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Early Start

Andrew Karch

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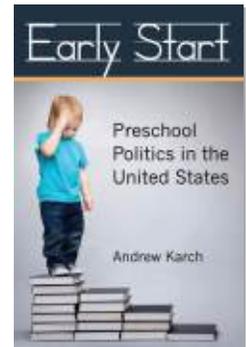
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I | Early Childhood Policy and the American Welfare State

Scholars have long been captivated by the distinctive features of the American welfare state. One recent focus has been the pronounced role of the private sector in the pursuit of social policy objectives. The American welfare state is a divided one in which many of the duties carried out by governments elsewhere are left in the hands of the private sector.¹ Various tax subsidies and regulations encourage private actors, such as employers, to provide benefits like health insurance and pensions (Hacker 2002, 7). As a result, the American economy is characterized by a “comparatively high level of private-sector spending upon health, education, and savings for old age” (R. Rose 1989, 113). The private sector plays a large role in early childhood policy. Of the 4,835,000 American children who attended nursery school in 2010, 2,059,000 (42.6 percent) were enrolled in private schools.² Private enrollment outnumbered public enrollment for most of the late twentieth century. As late as 1999, the majority of children in nursery school attended private institutions.

Most public early childhood programs in the United States are targeted initiatives that serve children who are from low-income families or who are considered disadvantaged. Dozens of public programs at the national and state levels are compensatory rather than universal. The decentralization of these government programs highlights the role of state governments as an important locus of decision making. State governments are “integral to almost all means-tested and some social insurance programs” (Howard 1999, 424), yet their impact is often overlooked. A complete understanding of American social policy necessitates attention to both private-sector activity and state politics. Conventional explanations of welfare state development offer limited insight into these two defining features of contemporary early childhood policy. This chapter reviews their strengths and weaknesses before turning to the analytical advantages of a

developmental perspective that treats policymaking as a long-term causal chain. Critical junctures, venue shopping, and policy feedback help explain the current structure and politics of preschool education in the United States.

Conventional Explanations: Political Culture, Interest Groups, and Institutions

Education policy is difficult to categorize. Some scholars describe investments in education as developmental initiatives designed to spur economic activity, noting that they rank among the best predictors of economic growth and productivity (Peterson 1995, 65). Others focus on the distributive implications of education spending, arguing that “skills and education are at the core of the welfare state” (Iversen and Stephens 2008, 602). Both arguments contain a grain of truth. Education spending is related to economic performance, but it is also a free public service that can have redistributive consequences.

The overlapping objectives of educational programs help explain why this policy sector has long fit uneasily into comparative scholarship on social policy. One pioneering study concluded that “education is special” and excluded it from its study of the welfare state (Wilensky 1975, 3). The status of education policy represents a particular challenge for scholars interested in the United States. The American welfare state has been called “underdeveloped” and “incomplete” (Orloff 1988, 37), yet the country created the most comprehensive system of public schooling in the world (Tyack and Cuban 1995). This section reviews three prominent explanations of welfare state development. While each of them offers insight into early childhood policy in the United States, none provides a complete and convincing account.

Political Culture

Cultural accounts attribute policy outcomes to societal values and beliefs about the operation and justification of government. Values like individualism and an emphasis on private property and the free market cause Americans to place a greater emphasis on personal responsibility than on collective responsibility. Americans believe that hard work and personal effort are the keys to success. They view government as wasteful and inefficient and as something that should be used in emergency situations only.

The distinctive structure of American social policy might therefore be attributed to Americans' core beliefs about the justification and operation of government. According to one cultural account, "[T]he state plays a more limited role in America than elsewhere because Americans, more than other people, want it to play a limited role" (King 1973, 418).

