Playground Politics:
Exploring the Actors and Factors in Universal Pre-K Adoption

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Abstract

Public access to preschool is one of the few issues in our polarized society that enjoys bipartisan public support. Yet, despite wide scale backing for early education, in practice universal access to preschool has consistently failed to find form. As of 2021, only three states offer truly universal access to preschool programs (UPK) to all four-year-olds. In 2020, only 1/3 of 4-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool programs. Which suggests the question: if everyone loves UPK programs, why haven’t more states embraced them? The literature has emphasized the role of elected officials, advocacy groups, and unions in leading the charge on lobbying for universal preschool. Thus, the present study poses the research question, “How do state level actors influence the adoption of state level Universal Pre-K (UPK) programs?” This study examines the level of influence of these actors in the adoption process of UPK at the state level. It includes a mixed methods study utilizing case studies of three state UPK programs with varying degrees of access, as well as discourse analysis of elected officials’ budget, union, and advocacy documents. Utilizing the social construction and policy design theory (Schneider and Ingram, 2005), the study finds that attitudes and opinion on preschool policy are influenced by structural distinctions between childcare and preschool. Emerging preschool programs frequently conflate early education with child minding, creating a barrier to access to universality. Findings point to significant presence of advocacy groups at all levels of preschool access, with a direct linear relationship between access to preschool and volume of advocacy discourse by state. While the support of elected officials appears as a prerequisite to preschool adoption, the prominent role anticipated for union advocacy did not emerge as a factor. This study points to the need for coalition building between elected officials and advocates and the need to amplify union participation.
Key Definitions

The following key definitions will be utilized throughout this paper:

**Universality:** The Alliance for Early Success (2021) defines a universal approach to Pre-K as “...a policy framework that gives all families with preschool-aged children the opportunity to voluntarily enroll their child in a publicly funded pre-kindergarten care and education program in a state or community.” In the context of this paper, degrees of universality will be discussed. States with increased percentages of access to preschool programming have higher levels of universality than states with lower levels of universality.

**Mixed Delivery System:** Pew Trusts (2006) defines a mixed delivery system as one that incorporates both community-based sites and school sites to provide preschool services. Incorporation of preschool programming through existing childcare infrastructure and systems (utilizing public funding) is defined as a mixed delivery system. Any program that is not exclusively housed in their own, publicly built institutions are considered implemented through mixed delivery.

**Established States and Emerging States:** States with high levels of universality will be labeled “established” preschool programs, and states with mid-levels of universality will be labeled “emerging” preschool programs given their potential for continued growth.
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Chapter 1: An Introduction to Universal Preschool

In 2021, the United States’ polarized electorate could rarely provide bipartisan support on any existing issue. Preschool and early child care, however, has been an exception. In 2017, 79% of voters, including 80% of Trump voters and 79% of Clinton voters, expressed support for congressional collaboration to expand preschool, early childhood education, and care (First Five Years Fund 2017). This number rose to 81% of total voters in 2021, with majorities of all Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, as well (First Five Years Fund 2021). Preschool is the “Switzerland” of public opinion polling; support to improve young children’s learning is a universally uncontroversial idea.

Despite wide-scale support for early education, in practice, it has consistently been neglected. As of 2021, only two states, Vermont and Florida, as well as Washington DC, offer truly universal preschool programs (UPK) with access to all four-year-olds. Many other states have “mostly universal” programs (Oklahoma, Georgia, Iowa, Wisconsin), because they reach less than 70% of all children in the state. Six states have no state-funded Pre-K programs at all (Figueroa, 2021). In 2020, only 1/3 of 4-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool programs (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020). Which begs the question: if everyone loves UPK, why isn’t it a reality?

This study will explore the research question, “How do state level actors influence the adoption of state level Universal Pre-K programs?” The study will be informed by three central tenants of Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram’s 2005 theory, social construction and policy design; 1- How actors conceptualize the populations a policy is targeted towards affects their willingness to push for its adoption 2- actors on a policy arena are interrelated and 3- As a certain target population begins to receive an entitlement, those entitlements are often extended to other
associated populations. This study found that the historic conceptualization of early childhood education as child minding affects actors’ political will to catalyze change. Elected officials were found to be a prerequisite to adoption of preschool programming, unions were found to play a minimal, non-essential role in the preschool adoption process, and advocacy groups were found to play a significant role in the policymaking arena at all levels of access to preschool, with a particular emphasis on emerging preschool programs and established preschool programs. Advocacy group presence in particular was found to have a linear relationship with access to preschool by state; as state level advocacy language presence increases, access to preschool in that state increases.

The Case for Universal Pre-K

The benefits of preschool for children are prominently discussed in the literature, prompting a compelling case for expanding access. Studies support quality early education’s role in promoting cognitive and social development and achievement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016, 15; Huston 2008, 4), producing long term economic benefits for students and society (Barnett 1995), as well as improving test scores and academic performance through later years (Gormley 2005). Historically, education for young students has often been classified as care, drawing away from the necessary teacher quality and educational components of a high-quality preschool program (Cho and Couse 2015). With a growing maternal workforce and increased single-parent families, the need for quality care is more crucial than ever (Cho and Couse 2015, 16). Paradoxically, the First Five Years Fund (2021) reports that more than half of Americans live in “child care deserts,” making it impossible to access high quality, affordable early education programs, including preschool options.
The case for universality specifically, as opposed to a targeted approach to Pre-K, is rooted in quality and access. The Alliance for Early Success (2021) defines a universal approach to Pre-K as “...a policy framework that gives all families with preschool-aged children the opportunity to voluntarily enroll their child in a publicly funded pre-kindergarten care and education program in a state or community.” Universality thus implies access to all children, regardless of income, race, or other demographic measures. Approaches such as Head Start or targeted Pre-K programs, in contrast, have an income cap and restrictions in size that limit attendance.

While Head Start provides access to child care for low-income families, the program has limitations due the scope of enrollment and barriers to access. Even with Head Start expansions, only 60% of all eligible students are enrolled in the preschool programs (Rose 2010, 2). With only one-third of all preschool-age children being enrolled in preschool to date (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020), there is a pressing demand for improved access to early childhood care and education.
Background: A Historical Understanding of Preschool

In describing the foundations of early care and preschool, this chapter will discuss the historical recognition of early child care aschildminding, rooted in a fear of eroding traditional family values and mother-child relationships. The chapter will then transition to a chronological discussion of child care and preschool programming, discussing three main foundational events in the preschool and child care landscape: 1960s Head Start, the 1970s Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA), and the 2014 Preschool Development Grant Program.

The narrative surrounding early care is often misleadingly divided between child care and education. Historically, government-sanctioned child care programming has been exclusively targeted towards low-income families in need of child care (Cho and Couse 2015, 18). Additionally, early care and education (ECE) has typically solely been implemented in times of emergency or pressing need.

In the 1890s, original day nurseries were put in place with significant levels of regulation. Out of fear of disincentivizing parental involvement and traditional family values, day nursery centers established relationships with families to ensure that they were not a replacement for “traditional” mother-child relationships. Day nurseries were meant to exclusively provide services to families that were deemed “appropriate,” (Cahan 1989, 19) or alternatively, for developmentally at-risk students who needed it most (Cho and Couse 2015, 18).

In 1960s and 70s, initial federal conversations on child care often conflated preschool and early education with social safety nets and, for conservatives, entitlements. Head Start was founded in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson’s 1960s Great Society’s War on Poverty. The early childhood program was launched as a need-based support to children and families (Barnett 1993, 524). Originally implemented as a summer program, Head Start eventually expanded to include daily
instruction as well as Home Start, an educational program for parents to support families outside of the classroom (Cahan 1989, 33). Beyond academic and social support, Head Start provided holistic health and nutritional care, employment, and training services to parents. The program, with its additional supports, is often conceptualized as an entitlement as opposed to as traditional education (Cahan 1989). From 1965 to 1973, the program’s funding expanded from $100 million to $400 million.

In the 1970s, the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA) called for a national day care plan. The plan would have been the first form of universal care across the United States, with no income caps on access. The annual cost of the CCDA would have been $2.1 billion (Barnett 1993, 525). Despite congressional approval, President Richard Nixon vetoed the bill, labeling its content as a “radical and communist” approach to interfering with “traditional child-rearing practices.” (The Economist 2021) Opposition to the CCDA, leading to its eventual demise, was ultimately rooted in the same rhetoric that continues to plague modern early child care policy. Today, portraying government intervention as an intrusion into family decision making continues to be relevant.

