Does Anti-Poverty Advocacy Matter?
Interest Group Advocacy and Social Welfare Policy in the American States

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Abstract
While a large body of research examines cross-state variation in social welfare policy, few studies examine the influence of organizations that advocate on behalf of the poor. This paper sheds light on this underexplored area of research by examining relationships between state advocacy communities and policy choices following the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), or welfare reform. Using an original dataset of states’ advocacy communities, political and economic characteristics, and welfare policy choices, the paper analyzes whether the size of a state’s advocacy community is associated with its decisions to reduce the government’s commitment to low-income families on the one hand and enact policies providing additional supports to families on the other. The analysis reveals that significant relationships exist for both types of welfare policies, suggesting that organizational advocates for the poor may play a more important role in shaping state-level social welfare policy choices than previous research suggests.

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Political scientists have long been interested in understanding cross-state variation in social welfare policy. Across the United States, states differ in both the nature and scale of their response to problem of poverty, which ranged from a low of a 10 percent poverty in New Hampshire to a high of a 24 percent poverty in Mississippi in 2012 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2013). Although federal and state governments share authority over an array of social welfare programs, state governments retain discretion over the program design, eligibility rules, and benefit levels of many programs. States also develop and administer their own programs, such as state tax credits to low-income working families and cash assistance to needy individuals. Moreover, such discretion has increased in the past several decades, as national policies have shifted authority away from Washington and to the state and local level (Conlan 1998; Meyers, Gomick, and Peck 2001).

The existing literature on state social welfare policy adoption yields important findings regarding the role of partisan politics, constituent opinion, economic factors, and racial politics (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Plotnick and Winters 1985; Soss et al. 2001; Tweedie 1994). Yet few studies examine whether interest groups that advocate on behalf of the poor shape social policy decisions across the American states. The absence of knowledge regarding the relationship between antipoverty advocacy and social welfare policy choice is problematic: many states maintain a robust community of groups that are active in advocating on behalf of the poor (Berry and Arons 2003; Pekkanen, Smith, and Tsujinaka 2014). Moreover, qualitative research suggests that advocates for the poor do influence social welfare policy choices in some states (Burt, Geen, and Duke 1997; Francis and Anton 1999; Geen et al. 1998; Karch 2007; Winston 2002).
To better understand the influence of state-level advocates in social policymaking, this paper analyzes relationships between state advocacy communities and policy choices following the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, or welfare reform. Under the PRWORA, the national government ended its 60-year guarantee of cash assistance to needy families and granted states increased discretion over many programmatic aspects of the welfare program (Weaver 2000). Because the federal legislation required each state to submit plans defining the structure of its welfare program, advocates across states had similar incentives to mobilize knowing that a welfare reform bill with a broad set of provisions would gain space on the legislative agenda. The PRWORA thus provides an ideal framework for analyzing the relationship between state-level advocacy and welfare policy choices.

In the next section, I merge insights from the literature on interest groups, nonprofit advocacy, and social welfare policy to motivate the paper’s focus on state-level advocates for low-income populations. This section challenges the conventional wisdom that the small numbers and limited resources of advocacy organizations limit their effectiveness in politics. Antipoverty advocacy communities are far larger than lobbying registration lists would suggest and although advocates often lack the financial and electoral resources of other interest groups, they do possess information that is valued by elected leaders (Berry and Arons 2003; Hays 2001; Pekkanen, Smith, and Tsujinaka 2014). There are therefore reasons to expect that advocates play an important role in the policymaking process, and that cross-state differences in advocacy communities are associated with differences in social welfare policies.

The third section of the paper presents the empirical analysis. This section begins by developing a new measure of advocacy community strength that includes both groups registered
to lobby on welfare-related issues and non-registered membership groups active on social welfare policy issues. In this section, I use multivariate logistic regression analysis to examine independent relationships between advocacy community strength and different types of welfare policies, including those designed to punish welfare recipients for failing to comply with program rules and those offering additional supports to help families transition off the welfare program.

The analysis reveals that across the 50 states, states with larger anti-poverty advocacy communities were less likely to adopt policies that imposed strict work requirements and penalties on welfare recipients for noncompliance with program rules, as well as policies that allowed recipients to possess greater assets without losing welfare eligibility. Systematic relationships exist for both punitive and supportive policies, but consistent with other research on welfare policy choices, do not exist for all programmatic issues over which states had discretion. The findings suggest that advocates play a role in shaping state policy choices despite their small numbers and limited resources, and imply that scholars interested in cross-state variation in social welfare policy should begin to consider the role of advocates in shaping policy decisions across the American states.

**Theoretical Foundations**

Interest groups play an active role in state politics. In 1997, over 34,000 groups representing an array of public and private interests were registered to lobby at the state level (Gray and Lowery 2001). State interest group communities vary considerably, both with respect to the number of groups active and the distribution of interests across economic sectors (Gray and Lowery 1996; Nownes and Freeman 1998; Thomas and Hrebenar 1999). Organized interests
also enjoy varying levels of influence across states: interest groups are described as having a dominant influence in states such as Alabama, Florida, and Nevada, for example, but are described as constrained or subordinate to other political factors in states such as Delaware, Minnesota, and South Dakota (Thomas and Hrebenar 1999).