Values like individualism and limited government intervention seem especially resonant in the context of early childhood policy. They imply that child-rearing practices should remain the private province of parents, and they suggest that government involvement is appropriate only when families are in crisis. Indeed, opponents of public investment often caution against government encroachment on parental prerogatives and argue that parents' educational choices should generally be free from either direct or indirect state interference (Cobb 1992; Gilles 1996). In the early 1970s, for example, one critic of child development legislation asserted that "autonomy of decision making must be an essential part of any child care arrangement . . . because it is right and just that Americans control their own lives" (Rothman 1973, 42). The primary strength of cultural accounts is their ability to account for these ubiquitous rhetorical claims.

The cultural explanation of American early childhood education is problematic for several reasons.³ Values like individualism and equality can be interpreted in different ways that are not necessarily consistent with one another (Verba and Orren 1985). The state is the major supplier of education in the United States, and one cultural account attributes this outcome to the triumph of equality over other cherished American values like limited government. Education was portrayed as the great equalizer, and the state only competed with private institutions in a very small way (King 1973, 420). Contemporary analyses of public opinion suggest that large majorities of Americans view education as a government responsibility and favor greater spending on it (Howard 2007, 113). A comprehensive system of public education represents a challenge for the cultural perspective.

In addition, the connection between broad ideals and concrete policy solutions is often tenuous. The outcome with which this book is concerned is a complex amalgamation of national, state, and local government programs supplemented by private-sector service providers. Furthermore, governmental initiatives like Head Start and state prekindergarten programs directly provide education and care for young children. Other programs, including the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, provide indirect support to the private sector. The mechanism linking values like autonomy to this wide-ranging public-sector activity remains opaque.⁴

Political culture connotes deep and enduring beliefs about the proper role and scope of government. It is difficult to link those beliefs to concrete outcomes.

Another weakness of cultural accounts is their inability to explain policy change or its timing. The deep and enduring beliefs that make up a political culture are not susceptible to change. Cultural accounts are therefore “too holistic and essentialist to give us the explanatory leverage we need to account for variations in the fate of different social policies, or for changes over time in the fate of similar proposals” (Skocpol 1992, 17). They struggle to explain both the existence of an extensive public system of elementary and secondary education and the complicated mixture of public and private programs that exist in preschool education. Values and beliefs provide limited analytical leverage over new directions in policymaking or the emergence of new issues on the political agenda.

Finally, political culture cannot explain the near passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, a foundational moment in American early childhood policy. Both supporters and opponents viewed the bill as a step toward the creation of a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services, and it received bipartisan support in both houses of Congress before being vetoed by President Richard Nixon. The congressional endorsement suggests that deep-seated beliefs about the proper role of government are insufficient to account for outcomes in this policy arena. One historian explains, “That Congress could be convinced to accept legislation even hinting at altering many of the strongest and most fervently held values about the role of government and the family was remarkable” (McCathren 1981, 120). In sum, while supporters and opponents of public investment frame their arguments in terms of equality and autonomy, respectively, the value content of their arguments cannot explain the fate of various proposals to expand the governmental role in early childhood policy.

Interest Groups

Interest group activity may help explain the contemporary fragmentation of early childhood policy in the United States. Specifically, the respective political strength of advocates and opponents of governmental intervention may account for the absence of a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services.⁵ The nominal beneficiaries of early childhood programs are “children [who] don’t vote; thus, their political cause has always been weak” (Grubb 1987, 1). In 1975, Senator

Walter Mondale (D-MN) explained, “There is something about the politics of children we have yet to solve; maybe it’s very simple. A friend of mine, a very conservative one, once said, ‘You know, you should do more for old people and forget these kids, they can’t vote,’ and maybe that’s the answer.”⁶

Several observers describe the absence of a strong, cohesive children’s lobby as important. Jule Sugarman, who directed the Office of Child Development during the Nixon administration, explained, “I think the advocates for children have never been organized in a way to sustain public pressure, and that is why children do get short-shrifted in this country.”⁷ Longtime advocate Marian Wright Edelman concurred, “Kids have been outside the political process and they’ve not had the kind of systematic advocacy that’s required of any group in this country that’s going to have any chance of anything.”⁸ The interest groups that lobby on behalf of young children and their families tend to be small organizations that compete with one another, such as the liberal Children’s Defense Fund and the conservative Family Research Council.

