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Stories of Hope and Decline:

Interest Group Effectiveness in National Special Education Policy

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes parent and professional organizations' effectiveness in national special education policy from 1975 to present. Of specific interest are the relationships among groups' policy victories, how groups construct their political messages, and organizational characteristics. The research is significant in that it is one of the first major studies of education client groups that examine group effectiveness over several decades. Drawing from coded Congressional testimonies and elite interviews with policy makers and organizational leaders, the major findings indicate that problem definition--how groups frame their interests, portray students with disabilities, and narrate their policy stories—is a significant determinant of effectiveness over-riding group resources. The implications for policy formulation are discussed.

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Scholars agree on the central role that interest groups play in the legislative process. The theoretical approaches have historically been grounded in (a) pluralist traditions (Key, 1964), (b) reasons in joining collective action and groups' capacity to assert political pressure (Moe, 1980; Olson, 1965), (c) circumstances under which groups mobilize (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Majone, 1989), and (d) groups' ability to influence institutional structures (McFarland, 1992). Also a rich body of literature exists on education groups' role in policy making. These works include, for instance, analyses of theoretical perspectives of interest group scholarship (Mawhinney, 2001), groups' micropolitical dynamics (Johnson, 2001), influence tactics requiring access and non-access to decision makers (Opfer, 2001), the influence of educational interests on policy outcomes (Kirst & Somers, 1981), and interest groups in special education (Hehir, 1992).

The number of organizations alone illustrates the size of the interest landscape in education (Johnson, 2001). *The Encyclopedia of Associations* lists over 200 categories of national education interest groups (Gale group, 2002). The age of some of these groups also speaks to a long tradition of interest involvement. Some of the oldest organized education interests include the Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf (1850), National Education Association (1857), and American Association of School Administrators (1865). Yet, despite the long-standing presence of interest groups in

education policy and politics, there is a scarcity of empirical research that analyzes their role in obtaining legislative victories and shaping policy. Groups, in other words, are rarely placed at the core of conceptual frameworks and studied as units of analysis (Mawhinney, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to empirically analyze interest group behavior, and specifically, test education groups' effectiveness in obtaining policy victories. This research examines what variables predict national groups' legislative victories in special education policy. Victories were determined by comparing the groups' Congressional testimony to the extent to which the group won or lost (Methods provides a more detailed discussion). Interest group work is more complicated than providing testimony, though. It involves lobbying, providing legislative language to policy makers, negotiating behind closed doors, conducting media campaigns, mobilizing constituents, among other strategies, and is characterized as "messy" and multi-faceted rather than linear (Martin, 1994; Wright, 1996). But this study limited the scope to coded testimony to provide an empirical test of the relationship between issue frames and policy victories.¹ By operationalizing how groups strategically communicate their policy interests, this research illustrates one way to systematically analyze the effectiveness of problem definition as a political strategy.

In the following section I present the theoretical framework on which this study is grounded, followed by a discussion on the methods. The subsequent results indicate that how groups frame their policy interests in Congressional testimony and narrate their

¹ Other forms of effectiveness, such as successful venue change from one institution to another are reported elsewhere (Itkonen, forthcoming).

“story” are predictors of legislative victories, overriding organizational resources. I finish with a discussion of implications for policy making process.

Framework

An interest group's goal by definition is to further the interests and goals of its members by locking them into policy (Wright, 1996). Group effectiveness has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, such as the ability to obtain policy victories (Kirst & Somers, 1981; Melnick, 1995), add items to legislative agendas (Kingdon, 1995), affect public opinion (Browne, 1998), and enjoy media visibility (Baumgartner & Jones, 1992; Browne, 1998). Effectiveness has also been examined using within-organization measures, for instance, variables contributing to successful member retention (Rothenberg, 1992), the ability to mobilize members for action (Olson, 1965), and aligning issue frames with the outside political environment for organizational survival (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986).

In addition to the interest group effectiveness literature, a body of research indicates how the framing of policy problems (Edelman 1988, 2001; Gusfield 1986; Nelson & Kinder 1996) and their narrative story structures (Hall Jamieson & Waldman 2003; Stone, 1997) influence policy outcomes. Framing involves conceptualizing the essence of a problem and expresses some set of preferences and values (Edwards, 2003; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Williams & Williams, 1995). Symbols and images are often used in framing the issue (Edelman 1988, 2001; Gusfield 1986; Williams & Williams, 1995). These frames shape thought and often carry diverse, conflicting meanings (Edelman 1988; 2001). For instance, the employment of individuals with disabilities could be advocated on the basis of equal access (“individuals with disabilities should have the

right to work and be included in society”); or by appealing to values of efficiency (“productive, tax paying citizens lessen society’s welfare costs”). Frames thus define the core issue and imply not only what the problem is about, but what is at stake, who pays, and who benefits (Edelman, 1988).

