**"Building a Social Movement for America's Children:
What Explains the Glaring Gap between Public Concern and Political Action when it comes to Children's Well-being?"**

Doug Imig
Political Science and the Hooks Institute
The University of Memphis

Dimig@Memphis.edu
(901) 678-3369
(901) 678-2983 (fax)

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Abstract:

Americans are concerned with the conditions of children and young people, and this concern has proven to be pervasive, intense, and enduring. But it has also largely proven to be politically anemic. Beyond the consensus that children's well-being is threatened, there is little public agreement over who bears responsibility for these problems or what we should do about them. As a result, public unease has failed to translate into a coherent and widespread demand for political change.

What explains this gap between public concern and political action when it comes to children's well-being?

This paper addresses several aspects of this question: First, in what ways is the public concerned with the well-being of children? Second, why has this concern failed to lead to political mobilization? Third, what factors helped to translate public concern with children in earlier eras into political movements, and allowed those movements to contribute to the policy-making process? Fourth, what might contemporary children's advocacy – reconfigured in light of these insights – look like? Our answers to these questions will help us to understand how collective public will develops and how and when it translates into collective political action benefiting children.

This paper is part of a larger project that examines the emergence, political engagement and decline of organized movements for children and young people. The larger research project is designed to:

- Describe significant trends in the pattern of mobilization of the children's movement over the past century.
- Identify key structural and strategic factors that correspond with the expansion and contraction of this advocacy sector.
- Analyze the operation of these structural and strategic factors across different instances of mobilization.
- Synthesize this information into an empirically informed, theoretical understanding of the mobilization of social movement organizations engaged in child advocacy.

This research project is intended to contribute to our understanding of the roles of social movement organizations and mass political action in achieving policy gains for children and young people.

Image 1: Mother Jones leading a protest march down Main Street in Trinidad, Colorado, probably in 1903. From *Video Ethnography: Toward a Reflexive Paradigm for Documentary* by Eric Margolis.

Building a Social Movement for America's Children: What Explains the Glaring Gap Between Public Concern and Political Action When it Comes to Children's Well-being?

Introduction

In her autobiography, published in 1925, Mother Jones recounts an episode of some two decades earlier:

> In the spring of 1903 I went to Kensington, Pennsylvania, where seventy-five thousand textile workers were on strike. Of this number at least ten thousand were little children.[1] … Every day little children came into Union Headquarters, some with their hands off, some with thumbs missing … They were stooped things, round shouldered and skinny. Many of them were not over ten years of age.
>
> We assembled a number of boys and girls one morning in Independence Park and from there we arranged to parade banners to the court house where we would hold a meeting. A great crowd gathered in the public square … I put the little boys with their fingers off and hands crushed and maimed on a platform. … I made the statement that Philadelphia's mansions were built on the broken bones, the quivering hearts and drooping heads of these children…
>
> The reporters quoted my statement … The Philadelphia papers and the New York papers got into a squabble with each other over the question. The universities discussed it. Preachers began talking. That was what I wanted. Public attention on the subject of child labor.
>
> From *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* (New York: Arno).[2]

The full story of Mother Jones' march of the mill children is both heart-rending and inspiring; And it is particularly relevant to us today as it speaks to the power of social movements to sweep across the country, mobilizing public concern and leveraging political concessions on behalf of children.

Ultimately, the Kensington strike was broken and the children were driven back to work, but not before Mother Jones marched her "Industrial Army" of striking children from Philadelphia to New York City, stopping to speak to crowds in cities and towns along the way. Upon reaching New York City, Mother Jones persuaded the Mayor and Commissioner of Police to allow her band to march up Fourth Avenue to Twentieth Street where she addressed an "immense crowd of the horrors of child labor." Reflecting on the march some years later, Mother Jones declared that it had been a success:

> Our march had done its work. We had drawn the attention of the nation to the crime of child labor. And … not long afterward the Pennsylvania legislature passed a child labor law that sent thousands of children home from the mills, and kept thousands of others from entering the factory until they were fourteen years of age (Mother Jones 1925).

Many dimensions of the march of the child workers are recognizable to students of social movements today. The striking children employed a *repertoire of action* that remains remarkably current, including strikes, marches, and public rallies. The marching children carried banners with slogans ready-made to grab newspaper headlines like "We want time to play," and "Prosperity is here, where is our share?" and some of the children were costumed as Revolutionary War heroes – linking them to the classic American struggle for liberation.

Mother Jones' campaign is also familiar in terms of its *targets*. Mother Jones leveled her attacks at exploitative mill-owners, whom she sought to shame into acceding to the strikers' demands. Indirectly, her actions targeted the general public and sought to build *issue salience* for child labor. In this respect the children's march was designed to raise public outrage and, through that outrage, to leverage governmental action.[3]

The children's march also demonstrates a savvy understanding of the importance of movement *framing* (Snow and Benford 1992). Mother Jones highlighted the *injustice* done to the children, pointed to the *agency* of the public – who could demand governments take action to remedy the problem – and built a shared *identity* – of the good and just fighting against the morally bankrupt "millionaire manufacturers" (c.f.: Gamson and Goodson 2001).