Despite setbacks, Head Start played a pivotal role in catalyzing continued discussions on federal early education policy. From 1988 to the early 1990s, 100 early care bills were introduced to Congress (Barnett 1993, 527), including legislation that established the Child Care and Development Block Grant in 1990. In the past 10 years, the enrollment of four-year-olds in state-funded preschool has doubled (Park and Hassairi 2021). President Bill Clinton significantly expanded Head Start in 1994 (Barnett 1993, 527), and President Barack Obama was able to provide over $2 billion in additional Head Start funding (Mead 2017).
President Obama’s ECE legacy can be seen in the pivotal establishment of the Preschool Development Grant Program, as well his administration’s allocation of $1 billion to 20 states’ expansion of ECE programming (Mead 2017). As defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2014), Preschool Development Grants were introduced in 2014 to incentivize states to construct preschool infrastructure. Grants were meant to provide a stepping stone towards expansion of preschool programming.

Programming under the Johnson, Clinton, and Obama administrations has constructed a point of entry for early childhood classroom proliferation across the United States. The political will at the national level has varied across administrations but has unquestionably allowed for significant progress throughout the late 1900s to early 2000s.

Preschool Structures Today: Mixed Delivery Systems

Implementation of preschool programs at the state level has been carried out through two primary systems. Universal Pre-K is traditionally implemented through a mixed delivery system, which Pew Trusts (2006) defines as a program that incorporates both community-based sites and school sites to provide preschool services. These programs utilize existing child care infrastructure, such as community-based organizations, private independent child care centers, or Head Start centers, to support the implementation of publicly funded UPK. Mixed delivery allows for independent contractors to be utilized in conjunction with public schools. Programs carried out by exclusively public schools are significantly less common due to the limitations in terms of expertise, funding, and access to infrastructure. While most programs contain some level of private infrastructure (mixed delivery), every state has different ratios of Pre-K seats hosted by private contractors as compared to those housed in public schools. Many states provide nearly exclusively non-public school programs, while others have a more even distribution.
The literature suggests mixed results in terms of the benefits and harms of both delivery systems. Bellm et al. (2002) suggest that public school-centered systems can attract and retain more qualified teachers due to increased regulation of compensation and benefits, as well as higher rates of unionization. The study additionally describes non-public school centers as having significantly higher teacher turnover rates than their public Pre-K counterparts for the same reasons, decreasing their overall quality. A separate study of California Pre-K programs found that privately operated facilities’ staff earn higher salaries, creating complications when it comes to collective bargaining from other, unionized centers due to the fluctuation in payment (Bellm and Whitebook 2004, 5). Oklahoma has resolved this disparity by having Pre-K teachers placed on a uniform salary regardless of whether they work in a private or publicly operated center (Bellm and Whitebook 2004, 8).

Introducing Actors in the UPK Debate

Elected officials, advocacy organizations, and unions have agency in the process of Pre-K program adoption. However, different stakeholders carry varying degrees of influence, and thus can be studied independently. This study has implications for understanding the motivations and influences behind universal education policy adoption. Teachers and advocates seeking support for nationwide UPK have approached the issue through appeals to a range of stakeholders. Understanding the influence each of these appeals carries will provide teachers and advocates with a pathway towards next steps in their activism. The question of “where should we, as advocates, go for support in policy adoption” will be addressed.
Elected Officials

Early childhood education (ECE) policy has gained traction with elected officials at significantly higher rates than other pieces of legislation. Park and Hassairi’s (2021) study of ECE policy success found that “while federal bills failed 96 percent of the time, close to 18 percent of ECE bills in our sample were passed into law, which was more than 4 times the success rate of passing for an average federal bill.” Legislators and elected officials thus have incentives to support ECE policy across party lines due to their bipartisan popularity.

Overall, this bipartisan legislative support has carried into preschool positions. Within the 2020 rankings of state preschool programs by access to preschool (see Appendix B), states with the top 10 amounts of universal access include conservative Florida, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Texas (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020). Governors have expressed support for making early child care a priority across party lines. Alabama Governor Kay Ivey (R) has consistently advocated for ECE policy. In April of 2018, Ivey expanded Alabama’s “First Class Pre-K Program.” Other Republican Governors that have expressed support for state preschool or ECE expansion include Idaho’s Brad Little, Massachusetts’ Charlie Baker, Ohio’s Mike DeWine, Oklahoma’s Kevin Stitt, Texas’ Greg Abbott, and Vermont’s Phil Scott (First Five Years Fund 2018). Conservative governors are additionally more likely to accept federal funding to support low-income families in the form of Pre-K or early child care. Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson (R) has accepted $26 million in federal funds for child care assistance and has consistently emphasized the importance of ECE (First Five Years Fund 2018).

Despite overwhelming bipartisan support for UPK, a loud, conservative elected official opposition to preschool policies has existed since its fruition. From President Nixon’s 1971 veto to nationwide child care (The Economist 2021), to Representative Glenn Grothman of Wisconsin’s
adamant opposition to Universal Pre-K provisions in President Biden’s Build Back Better Act (The Economist 2021), many conservative elected officials have consistently conceptualized preschool as a liberal tool to thwart traditional family values and indoctrinate young students.

While, at the state level, many conservative governors have supported preschool policy, on the federal stage, Democrats have consistently provided more funding to early child care and preschool than their Republican counterparts. The Obama administration provided significant funding for ECE through an expansion of Head Start and Preschool Grants. In contrast, the Trump administration actively thwarted a bipartisan child care funding bill by re-allocating funds and ultimately significantly reducing the total funding provided. The $2.4 billion dollar increase in ECE funding was approved by Congress, only to be reduced to a $169 million dollar increase (only 7% total) by the Trump administration. Consistently, Democratic presidential administrations have been the leading national actors in providing funding to state early child care.

Advocacy Efforts: Non-Profit Organizations, Business, and Corporate Actors

Large non-profit and corporate organizations’ contributions, lobbying, and advocacy efforts played a crucial role in the original adoption of UPK. In 1996, the Carnegie Corporation of New York launched a task force to promote Pre-K and 3K expansion, titled “the Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades.” The task force, made up of education and business actors, pushed UPK as a tool towards long-term academic achievement and success for students (Bellm and Whitebook 2004, 4-5). Other organizations that promoted Pre-K included the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the Committee on Economic Development (CED), and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Bellm and Whitebook 2004, 10-11). The NASBE in particular helped select states in which it made the most sense to lobby for Pre-K expansion given existent early child care traction.
One of the single most influential actors in the original adoption of UPK by states was Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew’s 2001 strategy involved large-scale coalition building and selective state campaigns. These coalitions were organized under the assumption that a universal program had the potential to gain more political and public traction. In 2002, Pew contributed $15 million towards UPK research and policy advocacy (Bellm et al. 2002, 3). Beyond this sizable contribution, in 2001, Pew committed to spending $10 million annually on UPK expansion (Bellm et al. 2002, 7-9). Susan Urahn, Education Director at Pew, described the rationale behind the allocation, stating that UPK was “substantial enough to make a difference in children's lives, but also well-enough defined so that the public, media and policymakers could readily understand it and follow progress towards the goal.” (Bellm et al. 2002, 7-9)

The introduction of UPK as a catalyst for economic growth for all, as opposed to the conservative portrayal of preschool and early child care as a care-based entitlement for the poor, ultimately transformed the market for its adoption. Pew was able to reframe the narrative around early care, centering the potential for educational, economic, and social growth (Rose 2010, 1). As previously mentioned, the appeal “across class lines” to suburban and conservative actors, a concept led by Pew, ultimately allows for more “political support, more stable funding, and higher quality services.” (Rose 2010, 3)

Pew initially targeted their efforts towards states in which it seemed that mobilization of political actors and coalitions of support would come easily. This resulted in a push for Universal Pre-K in Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey (Rose 2010, 9). This decision was primarily made due to local legislator support for the program, as well as through the support of experienced advocates on the ground willing to help support UPK’s pathway to fruition.
Advocacy Efforts: Advocates and Think Tanks, National Early Childhood Organizations

National early childhood organizations’ contributions to research, advocacy, and mobilization are a central component of the UPK movement. The National Institute for Early Education Research, or NIEER, which was funded by Pew Charitable Trusts as part of their 2001 push for UPK, serves a pivotal role in research and advocacy for ECE. NIEER, a project based at Rutgers University, carries out extensive policy research on the status of preschool, compiling a comprehensive guide of action items annually. NIEER’s (2020) quantitative data will additionally be included in this thesis’ data collection and comparison process, as discussed in the data and method section (Center for Early Learning Professionals 2021). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) additionally leads significant education campaigns, advocacy, and scholarly publications. NAEYC’s state-specific chapters champion ECE expansion at the local level.

