

Appendix A

Methodology

I employ case studies and elite interviewing as my principal methods in this research. In this appendix I outline the process by which I selected states for case studies and legislators for interviews. I discuss potential pitfalls common to case-study research and elite interviewing and how I safeguarded against such problems or attempted to mitigate them.

I first selected states for case studies. I defined the eligible population of states as any state that had considered a tax change in 1992, 1993, or 1994. This criterion offered a possible nineteen states from which to sample legislators. From this initial population, I stratified the states according to whether the tax proposal succeeded or failed and then according to various characteristics of its legislature. What was the outcome of the proposal? Did a tax change occur? I selected several states in which legislatures and citizens enacted tax changes and others where the tax proposals failed. I then selected the states based on variations in possible independent variables. I stratified states by population, region, whether they had an income tax, and by partisan control of both houses of the legislature and the governorship. I initially selected nine states based on variation in these factors and then added Vermont and Oregon when additional funding became available in 1994.¹

One criticism of case studies is that they involve selecting cases purposefully (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). I defend this approach on both methodological and practical grounds. Had I selected states randomly, I might have encountered little or no variation in policy outcomes and thus weakened my ability to explain why some policy proposals succeeded and others did not. Also, I selected states based on variation in both the policy outcome and in potential independent influences on the policy process, such as party control and current tax structure.

After selecting states, I chose state representatives and requested inter-

views using a random sample. In each state I requested between fifteen and eighteen interviews and conducted between eight and fifteen interviews. I spent four or five days in each state, during which time I interviewed and assembled as much documentation as possible.

Although I randomly selected legislators, they do not represent a random sample of U.S. state lawmakers. They represent eleven random samples of eleven state houses of representatives. The sampling method provided for a representative sample of representatives within each legislature, which was consistent with gaining knowledge about the first unit of analysis, individual legislators' policy preferences, and the second unit of analysis, the collective decisions of state legislatures. Although a random sample of all legislatures would have allowed for individual responses generalizable to the population of U.S. state representatives, it would have been inconsistent with the goal of understanding the collective decisions of state legislatures. On more practical grounds, such a sampling procedure would have exceeded the scope of the study and been nearly impossible to operationalize.

Where I have summarized responses and presented descriptive statistics about legislators' views, I have done so for two reasons. First, summaries offer an indication of the frequency with which different topics were discussed in different states and of the issues with which legislators associated various principles and concepts. Second, these frequencies offer some corroborative evidence that the issues emerging in one state were not idiosyncratic.

The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and two hours, and most ranged between thirty-five and forty-five minutes. In some instances, time or the representative's interests dictated that only one or two issues be discussed. I requested a meeting with each representative individually. In some cases, staff members asked if I would like them to be present, and I declined these courtesies. In two interviews, House members requested that their staff members attend the interview. In these cases, I transcribed only the members' responses and noted staff comments in an addendum.

I did not record the interviews. I developed shorthand and took notes. I then transcribed the interviews as soon after the interview as possible, in most cases within twenty-four hours. In the few cases where I could not transcribe interviews within twenty-four hours, I rewrote my notes, adding details and direct comments, and transcribed them shortly thereafter. I also fleshed out my notes immediately following most interviews.

I typically began with questions about tax policies and economic

development and then moved to specific tax proposals, Medicaid spending, education funding, and government mandates. Depending on the state and legislator, the order of questions varied. I began with general questions to afford members an opportunity to volunteer specific ideas and concepts without prompting. If they alluded to a subject or principle, I would insert a question or clarification to gain specificity. If this second question evoked an equally general response, I then asked about a specific idea or piece of legislation. In these cases, I took care to have enough background on the state's political landscape to be able to relate an idea from

TABLE A1. Interview Schedule

Taxes

Did you take a public position on the recent tax proposal?
 Personally, what would you like to see happen regarding that proposal? Why?
 Opponents (Proponents) of the proposal suggest this scenario. How do you respond?

Economic Development

Personally, what policies and priorities do you have for economic development?
 The governor (or House leadership) has offered Proposal X; have you taken a public position on this proposal?

Health Care

Like most states, your state has had to contend with escalating Medicaid costs.
 What do you think the current legislature might do?
 What would you personally like to do with respect to Medicaid specifically?
 With respect to health care in general?

