

# Strategic use of evidence in state-level policymaking: matching evidence type to legislative stage

Jennifer E. Mosley<sup>1</sup> · Katherine Gibson<sup>1</sup>

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

**Abstract** Although interest in research utilization in the policy process has grown, how advocates strategically deploy different types of evidence to influence lawmakers remains not well understood. In this paper, we draw on the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the Narrative Policy Framework to show how various types of evidence—from empirical findings to personal anecdotes—were utilized by advocates during the 2 years leading to the passage of California’s historic 2010 law to extend foster care. The result was a generous and flexible entitlement policy passed with bipartisan support in the context of a recession, a state budget deficit, and an ambivalent governor. We find that leaders of a diverse advocacy coalition strategically showcased different types of evidence at specific moments in the legislative process. Each evidence type can be tied to a specific narrative element and strategy. Advocates first used research evidence to convince lawmakers of the policy’s effectiveness, then used professional expertise and benefit-cost analysis to convince them it would come at an acceptable cost, and finally used personal narratives to motivate them to act. We conclude that though benefit-cost analyses play an integral role in policymaking during a time of austerity, advocacy coalitions may still benefit from personal stories that lend emotional potency and urgency.

**Keywords** Evidence · Policy process · Narrative Policy Framework · Advocacy Coalition Framework · Nonprofit advocacy · State-level policymaking

---

✉ Jennifer E. Mosley  
mosley@uchicago.edu

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, 969 E. 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637, USA

## Introduction

Previous research has highlighted that different types of evidence are often used in the policymaking process: quantitative summaries of effectiveness, testimonial evidence, and evidence about potential costs are just a few (Asen et al. 2011; Smith-Walter et al. 2016). Although we know that these different types of evidence enter into policy decision-making, scholars continue to know little about the functions of particular types of evidence and their use at specific moments in the policymaking process. Knowing more about what kind of evidence is most effective in different policymaking scenarios is important if we are to improve policy outcomes (Lasswell 1971; Nutley et al. 2007).

One context in which this may be particularly important is in the difficult advocacy climate brought about by state government budget shortfalls. Severe budgetary constraint presents challenges to advocates and lawmakers alike by creating scenarios in which even relatively uncontroversial policies become politically untenable because of their financial costs. In these cases, using empirical evidence to persuade policymakers about the *effectiveness* of a given policy solution may be necessary but not sufficient to mobilize their support. In this paper, we provide support for the notion that in times of budget austerity, backing up empirical evidence with narrative evidence that provides emotional motivation may increase lawmaker support (Stone 2002). This is because lawmakers are adjudicating between multiple empirically sound policy solutions, all providing potentially good solutions to different problems, but it would be fiscally impossible to implement them all.

Specifically, lawmakers face two additional hurdles in the decision-making process that are unlikely to be jumped with scientific evidence alone: they must decide that the policy solution in question is fiscally feasible, and they must believe that the policy is important enough that they are motivated to take action. In this paper, we argue that these two additional hurdles require a nuanced use of different types of evidence, each uniquely suited to a different task (Smith-Walter et al. 2016). First, to help policies meet cost acceptability expectations, additional cost-benefit evidence may be required in addition to evidence of effectiveness. Second, for a policy to be acted on, evidence that elicits motivation and commitment may be needed—perhaps best achieved by personal stories and narratives that resonate with lawmakers. Diverse but cohesive advocacy coalitions may be required to accomplish these goals (Sabatier 1987, 1988).

Three specific research questions are addressed: (1) Why might certain types of evidence be more effective at certain points in the legislative process than others? (2) What impact does budgetary constraint have on the types of evidence needed? (3) What is the relationship between evidence and narratives in the policymaking process? We answer these questions by looking at the policy process leading to the passage of California's 2010 Fostering Connections to Success Act, a historic bill that fundamentally transformed the foster care system in California, allowing thousands of youth<sup>1</sup> to stay in care until they are 20.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, this rich policy case tells the story of how evidence was strategically used to help the state with the worst budget crisis in the country pass a new entitlement program with broad bipartisan support in the face of a deepening recession. To situate our findings

---

<sup>1</sup> As a result of the policy, California grew its foster care caseload for 18–20 year olds by 67% from 2011 to 2014; over 5000 additional 18–20 year olds were covered. Growth in foster care for other ages during this time was only 2%. By 2016, over 20,000 youth had benefitted from extended foster care in CA.

<sup>2</sup> The 2010 legislation studied here extended foster care only to age 20—a late compromise to meet cost projections. Follow-up legislation in 2012 extended foster care to age 21, which was an original goal of advocates.

in the literature, we draw on both the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier 1987, 1988) and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan et al. 2011). This article uses a complementary approach to combining insights from the two theories (Cairney 2013).

The case we explore in our analysis begins in 2008, when the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which for the first time allowed federal matching funds for foster care services to be extended to youth aged 18–21 if they meet certain participation criteria. Extending care was optional for states, so, in most cases, states had to pass legislation to adopt these changes. The process of how this happened in California is the focus of this paper. Most states chose to either hold off on extending foster care, which despite federal matching funds would still cost states money, or else simply said that juvenile courts could allow youth to stay in care, but did not make foster care extension a meaningful program with broad uptake. On the contrary, what California passed amounts to an entitlement program for all youth exiting care and is unusually generous in terms of reentry procedures and participation requirements. This begs the question: How was it that a state with some of the worst budget problems in the country came to pass a new entitlement program—with budget implications in the \$70–80 million range—during a recession?<sup>3</sup>

This is a question that is increasingly important for other state contexts and across policy areas where additional government supports for vulnerable populations are called for. This case study illustrates that, in a time of budget austerity,<sup>4</sup> evidence about how much something is going to cost may be at least as important as evidence about whether it was going to work when it comes to getting bills passed. However, another component—lawmaker motivation—is of crucial importance in order to help the bill stay on the agenda and capture positive votes. Furthermore, sustaining motivation requires a substantially different use of evidence and discourse than does eliciting agreement (Stone 2002). While the latter may be advanced through the use of evidence that appeals to the rational, the former is a more subjective process; we attempt to show how “science” and “narrative” can be combined in ways that heighten the persuasive power of each.

This research contributes to the literature on the policy process in several ways. First, it explicitly engages with the budget constraints many state legislatures now face. Second, the policy areas in question—entitlement reform and child welfare policy—are relatively under-studied when it comes to understanding the use of evidence in policymaking. Third, the combination of these things—the fact that this is a case study of entitlement expansion despite budget constraints—provides a strong case for how evidence can be strategically used to move the policy process forward.

Finally, this case illustrates the unique roles narratives can play in the policy process, both by increasing the persuasiveness of evidence for policymakers and by strengthening the coalition that deploys the evidence. By exploring how different types of evidence are used at different moments in the policymaking process, our attention is drawn to what

---

<sup>3</sup> This policy represented a major change, both ideologically and legally. The process of changing foster care regulations—all written to be applicable only to minors—was daunting, and ideologically the idea that the state maintained some responsibility for foster “children” who were legally adults was a significant break from prior assumptions.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that although lawmakers often complain that money is tight and advocates often face formidable challenges in this area (e.g. claims of “we can’t afford it”), some fiscal contexts are objectively worse than others. In this case, the combined effect of lower tax revenue due to the recession, the mortgage crisis, and California’s enduring budgeting constraints due to Proposition 12 and the proposition system in general the lawmakers were not exaggerating the state’s financial woes.

Parkhurst (2016) calls the “politics of evidence” as well as how different actors involved come together to develop a complex but cohesive narrative. In particular, we contribute to an emerging body of literature on how evidence is embedded in narratives (Schlauffer 2016). In doing so, we link coalition formation, evidence use, and narrative elements to better understand how the coalition in this study managed to be so persuasive.