In addition to frames, policy problems often have a narrative, which rely heavily on symbolic devices such as decline and control (Stone, 1997). A decline story tells how conditions have gotten worse and tries to persuade why a new or revised policy (or enforced regulations) is needed. In contrast, control stories are hopeful, implying that a policy change can move the situation from fate and destiny to discretion and autonomy, placing the control in the hands of those who suffered from the problem.

Besides frames and stories, groups also strategically decide how to best portray those the policy affects. A social construction refers to the recognition of shared characteristics of a population and implies who has authority, who accepts it, and who is rewarded or penalized (Edelman, 1988). Research shows that the public image of a group (Donovan, 2001), and its social construction on the dimensions of image and power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) are critical variables in understanding how the policy problem is defined and what solutions are designed for the problem.

In sum, while the framing, political narrative, and social construction literatures have not examined groups’ legislative effectiveness per se, they suggest that the way in which policy problems are conceptualized is related to policy design and outcomes. One can thus speculate that framing can be successful when a group’s framed policy position is enacted to legislation and unsuccessful when not. Success with framing, then, becomes a form of effectiveness.

Prior work on frames, social constructions, and policy stories has analyzed these components separately. I conceptualized them as different ways to approach the same issue. I analyzed the associations among issue frames, disability construction, and policy stories to estimate relationships among the components (Itkonen, 2007). Chi-square tests on the characteristics of Congressional testimony and *amicus* briefs to the Supreme Court in nine special education cases showed that issue frames, disability constructions, and policy narratives were collinear and thus inter-related. These relationships pointed to a general construct, which I labeled as “problem definition.”

I employed this empirically tested model of stories, frames, and constructions in the present study. With regard to political narratives, decline stories (“matters have gotten worse”) and hope stories (“situation can improve with certain legislative amendments”) were used to examine how groups structured their testimony (Stone, 1997). Hope stories were used in 60% of testimony as compared to 40% of decline stories. With regard to issue frames, after an initial read of all testimony, three frame categories emerged. A political frame focused on the locus of decision-making authority (federal, state, local), funding and its distribution, or expansion of special education services. Examples of such frames included advocating for increased federal oversight, and advocating or opposing adding new eligibility categories to the statute (e.g., autism and traumatic brain injury in 1990). This was the most prevalent frame (64 %). A civil rights frame grounded the argument around the rights of students and their families. For instance, groups asked Congress to protect the students’ right to free appropriate public education instead of cessation of services in discipline disputes. Civil right frame was used in 20% of all testimony. Finally, educational issue frame (16 %) was communicated as educational

benefits and outcomes to students, specific pedagogical methods, and it did not include the other frames. For example, groups representing blind students advocated for literacy instruction in Braille for those students.

The model's student construction yielded four categories after an initial read of all testimony. Stone (1984) argues that disability in a political discourse is a socially created category rather than an attribute of individuals, and can be constructed politically, socially, psychologically, and economically.² In the model used in the present study, student portrayals were educational, civil rights based, social, or psychological. In an educational portrayal, students were talked about in the context of educational interventions, learning outcomes, or specific methodologies. This was the most prevalent construction (45 %). In a testimony which constructed students from a civil rights lens, students were referred to in the context of rights, access, or discrimination (7 %). A social construction talked about students as members of the school community and society, or it focused on the stigma of having a disability (33%). Finally, a psychological construction emphasized the specific traits of the disability and why therefore the students needed specific diagnoses, treatments, or interventions (12%). In the above example of groups advocating Braille instruction for blind students, the issue frame was educational (literacy instruction), while the student construction was coded as psychological as the specific characteristics being blind were emphasized.

² An economic construction of disability has typically been used in welfare and disability policy studies. I did not include an economic construction of disability in this study. Although children with disabilities (and their families) may collect social security income and Medicaid, individual students with disabilities do not have an income stream of their own. Rather, I categorized economic issues such as who pays for the various special education services as a political matter and treated them as issues of distribution among federal, state, and local sources.

I hypothesized that definitions using a hope narrative were associated with legislative victories. This assumption is grounded in the notion that members of Congress are rational actors who wish to enact good public policy but need to be re-elected in order to do so (Kelman, 1987). Hence, hope stories would have appeal in the legislature, as they provide a positive view of the future conditions—a promise of sound policy (Stone, 1997). In regard to framing, policy problems would be expected to be anchored on a political frame as bargaining and compromise characterize law making. However, IDEA grew out of litigation, as parent and disability advocacy groups sued school districts in order to gain access to public education for children with disabilities.³ It would be expected then that rights frames would continue to be successful by groups who represent parents and advocates (Egnor, 2003; Price-Ellignstad, 2001).