Mother Jones underscored the injustice done to American children for the sake of profit. Her appeal called upon business and governmental leaders to regulate child labor, and she demanded that President Roosevelt propose a law "prohibiting the exploitation of children." Moreover, her appeal demanded that all decent and compassionate citizens rally to her cause.

There are other parallels between this story and more recent social movements: Mother Jones' appeal attracted critical *allies,* including the professors, journalists, and clergy who took up her cause. The group of marchers embodied nothing less than the spirit of the old colonial army in its fight for freedom, wrote a sympathetic reporter for the *Philadelphia*

Evening Bulletin (Gorn 2001: 133).[4] And the Industrial Army resonated with a broad set of contemporary social and political conditions that collectively forced an opening in national *structures of political opportunity*. The child labor movement linked labor organizations with Progressives, churches, charities, women's clubs, and government agencies. During the first decades of the 20th century an expanding range of reformers took on the children's cause. Notably, these included Grace and Julia Abbott and their campaign to form the Children's Bureau, Jane Addams working from her base at Hull House, journalists and magazine editors intent on raising national awareness of child labor abuses, and organizations such as the National Child Labor Committee which was formed to document and publicize the conditions of child workers. The movement was catalyzed by national press attention to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and demanded accountability from political parties and elected officials who were unsure what extension of the franchise to women would mean (Skocpol 1992: 521).

Taken together, these efforts offer us a dramatic example of progressive social mobilization on a multitude of fronts that led to lasting improvements in the ways that society provides for children. Through a mix of contentious and institutional political action, these activists and advocates galvanized a national movement against the abuses of child labor, won reforms in labor practices across the country, and – in the process – contributed to the expansion of the federal role in American social welfare provision and in the protection of young people.

Social movements for children are particularly interesting to us today in a number of other ways as well. First, much like the present, Americans in earlier eras were disturbed by the influence of poverty, crime, urban decay, poor schools and failing health on their children, families, and communities (c.f.: Minow and Weissbourd 1993: 6-7; Tobey 1925). Second, advocates in these earlier eras launched many of the tactics that continue to define the movement: including protest campaigns (e.g.: Mother Jones' strikes), data collection and dissemination (e.g.: the work of Hull House and the Children's Bureau), nationwide media efforts (e.g.: *Delineator* magazine's "Child-Savers" campaign and the work of the National Child Labor Committee), and institutional lobbying (e.g.: creation of the White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909). Third, and apparently at odds with conditions

today, advocates and activists in these earlier eras were able to mobilize key public and elite groups into a potent political force that gained political concessions.

To be sure, many of the policy gains won during earlier waves of reform (e.g.: the maternal health provisions of the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act), were short-lived. But these early gains also should be credited with contributing to a number of long-lasting policy advances for children (e.g.: compulsory public education, the labor protections that became part of the Fair Labor Standards Act, and programs such as ADC, WIC, and Head Start). Additionally, these movements established an expanded federal role in securing children's well-being, and – in consequence – created new venues for advocates to participate in the policy making process.

The gains achieved through public mobilization are often fleeting. Still, direct and widespread public participation may be a critical input to any successful effort to expand the reach of social policy for children and young people. As political scientist E.E. Schattschneider argued over forty years ago, progressive social policy is most likely to result when the public plays a vigorous role in policymaking – broadening the scope of conflict and demanding that policy makers pay close attention to citizen preferences (1960). In their careful examination of poor peoples' movements, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward analyze those few instances where large groups of poor Americans have "withdrawn their consent" from established patterns of order and control. Piven and Cloward conclude that progressive social policies are most likely to come about when political elites are forced to quell widespread protest and appease disgruntled challengers (1979). More recently, William Julius Wilson has argued that until ordinary Americans find their collective political voice, they are destined to remain fragmented along class and racial lines, and will "fail to see how their combined efforts could change the political imbalance and thus promote policies that reflect their interests" (1999: 1).

Activists fighting for children also underscore the importance of public mobilization; arguing that building public and political will is a critical step in achieving policy gains for children. The director of a national youth advocacy program argues: "power yields nothing without a demand, and … nobody is making a strong demand on behalf of people in the low-income

community" (Walsh 1997). A Michigan children's advocate underscores the public's role in this process: "community mobilization is not happening in any systematic way … and it has to happen to move us off the dime." A National Parent Teacher Association executive echoes this same theme: "today, there really is no grass-roots mobilization for kids in this country…" Or in the words of an advocate with the Children's Aid Society: "communities that have mobilized around children's issues are few and far between … and without bottom up organizing not much is possible" (Author's interviews).

What does Mother Jones' march suggest about movements for children today?

What are the implications of the children's crusade of 1903 – and the broader movement of which it was a part – for current efforts to mobilize on behalf of children's well being? We can point to a number of parallels between earlier campaigns for children and the present that may help us better understand the conditions under which social movements emerge and contribute to social policy making in this country.

Perceptions of Injustice, Agency and Identity

Mother Jones sought to raise public concern with the condition of children. Though general conditions are much less dire than a hundred years ago, American children and youth continue to face a wide range of threats to their well-being, including one of the highest child poverty rates of any developed nation, uneven access to medical care, under-performing schools, troubled and broken homes, and crumbling communities (Kids Count 2003).