Although there are differences in the composition and political influence of interest group communities across states, most communities are dominated by business and professional rather than public interests, with few groups active on issues of concern to marginalized populations such as the poor. For example, of the 34,000 interest groups active across states in 1997, only 4 percent were mobilized around welfare-related issues (Gray and Lowery 2001). Groups that do mobilize around such concerns tend to be less active than other types of interest groups. Thomas and Hrebenar (1999) demonstrate that while social service groups are present in more than 45 states, such groups are described as “intermittently active” rather than “continually active.”

Given the fact that millions of Americans live below the poverty line, the shortage of organizational activity on behalf of the poor may seem surprising. Previous research suggests that both individual-level barriers and a lack of shared identity among the poor limit the extent to which low-income populations are able to mobilize for political action. Low-income individuals often lack the time, money, and civic skills that enable civic and political involvement and many are isolated from networks of political engagement. As a result, those living in poverty are less likely than other Americans to contact public officials or participate in political organizations (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993). Heterogeneity within low-income communities also limits political mobilization. As Imig (1996, 2) notes: “To act as a group, poor people would need to see themselves as undergoing a common plight—yet they have little or no opportunity to recognize the shared aspects of their condition.” As a result, few
interest groups mobilize to represent the political interests of the poor (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012).

Of the political organizations that do emerge, many lack the resources that political scientists theorize lead to interest group influence. Relative to the business and professional organizations that dominate interest group communities, social welfare organizations have fewer members and smaller budgets (Strolovitch 2007). Such groups are often funded by foundation and government grants, making them vulnerable to shifting preferences among private donors and political actors (Imig 1996). Research organizations that study social policy and intergovernmental actors that administer welfare programs lack an active membership base and thus have few electoral resources to exchange for favorable political attention (Hays 2001; Salisbury 1984). In addition, charitable organizations that provide services to the poor are legally prohibited from contributing to political campaigns and lobbying national and state legislators. Although a small number of charities are “H-electors” – a legal designation that allows groups to circumvent legal limits on legislative lobbying – most charitable organizations do not engage in extensive lobbying for fear of losing their tax-exempt status (Berry and Arons 2003).

Because advocates for the poor are few in number and lack political resources, the conventional wisdom within political science holds that organizational advocates for the poor lack influence in the policymaking process. Perhaps for this reason, recent quantitative research on the determinants of states’ social welfare policy choices tends to neglect the role of advocates. Of the many studies that analyze the predictors of states’ policy choices following welfare reform, for example, none account for the role of state-level advocates in shaping welfare policy decisions (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Filindra 2012; Gais and Weaver 2002; Hero and Preuhs 2007; Reingold and Smith 2012; Soss et al. 2001).
Yet there are reasons to challenge the conventional wisdom that advocates for the poor lack influence in the social policymaking process. First, the political interests of the poor are represented by a wide range of organized interests, many of which do not register as lobbying organizations (Hays 2001). Berry and Arons (2003) argue that although most public charities do not register as interest groups, many “act like” interest groups in their interactions with government officials, especially at state and local levels. Pekkanen and Smith (2014) similarly argue that nonprofit organizations that do not register as lobbyists nevertheless engage in a wide range of activities to influence public policy, such as testifying at public hearings and mobilizing grassroots advocacy campaigns. Thus, official numbers of registered lobbyists or interest groups may understate the true degree of advocacy within states.

Second, despite their resource limitations, advocates for low-income populations are not completely without resources to use in their lobbying efforts. While they lack extensive lobbying budgets and large membership bases, advocates such as nonprofit service providers, social policy research organizations, and intergovernmental groups often possess information that policymakers value, including information about the needs of the poor and the implementation of social welfare programs (Berry and Arons 2003; Camissa 1995; Hays 2001). Advocates can use this information to influence the decisions of policymakers eager to address a poverty-related problem and develop policies that have a high likelihood of success (Esterling 2004; Kingdon 1989). Advocates for the poor can also lobby collaboratively with groups possessing more plentiful resources, such as women’s organizations and children’s groups (Boris and Maronick 2014; Sherraden, Slosan, and Sherraden 2002; Strolovitch 2007).

Third, qualitative research indicates that advocates for low-income populations are both active and influential in the social policymaking process. On the issue of welfare reform in
particular, advocates for low-income children and families engaged in a wide range of activities to influence welfare policy and were successful in fighting off proposals to scale back the welfare state at the national level (Haskins 2006; Weaver 2000; Winston 2002). Interest groups are also cited as active and influential on welfare reform across states (Burt, Geen, and Duke 1997; Geen et al. 1998; Heaney 2004; Karch 2007; Winston 2002). Karch (2007), for instance, shows that advocates were able to modify stringent employment-related provisions of welfare reform in Oregon through involvement in hearings, a welfare reform task force, and legislative work sessions (185-189). Similarly, Winston (2002) finds that in Maryland, advocates were influential in decisions to preserve the welfare entitlement and set a floor on benefit levels (115-150).

