

Governors as Policymakers: Child Welfare as an Election Issue

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Introduction

Governors can be major policy actors in child welfare. As the head of the executive branch of state government, the governor oversees the public agency responsible for child welfare. This becomes very noticeable when a tragedy happens to a child in the state's care, and agencies often institute reactive responses (Collins, 2018). What about a more proactive effort to pursue a policy agenda in child welfare? Are there circumstances in which governors would take initiative in determining a policy agenda in child welfare? Gubernatorial campaigns provide an opportunity to examine this question. This article offers an analysis of gubernatorial candidates' attention to issues of child welfare in the recent November 2018 state elections.

Background

Child maltreatment continues to be a major social problem requiring intervention. The most recent data identify that during federal fiscal year 2017, child protective service agencies received 4.1 million referrals for abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). In response to these referrals, child protective service agencies have extensive procedures for investigating referrals, making determinations, and referring for follow up services. State and county child welfare agencies have the statutory responsibility for responding to allegations of child maltreatment. Then, often contracting with private providers, state and county agencies may provide a range of services to both families and children to meet federally stated goals of

child safety, permanency, and well-being.

As with any policy arena, politics is a profound force influencing the numerous policy processes of agenda-setting, policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Children are often disadvantaged in the policy process (Gormley, 2012). At the most basic level, their lack of voting power and lack of financial resources assure that they will not be a powerful group in seeking favorable policy attention. Moreover, their developmental stage, particularly at younger ages, makes it necessary that others act on their behalf. Child advocacy takes many forms (DeVita & Mosher-Williams, 2001), including state ombuds to monitor state actions in regard to children's interests (O'Neill, 2011), class actions lawsuits on behalf of children's rights (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2012), and efforts to support children's voices in care systems (Caldwell, McConvey, & Collins, 2019).

The policies and practices of child welfare most often come to the public's attention in the aftermath of child tragedies in care. Several scholars have documented the "cycle" of attention in these cases both in the U.S. (e.g., Gainsborough, 2010) and elsewhere (e.g., Ayre, 2001). Key factors in the cycle include: massive media attention; public calls for action; and responses by leaders that initially minimize, but often eventually result in partial and symbolic actions such as firing the head of the agency, reprimanding workers involved, forming commissions to make recommendations, and extensive case reviews. Gainsborough (2010) has noted that policymakers like to be perceived as caring about issues affecting children, but young people's lack of political power results in largely symbolic actions with

few attached resources.

Agenda-setting theory helps us to understand why some issues become a focus of policymakers while others do not. Kingdon's multiple streams framework (2003) identified processes of problem definition, policy formulation, and politics as critical forces. Previous research (Gainsborough, 2010; Collins, 2018) has often focused on the "problem" of child abuse, its framing by advocates, and the use of data and focusing events to help attain agenda status. The policy stream identifies that some potential solutions are more viable than others, and that policy entrepreneurs are needed to match a viable solution to a well-crafted problem definition at a propitious time for policy making. According to Kingdon (2003), the "politics" stream includes factors such as elections, the political mood, and the influence of interest groups. The 2018 elections for governor in the U.S. provide an opportunity to examine this particular part of the politics stream.

This analysis examined the campaign of each candidate for governor in the 2018 state elections. Gubernatorial campaigns occurred in 36 states and included 80 candidates. I reviewed the website of each campaign to determine the stated issues of the campaign. As candidates for public office, these positions are publicly available. In almost all cases, the campaign clearly identifies either "issues" or "priorities" on their website.

I reviewed each of the candidates' campaign websites and recorded the stated issues. I then coded them into common categories. Although the primary research question is related to child welfare, I identified all mentions related to "children" or "families" to examine the broader extent to which concerns of children and families were part of the candidates' stated agenda. Other variables that I recorded included the state, the candidate's party, and whether the candidate was an incumbent.

One other source of information was the most recent data about child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Two indicators from this data source are provided in Table 1: child fatalities per 100,000 children and referrals per 100,000 children. These data indicate of the extent of

the problem of child maltreatment in each state.

