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The Politics of Child Support in America

Political observers have long struggled to understand how new ideas are placed on the public agenda. Oftentimes, their accounts have focused on the pivotal group and/or individuals who manage to emerge from the public at large and “get things done.” In their studies, most social scientists have relied on biographical sketches and intensive case studies to explore the intricacies of innovation. Researchers have had much more difficulty, however, in moving from these individual success stories to more generalizable theories of entrepreneurship.

This book builds such a theory by focusing on the critical issue of child support enforcement in the United States. Beginning in the nineteenth century, this book tracks the evolution of multiple sets of political entrepreneurs as they grapple with the child support problem: charity workers and local law enforcement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social workers from the early twentieth century through the 1960s, conservatives during the 1970s, women’s groups and women legislators in the 1980s, and fathers’ rights groups in the 1990s and beyond. In detailing their efforts, this book borrows methodological tools from both political science and economics in order to highlight the pivotal stages in the innovation process.

Jocelyn Elise Crowley is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She has been previously published in such prestigious journals as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, the *Justice System Journal*, the *Eastern Economic Journal*, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, and *Social Science Quarterly*.

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Foreword

The “feminization” of poverty continues to grow at a rapid pace in America, and one of the main drivers of this growth is the lack of adequate child support and child support enforcement. Any American who buys a car on credit and moves across the state line knows he or she will still have to make the payments. We have made national enforcement of commercial credit laws very efficient. Not so with family credit. The federal government has worked to streamline the process, but there are still many glitches. There is also the issue that child support ordered by the court is often totally inadequate. Going back to my car payments comparison, many people’s child support payments are less than their car payments. Do we care more about our cars than our children?

This book identifies the leaders in the child support issue arena. We should all be leaders in the cause, because children are our future. Even if a perfect child support system were in place, single parents would face serious difficulties supporting their families. It is easier to work on making the child support system fairer, more equitable, and more efficient than it is to tackle all the other imbalances a single parent faces.

So launch into this book and figure out as you read what all of us can do to solve the remaining problems. We thank all of those who have been working out there, and we know no one can do it alone. We are much smarter and more effective when we work together. Too many people say parents shouldn’t be divorced and walk away. Well, if they are divorced, where does that leave the children? The public doesn’t want to support them, so we should at least insist that the parents of a failed marriage do

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what they can to support their children economically. This is not totally adequate, but it may be the best result we can achieve.

Patricia Schroeder (former U.S. representative from Colorado)
President and CEO, Association of American Publishers

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Acknowledgments

They say people write most passionately and honestly about the issues that they have faced in their own lives. I know all about parents breaking up, and I know all about how divorce impacts children. I also know all about child support enforcement. I know about its strengths, its weaknesses, and its potential for making a difference. Indeed, I am not alone. Many people have personal tales to tell. This book fills these personal spaces and sometimes personal tragedies with historical meaning.

Throughout the years, I have had three academic homes in which the ideas behind this book have happily percolated. At Georgetown University, where I earned my master's degree in public policy in 1994, I began thinking about child support enforcement as an important public policy issue for the first time. At this critical juncture, I was lucky enough to have R. Kent Weaver as a professor. He nurtured my interest in social policy in more ways than I can name. He was most influential, however, when he uttered seven key words that would shape my professional development – “Jocelyn, you should go get your Ph.D.”

I then moved on to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to earn my Ph.D. in political science. While in Cambridge, my ideas on child support would receive further nourishment through my interaction with both stellar faculty members and insightful colleagues. I would especially like to thank my dissertation committee, who pushed me in novel directions on this research. Charles Stewart III and Stephen Ansolabehere of MIT, as well as Theda Skocpol of Harvard University, provided enormous intellectual guidance when this project was in its early stages. Amy Black, Maryann Barakso, Miriam Murase, Anne Cammisa, Kira Sanbonmatsu,

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Rachael Cobb, and Sue Crawford – all part of the Cambridge crew – deserve special thanks.

At long last, I am now teaching at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Here once again I have cherished the intellectual environment I have needed to transform my ideas on the topic of child support enforcement, now fully formed, into a book. Spending the 2000–01 academic year attending weekly seminars at Rutgers' Institute for Women's Leadership focused my thinking on the book's remaining missing pieces. Outside of these seminars, Sue Carroll, Cynthia Daniels, Cliff Zukin, John Spry, and David Guston were particularly helpful in offering their encouragement to the project. In addition, I would like to thank Keri-Ann Eglentowicz, Amanda Smith, Molly Baab, and Devin Lush for their excellent research assistance. After spending far too many hours in the library hunting down materials, they still managed to maintain cheery dispositions. I would also like to thank the Rutgers University Research Council and the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University for their financial support of this project. Mary Jean Lush, Dee Bailey, and Ellen Oates provided me with excellent secretarial assistance.

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Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband, Alan Colmes, for his unwavering encouragement throughout the duration of this project. The manuscript is much stronger because of his unfailing support. This book is therefore dedicated to him with love.