ANATOMY OF A COALITION:
THE EMERGENCE OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA

by

BONNIE STEWART HOLLIDAY

(Under the Direction of Elizabeth Debray)

ABSTRACT

Using the ACF as an organizing framework, this study utilizes the school choice movement in Georgia as a case study of policy change in education. The study examines the ways in which support for choice initiatives has emerged and evolved to enable the passage of school choice legislation in recent years. A combination of data collection techniques were employed to answer the research questions posed by this study: document review and archival analysis, direct observation and participant observation, and targeted in-depth interviews with state-level policy actors.

Findings from this study reveal that the success of the school choice coalition was at least partially enabled through (1) Georgia’s political culture—which prioritizes decentralization and deregulation, (2) the change in Georgia’s systemic governing coalition (a shift from Democratic to Republican control), (3) federal education initiatives tying funding to school choice implementation and the support of the current Presidential administration, (4) the ability of the school choice coalition to engage latent constituencies by conflating several important issues including parental empowerment, community engagement, and local school board authority, and (5) funding from
organizations external to the state that provided the school choice coalition a significant advantage in their efforts to compete with the traditional education coalition on issues of policy expansion. Additionally, data collected for this study show that policy oriented learning did not play a significant role in the policy development process, and the 2012 vote on Amendment 1 served as a proxy for statewide support for expanded school choice options and increased parental empowerment.

INDEX WORDS: School Choice, Charter Schools, School Vouchers, Advocacy Coalition Framework, Politics of Education, Education Policy, Education in Georgia
ANATOMY OF A COALITION:
THE EMERGENCE OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA

by

BONNIE STEWART HOLLIDAY

B.S., The University of Georgia, 2003
M.Ed., The University of Georgia, 2004

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2013
ANATOMY OF A COALITION:
THE EMERGENCE OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL CHOICE IN GEORGIA

by

BONNIE STEWART HOLLIDAY

Major Professor: Elizabeth Debray
Committee: John Dayton
Sheneka Williams

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2013
DEDICATION

For my parents, Robert and Gail Stewart, who taught me to always finish the things I start. And for my husband, Lea, who patiently endured the long process of dissertation completion. Any small success I ever achieve is to my family’s credit.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Successful completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the continual support and expert advice of my committee members: Elizabeth Debray, John Dayton, and Sheneka Williams. Their guidance throughout this process made it possible for me to continue.

I am also grateful for the mentorship of Elizabeth St. Pierre who taught me that qualitative researchers must be good listeners before they can be good story tellers.

Finally, a special thank you goes to Jennifer Rippner who offered me my first job in state government many years ago. If not for that opportunity, my academic and professional pursuits would be far less interesting.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................v

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................1

Significance of the Study ...............................................................................................1

Purpose of the Study .......................................................................................................2

Research Questions and Data Collection .....................................................................3

Definition of Terms.......................................................................................................5

Organization of the Study .............................................................................................7

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..............................................................................9

Foundations of the ACF ...............................................................................................9

Utility of the ACF .........................................................................................................16

ACF Hypotheses .........................................................................................................26

Summary ......................................................................................................................30

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ..............................................................................31

Unit of Analysis ..........................................................................................................31

Description of Data Sources .......................................................................................33

Research Validity and Reliability .................................................................................39

Selection of Research Site .........................................................................................40

Limitations of the Study .............................................................................................40
Summary ..........................................................................................................................41

4 FINDINGS .........................................................................................................................42

Archival Review Findings ..............................................................................................42
Qualitative Interview Findings .......................................................................................52
Summary of Key Findings ...............................................................................................103

5 INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION .................................................................105

Interpretation of Findings .............................................................................................105
The Future of School Choice in Georgia .........................................................................114
Implications for Further Research ................................................................................117
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................120

REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................122

APPENDICES

A STABLE SYSTEM PARAMETERS IMPACTING EDUCATION POLICY IN GEORGIA ..................................................................................................................142

B SCHOOL CHOICE LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION IN GEORGIA .................................................................................................................................145

C BILL REVIEW ...............................................................................................................149

D A NATIONAL OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL CHOICE LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION .................................................................................................151

E BASIC PREMISES OF THE ACF ..................................................................................166
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

This study used the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to examine the emergence and expansion of the school choice advocacy coalition in Georgia that enabled significant state-level policy change in education (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). While researchers have applied the ACF to various aspects of educational policymaking (Burlington & Geske, 1979; Elmore & McGlaughlin, 1988; Kirst & Jung, 1982; Mazzoni & Clugston, 1987; Wong & Rollow, 1990), the existing body of research will benefit from an examination of the factors influencing political decision making within well-developed policy subsystems at the state level. Specifically, a study of educational policy change in Georgia is particularly well suited to buttress existing theoretical knowledge on both deregulation coalitions (Brown, 1985, 1987; Brown & Stewart, 1993; Kahn, 1983; Levine, 1981; Wilson, 1980) as well as education coalitions (Bishop, 1992; Bulkley, 2003; Bulman & Kirp, 1999; Ceperley, 1997; Fusarelli, 1998; Lewis, Young, & Sanders, 2008; Mawhinney, 1992, 1993; Morken & Formicola, 1999; Stewart, 1991) because it examines the emergence of the state’s school choice policy coalition as an extension of Georgia’s decades-old tradition of promoting deregulation and decentralized authority. As a result, maintaining a focus on the state's political history enables better understanding of the stable system parameters impacting education policy in Georgia (see
Appendix A) and prevents "inadequate conceptualizations of social phenomena" that stem from “failure to consider the effects of history and context" (Fusarelli, 1998, p.2).

**Purpose of the Study**

Georgia’s political culture has been repeatedly characterized as traditionalistic and moralistic (Elazar, 1984), as ideologically conservative (Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 1993) and as distrustful of government (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007). Within these political and cultural parameters, public policies are enacted to reflect the state’s ideological traditions. Given the foundational tenant of conservatism throughout the state, it follows that Georgia has consistently created policies—including those governing education—that champion deregulation and increased autonomy at the lowest levels of government.

As a result, the relationship between school choice and the state’s long-standing preference for local control and decentralized authority is particularly worthy of study given the recent state-level policy changes expanding educational flexibility options in Georgia (see Appendix B for an overview of recent trends in school choice legislation and litigation in Georgia). Using the ACF as an organizing framework, this study utilizes the school choice movement in Georgia as a case study of policy change in education. The purpose of this study is to examine state-level efforts to increase school choice options for students in Georgia and to explain how support for school choice initiatives emerged and evolved to enable the passage of key legislation in recent years (see Appendix C for a full review of relevant school choice legislation passed by the Georgia General Assembly since 2007).
Research Questions and Data Collection

In light of the state’s historical privileging of deregulation and free-market ideas, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What political and institutional conditions contributed to the emergence and expansion of the state’s school choice coalition—particularly during the last decade?

2. How has this expansion impacted the composition of Georgia’s school choice coalition as well as the policies it supports?

In order to most adequately address each of these questions, the following research methods and data collection techniques were employed:

- a thorough document review of media accounts, policy briefs, and relevant literature was conducted in order to highlight the state-level policy context out of which Georgia’s school choice movement gained an initial foothold and eventual momentum;

- an archival analysis of recent state voting records and legislative committee testimony was conducted to provide a record of coalitional support for school choice and to aid in the identification of interview candidates based on their association with and/or participation in the policy process that resulted in the passage of school choice bills in Georgia from 2007-2012; and

- interviews with policy players and political actors operating within Georgia’s education policy subsystem were conducted to yield insight into Georgia’s school choice policy development process.
Upon completion of the data collection process, findings were analyzed to measure the extent to which Georgia’s school choice policy process conformed to the assumptions of the ACF (Sabatier, 1988, 1991; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith; 1993). This analytical framework assisted in answering the research questions posed in this study by highlighting 1) the conditions that contributed to the expansion of coalitional support for school choice initiatives in Georgia and 2) the impact of such expansion on the state’s school choice policies. The following queries were adapted from the ACF to assess coalitional characteristics of Georgia’s education policy subsystem:

- **Coalitional membership**: Is there evidence of competing coalitions in Georgia’s education policy subsystem?
- **Shifts in authority**: Have changes in the systemic governing coalition (the composition of political actors) affected the passage of school choice policy?
- **Policy core beliefs**: To what extent do the groups within coalitions, if any, agree on issues pertaining to policy core beliefs?
- **Secondary aspects of beliefs**: To what extent do the groups within coalitions, if any, agree on issues pertaining to the secondary aspects of belief systems?
- **Abandoning secondary aspects**: To what extent do groups within coalitions give up any secondary aspects of their belief systems before acknowledging weaknesses in the policy core?
- **Policy oriented learning**: Is policy oriented learning a force for change in the secondary aspects?
- **Dynamic external events**: Has change in the policy core been the result of one or more exogenous forces?
Because this type of analysis aggregates data according to the assumptions set forth within the ACF, it ultimately produced a grounded theory that explains plausible relationships and “calls for exploration of each new situation to see if they fit, how they might fit, and how they might not fit” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279).

**Definition of Terms**

**Advocacy Coalition**

An advocacy coalition consists of a diverse group of individuals from both public and private sectors who share a particular set of beliefs and attempt to translate these beliefs into policy through coordinated and strategic efforts over time.

**Belief System Structure**

The ACF places significant emphasis on the belief systems of the actors within coalitions because these belief systems determine the issues around which individuals are likely to aggregate. Sabatier (1993) explains that while core beliefs—both deep (normative) core and near (policy) core—are very resistant to change, secondary aspects of belief systems are more likely to be influenced by external political factors. As a result, the ACF maintains a dual focus on both internal and external policy dynamics, and the activities occurring within a policy subsystem are examined in relation to those occurring within a broader political system.

**Charter Schools**

Charter Schools are public schools funded by public monies that are excused from a significant portion of state-level regulation in exchange for increased academic accountability as spelled out a school’s charter contract. These schools are autonomous
and mission-driven, and they may be created by any number of state sanctioned authorizers.

**Types of charter schools in Georgia.** Georgia has two types of charter schools: conversions and start-ups. Georgia also recognizes two charter school authorizers: local boards of education and the State Board of Education.

**Exogenous Forces**

The ACF defines exogenous events as those occurring outside the policy subsystem and impacting the belief systems of actors within the policy subsystem.

**Open-Enrollment**

An open-enrollment policy limits or prohibits the ability of schools or districts to create enrollment priorities for public school students.

**Policy Change**

For purposes of this study, policy change occurs when a reform passes both houses of the state legislature and is signed into law by the Governor.

**Policy-Oriented Learning**

Policy oriented learning—the process of altering one’s beliefs and objectives in light of new and compelling information or evidence—plays an important role in belief system modifications; especially those modifications related to secondary aspects of the belief system.

**Policy-oriented learning and belief system stability.** According to the ACF, the stability of belief systems is influenced by the level of policy oriented learning occurring within and across subsystem coalitions. The intensity of the conflict
corresponds with the degree to which a core belief is challenged or threatened; the more direct the threat, the more intense the conflict.

**School Choice**

The term ‘school choice’ encompasses a broad range of educational options offering parents and students varying degrees of flexibility in the selection of a school setting.

School choice options include public charter schools, public magnet schools and magnet programs, intra-district and inter-district transfer policies, private school voucher programs, tuition tax-credit scholarships, and private schools.

**School Voucher**

A school voucher is a payment issued by the government to a parent or guardian on behalf of a student to cover or offset costs associated with private school education. Usually, a voucher may only be applied toward tuition and fees.

**Tuition Tax Credit**

A tuition tax credit is issued to individuals or corporations donating a portion of their owed state taxes to an eligible organizations that issue scholarships to parents/guardians on behalf of students to cover or offset costs associated with private school education. In Georgia, donations are 100% tax deductible and must be made to a student scholarship organization (SSO) which, in turn, awards scholarships to students.

**Organization of the Study**

Using the ACF as an organizing framework, this case study of school choice policy in Georgia begins with an historic analysis of the coalitional activity that led to the passage of the state’s first charter school law in 1993. By establishing the political context that enabled this initial policy shift, it was then possible to evaluate the ways in
which coalitional support for school choice has evolved over the last two decades. In other words, the policy environment that existed in 1993 served as a baseline against which future policy changes were measured. The catalyst for these changes was determined upon collection and analysis of interview data, historical media accounts, and voting records of the state’s elected officials. Additionally, changes to policy core beliefs as well as secondary aspects of belief systems were examined in relation to the apparent compositional shifts that the state’s school choice coalition recently experienced. Finally, external factors such as a statewide shifts in the systemic governing coalition and the influence of national education initiatives on state policy agendas were examined and presented within the findings of this study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review examines the ACF as an extension of previous theories of policy change and assesses the utility of the ACF for a study of long-term education policy change in Georgia. While this review was conducted with Georgia’s education policy subsystem in mind as a case study, the theories discussed herein are multi-disciplinary. As a result, this review may be relevant in a number of policy arenas outside of education, and the audience for this review may span multiple policy subsystems. The intent of this review is to illustrate 1) how the conceptual basis of the ACF builds on many of the theories that preceded it, and 2) the usefulness of the ACF as an organizing framework that emphasizes the significance of political culture, inter-governmental dynamics, policy-oriented learning and analysis, and most importantly—coalitional behavior and strategy.

Foundations of the ACF

Because systems theory is “the oldest and most common approach to explain policy change” (Fusarelli, 1998, p. 12), a significant body of research focusing on education politics and policy utilizes systems theory as a basic organizing framework (Abrams, 1993; Bailey et al., 1962; Berke & Kirst, 1972; Campbell & Mazzoni, 1976; Easton, 1953, 1965; Fusarelli, 1998; Kirst & Wirt, 1982; Mazzoni, 1993; Senge, 1990). The ACF, like many subsequently developed theories of policy change, builds on certain aspects of systems thinking; for instance, both systems theory and the ACF emphasize the
relevance of political environment on policy development as well as the importance of 
“influence relationships among key actors—individuals, groups, and coalitions—as 
demands are converted into decisions” (Mazzoni, 1993, p. 359). Ultimately, however, 
the ACF was developed out of a need for better theories of policy study because, as 
Fusarelli (1998) argues, “in an effort to create an all-encompassing grand theory that 
explains everything, systems theory may, in the end, explain little” (Fusarelli, 1998, p. 
14).

Thus, the ACF emerged out of “a search for an alternative explanatory system to 
the stages heuristic, a desire to integrate top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy 
implementation, and a commitment to incorporate technical information into 
understanding the policy process” (Heck, 2004, p. 117). Additionally, the ACF’s 
emphasis on the dynamic nature of policy development (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, 
Sabatier, 1993) distinguishes the framework from the more prescriptive stage-oriented 
models of policy development derived from the works of David Easton (1965) and 
Harold Lasswell (1951). For instance, the ACF posits that policy making is iterative in 
nature and that on-going analysis as well as political environment impact policy 
development and enactment while Lasswell (1951) argues that policy development is 
characterized by a set of separate and distinctly temporal subprocesses: problem 
identification, agenda setting, adoption, implementation, and policy evaluation. Easton 
(1965) elaborates on the stages concept to include a specific set of input mechanisms that 
lead to the production of a public policy when considered within various policy contexts.

In clear contrast to the “stages heuristic” concept which “inappropriately 
emphasizes the policy cycle as a temporal unit of analysis” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier,
1993b, pp. 3), the ACF characterizes policy making as having “multiple, interacting cycles involving multiple levels of government” (p. 4). Additionally, the ACF is further distinguished from systems theory in that it cites different avenues by which major policy change may be accomplished; these avenues include: (1) individuals seeking to accomplish their goals over a significant period of time by aggregating into particular coalitions and (2) exogenous events occurring outside the subsystem and impacting the belief systems of actors within the subsystem. While these “motors of change” highlight a fundamental difference between the ACF and the stages metaphor (Sabatier, 1993, p. 36), they suggest significant commonalities between the ACF and Kingdon’s (1984) Multiple Streams (MS) theory. For instance, both the ACF and MS emphasize the importance of political context in the policy-making process, and they also emphasize the potential for dynamic external events to create sudden policy shifts within a policy subsystem.

According to Kingdon (1984), these shifts occur when “policy windows” emerge as a result of all three streams—problems, politics, and policy alternatives—converging at a given time. These open “windows” allow for the introduction of a specific policy idea or solution. While the ACF views the opportunity for major policy change less as a “window” and more as a result of a perturbation caused by an event external to the policy subsystem, both theories offer similar explanations of how sudden policy shifts occur.

Additionally, both approaches represent a departure from the stages metaphor in that they “can be applied to decision opportunities, not simply agenda-setting opportunities,” and also because they “suggest different types of event variables that can be examined for their influence on the agenda” (Birkland, 2005, p. 226). This is not to suggest that there
are no conceptual differences between the streams metaphor and the ACF. The streams metaphor, for instance, has been criticized for not describing the processes that follow the creation of a policy window while the ACF essentially follows the creation of one “window” after another over a significant period of time. Additionally, where the multiple streams model characterizes the political stream and the analytical stream as parallels that rarely converge, the ACF views politics and analysis as inherently intertwined throughout the entire policy development process.

It is this integrated focus on analysis and policy-oriented learning that aligns the ACF with many of the basic tenants described within Punctuated Equilibrium (PE) theory (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). While these theories differ in focus to some degree (the ACF explains policy change as a relatively stable and incremental process whereas PE theory argues that the policy process is much more dynamic with long spans of stability punctuated by brief periods of significant policy change, they are often viewed as complimentary in that the ACF describes how and why various policy actors coalesce around particular issues to effect change while PE theory examines the overall role of mobilization within a larger context of the policy process. For example, both the ACF and PE posit that major policy changes are most effectively identified over the course of several decades and that the belief systems of policy makers play a major role in policy development. Additionally, PE theory highlights the critical role of “policy images”—or “mixtures of information and emotion . . . used as part of the strategy of dealing with political conflict” just as the ACF emphasizes the role of core beliefs in the analytical strategies employed by coalitional actors (Heck, 2004, p. 106).
The idea that beliefs and emotions impact policy outcomes emerges from the literature on political belief systems that are comprised of both core and secondary beliefs (Majone, 1980, 1989; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Sabatier, 1987). Sabatier (1993) explains that the “abstract [core] levels are hypothesized to be stable, in large part because they are largely normative issues inculturated in childhood and largely impervious to empirical evidence” (p. 36). These belief systems determine the issues around which individuals are likely to aggregate as well as the policy images they are likely to select as representative of a particular cause. For instance, actors sharing similar beliefs are likely to collectively strategize so as to increase the potential for achieving a particular objective; thus, a shared belief system is the fundamental component of a developing advocacy coalition. Sabatier (1993) explains that while core beliefs are very resistant to change, secondary aspects of belief systems are more likely to be influenced by external political factors. As a result, the ACF maintains a dual focus on both internal and external policy dynamics, and the activities occurring within a policy subsystem are examined in relation to those occurring within a broader political system.

Thus, an intergovernmental component emerges, and the ACF draws largely from Heclo’s (1974) work which presents policy change as the product of both large scale political and socio-economic shifts as well as the result of the personal interactions occurring amongst actors in a “policy community” as they vie for political power and policy solutions. Additionally, Heclo (1978) cites the existence of “issue networks” that form around particular policy issues and are comprised of a variety of public and private actors. Conceptually similar to the subsystems described within the ACF, Heclo (1978) explains issue networks as follows:
At any given time only one part of a network may be active, and through time the various connections may intensify or fade among the policy intermediaries and the executive and congregational bureaucracies. For example, there is no single health policy network but various sets of people knowledgeable and concerned about cost control mechanisms, insurance techniques, nutritional programs, pre-paid plans, and so on. At any one time these experts in designing a nationwide insurance system may seem to be operating in relative isolation, until it becomes clear that previous efforts to control costs have already created precedents that have to be accommodated in any new system. (p.104)

Because of its “wide and changing participation,” “issue experts,” and “unclearness about who is in control,” an issue network might exist at one end of what Anderson (2006) describes as a subsystem continuum while the traditional conception of an iron triangle would be placed at the opposite end (p. 71). Somewhere between these extremes—stability and fluidity—exists the subsystem described by Sabatier (1993): a useful unit of analysis when studying policy development and change.

The ACF highlights the subsystem because it recognizes the variety of actors and interests surrounding a given policy problem in a particular policy area. Rather than emphasizing the actions of a single government agency or group, the ACF maintains that policies are developed through the collaboration of multiple actors who bring a variety of interests and values to bear in their attempt to influence policy change. The subsystem acknowledges the interaction that is continually occurring amongst all participants in the policy development process. In fact, it is this focus that further distinguishes the ACF’s notion of ‘subsystem’ from that of ‘iron triangle’. Unlike traditional conceptions of iron
triangles (Fritschler, 1983; Griffith, 1961; Hamm 1983) that emphasize a concentration of power amongst a specific group of policy elites, the ACF maintains a much broader view of potentially influential political participants. This diverse group is encompassed by the subsystem and includes representatives from legislative committees, interest groups, government agencies, think tanks, and media outlets. By examining a broad spectrum of political participants beyond those traditionally included in iron triangles, a more comprehensive understanding of policy development may be achieved (Heclo, 1978; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993b; Scholtz et al., 1991).

Sabatier (1993) explains the ACF as an attempt to “translate Heclo’s basic insight into a reasonably clear conceptual framework of policy change over time,” and that within fairly large and complex subsystems, advocacy coalitions may form (p. 16). These coalitions seek to "manipulate institutional rules and actors in order to achieve policy goals” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 36). By acknowledging the impact of politics and institutional rules on individuals’ behavior, the ACF also draws on the works of institutional rational choice theories (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Kiser & Ostrom, 1982). However, the ACF expands upon basic behavioral tenets by recognizing institutional rules as “the product of strategies by advocacy coalitions over time” rather than the central mechanism by which political players are conditioned to act (Sabatier, 1993, p. 37). In this way, the ACF also builds on aspects of traditional pluralist theory (Truman, 1951) by highlighting the importance of political competition within a given arena and the potential of powerful actors or groups to influence policy development. The ACF departs significantly from pluralism, however, on issues relating to interests groups and representation. Where pluralist theory focuses almost exclusively on the ability of
interest groups to influence policy development, the ACF offers a much broader conceptualization of political alliances and the potential power they might yield. As a result, the ACF explicitly rejects the pluralists’ “naïve assumption that all latent interests will be effectively represented” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 37). Sabatier (1993) explains that coalitions may increase their ability to influence policy change by “out-learning” any opponents—not necessarily by representing a broad range of interests. While policy-oriented learning may not always be adequate to create the conditions needed for major policy shifts, it is useful for bolstering awareness surrounding a particular policy alternative.

**Utility of the ACF**

A review of the dominant factors influencing stability within the policy arena (or subsystem) and an examination of ACF hypotheses within a specific state-level context present the ACF as a valuable mechanism by which the significance of political culture, inter-governmental dynamics, policy-oriented learning, and coalitional behavior and strategy can all be analyzed. The model was introduced by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith in 1988 and expanded in 1993 to include a detailed framework and an established set of hypotheses that enable in-depth study of the policy development process. While minor revisions to the ACF have been made since the framework’s inception (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009), the basic tenants of the ACF have remained relatively stable for almost two decades, and many studies of education politics and policy utilize the ACF as an organizing framework (Bulman & Kirp, 1999; Burlington & Geske, 1979; Ceperley, 1997; Fusarelli, 1998,
Coalition Formation

According to Sabatier (1993), a coalition generally forms around a particular policy problem and is contained within a policy subsystem or a “set of actors who are involved in dealing with a policy problem” (p. 13). Within the ACF, a coalition is defined as:

. . . people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers, etc.) who share a particular belief system—that is, a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions—and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time. (Sabatier, 1993, p. 25)

Because subsystems are comprised of large, diverse groups of actors sharing a variety of coordinated belief systems, multiple coalitions may exist within a single policy subsystem. For instance, in Mazzoni’s (1993) study of education policy change in Minnesota, Ceperley’s (1997) study of school finance reform in Tennessee, and Fusarelli’s (1998) study of the school choice coalition in Texas, at least two coalitions were identified within each state’s respective education policy subsystem: a traditional education coalition comprised of proponents of the existing system and a reform coalition comprised of those promoting systemic change or innovation.