### Use of evidence in the legislative process

As McDonnell and Weatherford argue, “Evidence...is a much broader category than research, ranging from the results of formal research studies to statistical data, judgments based on professional expertise, the personal experience of practitioners, and appeals to values articulated through stories and symbols” (2013). However, research on “evidence-based policymaking” has tended to more narrowly equate evidence with academic research such as randomized controlled trials and economic evaluations. In turn, studies of the use of evidence in the policy process have focused primarily on understanding how *empirical* findings are used and interpreted (Wye et al. 2015) including how policymakers can do a better job of evaluating evidence quality and eliminating “junk science” (van Gestel and de Poorter 2016). Still, Wye et al. (2015) find that policymakers are largely pragmatic and pick and choose among available evidence—and evidence types—that help them best persuade others. They found policymakers preferred evidence that can be communicated quickly and through stories. Little is known, however, about how lawmakers, advocates, and other participants in the policy process adjudicate between the scientific world of objectivity and empiricism and the political world of subjectivity and rhetoric (Caplan 1979), or how these “two worlds” come to be one in practice (Stone 2002).

In the past 15 years, theorists of the policy process have argued that individual cognitive processes must be kept in mind as policymakers’ ability to contend with masses of data and rhetoric is limited (Jones 2003) and personal values inevitably shape policy decisions (Stone 2002). As Cairney et al. (2016) argue, advocates have multiple tools; while policymaker uncertainty may be best addressed with scientific evidence, policymaker ambiguity may be best addressed with narrative persuasion. Learning more about how scientific evidence and narrative shape one another in the legislative process is crucial in order to gain a better understanding of how and when evidence informs policymaking (Campbell 2002; Hall 1993). This shift—from viewing evidence and rhetoric as separate worlds, to viewing them as complexly interwoven—expands our notion of what it means for policymaking to be “evidence-based,” first by illustrating that how “objective” evidence is used cannot be separated from how it is subjectively interpreted (Stone 2002), and second by showing that different types of evidence (whether empirical or anecdotal) can strongly influence policy decisions.

In this vein, it is important to recognize that advocacy is a process of convincing lawmakers both what they *can* and *should* do, and these processes may require different types of evidence (Cairney et al. 2016). Answering Campbell’s (2002) call for research that clearly delineates how and when different ideas and evidence affect policymaking, Blomkamp argues that “the choice and utility of particular types of evidence varies according to the political, institutional, and interpersonal context” (2014, p. 224). She and others (Epstein et al. 2014) accept a more interpretive definition of evidence use and conceptualize advocates as narrators and policymakers as the audience, a notion we return to below.

## Evidence and the Advocacy Coalition Framework

As an enduring theory of the policymaking process, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) has drawn attention to the fruitfulness of studying policy subsystems and, within them, advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1987, 1988). Subsystems are comprised of individuals actively engaged in addressing a particular policy issue—a broad group that in this case included researchers, philanthropy, and practitioners. The basic premise of the ACF is that policymaking is a decades-long process of policy-oriented learning in which advocacy coalitions within a subsystem advocate for their core beliefs on a particular issue to be reflected in policy. An advocacy coalition is “people from a variety of positions who share a particular belief system—i.e., a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions—and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time” (Sabatier 1987, p. 660). As will be shown in the case of AB12, a group of nine independent cosponsors of the bill—including advocacy organizations, professional associations, and a labor union—served as a clear coalition. Due to the often technical nature of the debates occurring within policy subsystems, external actors, including legislators, “take cues from those within” (Sabatier 1991, p. 148). Those cues often come in the form of evidence.

In the ACF, “policy-oriented learning is the process of seeking to realize core policy beliefs until one confronts constraints or opportunities, at which time one attempts to respond to this new situation in a way that is consistent with the core” (Sabatier 1987, pp. 674–675). Policy decisions are not only shaped by such learning, but by conditions external to subsystems, such as recessions and other macro-level issues that can suddenly change a coalition’s potential for success (Sabatier 1991). In the case of AB12, the emergence of federal legislation that provided matching funds for extended foster care is a positive example of such external change.

In ACF terms, empirical evidence is a technical resource deployed by coalition members (Sabatier 1987). Rather than the catalyst for policymaking in a particular domain, empirical evidence is considered an emergent tool in the policymaking process. In this sense, the ACF is a good fit for a study of how advocates use evidence to promote their positions. However, research using the ACF has paid much less attention to how non-empirical evidence (e.g., personal testimonies, professional expertise) is used by advocates. It also has not explored the “friction” in the process that results from the need to adapt to both technical and political realities as well as varying levels of sensitivity to new information and cognitive bias (Baekkeskov 2016).

James and Jorgenson (2009) argue that although the ACF was a first attempt at understanding how policy knowledge (i.e., evidence and evaluation) influences policy change, these two bodies of research “still run parallel” (p. 141). This may be because ACF research has not adequately addressed the role individuals play in forming and maintaining coalitions, leaving opaque the process by which actors within advocacy coalitions with access to particular kinds of evidence are brought to the fore at potentially pivotal moments (Fenger and Klok 2001). In this study, we present a close examination of how coalitions use evidence in order to illuminate not only how different types of knowledge inform the decisions of lawmakers, but also how coalition members’ appreciation of one another’s expertise may help them form and maintain strong and persuasive coalitions that are capable of *collective* policy learning (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013). Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) argue that it is precisely through the process of acquiring, translating, and disseminating knowledge and information (e.g., evidence) that collective learning happens and results in new policy products.

This study answers James and Jorgensen's call for research that combines utilization and policy process scholarship "to understand with more precision the inclusion and exclusion of policy knowledge leading to a policy design" (James and Jorgensen 2009, p. 152). We build on traditional ACF scholarship by closely examining how types of evidence and specific narratives were strategically deployed by an advocacy coalition during different moments in the legislative process; we also show how that use of evidence signaled the capacity of the AB12 cosponsors to engage in policy-oriented learning. Because there was no meaningful opposing advocacy coalition in this process (other than budget hawks), we focus on how intra-coalitional dynamics facilitated the creative and resourceful use of various types of evidence at different times throughout that period. In addition, we explore what policy-oriented learning looks like in the context of austerity, a challenge familiar to advocates in many different policy subsystems.

## Evidence and the Narrative Policy Framework

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is a promising theory of how knowledge is utilized by coalition members to form and maintain coalitions and to persuade audiences external to coalitions to champion a particular policy (Jones and McBeth 2010). Shanahan et al. (2011) argue that it may serve to amend the ACF such that it can more clearly connect knowledge utilization to the policymaking process. Instead of focusing on beliefs as the primary driver of political behavior, the NPF builds on the work of Stone (2002) and others by focusing on how information is used to shift policy positions and how narratives influence public opinion.

In this framework, rather than merely a stand-alone tool to be utilized at particular moments, evidence of a problem is seen as embedded within a narrative that explains why the evidence matters and what should be done about it. Narratives help people make meaning of existing evidence. These narratives sometimes alter not only the way policy-makers think, but also the way advocates approach the policy. The NPF identifies four key narrative elements: *characters*, such as victims (those harmed by the policy problem) and heroes (those who can fix the problem); *setting*, the context in which the problem is situated; the *moral* of the story (the proposed policy solution); and the *plot*, which is the causal relationship between all the elements.

Schlauffer (2016) persuasively demonstrated that evidence is associated with not just one, but all these narrative elements. That said, it likely plays different roles in each. In her study of school reform policy, she also shows how evidence can be tied to specific narrative *strategies*. For example, she finds that Stone's (2002) notion of stories of decline or helplessness and control are also often tied to a specific plot. We find a similar plot of story of helplessness and control here, as well as support for how stories of control may be associated with the "angel shift"—promoting the idea that a policy narrative is "winning" and convincing lawmakers that they are on the right side of history (Shanahan et al. 2013).

However, we build on Schlauffer's (2016) work to argue that in this meaning-making process associated with evidence, sometimes the types of evidence used changes. Although Schlauffer (2016) focuses on one type of evidence, we connect multiple types of evidence to different narrative elements. Smith-Walter et al. (2016) show the importance of considering different evidence types and identify five specific types: scientific studies, statistics, polls, ipso dictum, and laws or legal rulings. They find that varied use of these types of evidence can help bolster narrative strategy and emotional connection.

This is important because Jones and McBeth (2010) further hypothesize that four specific mechanisms increase the likelihood that an individual will be persuaded: (1) narrative breach, the extent to which a narrative alters one's understanding of the way the

world works; (2) narrative transportation, the capacity of a narrative to transport a listener into a particular perspective; (3) congruence, the extent to which a narrative aligns with one's beliefs; and (4) narrator trust, the level of trust elicited by the narrative's source. As will be discussed below, the advocates achieved all four of these mechanisms in this case, largely by using former foster youth as lobbyists, sharing personal stories, and invoking lawmakers' own experiences as parents.

