

Venue Shopping, Policy Feedback, and American Preschool Policy

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Abstract

The American preschool “system” is noteworthy for its decentralization and fragmentation. What explains this pattern? This paper examines the evolution of American preschool policy from the late 1960s to the present and argues that its distinctive shape is the result of two forces: venue shopping and policy feedback. The early 1970s witnessed the collapse of the national campaign to expand the role of the government and the emergence of state-level public preschool programs. These programs became entrenched over time, and their defenders helped thwart subsequent efforts to pass national legislation. The trajectory of American preschool policy suggests, as others have noted, that public policy is both the outcome of political processes and something that shapes those processes.

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On April 1, 1968, U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II made a bold prediction: “I would predict that by the year 2000 most children in the United States will be attending regular public school starting at age four.” Nearly forty years later, Howe’s prediction is remarkable not because he foresaw dramatic growth in preschool attendance (although his prediction that by 2000 many three-year-olds would be “going to school at home on TV” is noteworthy).¹ In the late 1960s many observers made similar predictions as mothers with young children entered the American work force in large numbers. The more striking aspect of Howe’s prediction is that he viewed the public sector as likely to meet the rising demand for preschool.

In 2000, patterns of preschool enrollment diverged significantly from what Howe had anticipated. According to the Current Population Survey, only 52.1 percent of three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in school in 2000. This figure represented a dramatic increase from the 15.7 percent of that age group that had been enrolled in 1968, but it was a far cry from the nearly universal preschool attendance that the commissioner predicted. In addition, the private sector played a more important role in preschool education than Howe envisaged. Of the approximately 4.4 million children enrolled in nursery school in 2000, approximately 2.18 million (49.6 percent) attended private schools. Ironically, the late 1990s and early 2000s were the first time that a plurality of nursery school students enrolled in public programs. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s, most American youngsters attended private nursery schools.

The nearly equal division between public and private nursery school enrollment is indicative of a broader fragmentation in American preschool policy. The development of early childhood programs in the U.S. has been “unsystematic [and] chaotic” (Kagan and Neuman 2003, 60), resulting in an “uneven patchwork of private and public programs” (Barnett and Hustedt 2003, 57). In the United States, preschool programs are funded and delivered in many different ways in the private and public sectors, and the public sector programs are administered at the national, state, and local levels (Kamerman and Gatenio 2003). In short, the most important characteristic of the American preschool “system” is its decentralization. This paper examines the emergence and evolution of this fragmented system from the late 1960s to the present. Specifically, it probes how early congressional forays into preschool policymaking shaped subsequent developments.

The current shape of preschool policy, seemingly chaotic on its surface, is easier to understand in light of two important concepts. The first concept is venue shopping, a phenomenon that occurs when the advocates of particular programs focus their efforts on the institutional setting in which they feel they are most likely to achieve their goals. The second concept is policy feedback, which occurs when the repertoire of existing policies affects the possibilities for future policymaking. In tandem, venue shopping and policy feedback suggest that reformers’ successful efforts to find a propitious institutional venue can have lasting policy effects. Officials who possess jurisdiction over a policy, and the constituencies who benefit from the decisions made in a specific institutional setting, will

¹ “Picking up the Options,” An Address by Harold Howe II, U.S. Commissioner of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, before the Annual Meeting of the Department of Elementary School Principals of the National Education Association, Houston, Texas, April 1, 1968, p. 5. Available at the National Archives. RG 12: Records of the Office of Education, Office of the Commissioner, Office Files of the Commissioner of Education, 1939-1980, A1, Entry 122, Box 382. Howe did not travel to Houston to deliver the speech in person because his presence was required at an appropriations hearing in Washington. The speech was read to the principals.

strive to insure that future policy decisions are also made in that venue. Such a dynamic, this paper argues, occurred in the context of American preschool policy.

When Commissioner Howe made his bold prediction, preschool policy occupied a prominent place on the national political agenda. In December 1971, however, President Richard Nixon vetoed legislation that would have dramatically expanded the role of the national government in this area. In an example of venue shopping, preschool advocates shifted gears and experienced moderate success at the state level. The subsequent growth and entrenchment of the state programs affected later debates over preschool policy at the national level, an example of policy feedback. The governors who ran the state programs and the program constituencies who benefited from them often appeared before Congress to defend the status quo. Their successful lobbying efforts solidified a fragmentation that continues to characterize American preschool policy.

Venue Shopping and Policy Feedback

When examining American social policy in a comparative perspective, scholars often describe the United States as a “laggard” where social policies developed relatively late, grew relatively slowly, and are less generous than corresponding programs in the advanced industrial democracies of Europe. Potential sources of the distinctive shape of American social policy—sometimes referred to as “American exceptionalism”—include national values, the weakness of U.S. industrial unions and the absence of a labor-based political party, and the structure of American political institutions. For our purposes here, the “institutions” explanation is the most relevant. In brief, this hypothesis attributes the distinctive features of American social policy to a political system that diffuses power to a remarkable degree.

The United States is a “federal state that divides authority and gives legislatures and courts pivotal policymaking roles” (Skocpol 1992, 50). At the national level, three branches of government—the executive branch, Congress, and the courts—each possess independent authority and responsibilities. In addition, the national government shares policymaking authority with the fifty states. The states are an important source of policy innovations and exercise independent authority. Furthermore, at both the national and the state level, legislative authority is divided among two houses and a bewildering array of committees and subcommittees. This decentralized structure, some argue, impedes the adoption of social policies with broad reach. It gives the opponents of policy initiatives multiple opportunities to block them. Opponents can block an initiative by succeeding at any one of a number of veto points, whereas the initiative’s supporters must clear every hurdle placed before them. Thus, it is sometimes argued that the decentralization of the American political system is responsible for the shape of American social policy.

The institutions hypothesis helps explain why the supporters of ambitious policy initiatives face an uphill battle, but it is equally important to recognize that the structure of American government is a double-edged sword. The dispersal of political authority provides multiple veto points for those who wish to halt a reform in its tracks, but each of these settings is also a point of access for supporters. Frustrated in one venue, reformers can try to gain support for their agenda in another setting. In fact, they possess a strong incentive to do so. After losing a congressional battle, for example, advocates can turn to the executive branch or to the state or federal courts. Those who object to a court ruling

can turn to the legislative process. A key implication of the decentralization of political authority in the United States is that policy issues may be assigned to any of a variety of institutions, and “there are no immutable rules that spell out which institutions in society must be charged with making which decisions” (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 31). This decentralization therefore leads to the phenomenon known as “venue shopping,” in which advocates focus their efforts on the institutional setting in which they feel they are most likely to experience success.