A lack of unity among advocates of government intervention has exacerbated their political weakness. They have been described as a “divided constituency” (Michel 1999). For example, they have long disagreed about the appropriate content of early childhood programs. The split in the early twentieth century between educational and custodial programs has evolved into a conflict between the communities concerned with elementary school and early childhood education, over purposes, methods, and control (Grubb 1987). Constituencies who share the goal of expanding access to preschool services often work at cross-purposes, taking different sides on proposals that attempt to serve this objective.

The coalition opposing government intervention, in contrast, has been more cohesive. The mid-1970s marked the beginning of a conservative resurgence in American politics.⁹ Ambitious initiatives in early childhood policy offended economic and social conservatives, who derided them as an undesirable expansion of the public sector and governmental interference in the family. Opponents viewed themselves as defending the prerogatives of stay-at-home mothers and the general principle of parental choice in all matters of child rearing (Morgan 2006). Their grassroots mobilization efforts sparked an avalanche of letters to Congress in the 1970s, and they continue to be active on matters of gender and family issues.

Interest group activity is an important part of preschool politics in the United States, but it is important not to overstate its significance as a causal factor. Even in the absence of a unified coalition, advocates of increased

public investment have achieved several important victories over the past four decades. National programs like Head Start and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit have grown significantly since the 1970s, and enrollment in and funding of state prekindergarten programs expanded dramatically in the 2000s. Much of this recent activity occurred at the state level.¹⁰ Interest group accounts struggle to explain why leading innovators in this policy arena include such conservative states as Georgia and Oklahoma.

Furthermore, congressional passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act suggests that, despite their lack of unity, supporters of increased public investment were sufficiently effective to move an ambitious piece of legislation through Congress. A coalition headed by Marian Wright Edelman was instrumental in drafting the proposal and formulating the legislative strategy that resulted in its passage. Although Nixon vetoed the bill, the content of the legislation and its passage represented a major break with the past. The veto predated the political mobilization of social conservatives. In fact, it contributed to their activation. It is therefore problematic to attribute the veto to interest group politics.

Interest groups affect the formation of public policy, but public policies also affect the positions that groups take and the strategies they employ. Supporters of increased public investment adjusted their interests, objectives, and political strategies as mothers of young children entered the workforce, preschool attendance soared, and public policies addressed these trends. Reformers accommodated their institutional and policy context, leading to shifting fault lines within the community concerned with early childhood education. The creation and expansion of various initiatives gave them distinct turf to defend. Supporters sometimes critiqued expansive proposals out of the concern that they would divert resources from their preferred program. Even limited government intervention in early childhood policy facilitated the organization and empowerment of constituencies with a stake in the status quo and fostered the fragmentation of the preschool coalition. As subsequent chapters of this book will demonstrate, this lack of unity among advocates is better characterized as an outgrowth of public policies than as their cause.

Institutions

Institutional accounts attribute policy outcomes to the constitutional structure that mediates societal demands. They focus on the extent to which this structure centralizes decision-making authority. The American

political system is noteworthy for its decentralization, which provides opponents of policy initiatives with multiple opportunities to block them. Opponents can defeat proposals at any of these veto points, whereas supporters must clear every hurdle if their proposal is to become law. In political systems with a large number of veto points, like the United States, the potential for policy change decreases (Tsebelis 1995). This institutional arrangement affords defenders of the status quo “a multiplicity of access points at which [they] can modify or exercise a veto over policy change” (Thomas 1975, 232). Due to their decentralizing impact, the core features of the American political system have been described as “inimical to welfare state expansion” (Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1993, 721).¹¹