Findings

Only two candidates for governor had clear statements about their interest in addressing child welfare issues. The Democratic candidate for Governor of New Hampshire identified "Protecting Vulnerable Children" as a key issue. This included providing stable funding for child protection and child violence prevention, following recommendations of an earlier audit report, and setting up an independent system of care to address needs and prevent violence. The other candidate was the Democratic candidate for Governor of Iowa, who highlighted "Supporting Children and Families," which included early childhood interventions, child care and economic security, and explicit attention to child welfare and child abuse. Neither candidate was elected.

Two incumbent governors addressed a child welfare issue in a narrow way. The Republican incumbent of New Hampshire described a record of achievements. Among those listed, under "Safety," was listed "added 20 new DCYF case workers across the state." New Hampshire, like many states, had experienced recent tragedies involving children in care, and this was the incumbent candidate's documented response. The Republican incumbent from Arizona listed "Safety and Security for All." This encompassed several more specific issues including border security, better investigation for sexual assault victims, opioids, child safety, and catching child support evaders. Within child safety, the website noted that the governor "has turned around the agency," reporting that the number of kids in foster care is down 20% and the agency has received an award from Casey Family programs. Generally, incumbent candidates' websites focused on portraying their accomplishments, compared to challengers whose websites were more explicit about their plans going forward.

Two other candidates proposed narrow issue areas related to child welfare, rather than broad systemic attention. The Democratic candidate in Arizona had several points related to "End Cycle of Poverty," including reducing unintended teen pregnancy, pre-K programs, support for low income and first generation college students, and diversion of parents from the

criminal justice system. One additional point specific to child welfare was to train and recruit effective foster and adoptive families. The candidate noted on the website that he himself had been adopted. A somewhat unique area of “protecting girls from early marriage” was identified by the Democratic candidate in South Carolina.

More broadly than child welfare, addressing child poverty, strongly linked with child maltreatment (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014), was a stated issue in two winning campaigns. Gavin Newsom, now the Democratic Governor of California, offered a multi-component platform of ideas to address child poverty, and Janet Mills, now Democratic Governor of Maine, highlighted the more specific issue of child hunger. Although these efforts are not labelled “child welfare” or focused specifically on the prevention of child abuse, given the known relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, success in reducing child poverty and child hunger might be expected to improve the lives of children and reduce the need for child welfare system involvement.

Education and health care were common among candidates’ platforms (identified 59 and 50 times, respectively). Although robust systems of high quality and accessible systems of education and health care would provide great benefits to all children and have potential to reduce some environmental risks to children, they are not specific to child welfare. Moreover, their general nature and ability to serve large populations make them politically popular with more privileged economic and social groups.

Examining the data in Table 1, there appeared to be no discernible pattern in the relationship between child maltreatment and issue statements of gubernatorial candidates for governor. In the two states (Iowa and New Hampshire) where candidates provided the most robust attention to child welfare, data do not suggest that child welfare issues were more serious in comparison to other states. The incumbents in New Hampshire and Arizona offered narrow responses on these issues; Arizona, like New Hampshire, was not an outlier according to the NCCANDS data.

Beyond Child Welfare

Candidates speak to a range of issues affecting children and families but aim to address these in a wide variety of ways. For example, a fairly large number identified issues of crime/safety (n = 20) or opioids (n = 19), but these concerns were not typically focused on children specifically.

Where “family” was concerned, responses tended to reflect party ideologies. For example, the South Dakota Republican candidate described a Family First Initiative with a number of points that were conservative (prolife, religious liberty/traditional marriage, reduce dependency/increase work, respect for parental rights) and some that were more neutral (military readiness, help for incarcerated parents, and expansion of residential/family based drug treatment that would keep children out of foster care). The Alaskan Republican candidate identified parental rights, particularly related to school choice and educational decisions. The Alaskan Democratic candidate linked family issues with women, focusing on child care and family leave.

Along with education and health care, some other popular (n = 20 or more) issue areas included employment/economic development (n = 59), government reform (n = 34), environment/energy (n = 31), crime/safety (n = 20), veterans (n = 20), and tax reform (n = 20).

