

**Table 1 Here**

Overall, the percentage of non-exit examination states within each of the levels of centralization closely mirrors the percentage of exit examination states within each of the levels of centralization (see Table 2). A chi-squared test on these data reveals a highly statistically insignificant relationship between how centralized a state is and exit examination policy existence, thus further signifying a lack of correlation in any direction between centralized governance and exit examination policy production.

**Table 2 Here**

The chi-squared test assesses how the degree of centralization in a state (0-3) varies among states with an exit examination policy and total states. In Table 3 the expected frequencies are calculated using the percentages that each of the degrees of centralization is present in all states. The observed frequencies indicate the number of states with exit examination policies that are governed under each of the four centralization structures. A statistically significant chi-squared test would imply that the type of centralization models found in certain states is in some way related to having an exit examination policy. Within the context of Hypothesis A, a statistically significant result could led support to the idea that more centralized states are overall more likely to be affiliated with exit examination policy. As is indicated in Table 3, however, the
difference between exit examination states and total states is not statistically significant with a p-value of .7336. In fact it is possible to say that this finding is hugely insignificant. Stated concisely, the distribution of centralization models among the 50 states is approximately equivalent to the distribution of centralization models among only states with an exit examination. Centralized governance is not a strong indicator of exit examination policy.

**Table 3 Here**

Additional analysis on the most centralized and most decentralized states reveals a surprisingly even relationship between these types of governance models. Among all 30 states that adopted an exit examination policy between 1975 and 2012, 60% of these were partially or fully decentralized and 40% were partially or fully centralized. Viewing these results as a sort of prediction model for future exit examination policies, it is possible to contend that there is a near equal chance of an exit examination policy state being affiliated with either centralized or decentralized governance. It would not be imprudent to additionally articulate that in the past exit examinations have slightly more often been passed under decentralized leadership, though this finding is not statistically significant.

Studying the entire history of exit examination policies in the United States allows analysis to additionally explore a relationship between centralization and policy throughout time. Results as displayed in Figure 3 and Table 1 reveal a negligible impact of time on the variables, as evidenced in the widespread frequencies of each
centralization model throughout the 36 years of policy activity. Although the promise of a prediction model already seems futile considering the above analysis of states that have passed exit examination policy, a trend of increased centralization among states in recent years, for example, may have provided the requisite inferential data to suggest a recent or growing trend toward greater centralization when discussing the passage of exit examination policies. But because no one model (0-3) is more or less active within any given cluster of dates, it is not possible to deduce such a trend.

As a final way of assessing Hypothesis A, I examined if there may exist a geographical relationship among the levels of centralization, and if in turn this relationship extends into the exit examination policy space. Figure 4 represents the variance in education governance structure models overall, wherein the randomness of model dispersion is highly evident. Figure 5 confines the study of education governance models only within exit examination states, and here the governance models are similarly randomly distributed. Figures 4 and 5 render visual the data that Table 2 put forth: centralization models are as randomly distributed throughout exit examination states as they are throughout all states. What the maps add to this conclusion is a spatial dimension, and through this we may again return to an exploration of a possible prediction model. Because there is no strong clustering of centralization models in any given area of the country, and because the spread of centralization models is similar among exit examination states and non-exit examination states alike, it is not possible to reliably predict the passage of exit examination policy based on where in the country a given state is located.
Results of Hypothesis B suggest that partisan control is a more reliable indicator of exit examination policy passage rates than centralized governance. Of the 30 states that have passed exit examination legislation at some point in their histories, half of these (15) were under unified Democratic leadership and three were under unified Republican leadership. The remainders were under divided leadership. To reiterate the distinction between unified and divided partisan leadership, unified leadership refers to the incidence of both the governor and state legislature belonging to the same political party. When comparing partisan state leadership in this way, unified Democratic states were five times more likely than unified Republican states to pass an exit examination policy. The figures discussed in this section (Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9) illustrate the relationship between partisan state education governance and exit examination policy passage both over time and geographically.