The poor and weakened condition of American children is all the more striking when compared with other industrialized nations. According to the Luxembourg Income Study of 2002, the United States is the richest nation in the world in terms of per capita wealth, but falls to 21st in terms of child poverty rates. (Among developed nations, only Mexico has a higher child poverty rate than the U.S.) (Jesuit and Smeedling 2002).

One of the most striking aspects of the plight of American children concerns the political dimensions of the problem. *As a society, we have chosen to protect other groups instead of children.* While we have cut our rate of elderly poverty in half over the last three decades – chiefly by building automatic cost of living adjustments into social security payments – we have

allowed the percentage of American children who live in poverty to more than double during that same period. The result is that the wealthiest nation in the world invests a "pitifully small percentage of our resources *and our concern* in the early years of the people who will obviously inherit the nation" (Hodgkinson 2003: 1).

Issue Salience

At the same time, these threats to children's well-being resonate with a wide cross-section of the public. Across the divides of race and class, Americans consistently rank children's issues among the most important problems facing the country, and – regardless of income or ethnicity – parents mention almost identical concerns when discussing their kids and families (Hewlett and West 1998). A recent poll from the Public Education Network and Education Week finds that at least 80 percent of voters favor full funding of Head Start, reduced class sizes, protecting the federal budget from education cuts and increased teacher pay (2004). In some polls, adult Americans have ranked "preparing young people for the future" as the nation's highest priority by a wide margin (Gallup Poll Social Audit Survey, 2001). As Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West argue: "on the critical issues that underpin and condition daily life – workplace policy, tax policy, and child safety – there is *enormous unity across race, class, and gender*" (2002: xx, italics in original). [5] Pointing to the implications of these conditions for mobilization, Hewlett and West argue that there is fertile "ground on which to build a parents' movement" (2002: xx).

Widespread awareness and concern with the injustice done to children presumably lays the groundwork for a social movement for children. What factors, then, stand in the way of such a movement? The answer, of course, is complex. A number of factors – collectively – serve to undermine the current political power of the children's movement.

Frame Confusion

While Americans agree that children are in trouble, we disagree over what should be done, or who should take action. There is no agreed upon "master frame" defining the plight of children or connecting general unease with their condition to specific antagonists or to specific policy solutions (Gamson and Goodson 2001; Kirkpatrick 2003).

This internal conflict is evident in public attributions of where responsibility for children lies. A majority of Americans believe that it is other parents – rather than government or some other group – that should take better care of children (Bostrom 2003). Looking at some specifics:

- 83% of Americans believe that parental inattention is the most serious problem facing families (Public Agenda 2001).

- 60% of Americans report that families, rather than government or employers, should be responsible for "ensuring access to child care" (Public Agenda 2001).

- The public is frightened by youth crime, is worried that other parents are not taking responsibility for raising their children; and is skeptical about government playing a larger role in securing children's well-being (Public Agenda 1999a; Yankelovich 1998).[6]

Demographic Trends

A second set of factors that contribute to the disconnect between public concern and political action follow from demographic trends that are rapidly changing the social landscape in this country.

- First, a growing number of Americans have no regular contact with children. Of the 105 million households in the U.S., less than a third (34 million households) have children under the age of 18 at home (Hodgkinson 2003: 7). The political implications of this shift are dramatic: while parents made up a majority of U.S. voters in 1956 (55 percent), today they constitute a minority (Teixeira 2002).

- Second, American society is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, leading to ethnic cleavages that make collective identification and collective action more difficult to engender. As Bud Hodgkinson notes, in a little over a decade, there will be no ethnic majority among American children under age five. The same will be true of *all* Americans before the year 2045. Young children are the most diverse group in the United States, and they will make the nation more diverse as they age (2003: 4).

- Moreover, the strong correlation between ethnicity and poverty in America further undermines efforts to build political voice. About one-third of black and Hispanic

children are growing up in poverty, compared with 10% of Anglo children (Hodgkinson 2003: 5).

- o Summarizing what we know of the strong correlation between socio-economic status and political voice, Sidney Verba underscores the disconnect between the haves and have-nots when it comes to political participation: "Political voice may be in the center of a virtuous circle of capabilities for those advantaged in a society, but [it is at the center of] a vicious circle of incapabilities for the disadvantaged" (Verba 2003).

- o Racial stereotypes may further undermine opportunities for cross-class and cross-race mobilization. In his careful study of attitudes toward welfare, Martin Gilens argues that whites' attitudes toward poverty and welfare are dominated by stereotypes about low-income blacks (1999).

These trends result in a predominately white and aging middle class that has less regular contact with children, and is increasingly unlikely to feel connected to problems that disproportionately affect children and families of color.

Fragmented and Transient Communities

Further, while a great many individuals are worried about the problems faced by children, efforts to unite concerned individuals into a collective political voice face daunting obstacles.

- Studies suggest that neighbors have less regular contact with each other than in the past (Putnam 2000).

- American neighborhoods are growing more segregated along racial and class lines (Frankenberg and Lee 2002; Waste 1998).

These trends toward fragmentation are amplified by the increasing transience of the American public.

