The Selection of Alliance Partners in State Reading Policy Networks
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Abstract

Coalition building is not a new phenomenon in educational policy. However, a changing political climate has dramatically increased alliance activity in the past few decades. Despite the pervasiveness of coalitions and their influence over educational policy outcomes, we have little empirical knowledge concerning their origins. The purpose of this study is to explain what factors influence the selection of alliance partners. Data for this study are drawn from interviews with 111 reading policy actors in California, Connecticut, Michigan, and Utah. Models of alliance formation are estimated using probit analyses. The results indicate that being a governmental actor and homophily¿the desire to be with policy actors with similar policy preferences and the same organizational type¿predict alliances between policy actors.

Key Words

politics of education, policy formation, reading policy, coalitions

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The growth and diversification of the interest group universe has led to an increase in competition for influence and resources (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Gray & Lowery, 1998; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986). This increase in the number of political actors and the level of competition in policy domains has led to an upsurge in collaboration between policy actors, whereby they exchange information and resources (Gray & Lowery, 1998; Hojnacki, 1997; Hula, 1999; Nownes & Freeman, 1998). These interorganizational relationships are so important to the agenda setting process in public policy that they have become the focal point of several key contemporary theories of the policy process (e.g., issue networks, policy communities, and the advocacy coalition framework). In the educational policy research literature, in particular, much of the focus on relationships has largely been addressed through the study of coalitions. The research on coalitions in educational policy has shown that coalitions are ubiquitous, widely regarded as the way to be effective in politics, and responsible for bringing about countless educational reforms (Hula, 1999; Kaplan & Usdan, 1992; Mazzoni, 2000). Despite the prevalence and influence of coalitions in educational policy, our knowledge about how groups decide to select alliance partners is limited. Since state education politics is increasingly becoming the politics of collective advocacy (Opfer, Young & Fusarelli, 2008), we need to improve our knowledge of coalitions to better understand contemporary policymaking.

Theoretical Background

Much of the political science research on coalitions has focused on explaining the benefits of coalitions and describing factors that influence political actors' decisions to join coalitions (Young, 2005). However, in recent decades the research literature has begun to explain the selection of alliance partners. The research has shown that ideology, similar organizational type, pro/con position on domain events, policy authority status, and social position in a network influenced the likelihood of policy actors collaborating (Heaney, 2004; Heinz et al., 1993; König & Bräuninger, 1998; Laumann & Knoke, 1987; Zafonte & Sabatier, 1998). However, characteristics of a policy domain or issue can influence the extent to which some factors predict alliance formation (Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Thus, additional research across issues and domains is needed to understand the interplay between political context and alliance partnerships. Hence, the purpose of this study is to use data from four educational policy networks to test alliance formation hypotheses derived from the study of alliances in other policy domains.

Hypothesis 1. Forming alliances with groups with similar interests allows actors to share costs, information and skills, and give the appearance of broader support (Berry, 1989; 1997; Hula, 1999). Additionally, because actors with similar preferences are more likely to attend similar political

events, they are more likely to meet and exchange information than actors with divergent views (König & Bräuninger, 1998). Lastly, shared interests in policy issues and events form a basis for interaction, further encouraging alliance formation (Laumann & Knoke, 1987). For these reasons, policy actors are more likely to form alliances with policy actors that have similar policy preferences than those with dissimilar policy preferences.

Hypothesis 2. Alliances require effort and commitment of resources to establish and maintain the relationship (Laumann & Knoke, 1987). These transaction costs associated with alliances are diminished when groups form alliances with groups that have similar organizational types. Furthermore, the principle of homophily like attracts like is evident in policy communities (Heinz et al., 1993; Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Thus, policy actors with similar types of organizations are more likely to form alliances with each other than with policy actors from different types of organizations.