Although any state governance system with varying partisan influence is classified as being under divided leadership, it is possible for some states to be more divided than others. A state with a governor and legislature each affiliating with a different party, Democrat or Republican, represents the most highly divided state, as each party exerts a stable presence against the opposing party. A state with a split legislature,

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14 States under Democratic leadership at the time exit examination policy passed: AL, AR, CA, FL, GA, LA, MD, MS, NV, NJ, NC, OR, SC, TX, WA
15 States under Republican leadership at the time exit examination policy passed: AZ, ID, UT
while still under divided control, necessarily affords one party more of a presence than
the other because the governor will share his or her partisan affiliation with one of the
branches of the state legislature. Thus, the former model represents states under pure
divided leadership, and the latter model represents states under partisan divided
leadership.

Of the 12 states that passed exit examination legislation under divided leadership,
only six\textsuperscript{16} of these were under pure divided leadership with neither Democratic nor
Republican influence greater than the other. The remaining six\textsuperscript{17} divided leadership
states were under divided Democratic leadership in some form, indicating that the
Democratic Party enjoyed a decidedly greater presence than the Republican Party. In
each of these six states, the governor was a Democrat working with a split legislature.
While it could be argued that these six states fall under the category of split control
because the legislature is split, I suggest that the incidence of a Democratic governor
combined with dual party advocacy in the legislature amounts to an overall greater
Democratic presence, hence the classification of these six states as partisan divided
leadership.

After accounting for Democratic influence beyond just unified Democratic
leadership, overall Democratic presence increases to 21 of the 30 states that have passed
exit examination policies and has therefore proven to be seven times more likely than
Republican leadership (three states), unified or divided, to pass an exit examination
policy.

\textsuperscript{16} States under fully divided, or split leadership at the time exit examination policy passed: AK, CT, MA, MN, TN, VA
\textsuperscript{17} States under divided Democratic leadership at the time exit examination policy passed: DE, IN, NM, NY, OH, OK
Figures 6 and 7 indicate the relationship over time between state partisanship and exit examination policy with respect to the governor and the legislature, respectively. Because these graphs span from 1975-2012 it is possible to explore the possible correlation, if any, between partisanship and exit examination policy over time. It is evident in both Figure 6 and Figure 7 that Republican governors and legislatures are overall randomly distributed among all remaining Democratic states that have enacted an exit examination policy. There is little evidence, then, to support any sort of longitudinal trend in exit examination policy adoption. Rather, the better conclusion is that Democrats are considerably more frequently affiliated with passing exit examination policies, and this conclusion has withstood the test of time. There is no point in history where the Republican Party has been more frequently affiliated with passing exit examination policy.

**Figure 6 Here**

**Figure 7 Here**

Exploring geographical variance is particularly wise when discussing state partisanship because despite the overwhelming movement toward increased party nationalization for both Democrats and Republicans, any strong regional trends would pose an obstacle for the generalizability of my findings across the United States. Figure 8 combines the partisan affiliation of each state’s governor and legislature, and uses this to map the spread of states that passed an exit examination policy under aggregate Democratic, Republican, or split control.
Figure 9 adjusts Figure 8 to account for divided control. Rather than labeling all states under some sort of split control as “split,” Figure 9 labels as Democratic all split states under divided Democratic control and labels as Republican all split states under divided Republican control. States with seemingly even control between the two parties, such as states with a Republican governor and fully Democratic state legislature, remain as split (fully divided) states on this map. With this adjustment, the number of states under Democratic control increases to 21. Among the 30 states that have passed exit examinations, these 21 states seem to be randomly distributed across the country. Conversely, the only states labeled as being under Republican control, unified or divided, at the time their exit examination policy was passed remain as Idaho, Utah, and Arizona.

**Figure 8 Here**

**Figure 9 Here**

**Discussion**

Overall, results from Hypothesis A demonstrate that centralized governance does not correlate with exit examination policy on a statistical, temporal, or geographical level. The insignificant relationship between centralization and exit examination policy suggests that we can fully reject my first hypothesis. A highly centralized education governance model is an unreliable predictor of exit examination policy success. Aggregate data as collected in Table 2 demonstrate the weakness of the relationship, and time-sensitive data as collected in Figure 3 and Table 1 show that there is not a consistent relationship when looking to specific time periods. Finally, Figures 4 and 5 reveal that
no one model of centralization is significantly more common than another throughout the United States. It is possible, therefore, to conclude with assertion that the relationship between centralized education governance and exit examination policy is weak. Further, the persistent lack of a correlation between governance and testing data over time and from a geographical standpoint corroborate the conclusion that governance is not an effective predictor of exit examination policy success.