Unions

Teacher unions have a complex relationship to Universal Pre-K. As previously mentioned, the mixed delivery system of UPK, while found most commonly, can incorporate a variety of unions, including some unrelated to traditional public school teacher unions. The inconsistency of salaries, structure, and methods across different states allows for union support to be inconsistent. Regardless of positionality, the power of unions is diluted in the ECE system. Nonetheless, conservative opposition publications have described unions as the “wealth and power behind Universal Pre-K campaigns” (Dellinger and Osorio 2007).

As discussed with Pew Charitable Trusts, initial 2001 efforts to promote UPK received significant endorsements and support from teacher unions. The American Federation of Teachers, one of the largest US teacher unions, expressed lukewarm support for universality, “with first
priority given to needy children” (Rose 2010). Modern statements by the AFT have additionally expressed the union’s support for UPK (AFT 2013). The AFT’s endorsement catalyzed other prominent unions to support the program in the early 2000s, most notably, the National Education Association (NEA), a larger union.

UPK programs located at public schools provide strong union incentives to support public UPK over a mixed delivery system. A 2002 study of UPK in California, Chicago, and New York showed that 96-98% of teachers in public school Pre-Ks had representation by a collective-bargaining unit (Bellm et al. 2002, 21). In contrast, center based or non-public school- Pre-Ks were found to have 2-33% representation in Georgia, Chicago, and California (Bellm et al. 2002), posing a strong incentive for unions to oppose mixed delivery programs with a significant center-based presence.
Funding of Child Care and UPK

ECE funding sources and structures are broad and diverse. Government financing in child care is best described by Huston (2008), who stated, “there is no "system" of early care and education, but instead a decentralized set of actors and activities with multiple goals, funding sources, and venues.” (Huston 2008, 11) Huston ultimately attributes two central roles to national actors: financial assistance and regulation. States do all the “heavy lifting” on ECE, with the federal government providing some oversight on certain predetermined policies, and some federal monetary support to be utilized at the state’s discretion (Rigby et al. 2007, 889).

In total, as of 2017, the federal government spent $9.7 billion on early child care. Despite this seemingly large number, only 17% of families eligible to receive care in the form of subsidies were able to access support (Chien 2017). Those families that were provided with funding additionally did not receive enough funding to, in practice, cover the full tuition of early childhood centers (Workman 2021). The most prominent modern child care programs are managed by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which provides child care funding for families “in or near poverty” (Gilliam 2010, 90). This provision is stipulated by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).

Preschool funding as it exists today varies by state, housed in a wide range of structures with varying degrees of quality. Overall, total state spending on preschool rose by nearly $301 million from 2019 to 2020, a similar increase as the rise from 2018 to 2019 (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020). However, per child spending rose by only $200 (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020). The contrast is indicative of a growth in access as opposed to quality per child; more money was applied to expanding programs rather than improving each child’s experience. NIEER has concluded that most states do not spend nearly
enough per child to provide high-quality, full day preschool programs (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020, 25). Quality metrics that require significant funding include early learning and development standards, curriculum supports, teacher qualifications, staff professional development, low class sizes, staff-child ratios, health screenings and referrals, and systems for continuous quality improvement (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020, 31). Quality, however, is beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on universality (number of students who have access to the programs) and adoption.

The methods through which states fund their preschool programs additionally have significant variation. Programs such as Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K utilize a series of competitive grants distributed by the Alabama Education Trust Fund (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020, 54). Other programs, such as Arizona’s, utilize creative approaches, such as tobacco tax revenues to support early childhood funds. Arizona utilizes these tax revenues, which have dropped significantly since 2008, through scholarships that are provided to existing child care centers that meet certain quality standards as stipulated by the Early Childhood Development and Health Board (The National Institute for Early Education Research 2020, 58). While theoretically creative, due to a 30% drop in tobacco tax revenues since 2008, preschool funding is additionally down in AZ. Florida primarily utilizes state DOE funds to support their Voluntary Preschool Program (VPK) by contracting private schools and child care centers. However, due to the funding limitations of this mechanism, local publications have reported that wealthier school districts are able to make up for resource shortages utilizing parent support, leading low-income neighborhoods to fall comparatively short in quality (Postal 2019). While funding for preschool programs is primarily provided at the federal level, states have their own unique ways to implement and allocate accordingly.
Research Question and Theoretical Framework

The question at the heart of this thesis is, “How do state level actors influence the adoption of state level Universal Pre-K (UPK) programs?” An aid into conceptualizing the work of this analysis is Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram’s theory (2005) of social construction and policy design. Schneider and Ingram’s social construction of policy design describes that how actors conceptualize a policy issue affects their willingness to push for its adoption (Schneider and Ingram 2007, 95). In the case of Universal Preschool and Early Childhood Education, how actors conceptualize the child care landscape affects their willingness to support adoption of UPK. Actors that view preschool as less of a priority than its K-12 counterparts may be less likely to place an emphasis on its creation. Another layer of Ingram et. al.’s work is the notion of a “feed forward effect” (Schneider and Ingram 2007, 95). This effect stipulates that action on policy issues produces a domino effect on other political groups “including political parties, interest groups, and other branches of government” (Schneider and Ingram 2007, 95). The feed forward effect will be discussed in the context of overlapping actors and their resulting relationships. A feed forward effect would be present in a situation where one actor’s involvement drives another actor to engage, as well. Additionally, the theory describes policy as an agent of change in its ability to promote coalition-building and “overcome divisive social constructions” (Schneider and Ingram 2007). Groups that would not have previously worked together may join to help catalyze a common policy effect. This is similarly rooted in the feed forward effect.

Ingram et al. additionally discuss the feed forward effect in the context of previous policies. As a certain target population begins to be applied to an entitlement, pensions and entitlements are often extended to other associated populations. Schneider and Ingram provide the example of pensions to soldiers and officers in the Revolutionary War, which were then extended to all
veterans regardless of economic status (Schneider and Ingram 2005, 12-13). This component of their work may suggest a strong case for a push towards universality in states with targeted preschool programming. Once the frameworks for preschool programming have been set with actors to provide support, a push towards universality becomes significantly more likely and favorable. This can be seen in the case of Connecticut preschool (see Case Study 2), where the Connecticut General Assembly attempted to pass a universal preschool bill in 2017. As perceived by Schneider and Ingram, emerging preschool programming states have been labeled as emerging because of their significant potential for expansion.

One of the most salient concepts of this theory is the social construction of target populations. Schneider and Ingram (2005) describe that policymakers and actors perceive some populations as more deserving of government support than others. Populations are predetermined as “deserving” or “undeserving,” which then defines policymakers’ treatment of these target populations. As populations gain power, they gain the ability to overcome their perception as “undeserving” through power and influence. Schneider and Ingram define this transition, stating that groups move towards stronger power through the three mechanisms of coalition building, advocacy, and media exposure (Schneider and Ingram 2007).

The historic conception of preschool as child minding categorizes preschool teachers, families, directors, and students as undeserving, weak populations. In this paper, I will argue that the influence of elected officials, union leadership, and advocates, can uplift the power preschool actors have to transition their place as a target population from weak deviants to strong contenders (See Figure 1). Please see Chapter 5 for further analysis of the application of the theoretical framework to the discussion and findings.
Utilizing the research question, foundational literature, and theoretical framework as guides, the following hypotheses have been proposed:

A- States with elected official support for ECE policies, specifically, gubernatorial support, are more likely to adopt Universal Pre-K.

B- State preschool programs with higher union discourse presence have higher levels of access to preschool.

C- Advocacy organization support has a direct positive relationship with access to preschool programming.