Federalism, the balance of policymaking authority between the national government and the states, seems especially crucial in the context of education policy. Education periodically becomes a national issue, but “policy talk and policy action have taken place mostly at the state and local levels” (Tyack and Cuban 1995, 43). The vast majority of the cost of public education is paid out of state and local budgets, and local school boards and state departments of education exercise considerable discretion. One might trace the contemporary fragmentation of American early childhood policy to the decentralization of decision-making authority in the United States, placing special emphasis on federalism.¹²

The institutional perspective accounts convincingly for a foundational moment in early childhood policy. The near passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act illustrates the significance of the country’s constitutional structure. A presidential veto prevented the creation of a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services, suggesting that the decentralization of decision-making authority can stymie major policy change. Additional efforts to create a comprehensive national system were also defeated, and institutional accounts attribute these repeated defeats to the existence of a large number of veto points.

Institutional accounts are incomplete, however. Institutions reveal little about the preferences, identities, and resources of key political actors (Pierson 1995). Institutional accounts also struggle to explain policy change and its timing. The constitutional structure of the United States has been stable, but while some policy initiatives successfully navigated this institutional labyrinth, others did not. Institutional accounts struggle to explain this variation, because they shed limited light on the actual decision-making processes that determine policy outcomes.

Furthermore, the national government has been increasingly active in

education policymaking. National officials are “increasingly willing to suggest that [they] should have a significant role in decisions about important [education] matters” (Stout, Tallerico, and Scribner 1995, 14). According to one account, a “gradual process of nationalization occurred and transformed the politics of education from dominantly a local enterprise” (Cibulka 2001, 19).¹³ The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush during his first term, represents “the most significant intrusion of federal power in the history of American education” (Viteritti 2004, 80). Given this overall trend of increased national government involvement in education policymaking, the limited national movement in early childhood policy is all the more puzzling.

Policy Development and Preschool Politics

To isolate the origins of public policies, it is often necessary to “pay attention to processes that play out over considerable periods of time” (Pierson 2005, 34). A developmental approach must be “particularly sensitive to the temporal sequencing of causal factors and to the combination of distinct causal processes that become conjoined at distinct periods” (Katznelson 2003, 391). At a fundamental level, the main shortcoming of the three frameworks profiled in the preceding section is their inability to account for change over time. Cultural values are deep and enduring, multiple scholars describe long-standing dissension within the early childhood policy community (Michel 1999; Grubb 1987), and institutions are defined by their durability. Yet early childhood policy is a lively arena characterized by complicated social and political dynamics.

Forward-looking lawmakers did not establish the contemporary amalgamation of private-sector and public-sector preschool programs at a single moment. This complex and fragmented system evolved over time as various stakeholders reacted to shifting institutional terrain and to what had already transpired. The existing policy repertoire constrained the possibility of major shifts, serving as a “vital force shaping the alternatives perceived and the policies adopted” (Hecló 1974, 156). The durability of public policies can affect the likelihood of major change by altering the incentives and resources of political actors (Hacker 2002; Pierson 1993; R. Rose 1990). The contemporary fragmentation of early childhood policy is a by-product of the interactive relationship between politics and public policy, and accounts that do not take history into account overlook this crucial relationship.

This book argues that three concepts—critical junctures, venue shopping, and policy feedback—help explain the evolution of early childhood policy in the United States. These concepts provide a common analytical framework through which the historical complexities of social policy can be examined. By constructing and testing general claims about processes of long-term policy development, it becomes possible to develop a genuinely analytical history that is attentive to substantively and theoretically challenging questions of temporality and periodicity (Katznelson 2003, 391).¹⁴ The developmental approach represents an especially important shift for the study of education policy, where existing research typically focuses on policy analysis. Policy analysis provides valuable insights about how programs function but, unfortunately, “leads one toward static snapshots of phenomena that are more accurately represented as being in motion” (Sroufe 1995, 79).