The NPF also makes some pertinent assertions regarding the relationship between coalition strength and the use of narratives. AB12 cosponsors indicated being willing to collaborate, valuing the skills and perspectives of each cosponsor, and wanting to maintain and present a sense of solidarity to legislators. NPF and ACF scholars have indicated that each of these factors is predictive of policy success (Shanahan et al. 2011; Weible and Sabatier 2009). Furthermore, Shanahan et al. (2011) hypothesize that "advocacy coalitions with policy narratives that contain higher levels of coalitional glue (coalition stability, strength, and intra-coalition cohesion) will more likely influence policy outcomes."

This study provides additional support for that assertion, examining how both narrative strategy and narrative elements are connected to evidence, partially by the inclusion of various actors who lend the advocacy coalition different types of legitimacy and expertise at different phases of the policymaking process. We examine how different types of evidence were used during different phases of the legislative process, with specific narrative elements (and new narrators) accompanying each type. Considering a broader range of evidence types than is typical, we trace certain narrative elements to specific individuals and groups, showing how coordinated action was effective in this case.

In this sense, we share Jones and McBeth's (2010) interest in the "heresthetics" (Riker 1986) of the policy process, the way in which narratives about a particular issue can serve to restructure the relationship between political advocates by emphasizing places of potential alliance and mutual political benefit while de-emphasizing potential political fissures. To this end, we show how evidence connected to a narrative that both united a diverse coalition and drew explicit connections between the political decisions of policymakers and the personal lives of youth in the care of the state. This, in turn, provoked a sense of responsibility and positive possibility among policymakers and advocates alike.

## Methods

Although studies of the use of evidence in policymaking have been both qualitative and quantitative in nature, as Gray and Jones (2016, p. 194) point out, the NPF's "theoretical scaffolding is well suited to incorporate qualitative methodologies." The role of qualitative research in helping to build theory, validate constructs, and provide novel insight is also well-recognized (Eisenhardt 1989). In this study, we are attempting to understand and explain elements of the policy process as well as the meaning applied to specific actions; Yin (1994) argues these are precisely the strengths of the case study method, which we use here. Throughout we follow the guidance of Gray and Jones (2016) in leaving the assumptions of the NPF intact while replacing quantitative standards for evaluating rigor with qualitative ones.

In order to gain the perspective of multiple stakeholders, we carried out 38 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews were held in person and over the phone, and lasted from 40 min to 2.5 h. Those interviewed included state legislators and legislative staff ( $N = 6$ ), state and county administrators ( $N = 11$ ), judges and judicial staff ( $N = 5$ ), and advocates and funders ( $N = 16$ ). Our sample was purposive; interviewees

were selected based on their closeness to the process and the role they played (e.g., cosponsor of legislation, head of state or county agency). Purposive sampling is appropriate when the goal is to “discover, understand, gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (Merriam 1998, p. 48). Attempts were made to interview all parties who played a role in the process; some of these individuals were pre-identified, and some were contacted after their role became clear in the interview process. Representatives from all cosponsor organizations of the legislation were interviewed as well as legislative staff from both the Democratic and Republican parties. Interviews were carried out until data saturation was reached, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Other data sources include participant observation (at stakeholder and implementation planning meetings and participation in open conference calls), and document review (e.g., legislative history, rules of the court, press releases, meeting agendas, and other communications from advocates). Yin (1994) argues that case study research is strengthened when it rests on multiple forms of evidence which converge through triangulation. In this analysis, the transcripts were treated as the primary data, with the participant observation and document review serving to corroborate the information received from individuals directly and triangulate findings. For example, press releases from advocacy groups and newspaper articles were used to support our finding around specific stories being repeated, and official documents were used to confirm dates, votes, the content of the Governors signing statement, etc. Participant observation allowed us to see how advocates communicated with each other, administrators, and lawmakers.

Throughout the data collection period, which lasted from approximately June 2011 to April 2012, research team meetings were held biweekly to discuss findings as they evolved. This is in accordance with guidance for qualitative analysis to begin as data are collected (Miles et al. 2013). Interview transcripts and notes from the participant observation, conference calls and document review were analyzed through an iterative coding process, using a primarily inductive approach, although prior theory-based codes were also included (Yin 1994). In other words, all transcripts were read and coded with an initial list of sensitizing concepts, including evidence types, legislative barriers, and lawmaker concerns. At the same time, open coding was carried out to identify new concepts and determine patterns. To address validity concerns, coding was carried out by two independent coders who exchanged transcripts until consensus was reached (Miles et al. 2013).

In the analysis, responses were compared both within and across categories of respondents (legislative, judicial, advocate) in order to pay careful attention to consensus versus dissenting views. Regarding matters of concern in this paper (e.g., legislative history, use of evidence, and interactions between advocates and lawmakers), we primarily found consensus. Thus, quotes were chosen that represent the consensus view, unless otherwise noted. For areas in which interviewees expressed different views, we prioritized the viewpoints of those most closely involved in the process but also note where those differences lie.

## Findings

### The case: extending foster care in California

The federal Fostering Connections Act (2008) contained several provisions intended to improve outcomes for youth in foster care; two of the biggest changes were offering

federal support for subsidized guardianship programs (sometimes known as kinship care) and allowing federal reimbursement to states through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to youth between the ages of 18 and 21 who chose to remain under state supervision. Allowing young adults stay in foster care past age 18—giving them access to monetary resources, educational programs, and housing support that other young adults typically benefit from—has been a long held goal in the child welfare advocacy community. Because states depend on federal Title IV-E funds for their foster care programs, however, advocates saw this new source of funding as an all-but-necessary precondition to achieving their goal of extending foster care at the state level.

To this end, advocates in California had been actively involved in promoting federal support for extended foster care prior to the 2008 law. Armed with recent research (discussed more below) showing poor outcomes for youth aging out of care, California-based advocates had several conversations with Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) in early 2007. In May of that year, she introduced SB1512, the first of several bills calling for Title IV-E reform. These bills ultimately came together to form the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (House Resolution 6893, 2008), signed by President George W. Bush in October of 2008.

Advocates and state lawmakers in California reported that they followed the federal legislation closely and advocates began working to craft their own legislation immediately after its passage. Fortunately for them, two longtime supporters of foster youth were in positions of power in the state assembly: Speaker of the Assembly Karen Bass and Human Services Committee Chair Jim Beall, who ultimately served as co-authors of the legislation. In California, however, it is common for organizational “sponsors,” such as advocacy organizations and professional associations, to partner with legislators to assist in writing bills. These sponsors collaboratively work together with legislative authors and staff to move the bill forward. In this case, advocates and other child welfare stakeholders in California had already been monitoring the federal legislation and were quick to jump on as cosponsors of the state legislation, ultimately taking the lead role in crafting the bill and successfully shepherding it through the legislative process. By all reports (including their opponents), this group of cosponsors served as a powerful advocacy coalition due to their diversity, energy, and expertise.

### **Subsystem actors: strategic coalition diversity**

Ultimately, nine organizations came together as cosponsors of what was to become AB12.<sup>5</sup> By all accounts, this process happened somewhat organically, with some advocates being contacted by the Human Service Committee staff and others expressing their interest independently. This group was comprised of organizations with content expertise, groups with political clout, and groups with broad memberships. As a key legislative staff member said, “The breadth and depth of the coalition to pass and draft it was unprecedented in my experience.”

Four of the cosponsors were longstanding child welfare advocacy groups with considerable legal and political expertise (e.g., The Alliance for Children’s Rights, Children’s

---

<sup>5</sup> In alphabetical order, the cosponsors were: the California Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC); The Alliance for Children’s Rights; California Alliance of Child and Family Services; California Youth Connection (CYC); Children’s Law Center of California; County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA); John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes; Service Employees International Union (SEIU); Youth Law Center.

Law Center, Youth Law Center, and the John Burton Foundation). The fifth, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)<sup>6</sup> was important, as they rarely cosponsor bills. Their participation underscored the bill's significance and many respondents noted that they provided critical legal guidance and manpower. As one respondent noted, "the AOC brought a tremendous amount of gravitas. They're seriously smart, obviously they know the statutes better than anybody, and it meant so much to have them." A sixth cosponsor, the California Alliance of Child and Family Services represented most of the private foster care agencies in the state, including residential care and family services, and a seventh, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represented the state agency social workers. Having both organizations on board was a crucial signal that these important constituencies approved of the bill.