Discussion

This analysis rarely found specific attention to child protection and the child welfare system to be a focus of candidates for governor. This is not a surprising finding, but it is impactful to contrast this lack of focus with state responses when tragedies occur to children in care. When those tragedies happen, a typical pattern of response often emerges, with the governor often playing a prominent role. In the face of child tragedies in care, particularly when the case is extreme, when there have been a pattern of cases, or when it appears the agency is at fault, there may be vocal public response and demand for something to be done (Gainsborough, 2010). In this heated and high-profile environment, reactive actions are a typical result (Gainsborough, 2010; Collins, 2018). More considered evidence-based approaches, with potentially more

Table 1: Child fatalities and Referrals for Maltreatment in the Sample States

State	Child fatalities per 100,000	Referrals for maltreatment per 100,000
AL	2.56	25.7
AK	1.08	100.2
AZ	2.14	46.6
AK	5.24	80.8
CA	1.62	44.2
CO	2.77	75.4
CT	1.48	55.6
FL	2.40	56.3
GA	3.74	48.8
HI	1.31	14.5
ID	2.25	47.2
IL	2.55	--
IA	2.60	71.0
KS	1.96	55.3
ME	--	63
MD	3.04	39.5
MA	--	60.5
MI	2.34	68.8
MN	1.85	69.9
NE	0.21	74.5
NV	3.06	52.8
NH	0.77	57.8
NM	3.28	80.2
NY	3.06	--
OH	2.80	70.1
OK	2.19	81.4
OR	3.43	82.3
PA	1.58	--
RI	2.41	64.4
SC	2.53	41.7
SD	2.33	74.2
TN	2.85	86.3
TX	2.53	34.6
VT	0.00	169.1
WI	2.42	61.3
WY	2.93	54.5
Average (all states)	2.32	

meaningful results, are limited. Furthermore, a proactive policy-making approach would also demonstrate a more serious commitment to the issues of child abuse and neglect and the broader issues of enhancing child well-being. Highlighting, promoting, and committing to efforts that address the range of serious issues facing young people would provide the leadership necessary to tackle these challenges. Governors are in a position to provide this leadership at the state level.

Governors themselves may lack the relevant substantive expertise to engage in issues related to child welfare and child maltreatment. They frequently have backgrounds in law, business, or government, and rarely in social work, human services, or the helping professions. But they can surround themselves with advisors and staff members with appropriate expertise on these topics. Foremost among the topics requiring the attention of governors and other policymakers is understanding the evidence of the long term negative effects of child maltreatment and other adverse experiences in childhood (Shonkoff et al., 2012). These pervasive and substantial effects have both human and financial costs. Costs are obviously of interest to governors and other policymakers in the states. Using the most current available data and up-to-date analytic techniques, Peterson, Florence, and Klevens (2018) estimated that the economic burden of child maltreatment based on 2015 substantiated nonfatal cases was \$428 billion; estimates for all investigated non-fatal incidents was estimated at \$2 trillion. When considering the costs of actions and inactions, it is also relevant to consider the substantial costs of ineffective reactive actions. Aside from the costs to the child and family, states' reactive strategies (e.g., replacing agency administrators, increasing administrative burden on caseworkers related to extensive documentation, convening advisory commissions, defending agencies against class action litigation) often result in an inefficient

*Note: **bold** indicates above the average

use of valuable state resources with limited impact on the safety and well-being of children.

To address the human and financial costs related to maltreatment, substantial research efforts have built a considerable evidence base of interventions that might guide decision-making in establishing a proactive approach to child protection (e.g., MacMillan, Wathen, Barlow, Fergusson, Leventhal, & Taussig, 2009). Thyer, Babcock, and Tutweiler (2017) noted that with the rapid increase of well-designed outcome studies, the accumulated evidence can be difficult for policymakers and other stakeholders to access, synthesize, and utilize. They provide information about some of the most relevant online resources that identify the degree of research support behind potentially useful interventions in child welfare practice. These include, for example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP), the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).