According to Sabatier (1993), the number of important coalitions that form within a subsystem are a reflection of the encompassing policy environment. In other words, greater or fewer coalitions may emerge depending on the number of factors within a subsystem driving actors to join forces in an attempt to further a specific policy agenda.
These factors may include the size of the encompassing subsystem within which the coalition exists, the history of the particular policy area around which the subsystem was formed, and the tradition of political participation and the variety of political actors associated with a given subsystem.

**State-Level Application of the ACF**

While the ACF emphasizes the inter-governmental nature of advocacy coalitions, the framework acknowledges that the influence of each level over policy production should not be presumed equal, and in fact, “debates about the role of government at each level, federal versus state, centralization versus decentralization, can be seen as controversies about the scope of conflict” (Heck, 2004, p. 105). The ACF also asserts that a basic coalitional strategy involves restricting policy debate to the particular level of government over which members have the most influence and/or control. For instance, a significant body of research focusing on school choice policy at the national level demonstrates the usefulness of the ACF as an organizing framework, and findings from many studies of school choice advocacy coalitions confirmed the ideological nature of school choice policy debate occurring throughout the country. Specifically, Debray-Pelot, Lubienski, and Scott (2007), Kirst (2007), and Vergari (2007) identified and distinguished between national advocacy coalitions comprised of (1) the educational establishment or proponents of traditional public schools and (2) school choice proponents. According to Lewis et al. (2008), many of these national studies “find that traditional public school and school choice advocacy coalitions have fundamentally different ideas on both the functions and operation of public school” (p. 2). While a national perspective on school choice coalitions provides unique insight into trends that
most likely impact state-level policy development to some degree (see Appendix D for a discussion of school choice legislation and litigation throughout the country), “the importance of taking into account the state and local political contexts in which school choice politics plays out” should not be underestimated because “while certainly there are common elements across states, individual state needs and political landscapes may lead to differences in advocacy coalition composition and ideology” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 2).

As a result, numerous education policy studies utilizing the ACF have been conducted at a sub-national level (Bishop, 1992; Bulkley, 2003; Ceperley, 1997; Feir, 1995; Stewart, 1991), and studies of school choice policy development in Minnesota (Mazzoni, 1993), Texas (Fusarelli, 1998), North Carolina (Lewis et al., 2008), Michigan (Morken & Formicola, 1999), and Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Bulman & Kirp, 1999) have demonstrated the utility of the ACF in state-level research. In each of these studies, state and local government representatives were much more active than federal policy players in each state’s respective school choice advocacy coalition. This behavior supports the argument put forth by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) that “almost all federal domestic programs rely heavily upon state and/or local governments for actual implementation” (p. 215). Additionally, the importance of state-level political context on school choice policy outputs is highlighted by Kirst (2007) in the following summary of coalitional activity in multiple states:

In both Michigan and Arizona, policymakers were interested in creating more competition in education, and used charter schools as a compromise towards this end when other policies such as vouchers and open enrollment became politically unviable. The understanding of charter schools promoted in these states reflects
this focus on competition. For example, Michigan legislators passed laws intended to encourage the creation of large numbers of charter schools, hoping that large numbers would create competition with traditional public schools. In Georgia, on the other hand, policy makers were uninterested in competition, and sought methods to deregulate and decentralize education after a period of increasing centralization to the state; charter schools were one method to move towards these goals (p. 266).

Thus, if the shared beliefs of policy actors account for a coalition’s formation, the collective desire to translate those beliefs into public policy subsequently explains a coalition’s purpose. Numerous strategies are employed by coalitions in pursuit of this overall goal; Mawhinney (1993) found that the Franco-Ontarian proponents of French-language education leveraged private industry connections to offset the lack of government funding for a private language-focused high school, and as a result, “the Simcoe County Board of Education finally agreed to approve the construction of a new French school” (p. 75). Similarly, studies of school choice coalitions in Texas (Fusarelli, 1998) and North Carolina (Lewis et al., 2008) concluded that successful school choice coalitions were able to facilitate the passage of key school choice initiatives by promoting messages of increased parental empowerment and free-market reform. Regardless of the strategy employed, coalition members continually seek to engage and include policy stakeholders possessing belief systems that are congruent with that of the coalition. However, effective networking goes beyond the identification of active policy players; it also involves the activation of what Balbus (1971) refers to as latent constituencies, or as Sabatier (1993) describes them: “those who would become active if they had the
appropriate information” (p. 24). Latent constituencies often include groups of individuals who are impacted—directly or indirectly—by a particular policy problem and who can significantly impact a subsystem’s composition if identified and encouraged to participate. In fact, a coalition’s ability to mobilize latent constituencies can significantly increase the potential for successful realization of policy objectives. Such mobilization—as well as the galvanization of existing coalitional membership—is often accomplished through what Heclo (1974) first termed “policy-oriented learning” which essentially involves the generation and distribution of information related to the benefits or disadvantages of a particular policy problem and/or solution.

The ACF emphasizes the strategic importance of policy-oriented learning within the policy change process and suggests that coalitions will often attempt to “outlearn” their opponents through the collection and subsequent dissemination of research, testimony, and anecdotal findings (Jenkins-Smith, 1988, 1990; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Hunter, 1989). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) note, however, that this learning is “filtered through preexisting beliefs” and that “actors tend to accept information confirming existing beliefs and to screen out dissonant information” (p. 145). Carol Weiss (1979) examined this “screening” phenomenon and developed a framework for understanding the process by which research utilization occurs. For instance, the “political model” of research utilization contemplates how various types of information are employed by policy actors during significant periods of policy debate. The model suggests that policy makers are likely to possess strong opinions on issues debated over the course of several years, and these opinions influence how they conceptualize the parameters of a problem as well as the impact of a particular policy alternative. In many
state-level studies of school choice advocacy coalitions, including Texas (Fusarelli, 1998) and North Carolina (Lewis et al., 2008), for instance, policy oriented learning did not play a significant role in policy development since—as Weiss (1979) explains—high levels of conflict prevent policy oriented learning (or belief system modification) from occurring on either side of a given debate. In both of these cases, data on the benefits and disadvantages of school choice were employed by both coalitions in defense of their respective policy core beliefs resulting in a significant level of analytical intractability which, as Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier (1993) explain, “permits a wide range of plausible analytical positions” (p. 50)

Because the opinions of coalition members are gradually developed and strengthened over time, they are unlikely to be changed or altered in response to an opposing argument. Weiss (1979) explains that “in such cases research can still be used, but it becomes ammunition for the side that finds its conclusions congenial and supportive” (p. 429). In this way, the coalition that packages its message most effectively has the advantage in terms of achieving a desirable policy outcome because it may influence the views of policy brokers seeking to create compromise between competing coalitions. Because these brokers are not typically members of coalitions, they often serve as mediators who facilitate the selection of “reasonable” policy solutions. As a result—their access to information can be critical to policy outcomes. One example of successful brokering of secondary beliefs is found in a study of North Carolina’s education policy subsystem (Lewis et al., 2008). The authors of this study conclude:

What is particularly noteworthy in North Carolina is the brokering of advocacy coalitions’ secondary aspects. The first of such compromises was the state’s
actual charter school legislation. The school choice advocacy coalition initially sought the more controversial school choice measures of public school vouchers and tax credits for private schools. Both advocacy coalitions have significantly compromised their secondary aspects in the areas of charter school finance, accountability, and operation. Finally, the recommendations of the governor’s bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission, acting as policy broker, incorporates elements of the belief systems of both advocacy coalitions. Though the core beliefs of neither advocacy coalition have changed, policy oriented learning as well as pressure external to the state public education policy subsystem have resulted in compromise in significant compromise state policy and regulations. (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 3)

Additionally, the ACF asserts that the stability of individual belief systems is influenced by the level of policy-oriented learning occurring within and across subsystem coalitions. The intensity of the policy conflict corresponds with the degree to which a core belief is challenged or threatened; the more direct the threat, the more intense the conflict. Very little learning occurs when a high level of conflict exists, and Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) argue that “when two cores conflict, the tendency is for each coalition to talk past the other and thus for a dialogue of the deaf to persist until external conditions dramatically alter the power balance within the subsystem” (p. 48). As a result, a conflict may appear to focus on a technical issue when, in reality, it reflects a much deeper disagreement over the validity of a core belief. Naturally, the more core beliefs are challenged, the more coalitions have at stake, and the less likely policy-oriented learning will serve to influence change within belief systems. Mawhinney
(1993) explains that “when core values are in question, conflict between advocacy coalitions will ensure that policy-oriented learning will not be a primary force for policy change” (p. 76). The converse is also true, however, and Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) explain that “in situations of moderate conflict, subsystem members will show some (but not unlimited) flexibility in questioning and modifying their own belief systems” (p. 50). These arguments are supported by findings from studies of education advocacy coalitions in both Texas (Fusarelli, 1998) and Tennessee (Ceperley, 1997). In both cases, policy oriented learning was not identified as a significant factor in the policy development process since the state education policy subsystems were impacted by conservative political cultures, and the level of conflict between competing coalitions was characterized by intense.

Besides the level of conflict between coalitions, the ACF describes two other factors that may affect the stability of belief systems: 1) the analytical tractability of an issue, and 2) the analytical forum in which the issue is debated. These factors often influence the likelihood that belief system modification will occur. For instance, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) argue that analytically tractable issues are those on which “the range of professionally acceptable analytical disagreement is fairly narrow” (p. 51). In other words, the greater the agreement on particular theories, methods, and research regarding a policy issue, the greater an issue’s tractability. Inversely, on issues for which there is little agreement on theories and data, analysts are much more likely to draw a variety of conclusions about causal relationships and policy objectives. Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) explain this further:
Intractable issues permit a wide range of plausible analytical positions, allowing subsystem participants with conflicting belief systems to promote and defend their conflicting analytical claims with relative impunity. Thus intractability serves to decrease the range of conflict within which belief system adjustment and policy learning take place. (p. 51)

Within the ACF, the distinction between tractable and intractable issues is often made according to the types of data—quantitative or qualitative—used to define a policy problem and identify potential solutions. Generally, issues that are readily quantifiable tend to be more tractable because there is overall agreement about the measurement tools and data sources used to identify and explain a given problem. Intractable issues, however, are less subject to quantitative methods because they often focus on complex phenomena that are only approachable through qualitative methods of inquiry. Because qualitative data is often specifically situated within a particular context, research conditions are difficult to replicate, and the insight gained from a given study may be more transferable than replicable when applied in a different setting. As a result, intractable issues allow greater room for debate around plausible theories, explanations, and solutions for policy problems.

The final component outlined within the ACF as influential with regard to belief system stability emphasizes the types of people involved in a policy debate. The participating individuals may be at liberty to provide more or less input on problem definition and policy solutions depending upon the forum in which the policy debate takes place. For instance, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) distinguish between “open” and “restricted” fora. An open forum is one in which all stakeholders are eligible to
participate in the discussion surrounding a policy issue. A restricted forum (also referred
to as a “professionalized” or “closed” forum) is one that affords slightly less access by
screening participants based on their respective abilities to engage in an informed
discussion about a specific issue or to contribute expertise and insight in the development
of a policy solution. The importance of forum is summarized with the following
explanation:

The characteristics of the forum can materially affect the way analysis is used.
In open fora, greater latitude exists for expression of conflicting analytical claims.
In these cases, analysis is likely to be employed by all sides in the debate, and
rarely will analytical conflict be resolved. Restricted fora may enhance prospects
for consensus by ensuring that participants have shared bases for verifying
analytical claims (professionalized fora) or by screening participants for policy
viewpoint. In either case, restricted fora may bias the values and beliefs
introduced into the analysis. (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993a, pp. 54-55).

When taken into account alongside 1) the level of conflict surrounding a policy issue, and
2) the issue’s analytical tractability, the forum in which the policy debate occurs may
have a significant impact on the stability of individual belief systems within a policy
subsystem.

**ACF Hypotheses**

Essentially, the defining characteristic of the ACF is summarized by its central
concept: “advocacy coalitions as a means of aggregating large numbers of actors from
different institutions at multiple levels of government into a manageable number of units”
(Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 154). This concept is undergirded by the four
premises of the ACF—the study of policy change over spans of a decade or more, the subsystem as the most useful unit of analyses with which to examine policy change, the intergovernmental dynamic of all subsystems, and the conceptualization of policies as representations of the belief systems of policy actors—and emphasized through the numerous hypotheses outlined within the framework (See Appendix E for a full review of the basic premises of the ACF). The list outlined in Table 2.1, organized in no particular order, includes the original as well as the revised and updated hypotheses of the ACF (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009, p. 129).

Table 2.1

_Hypotheses of the Advocacy Coalition Framework_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACF Hypotheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Significant perturbations external to the subsystem (e.g. changes in socioeconomic conditions, public opinion, system-wide governing coalitions, or policy outputs from other subsystems) are a <em>necessary, but not sufficient</em>, cause of change in the policy core attributes of a governmental program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong> On major controversies within a policy subsystem when core beliefs are in dispute, the lineup of allies and opponents tends to be rather stable over periods of a decade or so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> Policy-oriented learning across belief systems is most likely when there is an intermediate level of informed conflict between the two coalitions. This requires that (i) each have the technical resources to engage in such a debate; and that (ii) the conflict be between secondary aspects of one belief system and core elements of the other or, alternately, between important secondary aspects of the two belief systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> Policy-oriented learning across belief systems is most likely when there exists a forum that is (i) prestigious enough to force professionals from different coalitions to participate; and (ii) dominated by professional norms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 2.1
Hypotheses of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACF Hypotheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. The policy core attributes of a governmental program in a specific jurisdiction will not be significantly revised as long as the subsystem advocacy coalition that instituted the program remains in power within that jurisdiction—except when the change is imposed by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction *and/or when there is skillful exploitation of those opportunities by the (previously) minority coalition within the subsystem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Problems for which accepted quantitative data and theory exist are more conducive to policy-oriented learning than those in which data and theory are generally qualitative, quite subjective or altogether lacking. Actors within an advocacy coalition will show substantial consensus on issues pertaining to the policy core, although less so on secondary aspects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Actors within an advocacy coalition will show substantial consensus on issues pertaining to the policy core, although less so on secondary aspects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. An actor (or coalition) will give up secondary aspects of a belief system before acknowledging weaknesses in the policy core.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Problems involving natural systems are more conducive to policy-oriented learning than those involving purely social or political systems because in the former many of the critical variables are not themselves active strategists and controlled experimentation is more feasible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Within a coalition, administrative agencies will usually advocate more centrist positions than their interest-group allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Elites of purposive groups are more constrained in their expression of beliefs and policy positions than elites from material groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Even when the accumulation of technical information does not change the views of opposing coalition, it can have important impacts on policy—at least in the short term—by altering the views of policy brokers or other important governmental officials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.1
Hypotheses of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACF Hypotheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13. Coalitions are more likely to persist if (i) the major beneficiaries of the benefits that a coalition produces are clearly identified and are members of the coalition, (ii) the benefits received by coalition members are related to the maintenance costs of each member, and (iii) members monitor each other’s actions to ensure compliance.

14. Actors who share policy core beliefs are more likely to engage in short-term coordination if they view their opponents as (i) very powerful, and (ii) very likely to impose substantial costs upon them if victorious.

15. Actors who share (policy core) beliefs are more likely to engage in short-term coordination if they; (i) interact repeatedly; (ii) experience relatively low information costs; and (iii) believe that there are policies that, while not affecting each actor in similar ways, at least treat each fairly.

While the ACF includes 15 major hypotheses to date, many studies test only a subset of these hypotheses. After analyzing 80 ACF applications occurring over the past 20 years, Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen (2009) found that the most frequently tested ACF hypothesis involved perturbations external to the subsystem (Hypothesis 1, Table 2.1). The second most tested hypothesis focused on the stability of coalitions over a time span of a decade or longer (Hypothesis 2). Other frequently tested hypotheses focused on policy-oriented learning between and across coalitions as well as coalitional belief systems. In contrast, very few studies examined ACF hypotheses dealing with the attitudes and positions of administrative agencies (Hypothesis 10) or the impact of technical information on policy brokers (Hypothesis 12), and only three hypotheses (Hypotheses 13-15 involving the conditions that enable coalitional membership and the short-term coordination of policy actors) were not tested in any of the studies examined.
Surprisingly, "more than half of the applications (55 percent) do not explicitly test any of the hypotheses" (Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen, 2009, p. 128).

**Summary**

In the course of this review, the utility of the ACF as an organizing framework in a study of long-term policy change is examined independently as well as in relation to other theories of the policy process such as the systems theory, multiple streams, institutional rational choice, punctuated equilibrium and pluralism. Of all these models, the ACF is best suited to explain state-level policy change in Georgia because it 1) recognizes the influence of political and cultural history on policy development, 2) acknowledges the fact that organized interests are almost always the driving force behind policy change, and 3) frames the policy analysis within the manageable context of the policy subsystem. Further, the ACF builds upon earlier conceptualizations of issue networks and institutional learning to explain the ways in which policy actors may be influenced and how coalitions may galvanize or splinter throughout the policy process.
CHAPTER 3  
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY  

Unit of Analysis  
Qualitative research methods are commonly utilized when “attempting to explicate the complex interrelationships existing between people, policies, and organizations or institutions” (Fusarelli, 1998, p. 46). Rossman and Rallis (2003) offer the following five characteristics as hallmarks of qualitative research:  
1. it is naturalistic;  
2. it draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study;  
3. it focuses on context;  
4. it is emergent and evolving;  
5. it is fundamentally interpretive. (p. 8)  
While many research strategies exist under the umbrella of qualitative methodology, Yin (2003) explains that the case study method has particular advantages when “how and why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real-life contexts” (p. 1). Because case studies are expressly designed to explain the interplay of individuals and their respective environments as well as how specific circumstances influence actions and behavior (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003), the method is encompassed within an essentially interpretive theoretical framework which “looks for
culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 2004, p. 67) and “deals directly with issues such as language, communications, interrelationships, and community” (Crotty, 2004, p. 8).

As a result, a qualitative case study is an appropriate and relevant method for examining state-level educational policy change. As Bulkley (2005) explains, “the way in which policy makers define a problem is closely connected to the types of alternatives that they will use to address it” (p. 531). By examining how policy makers construct reality out of “their reported perceptions, truths, explanations, beliefs and worldview,” a study of state-level school choice policy development is able to address issues of policy culture and contextual understanding within the policy process (Patton, 2002, p. 132). Additionally, by employing a qualitative case study approach that emphasizes how common understandings among individuals in a particular context shape their respective behaviors, interactions, and meaning making processes (Majchrzak, 1984), the study is able to address state-level education policy from an historical perspective that acknowledges the unique political environment out of which a particular policy or set of policies initially emerged and evolved over time. This evolution is best examined and explained through an interpretive lens which integrates research and data into an intelligible pattern of meaning that enables better understanding of “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 440). As a result, the case study method is particularly well-suited for research examining the processes by which a state prioritizes and memorializes values through the passage of laws governing education.
Description of Data Sources

The selection of Georgia’s education policy subsystem as a case study in school choice policy development enabled a better understanding of the conditions that contributed to the passage of various state-level school choice initiatives. The venue for this case study was not selected to provide a sense of representativeness or produce generalizable findings, and the outcomes of this study may or may not be indicative of typical cases in other states. Rather, this study explains Georgia's unique policy environment by examining the degree to which research findings adhere to or refute the theoretical tenants set forth within the ACF (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, 1999).

A combination of data collection techniques were employed to answer the research questions posed by this study: document review, archival analysis, direct observations, participant observation, physical artifacts, and targeted in-depth interviews with state-level policy actors. These six sources of evidence are considered the “most commonly used in doing case studies,” and their comparative strengths and weaknesses are summarized in Table 3.1 (Yin, 2003, p. 85).

Table 3.1
Commonly Used Sources of Evidence for Case Study Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Evidence</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Documentation      | • stable—can be reviewed repeatedly  
                   | • unobtrusive—not created as a result of the case study  
                   | • exact—contains exact names, references, and details of an event  
                   | • broad coverage—long span of time, many events, and many settings  | • retrievability—can be low  
                   |          | • biased selectivity, if collection is incomplete  
                   |          | • reporting bias—reflects (unknown) bias of author  
                   |          | • access—may be deliberately blocked  |

(continued)
Table 3.1
Commonly Used Sources of Evidence for Case Study Research (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Evidence</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archival Records</td>
<td>• [same as above for documentation]</td>
<td>• [same as above for documentation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• precise and quantitative</td>
<td>• accessibility due to privacy reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>• targeted—focuses directly on case study topic</td>
<td>• bias due to poorly constructed questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• insightful—provides perceived causal inferences</td>
<td>• response bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• inaccuracies due to poor recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reflexivity—interviews gives what interviewer wants to hear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Observations</td>
<td>• reality—covers events in real time</td>
<td>• time-consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• contextual—covers context of event</td>
<td>• selectivity—unless broad coverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reflexivity—event may proceed differently because it is being observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• cost—hours needed by human observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-</td>
<td>• [same as above for direct observations]</td>
<td>• [same as above for direct observations]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>• insightful into interpersonal behavior and motives</td>
<td>• bias due to investigator’s manipulation of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Artifacts</td>
<td>• insightful into cultural features</td>
<td>• selectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• insightful into technical operations</td>
<td>• availability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While each source of evidence has inherent value, the collection of data from a variety of "highly complementary" sources is needed to develop a well-rounded data set that can be meaningfully incorporated into the overall analysis (Yin, 2003, p. 85).
Document Review, Archival Analysis, and Physical/Cultural Artifacts

Because coalitional behavior is best assessed over periods of a decade or more, it requires an understanding of the historical context that enabled the success of various policy initiatives. As a result, a document review of relevant literature synthesizing important periods of policy development at both the state and federal levels as well as an archival analysis of legislative drafts, newspaper archives, legislative voting records, and transcripts of relevant legislative hearings was conducted to yield foundational data for this study. The analysis of this archival data provided a type of contextual understanding required for an examination of Georgia’s education policy subsystem. As Glesne (1999) explains, “a lack of historical situating of observations and interviews limits the researcher’s work” because—among other things—“culture does not stand still; it changes over time” (p. 157). Further, grounding interpretations of present circumstances within a historical context provided a “powerful and useful portrayal that focuses on processes that transcend static, descriptive accounts” (Glesne, 1999, p. 158).

Interviewing

To buttress the data gathered through document review and archival analysis, this study incorporated interview data provided by participants with first-hand knowledge of Georgia’s education policy sub-system. These interviews were conducted to assess policymakers’ understanding of a state-level school choice coalition. By focusing on the responses of policymakers, the study intended to “capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” and to gain a better understanding of how state-level political culture impacts legislators’ perceptions of relevant policy issues, appropriate behavior, and advantageous alliances (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55).
A total of eighteen interviews were conducted with major policy actors involved in the recent passage of one or more of Georgia’s school choice initiatives. Interview participants were selected through purposive rather than random or representative sampling because purposive sampling is designed to maximize “the investigator’s ability to devise . . . theory that takes adequate account of local conditions, local mutual shapings, and local values (for possible transferability)” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p 40). The interview candidates were chosen based on their connection to one or more of the school choice bills introduced in the Georgia General Assembly from 2007-2013. The pool of potential interview candidates consisted of legislators, state education agency employees, advocacy or interest group representatives, public officials, researchers, scholars, and field experts—all of whom existed within the previously defined characterizations of “issue networks” (Kirst & Meister, 1983), “policy subsystems” (Easton, 1965), and “policy subcommunities” (Kingdon 1984).

An interview guide (Table 3.2) was developed to include neutrally worded questions that were open ended and easy for research participants to understand. This guide was deliberately constructed to yield data that would answer the research questions posed by this study and was utilized when interviewing each of the participants. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded following completion. This process of transcribing and coding interviews to develop relevant themes and to create increased understanding of a particular policy environment is an important part of data analysis and is commonly utilized in school choice policy studies (Bulkley, 2005; Lacireno-Paquet & Holyoke, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002).
Table 3.2

Interview Protocol

1. When a school choice bill is introduced in the Georgia General Assembly, who typically comes out in support of it? (organizations, agencies, interest groups, policy makers, legislators, political parties/entities, etc.)