- Of the 281 million Americans, roughly one in seven move each year – the highest known migration level of any nation (Hodgkinson 2003: 4).

- These trends are particularly pressing on children in poor families, which move more often than their middle-income peers (Lee and Burkam 2002).

Additionally, public schools are re-segregating along with residential housing patterns. As Gary Orfield and his colleagues at the Harvard Civil Rights Project report, "large metropolitan areas, smaller central cities and suburban rings are areas of great segregation" in this country, leaving most white students with "little contact with minority students" (Orfield and Lee 2003).

The result is that the places where neighbors do come together to discuss children's issues – along the sidelines of their children's ball games, or at parent teacher organization meetings, for example – provide few opportunities for individuals to discover that their concerns are shared by parents and non-parents alike who live across town, who may be of a different race, have a different family structure, or are surviving on a markedly different income. This disconnect confounds efforts to build a collective identity able to span communities, let alone capable of spanning the country (Hewlett and West 1998; Imig 2001b).[7]

A Disconnect Between the Public and Policy Making

Each of these factors contributes to the isolation and political silence of even the most concerned individuals, and adds to the distance between the public and politics (Skocpol 1999). Moreover, individuals may doubt that their voice matters or that they can make a difference when a multitude of advocacy groups already claim to speak for children (DeVita, Mosher-Williams and Stengel 2001).

Likewise, there is a great deal of – at least rhetorical – support for children to be found in the White House pledge to "leave no child behind" (Twohey 2001).[8] And because states are responsible for the bulk of child and family policy, and are trying to shore up existing programs with declining revenue, much advocacy effort is directed at state and local institutions – further masking not only the national character of the plight of children, but also the nation-wide concern with their well being.

What Factors make Mobilization for Children Possible?

If all of these factors stand between the public and its capacity to mobilize around its shared concern with children, under what conditions might such a movement to emerge?

In their seminal examination of the development of American children's policy, W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson argue that significant shifts in the direction and magnitude of child and family policy have come in the wake of more general social tumult and anxiety.

> During certain periods of rapid change – especially the decades before the Civil War, the progressive era around 1900, and the Great Depression of the 1930s – anxiety has become especially acute, generating institutional reforms and ideological revisions with lasting implications for families and children (1988: 4).

Grubb and Lazerson link significant shifts in economics, politics and society with attitudinal and behavioral changes in individuals which, in turn, prompt widespread demands for expanded governmental commitments to progressive policies. Grubb and Lazerson's formulation, however, offers few clues for how best to understand the causal links between periods of rapid change and attendant levels of social and political anxiety; or the mechanisms through which anxiety is translated into public sentiment and mobilization; or how best to spark political responsiveness. Gaining some purchase on these links becomes our task.

We can begin to gain additional analytic leverage into these questions by borrowing from the work of social movement scholars, who have attempted to build a more systematic understanding of the influence that variations in political context, organizational structures, and strategic choices will have both on the development of social movements and the influence that movements will have on public policy. This body of work has identified a wide range of factors that contribute to movement mobilization, including *political opportunities*, *framing processes*, *mobilizing structures*, and *repertoires of contention* (for representative overviews see McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Meyer and Gamson 1996; Tarrow 1998).

- *Political opportunities* refer to changes in political and social conditions that raise or lower barriers to political mobilization and policy access. For example, opportunities to mobilize are affected by highly contested elections, by the degree to which governmental administrations are sympathetic or antagonistic, and by the alliances that movements build (Tarrow 1998). Research on social movement mobilization suggests that challengers are likely to gain higher levels of access to – and concessions from – government when there is instability within dominant political coalitions. Highly contested elections and fragile political alliances cause uncertainty,

leading parties and candidates to pay more careful attention to the appeals of marginal constituencies, as elites attempt to reconfigure a winning, and stable, support base (Hansen 1991: 16-17; Piven and Cloward 1979: 28). During periods of political uncertainty, children's advocates have had greater opportunities to amplify their political voice. For example, the uncertainty inherent in extending the vote to women represented a major challenge to national political alignments. As the political parties tried to strategize around the uncertainty brought about by the "woman's vote," they gave serious consideration for the first time to such issues as child labor, and infant and maternal health policy (Hawes 1991: 50; Sutton 1996: 210). In the same way, the massive dislocations caused by the Great Depression, including staggering adult unemployment rates, contributed to increasing support for child labor regulation, in part as an effort to placate unemployed, adult voters (Hawes 1991: 53). Likewise, the Depression increased public support for expanding federal aid programs for families, children and widows (Skocpol 1992).

Demographic trends can also create political opportunities, for example by creating concentrations of voters with shared concerns. The migration of African Americans to northern urban centers contributed to the power of black voters, and increased their importance to the political parties, for example. Today, the rising number of women in the workforce, increasing reliance on non-family based child-care, and increasing reliance on two incomes to sustain families, might be expected to produce the type of collective social anxiety that Grubb and Lazerson forecast will lead to institutional reforms concerning families and children.

