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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Leveraging the insights of depth: A staged strategy for building qualitative case studies of American state-level policy

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Abstract

Objective: This article identifies and explains the need for qualitative case studies of U.S. state-level public policy and politics before providing researchers with a practical roadmap for how to proceed.

Methods: We first review relevant research from political science and sociology to establish the need for qualitative policy-focused state-level case study research. We then lay out a three-stage approach for case study research design and data collection.

Results: We find that qualitative case study research into state-level politics and policy making is useful for developing original theories that move beyond those developed at the federal level, for distinguishing between states and state policies in ways that are not easily measurable, and for conducting research that attends to variation in the meaning of policy design within different state contexts. We further find that barriers to conducting such research can be reduced by following a three-stage strategy that we elaborate.

Conclusion: State-level policy making yields essential processes and outcomes that social scientists across disciplines want to understand. Relying exclusively on quantitative methods will result in incomplete knowledge acquisition. Qualitative case studies, while time-consuming, are worthwhile and achievable. Researchers seeking to conduct this research can follow a three-stage strategy to make the process more manageable.

KEYWORDS
policy, politics, qualitative methods, states

All authors contributed equally to this study.

Partisan polarization, congressional gridlock, and recent policy developments have stimulated an unprecedented level of interest in state-level political and policy-making processes in the United States. The battles over the implementation of the Affordable Health Care Act, new state restrictions on reproductive and gender-affirming medical care, and voting rights are just a couple of salient examples of state governments and state courts' profound impact on people's lives. As a result, states are moving from the periphery of scholarship on American politics and policy making toward the center (e.g., Anzia 2019; Grumbach 2022; Hertel-Fernandez 2018; Rogers 2023; Stokes 2020). In this article, we argue that qualitative state-level case studies should be central to this scholarship, and we describe a practical three-stage strategy for constructing state policy case studies that yield robust on-the-ground research attuned to the varying realities of the state-level policy-making process.

We argue that qualitative case studies of state-level policy making are indispensable for three reasons. First, because most social science research on politics and policy making has focused on Congress, theories of the policy process are largely based on the federal level. Yet, the existing state-level research suggests that policy processes, determinants of policy outcomes, and policy actors often differ at the state level (Anzia 2019; Grumbach 2022; Rogers 2023). Qualitative state-level case studies are uniquely positioned to explore whether and how theories of the policy process apply to the states and to unearth mechanisms and processes missed by federal-level research. Second, because state-level scholarship has predominantly relied on quantitative analytical strategies, it can miss distinctions between states that are not easily measurable, such as differences in implementation because of political context (Merriman and Pacewicz 2022). Qualitative case studies of state-level policy making can capture the "unmeasurable" distinctions between state contexts and their interaction with other determinants of policy outcomes. Third, and relatedly, even when policy design and policy content look similar on the surface, qualitative case studies are attuned to variation in *the meaning* of policy design and content choices within different state contexts.

A handful of recent qualitative studies on state policy making have generated important insights (e.g., Basseches 2023; Lotesta 2017; Merriman and Pacewicz 2022; Schoenfeld and Campbell 2023; Stokes 2020), but they represent only a slice of the enormous range of policies worthy of studying across 50 states. We need a much larger body of qualitative case study research to develop theories about state politics and policy outcomes to explain complex formal and informal policy processes, and to grasp the nuanced implications of substantive policy content. We recognize that scholars may be daunted by the challenges posed by building state-level case studies. To provide scholars with a roadmap, we draw from our collective experience conducting state-level case study research in multiple policy areas in 15 different states.

We propose what we call a "staged strategy" for building state-level case studies that will reliably generate quality data on the politics of policy making—whether in state executive, legislative, administrative, or judicial arenas. The strategy includes three stages that build upon one another in a logical and increasingly refined sequence. They are (1) building provisional narratives, which involves acquiring the background knowledge to build the cases thoughtfully and systematically; (2) targeted data collection, which relies on documentary or archival sources to develop working theories in response to research questions; and (3) putting the puzzle together, which involves conducting policy-focused interviews and triangulating information from multiple data sources in order to arrive at answers to the questions that motivate the research.