Eighth, the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) is an important power broker in California state politics and their participation signaled that counties would support the plan—crucial given that California has a county-administered child welfare system. As one advocate told us, "If CWDA didn't want this to happen, it wouldn't have happened. Their commitment to it and the amount of political capital they expended to make this policy move forward can't be overstated." Finally, ninth, the California Youth Connection (CYC) is an organization comprised of and representing current and former foster youth. They were able to provide important substantive feedback about how different provisions in the bill might affect youth. Their personal stories proved essential in convincing legislators of the importance of the bill, as will be described below. Overall, as one respondent said:

So you had pretty much every little sector in some way represented in this group... It was a good diversity. ...If we were the only sponsor, all of those groups would still need to be at the table, talking through and signing off on legislation anyways. Making it broad from the get-go and having people buy in was very important.

It should be noted that not all the cosponsors are typical "advocates." The AOC represents the judicial system, while the CWDA represents county government. Their cooperation with more traditional nongovernmental advocates, including legal advocates, the providers association, and the labor union, is partly what led to such a strong coalition. Each group was able to contribute to the shared narrative in a unique way.

Although there were a number of policy issues about which these cosponsors disagreed, our analysis suggests they put aside these differences for three key reasons, all of which led to high levels of "coalitional glue" in this group (Shanahan et al. 2011). First, although bills proposing extended care had previously been introduced in California, the change in federal legislation created a window of opportunity regarding costs (Kingdon 1995). It was widely perceived as a "once in a lifetime" opportunity and energy and emotion were high. As a legislative staff member put it, "There are so few big bills these days because of the budget and fractious climate. We don't have the money or find the money to do the initial start up costs. So bills like this are a unique experience in the professional life of many staff." Second, coalition members recognized the diversity of sponsors as a strategic advantage: "There was never a time when someone said, 'Can so-and-so be moved from supporter to sponsor?' and anyone said, 'No, that's a bad idea.' It was the more the merrier." Their internal diversity helped them produce evidence that was similarly diverse, as well as policy that was responsive to a variety of different professional and policy

<sup>6</sup> The Administrative Office of the Courts is the staff agency for the state Judicial Council, which in California is chaired by the Chief Justice and is responsible for policymaking in the judicial branch.

concerns. Third, they believed their willingness to compromise and present a united front, despite some differences of opinion regarding how best to implement the policy, would highlight to lawmakers the urgency and significance of the bill.

### Step one: laying the groundwork

Working with the cosponsors to draft the bill, Speaker Bass and Assemblyman Beall introduced AB12 on the first day of the legislative session in December of 2008. As AB12 moved through the human services committee, it benefited from the fact the CYC had been educating the legislature for years with a consistent presence and previous bills proposing extended care. As a result, foster youth are widely considered a sympathetic population in California. Thus, the issue could be framed as a valence issue, and the population was presented as deserving of lawmakers' (and taxpayers') support and attention (Schneider and Ingram 1993). It was easy, then, to cast them as "victim" characters in the emerging narrative. In addition, this sustained contact between legislators and advocates "softened up" legislators, familiarizing both sides with the major issues and cultivating the kind of "narrative trust" that facilitates the uptake of all kinds of evidence (Jones and McBeth 2010; Kingdon 1995).

The evidence used to move AB12 forward at this stage was primarily research evidence detailing the negative outcomes experienced by many youth who age out of foster care. These include higher rates of homelessness and early pregnancy and poor educational outcomes, among others (Courtney et al. 2007, 2010; Macomber et al. 2008). Cosponsors talked about this work as important for "laying the groundwork" and "maintaining credibility." This research was synthesized and promoted by the cosponsors through the use of press releases, press conferences, one-page summaries, and other communications. Statistics on poor outcomes were found in essentially all their materials. This evidence served specifically to build support for the foster youth as "victim" characters, and to highlight the setting as a *story of helplessness*, and ultimately, *control*, once the moral of the story (e.g., the policy) was introduced.

Two studies were mentioned specifically. The first is a series of reports that came out of Chapin Hall's Midwest Study<sup>7</sup> that documented the poor outcomes for this population, and found that youth who had access to extended foster care had reduced involvement in crime and lower rates of homelessness and early pregnancy (e.g., Courtney et al. 2007, 2010). The second was similar work carried out by the Urban Institute, partially in California, focusing primarily on the difficulties foster care alumni often have (e.g., Macomber et al. 2008). The fact that the research came from two well-known research institutes—Chapin Hall and The Urban Institute—was also important. Both of these organizations have a name brand, established credibility, and bullhorn websites. An institution like this may be easier to promote than an individual academic researcher, increasing the level of narrative trust between the audience and evidence source.

Another important piece of evidence used during this time was the final report released by the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care, chaired by former Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, Carlos Moreno (who was a relative caregiver himself). In this report, the Commission recommended extending foster care to age 21, mentioning the need for some of the provisions included in AB12 (CA Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care, 2008). This high level, politically neutral committee was taken very seriously by

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth> to access the more than 15 reports and papers that came out of this study.

legislators due to their gravitas and standing. Advocates were eager to point to such a report, particularly in enlisting bipartisan support. These two things—(1) characterization of foster youth as victims who were both harmed and deserving and (2) compelling research and court evidence—led to wide consensus among lawmakers that the policy made sense “on its face.” This allowed advocates to select a lobbying strategy that focused more on providing relevant information and motivating legislative allies, than in trying to change opponents’ minds (Hall and Deardorff 2006).

### Step two: neutralizing both short and long-term cost concerns

Focusing on the merits of the policy worked well while AB12 was in the Human Service Committee and gaining momentum, but once the bill entered the appropriations committee, the focus quickly turned to the costs. As one high level state administrator said, “I don’t recall any arguments against the policy. We weren’t debating whether or not it was in a youth’s best interest to get these supports to be more self-sufficient. It was how do we do it in...such a way where California, given the fiscal uncertainty and crisis we were in, could afford it.” In other words, because of California’s budget crisis, advocates were clear that the bill would have to be cost neutral, or even a savings, if it was to be passed. The state was already cutting programs it had long been committed to; if the bill was seen as cost-intensive it would be, as one advocate noted, “dead in the water.” Similar bills that had been floated in the California legislature before had failed primarily because of the fiscal implications. In this case, the advocates used several types of evidence to overcome cost concerns—a crucial part of the *setting* in this case.

Respondents noted that evidence about costs needed to take into account both short-term cost neutrality (e.g., nothing else in the current budget would have to be cut to make room for the bill) as well as the long-term cost of the policy. The distinction between short-term budget balancing and long-term cost savings was important for evidence, as each required different types. For short-term concerns, “evidence” was mostly about making the budget numbers add up. In this case, exploiting a window of opportunity around new funding sources and agreeing on key compromises—requiring coalition stability—was key. In order to meet concerns about long-term costs, two different types of evidence were used: evidence in the form of professional expertise regarding the projected uptake rate and research evidence that benefits would outweigh costs. Both of these were possible through the utilization of an existing network of researchers, foundations, advocates, and affected citizens.

First, regarding meeting the needs of *short-term* cost concerns as a key lawmaker noted, “You have to realize that most of these fiscal people don’t look at beyond the next 12 months of a budget. They don’t really care what the savings are down the road. They want to know what the savings are this year.” Fortunately, the way the federal legislation was written gave the cosponsors a way to present the bill as cost neutral. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Because California had been paying the full cost of a statewide subsidized guardianship program (Kin-GAP) since 1998, and the federal Fostering Connections Act included new matching funds for state-subsidized guardianship programs, the cosponsors planned to use the funds no longer being spent on Kin-GAP to pay for extended care.<sup>8</sup> Everyone saw this “Kin-GAP conversion” as absolutely essential to the legislative

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, soon after AB12 was introduced, the cosponsors learned that the federal guidance on Fostering Connections would allow for prospective cases only, meaning California could not collect for the approximately 15,000 children they already had enrolled in Kin-GAP. This was devastating to the cosponsors’ hopes for cost neutrality. They carried on, though, assuming that when President Obama took

success. In NPF terms, it can be seen as key to the overall *plot*. A key legislative staffer explained it like this:

we were fortunate in that we already had a state-funded Kin-GAP program, and one argument we put forward was that, ‘Well, now we can draw down federal dollars for our state-funded program.’ Well, the hardcore bean counters are going to say, ‘Well, that’s great. We want to take all those savings and offset the deficit, not create a new program.’ So, that was something that we struggled with throughout. [But] we just continued to put that forward—that we have offsetting savings from Kin-GAP [and] we will have future offsetting savings from these other state programs. So we just tried to dwindle down the cost of implementation as much as we could.