Hypothesis A is founded on the central role of elected official support to policy adoption. Literature on the importance of governors to policy adoption emphasized the impact of vying for electoral security in attempting to confer statewide benefits through public policy (Barrilleaux and Berkman 2003). In light of the personal incentives to push for adoption, it can be hypothesized that elected official support plays a crucial role in policymaking.

Foundational to Hypotheses B and C are the importance of awareness campaigns to adoption of policy. Across varying policy arenas, awareness campaigns and social media have played a central role in adoption of policy (Yindi et al. 2020; Seymour 2017). Both the expansion of public discourse and advocacy can be hypothesized to produce a complementary result.

This study includes five chapters. Chapter 2, which follows, will provide an in-depth review of the variables and methods involved in the analysis of the collected data. Chapter 3 will be case studies of three states with varying degrees of access to preschool: Florida, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Utilizing Text Mining in R, Chapter 4 will provide a holistic analysis of actor discourse by state. Lastly, Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions, limitations, and avenues for further research.
Chapter 2: Data and Method

This study analyzes the actors involved in universal preschool (UPK) adoption at the state level. All data for this project is collected utilizing sources from 2019, or projections for the 2020 fiscal year created in 2019. This has been done to establish an understanding of universal preschool from before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected preschool enrollment and funding, skewing the values one could observe for 2021. 2019 values will provide the most relevant picture of the future of universal adoption as economic and social conditions begin to normalize into the future.

The analysis of the effects of each actor on the adoption of Universal Pre-K at the state level will be carried out in a three-part assessment of data. First, three case studies will be conducted. Second, a 20-state broad descriptive analysis utilizing Text Mining in R will be carried
out. Lastly, a descriptive analysis of findings will be written. Please see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the flow of the analysis.

Case studies operate as a foundation for understanding the interactions between actors in allowing for adoption. Case studies have been selected to exemplify the diversity of the spectrum of universality across the United States. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) complies a yearly metric of the “degree of universality” of each state (National Institute for Early Education Research 2019; National Institute for Early Education Research 2020). The data source, titled the “State Preschool Yearbook,” ranks states from “Most Universal” to “Least Universal” based on how many students have access to the states’ preschool programs (see Appendix B). States 1-10 have the most comprehensive preschool programs, with access to all students exclusively based on age. States 25-30 have a mid-level of universality, typically involving a targeted preschool program with a capped number of positions or determined by child or family characteristics in addition to age. States 46-50 have no preschool programs. This ranking has been utilized in both case study selection and sample selection for the 20-state analysis.

Florida has been selected as the first case study due to its Pre-K program’s 100% universality. Other states or regions with 100% universality are Vermont and DC, and states with near universal programs include Wisconsin, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Iowa, and Georgia. The top states for degrees of universality include significant political diversity, with more red and purple states than blue states. Thus, out of Florida, Vermont, and DC, Florida was selected due to its status as a conservative state with a universal program.

Connecticut was selected as the second case study based on its status as a mid-range state, ranked within the 25-30 range of universality according to NIEER. Connecticut has three separate preschool programs; a Child Day Care contract program with 28% access, a School Readiness
income-based program with 40% access, and a program called “CT Smart Start” with a limited 14% access. Other states within this range include Kansas, North Carolina, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. Much like Connecticut, most states within this range contain multiple types of preschool programs with varying degrees of access. Connecticut’s status as a blue state additionally contributed to selection. Florida, Connecticut, and New Hampshire have different partisan affiliations, allowing for the case studies to represent a diverse political population.

New Hampshire was selected as the last case study due to having no state-level preschool program. Other states with no preschool include Idaho, Indiana, Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Selecting a case study for the states with no preschool program was a greater challenge due to the inability to view trends in their established programs, as had been done with cases one and two. Montana was eliminated as an option due to its complicated history with Universal Pre-K. Montana briefly established a program and later removed it due to political divisiveness and gridlock, making it an outlier as a case (Flathead Beacon 2019). Out of the other states, Idaho, Indiana, South Dakota, Wyoming, and New Hampshire, New Hampshire was the least right leaning. In this case, since increasing education funding tends to be a liberal position, New Hampshire seems to be the most explanatory case in terms of removing political motivations for the lack of preschool programming. As a relatively liberal state, New Hampshire’s lack of preschool is less likely to be affected by political affiliation as a confounding factor, making it a desirable case study to understand why states do not adopt UPK.

Case studies will provide an understanding of the rationale behind adoption, including the actors most relevant to the adoption. Each case study will first provide background of the history and actors involved in adoption. The case studies will then discuss the most prominent actors involved in adoption in depth.
Utilizing the established case studies as a framework for the analysis, part two of my data collection will include a broad descriptive review of preschool by state. Based on NIEER’s degrees of universality, 20 states have been selected. As mentioned above, states 1 to 10, 25 to 30, and 46 to 50 will be utilized. Two states that provide “outlier” results will be eliminated from the pool (ultimately, Texas and Kansas were eliminated). For each state, utilizing state budget documents from FY2020, union legislative briefs from 2019-2020, and five advocacy group legislative agendas by state for 2019-2020 (approximately 100 total advocacy documents), text mining in R will establish trends and themes in the documents for each degree of universality (frequency coding). For state advocacy groups that do not provide advocacy briefs for 2019-2020, 2021-2022 briefs will be utilized as an alternative. Lastly, utilizing both the case studies and the holistic review, a descriptive analysis of the findings will be presented.
Chapter 3: Case Studies of Three State Preschool Programs

This chapter consists of case studies of three separate state preschool programs: Florida, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Each case study will seek to answer the question “Why was Universal Pre-K adopted?,” or, “Why was Universal Pre-K not adopted?” Each case study will discuss the actors involved in its original adoption, as well as contemporary actors pushing for its maintenance and expansion.

Florida

Florida’s Pre-K program began in 2002 via a state constitutional amendment (McKinnon 2019). This well-known program has high enrollment rates, at a 75% enrollment rate with 100% of students having access to the program should they want to. Despite this, the state’s efforts fall short on certain benchmarks of quality. NIEER’s State of Preschool (NIEER 2019) report found that Florida is one of the bottom three states in terms of per pupil spending on preschool (see Figure 2). Florida lags behind other states when looking at per pupil spending, at a half of the national average (McKinnon, 2019). The state additionally has consistently cut their total funding. Florida preschool is determined through the annual legislative appropriations process (McWalters 2019, 11), creating uncertainty in terms of the longevity of the program and when it might be cut.
Figure 2: State Preschool Spending per Child, Taken from NIEER’s 2019 State of Preschool Yearbook
Adoption: Elected Officials and Public Opinion

The two strongest actors in the adoption of Florida UPK were elected officials at the state and local level and public opinion. Florida preschool adoption was championed by two elected officials from opposite sides of the aisle, with the support of early child care advocates, corporate actors, and the public.

In 1998, the Retired *Miami Herald* publisher, David Lawrence, became the single most influential actor in Florida early childhood education (ECE). He did so by founding the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation (Hampton 2004). ECE was Lawrence’s life passion. He was appointed to the Governor’s Children and Youth Cabinet and chaired the Florida Partnership for School Readiness (The Children’s Movement of Florida 2021). Laurence and the ECIF convinced then Democratic Miami Mayor Alex Penelas to invest time and energy into making UPK a reality for all Floridians.

Penelas’ role was pivotal to the state’s ultimate adoption. As the Miami-Dade Mayor, given his role as a strong mayor of the largest county in Florida by population size, his support for the policy had significant influence. Additionally, the Mayor, on his second term in office, was hoping to receive a nomination for the US Senate Seat being emptied by Bob Graham. It is likely that Penalas viewed UPK as a key issue to gain bipartisan support in his political career (Hampton 2004, 4). Penalas and Lawrence were able to garner statewide attention on the issue, leading Republican Governor Jeb Bush to be generally supportive of the policy. Ultimately, UPK was passed through the will of the people. In 2002, a ballot referendum, specifying that mandated universal preschool be “established according to high quality standards by 2005” was passed with 60% of the vote (McWalters 2019, 11).
UPK was eventually made available by 2005. However, the original champions of the program were not able to have much of a say in its implementation. While the ballot initiative specified the need for a high-quality program, it did not specify how it would be funded, how it would be provided (mixed methods, public, private contractors), or any other significant details of what may constitute quality.