Our roadmap focuses on *research design* and *data collection* that are specific to studying state-level politics and policy making qualitatively. We do not specify which states to study, and we only mention very general guidelines on how to identify a policy of interest. Nor do we cover qualitative data *analysis* because it is written about extensively and includes a range of methods such as process-tracing and between-case and within-case comparative approaches (Beach 2018; George and Bennett 2005) as well as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Rihoux and Ragin 2009). However, we do discuss the range of potential research questions and theories scholars should investigate using qualitative state-level case study research.

Ultimately, we aim to highlight the potential of state-level qualitative case studies to produce new empirical findings and theories about the state-level policy process and to make conducting them more accessible to scholars. Below, we briefly discuss the growing focus on state politics and policy making and the need

for state-level research. We then develop our argument about the specific value of qualitative state-level case studies. Next, we discuss the perceived challenges of qualitative state-level case study research before our main contribution: a detailed description of a three-stage strategy for building comparable state-level case studies.

A CALL FOR "POLICY-FOCUSED" RESEARCH ON THE U.S. STATES

The U.S. states are essential sites for studying policy making. In the U.S. system of federalism, state governments significantly shape policy domains ranging from climate and energy policy (Stokes 2020), to healthcare (Lanford and Quadagno 2016) to incarceration policy (Beckett 2022) to election law (Merriman 2019). Furthermore, states have considerable leeway in interpreting how (or whether) to implement many federal laws or distribute federal funds within their borders (e.g., Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Increased dysfunction in the U.S. Congress due to hyper-partisanship has only increased the importance of the states in recent years (Grumbach 2022; Rogers 2023).

Yet, research on the politics of U.S. policy making disproportionately relies on the U.S. Congress as its site of analysis. Anzia (2019) argues that the national lens of interest group research has led to unasked questions, underdeveloped theories, and underestimations of interest group influence. This is in part because it does not allow for comparisons, whereas "variation in subnational governments allows for empirical designs that are much better able to detect interest group influence when it exists" (Anzia 2019, p. 343). Indeed, the states exhibit a variety of important differences that researchers can leverage to unearth social, economic, institutional, and political forces—including and beyond interest group influence—that shape policy outcomes (Gray, Hanson, and Kousser 2017).

Each state constitution establishes different governing and political institutions, such as the relative balance of executive and legislative power, citizen ballot initiatives and referenda, electoral processes, and the frequency and duration of legislative sessions. The rules governing legislative committees and procedures, the relative institutional power of party leaders (Anzia and Jackman 2013), and the size and role of legislative staff (Squire 2017) all differ across states. State judicial systems also differ in terms of their degree of professionalization (Squire and Butcher 2021), centralization and coordination, and the process of selecting state judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys (State Court Organization Data 2022). States also vary markedly in terms of their socioeconomic makeup, political cultures, and the historical forces shaping state institutions and policy structures (Gray, Hanson, and Kousser 2017).

Consequently, state-level politics and policy making are relevant to a broad range of social scientists whose work is engaged with a number of subfields and theoretical traditions beyond questions of interest group influence. In political science, U.S. federalism (e.g., Karch and Rose 2019) and state-level policy diffusion (e.g., Karch 2007) are subfields that, by definition, are concerned with state-level policy-making activity. Beyond those areas, political scientists have used state-level data to answer questions about the role of party politics, public opinion, state court decisions, and ideology in policy outcomes (e.g., Baumann, Nelson, and Neumann 2021; Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Oakley 2009). Additionally, state-level studies are key to developing and testing a diverse set of theories, including public policy process theory, median voter theory, policy feedback, punctuated equilibrium theory, party competition, and party-group coalition theories (e.g., Finger and Reckhow 2022; Grumbach 2022; Jenkins 2006; Ruseva et al. 2019).

Sociologists are also interested, especially in recent years, in policy-making processes and policy outcomes at the state level. Research on some of the biggest problems of our time, such as voting rights, climate change, or mass incarceration, have taken advantage of the variation between states to identify causes of stasis or change (e.g., Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Bentele and O'Brien 2013). Sociologists have used state level data to develop and test sociological theories as well, including social movement theory (e.g., Basseches 2019; King, Cornwall, and Dahlin 2005), theories of punishment (e.g., Campbell, Vogel, and Williams 2015; Duxbury 2021), and theories of inequality (e.g., Lobao and Hooks 2007).