The federal structure of the American political system provides an additional set of venues in which important policy decisions are made. Many public policies, including education, have traditionally fallen under the jurisdiction of states and localities, and the past thirty years have witnessed an unprecedented state resurgence in terms of political power, policy responsibility, and institutional capacity. Reformers who are shopping for a favorable venue therefore frequently turn to the fifty states. Sometimes they view the states as a propitious arena in which to begin their quest, and sometimes they head to the states after being stymied at the national level.

What are the long-term consequences of venue shopping, especially in a federal system? That is the theoretical question that drives the remainder of this paper. Imagine that reformers achieve their objectives in a given institutional setting. Does their success affect or constrain what is possible in other venues? Clearly policymakers in one venue react to developments outside their jurisdiction, as when members of Congress responded to court rulings on welfare policy in the 1960s and 1970s (Melnick 1994). Policymakers who react to developments in other venues, however, are not working on a blank canvass. Their options may be somewhat limited by what has already transpired.

In thinking about the consequences of venue shopping, it therefore seems useful to think about policymaking as an iterative process and to situate specific moments in a temporal process. By conceptualizing a political process as a long-term causal chain and focusing on the way that it unfolds over time, scholars can gain a better understanding of important political outcomes. Macro-level outcomes are especially amenable to this type of analysis, and in recent years some political scientists have embraced a developmental perspective that is attentive to processes that play out over considerable periods of time (Pierson 2005; Hacker 2005). Public policies, they argue, function both as outcomes and causes of crucial social processes.

A core claim of recent work on policy development is the significance of policy feedback, the notion that “policies with specific qualities can produce social effects that reinforce their own stability” (Pierson 2005, 37). Policy reforms, in short, can affect the possibilities for future policymaking. One especially powerful form of policy feedback is the empowerment of social groups with a stake in the policy’s maintenance. Often these constituencies are stimulated both to protect the policy against attack and to press for its extension, and their efforts contribute to the policy’s long-term sustainability (Patashnik 2003). Policymakers who wish to change the existing policy repertoire therefore must overcome the opposition of groups who benefit from existing arrangements. Groups that reach a certain size are politically powerful, and even policymakers who prefer another policy arrangement will feel pressure to affiliate with, or at least to accommodate, them (Pierson 2004, 73). Although further policy changes remain possible, the existence and political power of program beneficiaries are sources of stability that constrain the options that policymakers possess.

As various scholars have noted, public policy must be treated both as a dependent variable and as an independent variable. It is both the outcome of political processes and something that shapes those processes. The adoption of public policies usually facilitates the organization and empowerment of their beneficiaries, and the political mobilization of these stakeholders can contribute to policy stability and sustainability. To demonstrate the impact of policy feedback, it is necessary to determine who is invested in a particular policy and how that investment is sustained over time. Performing these analytical tasks makes it possible to explain the persistence of policy arrangements (Thelen 1999, 391). The emergence of strong and politically active beneficiaries makes the retrenchment of existing programs difficult (Pierson 1994, 1996).

The notion of policy feedback, in short, implies that successful venue shopping can have profound consequences. Program beneficiaries that benefit from the decisions made in a specific institutional setting will do their best to insure that future decisions are also made in that venue. Because shifting the locus of decision-making responsibility to another setting may introduce an element of uncertainty that puts their previous gains at risk, they may oppose any such shifts. We can think of this dynamic as the “filling up” or the “preemption” of a policy space. When officials in a given venue take initial control of a particular program, policymakers in other venues may find their options constrained even if they favor an alternative policy arrangement.

Federalism introduces another important element in the dynamic of post-adoption venue shopping. Lawmakers at either the state or the federal level may carefully guard their policymaking authority against encroachment by their colleagues. The emergence of the intergovernmental lobby, professional associations of state-level officials that are active in the nation’s capital, is an important development. Some of these organizations lobby on a wide range of issues, while others focus on specific policies. They generally share the same basic goals, however, which include increased grants-in-aid to the states and enhanced policymaking authority for state-level officials. The organizations support increased federal funding for state-administered programs with fewer strings attached to those funds. State-level officials, in short, value money and authority, which may imply that once they exercise control over a particular policy arena they are loathe to give it up to actors in another institutional venue.

Federalism has long been considered a key component of the American political system, one that has a crucial impact on the shape of social policy. The twin concepts of venue shopping and policy feedback imply that federalism affects policymaking not only at a single moment in time. When state-level officials are granted or seize authority over specific policies, they are analogous to the constituencies organized and empowered by the adoption of a new program. Like program beneficiaries, state-level officials may be ardent defenders of the status quo, urging that existing policies be maintained and even expanded in their current form. In other words, granting authority to state-level officials may constrain future possibilities for policy reform; reformers would have to overcome the opposition of the policymakers empowered by existing arrangements.

One important difference between program beneficiaries and government officials is, of course, their electoral clout. There is an inherent electoral logic embedded within the notion of policy feedback. The groups organized and empowered by existing policy arrangements, whether they are senior citizens defending Social Security (Campbell 2003) or veterans empowered by the G.I. Bill (Mettler 2002), become constituencies to whom

elected officials must appeal if they wish to win reelection. Advocating the retrenchment or elimination of the groups' favored programs can therefore put a candidate at electoral risk. State and local officials are not necessarily as powerful as other constituencies, but it is important to remember that members of Congress represent geographically-defined districts, giving them an electoral incentive to take account of the preferences of state and local officials and possibly defer to their wishes. Frayed relations with the officials at the state or local level can lead to the charge that a representative or senator has "lost touch" with his or her district.

In sum, state and local officials might become invested in a particular policy and attempt to sustain that investment over time. As a result, the success of policy advocates who "venue shop" in the fifty states might produce important long-term consequences for the shape of public policy. Once state officials possess jurisdiction over a specific policy, they may attempt to maintain their authority, constraining future possibilities for policy reform. The remainder of this paper examines this possibility by tracing the evolution of American preschool policy. Its analysis suggests that such a dynamic did, in fact, occur. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, preschool advocates were unable to achieve their goals at the national level. The debate over publicly-provided preschool, however, continued to rage at the state level, with several states taking steps to consolidate and expand their own programs. By the time national officials returned to the issue in the late 1980s and 1990s, the constituencies that benefited from existing programs had become obstacles to the enactment of initiatives that attempted to expand the role of the national government. These constituencies frequently favored the extension of preschool programs, but they guarded their turf carefully and were skeptical of proposals that affected their existing prerogatives.