To help determine the specifications of the plan, an Education Advisory Council was created in 2003 by the Florida State Board of Education (White et al. 2015, 408). The council was made up of private and public-school representatives, ECE advocates, members of the corporate and business community, and some representatives from the general public (White et al. 2015, 408). Despite attempts to incorporate qualified representatives in the policymaking process, the three legislative plans released to Governor Bush failed to incorporate most of the Council’s suggestions (White et al. 2015, 408). The bills were vetoed by Bush because of widespread public criticism. Bush’s veto was made based on the bill not having been “what the voters were promised” (White et al. 2015, 409). This reinforces the potential for public opinion and media attention to have influence on ECE policy. Bush eventually approved a preschool bill put together during a 2004 special legislative session. The bill received significant criticism from Democratic lawmakers and early child care advocates alike due to its short three-hour school day and low per-child-budget (White et al. 2015, 409).

Republican Governor Jeb Bush’s role in the adoption of the program was a small, but supportive role, with an emphasis on giving the voters what they wanted. He was a supporter of the plan but maintained conservative values of privatization of education despite implementing a universal program. Current Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has played a laissez-faire role when it comes to discussing or prioritizing UPK and early education. While DeSantis has not spoken
against the program, early education and preschool were not mentioned at all in his 2020 State of the State address. DeSantis’ budget contained a small section on VPK. There are eight total mentions of VPK in Gov. DeSantis’ FY 2020 budget (Florida Policy Institute 2019). From FY 2019-2020 to FY 2020-21, the Governor announced a mere $49 increase in per pupil spending (Florida Policy Institute 2019, 12). This amount is lower than the base spending in the program’s inaugural year, FY 2005-06. DeSantis has briefly acknowledged the importance of preschool, and of improving Florida preschool quality, to the press, but has not done much to indicate a fervor for change (Postal 2019).

Union Presence

Currently, UPK in Florida places little to no reliance on union educators given its reliance on private Pre-K providers. Thus, teacher unions hold little to no influence on UPK, and do not prioritize it in their legislative agendas.

The Florida Education Association, the state’s teacher union representing Pre-K to 12 teachers, had zero mentions of Universal Preschool or VPK (“Voluntary Preschool”) in their FY 2022 legislative agenda (Florida Education Association 2022). The organization groups preschool into a “Pre-K to 12” category in their academic goals, furthering the notion that preschool is not a legislative priority for the union.

Florida's program has previously been recognized as less union driven than other UPK counterparts. In 2015, Governor Jeb Bush repeatedly criticized New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio’s Universal Pre-K program, “Pre-K for All,” for being deeply tied to NYC teacher unions, calling the program a “union vehicle” (Shapiro 2015). American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten was quick to respond to the former Governor, citing Florida’s private, non-unionized preschool providers as underqualified and underfunded (Shapiro 2015). Clearly,
organizations such as the Florida Education Association have no place in Florida preschools, and thus choose to leave Pre-K out of the conversation altogether.

**Political Landscape**

Florida VPK was established in the wake of the 2000 Bush Gore Presidential Election. With Florida at the forefront of the race’s ultimate controversial culmination, the literature suggests that the state may have been perceived as a “laughing stock” in need of establishing political legitimacy (Hampton 2004). In the years leading up to the adoption of VPK (ballot measure passed in 2002, implemented by 2005), Florida’s role as a swing state shifted towards a stronger affiliation with the Republican party. A Pew Research Center study recognizes that from 2000 to 2004, 13 out of 50 states shifted their partisan affiliation towards the right, with 6 of the 13 states being swing states, including Florida (Pew 2003). Florida’s ability to introduce UPK in 1998 and adopt UPK by 2005 corroborates the potential for bipartisan support for the policy area. Pew’s 2004 research study establishes that in the late 1990s, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in Florida by 12 points. By 2004, however, Republicans outnumbered Democrats, suggesting a shift in an accelerated timeframe from 1998-2004 (Pew 2003). The ability of preschool to prevail despite a change in the political climate suggests the program’s ability to sustain bipartisan support and resist political opposition on a party basis.
Connecticut’s preschool programming spans across three separate initiatives. While the programs vary, all three are regulated by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC or CTOEC). The Connecticut OEC was founded in 2014 through Public Act 14-39 (signed by then-Governor Daniel Malloy) (CTOEC 2019). The OEC consolidated and streamlined oversight originally carried out by a range of agencies: the State Department of Education (SDE), Department of Social Services (DSS), the Board of Regents (BOR), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), and the Department of Public Health (DPH) (CTOEC). Central to this study is the OEC’s implementation through bipartisan supports from both Governor Malloy and the state legislature (CTOEC 2019). In total, 31% of 4-year-olds are enrolled in Connecticut preschool programs, with an additional 4% in Head Start, and 5% in special education programs. Despite having three existing programs, 60% of 4-year-olds in CT are not enrolled in public early childhood education, indicating a point of entry for additional funding and access considerations. Statistically, it is unlikely that these 60% of students that are not enrolled in public programs are accessing a private alternative. The WDSB (2019) reports that (presumably private) child care programs in Connecticut are more expensive than in-state tuition for most Connecticut colleges.

The first of the three programs were Child Day Care Contracts (CDCC). Originally implemented in 2014 but last amended in 2021 (CaseText 2021), CCDC is a targeted preschool program supported through state funds. Contacts are established by the OEC with existing elementary and secondary schools, nursery schools, preschools, daycares, group child care homes, family resource centers, or Head Start programs (NIEER 2019). The program is targeted, with access primarily provided to households with incomes below 75% SMI. 28% of school districts offer the program. The Connecticut School Readiness Program (SR) was founded in 1997 by
Connecticut General Assembly Public Act 97-259-sHB 5461 (CT.gov 1997). Given the lack of the OEC at this time, the Act established the State Department of Education (SDE) as the primary oversight agency for SR, with the Department of Social Services as the primary agency in charge of providing grants for child care providers and day care centers (CT.gov 1997). While program applications are open to all, 60% of students enrolled in SR must meet an income threshold based on the SMI (CT.gov 1997, 64). 40% of school districts offer the program. Smart Start “SS” is the final program for Connecticut preschoolers, founded most recently in 2014. SS is a competitive grant program distributed to regional or local boards of education. The program has no income requirement, and 14% of school districts offer the program.

Connecticut is additionally one of 18 states that received a Federal Preschool Development Grant in 2018 (CT.gov 1997, 24). Connecticut was awarded $8.6 million in development grants from the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families. The grant provided CTOEC funds to diversify the program and facilitate inclusive, culturally responsive practices, mental health training for child care providers, improve screening for special education programs at the Pre-K level, and incentivize community collaboration across ECE programs. This grant was a 1-year funding mechanism that did not allow for any changes in terms of universality, but rather, provided improvements to the program curriculum (CTOEC 2020). In 2019, the OEC was awarded a $26.8 million 3-year renewal grant, the Federal Preschool Development Birth Through Five Renewal Grant (CTOEC 2020). The grant became effective January 1st of 2020. It is worth noting that, in 2017, the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly attempted to pass a Universal Preschool bill, citing the importance of universal access for all four-year-olds (CT.gov 2017). The bill received pushback for being overly ambitious in terms of timing and economic feasibility. The bill was ultimately signed by the Governor in
2017 and is committed to “require the Department of Education, in consultation with the Office of Early Childhood, to develop a plan for universal preschool beginning in 2022” (CT.gov 2017). No action has been taken towards expanding current preschool programs towards universality thus far.

Despite being ranked 21st in degrees of universality, with significant volumes of students excluded from the programs, Connecticut ranks 5th in terms of the amount of per-pupil spending provided to preschool students (NIEER 2019, 30). This may be an indicator of high-quality.

Adoption: Strong Elected Official Support

On May 28th, 2014, Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy, alongside his appointed Commissioner of the OEC, signed a series of bills expanding preschool (CT.gov 2014). While the two other CT preschool programs already existed, one of these bills, CT General Assembly Public Act No. 14-41, established the Connecticut Smart Start Program (CT.gov). Malloy’s efforts started nearly a year before in June of 2013, when he founded the Connecticut OEC with the support of the State Assembly through Executive Order 35 (Public Act 14-41) (CT.gov, 2013). Malloy additionally expanded the CT School Readiness Preschool program by 1,000 seats, for a total of 2,124 new preschool spaces statewide by 2014 (CT.gov, 2014). For the Tri State Area, 2014 can be considered the year of preschool, with Governor Cuomo of New York and Governor Malloy both emphasizing preschool as a top budget priority (Avila 2014). Even with Malloy’s proposed $51.1 Million-dollar 2014 expansion, Connecticut’s program would fail to be universal.