Network Theory, despite its widespread support in the literature, does not seem to provide a reliable means to examine the history of exit examination legislation. Policymakers throughout the United States have enacted exit examination legislation with comparable frequency, regardless of how centralized their state may have been. Henig’s (2009) research suggests increased education policy production in highly centralized states, and as is the case with the more general Network Theory, my data do not support this supposed policy growth.

Perhaps when discussing “policy,” Henig and others treated the word as an umbrella term related to the aggregate number of bills drafted and passed across all issue areas, or across all issue areas within education. If so, it is important to explore why Network Theory does not extend into exit examination legislation. There are several questions to ask in order to help orient further research into why Network Theory may not be a suitable model for the analysis of exit examination policy production in the United States. Some of these questions appear below.

Is it inappropriate to use a concept like Network Theory to zoom in so specifically to one issue, such as exit examinations? This question is an important one, as it addresses the importance of scope and specificity in analyzing research results through a particular
theoretical lens. It is possible that Network Theory is a highly dependable philosophy when attempting to analyze policy production over-all in a highly centralized system, but the theory breaks down for highly specific issue areas. If this is indeed the case, then I would be curious to know where exactly Network Theory weakens: education policies, accountability policies within education, exit examination policies specifically, or somewhere in the middle. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore Network Theory in such depth, but perhaps the answer to why Network Theory served as such a poor predictor for exit examination policy production lies within this sort of exploration.

What type of policy is an exit examination? Many of the scholars cited in this research discuss the relationship between centralized state governance and educational policy outcomes (Mokher 2010; Henig 2009; Manna and Harwood 2011; McIntosh 2012). While an exit examination is most relevant to students and schools, there may exist a better way to analyze exit examination policy than as a type of education policy specifically. It may be, for example, more prudent to view exit examination legislation as accountability legislation or merely as a reflection of a desire for increased data structures within states. If either of these possibilities proves to be valid then it would be improper to analyze Network Theory in the sole context of education. Network Theory, in other words, may be exceptionally relevant to states passing education policies but not so for states wishing to pass legislation related to overall accountability or a desire for more state-level data.

The most significant takeaway from testing Hypothesis A is that centralized education governance does not have a relationship with exit examination policy. While this finding contradicts what might be expected in the literature, it is important to
consider why Network Theory was a poor lens through which to interpret exit examination policymaking. The questions and subsequent discussions above address these considerations, focusing specifically on different ways to investigate exit examination policy as it relates to state education governance structure.

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Results from Hypothesis B indicate that there is indeed a positive relationship between state Democratic partisan affiliation and exit examination policy. This relationship endures when examined statistically, temporally, and geographically. Democratic exit examination states outnumber Republican exit examination states 15 to three, and this relationship increases to 21 to three when expanding research to states under divided Democratic and divided Republican control. Historically as well, Democrats have consistently passed exit examination policies more frequently than Republicans. Finally, exit examination states under Democratic leadership are spread across all regions of the United States, which suggests that a) there do not seem to be any significant geographical trends with regard to exit examination policies and the partisan affiliation of state leaders passing said policies; and b) partisan policy activity does not seem to be restricted to certain regions of the country, which is an idea widely supported in the consulted literature.