Education

Have you taken a position on the current proposal? Why?

Government Mandates

The press has recently given attention to the issue of government mandates. In your experience as a legislator, have you encountered any particularly significant mandates?
 How have they affected the overall operation of the state government? What benefits can you perceive? What are the problems?
 In addition to federal mandates on states, states often mandate that localities comply with regulations or offer services. Are there any local mandates with which you have experience?

a local politician rather than my own.² Table A1 presents the basic interview schedule.

Conducting personal interviews offers several advantages over other possible methods of investigating state politics. An alternative would have been to conduct a mail survey of legislators in various states. I rejected this method because conducting the interviews allowed me to garner richer information. Personal interviews allowed me to tailor questions to the specific policy alternatives and politics in each state. The interviews also afforded me the opportunity to explore specific issues in depth with particular legislators. Such explorations would not have been possible using a survey.

Any difficulties in believing legislators in interviews would not be alleviated by using surveys. Indeed, the internal validity and reliability of a survey could be more problematic because one could not verify that the responses were indeed those of a legislator rather than of staff members or associates.

The case-study method allowed me to explore aspects of state politics that deserve greater attention. Many superb models of state politics rely mostly on aggregate or per capita spending and tax data (Garand 1988; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Dye 1990). These models typically discuss influences on state politics after the fact—that is, after appropriations have been made. Case studies allowed me to witness the policy process at various stages and to gather information about policy alternatives and political strategies leading to policy outcomes that are not revealed by various measures of spending and taxation. My results do not invalidate these other models. Rather, the case studies complement other methods.

An issue that may arise with interviews is whether an interviewer can believe what political elites relate. I employed three techniques for verifying information. First, newspaper articles, lobbyists' fact sheets, and legislative and administrative reports provided supporting evidence for, if not outright verification of, legislators' versions of events. Second, I often attempted innocuously to run a scenario past a legislator whom I suspected might have an alternative view from the original source. For example, I asked New Jersey Republicans about Democrats' claims that Governor Christine Todd Whitman's tax cut would necessitate local property tax increases. Some suggested that it would, and others explained why it would not. In using this technique, I was careful not to identify any proponent or opponent of an argument. I would place an argument before a legislator and ask them to respond by saying, "I understand your point,

but others might contend . . .” Respondents often replied with prefatory comments such as, “That’s a political argument from the liberals (conservatives). The truth is . . .” Although the arguments and counterarguments rarely provided an objective “truth,” they offered a range in which the truth might lie. In some instances, representatives candidly relayed that they personally favored a policy proposal not supported by their party or their constituents. Legislators admitted these political considerations (i.e., party unity and electoral risks) led them to oppose their most preferred policy proposal.

A third means for checking legislators’ accounts and perceptions came from staff, reporters, community and political activists, and lobbyists. I used a “snowball” sampling technique to find relevant interviews, and some occurred quite by chance.³ I contacted lobbyists and staffers based on the recommendations of legislators. This technique allowed me to check both policy proposals and accounts of events. In some cases, it enabled me to have the same information legislators used in shaping policy. I promised these individuals anonymity, and they offered very detailed information and background. I also protected the legislators’ identity. Lobbyists, staff, and activists frequently voluntarily identified leaders on various proposals and issues. From these identifications I could check information proffered by lawmakers.⁴

Although I treated the interviewees as informants rather than as respondents to a mass survey, the consistency and frequency with which certain topics, concepts, and principles appeared led me to code the interviews. Most of the coding centered on the frequency with which legislators discussed the six governing principles with respect to various policy areas (i.e., education, Medicaid, and economic development). I first coded the interviews to determine the overall frequency with which legislators discussed the principles regardless of the issue. Then I coded a subset of interviews for each policy area where the subset was comprised of those legislators who discussed the issue. If I did not discuss an issue with a legislator, the interview was not coded for inclusion in that chapter.

An important element of the case studies was acquiring and evaluating secondary evidence. I attempted to gather as many relevant state documents, interest-group publications, and press accounts as time allowed. In several states I sent for documents and bills after returning from the interviews. In addition to corroborating the information from legislators, this information provided valuable contextual and substantive information to write and document this research.