2. Has the contingency of school choice supporters remained relatively stable since the passage of the state's first charter law in 1993? If not, how has it changed?

3. When a school choice bill is introduced in the Georgia General Assembly, who typically comes out to oppose it? (organizations, agencies, interest groups, policy makers, legislators, political parties/entities, etc.)

4. Has this contingency of school choice opposition remained stable since the passage of the state's first charter law in 1993? If not, how has it changed?

5. Has the state's political landscape influenced the school choice movement within the state? If so, in what way?

6. Have national events influenced the school choice movement in Georgia? If so, in what way?

7. Has the state's tradition of local control impacted the school choice movement in Georgia? If so, in what way?

8. Since 2007, the General Assembly has passed several pieces of legislation to expand charter school options or "charter-like" options that provide flexibility from regulation.

   a. What factors--political and/or philosophical--contributed to the successful passage of so many school choice bills in the span of five years?

   b. How were legislative efforts impeded by opposition?

9. What strategies or methods were employed by supporters to pass school choice legislation?

10. What strategies or methods were employed by opponents to impede the passage of school choice legislation?

11. Is there a fundamental belief (or set of beliefs) that unifies school choice supporters in Georgia?

12. Are there points of contention--minor or major--amongst the state's charter school supporters?
**Direct Observation and Participant-Observation**

Direct observation and participant observation served as important tools for data collection in this qualitative case-study. For example, Yin (2003) explains that by virtue of focusing on, visiting, and examining a particular site with investigative intent, “relevant behaviors or environmental conditions will be available for observation,” and “such observations serve as yet another source of evidence in a case study” (p. 92). The nature of observational activities—which can be both formal and informal—are further explained as follows:

Most formally, observational protocols can be developed as part of the case study protocol . . . this can involve observations of meetings, sidewalk activities, factory work, classrooms, and the like. Less formally, direct observations might be made throughout a field visit, including these occasions during which other evidence, such as that from interviews, is being collected. For instance, the condition of buildings or work spaces will indicate something about climate or impoverishment of an organization; similarly, the location or the furnishings of a respondent’s office may be one indicator of the status of the respondent within an organization. (Yin, 2003, p. 92)

In addition to direct observation, this study benefited from the researcher’s status as a participant observer within the state’s education policy sub-system. By virtue of her employment status, the researcher has had and continues to have unique access to meetings, legislative hearings, and policy discussions that enable a deep understanding of the state’s policy process—especially as it pertains to school choice in Georgia. This access allowed insight into the development of “patterns and abstract similarities and
differences across individuals and events” (Glesne, 1999, p. 48) while also enabling the “distinctive opportunity to perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone inside the case study rather than external to it” (Yin, 2003, p. 94). This perspective—while somewhat uncommon—is uniquely beneficial to a case study, and “many have argued that such a perspective is invaluable in producing an accurate portrayal of a case study phenomenon” (Yin, 2003, p. 94).

**Research Validity and Reliability**

To ensure the validity of research findings, the following triangulation protocols were followed:

- theory triangulation which utilizes collaboration and discussions with colleagues to evaluate theoretical understandings, and
- methodological triangulation which solicits others’ assessments of selected approaches to data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Additionally, perceived validity was increased as responses of interview candidates were compared against one another as well as against other data sources such as media accounts, legislative voting records, and testimony provided in committee hearings. This method of triangulation helped to increase construct validity because it emphasized the collection and comparison of multiple data sources that provided “additional insight that one method alone could not provide” (Glesne, 1999, p. 52). Additionally, the incorporation of archival testimony data and legislative records alongside interview responses helped to ground the study within an historical context, and as Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) argue, “although public testimony has some validity problems, these are no greater—and often less significant—than in alternative techniques” (p. 8).
Selection of Research Site

This study focused on state-level policymaking occurring within Georgia’s policy arena: the Georgia General Assembly, the state policy network (educational agencies including but not limited to the Georgia Department of Education and the Governor's Office of Student Achievement), the state’s educational interest groups (Georgia Association of Educators, Professional Association of Georgia Educators, Georgia School Boards Association, the Georgia Charter Schools Association), and numerous colleges, universities, organizations, and think-tanks specializing in school choice and other educational initiatives aimed at decentralization. The legislation highlighted in this study was selected based on content, and only successful bills from 2007-2012 that expanded school choice options were examined (see Appendix C).

Limitations of Study

Because the qualitative case study is designed to “explore the understandings abroad in culture as the meaningful matrix that guides our lives,” the approach is subject to critique in terms of bias and subjectivity (Crotty, 2004, p. 71). A notable and challenging component of interpretive work is that it requires the researcher to evaluate an issue from an “emic” perspective—in other words—from the viewpoints of those being studied. It is assumed that a researcher can adequately represent and understand the ideas of others if she adheres closely to established interview protocol (i.e. asking thoughtfully developed, open-ended questions that solicit truthful responses) and listens closely and intently to the words and descriptions provided by research participants. However, this assumption is wholly based on the idea that a certain level of meaning can be shared between and amongst individuals, and that it is possible for a researcher to
understand a participant’s interpretation of reality. Additionally, a case study’s validity hinges on the ability of a researcher to be appropriately aware of how her own previous experiences may affect the way she hears and understands a story. These issues of subjectivity certainly complicate the idea of developing common understandings; however, qualitative data collection is necessary to study environments like state policy arenas that are defined by social interaction and individual relationships. After all, it is through the cultivation and sustainment of relationships “whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community” (Crotty, 2004, p. 8).

Summary

The unit of analysis for this study was the education policy subsystem in the state of Georgia. Data used for analysis in this study was collected from multiple sources including relevant print documents, archival data, and interview candidate responses. Interview participants were identified based on their connection to one or more of the identified pieces of legislation and/or their involvement with relevant school choice initiatives within the state. Data was collected, examined, and categorized consistent with the standards of qualitative case study method. Based on interview codes and policy trends identified within the document review, categories were developed and analyzed with regard to their direct relevance to research questions. Upon completion of the analysis, data findings were presented through detailed narrative, and conclusions, implications, and recommendations were discussed.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The analysis that took place for this study included 1) an in-depth archival review that synthesized information from legislative records, media accounts, and academic research to assess the impact of Georgia’s political history on the state’s policy outputs—especially within the education subsystem, and 2) a compilation of response data gathered from a total of eighteen interviews with state-level policy makers that was aggregated into thematic, coded segments based on common responses occurring across multiple interviews. The data gathered from both the archival analysis as well as the interviews were then used to test relevant hypotheses set forth within the ACF that determined the extent to which the behavior of Georgia’s school choice coalition bears out the theory set forth within framework. The resulting findings are presented in this chapter to answer the following research questions posed by the study:

- Question 1: What political and institutional conditions contributed to the emergence and expansion of the state’s school choice coalition?

- Question 2: How has this expansion impacted the composition of Georgia’s school choice coalition as well as the policies it supports?

Archival Review Findings

The following review of Georgia’s political history provides the requisite context for understanding school choice as a policy phenomenon because it addresses the conditions that enabled the emergence and eventual expansion of school choice support within the state. Archival data was analyzed to determine the extent to which shifts in
state-level political authority shaped education policy outputs in recent years, and historical governance trends were examined in order to test the ACF hypothesis positing a link between political power and policy agendas. This hypothesis states:

The policy core attributes of a governmental program in a specific jurisdiction will not be significantly revised as long as the subsystem advocacy coalition that instituted the program remains in power within that jurisdiction. (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993)

**Political Power in Georgia**

The ACF emphasizes the role of political authority in determining coalitional behavior, and as a result, the issue of partisan control in Georgia is an important one. If the education subsystem is influenced by the policy preferences of the systemic governing coalition, understanding the State’s education policy history requires an examination of the state’s political landscape because “educational politics and policymaking are inextricably linked and at times, difficult to distinguish because policy is at the center of political action” (Heck, 2004, p. 17).

*A history of Democratic control.* Georgia has a strong tradition of regionalism that emerged out of a general preference for states’ rights and decentralized authority (Bullock & Gaddie, 2010; Key, 1949). In the state’s post-civil war society, Georgia Democrats gained and maintained a stronghold that would last for decades “based on the general view that Republicans were northerners and outsiders” and through appeals to “the southern way of life, a phrase that came to stand for states’ rights and segregation” (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007, p. 27). During this time period and throughout the first few decades of the 1900s, “the cycle of rural poverty in Georgia was well established” in
large part because of the state's sharecropping tradition (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007, p. 27). As a result, Georgia politics were dominated by debates over lower taxes, increased rural assistance, and the tradition of white supremacy, and politics during the segregation years were driven by Democratic candidates’ appeals to rural voters who were adversely affected when the state’s largely agricultural economy began to falter in light of declining cotton prices and high interest rates on loans to farmers during the decades leading up to World War II (WWII). Ironically, the social programs instituted by the Federal Government during the 1930s to aid the poor and impoverished actually spurred many Black citizens to support the Democratic platform and consequently served as the impetus for many White citizens to begin their gradual abandonment of the party throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

In the years following WWII, Georgia’s economy began to shift from agriculture to manufacturing; and the practice of racial segregation was sustained through the strict enforcement of Jim Crow laws and buttressed by the political influence of groups like the Ku Klux Klan (Bartley, 1997; Holmes, 199;). The state’s legislature passed numerous laws—that would later be ruled unconstitutional—aimed at preventing integration, and “white flight” from urban cities commonly occurred throughout Georgia following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by the United States Congress. During this time period, many of Georgia's large, urban school districts experienced drastic declines in White student enrollment. For example, Black students in Atlanta Public Schools outnumbered their White counterparts by a 2:1 margin by 1970 (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991; Stone, 1989). Additionally, fewer white voters in Atlanta helped to enable the election of the city’s first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, in 1973, and as Fleishman and
Pierannunzi (2007) point out, “most of Atlanta’s subsequent mayoral candidates have been Black” (p. 31). Gubernatorial races, however, remained dominated by white, male, Democratic candidates, and despite the significant political changes that occurred in Georgia following the conclusion of WWII, it remained a one-party state throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

The Republican takeover. Despite the long-standing tradition of Democratic control in Georgia, ideological rifts began to manifest within the state’s Democratic Party as the national political landscape shifted to refine Democratic Party lines in ways that chafed many traditionalists in the South. Over time, Democrats in Georgia who emphasized fiscal and social conservatism found themselves increasingly at odds with the ideology of the national Democratic Party. These party-line schisms were evidenced by the diverse value systems of Georgia’s Democratic Governors during this time period; Eugene Talmadge, Herman Talmadge and Lester Mattox were staunch segregationists while Ellis Arnall, Carl Sanders, and Jimmy Carter eased the state’s transition into the more progressive New South through their more moderate approaches to governance and social policy (Bullock & Gaddie, 2010; Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007). As a result of this intra-state conflict, Georgia’s Democratic stronghold began to give way as the twentieth century drew to a close, and Fleishman and Pierannunzi (2007) argue that “the most far-reaching change in Georgia politics [was] the slow dissolution of the one-party system” (p. 33). A hallmark of said dissolution was the first modern, post-Reconstruction election of a Republican governor, George “Sonny” Perdue, in 2002. Illustratively, Perdue began his political career in the state legislature in the early 1990s as a Democrat. In fact, he was elected on a Democratic ballot to three terms in the Georgia Senate and
eventually served as president pro tem of the State Senate from 1994-1997. In 1998, however, Perdue officially ended his affiliation with the Democratic Party and successfully ran for two additional senate terms as a Republican candidate.

By 2006, the political momentum in Georgia seemed to shift overwhelmingly in favor of the Republicans; not only was Perdue elected to a second term as governor, but Republicans also won elections for lieutenant governor and secretary of state that year. Additionally, Republicans gained control of the Georgia Senate and House of Representatives in 2003 and 2005 respectively, and they have occupied both United States Senate seats since 2005 when Johnny Isakson joined Saxby Chambliss who took office in 2003. Additionally, in 2009, Republicans occupied 12 of the 15 statewide offices for which elections are held on partisan ballots (Bullock & Gaddie, 2010). Perhaps solidifying the state’s political turn, a second Republican Governor—Nathan Deal—was elected in Georgia in 2010. Like Perdue, Deal began his political career in the Georgia Senate as a conservative Democrat, but he officially changed his party affiliation in 1995 despite having been twice elected to the United States House of Representatives as a Democrat. He went on to win six subsequent elections to this office as a Republican.

These major political shifts have often been attributed to migration patterns because “population shifts have helped the Republican Party develop a solid base, first in suburban and later in rural areas, as the demographic makeup of the two political parties has changed since the 1960s” (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007, p. 41). Such changes in political power are important for state-level policy research because “party dominance reflects a more general understanding of liberal/conservative ideals and values that are
present in the legislature and state as whole,” (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005, p. 349). As evidenced through Georgia’s political history, however, the transfer of authority may not represent significant ideological changes (Brace, Arceneaux, Johnson & Ulbig, 2004). For instance, Fleishman and Pierannunzi (2007) cite the continuation of racial conflict in Georgia as evidence of entrenched social and cultural beliefs:

Conflicts have boiled up over election procedures and symbols such as the state flag. Moreover, the political parties have taken on a racial tinge in terms of membership, with almost all blacks voting for the Democrats and the Republican Party becoming overwhelmingly white. Ironically, these identities are the opposite of what existed before the mid-1960s, when southern Democrats stanchly defended racial segregation. (p. 43)

More concisely, the shift from Democratic to Republican control is likely an issue of arbitrary labeling rather than true ideological change as the new Republican presence within the state seems to embrace many of the traditional components of the state’s previous Democratic platform: lower taxes, rural issues and agricultural subsidies, and decreased government regulation. This phenomenon is not unique to Georgia, and policy research in other states—especially other southern states—cautions against placing too much emphasis on the influence of partisan shift on political culture. Using Florida as an example, Harris, Herrington, and Albee (2007) explain:

From 1980 to 1995, the self-reported political ideology (conservative, middle of the road, liberal) has remained almost unchanged . . . Going back even further, Florida has supported Republicans in 11 of the 14 presidential elections since 1948, despite being controlled by Democrats throughout most of that period. In
short, Florida remains the moderately conservative state it has always been.” (p. 232)

A similar political history is evident in Georgia. Since 1964, the state has supported only two Democratic Presidential candidates; one of which was Georgia-native Jimmy Carter. Georgia also shares Florida’s tradition of being minimally influenced by labor unions and interest groups. Both “right-to-work” states, “there is little public appetite . . . for the aggressive tactics that might be used in other states” (Harris, Herrington, & Albee, 2007, p. 233), and as a result, labor unions have less of a presence and wield less political influence in Georgia than in many Midwestern and Northeastern states (Bullock & Gaddie, 2010).

Other ideological traditions are reflected in the public policies enacted within the state, and as Fleishman and Pierannunzi (2007) argue: “Georgians have been known for traditional values, conservative politics, and a general distrust of government” (p. 70). Research suggests this characterization is not without merit (Elazar, 1984; Hepburn, 1992), and in a study of American political ideology that surveyed residents of each state to determine dominant ideological patterns, findings revealed the most conservative states—including Georgia—were located in the Southern and Mid-Western regions of the country (Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 1993). Additionally, the study found that state ideologies were overwhelmingly reflected in the types of public policies passed and enacted by state lawmakers, and Georgia’s policy outputs tended to be even more conservative than their measured political ideology.

Georgia’s conservative leanings are also corroborated by the “Index of Policy Liberalism” on which all states are measured on a scale of one (most liberal) to forty-
eight (most conservative (Gray, 2003). In the area of “policy liberalism,” Georgia ranked forty-fifth. Not only does this ranking suggest a continuation of conservative values despite a state-level partisan shift, it may also indicate the emergence a “new one-party dominance in the South—by Republicans—based on Georgia’s conservative traditions” (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 1997, p. 123).

**The impact of politics on Georgia’s first school choice initiatives.** Because education is a perennial policy concern, it is one that has always been heavily impacted Georgia’s political landscape. Perhaps more than any other policy area, education is the object of continual scrutiny from elected officials. Not only is a free and public education mandated for all children within the State Constitution, the provision of educational services is also funded with public tax dollars. This major budgetary obligation ensures that educational issues will continue to rank high on Georgia’s political agenda. As Bullock and Gaddie (2010) explain:

> Education is the largest single budget item in the state of Georgia. Consequently, policy affecting common and higher education is arguably the most important one before the General Assembly, as these items represent the greatest use of the public’s money. The history of public education cannot be disentangled from the economic and racial history of the state; indeed, it is in many ways representative of the progress of Georgia since the eighteenth century and is also indicative of the consequences of institution and political continuity in the state since the civil war. (p. 177)

This “entanglement” of education and politics is especially evident in a review of the state’s previous educational reform efforts. Historically, the state has continually
struggled with issues of educational equity as well as poor student performance and low academic standards. In fact, these two issues have dominated the educational agenda in Georgia for over a century, and while reforms once focused almost exclusively on racial issues (first on segregation and later on integration), they gradually evolved to emphasize equitable funding and most recently—improved academic achievement.

At the heart of these issues is a struggle over authority between state and local governments. Beginning with desegregation efforts in the 1960’s that followed Brown v Board (1954), the rights of local school districts have been a source of contentious debate within the education arena. Despite the ruling in Brown (1954) that ordered schools to desegregate with “all deliberate speed,” student assignment policies that prioritized racial balance were slow to emerge in Georgia with many systems attributing their noncompliance to issues of geography and limited transportation. In an effort to resist interference from federal and state authorities, local districts openly supported the sustainment of neighborhood schools, and continually cited locale—rather than race—as the impediment to integration efforts over the next two decades. In fact, busing was not widely used as a means of ending segregation until Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (1971) which established that busing policies could be legally instituted for purposes of integration.

As Georgia school districts finally implemented a large-scale integration plan that spanned the 1970s, a separate argument for educational equity emerged. This argument focused on funding rather than race and better aligned with the growing national emphasis on academic competitiveness in the early 1980s. In light of the significant funding disparities that existed between districts across Georgia and in the wake of the
publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Governor Joe Frank Harris was able to drive an agenda of reform that increased education spending and improved curricular rigor. This agenda included the passage of the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) in 1985 and the subsequent adoption of the Quality Core Curriculum (QCCs). Unlike previous attempts to increase education spending and overhaul basic academic standards in Georgia—the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) of the 1960’s and the Adequate Program for Education in Georgia (APEG) of 1974—QBE was larger in scope; it included financial incentives for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to build middle schools and consolidate city and county school districts.

While the adoption of QBE and the QCCs enabled major improvements to public education in Georgia, these reforms also instituted a largely “top-down approach in areas of curriculum, teacher certification, and student testing” that represented “the state’s attitude of distrust toward the 187 local superintendents, 117 of whom were elected” (Wohlstetter, 1994, p. 137). As a result, the education landscape during the early 1990s was dominated by reactionary decentralization politics as local districts appeared galvanized once again to regain an increased level of control over their schools. In a largely conciliatory gesture to districts—Governor Zell Miller summoned bipartisan support for the 1993 passage of the state’s first charter law which allowed locally approved charters to waive most Title 20 regulations. In fact, Bulkley (2005) argues that in contrast to other states that adopted charter laws between 1991-1993, Georgia, in particular, was “seeking methods to deregulate and decentralize education after a period of increasing centralization to the state; charter schools were one method to move toward these goals” (p. 528).
Qualitative Interview Findings

Through an analysis of interview data provided by key policy-makers in Georgia, the belief systems, political strategies, and membership characteristics of both the school choice coalition as well as the traditional education coalition were identified and assessed to determine how the school choice coalition has expanded and evolved in recent years and how that expansion has impacted the momentum for school choice initiatives in Georgia. The following findings illustrate how common themes that emerged across multiple interviews enabled a comparison of coalitional behavior in Georgia’s education policy subsystem to multiple hypotheses set forth within the ACF.

Belief Systems in Georgia’s Education Policy Subsystem

Within the ACF, the belief systems of policy makers play an integral role in determining the types of initiatives they support as well as the coalitions to which they belong. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) argue that these belief systems are complex and multi-layered; while secondary aspects of belief systems may be abandoned for the sake of political compromise or for the collective good, fundamental core beliefs are very unlikely to change regardless of oppositional pressure. If these individual belief systems determine coalitional composition, distinguishing fundamental core beliefs from “near-core” secondary aspects is key to understanding why some policies are more politically viable than others. To test this theory, the researcher applied the interview data gathered for this study to the following hypotheses set forth by the ACF:

- Actors within an advocacy coalition will show substantial consensus on issues pertaining to the policy core, although less so on secondary aspects.
• An actor (or coalition) will give up secondary aspects of a belief system before acknowledging weaknesses in the policy core.

• On major controversies within a policy subsystem when core beliefs are in dispute, the lineup of allies and opponents tends to be rather stable over periods of a decade or so. (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009, p. 129)

**Coalitional membership.** There is evidence to support the existence of at least two competing coalitions within Georgia’s education policy subsystem: the school choice coalition and the traditional public school coalition. Interview participants continually described a decades-old binary that contrasts the “new” ideas of those supporting a systemic overhaul of public education with the “old” approaches of those that hope to buttress the existing educational infrastructure. As a result, the school choice coalition is often described as being comprised of “reformers” as opposed to the traditional public school coalition which is made up of “the establishment.” This binary is further illustrated by the obvious and observable characteristics of coalition members on both sides. Legislative voting records and sponsorship trends for school choice initiatives suggest that school choice proponents are more likely to live in Georgia’s urban centers or metropolitan areas while traditional school proponents are often located in more rural, outlying parts of the state. Additionally, the school choice coalition is primarily comprised of Republican members while the opposing coalition is much more Democratic. The notable exception to the traditional partisan associations, however, is the growing contingency of young Democrats from urban centers throughout Georgia who very vocally support a variety of school choice initiatives.
The school choice coalition. There was broad agreement amongst interview participants with regard to membership within the school choice coalition. Both school choice proponents and traditional education proponents described school choice coalition members as parents of school-aged children, elected officials—typically those from the Metropolitan Atlanta area, and—more recently—individuals affiliated with charter school advocacy groups. All interview participants—regardless of coalitional membership—also acknowledged that while support for school choice initiatives was still strongest among Republicans in the Georgia General Assembly, a supportive Democratic faction had recently emerged and had served to bolster the school choice coalition’s ability to pass initiatives in both the State House and Senate. According to a Democratic member of the school choice coalition serving on the Education Committee within the Georgia House of Representatives, Democratic support for school choice within the Georgia General Assembly comes in large part from young legislators representing urban or suburban centers. This particular legislator explained that “we’ve truly grown into a real coalition of people who are Democrats and Republicans, Black and White.” This sentiment was echoed by many Republican legislators including those in leadership positions. One such leader in the House of Representatives explained:

You have to understand, it’s bi-partisan. Some of the most liberal members of the House are in lock-step with some of the most conservative Republicans in the House. It’s a coalition that consists of suburban Republicans and urban Democrats, and I think what’s most telling is the groundswell of support from parents across the board. (Feb. 12, 2013)
Despite claims of a broad bi-partisan presence within the school choice coalition, however, legislative voting records indicate that support for school choice initiatives is still much stronger among Republicans than Democrats, and Georgia’s school choice movement is still predominantly characterized as part of the Republican agenda since the vast majority of the school choice initiatives introduced since 2007 were sponsored by Republicans. As a result, Democrats who lend support to school choice initiatives are often required to break from party lines, and their actions often place them at odds with fellow party members. When interview participants were asked why support for school choice among Democrats still waned, respondents from both coalitions cited issues of age and race, and they described a generational divide that separated those who support school choice within the Democratic party from those who do not. Several respondents indicated that of all the factors impacting a Democratic policy maker’s willingness to support school choice, age is among the most important. An African American school choice proponent within the House of Representatives noted:

I find that the Democrats who are supportive of school choice happen to be younger, are of a different generation and a different mindset, who have children or are connected to people who do, who are more open-minded about reaching across the aisles; people who don’t demonize everybody in the Republican party. (Feb. 6, 2013)

The traditional education coalition. In contrast to the school choice coalition’s membership which was often described as young and metropolitan, members of the traditional education coalition were described as being affiliated with established educational organizations like the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA),
Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA), Georgia Association for Educational Leaders (GAEL), and the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). A former director of GSSA characterized the opposition to school choice as follows: “more times than not, it’s the traditional public education organizations: the teacher organizations, the school board organizations, the principal organizations” (Jan. 18, 2013). Additionally, a member of the district administration in the Gwinnett County Public School System—a large metropolitan district characterized by one interview participant as “the epicenter for school choice opposition”—described the traditional education coalition as being comprised of “members of the established educational community” (Feb. 2, 2013).