In sum, the study's guiding question is *What is the relationship between group effectiveness, organizational characteristics, and problem definition?* I first examined associations between various problem definitions (frame-construction-story) and groups' policy victories. I then developed an effectiveness model by adding organizational variables to the problem definition components, to test predictors of effectiveness.

Methods

Groups involved in special education policy under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are at the center of this analysis.⁴ Although students with disabilities constitute only about twelve percent of all school-aged children, advocacy by special education parents has had a larger impact on policy outcomes than numbers

³ *Mills v. Board of Education*, 348 F. Supp. 866 (D.D.C. 1972); *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 343 F. Supp. 279 (E. D. Pa., 1972).

⁴ Originally passed as the Education of the Handicapped Children's Education Act in 1975, and renamed to IDEA in 1990. Referred to as IDEA from hereafter.

would indicate (Itkonen, 2007; Melnick, 1994; Melnick, 1995). Parent advocacy and professional educator groups provide an appropriate organizational universe for several reasons. First, case studies of Congressional reauthorization processes suggest that parent organizations have been effective in enacting and shaping special education legislation (Egnor, 2003; Melnick, 1995; Price-Ellingstad, 2001; West, 1988). Second, these studies also indicate that parent groups tend to use rights to frame their concerns unlike the professional organizations. Finally, national level parent and professional groups' organizational characteristics differ. Parent groups' national staff sizes are smaller and they are younger as organizations, as compared to education professional organizations.⁵ Appendix A contains the development of the organizational universe.

Given that much of politics occurs within informal processes that define political relations between interest groups and policy makers, it is essential to study organizations' political behavior from multiple perspectives. This study utilized a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003). The first data set consisted of national professional and advocacy groups' Congressional testimony in special education hearings leading to the initial passage and subsequent reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (n = 139). Each testimony's problem definition was coded on the following dimensions: (a) issue frame; (b) disability construction; and (c) type of policy story. Appendix B contains the coding schemes.

The second data set consisted of elite interviews with national parent advocacy groups' and education professional organizations' leaders, members of Congress and their staffs, and staff at the United States Department of Education, Office of Special

⁵ The sample's parent groups' mean founding year was 1955 (n = 52), clustering around 1975. Professional educator and special educator groups' mean founding year was 1930 (n = 73). Plotted on a time line, the founding years clustered around 1850 and 1925.

Education Programs (n = 25). The interviewees were selected using stratified and snowball sampling to capture major variations within each subgroup. Elite interviews were analyzed qualitatively (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996).⁶ Data were first read and coded using the search capabilities of Microsoft Word and critical reading, and then placed into categories until larger patterns and themes began to emerge (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996).

To examine the organizations' effectiveness in obtaining legislative victories, I developed a seven-level ordinal variable based on the degree to which the organization won or lost items for which the group had provided testimony, and the items' relative importance to the group (see Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 here)

A mere numerical ratio of items won or lost on the testimony was not sufficient in and of itself as an indicator of legislative effectiveness. Groups testify on a variety of issues, some of which are more technical in nature and responses to items on the legislative agenda, whereas other items represent the group's core interest and mission. As one interest group leader put it:

Sometimes you testify on a topic that just comes up. A Congressman calls, there is a hearing coming up, and [s/he] would like you to testify. For us it was the technology in special education. Was it on our agenda—no! Were we stakeholders in the issue—no! But members [of Congress] have an interest in this issue, and you deal with [them on your] primary issues. So you cannot say no. (Itkonen, 2004, p. 84).

⁶ Elite interviews follow an interview guide approach, which outlines the general issue areas, but in which the sequence is decided by the interviewer at the time of the interview (Patton, 1990; Richards, 1996). This approach is based on the logic that elite interviewees possess detailed understanding and rich detail about the topic at hand.

Problem definitions (frame-construction-story combinations) were first cross-tabulated with wins and losses to discern associations.⁷ Thereafter, I controlled for organizational resource variables to test whether univariate findings on problem definition and effectiveness were confirmed. The effectiveness model consisted of the group's founding year (collected from *Encyclopedia of Associations*, Gale group, 2002), whether they acted in a coalition, organization type (e.g., parent advocacy versus professional educator group, in Appendix A), whether they had testified more than once, and composite problem definitions. I dropped problem definitions which occurred only once from the model. The model was tested using an ordered logit regression analysis on STATA.