The Evolution of American Preschool Policy

Examining the evolution of American preschool policy provides several analytical advantages. First, it represents an opportunity to assess the external validity of the claims made by scholars of policy development. Existing scholarship tends to focus on "those prominent moments of contention and change about which so much is written" (Hacker 2005, 150). These key moments include the 1930s, which saw the adoption of New Deal social programs, and the 1960s, which saw the adoption of Great Society social programs. In addition, existing scholarship tends to focus on a small number of extremely prominent social policies, especially Social Security and health care (Derthick 1979; Hacker 2002; Gottschalk 2000; Quadagno 2005). Embedded within many of these accounts are general claims about social policymaking in the United States, but scholars cannot evaluate these general claims without extending the frame of analysis across time and policy arenas. By examining the evolution of American preschool policy from the late 1960s to the present, this paper contributes to such an extension.

A second analytical advantage of examining the evolution of American preschool policy is that it provides multiple observations. On several different occasions since the late 1960s and early 1970s, national policymakers have debated the appropriate role of the national government in preschool provision. These congressional debates surrounded such legislation as the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, the Child and Family Services Act of 1975, the Child Care Act of 1979, the Community Collaborative

for Early Childhood Development Act of 1988, and several more recent initiatives in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the evolution of preschool policy represents a single “case” of policy development, these debates allow scholars to gain analytical leverage over the crucial questions of constituency organization and empowerment that lie at the heart of the developmental perspective. Changes over time in the identities and the positions of key actors would suggest the impact of policy feedback, whereas stability along these two dimensions would suggest that such a dynamic was not at work.

This paper assesses the long-term consequences of venue-shopping in three steps. It first examines the events of 1971, when Congress passed and President Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act. This legislation outlined an expansive role for the national government and would have mandated the national provision of a wide range of educational, nutritional, and health services for preschool children. Even though Congress did not override the president’s veto, this episode has been characterized as a “watershed event” (Olmsted 1992, 5). The early 1970s more generally have been called “the high-water mark” in efforts to establish public responsibility for the education and care of young children (Beatty 1995, 199). Existing scholarship on American preschool policy correctly notes the significance of Nixon’s veto, but it fails to appreciate its short- and long-term consequences. As will be described in more detail in the next section, the events of 1971 represent a critical juncture. Responses to the veto, especially in alternate institutional venues, provided the basic framework in which American preschool policy subsequently evolved.

In assessing the impact of critical junctures, scholars have distinguished between their “aftermath” and their “heritage” (Collier and Collier 1991, 8). The aftermath of a critical juncture represents its immediate or short-term consequences. The second step in my assessment is therefore to examine the aftermath of Nixon’s veto, the key period of reactions and counterreactions that occurred both within Congress and at the state level in the 1970s. The heritage of a critical juncture refers to its long-term consequences and the extent to which it affects temporally distant developments. The third step in my analysis is therefore to examine the debates of the 1990s and 2000s and to assess how the original responses to Nixon’s veto, and the dynamics of federalism, constrained the possibilities for reform in this policy area. Examining the historical evolution of American preschool policy will shed light on the usefulness of the policy feedback concept in the context of American federalism.

A Critical Juncture: The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971

In the late 1960s, several forces converged to place early childhood education and day care on the national political agenda. As the mothers of young children entered the labor force in large numbers, demand for and enrollment in programs serving very young children increased dramatically. Many observers claimed that the extant day care system provided insufficient support to working mothers (Steinfels 1973). The number of spots available in licensed day care centers fell far below the number of working mothers in the United States. Meanwhile, research in developmental psychology, especially by pioneers such as J. McVicker Hunt and Benjamin Bloom, heightened awareness of the importance of children’s early years of life. Scholars had long argued that nursery school attendance had desirable intellectual, health, and other benefits (Gesell 1924; Bradbury 1936), but the research of the 1960s highlighted children’s early years as a critical period for brain

development. Trends in workforce participation and academic scholarship merged with other societal changes, such as the women's movement and interest in using day care to promote welfare reform, to galvanize societal and political interest in preschool education. These forces converged in a political environment in which the expansion of government programs was commonplace, and policymakers began to debate the appropriate role of the national government in the provision of preschool services.

After holding a few hearings on preschool services in the late 1960s, members of Congress devoted considerable energy to the topic in 1971. Their efforts centered on the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971.² Backed by a bipartisan coalition of co-sponsors, Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN) and Representative John Brademas (D-IN) introduced the act in their respective houses of Congress. The measure mandated a broad set of educational, nutritional, and health services for preschool children. It represented a fundamental restructuring of the national government role in early childhood services and a sharp break with the past. Previous preschool programs, including the nursery schools authorized under the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression and the child care centers funded under the Lanham Act during the Second World War, had been temporary and did not attempt to provide universal access (Beatty 1995; Lazerson 1972; Slobdin 1975). Rather than proposing a temporary and targeted response to an existing crisis, the Comprehensive Child Development Act aimed to create a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services.

The legislation reflected a desire to make child development programs available to all children regardless of their economic, family, and social background. The original Senate language, for example, voiced its sponsors' intentions to "establish the legislative framework for the future of such programs to universally available child development services." The future possibilities offered by the proposal earned praise from its many supporters but troubled opponents who feared that its provisions violated the principle of parental autonomy. Supporters portrayed the Comprehensive Child Development Act as a desirable response to changes that affected a growing proportion of disadvantaged and middle-income families. They also noted that enrollment in preschool programs would be voluntary in an effort to preempt charges that the bill proposed too large a role for the national government. These arguments did not mollify opponents of the legislation, some of whom compared the child development program to policies implemented in the Soviet Union and communist China.

Supporters linked the child development program to an extension of the legal and fiscal authority of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which was scheduled to expire on June 30, 1971. They added the child development program to a bill extending the life of the antipoverty agency. Opponents of the child development program, with the support of the Nixon Administration, attempted to remove it from the Senate bill. When their efforts were unsuccessful, they introduced amendments that would have narrowed the scope of the child development program. All of the amendments were defeated, and the bill passed the Senate on September 9. Three weeks later, the House passed an OEO bill that included similar child development provisions. The legislation then proceeded to a conference committee.