With that said, Figures 8 and 9 each beg the question of why the only three states that passed an exit examination policy under Republican control are adjacent to one another. There is a notable gap in exit examination policy in the mountain and plains
states, which merits some exploration and analysis. Idaho, Utah, and Arizona serve as an unexpected border between the west coast, which is comprised entirely of states that have passed an exit examination policy, and the large section mountain and plains states, which is comprised entirely of states that have never passed such a policy. With occasional exceptions, most of these non-exit examination states have a sustained history with Republican Party affiliation (Dubin 2007). Perhaps Idaho, Utah, and Arizona represent states in this region under similarly Republican control that passed exit examination policy because they are more closely linked, at least geographically, to west coast states that approved exit examination policies under unified Democratic leadership. While regional partisanship has been increasingly less prevalent in favor of greater party nationalization, a geographical cause for partisan exit examination passage may still be possible. Alternatively, although the geographical proximity of Idaho, Utah, and Arizona is a compelling circumstance meriting some further exploration, it is possible that the regional concentration of Republican-approved exit examination policies is but a coincidence. Because exit examination legislation approved under Democratic leadership is so widespread with no overwhelming regional cohesion, I am inclined to believe that Idaho, Utah, and Arizona are indeed random Republican states that happened to approve exit examination legislation regardless of their geographical proximity. Perhaps a deeper exploration of a potential geographical relationship is a compelling topic for further study in future research on education policy in the United States, but to effectively test this type of regional party influence, particularly with regard to exit examination policies specifically, would be an undertaking inappropriate for the scope of this present research.
Overall, while it is perhaps most conclusive to compare the effect of unified Democratic versus unified Republican state leadership on exit examination policy, it would be imprudent to not recognize any other partisan impact, regardless of whether it is perhaps smaller in scope or less certain than unified partisan policy behavior. Distinguishing unified from divided partisan leadership offers an opportunity to underscore the impact of Democratic leadership at different levels of party strength.

Although the results of this research may appear to strongly support my second hypothesis that Democrats are most strongly affiliated with exit examination policy, it is important to also assess Democratic and Republican leadership in non-exit examination states in order to make country-wide comparisons. Overwhelming Democratic leadership in exit examination policy production means little if there exists overwhelming Democratic leadership at the state level on the whole. Accurately construing the effect of partisanship on policy, then, requires comparing levels of partisan state leadership overall to levels of partisan activity with exit examination policies more specifically. If the proportions align then partisanship may play an insignificant role in policy production, but if they differ significantly then it may be possible to determine which party exercises proportionally more control over a policy area than would be expected if each party contributed comparably to certain policies.

In order to set up my study to allow for country-wide partisan comparisons, I continue my analysis with non-exit examination states. Figure 10 displays the number of states not passing exit examination policies every year according to policy affiliation. Looking at the earlier years of enactment, non-exit examination states under Democratic control far outnumber their counterparts under Republican control. Given this fact, an
exaggerated Democratic presence in exit examination policy is expected. A higher frequency of Democratic state leadership naturally predicts a higher frequency of Democrats in the states supporting exit examination policies. In order to test if the partisanship variable is salient, then more non-exit examination states under Democratic leadership should be adopting exit exams than non-exit examination states under Republican leadership.

Figure 10 reveals that over time non-exit examination states under Republican control start to increase in frequency just as non-exit examination states under Democratic control start to decrease in frequency. The trend lines in Figure 10 are telling, as they indicate whether non-exit examination states are more or less likely to become exit examination states given their party affiliation. Because the Republican trend line has a positive slope, therein is implied that more non-exit examination states under Republican control each year remain without an exit examination than adopt one, which is the exact opposite trend reflected in the steeper negative slope of states under Democratic control.

**Figure 10 Here**

With this data, it is possible to deduce that a non-exit examination state under Democratic control is more likely to adopt an exit examination policy. This bolsters the first finding discussed in Hypothesis B analysis, which reveals that most states approving an exit examination policy were under the majority leadership of Democrats.

Taken together, these two conclusions demonstrate that the Democratic Party is much more friendly than the Republican Party toward exit examination policies across
the United States. Not only have most policies been enacted under Democratic leadership, but a state under Democratic control is overall more likely than a state under Republican control to propose and approve such a policy.

**Conclusion**

This study centers on the relationships between centralized governance and exit examination policy, and between partisan governance and exit examination policy. In testing Hypotheses A and B, this research also examines the potential effect of time on both centralization and partisanship. Including exit examination policy data for all 50 states from the years 1975–2012 allows for a comprehensive look at the effects of centralization and partisanship on policy throughout the entire history and geography of exit examinations.