Data from coded testimony were triangulated using interviews and a critical read of testimony to probe deeper into patterns (Creswell, 2003). This triangulation allowed for a rigorous analysis of the data. Eight percent of Congressional testimony was coded by an independent coder. Inter-observer reliability was calculated by dividing agreements by the sum of agreements and disagreements, and yielded an agreement rate of 81.5 percent. Additionally, ten percent of testimony was coded for the effectiveness variable by an independent coder, and yielded an agreement rate of 82.1 percent. In the latter coding, the coder was provided a tabbed copy of each statute, indicating the main sections and provisions, to ensure that no reliability was lost to the coder not finding a particular item in the statute. Both coders had a special education background.

Findings

Problem Definitions and Effectiveness Associations

⁷ I ran a correlation analysis on all problem definitions to ensure no relationships existed between composites. Coefficients were +/- .1 or less.

As hypothesized, a political frame with a hope narrative was an effective way to gain victories in Congressional testimony. A total of 89% of testimony using a hope story was associated with the groups winning all or most of the high-interest items for which they testified (see Table 2).

(Insert Table 2 here)

A cross-tabulation of specific frame-construction-story combinations revealed further that when the composite problem definition consisted of a political frame, a hope story, and constructed students socially, groups won all or most of the items for which they testified (81%). The following is an example of a testimony which emphasized membership (social construction) and narrated a hope story to advocate for significant federal oversight in ensuring that students with disabilities attended their neighborhood schools in general education classes (political frame asking federal expansion).⁸ This testimony was given in a House hearing in April 28, 1994 by the United Cerebral Palsy (UCP), Arc, and TASH.⁹

Brian has another story about inclusion and friendship. His friend Matthew helps him on and off with his coat daily. Being a very enterprising 12 year old young man, Matthew decided there must be an easier way for Brian to access his coat. He researched clothing patterns...and came up with a coat design individualized to Brian's needs—a zipper along the top of each sleeve to more easily work around Brian's disability—a design that ultimately won acclaim as the 1992 state winner of 'Invent America.' Both boys grew from this experience in ways that would have been denied them in a segregated school system. *Reauthorization of IDEA* (1994, p. 51).

⁸ The group won most items for which it advocated. Classroom teachers (general education) were required to attend students' individualized education program meetings in this reauthorization.

⁹ The Arc was formerly The Association of Retarded Citizens and TASH was The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps.

Hope stories with an educational frame and an educational student construction resulted in victories (all or most items) in 89% of the time. This testimony was given by TASH which was invited to testify, with UCP and The Arc signing on as coalition partners:

Rafael [the son of the person testifying] is making great scholastic progress in this school where he has been included for two years 100 [percent] included. Time and time again we observe [in] how many ways inclusion works. His reading and math continue to improve, we are impressed by what he picks up from science and social studies lessons presented to the class. He has been fully accepted as another student not only in his class but in the school as a whole. *Reauthorization of IDEA* (1994, p. 111).

Similarly, civil rights frames with social construction and hope story yielded victories for all or most items in 85% of the time. Finally, hope stories coupled with a civil rights frame and an educational construction resulted in victory in each instance. The following testimony argued that cessation of services for disruptive students would violate the free appropriate public education provision of IDEA (civil rights frame). It assigns the blame to the school system away from the individual child by using a hope story, and portraying the child educationally (she learned a new skill). Diane Lipton, an attorney with the Disability Rights and Defense Fund and a parent of a child with disabilities testified as follows:

A four year old girl with severe delays in speech and language abilities was very abusive to others—hitting and pushing them. Teachers wanted the child removed. [A] speech language pathologist was called in and commenced a program to incorporate augmentative and alternative forms of communication. Within 12 weeks her ability to talk to her peers grew and her behavior problems faded away. Clearly her disruptive behavior was inextricably linked to her lack of communication abilities. *Reauthorization of the IDEA: Discipline Issues* (1995, p. 65).

A critical read of the testimony revealed that when using a political frame, the parent groups along with civil rights groups consistently advocated for federal

intervention and oversight. In contrast, professional education groups used a political frame to argue for more state and local control, as opposed to federal intervention, in special education decision-making. Results from a previous study indicate that political decline stories are associated with older, established groups (e.g., National School Board Association) and education professional organizations (Itkonen, 2007).

The effectiveness of a civil rights frame with a hope narrative further suggests that the rights and access litigation out of which special education grew, still underline the narratives with which parent organizations communicate their interests to policy makers. Although the special education statute is now an education outcomes law (Egnor, 2003) and in 2004, became aligned with No Child Left Behind Act, civil rights frames with hope stories continue to have appeal to members of Congress.

Another pattern evident in the cross-tabulations indicated that emphasizing students' differences (psychological construction) *with* a decline narrative was associated with losing. When coupled with a political frame, this definition led groups to win little or nothing in 56% of the time, whereas with an educational frame the groups lost each time. Table 3 depicts these results.