Thus there are theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that advocates for the poor experience more political influence than the conventional wisdom suggests. If advocates are influential in the social policy process, then cross-state differences in state advocacy communities may be associated with differences in social welfare policy adoption. In the following section, I examine the empirical support for the hypothesis that the strength of a state’s advocacy community is associated with more generous policies following welfare reform, controlling for other political, economic, and constituency characteristics of states.

**Data Analysis**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), or welfare reform, ushered forth a wide range of changes at the state level. The entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children was replaced by the block grant program Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). Under TANF, cash benefits were made conditional on employment activities and time-limited. States were also granted increased
discretion over a wide range of programmatic issues, including generosity of benefits, stringency of work requirements, and sanctions for non-compliant behavior (Blank and Haskins 2001; Danziger 2001; Rowe 1999).

The goals of the TANF block grant program were to provide assistance to poor families, end the dependence of poor families on government benefits by encouraging employment, and reduce the incidence of child birth out of marriage (Gais et al. 2001). In pursuit of these goals, states adopted a range of policies that imposed strict requirements or penalties for noncompliance with welfare program rules, as well as those that offered resources and support to welfare recipients as they transitioned into employment. For simplicity, I refer to the former as “punitive policies” and the latter as “supportive policies.”

Table 1 provides a brief description of select programmatic issues falling within the categories of punitive and supportive policies, as well as the frequency of policy adoption across the 50 states. All policies are coded on either a 1-3 (time limits, sanctions, earnings disregards) or a 0-1 scale (asset limitations, vehicle exemptions, child support income, work requirements, and family caps). For punitive policies, higher values indicate more stringent policies; for supportive policies, higher values indicate greater supports or resources.

The first four rows of Table 1 describe the distribution of punitive policies across states. These policies include work requirements, time limits, sanctions, and family caps. Federal law requires that all adult recipients engage in work activities after two years of receiving benefits, but states are permitted to demand work from recipients at an earlier point. Table 1 shows that by

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1 The policy measures are constructed from two sets of sources: the Urban Institute’s Welfare Rules Database (WRD) and existing studies of state policy decisions (Blank and Schmidt 2001; Pavetti and Bloom 2001). The Urban Institute’s WRD is a detailed database of AFDC/TANF rules for each state for each year from 1996-2008. These rules were compiled from caseworker manuals in each state, and reviewed by state administrators for accuracy. I used the WRD to generate measures of family cap policy adoption, work requirements, asset limitations, vehicle exemptions, and child support pass-through policies. I use Blank and Schmidt’s measure of benefit generosity and earnings disregards (2001) and Pavetti and Bloom’s measure of sanction and time limit policies (2001).
1999, 38 states adopted a requirement stricter than the federal standard, requiring work activity immediately upon receipt of TANF benefits (Rowe 2000). Benefits are time-limited at sixty months for the majority of TANF recipients, though states are permitted to set earlier time limits. Twenty-four states enacted moderate time limits by 1999, which mirrored the federal standard of sixty months. Seventeen states adopted shorter time limits, and 9 states used state funds to extend TANF benefits beyond sixty months (Pavetti and Bloom 2001).

When a TANF recipient does not comply with activities requirements, states are required to impose a benefit reduction, or sanction, until that family meets the requirement. States vary in the stringency of sanctioning policies. For example, some state policies punish noncompliant behavior in areas other than employment, or impose sanctions that affect Food Stamp or Medicaid coverage. The most lenient sanctioning policies impose only a partial benefits reduction and do not impose a full sanction on Food Stamp benefits, while the strictest sanctioning policies impose immediate sanctions that revoke the entire cash benefit (Pavetti and Bloom 2001). Table 1 shows that 25 states adopted the strictest sanctions, in which the sanction was imposed immediately and affected Food Stamp and Medicaid benefits; thirteen states had moderate sanctions in which gradual full family sanctions did not affect other benefits; and 12 states had lenient sanctions.

Finally, TANF aimed to reduce the extent of out-of-wedlock childbearing by altering the costs and benefits associated with having children out of marriage. The family cap policy prohibits additional benefits to children born to mothers currently receiving welfare benefits. This policy was included in PRWORA at state option, meaning that states were allowed but not required to adopt the policies. By 1999, 21 states had enacted a family cap policy (Rowe 2000).

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2 Data on work requirements is unavailable for one state (Colorado).
While much of the research on states’ welfare policy choices has focused on punitive policies, states also provided resources and services to support recipients’ transitions into employment. The second four rows of Table 1 describe the distribution of several supportive policies. Under the PRWORA, states provide cash benefits to families falling below a predetermined, state-specific income threshold.\(^3\) A family is eligible to receive cash benefits if earned income falls below the income threshold and if assets do not exceed state-specific limits. Prior to PRWORA’s enactment, families were permitted to have up to $1000 in assets and $1500 in vehicle equity and remain eligible for the welfare program. By 1999, most states had liberalized these restrictions, with considerable variation across states. Table 1 shows that 19 states raised asset limitations above $2000 (the median asset limitation) and half exempted the full value of a vehicle. The PRWORA also increased state discretion over the division of child support income between families and the state. In 1999, 34 states permitted families to keep $50 or more of child support income and disregard this income when determining the amount of the welfare cash benefit. Sixteen states retained all child support income collected.