- *Framing processes* include both the strategic efforts of activists to shape the discussion of children's needs, as well as the dynamic by which advocacy messages are filtered by the media and received by the public and policymakers (Snow and Benford 1992). By tracking the dominant frames that children's advocates have advanced across time, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways that advocacy messages mesh with different configurations of political opportunity, and with patterns of mobilization. Children's issues present a baffling array of framing possibilities: How should children's well-being be defined? Who has the authority to speak for children? To

what extent do we think about children's issues in terms of specific crises (e.g.: the tragedies that befell Baby Jessica, Adam Walsh, Ryan White, or Elián González)? How are preferred policy solutions identified (c.f.: Gamson and Goodson 2000; Gilliam and Bales 2001)? Should children's advocates push for targeted or universalistic programs? Should activists emphasize – or avoid – the family and community context of children's problems, and the ever-present relationship between poverty and children's well-being (Hodgkinson 2003; Pardeck 2002)? The problems that confront children likely will need to be addressed in the context of their families, but as Nancy Amedei reminds us, the children we want to help may come attached to parents we don't much like (1993). Each of these framing decisions will influence levels of public and political support and opposition.

- *Mobilizing structures* refer to the formal and informal organizations and networks which give rise to social movements and through which they operate. Networks of community, women's, and progressive organizations in the first decades of the twentieth century, for example, galvanized communities around children's issues, and translated public concern into political agendas. The relative success of these organizations in advancing policy agendas has led analysts to argue that nationwide networks of community-based organizations – like the early women's groups, or like the National PTA in the 1950s, offer the best hope for mobilizing a new national children's agenda (Skocpol 1997; Skocpol and Dickert 2001).[9] Theda Skocpol argues that women's voluntary associations knitted women together as "uniquely moral political actors who had the duty to 'mother the nation'" (1992: 529). Should advocates push to rebuild networks and coalitions today based on their importance in earlier eras? Conversely, have developments in technology and communications reduced the need for an organizational infrastructure in child and family policy movements?

A critical facet of social movement success is their ability to tap into pre-existing social networks. As Doug McAdam's work on the Freedom Summer campaign of the American Civil Rights Movement demonstrates, the social networks in which

Freedom Summer applicants were embedded played a key role in determining who would participate in this campaign and who would stay at home (1988).

- *Repertoires of Contention* refer to the forms of strategic engagement challengers employ, ranging from institutional lobbying and educational campaigns to more contentious political events like demonstrations, sit-ins and boycotts. In other words, how social movements actually move. Children's advocates a century ago focused their efforts on building public awareness (e.g.: the National Child Labor Committee's campaign beginning in 1908 to document and publicize the conditions of child workers); governmental lobbying (e.g.: establishing the White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909, and pressing for the creation of the Children's Bureau); and nationwide media campaigns (e.g.: the *Delineator* magazine's Child-Savers campaign in the 1910s), alongside the protest campaigns led by Mother Jones (Gordon 1994: 90; O'Connor 2001: 295). Despite the constant effort to find new ways to better represent children's needs, advocacy efforts today have deep historical roots. This is evident across a range of current advocacy activities, including media campaigns and efforts to heighten public awareness (e.g.: the work of the Ad Council, the Benton Foundation, I Am Your Child, and Stand for Children); governmental lobbying and education (e.g.: efforts of the Children's Defense Fund or the Center on Budget and Policy Priority), and in efforts to collect and disseminate compelling data (e.g.: the efforts of the Annie E. Casey Foundation through its *Kids Count* project, or the American Academy of Pediatrics). How successful are these strategies across time and when they are embedded within different political contexts?

Strategic and Structural factors that contribute to mobilization of the children's movement.

Using these components of political context and strategic action to structure the investigation, what can we say about the development of American social movements for children? One set of lessons concerns the importance of *structures of political opportunity*.

- **General patterns of family and economic structures determine the shape and prominence of the children's agenda**. Grubb and Lazerson, for example, argue

that changes in poverty rates, divorce rates, and maternal employment rates are likely to precipitate social and political changes (1988: 4).

- **Vigorous social movements take up the children's cause.** Historically, the political voice of children has been amplified by other social movements, such as Progressivism (Lasch 1995), or the Women's and Civil Rights movements (Steiner 1976). Children are represented only by proxy – and children's movements have emerged as "spin offs" from these "initiator" movements, and will be framed in ways that reflect those broader movements (c.f.: McAdam 1995).

- **Electoral uncertainty amplifies marginalized voices.** Instability within political coalitions increases the willingness of political elites to champion new policy preferences and previously marginalized constituencies (Hansen 1991; Piven and Cloward 1979). In the classic example, extending the franchise to women heightened political uncertainty, creating agenda space for consideration for child and family policy.

- **Governmental action creates opportunities for advocates.** New government programs – along with more routine authorization and appropriation cycles – create venues for advocacy access, focus media attention on certain policy frames, provoke counter-mobilizations, and provide new resources for movements (Costain 1992; Cross 2004; Imig 1996b; Skocpol 2004; Walker 1991).

A second set of key factors identified in the literature suggests that movement success hinges upon activists' *framing* efforts. The key finding here is that successful iterations of advocacy are built upon master frames that resonate with contemporary structures of political opportunity. Observers point to the following dynamics:

- **Successful frames situate critical events within policy narratives.** While dramatic events may galvanize public concern, translating general unease into mobilization requires that advocates work to articulate and explain the place of specific events within overarching policy narratives (Stone 1997).

