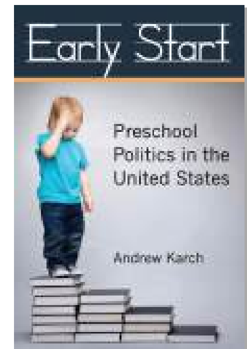
Early Start

Andrew Karch



Published by University of Michigan Press

Karch, Andrew.
Early Start: Preschool Politics in the United States.
University of Michigan Press, 2013.
Project MUSE., <a href=" https://muse.jhu.edu/.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/22707

Access provided at 29 Mar 2020 04:58 GMT with no institutional affiliation

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Conclusion: The Future of Preschool Politics

In a November 2011 interview, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was asked what her legislative goals would be if the Democrats were to retake control of the House of Representatives. The former Speaker of the House answered that her top priority would be to push for comprehensive change in early childhood policy. Describing how she struggled to find reliable care for her children, she spoke approvingly of the Comprehensive Child Development Act that President Richard Nixon vetoed in 1971. She observed, "One of the great pieces of unfinished business is high-quality child care; I wonder why we just can't do it."[1]

Many preschool advocates shared Pelosi's goals but not her optimism. At the end of 2011, the Pew Charitable Trusts ended its ten-year commitment to a campaign for high-quality, voluntary prekindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds. In a final report outlining its "Pre-K–12 vision" for the future of public education, the foundation noted that major reform would require collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Effective collaboration, it argued, "will demand more than merely cooperating better. At every stage of implementation, these stakeholders must be willing to change how they think, talk and operate, especially with respect to entrenched systems and long-held maxims about early childhood, pre-k and public education."[2] A December 2011 column by the executive director of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation touched on similar themes. Describing the barriers to major policy change, it noted that "change is popular in the abstract, controversial when it hits home. . . . We saw change quickly become controversial when reform requires adults with a stake in the failed status quo to do things differently."[3]

The developments profiled in this book illustrate the many challenges involved in early childhood policymaking. Beginning in the late 1960s, both comprehensive bills to create a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services and incremental proposals to

shift the status quo in a more modest direction have foundered on the shoals of the legislative process. The most famous proposal, the Comprehensive Child Development Act cited by Pelosi, cleared both congressional chambers only to be vetoed and denounced in extraordinarily harsh terms by the president. It is tempting to read this congressional history as a story of repeated rejection and policy stasis.

Interpreting the evolution of early childhood policy in this manner, however, underestimates the dramatic political and policy shifts that have occurred even in the absence of landmark national legislation. Some of these changes are rhetorical. Legislation in the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on child development and sought to provide a wide range of services to young children and their families. In recent years, the focus at both the national level and in the states has turned to educational programs and cognitive development, with terms like *school readiness* and *prekindergarten* moving to the fore. Similarly, supporters of increased public investment have responded to concerns about the cost of high-quality preschool services by describing it as an investment that will pay for itself over the long term.

More important for the purposes of this book, the politics of early childhood policy in the early twenty-first century differ profoundly from those of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, significant state-level activity is a defining feature of the current debate. The emergence of state governments as powerful stakeholders is illustrative of broader changes in the interest group universe. Other stakeholders, including Head Start supporters, educational associations, and private-sector service providers, are more active and influential than they used to be. Their involvement, ironically, has splintered the coalition supporting major policy change. Diverse stakeholders have endorsed additional government intervention, but they often disagree on its form. This political complexity is a by-product of the programmatic fragmentation that is a central feature of American early childhood policy, and it has contributed to the maintenance of a status quo that many observers find problematic.