Current Governor Ned Lamont is generally supportive of preschool but has not made the program as much of a key issue area as his predecessor. In Governor Lamont’s FY 2020 Budget, there were a total of two mentions of preschool and preschool affiliated language, both on the same page (Lamont 2020). Despite this seeming lack of prioritization of preschool and child care in the
budget, Lamont has announced that American Rescue Plan funds would go towards child care programs (Polansky 2021), and additionally released a historic $210 million-dollar COVID-19 child care recovery plan (CT.gov, 2021).

Advocacy Groups

Generally, advocates for UPK in Connecticut have expressed concerns regarding the lack of true universality in the State, and the subsequent potential failure to support all students. The CT Early Childhood Alliance has been heavily involved in critiquing and pushing for expansion and improvements to Connecticut Preschool throughout the 2000s. In 2011, then director of the Alliance critiqued Attorney General George Jepsen’s attempts to establish that preschool is not a constitutional right, expressing concern over the precedent it sets with a future governor with less commitment to the program than Molloy (Lambeck 2011). Jepsen and Governor Molloy insisted that, “it’s not about whether the state supports pre-school, it’s about how education is defined by the state constitution” (Stuart 2011). The notion that preschool should not be defined as a right furthers the perception of Pre-K as child care, not education. Given CT’s mixed delivery system of Pre-K, owners and teachers at early childhood education centers have expressed their concerns with the lack of salary parity for preschool teachers as compared to their K-12 counterparts, despite an equal education requirement of a bachelor’s degree for both parties (Stuart 2011).

Public Support

Connecticutians have expressed concern over the lack of appropriate preschool options, and the failure to provide truly universal access across the State. A Center for American Progress report (2020) shows that nearly half of Connecticut families live in a child care desert. Parents have expressed frustration with the inability to find affordable child care nearby, creating a
significant barrier to financial security and opportunity (Bamberger 2022). Support for Governor Malloy’s reelection came in part from his emphasis on Pre-K, with parents from the Connecticut area expressing their support for the expansion of preschool in op eds (Kirchhoff 2014) and other public forums (Caffrey 2021) joining advocacy groups such as the parent and provider run campaign “Child Care For Connecticut’s Future” (Childcare for CT 2022). Malloy actively pursued support and communication on ECE, providing opportunities for direct public and parental engagement with him on education issues. In April 2014, Malloy hosted a symposium to discuss birth-to-five child care in the State with the public.

Union Presence

Connecticut child care workers are represented by 32BJ SEIU, a service industry union (Oshinskie 2021). This furthers the narrative of preschool as a child care service rather than a form of education. Child care workers are additionally represented by CSEA SEIU Local 2001, a union for public sector workers (janitorial staff, office workers, cafeteria workers). As seen in the case of Connecticut unions, preschool teachers are often distinguished from their educator counterparts at the K-12 level, perpetuating their status as an undeserving population.
New Hampshire

New Hampshire currently has no state-funded preschool program in place. This case study will analyze the why behind the lack of programming, and actors involved in any potential opposition, providing insight into why universality is not always favored.

While state-funded preschool is not available, New Hampshire does provide other mechanisms of early childhood care. The NH Department of Health and Human Services provides scholarships for child care assistance to low-income families, and the Department of Education provides oversight to early childhood special education programs funded by the state. The scope of these programs is limited and does not fall into an education-based understanding of preschool. Programs are primarily targeted at child care for working parents that cannot afford an alternative, a very limited group (NIEER 2019). The state additionally provides licensure endorsements and credentials for early care professionals through these two programs (NIEER 2019). At least 29 towns in New Hampshire have voted at the district level to implement their own, local preschool programs that are publicly funded (McIntyre 2020). Given the lack of a state program, these districts must rely on local taxes or federal programs, such as Head Start or child care block grants (Citizens Count 2022). Only 5% of the state’s 4-year-old population is enrolled in Head Start, with 9% of students in special education early childhood programs, and 86% not enrolled in any form of public early childhood education (NIEER 2019, 127). While the New Hampshire DOE does not provide preschool, the organization provides resources and early learning standards to ensure a seamless transition into kindergarten for students that have attended Pre-K (NH Education Department).
While prospects of a New Hampshire preschool program seemed feasible in 2019, excessive red tape ultimately led to the inability to bring a program to fruition. On December 30th, 2019, Republican New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu announced that the state would be receiving a $26.8 million Preschool Development Grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for coordination and planning purposes (NH.gov 2019). NH additionally received a $3.8 million dollar planning grant. Rather than establish a program, NH has utilized its grant programs to create a series of coordinating agencies and councils targeted at compiling data and brainstorming ways to streamline access to already existent opportunities for NH children and families (NIEER 2020, 130). Under Governor Sununu’s oversight, he established the Governor’s Council for Thriving Children by Executive Order (NH.gov 2020). The Council was meant to coordinate the use of these federal funds with the support of the DOE, DHHS, and the University of New Hampshire. The program’s sole accomplishment thus far is to create a stakeholder group of parents, legislators, businesses, and advocacy groups to compile “evidence informed child and family well-being system(s)...bring(ing) NH innovative ideas, steeped in research and data, to ensure that we all work together to connect families to opportunities” (NH.gov 2020). While theoretically appealing, the creation of this council suggests the Governor’s prioritization of consolidating actors under government labels over promoting action on creating a state-funded preschool program.
Advocacy Groups

Early child care advocates attribute the lack of public Pre-K to the potential to create competition with child care providers and daycares across the state. Organizations including Early Learning N.H., a nonprofit child care advocacy organization, as well as researchers at the University of New Hampshire, describe that infant and two-year-olds require higher staff-to-child ratios, making them significantly more expensive than their preschool counterparts. The organization has expressed concern that publicly funded preschool in NH drive these child care centers out of business, making them lack any profitability due to the tremendous cost of staffing for the remaining demographic (McIntyre 2020).
Chapter 4: Investigation of Budget, Union, and Advocate Preschool Discourse

The next portion of this paper will discuss the findings of a 20-state analysis utilizing text mining in R. As previously discussed, states with varying percentages of access to preschool programming have been analyzed comparatively to identify trends in frequency of language. A set of universal preschool-related words have been pre-selected to be run through each document (see Appendix A for details). Findings have been discussed by category of actor: elected officials’ budget documents, union legislative briefings or constitutions (for those without legislative briefings), and up to five advocacy briefs per state from the five most prominent advocacy organizations. As mentioned in the Key Definitions section of this paper (see page 3), for purposes of this analysis, states with high levels of universality will be labeled “established” preschool programs, and states with mid-levels of universality will be labeled “emerging” preschool programs given their potential for continued growth.

Figure 3: Overview of Findings and Relationships between Actors
Budget Document Findings

Utilizing FY2020 State budget documents (written in 2019), the frequency of each keyword has been identified and represents total occurrence by state. A limitation of this mechanism is that state’s budget documents vary by size. Documents range from a typical size of 30-100 pages, with some documents being closer to 200-500, and some exceptions at up to 1,000 pages. Despite the variation, the documents nonetheless present a useful comparison regarding the emphasis (or its absence) a state’s legislators and elected officials’ place on preschool in their goals for the 2020 year.