- **Successful frames convey *injustice, agency,* and *identity*** (Gamson and Goodson 2000). Powerful frames have the capacity to build a sense of linked fate among otherwise atomized individuals. During World War One, for example, the

Kindergarten movement was able to build widespread public support for kindergarten programs by appealing to the need to "Americanize" the children of recent immigrants (Beatty 1995).

- **Frames must resonate with concurrent movements.** This is evident, for example, in the success of movements subsequent to the American Civil Rights Movement that were able to adopt the "rights" frame championed by that movement (Meyer 2004; Tarrow 1998: 117).

- **A chorus of voices amplifies the message.** More effective configurations of advocacy are galvanized around shared master frames – invoked by a broad range of activists (Bales 1999). A number of analysts have suggested that the rhetorical upper hand in framing current social policy is held by right wing strategists, who recognize the critical importance of framing and have been willing to fund frame building work (Block 2003; Covington 1998). As Fred Block argues:

  > On a whole series of issues from tax policy to welfare to abortion to foreign policy, conservative intellectuals and activists at well-funded right-wing think tanks have invented new language for framing political debate, have laid out long-term strategic campaigns, have maneuvered to create allies and neutralize opponents, and have drafted legislative language to enact their preferred policies (2003: 734).

A third narrative thread through the literature on mobilization argues that successful movements rely on effective *mobilizing structures*.

- **Horizontal linkages build shared identity, vertical integration leads to policy influence.** At the turn of the last century, the structure of women's organizations – linked to local communities and nationally federated – made it possible to influence policy at the local, state and national levels by building local identity movements, articulating shared agendas, and passing information and policy preferences from level to level (Skocpol 1992; 1997; Skocpol and Dickert 2001).

- **Coalition partnerships build collective will and link disparate groups.** Ultimately, the power of organizations may follow more directly from the partners in coalitions than from the structures of those coalitions. This may be particularly true in the age of the internet where movements – both tangible movement organizations like Greenpeace, and more amorphous movement collectives like the campaign against neo-liberal globalization – are able to draw upon a striking array of 'virtual'

organizational capacities. Who would the right set of partners be (both inside and outside of political institutions) in a vibrant contemporary coalition for children?

- **Patterns of children's mobilization reflect the arguments between (often gendered) professions.** The development of maternal health provisions in Sheppard-Towner, and their later re-emergence in ADC, for example, reflected arguments between nurses, physicians and social workers. Similar patterns of conflict – with parallel policy implications – are evident in the historical debates between kindergarten advocates, proponents of early childhood education and the public education system (Michel 1999; Sarbaugh-Thompson and Zald 1995; Stone 1996).

A fourth set of factors gleaned from the literature on social movements for children argues that successful iterations of mobilization are built upon strategic acumen, with advocates employing *repertoires of contention* that build public concern and help to translate that concern into collective action.

- **Little is new in the advocacy toolbox.** Child advocacy strategies have remained remarkably constant over time. They include a focus on data collection and dissemination, protest politics, campaigns to influence public opinion, and institutional lobbying.

- **The importance of charisma and entrepreneurship is easily exaggerated.** Charismatic leadership and entrepreneurial acumen are likely to be distributed randomly across time, but patterns of advocacy group formation and mobilization are strongly cyclic and episodic, reflecting more general patterns of political opportunity (Meyer and Imig 1993).

- **Effective Tactics embrace political opportunities.** More successful iterations of advocacy are less a function of developing new tactical repertoires, alliances, or networks than they are a function of choosing combinations of these strategies in order to fashion a fit with concurrent structures of political opportunity.

- **Tactics and frames are mutually reinforcing.** The critical strategic objective of advocates is to build a policy narrative that resonates with the public, ties widely perceived problems to particular policy solutions, and is able to mobilize critical public groups around shared advocacy frame.

Where to from here? Building a New Movement for Children

Armed with these insights, can we begin to unravel the paradox at the heart of this paper? That is – under current social and political conditions it seems axiomatic that building a political movement for children is impossible, *even though* children's issues are highly salient to a wide cross-section of the public.

Underlying this paradox is another: concerning the relationship between children's issues and the plight of low-income families. Children in low-income families are at greatest risk in our society. Across our history, consequently, relief efforts – logically – have focused on the children of the poor. This has been the arena for the charity work for the majority of the past century and has led to much of what activists in different eras considered progressive social policy (certainly including Settlement Houses, Friendly Visitations, Orphan Trains, and Day Nurseries).

Today, however, understanding children's issues in the context of family poverty may stand in the way of mobilizing mass concern or generating political salience. To the extent that children's issues are perceived to be poverty issues, children's advocates are working against strong anti-government and anti-welfare feelings. If the public believes children's advocates are fighting for more welfare, advocates will confront public antipathy toward big government, toward welfare, and a suspicion that the problems confronting other people's children are really problems of other parents.

The tenor of national political initiatives over the last decade – including the Contract with America and the Personal Responsibility Act – underscore the current hostility toward redistributive policy and efforts to promote social justice. In fact, current federal subsidies for asset development heavily favor more affluent families. Less than five percent of these benefits go to the bottom 60 percent of American taxpayers (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2004).