Policy Development and Preschool Politics

Early childhood education in the United States differs from that of other countries along two key dimensions. First, the private sector plays an unusually large role in service provision. This pattern resonates with other policy arenas and is a defining feature of the American welfare state (Gott-

schalk 2000; Hacker 2002; Howard 1997). It is important because public- and private-sector programs tend to serve different constituencies. Economically secure families tend to rely on the private sector for preschool services, while most government-administered programs are targeted on such specific subgroups as children from low-income families. The second distinctive attribute of early childhood education in the United States is its public-sector decentralization. Government programs are administered by numerous executive agencies at the national, state, and local levels. In recent years, the uneasy relationship between these diverse programs and funding streams has received substantial attention. Many observers cite insufficient coordination as one of the primary deficiencies of the contemporary system. This book has sought not to assess the merits or demerits of what presently exists but, rather, to explain how and why preschool education in the United States came to take on its distinctive form.

Isolating the political origins of the contemporary American system requires a developmental approach that treats policymaking as a long-term causal chain. The present system developed gradually. Its origins can be traced to the temporally distant events of the early 1970s, when several efforts to establish a national framework fell short. Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act was a critical juncture, because it set in motion a series of reactions and counterreactions that produced the present fragmentation of the contemporary system. The absence of a comprehensive national policy facilitated the growth of nonprofit and for-profit programs in the private sector. In addition, supporters of expansive governmental initiatives, largely stymied at the national level, sought a more favorable institutional venue for their campaign. Their successful venue shopping led to substantial policy activity in the states as well as to the expansion of Head Start and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit. The long-term political consequences of their successes were profound. Various constituencies mobilized to defend their stake in existing arrangements, and their successful lobbying made it more difficult for the national government to adopt a more coherent approach to preschool service delivery. As existing programs and the constituencies defending them grew more entrenched, preschool education evolved into a fragmented and decentralized system.

This evolution offers broader lessons for the study of public policy. It illustrates how the existing policy repertoire can affect the positions that interest groups take and the strategies they employ. Preschool advocates adjusted to changes in their social, institutional, and political environment. Constituencies who agreed that additional government involve-

ment was desirable differed on the specific form that it should take, and this disagreement led them to work at cross-purposes. The broad coalition that came together in the early 1970s to support child development legislation eventually disintegrated, torn apart by a combination of political frustration and disagreements over the details of various legislative proposals. State and local officials and Head Start supporters viewed many recent initiatives as threats to their existing prerogatives and budgets. Their shifting positions are instructive in terms of both explaining the contemporary fragmentation of American preschool education and illustrating the complex interplay between public policy and interest group activity.

Consider, for example, the evolving role of state governments. A key controversy during the congressional debates of the early 1970s concerned prime sponsorship and administrative responsibility. Many state officials expressed frustration with the Comprehensive Child Development Act, believing that the vetoed bill bypassed the states and privileged local governments and community organizations. Motivated by an interest in early childhood and a desire to protect state prerogatives against national encroachment, they devoted more attention to the issue. At the same time, preschool advocates viewed the states as an increasingly viable venue for policymaking on child development. As a result, the early to mid-1970s were a period of significant activity at the state level. The number and the size of state early childhood programs grew, and the states became more involved in the education and care of young children. For example, officials in many states created offices of child development, a bureaucratic reform designed to improve the administration of early childhood programs.

The state-level reforms of the early to mid-1970s were not broad in reach, but they nonetheless had significant short- and long-term political consequences. In the short term, they contributed to the increased assertiveness of state officials during congressional debates about early childhood policy. As Congress considered the Child and Family Services Act of 1975 and the Child Care Act of 1979, state officials were more assertive about protecting their prerogatives. They urged their congressional counterparts to support the efforts that were already underway at the state level. The Child Care Act granted the states significant administrative discretion, assuming that they would serve as prime sponsors. While it would be a mistake to attribute this shift solely to state officials' lobbying efforts, it is important to acknowledge their mobilization and increasing assertiveness. By the time Congress returned to early childhood policy in the late 1980s, state officials were viewed as crucial stakeholders. Prior to in-

troducing Smart Start in 1988, for example, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) convened a bipartisan panel of governors who provided suggestions about how best to achieve the goal of universal preschool access. This consultative process represented a sea change from the debates of the early 1970s.