(Insert Table 3 here)

The following testimony was given in the first-ever hearing held on school discipline. The main dispute was whether local school officials could impose cessation of educational services for special education students who were disruptive, or whether educational decisions should continue to be made with the student's individualized education team, including the parents. The hearing was held in the Senate on July 11, 1995. The testimony was given by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the

National Association of Secondary School Principals, and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Students were portrayed as violent, dangerous, and deviant, to convince members of Congress that school officials needed more authority to remove the students (political frame arguing for local control, psychological student construction, decline story).¹⁰ Charles L. Weatherly, an attorney, represented NSBA and stated:

Unfortunately, the public schools today are confronted with conduct on the part of students that includes rape, murder, physical and sexual assault, destruction of property...there are many examples of assaults, rapes, murders, etc. by children with disabilities that are occurring in schools today. *Reauthorization of the IDEA: Discipline Issues* (1995, p. 88, 89).

Similarly, teacher unions used decline story, psychological construction, and political frame arguing for cessation of educational services, as Marcia Reback, a vice president of the AFT testified:

Some teachers have succumbed to the ‘battered teacher syndrome.’ This phrase was coined by a New York City attorney to describe teachers she has represented who have come to believe, along with their school administrators, that being pummeled, bitten, spit at, pushed, and assaulted in a myriad of other ways is an expected part of the job. *Reauthorization of the IDEA: Discipline Issues* (1995, p. 71).

Elevated values contributed to the bitter debate in which professionals and parents could not see eye to eye to resolve the matter. Some groups even walked out of negotiations.

A parent advocacy leader explained:

You have to ask whether you are willing to negotiate. In discipline [in the 1997 reauthorization negotiations], we said bullshit, we cannot compromise, we cannot go against our values and our core. We are about civil rights, we believe in inclusion and full participation. So we walked out [of negotiations].

A policy maker verified the emotional nature of the discipline dispute:

In all my years involved in federal aid, going back to the late 1960’s, I have rarely seen school principals get as angry as they got with the separate rules for special education for discipline—red in the face...angry.

¹⁰ Cessation of services was not included in IDEA, thus, the groups lost on this issue.

Eventually after three years, the issue was solved through bipartisan and bicameral working groups which were headed by Senator Trent Lott's (R-MS) chief of staff who also had a child with Down Syndrome (Egnor, 2003).

A data final pattern suggested that a decline narrative with other than educational frames and educational student portrayals yielded mixed associations with wins and losses (see Table 4).

(Insert Table 4 here)

While the effectiveness of hope stories was hypothesized, the effectiveness of a decline story tied with an educational frame and student construction raises some questions, as this problem definition was 100% successful in securing victories. A critical read of the testimony suggested that when groups used this problem definition, they argued for continued federal involvement instead of placing authority to the hands of local school officials. The discipline dispute is an example. It successfully re-framed students and the matter educationally. A policy maker who was closely involved with interest group negotiations during the 1997 reauthorization, explained:

Before 1975, we had one million kids with disabilities on the streets, excluded from public education. That's why we had a zero-reject [policy in 1975]. The unintended consequence of allowing cessation [of education] is that we would go back to where we were in the past. So how do you make this argument on the merits? You know the vulnerability of these kids, and once on the streets, they are more likely to be in jail. So you say—we have a kid who is seriously emotionally disturbed and our approach is going to kick them out of school. Where will they go? ...On the streets, in the community, harassing the community, with no parental or adult supervision. Is that good public policy, to take a kid who is seriously emotionally disturbed, and say go out on the streets without adult supervision?

Thus, the issue was re-framed from one of school discipline to that of community safety. The logic was that if the policy of cessation of educational services would pass,

the ripple effects of unsupervised vulnerable youth would be felt outside of school settings-- in local communities among ordinary citizens. Thus the problem would not be solved, if special education would cease for disruptive students, but it would be passed onto other arenas such as communities, law enforcement, and the juvenile justice system.

The same policy maker continued:

Who is best to make the argument that [the proposed cessation of educational services] is a stupid public policy? Who is most powerful to a policy maker when you are talking about safety in the community? The cops!

This example illustrates how policy makers strategically choose which groups to invite to testify. Once the legislators had an argument they wanted to present, they looked and asked around to find the organization which could make that argument on record (Itkonen, 2004). The Police Executive Research Forum and Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, provided this argument in the relevant hearings and IDEA was reauthorized that year after 3 years of gridlock.

The police groups delivered their message using an educational frame and student construction to convince policy makers that students, even disruptive, belong in educational settings. They painted a fearful picture (decline story) on how community safety would be compromised if teenagers were loitering in neighborhoods instead of being at school under adult supervision. Cessation of services was then dropped from the bill, and groups using educational problem definition scored a full victory in the study's coding scheme. This qualitative finding thus helps understand why one type of decline story was a predictor of effectiveness while all other decline stories predicted losing. The police groups framed the discipline issue as an educational matter and re-constructed

students from “criminals” and “deviants” to pupils who needed educational services to stay out of trouble.