This fiscal argument worked particularly well in conjunction with the other types of evidence already used to build support for the policy on its face. An advocate explained:

Everyone sort of got it from a policies perspective, like, ‘Duh, no. We shouldn’t kick our kids out at 18. But how are we gonna pay for it?’ So the Kin-GAP conversion gave us the argument of how we were going to pay for it. And most people were like, ‘That makes sense.’ If they didn’t believe in the policy, which they did, they would have said, ‘We can convert our Kin-GAP cases and not spend it on AB 12. We don’t have to do that’. But they didn’t. They said, ‘Yeah. That’s an obviously good shift, and a way to pay for this’.

This story was corroborated by a Senate Republican who opposed the bill and noted that:

The bill was packaged as a cost-neutral bill and that is the general story about that bill that traveled. That was the first thing out of people’s mouths when they talked about the bill. I saw them as two very different policies but I don’t know if anybody but me wanted to delink the two...To be honest with you the conversations that I had, usually with senate staff—it is just a tough subject. Everyone has a soft spot for [foster youth].... Data was out for years and years about homeless and crime in exit, and they beat that drum very loud.

Short-term cost containment also came into play during the period the bill was in the Appropriations Committee. At that point, the cosponsors agreed to three major compromises aimed at cutting the cost of the bill. These compromises came after the state finance director threatened a “no” recommendation (which would have likely resulted in a veto from the governor). Together, these compromises functioned as evidence that the cosponsors were willing to control costs but would not have been possible without significant coalition stability and alignment in regards to core policy beliefs. Importantly, the compromises also allowed the cosponsors to *produce* evidence that AB12 would meet conservative short-term cost projections.

The first compromise was a “phase-in” that significantly reduced the upfront costs of the bill. With the phase-in, instead of immediately covering all foster youth through age 20, the policy would only apply to youth prospectively. Thus, in its first year, AB12 would only apply to youth under 19 years of age, in its 2nd year, youth under 20, and so on. The

---

Footnote 8 continued

office early in 2009, his administration would change the guidance and allow for established cases. Although they were eventually able to get the federal guidance changed, the change did not happen as quickly as they hoped and the bill ended up stuck in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations from June 2009 to January of 2010.

phase-in was widely lamented by advocates who hoped for more comprehensive coverage from the outset, but the general consensus is that the bill could not have passed without it.<sup>9</sup> As one cosponsor noted, “there was a willingness to make some compromises... It was dicey ...I think it would have been very difficult to have the governor sign a bill that went all the way to 21 in year one.”

The second and third compromises both provided evidence of how much powerful constituencies were willing to sacrifice, communicating the bill’s importance and the strength of the coalition. The second compromise was the elimination of group homes as a potential placement for most AB12 youth. Compared to family or kinship foster care, group homes are very expensive placements and excluding them would reduce the likely cost of extending care.<sup>10</sup> The California Alliance of Child and Family Services represents group homes, so this was a major signal by them. The third compromise was what is known as the “70/30 split” on a state-funded program called Transitional Housing Placement Plus (THP-Plus). THP-Plus, a transitional housing program for youth ages 18–24 in California, was strongly supported by the John Burton Foundation and others. The 70/30 split meant that 70% of the beds previously available through THP-Plus would now have to be converted into THP-Plus-Foster Care (THP-Plus-FC), essentially earmarking them for youth covered under AB12 (and ensuring they would be eligible for federal matching funds, reducing state costs).<sup>11</sup>

In terms of *long-term costs*, two types of evidence were used to resolve an important disagreement between the cosponsors, the Department of Finance, and the Department of Social Services (CDSS) about how much AB12 would cost in future years: professional expertise and cost-benefit analysis. First, many respondents perceived a split at CDSS and believed that while the more policy-oriented staff supported the bill, people in the financial division were reluctant. As one high level administrator there said, “within our building the policy side folks really felt strongly that it was the right thing to do. From the money standpoint of our building it became harder, like how do we pay for it? Especially, when finance is saying we’re broke.” This was largely because CDSS estimates regarding cost (directly tied to number of youth taking advantage of the new policy) were significantly higher than the cosponsors’ estimates.<sup>12</sup>

This is where the professional expertise of some cosponsor groups came in as important evidence. Cosponsor groups were able to say “I work with these kids. I know what they are going to do.” Indeed, many advocates believed that youth hated “the system” and would opt out, as opposed to “the Department of Finance and others who always assumed that every kid would stay in care.” That professional expertise was then operationalized into new cost estimates. The cosponsor responsible for those numbers reported that “our fiscal person ran boatloads of spreadsheets assuming different take-up rates and where they will live and breaking down the placement types and the cost of that and running math. Over and over, she’d update the spreadsheets. We’d go test [our] assumptions with the

<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the issue was resolved when the extension was included in the state budget passed in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Since group care settings also tend to be relatively restrictive environments, some hoped that severely limiting the use of group homes under AB12 would increase the likelihood that youth would be placed in more developmentally appropriate placements.

<sup>11</sup> For some advocates, this raised the concern that youth who do not qualify for AB12, or do not want to participate for some other reason, may find it much more difficult than in recent years to gain access to quality transitional housing in California under AB12.

<sup>12</sup> In hindsight, CDSS estimates were more accurate than the advocates numbers, with 75–90% of youth choosing to stay in care.

department, and then we'd re-work them." In this way, professional expertise and administrative expertise were iteratively adjusted until a mutually agreeable—and externally coherent—piece of evidence was created.

Second, and crucially, a benefit-cost analysis was commissioned by California foundations that showed that each dollar spent on extended care would return \$2.40 to the state (Peters et al. 2009). The analysis essentially balanced the average cost per day per youth in care and the average amount of time young people were likely to remain in care after age 18 (minus the average public assistance costs that could be avoided if young people remain in care) with the expected greater lifetime earnings of the youth due to expected growth in postsecondary education. This returns tax revenue to the state but also includes a number of more intangible benefits such as improved health and educational outcomes for future generations. The study was framed as conservative in its estimate, given that it assumed a relatively longer time in care, and did not factor in likely savings from reduced costs related to incarceration, teen pregnancy, homelessness and use of mental health programs.

An important key to getting this done was the pre-existing established relationships between advocates, foundations, and researchers—with foundations playing a convening role. This was critical to producing the required evidence in the right time frame for it to be useful. Specifically, the advocates let their connections in the philanthropic and research communities know that data on the cost-effectiveness of extended foster care were necessary, and the foundations responded by providing emergency funding to pre-identified researchers. That this type of evidence was of crucial importance in this case is supported by the fact that the governor chose to cite this information in his signing statement.

One respondent noted that such an analysis was important because it's "planting credibility, getting people to think in that kind of cost benefit analysis....it was a really good laying the foundation." It also gave the advocates the type of evidence that was easy to publicize. They had a "massive" press conference in March of 2009 with researchers, philanthropy, and key figures from all three branches of government (leaders of both the Assembly and the Senate, as well as the director of CDSS and key figures in the judicial branch) that resulted in significant attention and momentum around "we need to make this happen."

The evidence produced by the cost-benefit analysis reinforced a narrative that the costs of the policy would be concentrated and the benefits would be diffused. This explicitly recognizes the *setting* in which the narrative takes place—one of fiscal concern. That a narrative of this type was so useful is also consistent with NPF hypotheses about how *diffusion-of-benefits* narratives are often deployed by winning coalitions (McBeth et al. 2007). In the context of budget austerity, this narrative strategy may play a particularly important role, and evidence around costs and benefits may be particularly well suited to making that strategy work.