The states have played a central role in early childhood policy over the past two decades. State lawmakers consistently appear before Congress to protect their policymaking prerogatives and to lobby for increased financial support, and the states represent an institutional venue in which crucial policy decisions are made. Many congressional initiatives, including the PRE-K Act and the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge contest profiled in chapter 7, limit the national government's role to agenda setting and financial support. In contrast, they tend to view program development as a task best left to state officials and service providers. The early 2000s have been a period of widespread state-level activity, during which state lawmakers have enacted new programs and expanded access to and increased spending on existing programs.[4] The universal preschool movement is perhaps the most visible manifestation of this heightened state prominence.

Thus the evolution of early childhood policy in the United States highlights a dimension of federalism that is often overlooked. The fragmentation of political authority among national and subnational governments is often described as a constitutional hurdle to the adoption of expansive social policies (Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1993; Robertson 1989). This one-dimensional portrayal of federalism and its impact overlooks how the institutional fragmentation of the American political system provides reformers with several avenues through which they can achieve their goals. Thwarted in one institutional arena, they can pursue their objectives in another setting. Such venue shopping is a common element of American politics (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1993), and it helped shape the contemporary preschool system. When the states emerged as an important locus of policymaking activity, the scale of their efforts was less important than the fact that their very existence created a new set of stakeholders. The dynamics described in this book suggest that scholars should devote more attention to the role of subnational units as autonomous actors in federal systems (Pierson 1995). Successful venue shopping at the state level can have significant long-term political consequences (Orloff 1988). Scholars of American social policy must be more attentive to the complex and ongoing interplay between the national government and the fifty states.

The long-term impact of federalism may vary across policy areas due

to the structure of existing programs and their political appeal. Programs that offer the states considerable discretion might facilitate the mobilization of state officials, while those constraining subnational authority might limit it. The varying administrative role of state governments across programs like Medicaid, unemployment insurance, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families therefore represents an analytical opportunity to examine and refine the argument advanced in this book. Furthermore, the popularity of existing programs might influence whether state officials will mobilize to defend their prerogatives. If a program is viewed as a political liability because of the financial burden it imposes or the social construction of its target populations (Schneider and Ingram 1993), state officials might be willing to cede administrative control to Congress. Future research on the long-term impact of federalism and venue shopping should seek to identify the conditions that are most likely to generate feedback effects.

The political evolution of Head Start, a targeted national program that serves disadvantaged young children and their families, also illustrates how policy feedback contributed to the fragmentation of American preschool education. Established as part of the War on Poverty in 1965, Head Start maintained a tenuous existence during its early years but was placed on surer footing during the 1970s (Vinovskis 2005; Zigler and Muenchow 1992). It is a comprehensive program that provides educational and other services. Head Start parents value the decision-making authority the program allows them to exercise and the job opportunities it provides. Recent survey evidence suggests that recipients view Head Start as effective (Mettler and Stonecash 2008). Experience with the program also seems to increase political participation (Schneider and Sidney 2009; Soss 1999). The existence of Head Start spurred the creation of the National Head Start Association in 1973, which has been an outspoken and active defender of the program for the past four decades.

Ironically, the mobilization of Head Start supporters contributed to the fragmentation of the early education policy community. They generally favored the expansion of publicly funded programs but viewed major changes as potential threats to their prerogatives and their budgets. Tensions between Head Start supporters and other advocates were evident in the 1970s, when a California official described Head Start teachers as an obstacle to an early childhood bill and when the Child Care Act of 1979 sought to accommodate the Head Start community by avoiding any direct conflict with the program. By the late 1980s, Head Start supporters often viewed new early childhood programs as substitutes for, rather than com-

plements to, their favored program. At a congressional hearing in 1988, for example, the president of the National Head Start Association openly expressed her fear that a new national program would compete with Head Start for funding. The case study evidence and quantitative analysis presented in chapter 8 of this book suggest that Head Start also generated policy feedback at the state level. Accommodating the concerns of the Head Start community was often a prerequisite for major reforms.