Hypothesis 3. No single organizational entity has the capacity to design, enact, fund, implement, and evaluate educational policy. Consequently, government authorities coordinate their policy related activities. Moreover, both parties in a public-private sector alliance benefit from the cross-sector relationship. Specifically, nongovernmental actors become more informed about policy related activities; and governmental actors obtain professional opinion on issues, gain legitimacy, acquire financial resources, and attain the support of additional constituencies (König & Bräuninger, 1998; Laumann & Knoke, 1987).Consequently, the presence of a governmental actor in a dyad will increase the likelihood of an alliance between two actors.

Hypothesis 4. Because collaboration diminishes the ability of actors to distinguish themselves from other actors with similar political preferences and clientele, actors with interests in a narrow range of issues will be less likely to join a coalition than actors with interests in a wide range of issues (Browne, 1988; 1990; Hojnacki, 1997; Hula, 1999; Wilson, 1973). Further, groups with multiple interests must acquire expertise on multiple issues, increasing costs proportional to the number of

issues (Hula, 1999). Therefore, to diminish their costs to be actively involved with several issues, policy actors with a wide range of interests will form alliances. As such, policy actors with a narrow range of interests are less likely to form alliances than policy actors with a broad range of interests.

Context

Because interest groups make advocacy decisions with regard to discrete issues (Hojackni 1997) and form coalitions when the coalition is limited to one issue or the issue is of some immediacy with a good chance of government action (Berry 1997), I examined coalitional behavior within the context of one policy issue reading. Further, because reading was a hotly contested issue across many states and involved a large and diverse number of actors, the issue made comparative study across states and hypothesis testing related to characteristics of policy actors possible. Additionally, the persistent reading wars, the regular reporting of students' reading performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the widespread perception that reading skills are critical to the success of students make reading an important and perennial issue on state policy agendas (Young & Miskel, 2006). Lastly, the dynamics of reading policy the level of activism of reading policy actors, the controversy surrounding what types of research on reading is deemed legitimate to inform policy decisions and receive government funding, the ever-increasing influence of state legislature's over reading curriculum content and pedagogical practices, the vast amounts of students impacted by reading policy, and the inclusion of reading tests in all educational accountability systems not only make understanding the formation of reading policy important in and of itself but also shed light on a variety of matters that are focal points for a wide range of educational issues.

Methods

To test the hypotheses, I analyzed data from The University of Michigan's State Reading Policy Project (SRPP) a study of reading policymaking in nine states during the mid-1990s to 2000 (Miskel et al, 2003; Song & Young, 2008). Three criteria activity, contrast, and response rate guided the choice of states. First, there needed to be activity during the period of observation. A review of recent legislation, applications for Reading Excellence Act (REA) grants, news media, and journal articles revealed which states were currently or recently involved with reading reforms. Second, to

provide contrasts that would make generalizations from the findings possible, states were selected

to represent: (a) both REA and nonREA grant recipients (as time passed however, this criterion was

done away with because all states in the study eventually received a grant) and (b) high, low, and

average performing states (according to NAEP) from various regions of the United States. Lastly, to

enhance the robustness of the statistical tests used in this study, I applied a third criterion¿an

interview response rate of at least 85%. High response rates were necessary because there is a

multiplicative effect of response rates on missing relational (dyadic) data. The response rate

criterion reduced the SRPP sample from nine to four states: CA (87% response rate), CT (96%), MI

(97%), and Utah (92%).

Participants were chosen by a four-step method (Song & Young, 2008). First, SRPP identified key

elected officials, appointees, and civil servants in top-level positions in obviously relevant agencies

and interest groups. Second, SRPP reviewed public documents related to state reading initiatives

(e.g., state legislation, newspapers, press releases, journal articles) to identify other important

actors not affiliated with obviously relevant agencies or groups. Third, actors identified from the

previous steps were placed on a preliminary list of study participants that one or two state

consultants reviewed. After reviewing the preliminary list, consultants proposed that certain actors

be added or removed from the study. Lastly, participants were asked to review our list of

participants and recommend additional policy actors (i.e., snowball). Generally, participants

indicated our list was comprehensive and did not suggest additional participants.