Legislators' policy learning is evidenced by their eventual acceptance of a policy that they had initially deemed too cost-intensive. Meanwhile, the cosponsors made compromises that indicated their willingness to work within legislators' cost concerns. Furthermore, their production of a cost-benefit analysis not only provided key evidence, but also signaled the coalition's willingness and ability to speak policymakers' language. Ultimately, paying attention to both short- and long-term cost concerns helped the coalition portray itself as an ally within a policy narrative that highlighted the cosponsors' desire to meet legislators where they were at, fiscally. Rather than demanding that policymakers take a stand on the issue, they convinced them that the policy fit nicely with already existing policies and programs. This is in alignment with a "story of control" and set up legislators to be seen as "hero" characters, discussed below.

### Step three: motivation to act

Through effective neutralization of both short- and long-term cost concerns, AB12 was released from the appropriations committee in January 2010. At this point, the advocates needed to switch gears, focusing less on policy details and more on winning broad bipartisan support in both houses. Ensuring bipartisan support, not just passage, was thought to be critical to the governor's decision to sign the legislation (Dear and Patti 1981). This is where "hard" evidence—whether on improved outcomes or cost-benefit—was not sufficient. Advocates needed lawmakers to become "fans" of the legislation, to emotionally connect with it in the way the advocates did, so that the lawmakers would accept the advocates' argument around how to pay for the policy. Having policymakers become not just supporters but champions of the policy—to see themselves as "hero" *characters*—was essential to overcome the cost argument. This is important because there was no legal reason why the state could not have taken the federal matching funds for Kin-GAP and then used the \$35 million savings to the state to "plug some other hole," as one advocate mentioned. In order to keep that from happening, the cosponsors had to make the argument that this population deserved and needed support more than other groups. It is this argument that ultimately pulled the *plot* together.

Ultimately, this was much better accomplished through personal stories and anecdotes than numbers. As one advocate said, "The [benefit-cost analysis] and Kin-GAP helped us make the fiscal argument, but the youth! How do you say no when you've got youth coming to your office every day saying, 'I got kicked out at 18. I've been homeless ever since.' There was no need for the advocates to talk, because the youth would just tell their story and the members were like, 'Okay. I get it'."

Research evidence had demonstrated both the extent of the problem and that this solution would diminish the problem, saving money in the long run. At this stage, that research was combined with a strategy of narrative congruence, resonance, and transportation. Narrative congruence and resonance were partially achieved by asking legislators "were your kids ready to be independent when they were 18?" For example, "Justice Carlos Moreno was a Supreme Court Justice and was the chair of the Commission...when he presented the recommendations to the council in 2008, it was kind of a memorable moment when he looked around the room and said, 'Which of us at age 18 has told our children to leave home and that they can't come back.' Nobody said yes. That was the larger message that these are our children...And we should treat them as we treat our children. It was a powerful message."

The most important type of evidence during this period, however, was "testimonial evidence"—in particular, the sharing of personal stories by former foster youth. Respondents uniformly considered the "narrative transportation" provided by the youth as essential (Shanahan et al. 2011). As one said, "It was mostly the moral power of these kids coming up and [speaking]...By and large the sponsors and the stakeholders, except for SEIU, are not contributing significant funds to legislators. So you have to win them over in another way to the importance of your cause and the youth who come and testify. They remember that and it sticks with them." Another noted, "Their stories are compelling and they're true; they're real. I think that pushed it over the edge. All the other stuff got us to the edge. I think the passion with which California Youth Connection was able to get youth here... pushed it over the edge."

Some of these stories resonated partly because of the narrative breach elicited. For example, a surprising number of the lawmakers and legislative staff interviewed shared the

exact same story—unprompted—of a particularly compelling young man who told the story of his 18th birthday. He told of how, after finishing his cake, his foster mother asked him what he intended to do next: not generally, but rather after he moved out that afternoon (a surprise to him). Although our interviews took place a year after AB12 passed, people vividly remembered that story and remained upset by it. For example, one noted “You have youth come and say, ‘On my 18th birthday they gave me a cake and then 2 h later they said, “Okay, where are you gonna go? It’s time to go.” Having in no way prepared that youth for independence? (shakes head).” The implication is that this story is so contrary to how legislators felt an 18th birthday *should* go, that it stuck with them. It also meets Stone’s (2002) criteria for a *horror story* where a single haunting incident is used to represent the universe of cases.

Every member of the state Assembly and Senate had multiple visits from youth, including being “shadowed” by a foster youth for a day. Respondents universally reported that this type of evidence was among the most influential with policymakers. As one noted, “I can’t tell you how many legislators have said—because of their meeting with CYC and the direct stories they heard from youth about how hard it was to leave care at age 18—how it got them really directly engaged.” Another estimated, “A huge reason for the success—maybe 50%—was all the kids that came and spoke with legislators on shadow day and testified. That was so key, I’ll never forget it. It is almost like something you would see on a Hallmark show. You would have five kids and one legislator, telling about their abuse, rapes, parent’s drug abuse, and they were so honest. It became so obvious that they just needed a little bit of help. That is what convinced a lot of legislators to cosponsor—it wouldn’t have happened without them.”

Youth testimonial evidence met the criteria of narrative congruence and narrative transportation in several ways. At a basic level, youths’ experience of needing adult guidance aligned with legislators’ experiences with their own children (congruence) and their stories of broken family connections moved legislators to feel that they needed to act (transportation). One respondent specific referenced the power of the story of control when they said, “Even the more conservative legislators I think have this sense of ‘We step into the role of parent and we haven’t done a terribly good job. If these were our own biological kids in our own homes, what’s the standard we would hold ourselves to?’” But these personal narratives were important for two other reasons as well: promoting lawmakers’ vision of themselves as acting in the public good (“hero” characters), and providing additional coalitional glue.

First, instead of attempting to rally stakeholders against a perceived enemy, stakeholders used these stories to promote a vision of positive change. This is where we see the “angel shift” come into play. In these stories, youth were careful not to blame others for their difficulties and to frame their requests in terms of equity, not a “leg up.” They told stories of having dreams in the face of continual trials and taking advantage of any opportunities they were given. This allowed legislators to feel as if they could do something good for these youth, a rare feeling in a session of budget cutbacks and service retrenchment. These stories were directed to and appealed to both Republican and Democratic lawmakers, which helped avoid partisan pigeonholing. This is important because divergent narratives, even if anchored in the same research evidence, might have weakened the coalition’s credibility or coherence in the eyes of lawmakers.

Second, not only did testimonial evidence provide valuable emotional ammunition, it also helped keep momentum throughout the 2-year process by reminding cosponsors why the policy was important. This aligns with the NPF hypothesis that certain narratives provide coalitional glue by strengthening the coherence of not only the policy narrative but

of the coalition itself. As one legislative respondent put it: “I think the California Youth Connection, continued to remind us about the importance of these things and the importance of the bill from a very personal and effective way through the voice of youth.” Indeed, the dedication cosponsors themselves exhibited throughout the 2-year passage process may have been in part a product of their extended exposure to the compelling stories youth told of trial and triumph.

### Narrative success

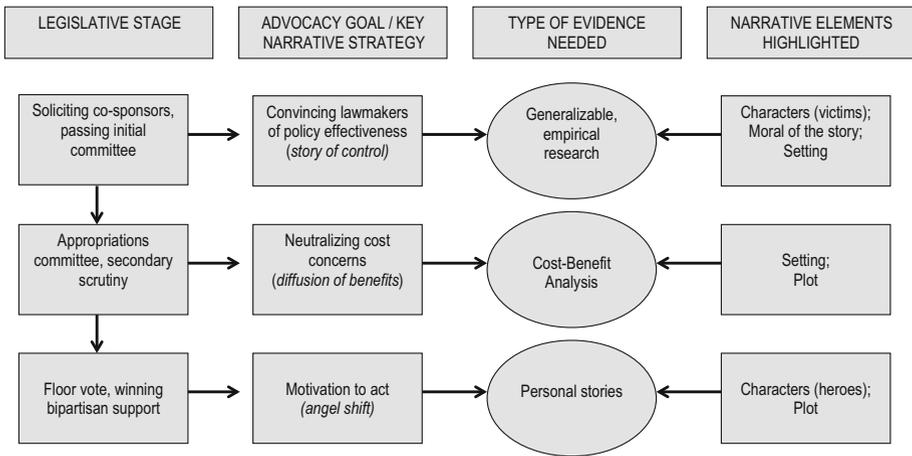
Advocates realized early on in the process that getting the votes necessary to simply pass the vote would likely be achievable, but may not be sufficient to win the governor’s signature. Gaining broad bipartisan support would be more difficult but would result in a situation where the governor felt much more pressure to sign. Thus, both steps two and three (evidence around costs, and narrative transportation) were critically important. The nature of and emotional resonance of the youths’ stories, as well as stories told by several celebrities that championed the cause, created widespread support in the legislature, including from many Republicans. Republican members were also recruited to give floor speeches and endorse the bill in other ways, with the hope that it would be passed with strong bipartisan support, which it was.