States also increased incentives for recipients to engage in work activities through the use of earnings disregards, which essentially ignore a share of earnings when calculating a household’s eligibility for welfare benefits. The earnings disregard prior to the PRWORA was 33 percent, which translated into a benefit reduction of 67 cents for every additional dollar earned (Blank and Schmidt 2001). Most states expanded this initial earnings disregard after reform (Matsudaira and Blank 2008). Table 1 shows that by 1999, 19 states had enacted a policy of low generosity, meaning that the amount that was disregarded for a single mother working full time

\(^3\) Monthly benefit levels vary significantly across states. For example, in 1999 the maximum monthly benefit under TANF for a family of three with no income ranged from a low of $120 in Mississippi to a high of $923 in Alaska (Rowe 2000). Because few states altered their benefit levels following the passage of PWRORA, benefit levels are not included in the analysis of state policy decisions.
at $6/hour was less than $100 below the median state disregard. Fourteen states had a medium generosity policy (disregarded earnings within $100 of median disregard) and 17 states had a high generosity policy (disregarded earnings above $100 of median disregard) (Blank and Schmidt 2001).

State welfare policy decisions therefore differed with respect to the policies themselves, and perhaps unsurprisingly, with respect to the level of controversy surrounding them. Relative to supportive policies, punitive policies such as sanctions and family caps were more behaviorally directive, restricting or eliminating access to benefits if recipients failed to comply with activities requirements and program rules. In contrast, supportive policies such as asset limitations, vehicle exemptions, and child support pass-through policies allowed families to possess greater assets and income without losing eligibility for the welfare program. Punitive policies were also highly contentious and visible, whereas supportive policies were relatively less so (Gais and Weaver 2002; Soss et al. 2001). Because such differences may have impacted advocates’ lobbying strategies and success, both types of policies are included in the following analysis.

State Advocacy Communities

In this paper, the primary independent variable of interest is the strength of a state’s advocacy community. I measure advocacy community strength as the total number of registered lobbyists and non-registered membership groups active on welfare-related issues within a state. To create this measure, I merge data on groups registered to lobby across states in 1997 with data

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4 Correlations between policies show that most states adopted “packages” of lenient and strict policies, with few states adopting either all supportive or all strict policies. Across policies, the highest correlations are between strict time limit and sanctioning policies (0.41) suggesting that these policy choices tended to cluster together across states. However, most correlations are quite low, with all remaining correlations below .30.
on nonprofit membership organizations active on social welfare issues in 1994 and 1995. Together, these sources allow me to identify interest groups that were explicitly engaged in political activity on social welfare issues, as well as groups that were mobilized around similar issues but did not register as lobbying organizations.

I use Gray and Lowery’s dataset of state interest group registrations in 1997 to create a count of the number of interest groups registered to lobby on social welfare issues. These data are compiled from lists of lobbying registration rolls provided by each state and include membership and non-membership based organizations that are listed by name and coded according to economic sector (Gray and Lowery 2001). Across states, a total of 1,276 groups (4 percent of all groups) are coded as lobbying on the issue of “welfare.” Of these “welfare” organizations, I code each into a specific category based on the group’s focus. The categories include animal welfare, children, disability, the elderly, housing and homelessness, public interest law, social service, social work, and other welfare issues (such as immigration). The count of registered lobbying groups active on social welfare issues includes those groups with a focus on children, housing and homelessness, public interest law, social service, social work, and “other” welfare issues (N=799) and excludes those groups with a focus on animal welfare, disability, the elderly and those groups for which a focus could not be determined (N=477).

Table 2 shows the distribution of interest groups across categories. Of the 799 groups mobilized around social welfare issues, most focused on either children’s issues (43 percent) or general social service issues (32 percent). Children’s groups include advocacy and service

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5 In the dataset, each organization is included only once, even if multiple lobbyists were registered to lobby on their behalf, and organizations are coded according to economic sector (small business, health, education, etc.) and organizational structure (membership, association, or institution).

6 For a majority of organizations, it is possible to determine the organization’s focus based on the name alone. For the remaining organizations, I cross-referenced organizational names with internet sources to determine the focus of the group. Of the 1,276 organizations registered to lobby on the issue of “welfare,” 1,234 (or 97 percent) could be coded as having a specific focus. It was not possible to determine the specific focus for 42 groups (or 3 percent).
organizations like the Alliance for South Carolina’s Children and the State Child Care
Association of Maryland, as well as state and regional branches of national children’s
organizations, such as the Children’s Defense Fund of Minnesota. Social service groups include
charitable organizations such as Catholic Charities of Colorado, Minnesota, and Mississippi, and
the United Way of Ohio, as well as public service providers like the Public Welfare Association
of New York and the County Welfare Directors’ Association of Montana. Relative to children’s
groups and social service groups, fewer organizations were mobilized about issues related to
housing, hunger, or homelessness (8 percent), general public interest law (5 percent), social work
(7 percent), or other social welfare issues (5 percent).