² For a comprehensive treatment of the congressional debate over the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, see Cohen (2001), Zigler and Muenchow (1992), and Congressional Quarterly (1972). This paper draws heavily on those three sources.

Two provisions of the child development program proved especially controversial during the conference committee negotiations. First, at what income level would families qualify for free services? The Senate version called for free services for families of four with annual incomes of \$6,960 or less, while the House version set a threshold of \$4,320. Conferees agreed to the lower House figure after the Nixon Administration insisted that anything above that level would not be acceptable. Second, which types of entities would be eligible to serve as the “prime sponsors” of child development programs? The Senate version of the measure provided for states, counties, cities, Indian tribes, and other public and private nonprofit agencies to be eligible; the House version limited local government sponsorship to units with a population of 10,000 or more. Conferees eventually agreed to a provision that permitted localities with a population of 5,000 or more to be designated as prime sponsors if they met specified requirements.

The conference report received significant support in both houses of Congress. It passed the Senate by a 63-17 roll call vote on December 2 and earned a 211-187 majority in the House five days later. On December 9, however, President Nixon vetoed the OEO bill and issued a stinging veto message that took particular aim at the child development program. The veto itself did not surprise preschool advocates, but its tone caught many of them off guard. Nixon invoked issues of family autonomy, administrative control, and cost, using colorful language to warn against the dangers of communal child-rearing and the “Sovietization” of American youth. The conference report returned to the Senate, and thirteen senators who had previously supported the OEO bill changed their votes to side with the president. As a result, the Senate fell seven votes shy of the necessary two-thirds required for a veto override.

The near passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act is a remarkable episode in the history of American preschool policy. The strident tone of the president’s veto message indicated that a comprehensive national program would not be established in the near future, but the social changes that sparked the congressional debate remained in effect. Policymakers in other institutional venues, especially in the states, responded to the veto by adopting less expansive programs. The adoption of these programs illustrates how the general fragmentation of political power in the American political system, while sometimes preventing the adoption of major policy shifts, simultaneously provides many points of access for those who want to change the existing policy repertoire. By turning to the aftermath of the presidential veto, we can gain a better understanding of the impact of venue shopping.

Aftermath: Congressional Stalemate and State Activity

To some extent, the president’s veto was a blow from which preschool supporters never fully recovered. They continued their congressional campaign to expand the role of the national government in preschool provision, but subsequent attempts did not come as close to gaining enactment as the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 did. In 1972, supporters of the vetoed measure introduced a new proposal that, they claimed, specifically addressed the concerns expressed by the president in his veto message. The legislation was entitled the Comprehensive Head Start, Child Development, and Family Services Act of 1972. Described as a compromise between Democratic and Republican proposals, it combined an expansion of the Head Start program with the establishment of child development programs. The Senate passed the measure on June 20, 1972, by a 73-

12 roll-call vote, but the legislation stalled in the House after being reported out by the House Education and Labor Committee in October.

Setbacks at the national level disheartened preschool advocates, but the federal structure of American government enabled them to continue their battle in state houses across the country. Congressional controversies frequently affect state political agendas (Karch 2007), and the debate over the Comprehensive Child Development Act, coupled with the attention-grabbing nature of Nixon's veto, heightened the visibility of preschool policy. Rather than shying away from the emerging controversy over the appropriate role of the government in this area, policymakers in many states introduced measures to allow greater governmental intervention in the education and care of young children. Preschool advocates helped foment the state-level activity as, basically stymied at the national level, they sought a potentially more favorable venue for their concerns.

Developments at the state level were both a response to congressional activity and an illustration of venue shopping. The administrative provisions of the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 had bypassed state governments in favor of local entities, giving state officials an especially strong incentive to respond. In the twelve months after Nixon's veto, officials in nine states took major steps to improve the administration and coordination of programs for the very young. Between November 1971 and May 1973, officials in a dozen states created offices of child development, the purpose of which was to plan and coordinate the delivery of services to young children and their families.³ This administrative reform illustrates how state policymakers attempted to fill the vacuum left by the stalemate at the national level and to seize the initiative in this policy area.

The establishment of state offices of child development reflected a much broader interest in preschool policy. In 1972, the Education Commission of the States, backed by a grant from the Children's Bureau, launched its Early Childhood Project. One primary objective of this endeavor was to "provide assistance to selected target states in initiating or expanding their early childhood programs." When the commission solicited proposals, twenty-nine states asked to be considered for selection as target states.⁴ This enthusiastic response illustrates that interest in early childhood programs was not limited to the states in which child development offices were created. Instead, there was widespread interest in a much more ambitious policy agenda.

State-level interest in preschool bore substantial fruit during the 1974 legislative session. A survey of state education agencies, legislative service agencies, school board associations, and teacher organizations is illustrative. The survey listed state legislation, projects, and studies relevant to the "very young" enacted in 1974. It divided this activity into categories like "kindergarten," "parent involvement," "teacher training," and "child care." Officials in seventeen states established "preschool" projects or began "preschool" activity in 1974. Preschool projects commenced in northeastern states like Connecticut, southern states like Georgia and North Carolina, Midwestern states like Minnesota, and

³ Education Commission of the States Early Childhood Task Force, "State Offices of Child Development: Do They Work?" (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, July 1974). Preliminary Draft for Use Only at the Early Childhood National Symposium, August 1-2, 1974. Available at the ECS Archives. State offices of child development had been established in five states between January 1969 and January 1971.

⁴ "Grant Received for Early Childhood Implementation Project--State Services Planned," *Early Childhood Project*, Number 1 (April 1972): 1-2. Available at the ECS Archives. The Early Childhood Project was the second phase of the Commission's Early Childhood Task Force, which was formed in 1970.

western states like Oregon.⁵ This range of activity indicates both the widespread interest in preschool policy and the success of preschool advocates in a state-level venue. Since this count does not include bills which were vetoed, failed, carried over or which fell into related categories (e.g., “early childhood”), it provides a relatively conservative estimate of state-level activity. Even such a conservative estimate, however, indicates the breadth of state action after Nixon’s veto.