In this way, it becomes apparent how important intra-coalitional cohesion was for preventing partisan battles. In this case, advocates presented themselves as non-partisan from the start, crafting narratives that carefully avoided demonizing any political faction. While acknowledging the fiscal constraints, advocates told a compelling story of helplessness and control: AB12 as a practical and fiscally minded response to a heart-wrenching problem that had been acknowledged as real by pragmatically minded politicians. In the face of overwhelming support, the governor risked appearing not just callous but blind to political reason if he opposed the bill. Thus, the coalition had successfully used evidence to show that the policy not only *could* be passed, but also that it *should* be passed.

With that kind of support, the only reason Governor Schwarzenegger could give for not signing was if the cost was unacceptable—his political brand was based in fiscal conservatism. This is why, the cost-effectiveness evidence was also crucial to the signing of the bill; in fact, in his signing statement the governor explicitly mentioned cost-benefit information, actually inflating the amount that the state might save (a fact of some amusement to many respondents). Thus, the short-term cost neutrality, long-term cost-benefit, and broad bipartisan support together created a situation in which AB12 was signed 2 years after its introduction, on the last day it was eligible for the governor’s signature.

We summarize our findings in Fig. 1. Overall, we see that at the beginning of the legislative process, advocates needed to convince lawmakers of the policy’s effectiveness, in order to get the conversation started. This was done primarily through sharing generalizable empirical research on the problem. This research was tied to particular narrative elements and a *story of helplessness and control*. Specifically, it outlined a particular *setting* for the narrative by framing foster youth as *victim characters*, who have had their suffering ignored, while also setting up AB12 as an opportunity to reduce that suffering—in NPF terms, the *moral of the story*.

At the second stage, the advocates needed to neutralize cost concerns, which they did by working with lawmakers to highlight a story of *diffusion of benefits*. This narrative strategy was best met with cost-benefit analysis evidence and was tied to the narrative elements of setting and plot. *Setting* was further invoked in this stage through the explicit



**Fig. 1** Conceptual map

acknowledgement of the context in which the bill must pass: the unfortunate fiscal condition of the state. Because of this setting, cost-benefit evidence was also essential to *plot* as it was an essential storyline. Finally, at the third stage, advocates needed to create energy, momentum, and passion around the bill. In this case, they did so by invoking the *angel shift*, setting up lawmakers to see themselves as *hero characters* in the story of the control. The telling of personal stories and anecdotes were an effective way to communicate the overall *plot* of the story (e.g., the causal connections between lawmaker actions and opportunities for youth).

## Discussion

In this study of how evidence was used in the effort to pass California’s law on extended foster care (AB12), we found that advocates made strategic use of three types of evidence: research evidence about effectiveness, cost-related evidence based on professional expertise and cost-benefit analysis, and testimonial evidence regarding its potential impact and ability to relieve suffering. These three types of evidence are associated with three hurdles that we find are important for policy production during a time of government fiscal austerity: effectiveness, cost, and motivation. In other words, even once it is believed to be effective in terms of impact and cost, lawmakers must see a policy as more important than other potential bills—to become “heroes” of the policy and thus willing to overlook any remaining concerns about cost or implementation. As one high level state administrator noted, “My experience has been that [good use of research evidence] often times occurs, but it is far from guaranteeing the success.”

Thus, we find support for Schlauffer’s (2016) hypothesis that presentation of scientific evidence in connection with narrative elements of *character* will be particularly effective—in this case, evidence about youth outcomes and cost-benefit analysis was more effective when connected to the personal stories of former foster youth. Throughout, we show that evidence cannot be separated from narrative, because it is, in fact, part of the narrative (Schlauffer 2016). “Rational” empirical evidence is interpreted as it is embedded in larger more subjective narratives (Stone 2002).

This study also provides insights into the ACF's "policy learning" process (Sabatier 1987, 1988) by examining not only the kinds of evidence used but the *creation and presentation of that evidence at particular moments* in order to pursue their political ends (Parkhurst 2016). Both creation and presentation of evidence happened not only through policy narratives but through the ability of the coalition to present itself as a valid and cohesive representative group. This coalition did so by developing a coherent account of the problem and its solutions while drawing from various wells of expertise to strategically respond to changing evidentiary needs. By illustrating how and why advocates in this subsystem both created and presented different types of evidence in response to the interests of the policymakers involved, and how together the different forms of evidence were used to shape a more complete narrative, this study bridges rational and non-rational approaches to policy analysis in two key ways.

First, results from this study call into question the notion that the creation of evidence in response to the concerns of policymakers necessarily supplants or co-opts the ability of policymakers and advocates to engage in truly "evidence-based policymaking." In this case, lawmakers were willing to consider the policy if it could be shown to be budget neutral or potentially cost saving. This is where, in ACF terms, evidence was used as a technical resource. When legislators insisted they would not pass a costly bill, researchers were recruited to develop a cost-benefit analysis that showed diffused benefits and concentrated costs. In addition, professional expertise was mobilized to shift cost projections. The production of evidence as a response to the demands and interests of policymakers suggests evidence-based policymaking and "policy-based evidence making" may co-occur, and in ways that are complementary (van Gestel and de Poorter 2016, p. 156) and essential to an emerging narrative.

Second, this case illustrates how narratives—both the personal stories deployed by youth and narrative elements invoked by the broader coalition—can affect the uptake and effectiveness of empirical evidence. This research furthers the development of the NPF by showing how (1) narrative strategy and (2) specific narrative elements are not only linked to evidence, but specific *types* of evidence (Smith-Walter et al. 2016). An important feature of this case was the degree to which advocates built on the fact that foster youth are a sympathetic population (or "victim" characters) and shared their personal stories in order to convince policymakers that the policy was important. These stories provided narrative congruence and transportation that was essential to mobilizing lawmakers to move forward with the bill (the angel shift, as experienced by "hero" characters). Thus, this study provides new evidence in support of key tenets of the NPF (Shanahan et al. 2011), further developing the bridge between positivist and post-positivist approaches to policy analysis. We find that for legislation that concerns sympathetic populations, such testimonial evidence can be just as (or more) effective with legislators than research evidence about effectiveness (Laws 1997). This is partly because it may push legislators "over the hump" when cost is a concern. Centering evidence drawn from the voices of affected youth may also have played a role in motivating the coalition and keeping it strong.

Our findings about use of evidence also indicate that for research to shape legislative decisions it needs to be more timely and geared more to the concerns of specific users than what is generally produced by academic researchers (Wye et al. 2015; Tseng 2012). In this case, a network of coalition members played an important role in facilitating access to research evidence. Established relationships were critical in producing the required evidence in the right timeframe for it to be useful. Specifically, the advocates let their connections in the philanthropic and research communities know the data were necessary, and the foundations responded by providing emergency funding to those pre-identified

researchers. In addition, coalition members “at the frontlines” consistently treated their group diversity as a resource rather than a constraint, using different skills to produce different types of evidence, helpful for drawing out different narrative elements (Smith-Walter et al. 2016).

Examining the convergence of various types of evidence and advocates at various stages of the policy process leads to a question regarding “coalitional glue”: How do policy coalitions develop and maintain high levels of stability, strength, and cohesion in their narrativized uses of evidence? While the NPF posits that high levels of coalitional glue are important for coalition success, our findings point to two inter-related processes: (1) the ability of coalition members to see their mutual interests and complementary strengths as outweighing their divergent beliefs and (2) the use of narratives that unify coalition members by reminding them of a common purpose. In short, this case suggests that coalitional glue is developed when groups are able to see their diversity as a strength rather than a weakness.

Although this is a case study, the findings about the use of evidence in the efforts to pass and implement AB12 may also be applicable to other situations in which (1) the policy under consideration concerns a sympathetic population, or where there is wide support for the policy on its face or (2) where state budget constraints dominate the discussion, which is becoming increasingly common. That said, as with all case studies, a major limitation of this study is in knowing its generalizability.