Overall, my hypotheses yield results of different strength and significance. Findings for Hypothesis A, concerning centralization, are weak and therefore serve as a poor predictor for the future of exit examination policy development. Highly centralized state education leadership is almost exactly as likely as highly decentralized leadership to pass exit examination policy. Network Theory, and other similar theories as outlined in the literature and theory, do not seem to apply to exit examination policy. Perhaps Network Theory does not extend to exit examinations or high-stakes education policy, or perhaps the theory is flawed or incomplete. It is beyond the scope of this research to explore and perhaps conclude why Network Theory did not effectively predict the environments most conducive to exit examination policy, but it is certain that there is a
disconnect between the literature studied in this paper and the results of my first hypothesis.

McIntosh (2012) claims that certain states have faced policy challenges related to centralized governance in the development of exit examination policy, yet my results strongly suggest that states have consistently passed policies regardless of these alleged challenges. Perhaps these “challenges” refer to additional time for debate, discussion, and policy drafting, but the overall rate of exit examination policy passage has not seemed to change based on how centralized a given state’s education leaders are. If these challenges that McIntosh references are indeed present, results from my research would suggest that they are not so devastating as to prevent or impede exit examination policy production.

While Hypothesis A is overall ineffectual, my failure to reject the null hypothesis\(^\text{18}\) has important implications for the future of exit examination policy development. The legislation is not dependent upon or even correlated with strong centralized leadership, so in theory any state’s education leaders have the same chance of passing exit examination legislation as any other leaders working in any other governance structure. Furthermore, results of this research reveal that a governor with a great degree of direct control over the education leaders in a certain state is no more likely to be able to pass exit examination policy than a governor who has limited or negligible control over the education leaders in another state. In other words, a highly centralized system does not automatically set the stage for high-accountability legislation, as Network Theory seems to suggest.

\(^{18}\)The null hypothesis in opposition to Hypothesis A is: centralized leadership has no significant effect on a state’s likelihood of passing exit examination legislation.
Results from my Hypothesis B partisanship study are strong and demonstrate a highly significant relationship between Democratic state leadership and exit examination policy. In addition to revealing a clear and powerful connection between Democratic leadership and exit examination policy passage, my results provide the support for a prediction model concerning the future of exit examination policy enactment. Examining the policy behaviors of states without active exit examination policies reveals that Democrats are likely to pass an exit examination policy in future years, whereas Republicans are likely to avoid such a policy. The relationship between the trend lines in Figure 10 best illustrates this dichotomy between Democratic and Republican partisan control in states.

Because the Hypothesis B findings strongly bolster much of the extant literature on the relationship between partisan state politics and policy outcomes, future research may explore if state partisanship shares a significant relationship with other high-stakes education policies overseen at the state level. Variables of interest include whether or not students have access to alternative routes to receive their diploma, the rise of end-of-course exams over comprehensive exit exams, and how many subjects an exit examination tests for proficiency. State governance partisanship may very well play a substantial, if not leading role in these sorts of initiatives, particularly as they relate to educational accountability.

Other variables to explore include the role of geography and, by extension, regional policy diffusion, and how well exit examination policies persist after their initial enactment. Figure 2 reveals two separate drops, when Utah and North Carolina each
decided to abolish their exit examination policy.¹⁹ A deep exploration into what motivated these decisions, accompanied by a detailed account of the policy environment at the time of policy revocation, may reveal a new and important dimension for the role of partisanship in policy.

Ultimately, this research has noteworthy implications for both state education governance and standardized testing policy across the country. As multi-state initiatives, such as the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC and SmarterBalanced testing consortia, begin to gain momentum, the results of my research may inform the future direction and likely success of these programs. As of yet, for example, exit examinations do not explicitly exist within the goals of any of these initiatives, but I expect that states under Democratic control will be more inclined to incorporate such a policy should the opportunity arise. Similarly, I expect these new initiatives to be more readily approved within states that currently use exit examinations, although if they are under Republican leadership at the time these initiatives are passed, I cannot extend my full confidence.