Further, between a quarter and a third of Americans identify themselves as evangelical Christians, who advance a family agenda that champions traditional family structures, and believes that mothers should stay at home to care for their children (Hardisty 1999; Media

Strategies Group 1999, Talbot 2000). It will be extremely difficult to convince this portion of the electorate, or the candidates they support, that government do more to support low-income children.

In the following sections I advance two possible frames around which to build cross-class and cross-race mobilization efforts that appear to be sensitive to contemporary structures of political opportunity.[10]

Mobilizing around Public Schools

The infrastructure of public education in this country may present one of the most promising opportunities for cross-class mobilization. Public schools currently educate 55 million children, representing 89 percent of all children in the United States (Carnevale and Desrochers 1999). While much press attention is devoted to antipathy toward public education, if we unpack the general unease with public schools we find that a majority of Americans view the quality of public schools in their own neighborhood positively by a margin of nearly two to one (Mellman 2003). The massive buy-in to public education – evident in the number of parents who send their own children to public schools – has led one of America's most successful community organizers, Ernesto Cortes, to argue that schools and churches are the two local institutions that *do* work in most American communities (1996).

If the infrastructure of public education suggests a structure for mobilizing a movement, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act offers an organizing frame to mobilize around. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) offers an intriguing opportunity for advocates as it potentially represents on of the most pervasive incursions of the federal government into child and youth policy, and is occurring during a period otherwise characterized by retrenchments of federal investment in social justice and social welfare policy. The potential implications of NCLB for progressive children's policy making perhaps have been best articulated by Department of Education Secretary Rod Paige, who argues that NCLB is the "logical next step" in the long and far-flung court battles over desegregation. In Secretary Paige's words:

> Equality of opportunity must be more than just a statement of law; it must be a matter of fact … factually speaking, this country does not yet promote equal

opportunities for millions of children. That is why the No Child Left Behind Act is so important… (quoted in Hendrie 2004).

Following Secretary Page's logic, if the courts should begin to accept evidence generated by NCLB of disparities between schools as the basis of claims for equal protection under the law, we may be entering a period in which it will be possible to revisit some of our national failures when it comes to equality in educational opportunity. The fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education* have seen a sad pattern of disinvestment in public education in this country: through the founding of southern segregation academies in the 1960s, the indemnification of white suburban school districts from desegregation plans in the 1970s, the widespread assault on affirmative action programs in the 1980s, through voucher programs – the 1990s version of the "choice" plans proposed by southern cities in the 1960s; and today's efforts by states to reduce tax burdens by shifting larger shares of education funding to lotteries and casinos (Andrews 2004; Bollinger 2004; Ratner 2004).

In this context, NCLB offers a new mobilizing frame to advocates. One that allows them to talk about equal protection under the law, and circumvents highly inequitably funding schemes such as district specific property taxes, and policy directives that balkanize and protect affluent districts. Potentially, the frame presented by NCLB has the ability to link the fates of families from different economic classes and racial groups, from different school districts, and – potentially – even from across the nation. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that a number of states with Republican legislatures, such as Virginia and Utah, are clamoring to be exempted from NCLB (Connect for Kids Weekly, February 2, 2004).

In short, NCLB offers a new wrinkle to advocates for equality in public education and for the equal protection of children more generally. The effort to generate a shared vision of the best interest of children – therefore – ultimately depends on framing issues and tapping into social structures that transcend class. NCLB represents such a possibility. As Lee Bollinger (2004) has argued, NCLB may actually present an opportunity not simply to build collective identity that will encourage political action, but may actually beak down the very social structures that propagate class and race based inequality among children in this society.

Urban Development and the Knowledge Economy

A second frame with the potential to catalyze the children's movement concerns the dictates of shifting economic forces in this country. Specifically, a growing share of productive capacity in this country depends on the skills, training and education of workers, rather than on the industrial infrastructure that drove Fordist modes of production.

Robert Reich argues that in twenty years fully a third of all jobs in the U.S. will be in knowledge based industries such as information technology and medicine (1998). Significantly, unlike a smokestack-based economy, the principal productive capacity of knowledge workers is completely transportable. In consequence, for states and cities to thrive in this economy, they need to be able to attract and hold concentrations of highly educated and skilled workers, the group that Richard Florida has labeled the "creative class" (2003). Consequently, the economic survival strategies of both cities and businesses, and the nature of the dialogue between cities and businesses, is likely to shift from market inducements (e.g.: "smokestack chasing" tax abatement strategies) to efforts to build the types of infrastructure and amenities that attract and hold knowledge workers (c.f.: Harrington 1999). Research on the types of inducements that attract and hold knowledge workers suggests that competitive cities need to work to provide good schools, safe streets, livable neighborhoods, recreational opportunities, a clean and healthy environment, and reasonable commutes. These factors constitute a type of *soft infrastructure* which will undergird the economic competitiveness of cities in the future. The need to nurture these aspects of soft infrastructure, in turn, suggests an opportunity to make all levels of government as well as the business community into allies for child advocates.