Of the 139 policy actors from the four states that were selected to participate, 119 actors agreed. After collapsing the state assembly and senate into one policy actor (i.e., state legislature) and deleting policy actors who themselves and others indicated were irrelevant, there were 111 policy actors in this study 84% from outside of the government and 16% from inside the government.

Data Collection and Measurement

A standard open-ended structured interview schedule served as the primary data collection instrument (Song & Young, 2008). Participants were asked in person or over the telephone to describe their involvement with reading policymaking in their state. Participants were interviewed in person or over the telephone and assured anonymity. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program.

The dependent variable is a collaborative *alliance* actors share information or exchange resources related to reading policy. To identify alliances between policy actors, I read participants' responses to an interview item that asked participants to review a list of policy actors and identify actors with whom they collaborated. Next, I read the entire interview narrative to identify additional alliances not mentioned in response to the question about collaboration. Finally, to ensure that all instances of alliances had been coded, I used the text search tool of Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development 2001) to search for occurrences of work, join, joint, team, partner, alliance, coalition, assist, and collaborate as well as their textual variations. An alliance was deemed present if at least one policy actor in the dyad indicated collaboration.

The variable *similarity in policy preferences* measured policy actors' common orientation toward three key policy variables at the center of debates about reading policy: pedagogy, standards, and tests. Two individuals read the transcripts and scored actors' policy preferences. The two initial codes were compared to determine an ultimate score. Coders discussed discrepancies of one unit and reached agreement. A third coder resolved discrepancies of more than one unit**.** Finally, I used the mathematical formula:

$5 - (Preference)_A - (Preference)_B$, to calculate the similarity measure for each preference variable and computed an average across the three scores.

Same type of organization was a dichotomous variable that took on a value of one if both organizations were in the same category and zero otherwise.

When one member of a dyad reported being a *governmental actor*, the governmental actor variable was coded as one and zero otherwise.

A *narrow actor* included policy actors concerned exclusively with some aspect of reading or specific subgroups, such as special education or English as a Second Language. The narrow actor variable was coded as one if at least one actor within the dyad was a narrow actor and zero otherwise.

Analysis

I used probit regression analyses to model the likelihood of policy actor i forming an alliance with policy actor j in a state reading policy network. Because the unit of analysis is an alliance, the dependent variable is a dyad a pair of actors (i.e., an alliance between policy actor i and j is either present or absent). Subsequently, the error that characterizes one dyad involving a specific policy actor is similar to error characterizing other dyads involving the same actor (Krackhardt, 1987; 1988). This autocorrelation can produce p-values that are too optimistic. Thus, to ensure the robustness of the results, I employed the Multivariate Regression Quadratic Assignment Procedure (MRQAP) articulated by Gulati & Gargiulo (1999), which is analogous to bootstrapping (c.f. Simpson, 2001). MRQAP involved randomly permuting actors within their groups and running a probit regression for each permuted sample. The percentage of frequency with which each permuted coefficient was equal to or greater than the coefficient based on the actual data indicated the statistical reliability of the original estimates a pseudo t-test (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999).

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the dyadic alliances between reading policy actors in each state. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of alliances present within each state to the total number of possible alliances was similar across the four states, about 40%.

Table 1

Mean and Standard deviations

Variables	States				
	CA	CT	MI	UT	Total
	(N = 741)	(N = 210)	(N = 406)	(N = 231)	(N = 1,588)

Alliances	.43	.38	.36	.37	.40
	(.49)	(.49)	(.48)	(.48)	(.49)
Similarity in	3.88	4.20	4.21	3.96	4.00
policy preferences	(.98)	(.70)	(.52)	(.48)	(.82)
Same type of organization	.09	.18	.14	.13	.12
	(.28)	(.38)	(.35)	(.33)	(.32)
Governmental actor	.28	.18	.38	.42	.31
	(.45)	(.39)	(.49)	(.49)	(.46)
Narrow actor	.53	.50	.53	.37	.50
	(.50)	(.50)	(.50)	(.48)	(.50)

Table 2 presents the probit regression models that predict alliance formation between two policy actors in state reading policy networks. Overall, the results indicated that there is at least partial substantiation of all four hypotheses. Hypothesis one similarity in policy preferences increases alliance formation was supported by the data in California, Connecticut, and Utah. Hypothesis two same type of organization predicts alliance formation received support in only two states, Connecticut and Utah. Hypothesis three the presence of a governmental actor in dyad increases alliance formation was supported by the data in all four states. Finally, hypothesis four the existence of a narrow interest in a dyad decreases alliance formation only received support from the Michigan data.