Critical Junctures

Critical junctures are “crucial period[s] of transition” (Collier and Collier 1991, 29). They are important not only in and of themselves but also because they produce durable legacies. Embedded in this concept is the notion that several institutional or policy options are feasible at a given moment but that any actions taken or decisions made at that time will profoundly affect subsequent developments. These crucial founding moments send institutions or public policies down particular developmental paths and constrain future possibilities. Critical junctures are “leading determinants of how programs and policymaking develop, with outcomes during a crucial transition establishing distinct pathways or trajectories of growth” (Mayes 2004, 18). They leave a lasting mark on the political landscape, one that constrains future reform possibilities.

Critical junctures provide an opening for institutional or policy change, but they do not determine the form that it will take. Only the more limited claim that a significant change occurred is embedded in the concept. Critical junctures “do not guarantee any particular institutional outcome” (Jones-Correa 2000–2001, 567). The institutions or public policies that exist after a critical juncture differ from what preceded them. Thus the antecedent conditions that precede a critical juncture represent the baseline against which its consequences must be assessed (Collier and Collier 1991, 30).

The notion that decisions made or actions taken at a particular moment have long-term consequences makes intuitive sense. The concept of critical junctures contributes to scholars’ understanding of policy or insti-

tutional development by placing political developments “in historical context and in terms of processes unfolding over time and in relation to each other, within a broader context in which developments in one realm impinge on and shape developments in others” (Thelen 1999, 390). It emphasizes the importance of timing, sequencing, and the interaction of ongoing processes in political life. The impact of interest group activity or political alignments, for example, may depend on the institutional context and on what has already transpired. Understanding these interactions between ongoing political processes is a prerequisite for any effort to explain long-term outcomes.

The significance of antecedent conditions and change may seem problematic for an account of early childhood policy that describes a presidential veto as a critical juncture. A veto, by definition, leaves the status quo intact. The concept of venue shopping, however, helps explain why the veto did not halt the movement to increase the governmental role in preschool services. Instead, it redirected that movement by spurring advocates to seek more favorable institutional terrain for their policy goals. This venue shopping sparked reactions and counterreactions that shaped developments in this policy arena over the long term.

Venue Shopping

American political institutions diffuse power to a remarkable degree, and this decentralization is a double-edged sword. The dispersal of political authority provides multiple veto points for reform opponents, as institutional accounts emphasize, but each of these settings is also a point of access for reformers. Frustrated in one institutional venue, reformers can try to achieve their goals in another setting. In fact, the “many venues of American politics also allow new policy to find niches within which to flourish” (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1071). After losing a congressional battle, for example, advocates can turn to the executive branch, the federal courts, or state and local authorities. Decentralization can therefore lead to venue shopping, as advocates focus on the institutional setting in which they believe they are most likely to experience success.

Venue shopping implies that reformers can be strategic in pursuit of their goals. One study explains how “lobbyists themselves frequently speak of designing their advocacy strategies as if they were preparing for war, carefully selecting battlefields that play to their strengths at the expense of their enemies” (Holyoke 2003, 325). Such strategizing is possible because policy issues may be assigned to and decided in various institu-

tional settings. Changes in venue can occur even when issues have traditionally been assigned to specific institutions. For example, the traditional preeminence of subnational governments in education policymaking has recently been challenged by such national legislation as the No Child Left Behind Act (Viteritti 2004; McDonnell 2005).

Reformers who engage in venue shopping do not need to know in advance how their proposals will be received. They may search for favorable venues in several arenas simultaneously, or they may search through a trial-and-error process. They may continue their searches where they find initial success, and they may abandon efforts where their ideas are rejected (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1048). Changes in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program in the 1960s and early 1970s illustrate how reformers can experience success by venue shopping after their initial efforts have been defeated. Those “seeking to make AFDC more nationally uniform, more generous, and more widely available turned to the courts because their efforts had repeatedly met with failure in Congress” (Melnick 1994, 67). Their successes in the judicial system had profound consequences for welfare policy. Those who lose a policy debate have an incentive to change or attempt to change the venue in which the relevant decisions are made.