How so? To the extent that cities and businesses see their survival tied to the promotion of child and family friendly policies – including strong schools and safe streets and sustaining a pool of well-paying jobs – advocates for children have the opportunity to gain government and business allies who are finding their traditional power base in flux, leaving regime partners casting about for ways to rebuild both a healthy economic infrastructure and a stable political power base. It is this political uncertainty which increases the attractiveness of a child friendly public policy to policy makers.

For the advocacy community, this economic shift and its political implications offer an opportunity to promote a community-based children's agenda that would appeal to both

governments and markets. Linking communities, businesses and governments in this way presents an attractive opportunity for activists because it builds upon the concerns they share with business and government leaders in ways that can be mutually reinforcing.

In sum, by resituating the children's movement within contemporary structures of political opportunity, and by concentrating on the types of mobilizing frames suggested in these examples, we may recapture the opportunity to define governmental responsibility – and policy interventions – for children in terms that will galvanize the support of American communities and families, and may even attract the support of allies in government and in the business community for efforts to promote the well-being of children.

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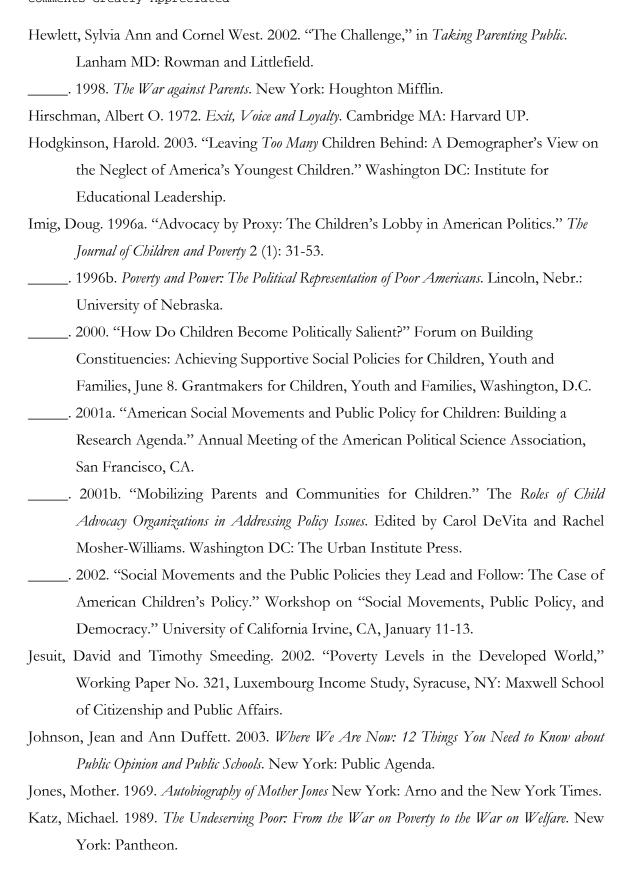_____. 2001. "The Politics of Preschool Advocacy: Lessons from Three Pioneering Organizations." *The Roles of Child Advocacy Organizations in Addressing Policy Issues*. Edited by Carol DeVita and Rachel Mosher-Williams. Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press.

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[1] Elliott Gorn estimates that "a hundred thousand workers, sixteen thousand of them children under sixteen years of age – walked out" during the Kensington strike (2001: 131).

[2] This account of the march of the mill children is drawn from *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* (1969: 71-83) and *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (Gorn 2001).

[3] In a transnational context, more recent analysts have labeled this indirect application of pressure the "boomerang effect." (Keck and Sikkink 1989).

[4] Not all coverage was so favorable. *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, for example, "dismissed the marchers as a gang of lunatics" (Gorn 2001: 139).

[5] For a range of public opinion data indicating the prevalence and intensity of public concern for children, see: Coalition for America's Children 1999; Public Agenda 1999a; 1999b; 2001; Yankelovich 1998). Two key findings: Many analyses record the plight of American children, including the Children's Defense Fund's *The State of America's Children*, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Annual *Kids Count Data Book*.

[6] Moreover, as Margaret Broadkin argues, while business leaders and fiscal conservatives surely love children, they rarely support increased government spending on any programs for fear of higher taxes (2001)

[7] Community fragmentation also both contributes to – and is exacerbated by – the decline in membership in national organizations such as the National PTA, uncoupling local parent teacher organizations and dismantling their national infrastructure for advocacy.

[8] The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized under the title: "No Child Left Behind."

9 Some recent efforts to build national coalitions of advocates (e.g.: the National Association of Child Advocates) have taken their cue from these earlier efforts (Author's interview with Jim Lardie, 2002).

[10] These suggestions parallel the proposal by Mona Harrington to frame child and family policy around issues of family care. Harrington notes that more and more American families depend on care providers to look after their children and aging parents. Shifting family structures, the growing number of women in the workforce, and families relying on two incomes, along with the aging of the American population, creates a moment, Harrington argues, where we have a chance to engage the public in a conversation about issues related to high quality, affordable care for our children and aging relatives. These concerns cross the divides of race and class, and are pressing upon a large number of families. For an analysis of the political implications of these trends, see Mona Harrington's excellent *Care and Equality* (1999).