Unlike the school choice coalition, however, wherein state legislators were often cited as important members, elected officials—outside of local school board representatives—were not identified by interview participants as playing a significant role in the work of the traditional education coalition. In fact, the interview participant representing Gwinnett County Public Schools acknowledged the lack of legislative support for the traditionalists as significant by explaining:

Many [school choice] supporters have been able to not only work with currently elected members of the General Assembly, but they’ve also been able to elect members of the General Assembly that share their beliefs on public education where choice is concerned. . . . And then, there’s a new group of emerging young policy makers that are basically being recruited into positions in the Governor’s office and the Lieutenant Governor’s Office, and they bring a different type of knowledge of school choice to the table . . . I think [the school choice coalition] is
getting much more organized [than the traditional education coalition]. (Feb. 2, 2013)

**Policy core beliefs.** Beyond the superficial differences that distinguish one coalition from the other lay deep ideological divisions, and coalitional membership criteria are often established along the lines of these conflicting ideologies. The belief systems espoused by Georgia’s school choice coalition as well as the traditional education coalition reflect each coalition’s respective identity and result from coalition members’ adherence to two divergent sets of values. In interviews with state-level policymakers, common responses emerged across multiple interviews with regard to the identification of fundamental “deep core” beliefs as well as secondary “policy core” beliefs. This response data was used to determine the advocacy coalition to which each interview participant belonged.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) hypothesize that policy core beliefs are those that are most deeply held and therefore highly resistant to change. In interviews with state-level policymakers in Georgia, the fundamental belief holding the school choice coalition together was repeatedly described as a general dissatisfaction with the current state of public education and the view that expanded choice options were a mechanism for reforming the existing system. In contrast, members of the traditional education coalition repeatedly articulated support for the established public education system and cited insufficient funding as the likely cause of any deficiencies in traditional school performance.

**The school choice coalition.** Policymakers from both the school choice coalition and the traditional education coalition repeatedly identified the need for systemic change
in public education as the core belief of school choice proponents. While individual coalition members described this belief in various ways, the notion that children could and should be better served by a system that was more adaptable, more efficient, and more individualized was pervasive throughout all interviews with school choice proponents. For example, a legislative leader in the Georgia House of Representatives explained:

   People across the ideological terrain recognize that we need to make some fundamental changes in how we do public education. We’re still in a situation, for instance, where only 2 out of every 3 students who enter high school graduate, and when you look at students from low income households, that number drops dramatically. (Jan. 23, 2013)

Other respondents, including a senior staffer in the office of Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle, expounded on the role of school choice—and charter schools, in particular—in the overall plan for education reform by posing the following question and answer: “If we have more charter schools, are things going to improve? Yes. Because failing charter schools close. . . But we don’t close failing traditional schools, and students need options when they’re stuck in those failing schools” (Jan. 25, 2013).

   The belief that expanded school choice options can reform a public education system that is not appropriately serving all students was singularly important in identifying school choice coalition membership, and the promotion of this idea undergirded the coordination of coalition activities. While members of the school choice coalition were less unified about secondary aspects of their belief systems, they expressed significant solidarity on core values. As a former president pro tem of the Georgia
Senate, argued: “the only true idea that we coalesce around now, I believe, is the idea that our public schools need something” (Jan. 23, 2013).

**The traditional education coalition.** In contrast to the school choice coalition, members of the traditional education coalition continually voiced support for traditional public schools and for the authority of local boards of education to govern those schools. Coalition members also articulated economic arguments against school choice, and interview participants argued that choice initiatives drive dollars away from traditional public schools in a time when education funding has already been drastically reduced in the face of decreasing state revenues and shrinking local tax digests. A representative of Gwinnett County Public Schools explained the issues of funding and authority when he said:

I think any of the organizations and associations or even local school districts have no problem with the idea [of school choice], but it's when the control gets to be the issue at the local school level . . . and the dollars following the child to the school and bypassing the system. (Feb. 2, 2013)

This sentiment was echoed by a former GSSA director who provided additional insight into the rationale supporting the oppositional stance of many established educational interest groups on the issue of school choice. He explained:

Typically, the reason [for the opposition] is not so much just about choice, but particularly nowadays, the choice stuff drives dollars away from already hurting public schools to private schools or whatever. (Jan. 18, 2013)

The idea that local boards of education should remain the sole governmental units with the authority to govern public schools was identified as a deep core belief of the
traditional education coalition by multiple interview participants regardless of coalitional affiliation. Any acknowledgement of systemic deficiencies by members of the traditional education coalition stopped short of faulting the local board governance structure and buttressed the argument that the current system would improve if local school boards were more empowered and local schools were more adequately funded.

**Universal belief in local control.** In addition to the identified policy core beliefs of the traditional education coalition and the school choice coalition, both sides also placed tremendous value on the concept of “local control.” Because Georgia is a state that has demonstrated a strong preference for decentralized authority for over a century (Bullock & Gaddie, 2010), it is politically undesirable for any policy maker or political operative to oppose the notion of increased local control. As a result, interview participants from both education coalitions spoke at length about 1) the ways in which their respective coalition sought to empower individuals at the local level and 2) the ways in which the opposing coalition sought to strip power from individuals at the local level. In other words, a belief in local control was central to the arguments put forth by both coalitions; however, the two sides defined the idea in drastically different terms.

For example, a former high-ranking member of the State Senate argued that “the best local control is the parents not the local school board” (Jan. 14, 2013), and a current leader in the Georgia House of Representatives said “I don’t believe any governmental entity should have exclusive control over anything—particularly education. There always needs to be certain checks and balances, and the ultimate local control is obviously the parent and the child—giving them greater flexibility” (Jan. 23, 2013). This need to “check” the control of local boards and traditional education organizations was
further explained by a former Associate Superintendent at the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) who said:

There are these notions amongst traditional systems—GSBA should train all school board members, we should have locally elected school boards, we should have certified teachers—I mean, the groups that oppose school choice believe in those things because they were raised in a system where those things were always assumed . . . and that I think nicely illustrates their world view. There’s a lot of faith in the traditional way of doing things. Those of us who I think are more on the reform side just think they’re working on the wrong reforms. So I think [local control] is the subtext of all of this . . . I think the reality is—there’s so much dissatisfaction with the quality of local boards, and you see these stories about nepotism and infighting and all the craziness we’ve seen both in the metro area and downstate in Georgia that people are persuaded that there’s got to be a better option . . . and if all you’ve got is a vote for one of nine school board members every four years—that’s not much real control. (Jan. 24, 2013)

In contrast, the traditional education coalition defined local control somewhat differently in that they placed significant emphasis on the importance of locally elected officials. A representative of the GSBA explained, “I define—and GSBA defines—local control as the voters. It’s the voters’ ability to elect people to represent them and make decisions” (Feb. 8, 2013). This definition was also supported by the leadership at GSSA who refuted the school choice coalition’s argument that parents—not school boards—represent the ultimate local control. He argued:
If that's the case, then why do we need local government at all? If parents are the ultimate local control, and they ought to have their say regardless of what their local government agency says, then it follows in my way of thinking that citizens are the ultimate local control and we don’t need things like county commissions and city councils making laws and all that. (Jan. 18, 2013)

Despite the divergent conceptualizations of “local control” described by members of both coalitions, each side argued that the opposition intentionally used the term as an appealing rhetorical device to further an overarching agenda. Specifically, a member of the school choice coalition who holds a leadership position in the Georgia House of Representatives cautioned, “You’ve got to move beyond the bumper sticker; the phrase: local control. You’ve got to ask yourself what it means” (Jan. 23, 2013), while a representative from the GSSA argued, “[Local control] is just one of those little bumper sticker lines that Republicans learn when they go to Republican talking point school” (Jan. 18, 2013).

Secondary aspects of belief systems. In addition to the deeply held core beliefs that are highly resistant to change, interview participants were also asked to describe the secondary aspects of their belief systems. Certain aspects of those secondary or “policy core” beliefs were sacrificed at times when they interfered with the collective will of the coalition. In part because of the diverse membership and varied values encompassed by a school choice coalition that include “efficiency/choice/competition Republicans and civil rights Democrats”, members of the school choice coalition—especially those in favor of private school choice options—sacrificed more aspects of their secondary beliefs than did members of the traditional education system. Additionally, the traditional education
coalition—comprised largely of Democrats—which dominated the education policy subsystem for several decades has only recently begun to lose influence with the Georgia General Assembly, and as a former president pro tem of the Georgia Senate argued, “with no competition, there was no impetus to change or adjust” (Jan. 14, 2013). A representative of GSSA expanded on this idea in his interview when he said:

...[until recently] the Democrats did what the Republicans are doing now, and that’s pretty much whatever they wanted because they had such a heavy majority in the General Assembly. But in my judgment—starting in 2003 and particularly since 2005 when the Republicans took solid control of both chambers of the General Assembly and the Governor’s Office—that’s when the support for choice issues really ramped up. (Jan. 18, 2013)

In other words, members of the school choice coalition have been forced to compromise more of the secondary aspects of their belief systems in the name of building a coalition that could compete with the traditional education coalition for political capital.

**School choice coalition.** Within the school choice coalition, members shared the fundamental belief that the current educational system should be improved; however, they differed to some degree on which type of school choice would enable the most meaningful change. For those choice proponents that believed public school choice options—intradistrict transfer policies, charter schools, district-level flexibility for accountability models—offered the most viable educational solutions, very few secondary aspects of their belief systems had to be abandoned in the name of furthering a statewide school choice agenda because public school choice initiatives have enjoyed fairly broad support from the public and from policymakers. For those choice proponents
that believed private school choice options—universal vouchers, in particular, but also expanded special needs vouchers and tuition tax credit programs—afforded better opportunities for students, almost all secondary aspects of their beliefs were sacrificed to maintain coalitional cohesion because private school choice options have not yet proved politically palatable.

In other words, private school choice proponents sacrificed many secondary aspects of their policy preferences in the name of furthering the coalition’s overall agenda and preserving the policy core belief that public education needs to be improved. Numerous interview participants explained that a voucher proponent will always support a charter school initiative, but the opposite is not necessarily true. For instance, one member of the school choice coalition—a Democratic legislator in the Georgia General Assembly—stated “I couldn’t support vouchers because it undermines everything that I’ve done for the charter school movement, but I actually believe that charter schools are what will save our public school system” (Feb. 12, 2013). She went on to add, however, that vouchers and other forms of private school choice like Georgia’s tuition tax credit program (of which she was in favor) could serve a valuable purpose if used appropriately and if they were not so politically charged. She explained:

The state has an obligation to provide a quality public education . . . but that’s where it gets tricky; you start talking about the lowest income kids who don’t have choices—what if there’s not a good public school of choice? A few years ago, I had a bill, I never dropped it, but we’d done some work on it, and we had an empowerment zone; where you had a zone of the lowest performing schools in the lowest income parts of the state, and you allow for a pilot project there where
you had vouchers. But the whole voucher conversation is so divisive politically. I mean, I really just believe that kids ought to have access to a good education period; whether it’s private or public. (Feb. 12, 2013)

Amongst those school choice coalition members who expressed strong support for private school choice options, there was also the hope that the political viability of more “free-market” initiatives is increasing. For instance, a former president pro tem of the Georgia Senate said:

I'm a public school graduate and both my children were public school graduates, but I truly believe that [school choice] is good for public schools. I think that it makes them stronger; just like Kennesaw [State University] has to compete with Georgia State. I also think that if you take some kids away but leave the local tax digest there--you actually have more money for fewer kids . . . I think there are a lot of Republicans that want to vote for school choice because that's their basic, fundamental, free-market beliefs, but they're still afraid to. (Jan. 14. 2013)

This idea that competition will improve education by loosening what was continually referred to in interviews as the “iron grip” of the “educational establishment” and forcing those interested in maintaining the “status quo” to innovate and adapt was echoed by virtually all members of the school choice coalition—regardless of political party affiliation.

*Traditional education coalition.* Overall, the traditional education coalition was more unified on the secondary aspects of members’ belief systems than the school choice coalition, and as a result—fewer sacrifices were required of individual members in order to maintain coalitional cohesion. Members of the school choice coalition acknowledged
that the traditional education coalition was much more unified on all aspects of their respective beliefs. A former head of a state education agency offered the following explanation for said unity:

I see them as more under one umbrella than maybe the school choice supporters are. The opposition shares the belief that supporting choice takes away from traditional schools. Bottom line. Mostly in the realm of resources. (Jan. 23, 2013)

She went on to say that the school choice coalition encompassed a broader range of belief systems because the coalition’s membership is comprised of

. . . those folks who believe parents deserve a choice because it’s their tax payer dollars and they can decide what to do with them . . . there’s also the free-market philosophy that competition is good for competition’s sake . . . and there’s also the argument for increased educational equity. Not everyone shares each of those philosophies, but because all of those lend support [for increased school choice options] the coalition comes together. (Jan. 23, 2013)

A leader in the Georgia House of Representatives agreed with this analysis explaining that state-level charter school supporters were “a coalition against the negative” and, as a result, the supporters were diverse in background as well as philosophy (Jan. 31, 2013). Because this group often rallied around the general belief that the public education needs to be improved rather than around specific improvement methods or tools, the school choice coalition managed to build a broad membership base. Another interview participant who previously served as Associate Superintendent of Policy at the GaDOE characterized this broad base as existing on “a Venn Diagram where there’s this
overlapping interest that everybody agrees on, but then they’ve got different angels they take” (Jan. 24, 2013), and a representative of the Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA) explained, “When you come to that kind of broad philosophical understanding, you open yourself up to a wide variety of partnerships that you would not normally have” (Jan. 14, 2013).

The main issue on which some level of compromise was required of traditional education coalition members, however, was that of academic performance. For instance, traditional education coalition members were forced, at times, to forfeit certain claims to the current system’s adequacy in light of the state’s documented track record of academic performance issues as well as a few high profile incidences of gross organizational mismanagement in both large and small school districts across Georgia that resulted in sanctions ranging from full or partial loss of school district accreditation (DeKalb and Clayton Counties) to criminal indictments related to employee participation in a district-wide cheating scandals (Dougherty County and Atlanta Public Schools). As a result, members of the traditional education coalition were sometimes forced to “admit that their baby is ugly” (as characterized by a senior staffer within the Lieutenant Governor’s office) by acknowledging the need for improved academic and operational performance (Jan. 25, 2013).

However, these public concessions stopped short of faulting the traditional local board governance structure for systemic shortcomings. For instance, an interview participant from the Gwinnett County Public School System offered a critique of the current public education system by acknowledging, “Sure, we’ve got to improve. Public education needs to improve. We can’t continue to sit still and not develop policies at the
local level that would allow parental choice and to be innovative;” however, he was careful to add, “but there’s a belief—a very strong belief among strong educational leaders—that the only meaningful change . . . remains at the system and district level” (Feb. 2, 2013). This sentiment was echoed by an employee of GSBA who agreed that local school boards—flawed as they may be—were a product of the Democratic process. While she acknowledged the need for local boards to operate as effective and responsive units of government, she also highlighted disparities in funding across school districts as an impediment to systemic statewide improvement when she argued:

There’s a vast differentiation between what local districts are able to offer. I mean, in some places there is no tax base. There’s no money. And when equalization was cut, the assumption that somehow equity had been created was just ridiculous. So some people push for choice as a way to have equitable schools, and some people say: your education shouldn’t depend on your zip code . . . but if you’re education isn’t going to depend on your zip code—then we have to end local property taxes. And everything would have to be collected at the state level and distributed on an FTE basis, and I think that would be a holy war. (Feb. 8, 2013)

By acknowledging the need for overall improvement in the traditional public education system while reiterating a commitment to local board authority and autonomy, the traditional education coalition was able to maintain cohesion amongst its membership by upholding its core belief: if local school boards were more empowered and local schools were adequately funded, the existing system of public education would be more effective.
Coalitional Awareness of Opposition

Interview participants—regardless of coalitional membership—were aware of the counter arguments often presented by their opponents. In interviews with members of the traditional education coalition, for example, participants accurately anticipated opponents’ arguments that the educational establishment was primarily concerned with upholding the status quo. In other words, representatives of GSBA and GSSA were conscious of the fact that they were often described as:

. . . educrats—the status-quo in education; and that’s a term I use loosely, but they’re people who tend to want to protect the system as it is; your School Boards’ Association and your Superintendents Association (by a Democratic member of the House Education Committee, Feb. 6, 2013),

and also as

. . . the monolithic opposition to [school choice]; the usual forces of the status quo in Georgia which unfortunately includes GSBA, GSSA, and the teachers unions (by a Republican leader in the Georgia House of Representatives, May 14, 2013).

In fact, there were a few cases in which traditional education coalition members even self-identified as representatives of “the system.” For instance, a representative of the GSBA emphasized that the traditional education coalition was comprised of members concerned with “protecting the status quo” (Feb. 8, 2013).

Similarly, members of the school choice coalition were very much aware of the critique put forth by the traditional education coalition that described the school choice movement as a coordinated effort to further a Republican agenda enabling deregulation and privatization. For instance, school choice coalition members understood that
opponents characterized school choice as “a piece of the Republican agenda, and some of the really controversial pieces of the choice agenda like vouchers really are a Republican kind of thing” (taken from an interview with a representative of GSSA, Jan. 18, 2013). This type of partisan association proved challenging for some Democratic members of the school choice coalition; for instance, one Democratic legislator explained that supporting school choice initiatives that are often championed by Republicans was difficult at times because “there is this whole conversation [about school choice] around the state . . . that it’s just a ploy to allow the governor to have more power over education. . . So you have that factor; you’ve got the mistrust [of Democrats toward Republicans] to contend with” (Feb. 6, 2013).

Despite understanding and correctly identifying the beliefs and allegations of the opposition, however, interview participants from both coalitions virulently disputed the credibility and sincerity of their opponents. For example, the traditional education coalition attempted, at times, to position itself in support of some choice options—namely charter schools. However, the support, as articulated by interest group leaders representing teachers and school boards, was very conditional. For instance, a representative of GSSA explained:

[GSSA] supports charter schools; we just think they ought to be schools that are approved by local boards and not by some group of appointed bureaucrats in Atlanta. So yeah, we support that type of choice, but we think that the locally elected boards ought to have a hand in making those decisions. (Jan. 18, 2013)

This idea was also expressed by member of the administration at Gwinnett County Public Schools who explained, “there’s a difference between parental empowerment and
parental control, and I believe the opposition [to school choice] is against parental control but not the parental empowerment piece” (Feb. 2, 2013). He later added that there was no opposition to “the school choice folks that want to work within the system to provide empowerment” (Feb. 2, 2013).

The notion that school choice—as a concept—has evolved over the last two decades to the point that “moderates” and “people who tended to look more at policy and vote for policy over politics” can no longer support choice initiatives was highlighted by representatives from GSBA and GSSA. Interview participants from both of these organizations pointed out the drastic differences between Georgia’s first charter school law that passed in 1993 which only allowed for the approval of conversion charter schools that operated under the authority of local school districts and the more progressive types of school choice bills that have passed in more recent years including those that created Special Education vouchers and state approved start-up charter schools (See Appendix C).

Not surprisingly, the school choice coalition highlighted their opponents’ claims of support for charter schools as an insincere and transparent attempt to garner public support in a time of increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional education system. As a Democratic member of the House Education Committee and the school choice coalition argued, “They’ll say emphatically: I support charter schools . . . but they really don’t support charter schools, quite frankly. Just look at the records” (Feb. 6, 2013). A review of the committee testimony from hearings in which school choice bills were debated from 2007 - 2012 supported this particular allegation as there was evidence of opposition from the GSBA, GSSA, Georgia Association of Educators (GAE) and the Professional
Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) in practically every legislative hearing on a school choice bill. Members of the school choice coalition also challenged the opposition’s argument that school choice in Georgia has evolved at the expense of local districts. One interview participant representing the Georgia Public Policy Foundation (GPPF) stated:

I wouldn’t call that original bill in 1993 [the one that garnered support from the traditional education coalition] a school choice bill. It didn’t give any choices. It was really more of a site-based management, flexibility bill, and a lot of school systems could support that. But districts and legislators saw a lot of schools convert to get the federal dollars, but then they ended up going back to a traditional model; again—I wouldn’t call that school choice. The real change came in 1998 when we allowed for start-up charters. That was the real difference maker because at that point, you had new players that could enter into the market, and you had true choice. If you had a start-up charter school, you could leave . . . and that put a very powerful decision in the hands of parents. Up until then, I wouldn’t say we had much school choice. (Jan. 25, 2013)

Another interview participant serving in a leadership position at the GCSA elaborated on how school choice expansion has—in many ways—galvanized the opposition over the last two decades. He explained:

It’s been a trend. Many times, and Georgia wasn’t the only state in which this happened, the law started with a provision for conversion charter schools and that opened the door, and before you knew it you had what we call independent charter schools. So I do think that the traditional opposition has really grown and
probably solidified because they see it as a slippery slope: first you get conversions, then you get independents, and then you get virtuals that they literally despise. And then, God forbid, you start giving vouchers for kids, and they think: now they don’t even have to talk to us anymore because they can just take the money and run. So they see their whole basis for existing as potentially falling apart, and it’s all about funding. (Jan. 14, 2013)

This argument that school choice initiatives diverted funds from traditional public schools was also disputed by members of the school choice coalition, including a representative of GCSA, who argued “anything that they think will affect their funding will be opposed,” and “by their logic [that assumes state money going to charter schools decreases the money available to traditional public schools], the state can’t buy anymore ambulances and police cars because that takes money away from them.” (Jan. 14, 2013).

Finally, the school choice coalition’s assertion that increased educational options would benefit everyone—including traditional public schools—by creating competition and affording additional choices for parents was refuted by members of the traditional education coalition who cited the rhetoric surrounding the benefits of school choice as misleading. Using the concept of start-up charter schools as an example, a representative of GSBA highlighted the “double standard” that exists for charter schools in comparison to traditional schools. She argued that the relationship between school districts and independent schools of choice had become “adversarial by its very nature” because:

This goes back to how we get along with each other. If you want a start-up charter school, you’re pretty much saying: I don’t want to be a part of the school district, but you have to be if you want the local money. But you’re starting by
setting yourself up as being different from *them*. And not being a part of *them*.

So that makes it difficult to work together if somebody comes to you and says:

basically, all I want is the money. (Feb. 8, 2013)

In other words, many members of the traditional education coalition argued that charter schools—unlike traditional public schools—were able to “cream skim” by not providing transportation to all students and by limiting enrollment numbers. A review of the state’s charter school law does prove that charter schools are exempt from many of the regulations governing traditional public schools—including the provision of transportation to enrolled students (O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2060).