In addition to specific evidence-based programs, as well as investment in research to continue to develop the evidence base for interventions, governors can also lead their states in developing the administrative infrastructure needed at the state level to undergird best practices. Chahine and Sanders (2013) summarized several strategies based on a series of national forums that Casey Family Programs convened to influence and mobilize national efforts to improve safety and prevent child maltreatment-related fatalities. Critical steps include improving surveillance systems to have better data, particularly around child maltreatment deaths, which are underreported; using known risk factors (e.g., poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence) to improve prevention strategies; using population-level prevention strategies (e.g., public information campaigns); identifying flaws in organizational processes that contribute to practice errors; and using comprehensive cross-system community-based approaches. Additionally, states might also use policies, practices, and investments related to establishing a high quality workforce, training and development, and evaluation of training (Collins, 2008) to potentially improve the

administrative infrastructure needed to protect children.

Addressing the needs of children and families in a proactive manner values these constituencies in their own right. This moral argument must remain part of the approach to securing resources for children and families. Additionally, there is evidence that investing in building strong families and healthy children has economic benefits. In one rigorous study, Peterson, Florence, Thomas, and Klevens (2018) conducted a cost-benefit analysis of two primary prevention programs for each of the 50 states. This analysis, based on existing data regarding the current population, costs, and maltreatment incidence, indicated that the implementation of these two programs might prevent child maltreatment for thousands of children. The researchers concluded that states could substantially offset the costs of the programs in the long term through the monetary value of benefits related to reductions in maltreatment and its adverse consequences. Several other cost-benefit analyses are available that governors and other policymakers can use. Maher, Corwin, Hodnett, and Faulk (2012), for example, used a cost-savings analysis of the statewide implementation of an evidence-informed parenting education program (Nurturing Parent Program), finding a positive benefit-cost ratio.

Political challenges remain to be addressed. Positive benefits may not occur until a distant future in which the current officeholder may have little stake. Political calculations are known to emphasize short term benefits with long term costs rather than the reverse. Consequently, this is an arena in which strong leadership is needed; leadership requires attention to the benefits of the state and its populace in the long term. This tendency also requires the advocacy community to engage in sustained argument emphasizing a long term perspective.

Elections for governor provide an opportunity to push candidates to consider more proactive options for addressing child welfare issues within the state. They provide a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon, 2003) to get these issues onto the policymaking agenda. Governors rarely have reason to address these issues unless they are pressured to do so. Like all other policy

issues, child welfare, and the interests of children and youth more broadly, are political. There is no common understanding of what children are entitled to from government, which child-focused issues deserve priority, or how government recognizes and addresses their concerns (or not).

Policy theories note that children do not vote, and they do not have money. For many, their parents are not in a position to secure resources for their families. Quite the contrary, often trapped by poverty, substance use, and incarceration, parents are more likely to receive punitive attention. Existing racial disproportionality, and the racism that accompanies it, also puts families at a political disadvantage (Roberts, 2002). Lacking resources and their resulting power, they can do little to influence the policy process. Maltreated children and those at risk for maltreatment continue to require professionals, advocates, and allies to pressure policymakers for beneficial policy treatment.

While child deaths in care have long provided a policy window, effective policy is rarely the result of reactive responses within the glare of the media and public spotlight resulting from tragedies that happen to children in care. Yet this descriptive analysis indicates that issues related to child abuse are rarely on governors' agendas during elections. This is a missed opportunity for the public to engage with candidates on this issue and to press for a greater commitment toward securing safety and well-being for young people. Policy processes are highly complex, involving

numerous actors. Governors are key actors, and their public platforms during and after elections provide an important indicator of the importance of children's issues to their planned administration. Elevating the importance of vulnerable children to be on par with other important state issues is critical. Broad-based, comprehensive strategies are needed to improve the range of supports for children and families; otherwise there is a risk that specific attention to child abuse prevention and intervention or the state agency with responsibility for these efforts might push costs onto other state systems that are also important.

In this article I have documented the minimal attention that gubernatorial candidates gave to child welfare in the recent elections. Existing research on negative effects of maltreatment, costs of inaction, and a burgeoning knowledge base of effective approaches provide tools in our arsenal of advocacy strategies. Cognizant of agenda-setting processes and political context, these strategies are necessary to more aggressively convince governors and other policymakers to engage in proactive efforts on behalf of vulnerable children for both moral and economic reasons.

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