As noted in the previous section, the number of groups registered to lobby may
underestimate the size of the antipoverty advocacy community because some groups active on
social welfare issues do not register as lobbyists (Berry and Arons 2003). To create a count of
non-registered groups active on social welfare issues, I gather data from the 4th edition of the
Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State, and Local Organizations. This source includes
over 80,000 nonprofit membership organizations active across a range of subject categories at
the state and local level in 1994 and 1995 (Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State, and
all organizations that were coded as active on issues related to homelessness, human services,
hunger, poverty, social services, and social welfare. Groups include state organizations such as

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7 The Encyclopedia of Associations notes that an intensive data collection process was used to identify organizations active across regions, states, and localities. For the 4th edition, all organizations listed in previous versions were contacted for updating. Newly formed organizations were identified through a variety of sources including lists from national organizations, libraries, and other local sources (Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State, and Local Organizations 4th Edition (Volume 1). In addition to membership organizations, non-membership organizations are included if they distribute information to the public (such as resource centers or service programs).

8 Each organization was included only once in the final count of non-registered membership organizations, even if it was coded by the Encyclopedia of Associations into more than one subject category. To prevent against double counting between the Encyclopedia of Associations and Gray and Lowery data, I cross-referenced the list of
the Illinois Coalition for the Homeless, as well as a large number of local organizations such as the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, the Austin chapter of the Texas Alliance for Human Needs, and the Salvation Army of Buffalo, New York. Table 2 shows that across states, the total number of nonprofit groups mobilized around such issues was 245.

The *advocacy community* variable sums the number of interest groups registered to lobby on welfare issues with the number of nonprofit membership organizations active on social welfare issues. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the independent variables, as well as the expected direction of the relationship between each independent variable and the two types of welfare policy choices. This table shows that across states, the average number of advocates is 21, ranging from a low of 3 groups in Wyoming to a high of 65 groups in Illinois. I expect the advocacy community variable to be negatively associated with the adoption of punitive policies and positively associated with the adoption of supportive policies.

*State Political and Economic Characteristics*

The remaining variables are grouped into three categories based on the posited mechanism of influence over state social policy decisions. The categories include political factors, economic factors, and constituent opinion. With respect to political factors, existing research suggests that liberal state governments are more likely than conservative state governments to adopt generous redistributive policies, particularly on the issue of welfare (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Gais and Weaver 2002; Peterson 1995). To control for *government liberalism*, I use Berry et al.’s (1998) measure of the ideology of the state government in 1996. This variable uses interest group ratings to estimate the ideological position of five key sets of Encyclopedia of Association organizations with the list of registered lobbying organizations and excluded cross-listed organizations from the final count of Encyclopedia of Association organizations (N=11).
actors (governors, and the two major party delegations in each Congressional house) and then aggregates these positions based on the relative power of each actor in the state (see Berry et al. 1998). Because higher values indicate more liberal governments, this variable should be negatively associated with punitive policies and positively associated with supportive policies.  

Past research also finds that across a range of public policy issues, electoral competition is associated with more liberal policies (Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; Plotnick and Winters 1985). When electoral competition is high, state legislators are more likely to favor disadvantaged interests because the possibility of electoral defeat makes candidates more responsive to constituent needs and because competition results in low-income voters constituting a larger share of the electorate (Barrilleaux et al. 2002; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; see also Key 1949).  

To control for electoral competition, I use Holbrook and Van Dunk’s (1993) measure of competition in district-level state legislative elections from 1994 through 1997, updated by Shufeldt and Flavin (2012). For this variable, higher values indicate greater levels of competition. The expected relationship is negative for punitive policies and positive for supportive policies.

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9 Some studies distinguish analytically between government ideology and partisan control, including measures of elite ideology and the percent of Republicans or Democrats in the state legislature in models of state welfare policy choice (Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer 2002; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Gais and Weaver 2002; Reingold and Smith 2012). However, because the Berry et al. (1998) measure uses information about partisan distribution within government to develop the measure of government ideology, the measure is highly correlated with measures of partisan control in state legislatures. Therefore, I include only the measure of government ideology in this analysis.  

10 There is some evidence that electoral competition and government ideology interact to influence policy choices. Barrilleaux and colleagues (2002), for instance, demonstrate that the effect of partisan control on welfare benefits is conditioned by electoral competition. When electoral competition is low, state governments provide similar welfare benefits regardless of partisan control. As electoral competition increases, legislatures dominated by Democrats increase their welfare expenditures but legislatures dominated by Republicans do not. This suggests that partisan or ideological control alone does not determine welfare spending, but rather depends on electoral competition.  