**Coalitional Strategies**

Given the significant number of school choice initiatives that have successfully passed through the Georgia General Assembly since 2007, the school choice coalition has arguably been more effective than its opposition in terms of developing and employing political strategy. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) acknowledge the importance of strategic information utilization on the policy-development process, and the ACF emphasizes the link between policy change and a coalition’s ability to effectively mobilize latent constituencies through the communication of policy-relevant messages. To test this theory, the researcher applied the interview data gathered for this study to the following hypotheses set forth by the ACF:

Even when the accumulation of technical information does not change the views of opposing coalition, it can have important impacts on policy—at least in the short term—by altering the views of policy brokers or other important governmental officials. (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009, p. 129)
Policy oriented learning. The ACF posits that a coalition's ability to use evidence—anecdotal or empirical—to modify belief systems increases the likelihood of successfully translating coalitional beliefs into policy, and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) argue that policy oriented learning—the process of altering one’s beliefs and objectives in light of new and compelling information or evidence—plays an important role in belief system modifications; especially those modifications related to secondary aspects of belief systems. In interviews with Georgia’s education policy-makers, participants identified the various types of evidence that were commonly introduced in school choice policy debates. Both the school choice coalition as well as the traditional education coalition acknowledged the role of empirical evidence—research on educational outcomes, student achievement, and systemic effectiveness—as trivial in terms of its impact on policy oriented learning. While both coalitions acknowledged the occasional use of empirical research in policy debates, neither side admitted to being persuaded by the respective arguments or evidence presented by the opposition. Interview participants offered the following assessments of the role of empirical evidence in school choice policy development. A member of the traditional education coalition and a representative of GSSA stated:

I can assure you that research means nothing to the Georgia General Assembly. They don't pay any attention to that stuff. As a matter of fact, one of the things that they are very quick to say is that education research is not solid research; it's soft research, and they just don't pay any attention to it. (Jan. 18, 2013)
Similarly, a school choice coalition member and former Associate Superintendent at GaDOE emphasized, “I hate to burst the bubbles of all the researchers out there, but the fact of the matter is: no one reads an 80 page white paper” (Jan. 24, 2013)

An explanation for this type of behavior is contemplated by the ACF, and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) acknowledge that while coalitions often attempt to “outlearn” their opponents through the collection and dissemination of research, testimony, and anecdotal findings (Jenkins-Smith, 1988, 1990; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Hunter, 1989), the tendency is for “actors to accept information confirming existing beliefs and to screen out dissonant information” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 145). This idea of screening is borrowed from Carol Weiss (1979) who developed the “political model” of research utilization which suggests that when opinions have been strengthened over time, they are unlikely to change in response to opposing arguments. In such cases, research becomes ammunition for whichever side can use findings to buttress a pre-existing argument. The interview data from research participants supported this theory, and respondents from both the school choice coalition as well as the traditional education coalition acknowledged that both sides use research and data to support their own claims of increased efficiency and performance. For example, an interview participant representing Gwinnett County Public Schools argued:

[School choice proponents] use data that will show the positive effect of school choice, and sometimes opponents say: Well, I’ve got data to show that it doesn’t work. I think they’re all much more organized than they were in the past about using data, but it’s kind of a strategy on both sides. (Feb. 2, 2013)
Numerous interview participants provided responses indicating that A) empirical data was, indeed, used in policy debates on school choice, and B) the opposing side’s data was flawed or unreliable in some way. For instance, an interview participant representing GPPF explained the research utilization strategy of the school choice coalition as follows:

First, you have to gather the facts, and I think we’ve got a great record of performance. . . I think, and I’m a little prejudiced, that the data is on the side of school choice so they can’t take that tack. (Jan. 25, 2013)

Additionally, a Republican leader in the State House of Representative argued that Georgia’s track record of public school performance is hard for the traditional education coalition to overcome. He said:

To be frank, they’re argument doesn’t hold up; their arguments are less persuasive than school choice arguments. They often appear to just be defending the status quo . . . and they’ve been unsuccessful because the backdrop of Georgia’s schools being in the bottom half just doesn’t go away. They have a really hard time side-stepping that. (Jan. 23, 2013)

Not surprisingly, a representative from GSBA disagreed that data supported school choice expansion; she argued that “[the opposition] was basing a huge governance change on paltry numbers” (Feb. 8, 2013).

This type of intense conflict between the competing coalitions within Georgia’s education policy subsystem perpetuates what Weiss (1979) refers to as “a dialogue of the deaf”. According to the ACF, the likelihood that policy oriented learning will occur within and across subsystem coalitions is determined—in part—by the extent to which a core belief is challenged or threatened. Weiss explains: the more direct the threat, the
more intense the conflict. In Georgia, for example, arguments over school choice have been ongoing since the passage of the state’s first charter school law in 1993, and the level of conflict has only increased over the last ten years as school choice initiatives have been expanded and policymakers’ opinions—both for and against school choice—have solidified. As the intensity of conflict has increased over time, so too has the disagreement over the benefits of both the traditional public education system as well as school choice initiatives. For example, an interview participant representing GSBA cited the “resentment” that is felt by many supporters of the traditional education model when she said:

A lot of people like the traditional school; a lot of people like the comprehensive school idea, and they don’t like the idea that their school would end up being a dumping ground or that the kids would end up being the ones who weren’t willing to live up to the behavior standards or the extra study time that a charter school may have added to their requirements or the parents aren’t going to take the time to look for another school and get them there and do those things. So the traditional school would end up being the left overs. And that scares people, and it makes them angry. (Feb. 8, 2013)

In contrast, many respondents expressed frustration over the lack of support for choice initiatives at the district level given the existence of many chronically failing schools and systems throughout the state, and even representatives of GSSA and GSBA acknowledged that many local districts are reluctant to approve charter schools. In fact, many districts have not yet developed or formalized a process to solicit or receive charter
petitions from interested applicants. A representative of the GCSA explained this frustration when he said:

Just because school administrators and school boards say “we have a wonderful school system” does not make it true. That isn’t what parents observe, and so I think parents are more willing to take the risk because they see what’s at stake, and it’s their children and their futures. And they see what they consider to be a failing school system . . . I think the public is saying: Government—you are not getting the job done. The schools are not educating the children to our satisfaction and to where we think they can be successful in our society. . . I think that those are the two basic things: the belief that parents know better and that the public is a lot more proactive now when something isn’t working. (Jan. 14, 2013)

Coalition members on both sides acknowledged the entrenched nature of the school choice policy divide, and many interview participants concluded that the issue had become politically intractable because of the high level of conflict between the competing coalitions and because research exists to both support and refute claims of increased educational efficacy through expanded school choice options. An interview participant serving in a leadership position within the Lieutenant Governor’s Office called the issue “polarizing” because . . . those on the traditional side can’t seem to get along with those who are on the ‘all choice, all the time’ side. We should all be working toward the same goal which is: what’s best for the student so they can be properly educated in the State of Georgia. But there’s no right answer . . . the school choice advocates are too negative about traditional education, but the traditional education folks just keep
saying: we are getting it done, and they can’t recognize that there’s more than a sliver of truth in their opponents’ argument. (Jan. 25, 2013)

In these types of situations where there is a high level of conflict and a low level of agreement on the validity of empirical evidence put forth by competing coalitions, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993a) explain that policymakers are much more likely to draw a variety of conclusions about causal relationships and policy objectives, and anecdotal evidence is often used to defend the necessity of various policy options. This idea is upheld by interview data, and respondents emphasized that personal stories often proved more persuasive to policy makers than empirical data. A GSSA representative explained:

What's always best is a good story about some child whose opportunities are being denied because he's in a bad situation. I mean, if they can tell a good tear-jerker story, that's always the strategy that's used. And of course, the strategy that's used by the school-choice opponents typically has to do with providing examples of where choice is already available and particularly the idea that this is trampling on local control. (Jan. 18, 2013)

In addition to the entrenched views of each side of the school choice debate in Georgia, the issue of political tractability (or intractability) is also impacted by the forum in which the policy debate most often takes place. Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993a) explain that “the characteristics of the forum can materially affect the way analysis is used” and in the case of open fora—like a legislative committee hearing that is open to the public and affords opportunities for public comment—“greater latitude exists for expression of conflicting analytical claims” (p. 54). Since most of Georgia’s school
choice policy debate occurs in the open fora of legislative committees, stakeholders on both sides of the issue have ample opportunities to voice concerns about particular initiatives. However, this type of open policy forum decreases the likelihood of achieving conflict resolution between opposing coalitions since “analysis is likely to be employed by all sides in the debate” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993a, pp. 54-55).

**Political authority.** Interview participants repeatedly alluded to the fact that a coalition’s ability to achieve a desired policy outcome within Georgia’s education policy subsystem is often tied to the degree of political influence and authority coalition members wield. Participants explained that when Democrats held the majority in the House and Senate, very few school choice bills passed through the Georgia General Assembly; however, when Republicans took control, committees were more likely to hold hearings on school choice bills and House and Senate leaders were more likely to shore up the votes necessary for passage. In an interview with a representative of GSSA, the issue of political influence was explained as follows:

If you look at the history, until 2003--the Democrats were in control of the Governor's Office, and they had the majority in both the house and the senate. You didn't even see those bills introduced; let alone acted upon. But then in 2003, Governor Perdue won, and he convinced some senators to switch parties, and suddenly the Republicans had the Senate and the Governor's Office, and the House was still controlled by the Democrats so for 2 years we had some gridlock. But then, in 2005, the House flipped to Republican leadership, and Republicans had control of all of it. Now, if you go back and look at the leadership then that was in place in 2005--you had a Republican Governor--but knowing that the
leadership of the General Assembly in many ways is a seniority based thing, then the people who got elected to be the leaders when the Republicans took over were the ones who had been there the longest, and they were the strongest, most dedicated Republicans who had been Republicans when being Republican wasn't cool, and so what you had were some pretty far right people like Chip Rogers and Glenn Richardson and Eric Johnson and Tommie Williams; people that had been Republican for a long time. And so what happened for the next several years was that they pushed the hard-right Republican agenda which even included vouchers, and Eric Johnson was the one who was successful in getting the Special Needs voucher through, but David Casas and Earl Ehrhart helped him in the House. (Jan. 18, 2013)

Not surprisingly, bill sponsorship was often identified by members of both coalitions as an important strategy employed by school choice proponents in their efforts to pass legislation in the Georgia General Assembly. Since 2006 when Republicans gained control of the state legislature, the school choice coalition was often able to garner the votes required for bill passage in both chambers because members intentionally selected influential House and Senate leaders to carry important bills. One former state education agency head said

The Republicans have the majority in both houses of the legislature, and they also have the Governor’s Office so they call on their party to vote and get it done. They do put out research . . . but I’d say number one is simply counting on party politics. (Jan. 23, 2013)
This statement was corroborated by a high-ranking member of the Georgia House of Representatives who commented, “Bill sponsorship is critical. You can almost tell if a bill will pass according to whose name is on it” (May 14, 2013).

While interview participants repeatedly cited legislative leadership as a key component in the efficacy of the school choice coalition, it is important to note that the selection of influential Republican leaders as bill sponsors for key school choice initiatives has often posed challenges for Democratic legislators who favor school choice expansion. One school choice coalition member who serves as a State Representative and is a member of the Democratic Party and the House Education Committee pointed out that few Democrats are willing to support initiatives sponsored by the most notable members of the opposing political party. She explained:

There’s a mistrust about who the sponsors are for legislation; for what the agenda is . . . So we have to recognize those things, and we have to be more strategic on the proponents side about who sponsors of bills should be and what relationships we have. And we’ve got to spend the time investing in Democratic and Black legislators so they will understand what the intentions are, and even more importantly, we’ve got to engage their constituents. (Feb. 6, 2013)

These sentiments were supported by a former Deputy Superintendent at GaDOE who discussed the challenges of building a bi-partisan coalition. He described the inherent issues involved in obtaining Democratic support when “the lead sponsors of the bill in question were those same legislators most Democrats had voted against 90% of the time on other issues” (Jan. 24, 2013).
In the end, however, as long as Republicans make up the majority in both chambers of the General Assembly, broadening the base of support for school choice initiatives through increased backing from Democrats is not required for successful school choice expansion—especially considering the extensive Republican support currently buttressing the movement in Georgia. In the case of the constitutional amendment that re-established the State Charter Schools Commission, for example, support was strong among both high-profile legislators as well as other powerful elected officials. The following list contains just a few of the most notable school choice advocates who have openly supported the expansion of educational options since 2007:

- Former Governor Sonny Perdue publically supported several school choice bills including House Bill 1209 (2008) which provided school districts significant flexibility from Title 20 regulation in exchange for increased accountability goals.
- Former President Pro Tempore of the Senate Eric Johnson publically supported both public and private school choice options—including those he authored and carried himself like Senate Bill 10 (2007) which created a voucher program for special-needs students and Senate Bill 1133 (2008) which provided for the development of a tuition-tax credit scholarship program.
- Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle worked to ensure the passage of his charter system initiative (Senate Bill 39, 2007) which afforded entire school districts the opportunity to enter into performance contracts and become charter systems.
- Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones—although she was a House floor leader at the time—wrote and carried HB 881 (2008) which established the first iteration of the State’s Charter School Commission, and she later wrote HR 1162 (2012) which
allowed the referendum for the constitutional amendment to appear on the ballot in 2012 and the companion legislation, HB 797 (2012), which enabled the recreation of a constitutional version of the State’s Charter School Commission.

- Speaker of the House David Ralston publicly supported numerous public school choice bills from 2007-2012.

- House Majority Whip Rep. Ed Lindsey served as a co-sponsor of both House Bill 1133 (2008) which created a tuition tax credit program as well as the bill that enabled the program’s expansion (House Bill 100, 2009).

- Governor Nathan Deal who expended significant political capital in support of the 2012 constitutional amendment that enabled the creation of a state-level charter school authorizer.

The support of Georgia’s political elite was memorialized in a letter issued by Tony Roberts, CEO and President of GCSA, following the November 2012 ballot referendum which presented Georgia voters with the option to change the State Constitution in order to re-establish the State Charter Schools Commission—an independent state-level charter school authorizer with the authority to override the decisions of local boards of education. The following excerpt of said letter cites notable supporters of Georgia’s school choice initiatives by name:

We won because of the strong, patient, and relentless leadership of the best friend our children have in Georgia—our Governor Nathan Deal! We won because Lt. Governor Casey Cagle and Speaker David Ralston led the charge in the Senate and the House. We won because Speaker Pro Temp Jan Jones worked tirelessly (with both strong support and under heavy criticism) to craft and advocate for HR
1162 and HB 797. We won because of bi-partisan leadership of House and Senate members including House and Majority Whip Edward Lindsey, Senator Chip Rogers, House Education Chairman Brooks Coleman, Senate Education Chairman Fran Millar, Representative Rahn Mayo, Senator Ronnie Chance, Representative Alisha Morgan, Senator Curt Thompson, and Representative Margaret Kaiser. We won because leaders like Representatives Buss Brockway and Mike Dudgeon advocated publicly during and after the session for the Amendment’s passage. In all, we won with a 2/3 majority (123 members of the House and 40 members of the Senate) voting “yes” for HR1162. (T. Roberts, personal communication, November 2012)

**Messaging.** The ACF emphasizes the role of belief systems in the development of a coalition’s analytical strategies, and coalition members are often able to gain political support and mobilize latent constituencies through the effective messaging of core beliefs. In Georgia, for instance, the school choice coalition and the traditional education coalition embrace two very different messaging and communication strategies. While the traditional education coalition argues the need for increased funding and local board empowerment, the school choice coalition cites the need for innovation and improved educational options. Several interview participants characterized these messages as representative of the larger philosophical rift between 1) the “old guard” operating within the education subsystem that champions the traditional public school system in which the authority is vested in a superintendent and a school board and 2) the “new guard” seeking more flexibility and greater school-level autonomy than the traditional system is often able—or willing—to provide. Several interview participants highlighted this issue by
comparing the spokespeople designated by both coalitions to convey their respective messages to the public and to policymakers. For example, in the heated debate that occurred in the weeks leading up to the November 2012 ballot referendum on Amendment 1—a constitutional amendment that enabled the re-creation of the state-level charter school authorizer, the school choice coalition organized its messaging strategy around the personal stories of students and parents who had benefited from school choice opportunities.

In contrast, the traditional education coalition utilized local school superintendents and professional education organizations to emphasize the importance of local board governance and the disadvantages associated with decreased school funding. The media attention both sides received in the months leading up to the amendment vote focused public attention on the differing viewpoints of each coalition, but more importantly—it highlighted the stark and visible contrast between “messengers” representing each side. Most notably, people compared the “girls in green jackets” from Ivy Preparatory Academy (a single gender charter school in Gwinnett County serving a predominantly African American student population) who regularly attended press events and legislative hearings on behalf of the school choice coalition to the local school district superintendents (88% of whom were White and 71% were male in the 2012-2013 school year) who vehemently promoted the interests of the traditional education system in communities throughout the state (State School Superintendent List, 2012). These “policy images”—or “mixtures of information and emotion . . . used as part of the strategy of dealing with political conflict” proved very influential in the passage of Amendment 1 (Heck, 204, p. 106). Throughout the weeks of debate preceding the
amendment vote, the school choice coalition was able to galvanize support for the referendum by highlighting the personal stories of students and families who were positively impacted by school choice. A member of the school choice coalition—who also served in the Georgia House of Representatives as a Democrat—explained, “Our commercials featured kids and the voices of kids. Their commercials featured adults talking about how the sky was falling . . . . our message is always hope. Theirs is fear” (Feb. 6, 2013).

The effectiveness of the school choice coalition’s communication strategy was even acknowledged by the opposition, and one local school district representative explained that the school choice coalition “put a real face on the issue” (Feb. 2, 2013). As a result—Georgia voters approved the referendum by a margin of 59% to 41%, and Tony Roberts, President and CEO of GCSA attributed this victory to the school choice coalition’s fundamental message: the traditional public education system needs to improve. Specifically, Roberts wrote, “With this vote, the people of Georgia roared that they are not happy with the status quo in public K-12 education. They want and deserve more” (T. Roberts, personal communication, November 2012).

Representatives of traditional education organizations such as GSBA and GSSA acknowledged that they were at a disadvantage in terms of messaging throughout the campaign against Amendment 1. For example, Herb Garrett of GSSA complained that the traditional education coalition’s ability to block the referendum was impeded by the complexity of the school finance argument it had put forth in opposition to the amendment. He was quoted by the New York Times as saying, “Unfortunately, our side of the issue couldn’t be explained to the public on a bumper sticker” (Rich, 2012).
Regardless of whether or not the arguments put forth by the school choice coalition were
legitimized or proven in the weeks and months leading up to the amendment vote, there
was broad consensus amongst members of both coalitions that school choice proponents
were better able to effectively message core beliefs to promote a specific policy outcome
which—in this case—was the passage of Amendment 1.

**The Impact of External Events**

The ACF highlights the role of dynamic events occurring outside the policy
subsystem in the policy development process, and Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen (2009)
specifically cite “changes in socioeconomic conditions, public opinion, system-wide
governing coalitions, or policy outputs from other subsystems” as examples of potentially
influential occurrences (p. 129). While the impact of a single external event is not likely
to produce a fundamental shift in program or policy priorities, it often helps to spur
change within a subsystem by increasing the viability of existing policy options. In other
words, a coalition is sometimes able to capitalize on a development occurring outside the
policy subsystem to buttress arguments that further an existing policy agenda. In
Georgia’s education policy subsystem, for example, if the recent expansion of school
choice options was 1) enabled by state-level partisan shifts that consolidated political
power within the Republican Party and 2) strengthened by analytical communication
strategies that established public support for choice initiatives, then it must also have
been 3) bolstered by support from national advocacy organizations and the federal
government. To test this theory, the researcher applied the interview data gathered for
this study to the following hypotheses set forth by the ACF:
Significant perturbations external to the subsystem (e.g. changes in socioeconomic conditions, public opinion, system-wide governing coalitions, or policy outputs from other subsystems) are a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of change in the policy core attributes of a governmental program. (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009, p. 129)

**Federal education initiatives and Presidential support.** When the United States Department of Education (USED) launched President Barack Obama’s $4.35 billion competitive grant initiative, Race To the Top, in 2009, states were rewarded for implementing policies and practices that enabled “conditions conducive to reform” (States’ Applications, Scores, and Comments, Race To the Top Phase 2, 2009). One such “condition”—as identified in the application materials and prioritized in the scoring criteria—focused specifically on states’ existing school choice laws. For instance, a state seeking Race To the Top funds was eligible for up to 40 points (8% of the overall points available) if it could demonstrate through its existing law, policy, and practice that it had enabled “successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools” (States’ Applications, Scores, and Comments, Race To the Top Phase 2, 2009). According to the scoring criteria, points were awarded to states that prohibited caps on charter expansion, permitted the operation of independent charter school authorizers, maintained high accountability standards, provided financial assistance for charter school facility cost, and equitably funded charter school students in comparison to traditional school students.

The State of Georgia, a Race To the Top Phase II winner, would have been much less competitive without the additional points it received for its existing school choice
policies. In fact, Georgia’s scoring rubric reveals that 33 (or 82%) of 40 possible points were earned for implementing supportive school choice policies—including those related to charter school authorization and funding—across the state. Additionally, 2 out of the 5 reviewers that scored Georgia’s Race To the Top application singled out the state’s independent charter school authorizer—the Georgia Charter Schools Commission which had not yet been ruled unconstitutional by the Georgia State Supreme Court—in their comments as evidence of the state’s dedication to quality authorization and school choice expansion. While the portion of the application focusing on school choice and innovation only accounted for a small portion of the total points available on scoring rubric, Georgia would have fallen well-below the award threshold without the 33 points it received for having implemented state-level policies that expanded and supported school choice. For example, Georgia received an overall score of 446 out of 500 possible points in Phase II. Of the ten states receiving grant awards in Phase II, only two scored fewer points than Georgia—North Carolina and Ohio earning 442 and 441 points respectively. Thus, without the additional 33 points Georgia earned for enabling educational innovation and school choice expansion, the state would have dropped from 8th to 19th in the overall scoring distribution and fallen well below the point threshold required for a Race To the Top grant award.

**Georgia’s constitutional amendment.** By rewarding individual states for expanding charter schools, the federal government was able to successfully drive an agenda of reform that included increased school choice options. Additionally, and perhaps just as importantly, the President’s vocal support of public school choice provided some much-needed political cover to state-level Democrats in Georgia in the
months leading up to the vote on the constitutional amendment to re-establish the State Charter Schools Commission. In fact, several metro-Atlanta radio stations targeting largely African-American audiences began airing a 60-second pro-amendment radio advertisement two weeks prior to the referendum vote that featured the words and voice of President Obama. This commercial—which was created by two Democratic strategists, Cabral Franklin, son of former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Chris Carpenter—including the following script (Support for Amendment 1, 2012):

**President Obama:** “I call on states to reform their charter rules…When I passed a law to double the number of public charter schools…I called for a doubling of our investment in charter schools so that students and parents have choices.”

**Woman No. 1:** President Obama supports public charter schools.

**Woman No. 2:** Many Democrats in this state support public charter schools. But Amendment One shouldn’t be about Democrats or Republicans.

**Woman No. 1:** It shouldn’t be about local politicians trying to further their careers. It should be about providing every child with a real education opportunity. You should vote “yes” on Amendment One.

