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State and Regional Politics: Introduction

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STATE AND REGIONAL POLITICS *

INTRODUCTION

The policy decisions of the states have become increasingly important to social welfare in recent years. In that sense, it is an opportune time to introduce an interdisciplinary collection of articles which has as its principal focus the circumstances and the processes of policy at the state level. With one exception, the articles which address regional concepts do so in the context of comparative or case studies of one or more state policy decisions.

Much of the states' new prominence in social welfare is due to a conspicuously diminished scope and level of federal activity since 1980. Four of these articles establish significant connections between their research and one or more of these recent reversals in national policy. Mueller and Comer examine the fate of state health system agencies, following federal deregulation in 1981. They explore several potential explanations for state decisions, grounded in the framework of an interesting variant of general innovation theory as developed within political science. The results of their analysis suggest that "dissinnovation" or termination of the agency is negatively related to general factors normally associated with decisions to adopt reforms initially but in interaction with several variables which are more specific to the problem, such as the costs of hospitalization in the states. The aftermath of federal deregulation and reduced block grants is also explored in Sink and Wilson's case study of initial allocations in Alabama. In that article they develop a model of interaction between the initiation of that mechanism of fiscal transfers and regionally placed systems of political culture and balances of power among the branches of state government. Demone and Gibelman contribute an examination of factors effecting state decisions in the design of social service delivery strategies within the rubric of expanded state discretion. They devote special attention to purchase of service arrangements and relate the examined advantages and disadvantages to a discussion of future trends.

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The results of Heffernan's study of welfare spending are illustrative of a number of common objections to increasing reliance upon the states. They are also indicative of the challenges facing social welfare scholarship and advocacy even if future elections restore a period of incremental growth in federal funding roles. Controlling for differences between state wealth and several other measures similar to those used in Mueller and Comer's study, Heffernan concludes that in their allocation of their own revenues there are rather stable patterns in which some states exceed predicted spending, while others regularly make less than predicted efforts. Since the states appear to be "resilient in their desire to carry out programs consistent with their own traditions," reduced federal funding would compound benefit inequalities between states on the basis of those varied traditions. On the one hand, these inequalities may substantiate need for national standards requiring a larger federal funding role than that of the seventies. On the other hand, to defer actions to promote benefit allocations in the states in favor of creation of an adequate federalized program appears to be a remote prospect in the immediate future unless accompanied by a "swap" which yields a net loss of federal social program transfers to the states. One of his principal points is that as yet social research lacks a reasonable understanding of what exact circumstances account for the differences in spending efforts.

Three of these articles explore regional constructions as partial explanations of differing state policy decisions. The two case studies in that group fall within traditional boundaries of the south. Sink and Wilson's article on block grants in Alabama, already mentioned, was the only one of the two which focused upon spending. McNeece and Ezell discuss the interaction of political culture and symbolism in describing the backlash to reform in Florida's juvenile detention criteria. Along with Block's overview of a sunset review of social work licensing, the study of juvenile detention reform illustrates one of the reasons the framework of this collection was not equated with the scope or duration of the Reagan agenda for social welfare. Both issues fall within domains of state policy which are largely removed from federal politics.

Savage's article is the most ambitious of the studies concerned with regional traditions in state policy in that it is national in scope and historical in perspective. It should be noted that his inferences about regional traditions in the states' adoptions of policy innovations are drawn from statistical factors which underlie relations between the states over a broad range of policies including innovations outside common definitions of social welfare. Stated differently, his analysis is oriented towards the discovery of underlying patterns which apply to policy innovation in its most general sense. Regional traditions which might be operating only for one or several related fields of state policy would not be suggested. In terms of generally applicable regional traditions, he concludes that such patterns appear to be declining especially since 1930. The two exceptions, he notes, are southern and northeastern clusters.

While suggesting some continuation of societal development along multilinear regional lines, he concludes that the forces of national integration appear increasingly dominant in such evolution. Parenthetically, all but one of the six regional case studies of state politics received for review were concerned with the dynamics operating in the south. The two included in this collection have already been introduced. (Sink and Wilson) (McNeece and Ezell).

The receptivity of state governments and their legislatures in particular to the perspectives of and information provided by social welfare advocates and representatives of social agencies is often presumed to be low. Freeman and Lyons' comparative study of sunset reviews in Kentucky indicates that social welfare programs emerge from legislative evaluations with a lower probability of termination or major change than non-welfare systems. The pattern was reversed in terms of the likelihood and number of "minor" administrative changes which the agencies typically made in consultation with the review prior to completion of the formal sunset report. Along with Block's paper, the collection includes two articles on the performance of sunset mechanisms now found in over half of the states.

The activities of legislative staff are analyzed in the case study by Prindle and Burshtyn. In one of the less "professionalized" legislatures, at least, differences appear in the allocation of time to such activities as policy research for the staff of "liberal" and "conservative" members of the Texas assembly. Interestingly, McNeece and Ezell found the "tradition" oriented Florida legislature to be conspicuously inattentive to the research findings which supported retention of the reformed detention criteria for juveniles. Baney's study suggests that women legislatures may be especially receptive to the initiation of social legislation. Variables which have appeared to make gender differences in the introduction of bills spurious in other studies did not seem to do so in this case study.

Cox's paper on Black families in Appalachia is the only regional study in this issue which does not have state policy processes as a principal focus. Following a brief historical account of settlement patterns, it focuses upon the problems associated with the population's marginality within the region particularly in terms of economics as well as with the region's own typical marginality to the centers of state economics and politics. Substantial attention is given to the group's unique historical experience and to adaptive responses found within the group. His article includes recommendations for more responsive social service designs. Readers may wish to relate the state purchase of service options described by Demone and Gibelman to Cox's assessment of the role of the Appalachian church and informal family supports. The following two articles concern models of state policy planning and implementation which seem responsive to intra-state regional differences found in most states.

Ahn, Horan, and Taylor's paper focuses primarily on the development of an advocacy design in public administration. It and Korr's article describe regional models of state coordination. Korr outlines how a regional office in the field of mental health functioned as a catalyst for community supports in underserved and inappropriately served minority neighborhoods.

Finally, Mathews describes a set of factors which influence the ability of social work political action committees to organize on behalf of the priorities of professional associations in the states. It is one of several papers which provide case histories of advocacy in the policy arenas of the states. They include Block's report on sunset review of licensing and McNec and Ezell's analysis of juvenile detention reform.

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