The new projects took varied approaches to preschool policy, but they overlapped in important ways. In general, they did not embody the comprehensive approach laid out in the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971. Whereas the national legislation counted universal provision of preschool services as a major objective, the state projects generally served specific subgroups of the population. These subgroups included young children with learning disabilities or young children living in rural areas where preschool services were unavailable. It was more common for states to provide services to young children who were too young to attend primary school than to fund preschools. By 1974, eleven states provided public funding for prekindergarten programs. Yet at least thirty-eight states offered “pre-first-graders” other state-supported services such as medical and dental care, nutritional programs or special programs for the handicapped.⁶ State projects took an incremental approach to the public provision of preschool programs, a strategy that had been followed at the national level in programs such as Head Start. Their focus on disadvantaged young children laid the foundation for the current decentralization and fragmentation in American preschool policy.

The state preschool projects of the early 1970s did not eliminate national interest in this policy arena. Members of Congress continued to introduce legislation on several fronts. The next major congressional foray into preschool policy occurred in 1975, when Senator Mondale and Representative Brademas held a set of joint House-Senate hearings on the American family and introduced the Child and Family Services Act. Although the new legislation retained many of the ambitious objectives of the bill that Nixon vetoed, it also attempted to respond to the objections voiced by the president and other opponents of an expanded national government role in preschool policy. In an effort to ameliorate concerns that the bill would encroach on parental autonomy, supporters of the Child and Family Services Act characterized it as voluntary and parent-dominated (Brademas 1987). The bill called the family “the primary and the most fundamental influence on children,” and the primary objective of the legislation was to “build upon and strengthen the role of the family.” Supporters frequently emphasized that children would only be enrolled in a federally supported program with parental permission. For a variety of reasons, however, the Child and Family Services Act suffered an overwhelming rejection.

Three important features of the debate over the Child and Family Services Act contributed to the bill’s resounding defeat. First, the national political environment had changed dramatically between 1971 and 1975. The 1970s witnessed declining faith in government programs (Schulman 2001), so preschool supporters faced a more skeptical

⁵ Denise Kale Hayas and Doris M. Ross, *The Very Young and Education: 1974 State Activity*, Report No. 68 (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States Early Childhood Project, May 1975). Available at the ECS Archives.

⁶ “Early Childhood Programs: A State Survey, 1974-1975,” ECS Report No. 65, EC Report No. 11 (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, April 1975). Available at the ECS Archives. A 1972 survey had found that only thirty states offered such services, and the sharp increase between 1972 and 1974 illustrates the widespread state-level activity in preschool policy during the early 1970s.

audience as they attempted to win support for federally supported programs. After the Watergate scandal and as the Vietnam War drew to a close, optimism about the ability of the government to solve important social problems dropped. A struggling economy also militated against the establishment of large, costly public programs. President Gerald R. Ford pledged to hold the line on public spending, and preschool supporters in Congress recognized that the type of child development program they envisioned would be a prime candidate for his veto pen. Although they knew that their ultimate success was unlikely, they pressed ahead in the hope that their efforts would lead to continued attention for the issue of preschool education and child development.

A second important feature of the debate over the Child and Family Services Act was the emergence of an energetic opposition campaign. While preschool supporters had their share of critics in 1971, they faced what can only be termed an onslaught four years later. The opposition campaign was fueled, at least in part, by the sharp tone of Nixon's veto message. A central weapon in the opposition campaign was an anonymous flyer, the origins of which remain something of a mystery. The flyer leveled a series of inaccurate and relatively remarkable charges at the legislation, claiming that it would give children the right to sue their parents for asking them to take out the garbage and prevent parents from giving their children a religious education. The charges outlined in the flyer spread like wildfire and sparked such an outcry that editorialists on both sides of the preschool issue urged that lawmakers set aside these claims and debate the actual merit of the Child and Family Services Act. The flyer, and the attention it garnered, destroyed the relatively slim chances that the legislation would gain enactment.

The debate over the Child and Family Services Act also witnessed a fissure within the early childhood advocacy community. This third feature of the debate is particularly important for our purposes here, because it illustrates how the constituencies favored by a specific policy arrangement will fight to defend that arrangement. During the debate over the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, teachers unions played a peripheral role. They were far more prominent during the debates of the mid-1970s. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), led by President Albert Shanker, proposed the creation of a national preschool system. One might have expected preschool advocates to welcome the support of the powerful teachers union, but that was not the case.

The AFT proposal reignited the controversy over prime sponsorship that almost derailed the conference committee in 1971. The subtext of the 1975 debate, however, was quite different. The teachers union's proposal grew, in part, out of a concern that the number of available teachers outnumbered the number of available teaching jobs. When the teachers union argued that the public schools should serve as the prime sponsor of a national preschool system, many early childhood educators resisted the proposal because they viewed it as an AFT power grab. Rather than bringing together a stronger coalition in support of public preschool provision, the AFT proposal therefore heightened already existing tensions among supporters and drew heated criticism (Fishhaut and Pastor 1977, 1978). Educational practitioners have long debated the proper role of educational, social, and emotional content in preschool programs, and the AFT proposal inflamed this long-standing controversy. The resulting debate divided preschool supporters into competing camps and contributed to the demise of the Child and Family Services Act.

Although comprehensive preschool legislation made little headway in Congress during the early and mid-1970s, a couple of smaller programs established themselves as

viable policy alternatives. Members of Congress expanded these existing policies with relatively little fanfare, yet their growth contributed to the further fragmentation of the preschool advocacy community. Head Start is the first of these programs. It is a targeted program that serves disadvantaged young children and their families, providing a variety of social services to the families while also preparing the children for primary education. Head Start is a national program that distributes federal monies to various types of local community organizations. Established as a component of the War on Poverty during the 1960s, Head Start maintained a tenuous existence during its early years (Vinovskis 2005; Zigler and Muenchow 1992). Opponents questioned whether the program led to lasting improvements in intellectual achievement, but supporters withstood this controversy and managed to place the program on surer footing during the early 1970s.

A second important policy is currently known as the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit. It belongs to a larger class of policies known as tax expenditures, which are not particularly visible to citizens or policymakers but possess impressive size and scope. Tax expenditures also foster distinct political dynamics that distinguish them from other forms of social policy (Howard 1997). The origins of the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit date to 1954, when revisions to the federal tax code added a provision to allow a tax deduction for particular employment-related dependent care expenditures. Gainfully employed women, widowers, and legally separated or divorced men were eligible for the deduction. The Revenue Act of 1971 altered the existing deduction in several ways. It made any individual maintaining a household eligible, modified the legal definition of a dependent, raised the deduction limit, and raised the income level at which the deduction began to be phased out. One goal of the act was to provide tax relief to middle- and low-income taxpayers. In 1975 and 1976, additional legislation altered the provisions of the tax credit. The 1975 legislation nearly doubled the income level at which the deduction began to be phased out; the 1976 legislation replaced the deduction with a non-refundable tax credit. It was believed that changing the tax deduction to a tax credit would expand its reach to taxpayers who did not itemize deductions and that it would provide a greater benefit to taxpayers in the lower brackets (U.S. Congress 1990, 840).