The highest frequency of occurrence of preselected words was in the Colorado State budget. Colorado had a total of 142 words, compared to an average frequency of 20.8 occurrences. Most notably, Colorado featured 108 mentions of Early Childhood, not preschool. Emerging preschool states present higher frequencies of child care word mentions than their established counterparts (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Text Mining Results, Budget Documents, Childcare Word Frequency by Degrees of Universality](#)

1 Multiple sources. Please see bibliography.
State programs with the lowest instance of mentions of both early education and preschool were those that contained no preschool programs (see Figure 5). South Dakota was the only state without a program that produced significant preschool-affiliated results; the state contained six instances of the phrase “child care.” A couple of exceptions, most notably, Wisconsin, contained zero occurrences of preschool words (see Figure 5). Upon a more detailed analysis of the Wisconsin 2020 State budget, it is evident that Wisconsin places significant emphasis on education, as it represents the largest percentage of the state’s budget. This finding suggests that Wisconsin, with a fifth ranking of universality and 75% of its 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool, represents preschool as part of the general budget without special mention. The state most likely incorporates preschool as a form of traditional schooling under the same category as K-12 education, neglecting to create a separate statement on the program all together. Wisconsin has significant mentions of the word “education” within their budget, which the state groups closely with preschool.
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<td>South Dakota</td>
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<td>Wyoming</td>
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Figure 5: Results, Text Mining, FY 2020 Budget Documents: Total Occurrences of Preschool Affiliated Language\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Multiple sources. Please see bibliography.
Union Legislative Briefing Findings

Union legislative briefings for 2020 were available for the majority of emerging and established preschool programs. Exceptions included states with more general union representation of childcare workers through the same organizations as other municipal or service industry workers, such as 32BJ. These organizations frequently did not provide detailed legislative agendas on preschool or childcare action. In turn, their unions’ constitutions were utilized as the text mining source. Most states without preschool programming did not have unions that discussed childcare or preschool at all.

A section of both established and emerging state preschool teachers were represented by broader unions that did not exclusively target preschool or childcare. Both Connecticut (emerging) and the District of Columbia (established) were represented by larger, more general unions; 32BJ and Local 500 SEIU, respectively. States with broader, service-based unions had lower frequencies of childcare and preschool words, as indicated in Figure 5 (0 for DC, 0 for Connecticut, 3 for New York AFL-CIO, 0 for Iowa AFSCME Council 61). Other states with zero mentions of preschool or childcare related words were represented by broader educational unions, such as the American Federation of Teachers (West Virginia) or the Oklahoma Education Association (Oklahoma). States with more prominent preschool programming thus perceive their preschool programs as part of their broader education programming, incorporating the programs into their broader education unions. However, the unions themselves do not appear to play a prominent advocacy role for preschool education, failing to mention preschool at all in their legislative goals for the 2020 fiscal year.

As seen in Figure 6, nearly all states without preschool programs had zero mentions of preschool words or child care words. For states without preschool programming, I investigated
prominent teacher unions for K-12 educators to see if there were any mentions of preschool programming or advocacy to incorporate preschool programming. For Idaho and Indiana, no prominent teacher unions emphasized child care or preschool. The largest union in Idaho, Idaho Education Association, had one mention of early childcare on their website— a blog article written by a kindergarten teacher emphasizing the importance of early care (Nesbitt 2019). There were zero preschool results for the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA 2022). For states without preschool, Montana poses a notable exception to trends observed. While Montana’s largest public employees union appears influential in the preschool discourse available, the union has actively fought against the state’s preschool legislation, House Bill 755 (Cates-Carney 2019). The union, Montana Federation of Public Employees, expressed concerns over a mixed delivery system preschool program, fearing the privatization or charter-ization of preschool programs they prefer to see incorporated into public education infrastructure (Cates-Carney 2019).
<table>
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</table>

Figure 6: Total Frequencies of Childcare and Preschool Words, Union Documents

When differentiating between preschool words and child care words available in union briefs, a clear divide appears between emerging and established states, with established programs

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3 Multiple Sources. Please see bibliography.
presenting significantly more mentions of preschool words than emerging states. This relationship flips with child care words, where emerging mid-levels of universality states offer more mentions of childcare words than established states. Moreover, this relationship additionally parallels the relationship in budget documents, where child care words were significantly more prominent for emerging states than their established counterparts (Figure 4). Figure 7 demonstrates the relationships for preschool and childcare words by category of universality below.

Figure 7: Preschool and Childcare Words Mentioned by Category of Universality, Union Documents

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4 Multiple sources. Please see bibliography.
Advocacy Brief Findings

To understand the preschool advocacy landscape across the nation, legislative agendas compiled by a range of prominent advocacy organizations were analyzed. The advocacy organizations ranged from larger nonprofits under an umbrella organization (for example, the South Dakota AEYC, part of the NAEYC), to local, grassroots organizations led by parent or teacher organizers. Additionally, think tank-based research incorporating action items and policy agendas were included in this section. Each state was provided with a maximum of five advocacy organizations. For states with less visible advocacy, 2-4 documents were provided; this was a small minority of total states.

Total advocacy brief language frequency per state was significantly higher than union or budget document language. Advocacy word frequencies were at an average of 64.95 mentions per state, as compared to an average of 4.35 mentions for union briefs and 20.77 mentions for budget documents.

Advocacy discourse frequencies for established states were significantly higher than for emerging states and states without preschool. There were over 600 total mentions of preschool words for established states, over 400 for emerging states, and nearly 200 for states with no preschool words (see Figure 8). A direct, linear relationship is observed between total mentions of preschool words in advocacy documents and access to preschool programming (See Figure 9).
Figure 8: Advocacy Brief Total Mentions by Degree of Universality

Figure 9: Graphing the Linear Relationship between Frequency and Advocacy Discourse

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5 Multiple Sources. Please see bibliography.
6 Multiple sources. Please see bibliography.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Further Questions

This study aimed to answer the research question, “How do state level actors influence the adoption of state level Universal Pre-K (UPK) programs?” Guided by the pre-existing literature that has emphasized the role of elected officials, nonprofit organizations, and unions in leading the charge on lobbying for universal preschool, and using the lens of the social construction and policy design theory, the following implications can be discussed.

Broad Implications

As first discussed in Chapter 1, Schneider and Ingram believe that all policy is based on how policymakers socially construct target populations. This study has confirmed this theoretical assumption by finding that how states conceptualize early childhood education, either as care or as education, is reflected in their political will to implement Universal Pre-K. New Hampshire’s significant emphasis on child and family well-being was not sufficient to incentivize utilization of grant funding to create a preschool program. This aligns with the theoretical understanding of the need for childcare versus the need for preschool education. As discussed in Chapter 1, the historic understanding of birth-to-five care as separate from conceptions of education carries into many considerations of preschool today. While New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu and other New Hampshire agencies may place an emphasis on early childhood, no emphasis is placed on preschool itself, suggesting a conceptualization of early care as “child minding” rather than education. In contrast, Florida’s preschool program founders emphasized school readiness as an important pillar of the need for adoption (see page 32), depicting preschool as a form of education, not care.
This finding was additionally confirmed by the 20-state text mining analysis. For state budget documents, as seen in Figure 4, states with mid-level, emerging preschool programs had significantly higher amounts of mentions of childcare words than established, universal counterparts. As an example, Colorado’s 108 occurrences of early education, despite having a mid-to-low ranked emerging preschool program (28th out of 50 states), confirms the notion of care as separate from education. This may suggest an emphasis on birth to five services without a prioritization of universal preschool or educational programs. Only twenty three percent of Colorado students are enrolled in state-funded public preschool programs. The frequency of early education language thus is not indicative of universality; however, the low frequency of direct preschool mentions (words such as “pre-k,” “preschool,” “UPK”) may be indicative of the program’s limited access and room for expansion. In contrast, high-ranked Oklahoma preschool program’s occurrences of preschool are the highest of all programs, with 4 occurrences of “PreK”, 3 occurrences of “Pre-K”, 1 occurrence of “pre-kindergarten”, and 5 occurrences of “preschool” (13 total, the second highest of exclusively preschool words from all states).

Union legislative briefs produced similar results. As mentioned in Chapter 4 Figure 6, emergent states’ union briefings had significantly more mentions of childcare than their established counterparts, and established states had more mentions of preschool words. This result furthers the finding that emergent states view preschool as separate from education, which has impeded their progress towards establishing programs. The notion of service-based unions in both established and emerging states placing less of an emphasis on preschool additionally furthers the conception of preschool as child minding. Rather than categorize preschool programs as education, these states have labeled preschool programs as aligned with “cleaners, property maintenance workers, doormen, security officers, window cleaners, building engineers...” and other service
workers in their unionization (32BJ 2022). Connecticut preschool programming, and others, could benefit from shifting away from 32BJ (as well as other service unions) and towards joint unionization with K-12 teachers.