The shifting positions of state governments and Head Start supporters illustrate how the mobilization of those who benefit from existing policy arrangements can constrain policymakers' options. This feedback dynamic helps explain why contemporary discussions of early childhood policy tend to emphasize the potential costs of programmatic fragmentation and the potential benefits of coordination. Promoting collaboration among different stakeholders is a challenge, but there have been some noteworthy successes (Gormley, Phillips, and Gayer 2008). Accommodating existing stakeholders seems to be a logistical and political necessity for major policy change. It is a logistical necessity because program expansion requires additional facilities, personnel, and supporting infrastructure. It is a political necessity because the early childhood policy community includes diverse constituencies who disagree about many basic questions, and some of these groups view the expansion of public programs as a threat to their survival. Reform often requires concessions that grant these groups an ongoing role in service provision. As a result, most of the major policy changes of recent years accommodate existing providers. This approach, however, furthers, rather than mitigates, the fragmentation of the contemporary preschool system.

In summary, the present structure of American early childhood education can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, several efforts to establish a permanent national framework were defeated, and reform advocates engaged in venue shopping. Their successes resulted in a mélange of public-sector programs at the national and state levels. Those who benefited from these programs mobilized to defend their prerogatives. Their mobilization, in combination with the growth of the private sector that was fostered in part by expansions of the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, reshaped the political terrain on which subsequent discussions of early childhood policy took place. Although many observers expressed reservations about the status quo, major policy change was usually controversial, because it offended the mobilized groups who benefited from existing arrangements.

With its emphasis on critical junctures, venue shopping, and policy

feedback, the present analysis applies concepts that have been developed in other contexts to a largely unexamined but substantively important domain. This endeavor represents the sort of "test case" without which scholarly literatures are inadequately integrated and fail to advance. It is an especially valuable enterprise because recent research on American social policy has been criticized for a lack of integration (Hacker 2005). The evidence presented in this book suggests that the central concepts of the policy development approach may be applicable to a wide range of policy arenas.

Indeed, future research on social policymaking should incorporate education programs more systematically. Scholars of American and comparative politics have devoted relatively limited attention to this topic.[5] As a result, most existing research on education policy consists of program analyses that offer valuable insights about how policies function but that produce static portraits of phenomena that are constantly in motion (Sroufe 1995, 79). Furthermore, program variation across different education levels provides an analytical opportunity to assess hypotheses about the policymaking process. The enactment and implementation of No Child Left Behind, for example, has shed light on the impact of federalism and various institutional and ideological changes (Manna 2006; McGuinn 2006). Efforts to impose NCLB-like accountability mechanisms on higher education were decisively rebuffed, however (Lowry 2009). In addition, the role of the private sector is more pronounced in early childhood education than it is in elementary and secondary education. For a variety of reasons, education policy represents fertile terrain for scholars who wish to develop generalizations about the politics of American social policy. Additional research is likely to prove both substantively and theoretically illuminating.

Finally, subnational policymaking merits a more prominent place in the study of policy development. In addition to illuminating the impact of federalism, turning to the state level provides a virtually untapped venue in which to assess the applicability of key concepts of the developmental approach. Most existing studies concentrate on the national level,[6] an understandable focus, but one that presents several challenges in terms of developing generalizations. One can overcome these challenges using the underlying similarity and manageable variation offered by the fifty states to evaluate hypotheses about policymaking. During an era in which state governments are a central locus of policymaking activity, there are both substantive and analytical reasons why scholars of social policy should be more attentive to state politics.[7] Analyses of state-level developments will

allow scholars to make more-confident generalizations about social policymaking.