In sum, the early to mid-1970s witnessed widespread interest in preschool policy in a variety of institutional venues. After President Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, the demographic and social pressures that helped place this issue on the agenda remained. Preschool advocates shifted their attention to the state level, where officials considered and enacted several projects designed to expand access to preschool and the public role in its provision. At the national level, programs such as Head Start and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit experienced incremental growth without much fanfare. The aftermath of Nixon's veto, in sum, is characterized by a wide range of activity in several institutional venues. The fragmentation and decentralization that continue to characterize American preschool policy began to emerge, and subsequent developments reinforced this dynamic.

Heritage: Continued Fragmentation and the Ascendance of the States

The "heritage" of a critical juncture refers to its long-term consequences and the extent to which it affects temporally distant developments (Collier and Collier 1991, 8). The developmental approach to the study of public policy emphasizes how constituency organization and empowerment affect the organizational logic of social programs. This

section therefore examines how developments in the early 1970s influenced subsequent debates over the public role in preschool provision. While it focuses on events from the late 1980s through the present, it begins with a brief description of developments during the late 1970s. Changes over time in the identities and the positions of key actors suggest the existence of policy feedback. Constituencies that supported the expansion of public preschool programs carefully guarded their turf and were skeptical of any proposals that would affect their existing prerogatives.

In 1979, Senator Alan Cranston (D-CA) introduced the Child Care Act of 1979. It was a proposal that possessed limited scope, especially in comparison to the 1971 and 1975 child development proposals. Cranston's bill focused narrowly on child care. Its goal was to "provide assistance and coordination in the provision of child-care services for children living in homes with working parents." The Child Care Act of 1979 did not aim to establish a universal child development program. Indeed, it did not even envision a competitive or parallel program to Head Start. Its substantive provisions attempted to foster a compromise among the various interest groups with a stake in child care policy while simultaneously avoiding massive government spending.

The Child Care Act of 1979 was a modest bill that generated limited enthusiasm among its potential supporters. Conservative columnists and right-wing groups opposed the bill, and there was no "powerful and unified countervailing response from supporters" (McCathren 1981, 126). The Carter Administration, featuring Walter Mondale as its vice president, expressed its unequivocal opposition at a February hearing. The coalition that worked together on the Comprehensive Child Development Act in 1971 had splintered in 1975. By 1979 it was "hopelessly divided" (McCathren 1981, 131). When the proposal received limited support, Cranston killed his own bill by canceling further hearings on it. From a developmental perspective, the most significant feature of this particular episode is the fragmentation of the preschool coalition. The positions of key actors changed in a way that hints at the importance of previous developments. Preschool education fell off the congressional agenda, displaced by a narrower focus on child care.

During the 1980s, several important developments in American preschool policy occurred at the state level. The state-level activity epitomizes venue shopping. Stymied at the national level, preschool advocates shifted to another institutional venue in which they were more likely to experience success. Officials in many states decided to provide public funds to support prekindergarten programs, bringing the total number of states in which such funds were available to "at least twenty-four," and officials in "several other states" convened commissions to consider their options.⁷ Early pioneers had established the precedent of providing state funding for preschool during the early 1970s. During the 1980s, officials in several other states joined them.

Developments at the state level seemed to rekindle national interest in preschool policy. In 1987, members of Congress introduced more than 70 measures related to early childhood programs. Many of the bills dealt with targeted programs such as Head Start, but a handful of them revisited the themes of the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 and the Child and Family Services Act of 1975. The content and fate of one such bill, introduced by Senator Edward M. Kennedy in 1988, are instructive. Entitled Smart

⁷ W. Norton Grubb, "Choices for Children: Policy Options for State Provision of Early Childhood Programs," Finance Collaborative Working Paper #5 (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States and the National Conference of State Legislatures, October 1988), p. 1. Available at the ECS Archives.

Start: The Community Collaborative for Early Childhood Development Act of 1988, the measure combined health, nutrition, social and educational services for all four-year-olds. Half of the spaces in each program were reserved for children from low-income families, who could participate at no cost. Other families were required to pay tuition based upon their income. This attempt to make preschool services universally available and available for free to low-income families resonates with the most ambitious legislative proposals of the 1970s. The means of achieving universal availability, however, illustrates the lasting effects of venue shopping and an acknowledgement of the crucial role played by the fifty states in preschool policy. The main objective of the legislation was “to provide financial assistance to states and localities for high quality early childhood development programs for prekindergarten children.” In short, Smart Start envisioned a supporting role for the national government and the continuing preeminence of state and local programs.

There were three days of hearings on Smart Start. The identities and testimony of many witnesses illustrate that the role of states and localities was a common theme during the hearings. Several governors and former governors—James J. Blanchard (Michigan), Mario M. Cuomo (New York), Thomas H. Kean (New Jersey), Richard W. Riley (South Carolina), and Rudolph G. Perpich (Minnesota)—appeared before the committee, as did Lieutenant Governor Evelyn Murphy of Massachusetts. The officials described existing programs within their states and how they would leverage national funds to expand them. For example, former Governor Riley noted that limited resources forced policymakers in his state to establish a half-day program for at-risk four-year-olds. Others voiced similar concerns. Governor Perpich, speaking on behalf of the National Governors’ Association, said, “I would like to comment on how your early childhood legislative proposal can best assist and encourage our efforts on the state level” (U.S. Congress 1988, 31). This blunt assessment of the national government’s role is quite revealing. As in many other policy areas, state officials lobbied both for more money from the national government and for continued policy autonomy for the states. They sought to protect their prerogatives from what they viewed as congressional encroachment.