**Woman No. 2:** Too many of our children are trapped in struggling schools –

**Woman No. 1:** And don’t have quality school options. If you believe that education should come before petty politics —

**Woman No. 2:** Then you should vote “yes” on Amendment One. If you believe that every child deserves an opportunity for a quality education —

**Woman No. 1:** Then you should vote “yes” for Amendment One.

**Woman No. 2:** Vote “yes” for public charter schools.
The apparent endorsement of school choice policies by President Obama was a relief to many Georgia Democrats who supported expanded choice options in general and the passage of Amendment 1 in particular. One Democratic State Representative explained:

I would say that that’s been the single-most impactful move for charters around the country in the last 5 years—the focus from the U.S. Department of Education and our President who has said: ‘charters need to be a part of the fabric of education. Period.’ And so states—whether they’re red or blue—have to come on board . . . So I really give the President a lot of credit for driving that conversation and making charters more palatable for Democrats and really speaking on behalf of parents. That’s really what they’re doing. I think parents have been—whether or not they understood the intricacies of charters—they’ve been supportive of them and supportive of options along. So he’s just giving voice for what parents have been wanting. (Feb. 6, 2013)

While Democratic members of the school choice coalition serving in the General Assembly appreciated the political cover the President’s endorsement of school choice provided, not all Democrats in Georgia shared that view, and many prominent Democratic leaders—both within and without the Georgia General Assembly—spoke out publically in opposition to Amendment 1. For instance, State Senator Steve Henson of DeKalb County, the leader of the Senate Democratic Caucus, wrote an editorial that appeared in the Atlanta Journal Constitution’s education blog in October 2012 within which he argued:
Partisan politics aside, we can all agree on one thing: Georgia’s children deserve good schools and a great education. The Charter School Amendment, however, is not the solution. Local school systems, parents and educators, should be able to retain control of their districts and decide if, and when, they admit locally approved charter schools . . . As we continue to recover from the most severe economic collapse since the Great Depression, it is important to look at the financial ramifications of the amendment. The state has repeatedly cut teachers’ salaries, and funding for local school systems, increased class sizes, laid off 4,400 teachers, reduced the teaching tools available to educators and has shortened the school year by up to 36 days in two-thirds of our school districts. Year after year, budgets cuts to our secondary education system have left local school systems with no choice but to make drastic changes that hurt our most important resource: our children . . . Republican leaders, who drafted the charter schools amendment, want you to think this ballot initiative is the only way to save schools and improve education. But they are wrong. (Henson, 2012)

This stance was refuted, however, by Rep. Alisha Thomas Morgan (D) who partnered with Speaker Pro Tem Jan Jones (R) to publish an editorial on the same education blog in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution which cited bi-partisan support at both the state and federal levels for school choice expansion. Together, they argued:

Between now and November, hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising will be spent telling us all the differences between President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney. They will disagree on nearly every issue, but one area where they have found common ground is the need for more public
charter schools. We feel the same way in the Georgia House of Representatives. While there are many issues on which our constituents expect us to draw a hard line in the sand and oppose much of what the opposition party supports, education reform is frankly too important to let our differences in political parties get in the way. As the Republican Speaker Pro Tem and a leading Democratic voice on education, we are together asking voters to support the charter school amendment on the November ballot. The amendment does something very simple but very profound – it will allow the state to create a commission to hear appeals when charter applications are denied by some school boards and superintendents. (Jones & Morgan, 2012)

*The generational divide in Georgia’s Democratic Party.* While many Democratic state legislators support school choice initiatives, there is still a notable disconnect between the stance of Georgia Democrats as represented by the House and Senate Democratic Caucuses (both of which issued official opposition statements on Amendment 1) and the stance of the national Democratic party as represented by the President and his education initiatives. Several interview participants from both the traditional education coalition and the school choice coalition implied that complex racial dynamics influenced the split amongst state-level Democrats on many school choice issues. For instance, notable opponents to Amendment 1 included civil rights icons Rev. Joseph Lowry and former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young who traveled the state prior the amendment vote arguing against the establishment of a new state-level charter school authorizer. In a 60-second media spot that aired on television and radio stations throughout metropolitan Atlanta, Rev. Lowry implied that the expansion of charter
schools would lead to detrimental outcomes, and he warned, “Don’t let them re-segregate our schools” (Opposition to Amendment 1, 2012).

One school choice coalition member—a Democratic member of the House of Representatives and the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus—argued in an interview that “there were a lot of dynamics with the Black caucus happening around that vote—the Black and the Democratic caucus. The membership is very close in numbers so it’s very much group-think in that respect.” She went onto highlight what she called a “generational issue” that played a significant role in determining which types of African-American Democrats would support school choice expansion. She explained:

You have the generational issue where I had members of my caucus—the Black Caucus in particular—truly believe that the charter amendment was going to re-segregate schools. And I didn’t ride with them on segregated buses so I don’t understand that experience. But I don’t discount what they feel is from a very deep dark experience that they have brought to this conversation because their kids have been out of school for 30 years, and they don’t have an understanding of what school is like now, but this ain’t my Mama’s school anymore. So there’s a lot going on; it’s a very complex issue to understand why school choice is perceived very much as Republican and White. (Feb. 6, 2013)

This idea was echoed by other young African American legislators who elaborated on the generational divide that separated the “old guard” civil rights leaders who were once victims of an unjust system of government from the “new guard” African American leaders who are comfortable working within the system to promote change and equity.
One State Representative who identified himself as part of this “new guard” of young Black leaders explained:

My thought is: there’s sometimes a resistance to change and the longer you’ve done something a certain way, the more difficult it is to change your view and open your mind to some alternative approach. And I think that’s what we witnessed with the old guard—some of the older African Americans and the establishment from the education community—being accustomed to a certain system and a system that works for many people in their sphere of influence and when you present something that challenges the approach that they’ve been molded to believe in and to follow—it sometimes creates resistance. And my thought is: there were a number of people who witnessed the civil rights movement and issues of school segregation from a different era—who are a little bit cautious and pessimistic about the direction of public education and they believe there are now more subtle and covert attempts to reestablish separate but equal . . . I believe that there’s the fear of unintended consequences of removing power from local school boards and the status quo and placing that power in the hands of parents. It’s the unintended consequences that many of the old guard fear, and they don’t trust the motives sometimes of those leaders and those organizations and those interest groups that are driving the policies that promote school choice. (Mar. 8, 2013)

These arguments were buttressed by the high-profile African Americans who lined up both for and against Amendment 1 in the Fall of 2012. For example, just as Joseph Lowry and Andrew Young spoke out in opposition, students attending Morehouse,
Spelman, and Clarke Atlanta University in Atlanta—all Historic Black Colleges and Universities in Georgia—staged a march on the State Capitol steps in support of increased school choice options. Similarly, just as the leadership of the Black Caucus put forth official opposition statements to the passage of Amendment 1, young African American representatives like Alisha Thomas Morgan, Rahn Mayo, Ralph Long, and Stacy Evans expended a great deal of political capital in the process of voting against the leadership of their party and their caucus in order to support the amendment’s passage.

In fact, one African American member of the Georgia House argued that those younger African Americans who fell in line with the party on the issue of school choice only did so because they did not have children and had not yet had to face the possibility of sending a child to a failing school; she argued:

> Of those of us who did vote to support that bill in the Democratic caucus, a lot of us were younger; a lot of us had children. In the Black Caucus, those younger legislators who voted against the amendment were not married, and they have no children . . . so I think their life experience may have been a little bit different and they may not have been able to really connect to this issue yet. (Feb. 6, 2013)

This idea that life experience has a significant impact on the types of education policy an elected representative supports came up again and again in interviews with legislators, and one notable problem that legislators with children identified were the recent accreditation issues in several large urban districts like DeKalb County Clayton County. Senators and representatives serving constituents in these counties were very sensitive to the consequences of failing public schools and/or dysfunctional boards of education. In both DeKalb and Clayton Counties, the inability of the local school boards
to meet certain standards of operations and governance (as determined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools or SACS) put students’ scholarship eligibility and college admission status at risk, and parents saw property values and tax bases drop significantly over a short period of time. In Clayton County, for instance, where district accreditation was actually revoked, “thousands of students fled the system; it lost millions in state and federal funds; and home values in the area plummeted” following the district’s loss of accreditation in 2008 (Tagami, 2012). In DeKalb County, the district was put on probation by SACS in 2012 because of “problems that stem from a decade of poor, ineffective governance” (Tagami, 2012). This led to the controversial replacement of several school board members by Governor Nathan Deal.

Interview participants cited these issues along with those related to the highly-publicized cheating scandal that occurred in Atlanta Public Schools in 2009 as evidence of poor district leadership and limited local governance capacity. One Democratic state representative within the Georgia General Assembly explained how problems in school districts erode public confidence in local government and create a desire to challenge the status quo. He argued that school choice may often provide the only viable escape from an otherwise dysfunctional system, and certain types of elected officials—particularly younger legislators—are intent on ushering in expanded school choice. He explained:

I think there’s been a gradual change. There’s been some change in the individuals who represent different districts, and with the change in elected official sometimes comes a change in ideology. I believe that some of the turmoil we’ve witnessed over the past few years in Clayton County and Dougherty County and DeKalb County; from different school districts that have had many
negative stories and issues arise; there’s been a gradual move by—particularly younger—elected officials to be more willing to explore alternatives to the traditional status-quo system. (Mar. 8, 2013)

This shift in focus may put younger legislators and policymakers—particularly those who are African American—at odds with many respected members of the political and educational establishment, but members of the “new guard” express continued resolve because of what they see as growing public support for expanded school choice throughout the state. This argument is largely based on the results of the vote on Amendment 1. For example, Amendment 1 was approved in DeKalb County—where 54% of residents were African American in 2012—with 64% of the vote, in Clayton County—where 66% of residents were African American in 2012—with 71% of the vote, and in Fulton County—where 43% of residents were African American in 2012—with 66% of the vote (Secretary of State’s Office, 2013).

One school choice coalition member who is also a State Representative and member of both the Democratic Caucus and the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus said this type of public support made his policy choices easier—even though they put him at odds with state-level party leadership. He explained:

When there’s public support for the legislation or a concept that relates to school choice, it tends to balance some of the opposition that may come from within the political structure of the Democratic Party or caucus. And ultimately, as elected officials, we should be accountable to voters as elected officials, and when there’s public support, and voters provide cover, and have made demands and expressed support for an idea or a policy—it’s usually going to make it a little bit more
palatable, and make it so that as a Democrat you can get on board and support it.

(Mar. 8, 2013)

Another interview participant who also serves in the Georgia House of Representatives echoed these arguments but added that she believes the support for school choice will only increase in the years to come for the following reasons:

The mindset of the superintendents, school boards, PTA—it’s a dying breed, their mindset. If you were to just look at the leadership and the lobbyists for those groups—you’d see that they haven’t been in school—or their children haven’t been in school for decades. So yes, they may be engaged in education, but their perspective is very different. They’re living a very different experience than folks in my generation . . . I hope [the vote on Amendment 1] opened their eyes because it would be a missed opportunity for them to remain on the wrong side of history. (Feb. 6, 2013)

**Funding in the campaign for Amendment 1.** Interview participants from both coalitions highlighted the importance of funding—from donors inside and outside of Georgia—in the campaign mounted by school choice advocates in support of Amendment 1. The Atlanta Journal Constitution reported that “The campaign drew millions in out-of-state money from big-money donors who saw the ballot question as a proxy for the broader question of whether parents should have more choice” (Washington, 2012). As a result, the traditional education coalition complained that they were outspent by a wide margin because their efforts to oppose Amendment 1 were funded largely by individual donations from school district employees. A representative from GSSA said:
There are organizations from across the country that support all kinds of school choice stuff including vouchers; nobody's been on the school voucher stuff longer than the Friedman Foundation. Well, they put money into [the campaign to support the amendment’s passage]. You know Alice Walton with the Walton Foundation? Good lord, why should she care what's going on in Georgia? But it's all about this school choice movement, and so there's big dollars behind this ideology. (Jan. 18, 2013)

Not surprisingly, the school choice coalition did not share the views of the opposition that implied external funding inevitably creates conflicts of interest. A former Associate Superintendent at GaDOE explained that the

There’s this argument against the ‘Billionaire Boys Club’—Broad, Gates, Walton, and all that—where [the traditional education coalition] is trying to attack people for their motives because they’re losing the general battle. And you know, it’s really hard to make a credible argument that Gates, Walton, and Board are trying to make money on these changes. They’re investing hundreds of millions of dollars annually in school choice; mostly in charters and district initiatives, with zero chance of return on that. So this argument that: ‘oh, they’re just out to make money’ is just empirically wrong. (Jan. 24, 2013)

Ultimately, the school choice coalition argued that improved educational outcomes were important not only for the state of Georgia but also for the nation as a whole. As a result, school choice proponents thought it logical for external funders to contribute to state-level initiatives when those initiatives promoted educational innovation. The traditional education coalition saw it a bit differently, however, and they posited that being outspent
10 to 1 by the school choice coalition posed serious challenges with regard to providing balanced information to the public during the weeks preceding the vote on Amendment 1. Specifically, “pro-amendment groups, including national school-choice advocates and for-profit charter school operators, raised and spent more than $2.7 million” while “opponents of the amendment reported spending $262,822, about half of it raised in the final days of the campaign” (Badertscher & Salzer, 2013).

The Atlanta Journal Constitution quoted Republican State Senator Fran Millar as he downplayed the importance of donations from funders outside of Georgia; he said, “I don’t think it made a difference. The charter school vote message was people are not happy with the status quo” (Badertscher & Salzer, 2013). However, GSBA lobbyist Angela Palm was quoted in the same article saying, “I think money definitely played a part . . . this was a complex topic which was under the radar for most people. Educating the public in a broad way was necessary and is expensive. They were fortunate to have plenty of money to buy ads and a broad team of professionals to put their perspective out there” (Badertscher & Salzer, 2013).

**Summary of Key Findings**

The data collected for this study through an in-depth archival review and a series of qualitative interviews with state-level policy makers make it clear that the school choice coalition has been more successful than the traditional education coalition in terms of translating policy core beliefs into public policy. It is evident from the data that the success of the school choice coalition was at least partially enabled through 1) the Republican takeover in 2003 (representing a shift in the systemic governing coalition) and the subsequent party dominance that continues in Georgia to date, 2) the emergence
of a faction of young Democratic legislators—at the state and federal level—who support school choice as a new civil rights issue, 3) the inability of the traditional education coalition to mobilize latent constituencies on complex issues of school funding and local governance, 4) the ability of the school choice coalition to coopt the opposition’s argument in favor of local control and decentralization, and 5) public mistrust of local school boards in light of a few high profile cases of district-wide mismanagement that occurred at the expense of students and families.

Additionally, data collected for this study show that the 2012 vote on Amendment 1 served as a proxy for statewide support for expanded school choice options and increased parental empowerment and was arguably enabled to some extent by dynamic external events including Presidential support for charter schools and significant financial contributions from out-of-state donors who support a national school choice agenda. Finally, data from this study show that the conditions within Georgia’s education policy subsystem are not conducive for policy oriented learning related to school choice given the entrenched beliefs of policymakers on both sides of the issue.
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

The data collected for this study through participant observation in the state policy arena, an in-depth archival review, and a series of qualitative interviews with state-level policy makers were used to test relevant hypotheses set forth within the ACF in order to determine the extent to which 1) political and institutional conditions contributed to the emergence and expansion of the state’s school choice coalition and 2) how this expansion impacted the composition of Georgia’s school choice coalition as well as the policies it supports. Findings from this study were sufficient to produce the conclusions presented in this chapter.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study support the existence of at least two coalitions within Georgia’s education policy subsystem since 2003: however, a single dominant coalition—the traditional education coalition—remained virtually unopposed during the many decades that Democrats maintained statewide political control. While school choice policy debate did occur to some extent within the education policy subsystem in the years following the passage of the state’s first charter school law in 1993, the traditional education coalition controlled the policy space until the mid 2000’s when Georgia experienced a significant change in the state’s systemic governance coalition which enabled the viability of a second coalition: the school choice coalition. This
governance shift began in 2003 when Democrats lost key elections to Republicans for the offices of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Secretary of State while also forfeiting the majority to Republicans in the State House of Representatives. This trend continued in 2005 when Republicans also gained control of the State Senate, and the dominance of Republicans was solidified in 2006 when George “Sonny” Perdue, along with others holding key state-level leadership positions, were re-elected for second terms.

This shift in political authority supports the ACF hypothesis that dynamic events external to the policy subsystem can significantly impact policy change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In Georgia, for instance, changes to the state’s systemic governing coalition effectively buttressed the efforts of the school choice coalition to compete with the traditional education coalition on issues of governance, choice, parental empowerment, and funding. Specifically, the political overhaul that established the dominance of Georgia’s Republican Party enabled the school choice coalition to leverage the political capital of key legislative leaders in order to pass numerous pieces of school choice legislation from 2007-2012 (see Appendix C).

In addition to statewide governance shifts, findings from this study indicate that the involvement of federal policy players influenced public support for school choice initiatives at the state level. By awarding Georgia millions of dollars in Federal Race To the Top grant funds in 2009, for example, President Obama—by way of the United States Department of Education (U.S. Ed)—was able to drive an agenda of reform that focused, in part, on the state’s willingness to provide school choice options to students attending persistently low-performing schools. These findings are similar to those of Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot (2008) which also highlight the influence of federal
education initiatives—specifically the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—on states’ adoption of various school choice policies (p. 245). Like No Child Left Behind (2001), Race To the Top emphasized school choice as an important tool for education reform and required states like Georgia to expand school choice offerings as a condition of receiving federal funding. A former Associate Superintendent with GaDOE went so far as to say:

What’s really interesting is that a lot of these left-leaning populace types like President Obama—who one might think would really dislike charter schools and dislike public school choice—have not just embraced [school choice] rhetorically, but they’ve also put money behind it. I mean, hell—Race To the Top was designed to incentivize districts and states to open up the window for more charters and things like more rigorous evaluation of teachers, and that was huge because with Democrats leading on it, it was easy to get local wins. And even Nathan Deal and Sonny Perdue said: I support the President on this. Even though they opposed him on 9 of 10 other policy issues.

While the indirect influence of federal funding incentives have been shaping education policy at the state-level for over a decade, the direct influence of President Obama in particular on Georgia’s school choice debate is a much more recent development. Findings from this study indicate that the President’s vocal support of charter schools played a critical role in the state’s passage of a ballot referendum that, once approved, enabled a constitutional amendment to create an independent state-level charter school authorizer. Specifically, President Obama’s support (1) provided much needed political cover to Democratic legislators affiliated with Georgia’s school choice coalition in the weeks leading up to the amendment vote and (2) helped galvanize support
for the constitutional amendment among Democrats and African Americans across the metropolitan Atlanta area. While these findings support Carl’s (1994) conclusion that school choice advocacy—at both the state and federal levels—is largely driven by policy elites, it is worth noting that the ability of Georgia’s school choice coalition to successful engage latent constituencies throughout the states also played an important role in the passage of Amendment 1 (2012).

Study findings also confirm what Carl (1994) argued in his comparative essay on parental choice in the United States and England:

Parental choice has become a symbol. Supporters view “choice” as the solution for a variety of problems facing educators, students, and businesses . . . The symbolic appeal of parental choice helps to generate growing popularity for the reform, as different populations respond favorably to choice proposals in part because of what changes symbolize— notions of “freedom,” “competition,” “democracy,” and “individual rights.” (p. 321)

In Georgia, for example, the intense public debate preceding the vote on Amendment 1 (2012) benefited the school choice coalition by adding symbolic value to the ballot referendum. By conflating several controversial issues—parental empowerment, local board governance capacity, the state of public education, and students’ rights—school choice advocates were able to broaden their base of support in the weeks leading up to the amendment vote. This conflation was enabled in the following ways:

1. Unlike typical school choice policy debate which is generally limited to brief testimony in legislative committee hearings, the debate on Amendment 1 took
place over an extended period of time in open fora throughout the state and was enhanced by broad media coverage in news outlets inside and outside of Georgia.

2. The positive wording of the actual referendum—“Should the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities?”—emphasized the opportunity for increased parental and community empowerment and was described by one member of the traditional education coalition as being “written in such a manner that if you voted against it, you were voting against Ma, Pa, Chevrolet, apple pie, and the girl next door.”

3. The general public in Georgia “saw the ballot question as a proxy for the broader question of whether parents should have more choice.” (Washington, 2012).

Thus, findings from this study support the arguments put forth by other researchers (Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot, 2008) that messaging matters in public debates on school choice, and the school choice coalition’s ability to successfully frame the argument over Amendment 1 (2012) as a dispute over parental empowerment provided school choice proponents a significant advantage at the polls. Ultimately, the symbolic value of Amendment 1 not only contributed to the passage of the constitutional amendment in 2012, but it also added increased political momentum to an already robust statewide school choice movement.

In addition to dynamic events external to the policy subsystem, study findings show that institutional factors including Georgia’s apparent ideological preferences for “traditional values, conservative politics, and a general distrust of government” bolstered the efforts of the school choice coalition in recent years (Fleishman & Pierannunzi, 2007,
especially since school choice initiatives have often been championed by policymakers as a mechanism for decentralizing and deregulating public education (Carl, 1994). The open forum of legislative committees in which most school choice policy debate takes place has also impacted the passage of certain initiatives within the education policy subsystem. Because “analysis is likely to be employed by all sides in the debate” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993a, pp. 54-55) within an open forum, the likelihood of conflict resolution between opposing coalitions is minimized as “greater latitude exists for expression of conflicting analytical claims” (p. 54). Additionally, the operational structure of the legislative committee proved inherently influential in determining policy outcomes in recent years because committee chairs—in consultation with State House and Senate leadership—crafted the committee agendas that determined which bills were called for hearings. Both the Senate and House Education committees operating within the Georgia General Assembly have had Republican committee chairs since 2003 and 2005 respectively, and as a result—more school choice bills were scheduled for hearings in both committees.

Findings from this study, like those of Fusarelli’s (1998) study of school choice advocacy groups in Texas, suggest that (1) policy oriented learning did not play a meaningful role within the space of Georgia’s education policy subsystem, and (2) the passage of charter school initiatives within the Georgia General Assembly was not significantly impacted by research utilization. Rather, interview participants from both coalitions expressed strongly held beliefs on the issue of school choice that had solidified over a period of years, and when research was cited during a school choice policy debate, it was primarily employed as a policy argument. This behavior supports the ACF
hypothesis that on major policy debates—when core beliefs are at issue—coalitional composition on both sides remains fairly stable over periods of a decade or more. For instance, the school choice coalition remained unconvinced that the traditional education system was capable of meaningful change, and the traditional education coalition maintained its confidence in the capacity of local boards of education to make the best decisions for students throughout the state; neither coalition was persuaded to alter a core belief in light of research presented by the opposing side. Thus, findings also support the assertions of Weiss’s (1979) “political model” of research utilization which suggests that when policy makers develop strong opinions on issues over the course of several years, these opinions inevitably influence how they conceptualize the policy problems and are unlikely to change in response to oppositional arguments. Because neither coalition successfully convinced the other to change existing policy core beliefs, coalitional success within Georgia’s education subsystem—that is, a coalition’s ability to translate core beliefs into public policy—was dependent on its ability to effectively appeal to legislators and policy makers. In the case of school choice policy in Georgia, findings indicate that the school choice coalition was more effective than the traditional education coalition in effectively engaging policymakers through the use of anecdotal evidence and personal stories from those individuals who were directly and positively affected by the availability of school choice options. Additionally, the school choice coalition was better positioned to leverage key legislative leaders as bill sponsors which proved advantageous throughout the policy development process.

Findings from this study only partially support the arguments put forth within the ACF that (1) “actors within an advocacy coalition will show substantial consensus on
issues pertaining to the policy core although less so on secondary aspects,” and (2) “an actor (or coalition) will give up secondary aspects of a belief system before acknowledging weaknesses in the policy core” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 32). For instance, interviews with members of both coalitions revealed strong uniform support for core beliefs, and school choice coalition members agreed that the current public education system was not meeting the needs of all students while traditional education coalition members argued that school choice initiatives divert funds away from existing public schools while also undermining the rightful authority of locally elected school board members. However, interview findings revealed significant disagreement on (and subsequent sacrificing of) secondary aspects of beliefs in only one coalition—the school choice coalition. Unlike traditional education coalition members who expressed agreement on both primary and secondary beliefs, school choice coalition members disagreed about which forms of school choice were most likely to produce meaningful educational change.

These disagreements are characteristic of the school choice coalition’s diverse membership which includes free-market conservatives who champion private school choice options, moderate education reformers who champion public school choice options, and liberal Democrats who view access to quality educational options as a civil right to which all students are entitled (Carl, 1994; Fusarelli, 1998; Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot, 2008). Because public school choice has proven more politically palatable than private school choice at both the state and national levels (Huerta & d'Entremont, 2007; Lemmond & Ouzts, 2007; Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot, 2008; Wolf, 2008), private school choice proponents operating within Georgia’s education policy subsystem
have continually sacrificed almost all secondary aspects of their beliefs in order to remain in the coalition that supports the expansion of school choice across the state. Similarly, Democratic members of the school choice coalition seeking to improve the existing educational system through increased public school options must share policy space, and to some extent, policy affiliation with conservatives who support voucher plans that would send public money to private institutions. Study findings show these compromises, while difficult, proved critical for maintaining the level of coalitional cohesion required to compete with the formerly dominant traditional education coalition.

Finally, findings from this study revealed a generational divide amongst Democrats—particularly African American Democrats—on the issue of school choice. For example, interview participants identified a distinct difference between the philosophies of 1) the “old guard” African American leaders—typically characterized by interview participants as high-profile Civil Rights icons from in and around Atlanta—who viewed the traditional education system as a mechanism for increasing equitable opportunity and 2) the “new guard” African American legislators and political activists—many of whom experienced the benefits of school choice opportunities first hand—who cite disproportionately low graduation rates among poor and minority students along with the recent dysfunction of local boards of education representing large urban districts as evidence that the traditional system not only traps students in failing schools but also perpetuates educational inequity. These findings reflect a broader national trend as detailed by Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot (2008) wherein “school choice is the central advocacy issue of concern for [groups like BAEO and Hispanic CREO, as
opposed to the broader social policy platforms of established civil rights groups such as the NAACP” (p. 257).