11 Competition is typically assessed with Ranney’s (1965) measure of shared partisan control of government or Holbrook and Van Dunk’s (1993) measure of electoral competition at the district level. Shufeldt and Flavin (2012) argue that while the two measures share a focus on partisan competition, they differ with respect to the primary mechanism of interest. For the Ranney’s measure, the mechanism of interest is the extent of shared partisan authority over decisionmaking. For the Holbrook and Van Dunk measure, the mechanism of interest is the degree of electoral pressure facing a legislator (see Shudelft and Flavin 2012). I use the second measure in this analysis because the Holbrook and Van Dunk variable provides a more direct measure of electoral competition and more...
Scholars have also drawn attention to the role of racial stereotypes in shaping social policy choices (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Gais and Weaver 2002; Soss et al. 2001, 2008). Soss and colleagues (2008) theorize that when race is salient in policy debates, policymakers turn to racial group reputations to evaluate public policies. On the issue of welfare, African American recipients were more likely than other recipients to be viewed as having motivational or behavioral deficiencies that led them to prefer or become dependent on welfare (Gilens 1999). The authors posit that policymakers from states with larger minority representation on welfare caseloads were therefore more likely to view themselves as enacting policies for people who faced behavioral or motivational barriers to economic self-sufficiency, and consequently were more likely to adopt punitive welfare policies (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2008). Following Soss and colleagues (2001), I control for racial bias by including variables measuring the percentage of African American recipients on states’ welfare caseloads in 1995 (African American caseload) and the percentage of Hispanics on states’ welfare caseloads in 1995 (Hispanic caseload). I expect this variable to be positively associated with punitive policies and negatively associated with supportive policies.12

Economic factors also shape welfare policy choices. Positive economic conditions may increase citizens’ preferences for redistribution or provide increased funding for social policy programs (Tweedie 1994; Plotnick and Winters 1985). I use per capita gross state product in 1996 to control for budgetary capacity within a state. As shown in Table 3, the average per capita income in 1996 is $31,040. Because states with greater budgetary capacity may be less

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12 Although most work on racial stereotypes and welfare politics focuses on racial biases involving African Americans, Fox (2004) shows that white’s perceptions of Latinos also shape their welfare preferences, often in a punitive direction. Thus it seems likely that higher percentages of Latinos on the welfare caseload will be positively associated with the adoption of punitive policies and negatively associated with the adoption of supportive policies.
resistant to redistributive policies, this variable should be negatively associated with punitive choices and positively associated with supportive choices.

In addition to political and economic factors, previous research reveals that constituent liberalism is associated with state policy adoption in areas as diverse as health, education, criminal justice, and welfare (Burstein 2003; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Tweedie 1994). To control for constituent liberalism, I use Erikson, Wright, and McIver’s measure of the ideology of a state’s electorate in 1996 (McIver, Erikson, and Wright 2001). This variable estimates of the ideological identification of state electorates from cumulative opinion surveys from CBS/New York Times, with higher values indicating more liberal states (see Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; McIver, Erikson, and Wright 2001). I expect this variable to be negatively associated with punitive policies and positively associated with supportive policies.

Finally, two variables are included to control for the states’ past generosity on the issue of welfare and the overall size of the interest group population. Prior to the passage of PRWORA, states differed with respect to the generosity of their social welfare programs. A state’s past orientation in the social welfare policy arena likely influenced policy choices made following PRWORA’s passage. To control for a state’s social policy orientation, I include a variable

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13 An alternative approach is to measure constituent opinion using the Berry, Ringquist, Fording, and Hanson (BRFH) measure of constituent ideology in 1996 (Berry et al. 1998), the vote share received by a particular candidate in an ideological election, or to use specific survey items to estimate state public opinion on social welfare issues. The BRFH measure (1998) measure, widely used in the comparative state politics literature, estimates constituent opinion from the ideological position of candidates in state Congressional races, with higher values indicating more liberal populations. Scholars of state welfare policy have used both the BRFH measure and measures based on electoral vote shares to control for constituent opinion (Gais and Weaver 2002; Hero and Preuhs 2007; Reingold and Smith 2012). I use the updated Erikson, Wright, and McIver (EWM) measure for two reasons. First, because the EWM measure is based on the mean ideological self-identification of respondents in survey data, it represents a more direct measure of constituent opinion than variables that are based on electoral races and returns (see Erikson, Wright, and McIver 2007). National survey data that assess specific issue preferences provide the most direct measure of constituent opinion, but data that are disaggregated to the state level often yield samples too small to provide a reliable indicator of state opinion (see Brace et al. 2002 and Norrander 2001 for discussions of this issue). Second, Berry and colleagues’ measure of constituent ideology correlates strongly with their measure of government ideology, thereby introducing collinearity into the model when both variables are included.
measuring the value of a cash welfare benefit for a family of three in 1990. In addition, it is necessary to control for the total number of lobbying and nonprofit organizations in a state. Table 3 shows that across states, the average size of the community of organized interests (including registered lobbying organizations and nonregistered membership groups) is 2,336.

Results

Tables 4 and 5 present the coefficients and standard errors for the regression of state welfare policies on the set of independent variables. I use ordered logistic regression analysis to estimate relationships for time limits, sanctions, earnings disregards, and logistic regression analysis to estimate relationships for asset limitations, vehicle exemptions, child support income, work requirements, and family caps. Table 4 shows results for the four strict policies: sanctions, time limits, work requirements, and family caps, with higher values indicating more punitive policies. This table shows that the size of the anti-poverty advocacy community is significantly and negatively associated with the adoption of stricter sanctions and work requirements. Controlling for other political and economic characteristics, states with a larger number of advocates are less likely than other states to adopt policies that penalize recipients for failing to comply with activities requirements and less likely to require work earlier than the federal standard of 24 months.