Other witnesses who appeared before the committee also urged the committee to protect existing programs. The president of the National Head Start Association, Eugenia Boggus, lobbied for “full and expanded support” for Head Start. She outlined the reasons why Head Start needed additional funding and then expressed her fear that the creation of Smart Start would establish two funding streams. Other witnesses had already said that it would make little sense to have two programs, and Boggus worried that Congress would face pressure to combine them. She stated that the “solution of taking money from Head Start and giving it to Smart Start is exactly what we fear” (U.S. Congress 1988, 294-295). Boggus, a strong supporter of expansive public preschool programs, viewed Smart Start as a threat to existing programs like Head Start. Like the governors who preceded her as witnesses, she sought to defend her turf. Her position seems to indicate the presence of policy feedback. A strengthened Head Start program actually represented something of an obstacle to the creation of a universal preschool policy.

Smart Start never made it out of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources. It would be a mistake to attribute this fate solely to the positions of the governors and the National Head Start Association, but their stances on the legislation suggest that existing programs (and the constituencies defending them) represented an important obstacle to its enactment. A few months later, the Education Commission of the States and the Institute

for Educational Leadership jointly sponsored a conference on the evolving federal-state partnership in education. Though it did not address preschool education specifically, the conference report described the general fragmentation of national education policy and noted that at least four federal departments and agencies administered nearly 70 separate education programs. Almost all of the programs, it claimed, were “protected by an active constituency,” and it called on presidential leadership to “shake loose the intransigence of vested interests in education which often fracture and diffuse efforts and funding.”⁸ The general thrust of this message seems to indicate that tone of the debate over Smart Start was not unusual. Once programs are well established, the political mobilization of their stakeholders can represent a powerful hurdle to the establishment of an alternative policy arrangement.

In late September 1989, President George H. W. Bush held an education summit with the nation’s governors in Charlottesville, Virginia. Attendees sought to develop a consensus in the area of setting national education goals. One such goal was to promote “school readiness,” making sure that young children (often of disadvantaged backgrounds) entered school ready and able to learn and perform well academically. Early childhood education was therefore a prominent topic at the summit. The governors reiterated many of the themes broached by witnesses at congressional hearings in 1988. They urged the national government to provide additional funds for existing prekindergarten programs like Head Start while also preserving the flexibility of state governments and local school districts in administering the programs. In a memorandum issued just before the summit, the president of the Education Commission of the States listed preschool education as a candidate for additional federal spending. He also alluded to the existing programmatic fragmentation and pressed for a clarification of the respective roles of the states and the national government. The national government, he added, “must get its act together since multiple departments have differing approaches.”⁹ The education summit illustrated the governors’ increased interest in preschool education and their desire to retain their policy prerogatives.

In the absence of major policy change at the national level, state officials pressed ahead in their efforts to expand the availability of and access to preschool programs. By 1997, thirty-seven states funded prekindergarten programs or supplemented the national Head Start program. Twenty-five states funded their own preschool programs, nine states supplemented Head Start, and nine states did both. These state-level initiatives illustrate how American federalism provides multiple institutional venues in which public policy decisions are made. In addition, their provisions reflect the lasting programmatic legacy of decisions made during the 1970s. Like Head Start and the state programs established decades earlier, the state-level preschool programs of the 1990s generally served specific subgroups of the population.

The intended beneficiaries of most state preschool programs, even those that were not Head Start supplements, were children classified as disadvantaged or at-risk of failure.

⁸ “Federalism and Education: The Evolving Federal-State Partnership,” Report of a Conference Jointly Sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the Institute for Educational Leadership, “New Dimensions of Federalism: The Evolving Federal-State Partnership,” September 14-16, 1988. Available at the ECS Archives.

⁹ “Federal/State Relations,” Memorandum from Frank Newman to Governor Garrey Carruthers, Governor Bill Clinton, and Governor Ted Sanders, September 25, 1989, p. 2. Available at the ECS Archives.

The state of Arizona provided \$10 million in discretionary grants for preschool programs for four-year-olds in “areas with many at-risk children,” and the Arkansas Better Chance program “remediate[d] at-risk or poor” three- to five-year-olds. In the state of Colorado, preschool funds served four- and five-year-olds “at risk of failure.” School districts in the state of Michigan that operated “comprehensive compensatory education programs for educationally disadvantaged” received \$42.6 million in school state aid in 1994-95. The state of New York spent \$47 million on “economically disadvantaged children” in one hundred school districts in 1993-94.¹⁰ Rather than striving for universal provision, most state preschool programs attempted to reach young children who were unlikely to enroll in prekindergarten on their own. Enrolling in preschool programs, it was hoped, would level the playing field and enable these children to enter primary school with the same chance for academic success as their more advantaged contemporaries.

Interest in early childhood education remained high during the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century, and state officials continued to take the lead in this policy arena. For example, New Hampshire Governor Jeanne Shaheen pledged to make early care and education the main focus of her term as chairwoman of the Education Commission of the States in 2000-01. Innovators like Shaheen faced several obstacles as they attempted to build on and expand existing state efforts. Societal consensus on the appropriate roles of families, governments, employers, and the private sector remained elusive, although most parties felt that some form of partnership among these actors was essential. In addition, preschool advocates found it difficult to generate sustained attention and commitment to action because responsibility for existing programs was so decentralized. One overview of preschool policymaking asserted, “While nearly every level of government and sector of society has a stake in improving early care and learning, the responsibilities are so fragmented that no single actor holds enough of the levers for change to get it done.”¹¹ This quotation does not mention entrenched interests as an obstacle to the expansion of preschool programs, but it suggests that the legacy of policy fragmentation established in the early 1970s continued to affect policymaking.

Despite ongoing controversy over the appropriate government role in preschool provision, state-level programs continued to emerge and expand. By March 2002, forty-four states funded their own preschool programs or supplemented Head Start.¹² Most of these programs retained the standard focus on disadvantaged children, although Georgia and Oklahoma administered universal programs for which all four-year-old children were eligible. Since 2002, state policymakers have devoted increased attention and funding to public preschool programs. In September 2004, the Trust for Early Education released a study showing that 15 states increased their preschool funding by \$205 million for fiscal year 2005. The increase in preschool funding occurred in a diverse set of states including Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, and Virginia.¹³ During the 2005 state legislative sessions,

¹⁰ “Early Childhood Education Programs,” *Clearinghouse Notes: Early Childhood Education* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, February 15, 1997). Available at the ECS Archives.

¹¹ Education Commission of the States, *Early Learning: Improving Results for Young Children* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2000), p. 4. Available at the ECS Archives.

¹² State-funded preschool programs did not exist in Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, Utah, or Wyoming. See Jessica McMaken, “State Notes: State Funded Pre-Kindergarten Programs” (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, March 2002). Available at the ECS Archives.