Effectiveness Model

The previous findings suggested associations, but in essence could not be used to predict whether problem definitions actually predict victories or losses. Further, the univariate findings provide only a partial picture, as other variables such as organizational resources play a role in group effectiveness (Leyden, 1995). Older groups have simply been involved in policy making longer, and often enjoy access, visibility, and knowledge which can turn into victories. Another resource available to organizations is to act in a coalition to bridge interests with other groups, share resources, and enlarge the pool of potential adherents (Martin, 1994; Sinclair, 1997; Wright, 1996), as membership in a coalition increases the likelihood of the group engaging in lobbying (Holyoke, 2003). Finally, members of Congress invite interest groups to testify. Thus, groups who testify repeatedly have some notion of effectiveness (e.g., perceived status), by the virtue of being invited back (Leyden, 1995).

To broaden the inquiry of group effectiveness in Congressional testimony and to test whether univariate associations had statistical significance in a multivariate model, I tested whether problem definitions, organization type, founding year, acting in a coalition and being a repeatedly invited guest to testify were associated with various levels of victories and losses. In summary, the effectiveness model consisted of:

Problem definition. Hope stories and political frames would be expected to be effective in the legislature, as suggested by the univariate findings. However, case studies indicate

that civil rights frames have been effective and if used would be expected to continue to be effective (Egnor, 2003; Price-Ellingstad, 2002; West, 1988).

Organization type. Family groups, based on case study evidence (Egnor, 2003; Melnick, 1994, 1995; West, 1988), would be expected to continue to be effective in locking in policy victories. Professional educator groups would also be expected to gain victories due to generally being older and enjoying more resources (Leyden, 1995).

Founding year: Organization's founding year is a proxy for resources. Older organizations have been "around" longer, and have developed the resources (access, knowledge, staff) that would lead to victories.

Coalitions: Testimony by coalitions would be effective by virtue of increasing the resource pool (staffs, expertise, adherents) and creating a perception of widespread support.

Repeat player. Being invited back to testify on IDEA reauthorization hearings would be effective, as policy makers choose whom they invite, and thus may be more likely to listen to a particular group's interests in a matter.

As seen in Table 5, the results from this model indicated that testifying more than once (i.e., being a "repeat player") had a small coefficient, but was a statistically significant predictor of effectiveness.

(Insert Table 5 here)

Groups that were "invited back" to testify, were thus more likely to obtain victories.

These data do not permit further conclusions as to whether the testimony resulted in the victory, or whether the testimony itself was a formality on an issue that had been added to

the legislative agenda or negotiated at some other point in time. But the data do indicate that repeat players are more likely to obtain victories.

Civil rights and family groups were also statistically significant predictors of effectiveness. These results provide empirical evidence to prior case study findings in that family and civil rights groups have been highly successful in obtaining all or most of the policy items for which they testified before Congress in IDEA hearings. These findings raise a few questions, as parent groups tend to be younger than the established professional associations. There are a few plausible explanations for their effectiveness albeit the lack of comparable resources. First, parent advocacy is diligent and highly personal in nature—for parents, there is no compromising because there is simply too much at stake for their child (Itkonen, 2007). Special education and disability interests, moreover, are their sole issue domains, whereas professional educator and government groups divide their attention across many other policy areas. Further, special education is a bipartisan policy domain, and advocates' thus have appeal to a wide range of legislators. Yet another plausible explanation of family groups' success in Congress lies in the match between the personal nature of parent advocacy and the policy's focus on an individual child. Family groups, in other words, have not had to make adjustments in their strategies to gain victories. Rather, the policy was based on their interests and advocacy style from its conception, as the Act was largely based on *PARC* and *Mills*, brought forward by these groups.

The most intriguing finding indicates that when controlling for organizational variables, problem definition is critical in understanding legislative victories and losses in Congressional testimony, as eight problem definition composites yielded significant

coefficients. Problem definition, in other words, is a predictor of effectiveness overriding resources. As seen in Table 5, the problem definitions that predicted legislative victories combined: (a) a political issue frame, social disability construction, and a hope story narrative; (b) an educational issue frame and student construction regardless of the policy story type; and finally (c) a civil rights frame with a hope story line, regardless of disability construction. These results thus confirm the univariate findings in that hope stories are an effective way to present special education testimony before Congress. The one problem definition type that predicted winning albeit using a decline narrative included an educational frame and student construction. As mentioned earlier, a critical read of testimony revealed that this type of definition solely advocated for federal involvement and oversight against local authority. This suggests that Congress has been sympathetic to increasing the federal involvement in the special education policy over the three decades, as opposed to giving more discretion to local authorities.