Table 2

Probit Regression Models

	State			
Predictors	CA	CT	MI	UT
Constant	-2.45**	-2.63**	-1.73**	-4.42**
	(.27)	(.82)	(.67)	(1.06)
Similarity in policy preferences	.51**	.48*	.26	.76**
	(.06)	(.20)	(.16)	(.25)

Same type of organization	.28	.71**	-.02	1.58**
	(.18)	(.27)	(.20)	(.31)
Governmental actor	.77**	1.42**	1.20**	1.53**
	(.11)	(.28)	(.15)	(.22)
Narrow Actor	.02	-.16	-.41**	.32
	(.10)	(.23)	(.14)	(.22)
N	741	210	406	231
LR chi^2	145.21**	5.56**	97.13**	8.95**
df	4	4	4	4

Note. The results of the MRQAP were significant, indicating that these probit models were robust.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Discussion and Conclusions

One of the primary foci of this research has been to identify what type of policy actors are likely to enter alliances. The results indicate that the presence of a governmental actor in a dyad predicts the formation of an alliance between two policy actors but the presence of a narrow actor does not. The finding that having a narrow actor in the dyad is not related to alliance formation is inconsistent with the literature on the collaborative activity of narrow interest groups. This disparity may be due to the difference in samples. Whereas earlier works (Browne, 1990; Hojnacki, 1997; Hula, 1999) focus on national actors, this study focused on state actors who are likely to have fewer resources than national counterparts, and thus have a greater need to acquire the benefits associated with alliances. Second, narrow groups' propensity to avoid coalitions may be affected by the issue context. The heightened conflict, large number of actors, and the elevated importance of reading may offset any identity-based preferences narrow groups possess for working alone.

The finding that having a governmental actor in the dyad increased the likelihood of an alliance is noteworthy because the political science literature on coalitions is largely rooted in interest group theory, which often overlooks government agencies as coalition actors. Heinz and his colleagues' work (Heinz et al., 1993) exemplifies the drawback of using interest group theory to examine patterns of relationships. In particular, they found a *hollow core* in policy domains¿no core actors serving as

intermediaries among actors to promote compromise and resolution. Heinz et al. do speculate that government officials might be the very mediators that bind the system together, and this study's results provides empirical evidence that government can be extensively involved in a network and may be serving as an intermediary.

Four approaches may provide a useful lens for understanding why having a governmental actor in a dyad predicted alliance formation between two policy actors. The information transmission and resource dependence perspectives have received considerable attention (Laumann & Knoke, 1987), and thus are not discussed here. A third approach that has received less attention but would provide insight into group-state links is Selznick's (1949) notion of cooptation¿the absorption of potentially disruptive elements into an organization's decision-making structure. From this perspective, government officials may prevent threats to power and enhance legitimacy by incorporating powerful educational interest groups into the policy process. Government actors may be establishing all of these alliances to coopt other actors. The fourth perspective is institutional theory, which supposes that organizations that incorporate legitimating structures, rules, and procedures are themselves legitimated (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). One likely explanation for the pervasiveness of government-group alliances is coercive isomorphism. States are often required to involve a variety of stakeholders in federally funded programs, as was the case with the Reading Excellence Act during the period of study. Thus, some group-state relationships are likely an artifact of institutionalism.

The second focus of this study was to examine the extent to which homophily¿like attracts like¿predicts an alliance between policy actors. The results indicate that similar policy preferences and organizational types predict alliance formation in two of the states, suggesting state-specific effects. However, the relationship between similar preferences and alliance formation cannot be presumed causal. Similar policy preferences may be an outcome of the alliance.

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