Venue shopping implies that studies of policy development in the United States must look beyond congressional and presidential activity to understand the dynamics of policymaking. The recent attention paid toward the role of the private sector in social provision is therefore a promising trend (Hacker 2002; Gottschalk 2000; Howard 1997). Other institutional venues, such as subnational governments, have received less attention. Studies of American federalism typically portray it as an impediment to the adoption of social policy (Robertson 1989; Hacker and Pierson 2002), but states and localities also represent an alternate institutional venue in which important policy decisions are made.

Recent research suggests that federalism can create opportunities for major policy change. It allows politicians at one level to build on the ideas and actions of their counterparts at other levels, generating positive feedback by accelerating certain trends and creating a bandwagon effect. Manna (2006) describes a process of “borrowing strength” whereby policy entrepreneurs working at one level of government can affect the policymaking agenda by leveraging the license and capacity that exist at another level. His compelling study of federalism and the national education policy agenda suggests that it is a mistake to view federalism solely as an obstacle to policy change. This insight is especially important for scholars of

education policy, an arena in which “playing-field boundaries are in perpetual motion, and political arenas are constantly shifting boundaries where governing powers between national, state and local units of government are shared” (Scribner, Reyes, and Fusarelli 1995, 203). Early childhood policy exemplifies this dynamic, with a history that has taken place on several terrains in the public and private sectors (Michel 1999, 6).

The opportunities provided by American federalism help explain why it is appropriate to describe Nixon’s veto as a critical juncture. The veto provoked responses in alternate institutional venues that provided the framework within which early childhood policy subsequently evolved. Thwarted at the national level, at least in terms of their most ambitious goals, preschool advocates modified their congressional campaign and sought more-favorable institutional venues for their concerns. Their successes, many of which occurred at the state level, had profound long-term consequences for the evolution of preschool education and the politics surrounding it.

Policy Feedback

Critical junctures are periods of change or transition that manifest lasting political legacies. Without this long-term impact, they would not be critical (Pierson 2000, 263). Existing research on critical junctures has been criticized, however, for inadequately specifying “the mechanisms that translate critical junctures into lasting political legacies” (Thelen 1999, 388). Studies invoking this concept must explain what sustains the institutional arrangements that emerge. Mechanisms of production link the critical juncture to its legacy, and mechanisms of reproduction perpetuate the ongoing institutional or political processes (Collier and Collier 1991, 31). This book uses the concept of policy feedback to denote these mechanisms of production and reproduction.

Public policy has traditionally been treated as the outcome of broader social and political processes. Under certain circumstances, however, this causal arrow is reversed. A policy’s emergence and continued existence can affect the possibilities for future policymaking by altering the social and political environment. Public policies affect the possibilities for future policymaking by shaping the identities, interests, and incentives of key social actors (Skocpol 1992). The existing policy repertoire can influence the goals of important constituencies. For example, it can alter their attitudes toward governmental intervention and the form it should take (Gottschalk 2000; Morgan 2006).

One significant form of policy feedback is the empowerment of social groups with a stake in the status quo. The adoption of a policy can facilitate the organization of its beneficiaries. They might mobilize to protect the policy against political attack and to press for its extension. The participatory patterns of senior citizens in the United States are illustrative. Most interest groups representing the providers and recipients of government services to the elderly were formed after the adoption of Social Security, Medicare, and the Older Americans Act of 1965 (Walker 1991, 30). Several scholars detect a similar dynamic in health care policy, where stakeholder mobilization helped prevent the creation of national health insurance (Mayes 2004; Quadagno 2005). The establishment of new programs can restructure the long-term interests of politicians and interest groups (Hacker 2002; Pierson 1993).