Decline stories portraying students from a psychological perspective (emphasizing the student's differences from the typical population), on the other hand, were of particular interest because the coefficient was negative and relatively large, and not statistically different than zero, regardless of the issue frame category. In other words, emphasizing students' individual differences with a story on how matters could get worse was likely to result in a legislative loss. In summary, how groups define and communicate their interests overrides their resources, in obtaining legislative victories through Congressional testimony.

Discussion

The quantitative data analysis indicated that when controlling for organization type and resources, problem definition was a predictor of effectiveness. How groups frame their interests, portray students with disabilities, and narrate their policy stories is significant in determining whether the organization obtains policy victories or losses. Specifically, arguments with a hope story predicted victories. The predicted effectiveness of a hope narrative may be explained by the nature of the legislative arena as hypothesized. Legislators simply do not want to pass bad public policy. While their job is to solve problems, and each approaches them from his or her own set of values, policy proposals must be politically attractive, to enhance their re-election prospects (Kelman, 1987). Hope stories move from fate and destiny to control and autonomy, thus having appeal in the legislature, which is forward-looking in its search for sound public policy. A related plausible explanation is that students with disabilities, as a group, appeal to values of compassion. Therefore, hope stories (which depicted how these children's situation can improve) and the students' social portrayal (which highlighted their belonging in society) are likely to have additional political appeal.

I have presented the results of 30 years of special education interest group effectiveness because it suggested consistent patterns over time. However, Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 included some school groups' interests, for example, more discretion for school administrators in discipline matters (a recycled issue from 1997) and a reduction in paperwork, both of which the parent groups opposed as it stripped them from previous benefits. It is unclear at this point, whether this reauthorization is *atypical* in the pattern of special education policy outcomes, or whether it represents a turning point from a civil rights frame and parent group victories to an

education frame and an increase in school groups' voice in the legislative process. But the prevalence of national groups in the 2004 reauthorization may have also indicated a change in the preferences of the 105th Congress regarding who they invited to testify. Instead of national groups, individuals (parents, teachers, administrators) and local and state groups provided the majority of testimony.¹¹ National groups comprised only 9 percent of Congressional hearings leading to the 2004 reauthorization, as compared to 57 percent in 1990 and 36 percent in the 1997 reauthorizations. Future research is needed after subsequent reauthorizations to analyze whether interest group behavior patterns across the first 30 years of IDEA continue as reported here or change, or whether the 2004 testimony and policy outcomes were an anomaly, influenced by the party in control of Congress. The Republican controlled chambers preferred a closed process and did not seek national group input (Anonymous reviewer, 2008).

There are a few cautions that should be kept in mind with regard to these findings. First, the document data measured effectiveness by examining the items on which the group testified in a Congressional hearing and whether those became enacted in the subsequent statute. The results did not reflect policy victories that the groups gained through lobbying and informal interactions with members and Congressional staff. Further, these data did not capture special education related victories groups obtained through bills not associated with IDEA reauthorization. Policy making is multi-faceted, and this study did not capture all that is involved in obtaining legislative victories.

The study design though allowed me to test and develop a model that helped explain the relationship between various effectiveness determinants. The model provides a parsimonious conceptualization of the complex set of variables that affect whether

¹¹ Only national groups' testimony was included in this study's universe.

organizations win or lose after Congressional testimony. Stone (1997) has argued that traditional policy analysis neglects the strategic aspects of policy processes and factors, which cannot be quantified. By operationalizing stories of hope and decline, issue frames, and social constructions of targets, this research illustrates one way to empirically analyze problem definition as a political influence strategy. Although the study analyzed special education groups, it has implications to the study of interest groups more broadly. While most literature focuses on the economics or ideology of groups, this study contributes to the methodology on how to quantify groups' political messages and the subsequent effectiveness of a well-organized network of organizations. The systematic analysis of effectiveness thus provides a way by which to study group behavior in any social policy domain.

In summary, the quantitative results clearly indicate that problem definition is critical in gaining legislative victories. Frames, constructions, and stories predict effectiveness. Problem definition, in short, is a complex strategic activity that allows organizations to engage in sophisticated political story telling.