To assess generalizability, as well as to contribute to theory building, the scope conditions of this case are important to note. First, this was widely considered historic legislation, even before the bill passed. Many respondents remarked that they felt involvement with AB12 was a “once in a lifetime” opportunity to contribute to a major policy innovation. This may have made both policymakers and advocates more motivated and willing to fight harder than usual. Our findings largely support the Shanahan et al. finding that “a winning policy narrative is one a reader can hitch their wagons to, in contrast to desensitizing and at times extreme doom and gloom narratives” (2013, p. 469). This historic nature may also have led to the unusually strong and diverse main coalition, which we argue enabled them to use varied types of evidence more effectively.

Second, California is a generally progressive state that likes to see itself as a leader for other states. That may have made taking bold action on this issue easier than it would have been in states with stronger opposition to the expansion of government programs. Third, because there was only one coalition, there was not explicit competition in terms of either evidence or narrative. For example, an opposing coalition might have been able to counter the benefits estimates in the cost-benefit analysis or have constructed a counter-narrative that made the stories less effective. Thus, we can only draw lessons for cases where there is not a clear opposing coalition on the issue. Other scope conditions of our case include a sympathetic target population, a serious budget crisis, and limited interest and knowledge by the general public.

Future research could help shed light on the specific contribution each of these issues made to the policy outcome. In particular, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between coalition size and strength and the use of various types of evidence. A comparative state-by-state analysis of attempts to extend foster care could shed light on the extent to which the potency of a diverse coalition can be attributed to its access to diverse kinds of evidence. It could also improve our understanding of what kinds of narratives help coalitions maintain some control over how evidence is interpreted by policymakers. Future studies should also elucidate how factors external to the policy subsystem, such as the financial resources and political attitudes unique to each state, might facilitate or

complicate attempts by advocates to gain narrative control, build strong and diverse coalitions, and signal to policymakers that solution consensus has been reached among key stakeholders.

**Acknowledgements** This research was made possible by a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation. The authors would also like to thank Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Genevieve Benedetti, Laura Napolitano, and LaShaun Brooks for their contributions to this project.

## References

- Asen, R., Gurke, D., Solomon, R., Connors, P., & Gumm, E. (2011). "The research says": Definitions and uses of a key policy term in federal law and local school board deliberations. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 47, 195–213.
- Baekkeskov, E. (2016). Explaining science-led policy-making: Pandemic deaths, epistemic deliberation and ideational trajectories. *Policy Sciences*, 49, 395–419.
- Blomkamp, E. (2014). Uses of evidence in local cultural policy: Performance, legitimation, problem representation, and learning in two Australian municipalities. *Evidence & Policy*, 10(2), 223–241.
- Cairney, P. (2013). Standing on the shoulders of giants: How do we combine the insights of multiple theories in public policy studies? *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(1), 1–21.
- Cairney, P., Oliver, K., & Wellstead, A. (2016). To bridge the divide between evidence and policy: Reduce ambiguity as much as uncertainty. *Public Administration Review*, 76(3), 399–402.
- California Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care (2008). *Final Recommendations to the Judicial Council*. Sacramento, CA: California Judicial Council.
- Campbell, J. L. (2002). Ideas, politics and public policy. *Annual Review Of Sociology*, 28, 21–38.
- Caplan, N. (1979). The two-communities theory and knowledge utilization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 22(3), 459.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T. (2007). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 21*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Dear, R. B., & Patti, R. J. (1981). Legislative advocacy: Seven effective tactics. *Social Work*, 26(4), 289–296.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550.
- Epstein, D., Farina, C., & Heidt, J. (2014). The value of words: Narrative as evidence in policy making. *Evidence & Policy*, 10(2), 243–258.
- Fenger, M., & Klok, P. (2001). Interdependency, beliefs, and coalition behavior: A contribution to the advocacy coalition framework. *Policy Sciences*, 34(2), 157–170.
- Gray, G., & Jones, M. D. (2016). A qualitative narrative policy framework? Examining the policy narratives of US campaign finance regulatory reform. *Public Policy and Administration*, 31(3), 193–220.
- Hall, P. A. (1993). Policy paradigms, social learning, and the state: The case of economic policymaking in Britain. *Comparative Politics*, 3, 275.
- Hall, R. L., & Deardorff, A. V. (2006). Lobbying as legislative subsidy. *American Political Science Review*, 100(1), 69–84.
- Heikkila, T., & Gerlak, A. K. (2013). Building a conceptual approach to collective learning: Lessons for public policy scholars. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(3), 484–512.
- James, T. E., & Jorgensen, P. D. (2009). Policy knowledge, policy formulation, and change: Revisiting a foundational question. *Policy Studies Journal*, 37(1), 141–162.
- Jones, B. D. (2003). Bounded rationality and political science: Lessons from public administration and public policy. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13(4), 395–412.
- Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2010). A narrative policy framework: Clear enough to be wrong? *Policy Studies Journal*, 38(2), 329–353.
- Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives and public policies*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1971). *A preview of policy sciences*. New York: American Elsevier.
- Laws, G. (1997). Voluntary organizations and advocacy: The case of housing for older Americans. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 26, 307–335.

- Macomber, J. E., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Duncan, D., Kuehn, D., McDaniel, M., Vericker, T., et al. (2008). *Coming of age: Employment outcomes for youth who age out of foster care through their middle twenties*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- McBeth, M. K., Shanahan, E. A., Arnell, R. J., & Hathaway, P. L. (2007). The intersection of narrative policy analysis and policy change theory. *Policy Studies Journal*, 35(1), 87–108.
- McDonnell, L., & Weatherford, M. (2013). Evidence use and the Common Core State Standards movement: From problem definition to policy adoption. *American Journal Of Education*, 120(1), 1–25.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nutley, S., Walter, I., & Davies, H. T. O. (2007). *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Parkhurst, J. O. (2016). Appeals to evidence for the resolution of wicked problems: The origins and mechanisms of evidentiary bias. *Policy Sciences*. doi:10.1007/s11077-016-9263-z.
- Peters, C. M., Dworsky, A., Courtney, M. E., & Pollack, H. (2009). *The benefits and costs of extending foster care to age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall.
- Riker, W. H. (1986). *The art of political manipulation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sabatier, P. A. (1987). Knowledge, policy-oriented learning, and policy change: An advocacy coalition framework. *Science Communication*, 8(4), 649–692.
- Sabatier, P. A. (1988). An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein. *Policy Sciences*, 21(2–3), 129–168.
- Sabatier, P. A. (1991). Toward better theories of the policy process. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 24(02), 147–156.
- Schlauffer, C. (2016). The narrative uses of evidence. *Policy Studies Journal*. doi:10.1111/psj.12174.
- Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (1993). Social construction of target populations: Implications for politics and policy. *American Political Science Review*, 87(02), 334–347.
- Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2011). Policy narratives and policy processes. *Policy Studies Journal*, 39(3), 535–561.
- Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Lane, R. R. (2013). An angel on the wind: How heroic policy narratives shape policy realities. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(3), 453–483.
- Smith-Walter, A., Peterson, H. L., Jones, M. D., & Reynolds Marshall, A. N. (2016). Gun stories: How evidence shapes firearm policy in the United States. *Politics & Policy*, 44(6), 1053–1088.
- Stone, D. A. (2002). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (p. 448). New York: Norton.
- Tseng, V. (2012). The uses of research in policy and practice. *Social Policy Report*, 26(2), 3–16.
- van Gestel, R., & de Poorter, J. (2016). Putting evidence-based law making to the test: Judicial review of legislative rationality. *The Theory and Practice of Legislation*, 4(2), 155–185.
- Weible, C. M., & Sabatier, P. A. (2009). Coalitions, science, and belief change: Comparing adversarial and collaborative policy subsystems. *Policy Studies Journal*, 37(2), 195–212.
- Wye, L., Brangan, E., Cameron, A., Gabbay, J., Klein, J. H., & Pope, C. (2015). Evidence based policy making and the ‘art’ of commissioning—how English healthcare commissioners access and use information and academic research in ‘real life’ decision-making: An empirical qualitative study. *BMC Health Services Research*, 15(1), 430.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.