Consistent with past research, government liberalism and racial bias also emerge as significant predictors of punitive state policy choice (see Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Gais and Weaver 2002; Soss et al. 2001). The first and third columns show that states with more liberal governments are less likely to adopt sanctions and work requirements. States with a higher percentage of African American recipients on the welfare caseloads are more likely to adopt
strict sanctions and family cap policies, but less likely to adopt shorter work requirements. A higher percentage of Hispanics is associated with a less stringent work requirement.

Table 5 shows results for the four supportive policies: asset limitations, vehicle exemptions, child support income benefits, and earnings disregards. In these models, higher values indicate more supportive policies. Relative to punitive policies, fewer characteristics emerge as significant predictors of supportive welfare policies. However, the strength of a state’s advocacy community is positively associated with adopting more supportive asset limitations: in other words, states with larger advocacy communities were more likely than other states to adopt high asset limitations.

Because the regression coefficients reveal the direction but not the magnitude of the relationship between independent and dependent variables, I calculate how the probability of a state adopting a strict sanctioning policy, work requirement, or generous asset limitation changes alongside a change in the size of a state’s advocacy community. This analysis reveals that for a state with mean political and economic characteristics, the probability of adopting the strictest sanctions is 53 percent, the probability of adopting short work requirements is 96 percent, and the probability of adopting a generous asset limitation is 37 percent (data not shown).

For a state with a low number of advocates (14 advocates, or half a standard deviation below the mean number of advocates) and mean political and economic characteristics, the probability of adopting the strictest sanction increases by 10 percentage points, the probability of adopting short work requirements increases by 3 percentage points, and the probability of adopting generous asset limitations decreases by 22 percentage points. For a state with a high number of advocates (28 advocates, or half a standard deviation above the mean), the probability of strict sanctions and short work requirements decreases by 9 and 10 percentage points,
respectively, while the probability of generous asset limitations increases by 28 percentage points. Thus the magnitude of the relationship between the advocacy community and welfare policy choices is largest for asset limitations, and comparable for sanctions and work requirements.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The empirical analysis reveals that the strength of a state’s advocacy community, measured as the total number of groups active on social welfare issues within a state, is significantly associated with the adoption of both punitive and supportive welfare policies. Although advocates do not emerge as a dominant influence across all policy issues, evidence of a significant association across several policies suggests that advocates for low-income populations may play a larger role in the social welfare policy process than previous quantitative research suggests. The findings are also consistent with qualitative research on state policymaking after welfare reform, which demonstrates that advocates for low-income populations were influential in shaping welfare policy decisions in some states.

In addition to the finding of a significant association between advocacy community strength and state policy choice, an important contribution of the analysis is the development of a measure of advocacy community strength that incorporates both registered lobbyists and non-registered membership organizations active on social policy. Because advocates for the poor encounter unique constraints that decrease the likelihood that they will formally register as lobbyists, it is necessary to consider groups that explicitly identify as political actors as well as those that may not identify as lobbyists but nevertheless advocate on behalf of low-income populations. This suggests that scholars interested in the role of advocates must consider the
many different types of organizations that are active in social welfare policy domain. It also affirms the importance of drawing upon multiple data sources to identify the groups likely to be influential within this domain.

The finding that significant relationships do not emerge for all policies is consistent with existing research on the predictors of state welfare policy decisions. In previous studies of welfare policy adoption across states, the predictive power of political, economic, and constituent factors varies considerably across discrete policy choices (see for example Soss et al. 2001; Reingold and Smith 2012). Inconsistencies across policy choices may stem part from the fact that after PRWORA’s passage, states were granted enhanced discretion over a wide number of programmatic decisions and used this discretion in many different ways (Gais et al. 2001; De Jong et al. 2006). The fact that the advocacy community does not emerge as a significant predictor across all policies may also reflect the fact that advocates pursued different types of strategies across states that may have affected the extent to which they were able to influence policy choices (see Karch 2007).

The lack of a consistent relationship across policy choices speaks to the importance of developing additional measures of advocacy community strength and assessing influence across social policy areas in future research. In this paper, advocacy community strength is measured as the presence of anti-poverty advocates within a state. My assumption is that if such groups existed at the state level, then they viewed the issue as salient and were likely to lobby on the issue. While a review of existing case studies of welfare reform at the state level provides support for this assumption (see Heaney 2004; Karch 2007; Winston 2002), refining measures of advocacy community strength may help scholars assess whether it is the presence of advocates or their activities that shapes their role in the social welfare policymaking process.
In addition, while the welfare reform case permits an analysis of the role of advocates during a time when advocates across states had similar incentives to mobilize for political action, the case is also somewhat unusual in its visibility as well as the defensive nature of advocacy. Following PRWORA’s passage, advocates found themselves in the position of lobbying to prevent changes to a program that was disliked by both policymakers and the public (see Weaver 2000). It seems reasonable to suspect that groups representing the poor may have greater levels of success on policies that are more strongly supported by constituents and policymakers. Future research on the role of advocates across issues may provide greater insights regarding how and when advocates are able to achieve influence over policy decisions.