The political clout of program beneficiaries can constrain the options that policymakers possess. Groups that reach a certain size are politically powerful, and elected officials who prefer another policy arrangement will feel pressure to accommodate them (Pierson 2004, 73). Reforms that do not mobilize a strong supporting coalition, in contrast, are not likely to have a long shelf life (Patashnik 2003, 2008). Furthermore, the fragmentation of political authority in the American political system provides certain advantages to groups hoping to preserve the status quo (Howard 2007, 136). Indeed, a recent study of lobbying concludes that “one of the best single predictors of success in the lobbying game is . . . simply whether [the group] is attempting to protect the policy that is already in place” (Baumgartner et al. 2009, 6). Understanding who is invested in a specific policy and how that investment is sustained over time makes it possible to explain programmatic durability (Thelen 1999, 391).

Stakeholder mobilization is an important element of education policy-making. Groups favored by the status quo often lobby successfully to protect their prerogatives, illustrating the potential impact of policy feedback. An early study of interest groups revealed that education associations possessed a “continuing interest in the administration of whatever programs are on the books” (Bailey 1975, 45). A more recent account concurs, describing the emergence of “an ‘education-industrial complex’ that fought hard to protect existing programs and to create new ones” (McGuinn 2006, 34). Policy feedback is an important determinant of programmatic durability, as new educational programs “were likely to persist if they produced *influential constituencies* interested in seeing them continue” (Tyack and Cuban 1995, 57; emphasis in original). Job generation contributes to persistence. Those employed by new education programs have a profound interest in their maintenance.

Policy feedback suggests that successful venue shopping can have long-term consequences. Reformers' success in a particular institutional setting may affect what is possible in other venues. Program beneficiaries may work to ensure that future decisions are also made in that venue, because shifting the locus of decision-making authority may introduce an element of uncertainty that puts their previous gains at risk. Groups that have been successful in court or at an executive agency may argue that subsequent decisions should be made in those institutional venues, and officials who favor an alternative policy arrangement may find their options constrained as a result.

In addition, government officials with jurisdiction over a program may work to preserve the status quo because it gives them an opportunity to cultivate the political loyalty of its beneficiaries. If a policy is perceived as successful, officials may engage in credit claiming, an effort to "generate a belief in a relevant political actor (or actors) that one is personally responsible for causing the government, or some unit thereof, to do something that the actor (or actors) considers desirable" (Mayhew 1974, 52–53). An electoral logic drives credit claiming, as those who believe that elected officials are responsible for positive outcomes will be more likely to support their reelection. Government officials with jurisdiction over an existing policy, especially if they are elected officials, may therefore resist attempts to move decision-making responsibility to actors in another institutional venue. Reformers therefore might face opposition from program beneficiaries and from the policymakers empowered by existing arrangements.

Government officials may also work to preserve the status quo because they simply want to protect their bureaucratic turf. Such a dynamic may emerge regardless of whether the policy is viewed as successful. The existence of programs in a particular venue may therefore cause the "filling up" or the "preemption" of a policy space (Pierson 1995). Officials with jurisdiction over a program may fight attempts to alter the status quo. This dynamic differs from the one surrounding program beneficiaries. Program beneficiaries, such as senior citizens defending Social Security (Campbell 2002, 2003), are constituencies to whom elected officials must respond if they wish to win reelection. Government officials may not always possess comparable electoral power, but American federalism gives state and local officials potential influence over their national counterparts. Members of Congress represent geographically defined districts, giving them an electoral incentive to take account of subnational officials' preferences. Frayed relations can lead to charges that legislators have lost touch with their district or state. State officials might challenge the incum-

bent in a future election or retaliate during the decennial redrawing of district lines.

In his seminal essay on policy feedback, Paul Pierson (1993) explains how policy initiatives can affect government elites' resources and incentives. Most research in this tradition focuses on the notion of bureaucratic capacity and the conditions under which policies generate the specialized knowledge and managerial experience that facilitate government intervention. The existing scholarly literature provides several compelling examples of elite-level feedback. It is often vague, however, about the precise factors that comprise bureaucratic capacity and the specific circumstances under which it will affect subsequent policymaking. As a result, Pierson (1993, 605) concludes that "work on this dimension of policy feedback clearly has a long way to go."