While results of my research afford me a certain degree of confidence in the analysis and predictions related to the future of standardized testing, this confidence is limited by virtue of the narrow scope of this paper. Even if Democratic states may express more of an affinity toward exit examination proposals within the Common Core framework, my findings are not comprehensive enough to offer a prediction model for the future of cut score setting practices, the nature of high school standardized tests that are not exit examinations, or the potential roles that states may fill throughout the

¹⁹ In early 2006 Utah abolished exit examinations under unified Republican leadership; In late 2010 North Carolina abolished exit examinations under unified Democratic leadership.
development and delivery of standardized tests. Each of these topics is highly relevant in today’s education environment, and perhaps future research on the relationship between state education governance and student testing will begin to address some of these nuances and practices that will come to define public education in the 21st century.

Exit examinations are a growing and evolving phenomenon, and upcoming policy initiatives may usher them even more strongly into education policy discourse. This study only begins to explore the possible role of exit examination policy in the United States, and future research on the issue is highly salient in our 21st century age of education accountability.
Works Cited


Appendix

Figure 1: Map of all States that have Passed Exit Examination Legislation
Figure 2: Active Exit Examination Policies by Year

# States with Active Exit Examination Policies

Year
Figure 3: Governance Strength and Exit Examination Policy

- 3: Centralized
- 2: Somewhat Centralized
- 1: Somewhat Decentralized
- 0: Decentralized
Table 1: Number of States that Adopted Exit Examination Policy, by degree of centralization and by year

**KEY:**

0 = Decentralized  
1 = Somewhat Decentralized  
2 = Somewhat Centralized  
3 = Centralized

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**Totals:**

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<th>3</th>
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<td># States</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>
Table 2: Comparing Governance Structure among States with and without Exit Examination Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Centralization</th>
<th>Exit Examination States</th>
<th>Non Exit Examination States</th>
<th>Total States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 (Decentralized)</td>
<td>7 23.3%</td>
<td>5 25%</td>
<td>12 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (Somewhat Decentralized)</td>
<td>11 36.7%</td>
<td>3 15%</td>
<td>14 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Somewhat Centralized)</td>
<td>7 23.3%</td>
<td>6 30%</td>
<td>13 26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Centralized)</td>
<td>5 16.7%</td>
<td>6 30%</td>
<td>11 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 (100%)</td>
<td>20 (100%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Comparing Observed and Expected Values for the Number of States that have Passed Exit Examination Legislation within the Four Degrees of Centralization
(“expected” values derived from percentages in “Total States” column)

| Degree of Centralization | Exit Examination States (observed || expected) | Total States |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 0 (Decentralized)        | 7 || 7.2 | 12 | 24% |
| 1 (Somewhat Decentralized)| 11 || 8.4 | 14 | 28% |
| 2 (Somewhat Centralized) | 7 || 7.8 | 13 | 26% |
| 3 (Centralized)          | 5 || 6.6 | 11 | 22% |
|                          | 30 (100%)                                      | 50 (100%)   |

Chi-square = 1.280 (d.f. = 3; p = .7336)
Figure 4: Map of Governance Strength in All States

Governance Strength of All States

Governance Strength:
- 0: Decentralized
- 1: Somewhat Decentralized
- 2: Somewhat Centralized
- 3: Centralized
Figure 5: Map of Governance Strength in States that have Passed Exit Examination Policy

Governance Strength of Exit Examination States

Governance Strength: 0: Decentralized  1: Somewhat Decentralized  2: Somewhat Centralized  3: Centralized
Figure 6: Partisanship and Exit Examination Policy
(Governor)
Figure 7: Partisanship and Exit Examination Policy (Legislature)
Figure 8: Map of Partisanship in States that have Passed Exit Examination Policy

Partisan Affiliation of Exit Examination States

Combined Governor and Legislature Party:
- Blue: Unified Democrat
- Purple: Divided
- Red: Unified Republican
Figure 9: Adjusted Map of Partisanship in States that Have Passed Exit Examination Policy
(all states under divided control recolored to reflect partisan affiliation)

Partisan Affiliation of Exit Examination States
Adjusted for Unified and Divided Partisan Control

Combined Governor and Legislature Party:
- Blue: Unified/Divided Democrat
- Purple: Divided
- Red: Unified/Divided Republican
Figure 10: States Without Exit Examinations, by Party Control

*Split-Party States Excluded from Model