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Table 1

Effectiveness Coding Scheme

Categories	Definitions
7	Obtained all items
6	Obtained most, and items were high priority
5	Obtained some, items were high priority
4	Obtained some, not highest priorities
3	Obtained little, got high priority
2	Obtained little, not high priority
1	Obtained none

Table 2

Percentage of Hope Stories Associated with Wins

Problem definition	n	Won all or most	Won some	Won little or Nothing
Political-social-hope	26	81	19	0
Educational- educational-hope	9	89	11	0
Civil rights-social-hope	13	85	15	0
Civil rights- educational-hope	5	100	0	0

Table 3

Percentage of Decline Stories with Psychological Construction Associated with Losses

Frame - Construction	n	Won all or most	Won some	Won little or Nothing
Political-psychological	9	0	33	56
Educational- psychological	4	0	0	100

Table 4

Percentage of Decline Stories Associated with Wins and Losses¹²

Frame-Construction	n	Won all or most	Won some	Won little or Nothing
Educational- educational	4	100	0	0
Political-educational	22	59	14	23
Civil rights-civil rights	7	43	0	57

⁹ Note: Using student constructions other than psychological.

Table 5

Determinants of Legislative Effectiveness based on Congressional Testimony

Variable	B	SE B	p
Organizational Characteristics			
Coalition	-.28	.409	.50
Founding year	.11	.171	.29
Repeat player	.11	.07	.10*
Group Type			
Civil rights group	4.05	1.32	.00**
Family disability group	1.09	.55	.05*
Educator group	-.62	1.21	.61
Special educator group	.51	.49	.30
Problem Definition (frame – construction – story)			
Political-social-hope ^a	1.59	.53	.00**
Political-educational-decline	.35	.52	.50
Political-psychological-decline	-2.40	.77	.00**
Educational-educational-hope	1.65	.74	.03**
Educational-psychological-decline	-3.52	1.05	.00**
Educational-educational-decline	3.27	1.29	.01**
Civil right-social-hope	1.44	.73	.05**
Civil right-civil right-decline	-1.55	.98	.11*
Civil right-educational-hope	2.17	1.11	.05**

a. Problem definition consists of frame-construction-story type combinations. Combinations with only one or two occurrences were dropped from the analysis.

Pseudo R² = .20

n = 139

**p < .05

*p < .1

Appendix A

Organizational Universe

I used the Congressional Universe on Lexis-Nexis and *Congressional Index* to determine the legislative histories and hearings leading to Public Laws 94-142 (1975), 98-199 (1983), 191-476 (1990), and 105-17 (1997). Each hearing's witness list in *Congressional Index* and in Congressional Universe was coded to determine if national organizations had testified in those hearings. The unit of analysis was a testimony. Hence, prepared statements provided for the record without a witness delivering them, or supplementary articles and materials were not included in the universe, even if filed by a national organization. The accuracy of this selection was confirmed using the index page in the published hearings. I excluded testimonies given by individuals (e.g., parents and teachers), unless it was stated that they represented a national group. I further excluded testimonies by state departments of education, state chapters of national organizations, local organizations (e.g., persons representing school districts), universities, federally funded projects, government representatives, and government organizations, unless it was stated that a national organization was represented in the testimony. Once I had a list of organizations, I used the *Encyclopedia of Associations* and the Associations Unlimited on the web to check the accuracy of my organizational universe.

Groups were then assigned to categories based on whom they represented. The table below summarizes group types.

Organization Type Coding Scheme

Category	Definition	Examples
Family/disability	Represents families of students with disabilities; people with disabilities	Learning Disabilities Association; National Association of the Deaf
Civil rights/legal	Has no membership base, engages in civil rights litigation	Disability Rights and Education Defense Fund
Professional-education	Represents various education professionals	National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers
Government	Represents various government entities	National Governors' Association
Business	Represents private sector business ^a	IBM

a. Dropped from the analysis, n = 2.

Appendix B

Issue Frame Coding Scheme

Categories	Definitions
Political	Argument based on locus of decision-making control (federal-state, state-local); funding and distribution of funds (state v. local district); expansion of eligibility or services
Civil rights	Rights of students with disabilities and their families, equal access, discrimination
Constitutional	Separation of powers; state sovereign immunity against damage suits
Educational	Educational benefits of proposed legislative items/court decision, educational outcomes, specific pedagogy recommended; absence of civil rights or political frames

Disability Construction Coding Scheme

Categories	Definitions
Educational	Students are talked about in the context of educational interventions; specific methods or learning outcomes are outlined
Civil rights	Students are talked about in the context of rights, access, or discrimination
Social	Students are talked about as members of the school community and society; their contributions to friends, family, and the work force; or the stigma of a disability is emphasized
Psychological	Specific traits of a disability are emphasized; therefore the students need specific diagnoses, treatments, and interventions

Policy Story Coding Scheme

Category	Definition
Hope	Matters can improve with certain legislative items/court outcomes, the law has been fair and just;
Decline across time	Matters have gotten worse over time (e.g., shortage of personnel, lack of funding, lack of administrative control on decisions)
Decline across jurisdictions	Matters have gotten worse across the country; non-uniform implementation of the statute