Since the passage of welfare reform in 1996, a growing body of research has emerged to better understand the determinants of state social policy choices in an increasingly devolved welfare state. This paper suggests that scholars interested in the predictors of states’ social policy decisions should begin to consider the role of advocacy communities in the social policy process. Moreover, the devolution of policy authority from national to state levels has likely increased incentives for advocates for the poor to mobilize in order to influence state social policy decisions. If advocacy communities have grown alongside the shift in policy authority, then research examining the prevalence and consequences of state-level advocacy may prove a fruitful path of inquiry for scholars interested in state level policies targeting America’s least advantaged citizens.
References


Gray, Virginia, and David Lowery. "The Expression of Density Dependence in State


Key, V. (1949). Southern politics in state and nation.


# Table 1. Description of Policy Goals and Prevalence of Punitive and Supportive Welfare Policy Adoption by 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punitive Policies</th>
<th>Lenient/ No</th>
<th>Moderate/ Medium</th>
<th>Strict/ Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanctions</td>
<td>N=12</td>
<td>N=13</td>
<td>N=25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Limits</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Requirement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Caps</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset Limitation</td>
<td>N=31</td>
<td></td>
<td>N=19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle Exemption</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Support Income</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earnings Disregard</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Punitive Policies: Reduction in benefit associated with non-compliance with work and child support requirements in TANF.

Time Limits: Time limit for receipt of welfare benefits

Work Requirement: Recipient are required to work before federal requirement of 2 years

Family Caps: Benefits do not increase if additional child is born to mother currently on assistance.

Supportive Policies: Maximum asset amount allowable to retain eligibility for TANF program is greater than $2000.

Asset Limitation: State exempts primary vehicle from determination of household eligibility for TANF

Vehicle Exemption: Some or all of child support income is returned to family or disregarded in benefit computation

Child Support Income: Amount of earnings that are disregarded in benefit computation. Technically, the inverse of the rate at which benefits are reduced as earnings increase.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Lobbying Organizations</td>
<td>799</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing, Hunger, and Homelessness</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Interest Law</td>
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<td>5.0%</td>
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<td>Social Work</td>
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<td>7.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Social Welfare Issues</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit Social Welfare Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy Community</td>
<td>Number of welfare lobbying groups (1997) and nonprofit social welfare membership organizations (1994/1995)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Government Liberalism</td>
<td>Ideological score for state government, with higher values indicating a more liberal government (1996)</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Competition</td>
<td>Competition in district-level state legislative elections, with higher values indicating greater competition (1994-1997)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Caseload</td>
<td>Percent African American on AFDC caseload in 1995</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Caseload</td>
<td>Percent Hispanic on AFDC caseload in 1995</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary Capacity</td>
<td>Per capita gross state product (1996)</td>
<td>$31,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituent Liberalism</td>
<td>Ideological score for population, with higher values indicating a more liberal population (1996)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Policy Orientation</td>
<td>Maximum AFDC benefit level for a family of three in 1990</td>
<td>$385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of Organized Interests</td>
<td>Total number of lobbying groups (1997) and nonprofit membership groups (1994/1995)</td>
<td>2336</td>
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Table 4. Coefficients and Standard Errors for the Regression of Punitive Policies on the Set of State-Level Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sanctions</th>
<th>Time Limits</th>
<th>Work Requirement</th>
<th>Family Cap</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy Community</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>2.431</td>
<td>(2.762)</td>
<td>0.039</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government Liberalism</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>5.426 *</td>
<td>(2.857)</td>
<td>-0.116 ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electoral Competition</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td>-4.371</td>
<td>(3.084)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American Caseload</td>
<td>4.272 **</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>-6.093 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>-19.484 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-2.177</td>
<td>(5.261)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constituent Liberalism</td>
<td>3.177</td>
<td>(5.985)</td>
<td>-0.743</td>
<td>(1.693)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Policy Orientation</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>*** (0.000)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
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<td>Interest Group Population</td>
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<td>-0.022</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cut1</td>
<td>-4.708</td>
<td>(2.924)</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cut2</td>
<td>-3.173</td>
<td>(2.876)</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>** (0.004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
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Method of Analysis
Ordered Logit Ordered Logit Binary Logit Binary Logit

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asset Limitation</th>
<th>Vehicle Exemption</th>
<th>Child Support</th>
<th>Earnings Disregard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy Community</td>
<td>0.168 ** (0.071)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.035)</td>
<td>-0.052 (0.042)</td>
<td>0.031 (0.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Liberalism</td>
<td>-0.011 (0.016)</td>
<td>0.014 (0.014)</td>
<td>-0.007 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.004 (0.013)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electoral Competition</td>
<td>-0.011 (0.042)</td>
<td>0.026 (0.037)</td>
<td>-0.064 (0.044)</td>
<td>0.059 * (0.035)</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American Caseload</td>
<td>0.109 (2.120)</td>
<td>-0.546 (1.797)</td>
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<td>1.505 (1.848)</td>
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<td>Hispanic Caseload</td>
<td>-1.897 (3.261)</td>
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<td>0.444 (3.341)</td>
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<td>-0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>-0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
<td>-0.000 (0.000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constituent Liberalism</td>
<td>2.191 (6.418)</td>
<td>0.148 (5.508)</td>
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<td>6.902 (5.149)</td>
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<td>0.002 (0.005)</td>
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<td>Binary Logit</td>
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<td>Ordered Logit</td>
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Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1