

Shober, Arnold (2006). Building government: Autonomy and scope in state departments of education, 1981--2001

Abstract

This dissertation explores when and how state departments of education are able to shape education policy in their states. I argue that government agencies in general are able to shape the policy preferences of their political principals even in unfavorable political environments. To explain this process, I use in-depth interviews, archival research, and both cross-sectional and time-series models for the departments of education in Georgia, Ohio, and Wisconsin between 1981 and 2001. I conceptualize government agency actions in terms of autonomy and scope. Autonomy is the exercise of independent choice by an agency regardless of the initial preferences of the governor or legislature. Scope is an agency's set of tasks, formally specified, and accompanied by a budget sufficient to do them. Scope is derived from the mutual preferences of the legislature and the governor. A highly autonomous agency will be able to move the preferences of the governor and legislators toward its own preferred policy and thereby gain broader scope to fulfill that policy preference. When successful, the agency will not have to take autonomous action on the particular policy in the future. I propose that an agency's success at building autonomy and scope is drawn from three sets of factors: institutional, endogenous, and exogenous. Institutional factors include the agency's formal and constitutional structure; endogenous factors include the superintendent's leadership and the management of interest groups; and exogenous factors are the salience of education in the legislature and with the governor and electoral turnover. Given the constellation of institutional, endogenous, and exogenous factors in the three states studied, Georgia's Department of Education proved to be the most autonomous with the greatest scope and Wisconsin's Department of Public instruction the least on both measures. The implications of these findings are important for education reform. An agency that can effectively change the preferences of governors and legislators may well be able to sustain reforms better than one that must follow the political winds. Further, as the federal government asks state agencies---education and otherwise---to do more, autonomous agencies stand better able to administer new programs competently.