In sum, the argument and analytical approach advanced in this book suggest three avenues for future research. First, scholars must acknowledge the multiple dimensions of federalism, devoting particular attention to the role of subnational units as autonomous actors in a federal system. Federalism provides opportunities for venue shopping that can have significant short- and long-term political implications. State governments are not only the source of crucial policy decisions. They also lobby the national government, acting to protect their policymaking authority. Second, scholars must expand their frame of reference to include a wider range of program areas. Retirement security and health care policy undoubtedly merit the attention they have received, but the concepts developed and generalizations made in studies of those two program areas might not be applicable to other domains. Additional "test cases" of the sort offered by this book would be valuable. Third, scholars would be well served to turn their attention to the American states. The subnational level represents a favorable venue for assessing the validity and limitations of concepts like policy feedback, and it offers an opportunity to conduct historical and quantitative analyses of policy choices. Examining temporal and spatial variation at the state level will enable scholars to refine their knowledge about the dynamics of the policymaking process.

The Future of Preschool Politics

Almost four decades after Nixon's landmark veto, former vice president Walter Mondale (D-MN) reflected on its implications and on whether supporters could have done anything to produce a different outcome. He explained, "I have often wondered if we had put in place the same controls but operated it through the public school system if it would have had more support."[8] Such a tactical shift may have been beneficial, but it also may have dampened the enthusiasm of advocates who preferred the Head Start model and were wary of giving too much authority to state governments or the public school system. When Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers described early childhood education as a job for the public schools in September 1974, those constituencies viewed his proposal as a power grab. Even if Mondale and his congressional allies had overcome these intramural disagreements within the early childhood policy community, the presence of Richard Nixon in the White House

made the enactment of comprehensive child development legislation unlikely.

Over time, the obstacles confronting potential reformers grew more difficult to surmount. The evolving positions and political activities of state governments and Head Start representatives in the public sector, in combination with a growing number and range of service providers in the private sector, meant that more actors perceived themselves as stakeholders. Anyone wishing to alter the status quo had to grapple with this growing organizational density. The difficulty of this task was apparent by the late 1970s: "If you put your hand on Head Start, for example, you'd find a lot of people who knew exactly what it meant to them and what sort of budget they expected from Washington" (Mondale 2010, 270). The Head Start community was one of many constituencies whose mobilization affected subsequent political debates over early childhood policy. Many of these constituencies opposed proposals to alter existing arrangements. Though they expressed fealty to the general objective of increased public-sector investment, they worried that policy changes would affect their administrative prerogatives and their financial support.

What do the dynamics described in this book portend for the future of preschool education in the United States? Major policy change is always a difficult undertaking in the institutionally fragmented American political system, and it becomes even more challenging when the interests and political influence of existing stakeholders are taken into account. Even so, one should not interpret the preceding analysis to mean that the present system is frozen in place. One of the striking developments of the last two decades is the extent of policy change in states like Georgia and Oklahoma. These episodes suggest that substantial shifts are most likely to occur when reformers accommodate existing stakeholders in the public and private sectors. Contemporary reformers seem to be cognizant of this dynamic, and they often assert that new programs will not cause anyone who is satisfied with the preschool services their children receive to lose access to them.

In conclusion, the fragmented and decentralized preschool system that exists in the contemporary United States is the legacy of Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act and the reactions it sparked across several institutional venues. This historical legacy limits reformers' alternatives, because "policy options are always constrained by the legacies of existing policy, politics, and administration, and our choices today are burdened by our past" (Orloff 1988, 80). Some of the possibilities that existed in the late 1960s and early 1970s are unlikely today, a point that can

be illustrated by returning to the prediction made by Harold Howe II, as commissioner of education, in 1968. Howe predicted that publicly provided preschool education would eventually be universal for four-year-olds in the United States. Since that time, the number and proportion of children enrolled in preschool has grown significantly. However, the private sector has long played and continues to play a crucial role in providing preschool services. A universal public system is unlikely to develop in the United States, where the complementary roles played by the public and private sectors are likely to be defining features of preschool politics for the foreseeable future.