

Summary of Ph.D. dissertation

Federalism, Agenda Setting, and the Development of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2001

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Part I. Foundations

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter identifies the key puzzle that motivates the project: If K-12 education is primarily a state and local responsibility in the United States, how have federal policymakers so expanded their reach in the nation's schools since 1965, the year that the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act became law? This chapter also provides a brief history of federal and state education policy since the 1960s; identifies past research on federalism, agenda setting, and political development that are central to the work; and previews the overall argument and evidence. In part, that evidence includes several quantitative databases on agenda change, and roughly sixty elite interviews with members of the education policy community in Washington, DC. The core claim of the project, broadly stated, is that changes in the federal education agenda have emerged from the evolving relationship between the federal government and the states during the last four decades.

Chapter 2. How Federalism Affects the Federal Agenda

The study's key concepts and a theory to explain how federalism affects the federal agenda are outlined in this chapter. The theory begins with the claim that a government's level of interest and involvement in a policy area depends on its license and capacity to act in that area, and the advocacy of policy entrepreneurs. In other words, when policy entrepreneurs can muster a warrant for government involvement and government resources exist to affect change in a positive way then these entrepreneurs can build agendas in their favored policy areas. A lack of license or capacity need not limit a government's agenda, though, as long as policy entrepreneurs can ameliorate these deficits by borrowing strength from another level of government to seek their leverage. Thinking about federalism in this way provides insights about how the federal education agenda has taken shape during the last four decades. More generally, this approach provides a way to think about agenda development in a range of policy areas and across levels of government.

Part II. Evidence and Explanations

Chapter 3. Patterns of Federal Interest and Involvement in Education

This chapter uses a variety of sources to trace changes in federal interest and involvement in K-12 education, the two dependent variables of the study. It maps the presence of education in congressional hearings, presidential speeches, commitments of federal revenues, public laws, and key institutions during the last forty years. The evidence shows both stability and change in the federal education agenda, and an overall increase in federal interest and involvement in the nation's schools. Over time the federal education

agenda has expanded and now touches—both rhetorically and substantively—on many of the core functions of schooling in the United States.

Chapter 4. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The evidence presented here continues to describe federal interest and involvement in education. But unlike the previous chapter, which focuses on broad trends over time, this one considers the federal education agenda through an in-depth look at the process that produced the ESEA reauthorization of 2001, known as the No Child Left Behind Act. It explores the build-up to the law during 1999 and 2000; the Bush administration's proposal for reform and the Congress's response; key difficulties and challenges from interest groups that dogged legislators during the lawmaking process; and the eventual product and its implications for policy.

Chapter 5. Borrowing Strength to Build a Federal Education Agenda

This chapter relates changes in federal interest and involvement in education to the study's three independent variables: license and capacity to act, and advocacy from policy entrepreneurs. It shows how the federal education agenda has expanded as policy entrepreneurs at the federal level have borrowed strength from state governments to address federal shortages in license and capacity to act in education. Borrowing strength has allowed federal officials to reach farther and deeper into the core functions of the nation's schools. At the same time, however, federal policy has helped to cultivate this same license and capacity at the state level, and state officials have borrowed strength from their federal counterparts, too, as they have crafted their own agendas. Over time, these changes have produced an agenda setting process characterized by contested and fluid, rather than command-oriented and hierarchical, interactions between federal and state officials. The arguments in this chapter help to provide new insights that help to correct common misperceptions regarding the influence of two key events in the nation's educational history: the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*, and the 1989 National Education Summit.

Part III. Implications

Chapter 6. Education Politics in the American Federal System

The political implications of the development of federal interest and involvement in education are the focus of this chapter. It shows how federal officials, through the process of borrowing strength to craft their education agendas, have affected the nation's politics in Washington and the fifty states. The chapter features an in-depth look at the issue of education in the 2000 presidential election campaign, and how Republican George W. Bush cut against the recent political grain to embrace and enjoy success with an issue that his fellow partisans had essentially conceded to the Democrats in past presidential contests.

Chapter 7. Setting the Agenda in the American Federal System

This chapter returns to some of the theoretical expectations outlined in Chapter 2 and assesses them in light of the evidence. It begins by conjecturing about the future trajectory of K-12 education in national policy and politics. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to considering the general principles that the study reveals. It also offers concrete advice to scholars interested pushing the study's main claims in new directions, and to policymakers who must navigate the thicket of the American federal system as they fight for their favored ideas.