One potentially constructive direction for research on elite-level policy feedback is to emphasize the lobbying activities in which government officials engage. American federalism is an especially propitious arena in which to investigate this dynamic, which begins to explain why successful venue shopping can have significant consequences for long-term policy development. When policies are adopted at the subnational level, officials with jurisdiction over existing programs may defend their authority against encroachment by their colleagues at the national level. Professional associations whose primary constituencies include governors, state legislators, and other officials are active participants in the national policymaking process (Cammisa 1995; Haider 1974). Like program beneficiaries, subnational officials may defend the status quo and lobby for existing policies to be maintained and expanded. They value money and authority, and they "have an interest in maintaining or increasing their authority over federally funded programs" (Cammisa 1995, 21). Their lobbying may limit the possibility of major policy change. The evidence presented in this book suggests that preschool education generated multiple forms of policy feedback. Existing policies have been defended by both their beneficiaries and the officials with jurisdiction over them.

Explaining Preschool Politics in the United States

Understanding how and why early childhood policy in the United States took on its current form requires a developmental approach that is sensitive to processes that play out over considerable periods of time. Policymaking should not be depicted as a final policy result or outcome. Instead,

it is best understood as an “unfolding historical process” (Patashnik 1997, 432). This book argues that the contemporary fragmentation of American preschool education can be traced to temporally distant events. The venue shopping that occurred after a critical juncture generated policy feedback, and the subsequent mobilization of program beneficiaries and government officials constrained the options of future generations of policymakers.

The critical juncture occurred when efforts to establish a national child development program fell short in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The absence of a comprehensive national policy contributed to the emergence of private-sector service providers, and preschool advocates engaged in venue shopping. Their successes created and expanded a *mélange* of public-sector programs at the national, state, and local levels, and these programs generated substantial policy feedback despite their limited breadth. Program beneficiaries and government officials with a stake in the status quo mobilized to oppose changes that would affect their prerogatives. When national lawmakers returned to the topic of preschool education in later years, they operated on more challenging political terrain because the constituencies that benefited from existing programs fought major policy change. This dynamic resonates with a central insight of the developmental approach, namely, that once a policy or an institution is in place, actors adjust their strategies in ways that reflect and reinforce the logic of the existing system (Thelen 1999, 392).

The remaining chapters of this book use archival material and statistical data to examine the changing terrain of American preschool politics. They combine congressional testimony, speeches, media accounts, and other public documents with private memoranda, strategy papers, and letters that illuminate actors’ strategic calculations. The impact of federalism and venue shopping means that the analysis examines national episodes, developments at the state level, and their interaction. National policymakers have debated the appropriate national government role in preschool service provision on several occasions. These recurrent debates provide analytical leverage over questions of constituency organization and empowerment that are crucial to the developmental perspective. Changes over time in the identities and positions of key actors would suggest the impact of policy feedback, whereas stability along these dimensions would suggest its absence. Similar debates have occurred at the state level. Developments in the states provide an opportunity to examine the changing resources and incentives of various stakeholders, including officials with jurisdiction over existing programs.

Investigating preschool education makes a broader contribution to the

study of social policy. It provides an opportunity to reassess the central claims of the policy development approach. Most existing scholarship focuses on “those prominent moments of contention and change about which so much is written” (Hacker 2005, 150). These studies emphasize certain eras like the 1930s and 1960s, key programs like Social Security and health care, and developments at the national level. Often embedded within these accounts, however, are general claims about the policymaking process. It is only possible for scholars to evaluate these claims by extending the frame of analysis across time periods, policy arenas, and institutional venues. By examining the evolution of preschool education at multiple governmental levels from the late 1960s to the present, this book represents such an extension. In addition to shedding light on the dynamics of a largely overlooked policy arena, it provides broader lessons about social policymaking.