**The Future of School Choice in Georgia**

The success of Georgia’s school choice coalition to date has been largely tied to its ability to leverage the interests of all education proponents who are dissatisfied with the status quo; however, the likelihood of continued cohesion among these school choice advocates is uncertain because as the coalition continues to mature within the education policy subsystem, the different factions are likely to reach a point at which the sacrifices are no longer as worthwhile or beneficial as they once were. For instance, the most conservative faction of the school choice coalition—those members who favor increased private school choice—may tire of settling for charter school expansion and push for more market-driven school choice options. Interview participants recognized this possibility, and a former associate superintendent at GaDOE commented:

> When it comes to the future vision [of the school choice coalition], I think there are very disparate ideas. The Republican view is: if we allow choice broadly, we’re going to be more competitive and schools will be much better; we can attract businesses to the state; we can improve our overall economy, etc. I think most Democrats are worried about local communities and having good school access for families and the impact that’s going to have. Fundamentally, though, Democratic national leaders don’t believe in vouchers so I see a coalition around public school choice, but vouchers being on more on the outs if Democrats are in control.
Thus, the unity of public and private school choice advocates and the ability of both groups to maintain their alignment may eventually be compromised by political deals that promote public school choice at the expense of private school choice. For instance, a member of the traditional education coalition and a leader in a large metropolitan school district referenced the following arrangement amongst policymakers in Georgia’s education arena:

There was an agreement that if the amendment [Amendment 1, 2012] passed, certainly no voucher legislation would be introduced. And yes—there would be strong opposition for a universal voucher bill, and it would be a different fight than the charter/choice bill.

Other interview participants elaborated on this notion of vouchers as political leverage. A former state agency employee explained that during legislative sessions, vouchers bills were often rolled out as part of an overarching strategy to distract the traditional education coalition from public school choice initiatives. He explained:

Frequently, charter people will roll out a voucher bill to take the attention away from the bill they really want. The fact of the matter is: the school choice opponents hate vouchers so much that if you roll the voucher bill out there, have some hearings on it, and get some votes lined up for it—you can then kind of scale back to a charter bill and it looks more palatable, and it makes it harder for the opponents to resist if you’ve given up the voucher bill. Now, it creates problems within your school choice coalition if the charter folks are using the voucher folks to get what they want. There’s so many different ideologies about things, but that’s the dynamic that plays out.
Thus, as long as public school choice proponents broker deals that implicitly prevent voucher expansion, the stability of the school choice coalition is vulnerable—especially if private school choice proponents hope to leverage the recent passage of the following initiatives in favor of broader access to private school choice options:

- Senate Bill 10 (2007) which provides special needs students with state-funded school vouchers for private school,
- House Bill 1133 (2008) which created a tuition tax credit program that provides tax credits to donors who gave money to Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs), and
- House Bill 100 (2009) which expanded the tuition tax credit program created the previous year.

Despite the moderate success of private school choice proponents in Georgia, however, a representative of GSSA argued that further expansion of vouchers and tax credit plans is unrealistic, and he attributed the passage of recent initiatives—particularly the voucher bill (SB 10, 2007)—to the targeted nature of the legislation. He explained, “Remember, [SB10] was limited only to Special Needs kids, and so it was kind of hard to argue that you were against something that appeared to be designed to help that group of kids.” This argument is substantiated by research on the political intractability of voucher plans and other private school choice options throughout the country (Scott, Lubienski, and Debray-Pelot, 2008) and by the fact that universal voucher bills—even those proposed in the last 10 years—have always failed in the Georgia General Assembly. However, even if expanded private school options remain implausible, voucher proponents in Georgia may eventually reevaluate the benefits of sacrificing
secondary aspects of their belief systems to further a coalitional agenda that primarily promotes public school choice. Such a fracture could potentially impede the efforts of the school choice coalition to translate core beliefs into public policy since the success of the current coalition relies so heavily on a broad base of Republican support and a small—but growing—faction of Democrats who have traditionally opposed private school choice.

**Implications for Further Research**

The findings of this study highlight several areas for further research. First, the issue of changing state-level demographics on school choice policy development is one worthy of additional study. While several recent studies have confirmed the influence of political cultures on states’ education policy development (Atkinson, 2002; Febey & Louis, 2008; Johnston & Liggett, 2002; Wirt, & Krug, 2001), more work is needed to determine the impact of demographic changes on school choice policy in particular. In Georgia, for instance, the shifting electorate reflects a growing percentage of African American and Latino voters, and Table 5.1 illustrates a 13% decrease in the number of active registered White voters over the last decade while Black and Latino voters increased by 4% and 2% respectively (Georgia Secretary of State’s Office, 2013).

**Table 5.1**

*Active Registered Voters in Georgia*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Registered Voters</th>
<th>November 2002</th>
<th>November 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>973664 (26%)</td>
<td>1623323 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2719311 (72%)</td>
<td>3186735 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10786 (less than 1%)</td>
<td>73337 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>11955 (less than 1%)</td>
<td>93104 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>1921 (less than 1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>79122 (2%)</td>
<td>417,714 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3794838</td>
<td>5,396,134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Alan Abramowitz, an Emory University political scientist and expert on voter demographics, pointed out in an article that appeared in the Atlanta Journal Constitution, “These shifts portend positive returns for Democrats. African-Americans in Georgia vote overwhelmingly Democratic, and party leaders believe they can, thanks to Republican policies on immigration, do well among Latinos” (Sheinin, 2012).

Second, the ability of the Democratic Party to adapt its political strategy and policy positions may prove significant in coming years, and additional research is needed to determine what impact, if any, the recent passage of Amendment 1 (2012)—which was repeatedly identified by interview participants as a “wake-up call” for Democrats and other members of the traditional education coalition—will have on future Democratic tactics within Georgia’s education policy subsystem. As a former Associate Superintendent with the GaDOE explained:

There will be renewed pressures on the Democratic Party to readjust. Frankly, the problem with the Democratic Party in Georgia is that they’re fighting last generation’s war. They’ve got no discipline. No organization. They’re not trying to lift up younger members. They’re just fighting a rear-guard battle, and they have no real leadership. I can envision a day—8 or 10 years from now—where they have real leadership and they appeal to the growth and diversification in the population and the younger population in ways that build a different kind of coalition. I think it’s going to take some time, but there will be a group ascend within the Democratic Party that realizes: we’re really getting beaten on this issue [of school choice]. It should be frustrating for Democrats since education has been their issue for 30 years—nationally and elsewhere—to be beaten by
Republicans on it. They’re going to try to triangulate a little bit, I think—like Bill Clinton did in the 90’s on welfare reform—and try to grab something back. And that will be an interesting development to watch.

Thus, more work is needed to (1) track the evolution of Georgia’s political culture as Democrats attempt to regain power and influence in a state dominated by the Republican Party, and (2) evaluate the impact of these changing dynamics on the composition of the school choice coalition as well as the types of policies it supports.

Third, the role of national organizations in state-level school choice policy development warrants further examination. In Georgia, for instance, outside funders including the Broad Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Gates Foundation provided the school choice coalition a significant advantage in the campaign promoting the passage of Amendment 1 (2012). While numerous studies have highlighted the role of national interest groups and think-tanks in state-level school choice policy development (Carl, 1994; Rich, 2004; Spring, 2005), additional research is needed to determine the long-term influence of mass-media coverage at the national level which has recently provided the school choice movement a significant amount of positive attention through the release of highly publicized documentaries like Waiting For Superman (2010), The Lottery (2010), and the full-length feature film Won’t Back Down (2012). As one interview participant representing the Georgia Lieutenant Governor’s Office explained,

What’s really impacted the school choice movement are these movies that have come out recently, and all the news in Atlanta and throughout the country—you
know, how KIPP has done such a good job and how Teach For America is so important. Those are the things that raise awareness on this issue.

As a result, an in-depth examination of the ways in which the national media exerts influence over state-level school choice policy development would provide additional insight into the ties that bind state level advocacy coalitions together.

Finally, given the high level of coordinated political support for school choice at both the state and national levels, more studies comparing the composition of school choice coalitions in various states as well as the strategies employed by these coalitions to translate core beliefs into policy outcomes will provide increased understanding of the conditions impacting the development of school choice policy throughout the country. As this study suggests, successful advocacy coalitions adapt in light of changing political dynamics, and additional research would provide increased understanding of how these adaptations are similar or different from one state to another.

**Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that (1) Georgia’s political culture—which prioritizes decentralization and deregulation—enabled conditions conducive for school choice emergence and expansion, (2) the change in Georgia’s systemic governing coalition (a shift from Democratic to Republican control) empowered key legislative leaders to lend critical support to school choice initiatives in recent years, (3) policy oriented learning was not a driving factor in policy development and change within Georgia’s education policy subsystem; however, coalitions often employed research to support various policy arguments and positions, (4) federal education initiatives tying funding to school choice implementation buttressed state-level efforts to expand school
choice over the last ten years, but the support of the current Presidential administration, in particular, provided critical political cover to Democratic members of the school choice coalition in Georgia, (5) the ability of the school choice coalition to engage latent constituencies was aided by its positive message of parental empowerment and improved educational opportunities for students, (6) the campaign to pass Amendment 1 (2012) successfully conflated several important issues including parental empowerment, community engagement, school district dysfunction, and educational bureaucracy in order to build public support for the broader issue of school choice throughout the state, and (7) funding from organizations external to the state provided the school choice coalition a significant advantage in their efforts to compete with the traditional education coalition on issues of policy expansion.

Additionally, findings from this study affirm the utility of the policy subsystem as a unit of analysis for the study of policy change, uphold the basic assumption of the ACF that policy outputs result from conflicts between competing coalitions, and emphasize the importance of political authority and institutional context on school choice policy development.
REFERENCES


Bush v. Holmes, 919 So.2d 392 (Fla. 2006).


Davis v. Grover, 480 N.W.2d 460 (Wis. 1992).


Fla. Const. art. IX, § 1(a).


GA Dept. of Natural Resources (2011). *Georgia's Natural Resources*. Retrieved from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources website:

http://www.gadnr.org/resources


adoption, design and court challenges of Florida’s three voucher programs.

*Educational Policy, 21*(1), 215-244.


Jackson v. Benson, 578 N.W.2d 602 (Wis. 1998)


Larue et al v. Colorado Board of Education, District Court, No. 11CV4427, August 12, 2011.


http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/LandResources/Geography&id=h-948

http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/Education/ElementaryMiddleandSecondary/PublicEducation&id=h-2619


Sabatier, P., & Hunter, S. (1989). The incorporation of causal perceptions into models of


State School Superintendent List (2012). Retrieved from the Georgia School Superintendents Association website:


States’ Applications, Scores, and Comments, Race To the Top Phase 2. (2009). Retrieved from the United States Department of Education website:

http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase2-applications/comments/georgia.pdf


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

STABLE SYSTEM PARAMETERS IMPACTING EDUCATION POLICY IN GEORGIA

According to Sabatier (1993), stable system parameters include the basic attributes of the problem area, the legal structures or rules governing policy development in a given area, and the existing value system and social structure. In Georgia, education policy is established when the Governor signs legislation passed by the Georgia General Assembly which is made up of two chambers: the Senate with 56 seats and the House of Representatives with 180 seats. The process by which a bill is enacted at the state level mirrors that of congress and is summarized as follows:

- Bill introduction in either chamber
- First reading on chamber floor (list of all bills introduced is First Readers)
- Committee
- House Second reading day after 1st (Senate after reported from committee)
- Hearings
- Amendments including substitution
- Reported favorably
- General Calendar, called up for floor action
- Rules calendar, called up for floor action
- Third reading, floor debate, amendments
- Voting (91 votes required for passage in the House; 29 in the Senate)
- Other chamber, conference committee
Additionally, the legislative session in Georgia consists of 40 working days each year and always begins on the second Monday in January. In order for a bill to active, it must pass in one chamber by “crossover day” which is day 30 for the House and day 33 for the Senate.

While Georgia has been obligated through its State Constitution to support the education of its children since 1777, the first “government-supported” high school did not open until 1783 in Augusta, Georgia, and there was little organized effort to create a state-wide education system until 1858 when Governor Joseph Brown championed the development of a state funded system to serve the state's White children (New Georgia Encyclopedia, 2009). This system was not fully operational, however, until after Reconstruction when a new State Constitution was adopted in 1868 which called for the development of a “thorough system of general education, to be forever free to all children of the State” (GA Const. art. IV, § 1, para. 1). The legal structures compelling the provision of a free education to children residing in Georgia resulted in a racially segregated system wherein most schools only operated for a few months out of the year. Subsequent legislation enacted in 1945 and 1951 by the Georgia General Assembly increased state support—albeit racially inequitable—for facilities, employee salaries, and textbooks.

Perhaps the most notable legal development occurring in education during the last century was the decision in Brown v. Board (1954) whereby the U.S. Supreme Court
declared segregation unconstitutional and thus fundamentally changed education at both state and federal levels. While integration efforts stalled in the South for almost 20 years, most schools in Georgia admitted and enrolled both white and black students by the mid-1970s. At that point, the educational focus began to shift from racial balance to equitable school funding, and Georgia passed legislation creating new school funding formulas as a result; the Adequate Program for Education in Georgia (APEG) was created in 1974, and the Quality Basic Education (QBE) Act followed in 1985. As of 2012, the QBE remains the state's school funding formula.
APPENDIX B

SCHOOL CHOICE LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION IN GEORGIA

Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits

Legislative enactment patterns in Georgia become clearer upon close review of the actual legislation. For instance, Senate Bill 10 (2007) established the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship—a targeted plan offering vouchers to students with disabilities who were dissatisfied with their current public school placement. Various eligibility requirements mandated that students receiving vouchers have a documented disability as determined through a public school's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Modeled closely after Florida's McKay Scholarship, Georgia's targeted voucher program allows "the public school system to keep all federal funds for the child, even though the child has left the public school, and only the state funds allocated under the FTE funding matrix will follow the student" (Lemmond and Ouzts, 2007, p. 6). As a result, the bill's sponsors—Senator Eric Johnson and Representative David Casas—argued that public school systems would actually benefit from the special education voucher program because public schools would have more money and fewer students. This argument did not hold, however, for Senate Bill 90 (2009). Unlike its targeted predecessor, Senate Bill 90 (2009) aimed to create a universal voucher program for which all students in Georgia were eligible. Both of Georgia's voucher proposals were modeled after similar legislation in Florida; although, the issue of Georgia's Blaine amendment was surprisingly absent from discussion in committee hearings despite the fact that a similar constitutional amendment derailed Florida's universal voucher program. Rather, the debate in Georgia focused on free-market values; proponents called for increased competition and parental
choice while opponents decried the bill as an attack on the state's public school system. Both voucher bills (S. 10, 2007 and S. 90, 2009) were successfully passed out of committee along party lines; however--unlike Senate Bill 10 (2007), Senate Bill 90 (2009) was never called for a vote before the full Senate. In a similar turn of events, both of Georgia's tuition tax credit bills (H.R. 1133, 2008 and H.R. 100, 2009) passed quickly in the House and Senate, but the Governor's veto—not a lack of support from the legislature—ultimately prevented House Bill 100 (2009) from becoming law.

**Charter Schools and "Charter-Like" Options**

Georgia passed its first charter school legislation in 1993, and the original law only permitted existing public schools to apply for and obtain charter status; however, several changes to the law have been made over the last two decades including the passage of the Charter Schools Act of 1998 and the subsequent allowance of start-up charters and state-chartered special schools. Additionally, charter schools' blanket exemption from the state's Title 20 educational requirements was eventually approved as was the ability of charter petitioners to apply to the State Board of Education in the event of charter denial by the petitioners' local board. While each of these changes contributed to the gradual evolution of Georgia's charter school policy, perhaps the most significant adjustments have occurred over the course of the last five years. The recent passage of significant charter school legislation sparked new debate over the respective efficacy of the two primary types of charter schools that exist in Georgia: the conversion charter and the start-up charter. A traditional public school may convert to a charter school if the faculty and parents at the school vote to do so (subject to approval of their charter petition), and start-up charter school is a brand new school that requires individuals and
organizations--usually those comprising the governing board--to submit a petition, procure facilities, and hire staff.

In terms of logistical differences, conversion charter schools elect to modify their traditional public school governance structure and mission statement while retaining the same facilities and faculty, and start-up charter schools rely heavily on their respective governing boards to procure buildings to house school operations and recruit new staff. In terms of ideological differences, conversion charters represent a more structured approach to chartering than start-ups because conversions are inevitably more district-reliant. While policymakers in Georgia remain divided about which type of charter is most beneficial, the passage of recent charter legislation represents strong—if not always cohesive—support for both conversion and start-up charter schools. For example, Senate Bill 39 (2007) and House Bill 881 (2008) illustrate differing ideologies within a single state-level charter school movement. While House Bill 881 (2008) and the subsequent iteration—House Bill 797 (2012) established an independent authorizing body with the power to approve and deny individual start-up charters throughout the state with or without the approval of a local school board, Senate Bill 39 (2007) allowed for the conversion of entire school systems to charter school districts.

Proponents of conversion charters like those created under Senate Bill 39 (2007) recognize the advantages of drawing from an established professional talent pool while also maintaining access to adequate material provisions, property, and support from the local school board. In contrast, proponents of start-up charters like those created under House Bill 881 (2008) and House Bill 797 (2012) argue that a school must be created in the light of its own unique mission to foster true innovation; it must employ teachers who
voluntarily apply because they too believe in the expressed goals of the charter, and it must be very much independent from the traditional regulatory power of the local school board. This philosophy is evidenced in the language of both House Bill 881 (2008) and House Bill 797 (2012) which specifies that the Charter Authorizing Commission may only consider applicants for start-up charter schools--no conversions allowed. In short: those in favor of start-up charters prefer their schools to be made "from scratch" and for innovation and governance to be restructured from the ground up while those who prefer conversion charters seek to "remodel" the existing educational structure and gradually overhaul the vestiges of a more traditional public school organization.

In addition to legislation explicitly enabling the expansion of charter schools, Georgia has also passed several bills in the last ten years that afford schools and districts increased "charter-like" options. Much like Senate Bill 39 (2007) that created charter districts, House Bill 1209 (2008)—the Investing in Educational Excellence (IE2) bill—was based on the idea that increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability yields positive academic outcomes, and it allowed for performance contracting between the State Board of Education and Local Education Administrations to provide local districts flexibility from Title 20 regulation. Similar “charter-like” flexibility was provided through House Bill 251 (2009) which mandated local school boards to develop intradistrict student enrollment policies that provided open enrollment opportunities to students within their assigned districts.
APPENDIX C

BILL REVIEW

Since 2007, multiple bills aimed at deregulating traditional public school districts and increasing school choice were introduced in the Georgia General Assembly. These bills can be summarized in the following categories:

1. Bills aimed at expanding public school choice (through the creation of charter schools or "charter-like" flexibility options):
   - Senate Bill 39 (2007) and House Bill 1209 (2008): allowed local districts to waive many of the most restrictive Title 20 laws governing public schools in exchange for signing a performance contract or charter with the State Board of Education;
   - House Bill 881 (2008): increased the number of state-approved start-up charter schools operating throughout the state; and
   - House Bill 251 (2009): designed to increase public school choice through intra-district open enrollment policies.

2. Bills aimed at expanding private school choice options:
   - Senate Bill 10 (2007): provided special needs students with state-funded school vouchers;
   - Senate Bill 90 (2009): provided universal voucher availability to every child in Georgia;
   - House Bill 1133 (2008): created a tuition tax credit program; and
With the exception of Senate Bill 90 (2007) which was not called for a vote in the Senate, each of these proposals were passed by the Georgia General Assembly. However, Governor Sonny Perdue vetoed House Bill 100 (2009) preventing it from becoming law.

Most recently, Georgia also passed House Resolution 1162 (2012) in response to the 2011 ruling issued by the State Supreme Court of Georgia declaring the authority of Georgia Charter Schools Commission (established by House Bill 881 in 2008). House Resolution 1162 (2012) enabled a ballot referendum to amend Georgia's constitution so as to establish the state's explicit authority to create and approve charter schools. This referendum was approved in November 2012, and as a result—the legislation enabling the creation of the new charter school commission, House Bill 797 (2012) was enacted, and the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia was operational as of January 2, 2013.
APPENDIX D

A NATIONAL OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL CHOICE LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION

The system parameters impacting education policy in each state—including Georgia—are revealed in large part through legislative proposals and legal challenges focusing on school vouchers, tuition tax credit programs, charter schools, and deregulation. The following review illustrates how school choice policy has evolved in recent years at both the national level as well as the state level. By examining the specific choice initiatives of each state, a clearer understanding of national trends and future directions for school choice is developed.

School Vouchers

As of 2012, 8 states plus the District of Columbia as well as Douglas County, Colorado have implemented 15 school voucher programs across the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2012). While the criteria by which students qualify for vouchers varies from state to state, certain commonalities are evident across programs. For instance, each of the voucher programs currently in operation offer funding to a specific and targeted student population; many target low-income students while others base voucher eligibility on a student's special education status. The few attempts on behalf of individual states to implement universal voucher programs for which all students are eligible have either failed in state-referenda or been ruled unconstitutional by state courts.
Town-Tuitioning

The first voucher plans in the United States were implemented so that students in rural areas of Vermont and Maine could have access to junior high schools and high schools. Referred to as "town-tuitioning," these early voucher programs enabled "parents to enroll their children in the public or private high schools of their choosing" (Wolf, 2008, p. 2). In many cases, small towns in these states found it more economical to pay students' tuition at nearby private schools than to construct new school buildings to accommodate so few individuals (Lemmond & Ouzts, 2007). Thus, the country's first voucher programs were born out of economic necessity, and the town-tuitioning programs in both Vermont and Maine have served students living in rural areas with no public high schools since 1969 and 1973 respectively.

Special Education Vouchers

Of the states that have implemented school voucher programs, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah operate targeted plans designed to serve students with disabilities. Utah's Carson Smith Scholarship, Florida's McKay Scholarship, Georgia's Special Needs Scholarship, and Louisiana's School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities all allow students with special needs to attend another public school or private school of their choice (Lemmond & Ouzts, 2007). Louisiana's voucher program expanded in 2012, however, to provide assistance to low-income students enrolled in "failing" schools across the state (Center for Education Reform, 2012). Similarly, Ohio's voucher plan also expanded over the last two decades to include 1) a means-tested component (implemented in 1996 and available only to students in Cleveland from low-income families), 2) a special education component
(implemented in 2003 to include eligibility for students with disabilities), and 3) a school performance component (implemented in 2006 to include students in very low-performing schools) (Wolf, 2008). Arizona followed a comparable expansion pattern when the state updated its initial voucher eligibility criteria in 2006 to include both students with disabilities as well as students in foster care.

**Means-Tested Vouchers**

Voucher programs targeting low-income students—"means-tested" voucher plans— are common throughout the United States and based on the idea that many poor and often urban students are not being afforded adequate educational opportunities within their assigned public schools. Milwaukee, Wisconsin implemented the first means-tested voucher initiative in 1990, and Cleveland, Ohio followed suit with a similar program for low-income students in 1996. Washington, D.C. also established a means-tested voucher program in 2004 which was restricted to students from families at or below 185% of the poverty level. More recently, Louisiana passed a bill to provide assistance in the way of private school tuition grants to low income students enrolled in the city's public school system (Barrow, 2008). Eligibility is restricted to students from households with annual earnings not exceeding 250% of the federal poverty level.

**Universal Vouchers**

While targeted voucher plans have been implemented in several states, universal voucher proposals have been largely unsuccessful. As of 2012, Utah remains the only state to successfully pass a universal voucher program through their legislature, however, a large-scale petition drive in 2007 resulted in a state referendum on the issue which voters defeated by a wide margin. To date, no state currently operates a universal
voucher plan, but the local school board in Douglas County, Colorado came close when it voted in 2011 to provide school vouchers consisting of 75% of the district's per-pupil revenue to 500 students living inside the Douglas County school district. Much like a charter school model, if over 500 students applied for a voucher, a lottery was used to determine recipients. This program was deemed unconstitutional; however, by a Colorado District Court shortly after the conclusion of the 2010-2011 school year ended on the grounds that it provided public school monies to private and religious institutions (Larue, et al v. Colorado Board of Education, 2011). As a result of this decision, Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program has the broadest eligibility criteria in the country to date in that it provides assistance to both low and middle-income students.