A sub finding of the early childcare versus preschool language discussion is the role of mixed delivery systems. As discussed in Chapter 1, mixed delivery systems of preschool, the most prominent mechanism to implement preschool programming today, utilize private infrastructure and existing childcare facilities to house and incorporate preschool classrooms as states expand their UPK programming (Early Care and Education Consortium 2021). As preschool programs cannibalize existing child care infrastructure, the child care discussions that were previously in place may shift towards conversations on preschool. This rationale may explain why established preschool states have higher instances of preschool language and lower instances of childcare language as compared to emerging preschool programming.

Elected Official Implications

Building on the first broad finding, gubernatorial support serves as a prerequisite for establishing preschool. Gubernatorial support is key in terms of perpetuating or curtailing conceptualizations that influence policymaking in education. This relates to the feed forward effect to the extent that administrations decide to perpetuate existent perceptions of preschool and continue to view preschool populations as undeserving, or choose to break the cycle and uplift preschool populations with their power as actors. All states with Pre-K adoption will have pro-Pre-K governors who push for the UPK agenda at the time of founding. This finding can be discussed both in the context of all three case studies. In the case of Florida, while Governor Jeb Bush was not the primary actor in promoting the adoption of preschool, his support for the policy was a necessary condition to receive public support and ultimately pass the program. Connecticut’s
Governor Dannel Malloy played a significant foundational role in the adoption of Connecticut preschool programs and the consolidation of the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC). New Hampshire’s Governor Chris Sununu’s decision to utilize NH’s preschool grant to create a range of stakeholder groups and conversational organizations on early childhood instead of promoting a preschool program itself was the primary, if not exclusive reason that a preschool program was not established in New Hampshire, suggesting that without gubernatorial support, programming may be impossible.

Union Legislative Briefing Implications

One of the premises of the feed forward effect by Schneider and Ingram is that conceptualizations of policy result in the institutionalization of certain perceptions. As we think about ECE as care versus education, unions reflect those conceptualizations by being divided; serving those that are perceived as child minding through service-based unions, versus being served by broader teacher unions. This division strips preschool teachers of agency and power. Expanding on the broad implications, service-based unions placing less of an emphasis on preschool does not correlate with a lack of preschool programming. Programs such as DC, Iowa, and New York are all established despite the lack of prominent preschool and child care advocacy from unions. This may suggest that unions do not play a necessary role in the establishment of preschool programs as compared to elected officials, who are always relevant to establishment of programming (as seen above in the elected official discussion). The case study analysis further corroborates this claim. Florida’s preschool program, while universal, did not bring unions to the table by hiring non-unionized child care providers for their programming. Connecticut’s unions had broad, service-based goals and did not play a prominent role in adoption or advocacy after the fact. The lack of union input may be related to poor working conditions in many preschool centers,
resulting in a lack of salary parity between early childhood teachers and elementary school educators (Heckler 2019).

As a separate implication, the case of unionization in Montana indicates that one obstacle to access to preschool may be a fear of privatization and a mixed delivery system. In this case, unions may act as a force of opposition to the adoption of preschool.

Advocacy Group Implications

The linear relationship between advocacy discourse and universality directly aligns with the social construction of target populations. As advocates get involved, the capacity for access heightens. Advocates on the ground are loud and present. Findings on the average total frequency by state suggest the saturated prominence of advocacy group discourse on preschool as compared to unions and elected officials (65 average mentions compared to 4 and 20, respectively). All three categories of access to preschool (established, emerging, and none) had significant frequencies of advocacy words, suggesting that advocates are present and discussing preschool across the nation. States with the most universal preschool programs have the highest levels of preschool language (600+), suggesting that advocates have effectively lobbied for increased power, and thus, universality. The relationship between advocacy representation and preschool universality is linear; as advocates increase their discourse, access to preschool increases. This suggests a strong role of advocacy in improving outcomes across the nation, confirming Schneider and Ingram’s conception of advocates, coalition building, and media exposure as the most prominent factors in a shift towards being a contender on the policy landscape.

The high frequency of preschool words in addition to childcare words for emerging states may suggest an increased desire to support universality for states in emerging stages of adoption. States with a drive to promote preschool legislation that do not have universal access may be
perceived as the most effective targets for expanding preschool programming. Given the point of entry for advocates and the need for increased action, advocacy groups with a desire to catalyze change may have heightened preschool discourse in emerging states than their already established counterparts.

Limitations and Future Questions

Questions regarding evaluating the impact of actors on universality remain. While grants were discussed in the context of case studies, a limitation of this study was the inability to capture the full scope of impact of federal grant funding on adoption. In the case of New York City, federal funding catalyzed and ultimately allowed for universal adoption. Future studies can investigate the role of federal grant funding or other federal dollars in igniting adoption nationwide. Additionally, future studies may discuss the impact of a history of family friendly policymaking, the wealth of a state, and additionally variables on access. Findings-specific limitations include directionality and proving causation. While the volume of advocacy documents and the stories portrayed by the case studies suggest the implications above, other factors could be causal. In particular, a limitation of this study is the inability to determine if, for states where gubernatorial support was high, advocates changed governors’ perceptions and policymaking. While the volume of advocacy discourse suggests that their role is prominent and significant, it is ultimately beyond the scope of this study to be able to determine quantitative causation. Lastly, while budget, union, and advocacy documents were meant to align in years and content across states, given varying levels of access to documents, there were occasional selected documents that were not consistent, such as a 2021 advocacy agenda instead of a 2019-2020 document. In these instances, content seemed equally applicable, but may nonetheless be a potential limitation.
While this study emphasized the impact of actors on degrees of universality, it is important to recognize the impact of the quality of a program on its ultimate success, which was beyond the scope of this study. While Florida has high degrees of access, the programming has received significantly lower quality measures than its counterparts.

Conclusions

This study analyzed the impact of elected officials, unions, and advocacy groups on Universal Pre-K adoption at the state level. Through three case studies and a 20-state text mining analysis of discourse by actor, this study resulted in three main findings. First, gubernatorial support serves as a prerequisite to preschool adoption. Second, union preschool involvement is minimal and not necessary for adoption. Third, advocacy has a significant positive effect on adoption. An additional overarching theme was the effect of perceptions of early childhood education as child minding on the political will to catalyze change at the state level. The implications of these findings are twofold. Ultimately, teachers and advocates on the ground should continue their work, uplifting the voices of advocacy groups and influencing elected officials to catalyze change. Unions have not been brought to the table, suggesting some state-level pushback towards unionization and preschool expansion. The lack of union support may additionally affect worker and wage conditions for preschool teachers, a question for further inquiry in future studies. Ultimately, access must not be viewed in a vacuum; to truly provide Pre-K for all, it must be quality, equitable Pre-K for all.
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Appendix A: Preschool-Affiliation Words, Text Mining

Preschool Words:
Preschool
Universal Pre-K
UPK
Pre-K
Prekindergarten
VPK
Voluntary PreK
4K

Childcare Words:
Childcare
Early Care
Early Child Care
Day care
ECC
EC
ECE
Early Learning
Early Childhood
Appendix B: Degrees of Universality, NIEER 2020

FIGURE 5: VARIATION IN PERCENT OF 4-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN EACH STATE

Note: Colors reflect the state's majority party in the U.S. House of Representatives. Michigan's house delegation is evenly split between Republican and Democrat.
Appendix C: Text Mining Code, Budget Documents, Union Documents, Advocacy Documents

```r
library(pdfsearch)
library(pdftools)
library(dplyr)
directory <- ("~/Desktop/Union PDFS") #or budget pdfs or advocacy pdfs
result <- keyword_directory(directory,
  keyword=c('Preschool',
            'PreK',
            'UPK',
            'Universal PreK',
            'Pre-K',
            'Universal Pre-K',
            'Childcare Child care',
            'Early Care',
            'early care',
            'Early Child Care',
            'Early Childcare',
            '4K',
            'Prekindergarten',
            'prekindergarten',
            'Early Learning',
            'Early Childhood',
            'early childhood',
            'Early childhood',
            'Early Childhood Education',
            'childcare',
            'Child Care',
            'Child care',
            'prek',
            'VPK',
            'prek',
            'VPK',
            'Voluntary PreK',
            'daycare',
            'Daycare',
            'day care',
            'Day care',
            'pre-k',
            'pre-kindergarten',
            'Pre-Kindergarten',
            'Pre-kindergarten',
            'preschool'),
  full_names=TRUE)
result
```