¹³ Rhea R. Borja, “Pre-K Rises as State Priority, Studies Show: Funding Up in 15 States, Though Others Trim Aid or Still Lack Programs,” *Education Week*, Volume 24, Issue 5, September 29, 2004, pp. 16, 18.

officials in 26 states boosted preschool funding by \$600 million. States such as Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania increased preschool spending by at least 30 percent.¹⁴ These large increases occurred in every region of the country and suggest that support for public preschool programs possesses national appeal.

In sum, the last fifteen years have been a period of widespread state-level activity in preschool policy. For the most part, state officials have built on the targeted programs that were established in the 1970s by expanding access to them or by providing additional funds. Where such programs did not exist, state officials established new prekindergarten programs that mainly served disadvantaged children. Policymakers at the national level were also interested in preschool as a solution to the problem of school readiness, but it is fair to say that they took limited action and made minimal changes to the existing policy repertoire. Smaller national programs, including Head Start and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, continued to grow, but comprehensive proposals like those of the 1970s were generally not on the agenda.

Congress held several hearings on preschool programs beginning in the late 1990s. In general, the hearings did not focus on specific proposals. Instead, they addressed some of the issues associated with existing preschool programs. For example, in July 1998 the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight held a hearing on early childhood interventions but focused on the issue of public-private partnerships. Legislators justified this focus by noting that the public and private sectors both had “an undeniable stake in the outcome” and an “indispensable role to play in achieving it” (U.S. Congress 1998, 2). Later that year, the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources examined early childhood education and related services at a hearing entitled, “Are Our Children Ready to Learn?” The issue of school readiness prompted the committee’s interest in preschool programs, and it sparked others’ interest in this topic. In 2002, President George W. Bush announced his Good Start, Grow Smart initiative. It encouraged states to develop voluntary early learning guidelines on literacy, language, and pre-reading skills. The “School Readiness Act of 2003,” a reauthorization of the Head Start program, touched on similar themes.

The reach and effectiveness of existing preschool programs were also prominent themes at congressional hearings. In April 2000, a Senate subcommittee examined “early childhood programs for low-income families, focusing on federal and state funding and collaborative efforts and the effectiveness of federal preschool and child care programs.” In March 2001, a Senate committee compared U.S. early childhood education and care to programs in other countries. In July 2001, a House subcommittee held a hearing on “The Dawn of Education: What’s Working in Early Childhood Education.” In January 2002, a Senate committee convened a forum on early learning featuring First Lady Laura Bush. It examined the quality of early childhood learning programs, focusing on the importance of cognitive development. A month later, the committee examined several issues in early childhood education, from quality programs to parent involvement and the separation of education for children with special needs. The number and substantive breadth of these hearings suggest great interest in preschool generally, but they evince little interest in an expanded national government role in public preschool provision.

The continued fragmentation of existing policies represented one obstacle to more expansive preschool programs. Two congressional hearings addressed that precise issue.

¹⁴ Kavan Peterson, “Preschool Gets Record Boost in ’05,” *Stateline.org*, November 16, 2005.

In 1999, the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring and the District of Columbia of the Senate Committee on Government Affairs held hearings on “multiple program coordination in early childhood education.” Senators lamented the wide fragmentation of authority over existing federal programs, which were administered by eleven different agencies and twenty different offices. Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) claimed that, in addition to causing duplication and inefficiency, this arrangement led the agencies and their staff to “despite their best intentions, get caught up in a mind set, a turf battle, jurisdictional problems” (U.S. Congress 1999, 3). Six years later, the members of a different Senate subcommittee discussed similar concerns at a hearing on the role of the federal government in early education and care. The goal of the hearing was to improve the effectiveness and coordination of such programs as Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).

The trajectory of preschool policy from the late 1980s to the present suggests the existence of a “preempted policy space” in which state-level actors are dominant. State officials and others favored by existing policy arrangements lobbied successfully against Smart Start in 1988, and various actors lamented the importance of entrenched interests and programmatic turf battles in this policy arena. Most recent congressional initiatives therefore view the national government in a supporting role, helping states maintain their existing policies, and attempt to eliminate some of the administrative fragmentation that characterizes preschool policymaking. This fragmentation was set in motion by Nixon’s 1971 veto and is a key element of the heritage of that critical juncture.

Conclusion

The decentralization and fragmentation that currently characterize the American preschool “system” are the legacy of decisions made in the early 1970s and the product of venue shopping and policy feedback. Thwarted at the national level when President Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act in 1971, preschool advocates turned to the states as an alternative institutional venue and experienced some success in that setting. As their reach expanded, these state-level public preschool programs became an obstacle to the expansion of the national government’s role in preschool policy. When national officials considered preschool legislation, the officials with jurisdiction over the state-level programs and the constituencies who benefit from them sought to preserve the existing policy repertoire. Although these officials and constituencies frequently favored the expansion of preschool programs, they were skeptical of proposals that affected their existing prerogatives.

The preceding examination of American preschool policy provides several useful lessons for scholars of public policy. First, it suggests that policies are both the outcome of political processes and something that shapes those processes. Policies mobilize and empower social groups with a stake in their maintenance, a process that usually plays out over considerable periods of time (Pierson 2005; Hacker 2005). Second, it suggests that the institutional structure of the American political system is simultaneously an obstacle to major policy changes and something that provides reformers with multiple venues in which to pursue their objectives. Due to policy feedback and the mobilization of social groups, venue shopping can have lasting effects. Third, scholars of policy development would do well to move beyond the time periods, such as the New Deal, and policy areas,

like Social Security, that have preoccupied many existing studies (albeit for good reason). Examining different time frames and programs will allow scholars to assess the external validity of existing generalizations. It will also enable them to highlight features of the American political system, like federalism and the role of the states, which have received insufficient attention.

Finally, this paper illuminates the possibility of reforming the way that preschool services are delivered in the United States. National officials are increasingly willing to assert themselves in the making of education policy (Cibulka 2001; Mazzoni 1993; Stout, Talerico, and Scribner 1995), but they are likely to face tremendous institutional hurdles if they attempt to expand the role of the national government in preschool policy. They will feel pressure to affiliate with, or accommodate, the constituencies who benefit from existing arrangements (Pierson 2004, 73). Indeed, the prospects for major changes at the national level are considerably smaller than they were when Commissioner Howe made his bold prediction in 1968 that preschool education would eventually be both universal and publicly-provided.

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