Overall Implementation Trends

Following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002) which opened the "constitutional floodgates" for school vouchers, there has been a marked increase in voucher implementation throughout the country (Huerta & d'Entremont, 2007, p. 73). Wolf (2008) explains this trend as follows:

The incremental trend of establishing additional voucher programs in the 1990s paused from 1999 to 2003 as policymakers awaited the outcome of the constitutional challenge to the Cleveland voucher program. Upon the issuance of Zelman v. Simmons-Harris, in which a majority of the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of school voucher programs such as Cleveland's, school voucher initiatives re-emerged on the policymaking Docket in many states. Whereas only five voucher programs had been established in the 130 years between 1969
and 1999, an additional seven programs were enacted in just the first five years post-Zelman (p. 3).

Despite increased voucher program implementation, however, the popularity of these market-based reforms is much less apparent among voters than policymakers. For instance, in states where voucher programs have been voted on by constituents, the initiatives have repeatedly failed. In 2000, both California and Michigan placed statewide voucher referenda on the ballot, and both were defeated by margins of 3 to 1 "with even minorities voting against them" (Apple & Bracey, 2001, p. 1). In similar fashion, after the legislature in Utah passed a universal voucher bill in 2007, the state's voucher opposition mounted a successful petition drive that forced Utah lawmakers to place the voucher program on a special election ballot in 2007 where voters overwhelmingly rejected the referendum with 62% voting in opposition to the voucher program (Bolick, 2009).

Litigation

Constitutional constraints at the state level often pose major problems for voucher implementation. While the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Zelman (2002) that Cleveland's voucher program did not violate the Establishment Clause in the United States Constitution because the program was "neutral with respect to any particular religion--that is, the money could be used at schools associated with any religion and did not single one out," many state constitutions include much more prohibitive language regarding ways in which public monies may be spent (Harris, Herrington, & Albee, 2007, p. 234). Specifically, 37 states contain what are often referred to as "Blaine amendments" which explicitly restrict public monies from flowing to private institutions.
These Blaine amendments often form the basis for legal action against the state when a voucher program is challenged. In the case of Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program which was implemented in 1999 to provide vouchers to students in chronically low-performing schools, the program was challenged almost immediately on the grounds that it violated Florida's Blaine amendment. This argument was validated in both State trial court (*Holmes v. Bush*, 2000) and in Florida's First District Court of Appeals (*Bush v. Holmes*, 2004). However, Florida's Supreme Court eventually remained silent on the "no-aid provision;" opting instead to reject the Opportunity Scholarship for violating another provision in the State's constitution requiring a 'uniform system of public free schools' (Fla. Const.). The justices concluded that the State Constitution of Florida insisted that "the system of public education must be public" (Harris, Herrington, and Albee, 2007, p. 235).

A similar challenge based on a constitutional guarantee of a uniform system of education was made in response to the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) in *Davis v. Grover* (1992). In this case, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the program citing that it "did not violate the uniform public school provision of the Wisconsin constitution because the private schools were not operated by public officials and because participants could always return to Milwaukee public schools if they were dissatisfied" (Kemerer & King, 1995, p. 331). In other words, private schools do not automatically become public schools by virtue of receiving public money. This decision was upheld in *Jackson v. Benson* (1998) when MCPC was challenged as a result of the program's expansion.
In addition to the no-aid provisions and uniformity guarantees included in many state constitutions, issues of funding allocation are always contentiously debated with regard to state voucher programs. In *Owens v. Colorado Congress of Parents, Teachers and Education* (2004), Colorado's Opportunity Contract Pilot Program was overturned by Colorado's Supreme Court for violating their State Constitution by "interfering with the local school districts' discretion to allocate their funding" (Ouzts, 2007, p. 5). Thus, local control provisions can also serve to impede voucher program implementation.

**Tuition Tax Credits**

Because school voucher programs are often limited by a myriad of constitutional constraints, many states have opted for a less contentious school choice option: tuition tax credits. Huerta and d'Entremont (2007) argue that tax credits are a "feasible alternative" to vouchers in many states because of the significant legal advantages associated with tax credit implementation (p. 74). Despite their similarity to vouchers, many policymakers associate tuition tax credits with tax policy rather than with education policy because the tax credits may be "interpreted simply as subsidies . . . and made more palatable to voters" (Huerta & d'Entremont, 2007, p. 75). Essentially, tuition tax credit programs retain the support of voucher proponents yet appear much less controversial to the general public than traditional voucher programs.

As of 2012, tuition tax credit programs exist in eleven states: Arizona (2), Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa (2), Louisiana, Minnesota (2), Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. The characteristics of these programs differ according to the specific mechanisms by which they afford benefits to students, parents, and schools. For instance, Huerta and d'Entremont (2007) describe three types of tax programs:
1. Education tax *credits* for expenses. Examples include a nonrefundable credit granted to families who claim public or private school expenses, including tuition, a refundable credit for public private school expenses, and a refundable credit for contributions by individuals to public schools.

2. Education tax *deductions* for expenses. This is a deduction granted to families who claim public and private school expenses, including tuition.

3. Education tax *credits* for contributions to School Tuition Organizations (STOs). These credits are granted to individuals or corporations making charitable contributions to nonprofit STOs. The STOs distribute tuition scholarships to families who sign up to receive a scholarship for their children. (pp. 66-67)

**Overall Implementation Trends**

Table A.1 provides a brief description of the tax credit (or deduction) plans in other states (Research Department of the Minnesota House of Representatives, 2011).

Table A.1

*State-Level Tuition Tax Credit Plan Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Legal Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to school tuition organizations (individuals)</td>
<td>Yes; credit remains in effect; U.S. Supreme Court held plaintiffs did not have standing to challenge a tax credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to school tuition organizations (corporations and insurance companies)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to scholarship funding Organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table A.1

*State-Level Tuition Tax Credit Plan Descriptions (continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Legal Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to student scholarship organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Credit for qualified education expenses</td>
<td>Yes; credit upheld by state appellate courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to scholarship granting organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Credit for tuition, textbooks, and extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Yes; credit upheld by federal district court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Credit for contributions to school tuition organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Deduction for qualified education expenses</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Dependent education expense deduction for public and private school related</td>
<td>Yes; deduction upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>costs, including tuition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Credit for public and nonpublic education related expenses, excluding non-</td>
<td>No. However, a previous iteration of this credit which included non-public school tuitions was struck down by the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1974.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>public school tuition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Credit for contributions made to a scholarship-granting organization.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Credit for corporate contributions to scholarship-funding organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>Credit for corporate contributions to scholarship organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Litigation

While tax credit programs have proven viable policy alternatives to vouchers in many states with restrictive constitutions, several have been challenged in court. Minnesota (Mueller v. Allen, 1983), Iowa (Luthens v. Bair, 1992), Arizona (Kotterman v. Killian, 1999), and Illinois (Griffith v. Bower, 2001). In Mueller (1983), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Minnesota's tax credit program because it found "the mechanism of indirect aid through parents rather than direct aid to religious institutions constitutionally permissible" (Huerta & d'Entremont, 2007, p. 81). This argument was cited in each of the subsequent challenges as a rationale for upholding the respective state's tuition tax credit program. In each case, the challenge was dismissed, and the tax credit program was deemed permissible.

Charter Schools

Although the first charter school law was not passed until 1991, the charter movement dates back several decades, and "has roots in a number of other reform ideas, from alternative schools, to site-based management, magnet schools, public school choice, privatization, and community-parental empowerment" (Friedman, 2004, p. 75). These educational alternatives span the entire school choice continuum and illustrate the notion of publicness as it pertains to charter school classification and behavior.

While charter school performance has proven difficult to accurately assess, the assumption that private organizations operate more efficiently than public ones is foundational to the charter school approach. As Zimmer and Buddin (2006) explain:

The charter movement grew out of a hope that by providing greater autonomy to schools, they would be able to cut through bureaucratic frustrations and offer
innovative, efficient, and effective educational programs, provide new options to families, and promote healthy competition for traditional public schools. (p. 1)

Thus, the guiding principle behind chartering encourages deregulation as a means of fostering innovation and enabling improved student outcomes. While charters remain accountable for federal education requirements associated with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the United States Government acknowledges the overall objective of charter schools as "replacing rules-based governance with performance-based accountability, thereby stimulating the creativity and commitment of teachers, parents, and citizens" (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Overall Implementation Trends

This emphasis on decentralization and deregulation manifests in a variety of ways depending on where charter laws are passed and how these laws are implemented, and since 1991–41 states as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia have adopted some form of charter legislation (Center for Education Reform, 2012). Guthrie (2007) acknowledges general similarities between and amongst state-level charter policies, and he offers the following characteristics as examples of "common charter school elements" that generally appear in most states' charter statutes:

- an independent governance structure, where decisions are made at the school level without the intervening layer of the school district;
- reduced or eliminates state regulations designed to acknowledge a charter's specific mission;
- direct parental control over policies and procedures through planning teams or other means; and
a mandate to succeed with sanctions for failure . . . [including] revocation of the school charter. (p. 336)

These characteristics illustrate the theory that decreased bureaucracy and increased school-level autonomy afford schools the opportunity to tailor their governance, instruction, and school mission to best serve their respective student populations. Ultimately, charter schools operate according to "the general view" that "government organizations operate less efficiently and effectively than private organizations because of the constraints and characteristics" associated with most large publically owned entities (Rainey, 2003, p. 78). This theory is often contested; however, and Zimmer and Buddin (2006) argue that current charter school performance data does not suggest a strong relationship between improved student achievement and increased school-level autonomy.

Litigation

As the charter school movement has gained momentum and charter school numbers have increased nationally, so too have legal challenges to this particular form of school choice. A review of charter school litigation suggests that related legal challenges can be divided into six categories:

1. claims that this sort of autonomy is incompatible with being a "public" school;
2. claims that charter schools unfairly hurt traditional public schools;
3. claims that applicants were unfairly denied a charter;
4. claims concerning the racial composition of charter schools;
5. claims concerning religion and charter schools; and
6. legal disputes among the players once the charter has been granted and the school is in operation. (Sugarman, 2000, pp. 6-10)

Within these categories, a wide range of legal issues have emerged in several states. However, challenges to charter school programs have not been as contentious or as successful as those associated with more controversial school choice options like private school vouchers or tuition tax credit programs. For instance, several school districts in New Jersey attempted to overturn the state's entire charter school scheme in 1999 on the grounds that "charter schools would drain funds from districts and conflict with districts' authority, thereby being unconstitutional" (Center for Educational Reform, 2005, p. 1). However, the New Jersey Supreme Court rejected this argument in 2000, and the state's charter school law was subsequently upheld. A similarly unsuccessful attempt to prove charter schools unconstitutional occurred in Michigan in *Council of Organizations and Others for Education About Parochial, Inc. v. Governor* (1997). In this case, plaintiffs argued that charters were non-public schools which could not be funded with state monies. As in New Jersey, the Michigan Supreme Court also ruled that the state's charter law was indeed constitutional as charter schools are, in fact, public schools.

Other claims throughout the country have contended that charter schools operate to the detriment of traditional public schools; some of these claims originated as funding disputes in which plaintiffs alleged charter schools "siphon off funds from the regular public schools" (Sugarman, 2000, p. 4) while others focused on enrollment issues. In *Villanueva v Carere* (1991), for instance, Colorado plaintiffs argued that the enrollment of students in local charter schools could require the closing of traditional public schools; additionally, charter school placement within the district could be selected strategically so
as to contribute to enrollment decreases in certain schools. Ultimately, the courts ruled in favor of the district "rejecting plaintiff claims that there were improper racial motives behind the district's actions" (Sugarman, 2000, p. 4).

Other challenges facing charter schools often involve an authorizer's denial of a charter application or petition. Sugarman (2000) argues that "several would-be charter schools have gone to court after the local district from which they sought a charter refused to grant one" (p. 5). The decisions in these cases are almost entirely dependent on the guidelines set forth in a state's respective charter law with regard to who may legally grant a charter to a charter applicant, and because charter statues vary so significantly throughout the country—a very specific challenge may be successful in one state while unsuccessful in another. This lack of uniformity amongst state-level charter laws also accounts for the various findings of state courts on issues including racial composition (Beaufort Co. v. Lighthouse Charter, 1999) and religious affiliation (Porta v. Klagholz, 1998). In Beaufort (1999), the South Carolina Supreme Court actually found the state's charter statute unconstitutional on the grounds that it "required charter schools to mirror the district's racial balance" (Center for Educational Reform, 2005, p.2); however, in Porta (1998), a New Jersey court upheld a charter school's right to occupy a building previously owned by a private sectarian school as long as no religious instruction was taking place.

Finally, challenges to charter schools often arise out of governance issues. These disputes emphasize the sometimes contentious relationship between a charter school and the district in which it is located, and many challenges focus on the rights of charter
schools to enforce the rules set forth within their unique charters. For instance, Sugarman (2000) notes:

Just as families sue regular public schools, it should not be a surprise for them to sue charter schools. In one unreported California case, the parents' objection was to mandatory parental involvement. The school won. (p. 9)

This type of challenge was recently successful in Georgia when the State Supreme Court ruled the Georgia Charter School Commission—an independent authorizer created in 2009—unconstitutional on the grounds that charter school authorization was a power solely vested in local boards of education. Following this decision, the Georgia General Assembly passed both a ballot referendum that would change the State Constitution to provide charter school authorizing authority to an independent authorizer as well as enabling legislation that would take effect should the amendment pass and re-establish a state charter commission. The referendum will appear on Georgia's election ballots in November 2012.
Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993; 1999) cite four premises on which the ACF is based. These premises are described as follows:

1. understanding the process of policy change—and the role of policy-oriented learning therein—requires a time perspective of a decade or more;

2. the most useful way to think about policy change over such a time span is through a focus on policy subsystems, that is, the interaction of actors from different institutions who follow and seek to influence governmental decisions in a policy area;

3. subsystems must include an intergovernmental dimension, that is, they must involve all levels of government (at least for domestic policy); and

4. public policies (or programs) can be conceptualized in the same manner as belief systems, that is, as sets of value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them.” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 16)

The emphasis on time spans of ten years or longer emerges out of policy implementation literature; specifically Weiss’s (1977) argument that a focus on short-term policy decisions will ultimately disregard the role of policy analysis and the influence of research on policymakers over time. In other words, the “enlightenment function” of policy research may only become evident over a period of a decade or more, and the extent to which policymakers bring policy oriented learning to bear in their decision making processes may be overlooked if only examined in short-term intervals (Weiss,
Additionally, a focus on an extended policy cycle—in its entirety rather than in discrete increments—allows for a more in-depth understanding of which policies succeeded, which ones failed, and which strategies proved more or less successful in a variety of contexts (Kirst & Jung, 1982; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989).

The second premise on which the ACF is based acknowledges the subsystem as the most useful unit of analysis for the study of policy development, and represents a distinct departure from other theories of policy change that characterize policymaking as occurring within iron triangles and at the hands of a small group of policy elites. According to the ACF, subsystems are comprised of a wide variety of participants that may include legislators, interest groups, government agencies, journalists, researchers, and policy analysts from various levels of government. This philosophy of inclusion is based on literature illustrating the significant influence such actors may yield over policy ideas, development, and evaluation (Hall, 1993; Heclo, 1978; Kingdon, 1984). Additionally, the focus on subsystems rather than on specific programs or government organizations is based on the rationale that “there is seldom a single dominant program at the local/operational level;” rather, there is usually “a multitude of programs initiated at different levels of government that local actors seek to utilize in pursuit of their own goals” (Sabatier, 1999, p. 119).

Subsystem boundaries—participants (and their various levels of influence), laws, regulations, and problems—may differ depending on how long the subsystem has existed. For instance, a nascent subsystem is one that is only in the process of forming whereas a mature subsystem has existed for a decade or longer. Sabatier (1999) explains that the ACF is best suited for the study of mature subsystems containing a “group of
people and/or organizations interacting regularly over periods of a decade or more to influence policy formulation and implementation within a given policy area/domain” (p. 135). Delimiting a subsystem’s boundaries can be accomplished through a network approach that identifies actors’ involvement over significant periods of time. When establishing the parameters of a subsystem, they may be classified as either “stable” or “dynamic” (Sabatier, 1993). Sabatier (1993) explains that stable factors may include the attributes and characteristics of the problem area, the distribution of natural resources, the cultural values and the social structure of a particular society, and the legal structure undergirding the subsystem as well as the overarching policy structure. Because these factors are somewhat resistant to change, they often limit the “range of feasible alternatives” available to various policy actors (Sabatier, 1993, p. 20). Many of the stable factors—especially cultural values and social structures—may play a significant role in the formation of actors’ belief systems thereby increasing the likelihood of continued and perpetuated stability within a subsystem. In contrast, dynamic events are those occurring external to the policy subsystem that may result from changes to socioeconomic conditions, advances in technology, and large-scale turnovers in systemic governing coalitions. Much like the stable factors impacting subsystems, external dynamic events also serve to constrain the policy options and opinions of policymakers in that they A) suddenly alter the viability of existing policy options and B) occur outside the policy subsystem leaving policy actors with a diminished level of control. While both stable and dynamic factors may influence policy change over time, dynamic events are much less foreseeable and are therefore more likely to result in major policy shifts. As Sabatier (1993) explains:
Changing [relatively stable parameters] is not impossible, but it is very difficult.

Change at this level normally requires a concerted effort by an advocacy coalition for at least a decade—and often several decades. Major changes in public policy within a subsystem are more likely to come from the factors outside the subsystem. (p. 22)

Thus, the ACF acknowledges that societal norms and cultural traditions often contribute to gradual policy change over time whereas radical and immediate changes are often triggered by external perturbations.

The third premise on which the ACF is based presents the subsystem as integral to in-depth policy study involves its inter-governmental nature. Sabatier (1993) explains that “subsystems will usually include actors from all levels of government, and there is no a priori assumption that national actors are more important than subnational ones” (p. 35). Like the subsystems that encompass them, advocacy coalitions are also comprised of actors from all levels of government. These actors may include but are not limited to political representatives, interest group members, media outlets, and government employees at the local, state, and federal levels. Depending on the dynamics of the subsystem, one level of government may yield significant influence over another, and to the extent that these intergovernmental actors share resources—one may ultimately contribute to another’s ability to achieve a policy objective. This ebb and flow of authority and power is evident within “the relationship between dominant coalitions and public policy in intergovernmental systems,” and by virtue of the fact that “subsystem actors can actively exploit external events to augment their power within the subsystem” (Mawhinney, 1993, p. 82). This is not to imply, however, that all levels of government
should be conceptualized as a collective and organized group of actors. In fact, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith draw from the work of Schattschneider (1960) when qualifying their understanding of the ACF’s intergovernmental component; specifically, they acknowledge individual levels of government as “semi-autonomous” and explain that “coalitions spend a great deal of time and effort trying to restrict authority to the level at which they have a competitive advantage” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 216).

Regardless of the governmental level at which they occur, the interactions of policy actors are influenced by the belief systems they possess. The ways in which these belief systems form, solidify, and in some rare cases—change or alter, represent the fourth and final premise on which the ACF is founded. Actors’ belief systems are often characterized as the “principal glue of politics,” and the ACF posits that public policies are simply representations of the belief systems of participating policy actors (Sabatier, 1993, p. 27). In other words, public policies—much like belief systems—may be conceptualized “as sets of value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 16). The ACF’s conceptualization of “belief system” is based on the following three models and ideas: (1) the “expected utility model” described by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) in which policy actors investigate the potential efficacy of various courses of action in the pursuit of a specific policy objective while also displaying some deference to the preferences of reference group members (or of coalition members in the case of the ACF), (2) the bounded rationality model which posits that an individual’s rationality is always limited and never perfect (Kahneman et al., 1982; March and Simon, 1958; Nisbett and Ross, 1980), and (3) the general idea that policy actors are likely to share complex and personal belief systems associated with the policy
area in which they participate (Axelrod, 1976; Buttel & Flinn, 1978; Cobb, 1973; Wilker & Milbrath, 1972). While these models clearly inform the ways belief systems are examined within the ACF, Sabatier (1993) expands on them in an attempt to clarify how the belief systems of individuals are structured.

By emphasizing Axelrod’s (1976) work on causal assumption which was adapted from Lakatos’s (1971) work on “core” belief systems and by acknowledging the general idea put forth by Converse (1964) that certain beliefs are more or less likely to change depending upon how abstract or concrete they are, Sabatier (1993) proposes a specific structure to describe the belief systems of policy actors. This structure includes “Deep (Normative) Core” beliefs, “Near (Policy) Core” beliefs, and “Secondary Aspects” of beliefs (Sabatier, 1993, p. 31). Deep core beliefs are those that define an individual’s personal philosophy. These beliefs span all policy areas as they represent overarching ideas of wrong and right. As a result, these deep core beliefs are very resistant to change and the likelihood of changes to the deep core has been likened by Sabatier (1993) to that of a “religious conversion” (p. 13). Near core beliefs are also difficult to change; however, they are less abstract than deep core beliefs and are therefore more likely to be affected by policy-oriented learning over periods of time. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) explain that near core beliefs are the most important belief system component because they “are more salient to the individual than deep core beliefs and serve as more efficient guides to behavior than specific policy preferences in the secondary aspects” (p. 131). In other words, near core (or policy core) beliefs are somewhat “endogenous to the sets of behavior to be explained” whereas deep core (or normative) beliefs are “exogenous to the behavior being explained” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 131).
In addition to near core and deep core, belief systems are characterized by their secondary aspects which encompass the decision making strategies and policy instruments that allow policy makers to implement policies resulting from the positions of the near core. A set of secondary aspects is specific to a policy area as it is likely to involve issues of problem definition as well as logistical knowledge of the legislative and administrative rules governing the policy-making process within a specific policy environment. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) clarify the scope and characteristics of belief systems described within the ACF (p. 133). See Table E.1.

Table E.1  
*Structure of Belief Systems*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Characteristics</th>
<th>Deep Core</th>
<th>Policy Core</th>
<th>Secondary Aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defining Characteristics</strong></td>
<td>Fundamental normative and ontological axioms</td>
<td>Fundamental policy positions concerning the basic strategies for achieving core values within the subsystem</td>
<td>Instrumental decisions and information searches necessary to implement policy core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scope</strong></td>
<td>Across all policy subsystems</td>
<td>Subsystemwide</td>
<td>Usually only part of subsystem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Susceptibility to change</strong></td>
<td>Very difficult; akin to a religious conversion</td>
<td>Difficult, but can occur if experience reveals serious anomalies</td>
<td>Moderately easy; this is the topic of most administrative and even legislative policymaking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table E.1
Structure of Belief Systems (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrative components</th>
<th>Deep Core</th>
<th>Policy Core</th>
<th>Secondary Aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Human nature:</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Fundamental normative precepts:</strong></td>
<td>1. Seriousness of specific aspects of the problem in specific locales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Inherently evil vs.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Orientation on basic value priorities</td>
<td>2. Importance of various causal linkages in different locales over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socially redeemable</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Identification of groups or other entities whose welfare is of greatest concern</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Part of nature vs.</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Precepts with a substantial empirical component:</strong></td>
<td>3. Most decisions concerning administrative rules, budgetary allocations, disposition of cases, statutory interpretation, and even statutory revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dominion over nature</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Overall seriousness of problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Narrow egoists vs.</td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Basic causes of problem</td>
<td>4. Information regarding performance of specific programs or institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contractarians</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Proper distribution of authority between government and market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relative priority of</td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Proper distribution of authority among levels of government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>various ultimate values:</td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Priority accorded various policy instruments (e.g., regulation, insurance, education, direct payments, tax credits)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freedom, security, power</td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Ability of society to solve the problem (e.g., zero-sum competition vs. potential for mutual accommodation; technological optimism vs. pessimism)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge, health,</td>
<td></td>
<td>9. Participation of public vs. experts vs. elected officials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>love, beauty, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>10. Policy core policy preferences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>