The question, then, is not *whether* to study the U.S. states, but rather, *how scholars best approach* the study of the politics of state-level policy making. Anzia (2019) suggests that the study of states is usefully paired

with what Hacker and Pierson (2014) refer to as "policy-focused political science." That is, an approach to studying politics where:

> Politics is centrally about the exercise of government authority for particular substantive purposes. Such exercises of authority create the "terrain" for political struggle, profoundly shaping both individual and group political behavior. More important, because policies can be so consequential, they also serve as the "prize" for many of the most enduring political players, especially organized interest groups (Hacker and Pierson 2014, p. 643).

To do this, Anzia (2019) argues that scholars should "start by considering what policies a government makes and then work outward to think about which groups have a stake in those policies" (p. 346). But she acknowledges that scholars face a "data availability" problem that limits this type of analysis at the state level.

> Almost certainly the main reason for the dearth of research on state and local interest groups is the shortage of easily accessible data. At the state level, there are data sets of registered lobbyists and campaign contributions, but anyone wishing to research interest groups' activity beyond those forms has to collect new data (Anzia 2019, p. 349).

We agree that researchers will need to collect new data. However, while scholars have made strides in compiling more data sets for quantitative analysis (e.g., Boehmke et al. 2020; Grumbach 2022), fewer political scientists or sociologists use state case studies for qualitative historical or comparative analysis (see also Maxwell 2020). Below, we draw from notable exceptions in both fields to describe how qualitative case studies of state-level policy making will advance theories explaining law and policy creation in the United States.

THE BENEFITS OF QUALITATIVE STATE-LEVEL CASE STUDY RESEARCH

State-level case study research designs are ideally suited to studying differences in policy-making processes and outcomes across U.S. states. While definitions of case studies vary, certain characteristics are generally accepted; they involve "the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events" (George and Bennett 2005, p. 5). In general, qualitative case study research allows the researcher "to peer into the box of causality to locate the intermediate factors lying between some structural cause and its purported effect"—what is often referred to as "mechanisms" (Gerring 2007, p. 45). Below, we expand on general treatments of case study research (e.g., George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007) to address three specific ways that qualitative case study research on state-level policy making enhances our understanding of politics, policy making, and policy outcomes. To do this, we draw on our own and others' qualitative state-level case study research.[1]

First, state-level qualitative case studies inductively generate accounts of policy development that scholars can use to refine or extend current theories. For example, using qualitative analysis of states' enactment of "right-to-work" laws, Hertel-Fernandez (2018) developed the concept of "policy feedback as a political weapon" where political strategists advocate for policies that will weaken their opponents. Lotesta's (2017) qualitative case study that includes Capitol Television footage, archival, and interview research allows her to develop a new theory of party change based on parties' ties to civil society organizations. Likewise, state-level cases can also help researchers identify and establish potential limits to generalized theoretical propositions by tracing complex interactions within state contexts.

[1] Sociologists have long embedded ethnographies of policy implementation within state or local "cases." Prominent examples include Watkins-Hayes' (2009) study of TANF caseworkers in two different Massachusetts communities, and Lara-Millan's (2021) study of jail and emergency room intake in Los Angeles County. Here we mainly (although not exclusively) focus on studies about the politics of policy making at the state-level.

Importantly, since prior research often used federal-level data to develop theories, the theories could be wrong or incomplete, causing quantitative analyses of the determinants of state-level policy to omit relevant factors. For example, before 2015, quantitative research on the determinants of incarceration rates using state-level data missed that federal court orders on state prison conditions impacted state incarceration rates. The potential significance of this variable came from Schoenfeld's (2010) case study of Florida and was then confirmed in subsequent quantitative analysis, thus demonstrating that previous analyses overstate the role of partisan power in determining incarceration rates (Guetzkow and Schoon 2015). In another example, in her case study of "business-friendly" legislative reforms in Rhode Island, Lotesta (2019) finds that "the symbolic" or cultural "dimensions of the policy evaluation and reform process" were crucial for understanding the timing and content of the neoliberal reforms (p. 216).

Of course, case studies can also uncover the mechanisms that connect explanatory factors to outcomes. For example, in comparative case study work examining Medicaid and election administration in Rhode Island and Kansas, Merriman and Pacewicz (2022) discovered that the "low-visibility environment of state bureaucracies" (Merriman and Pacewicz 2022, p. 1222), not legislative branch action, resulted in partisan and ideological differences in policy implementation in these two states. Policy diffusion research could also benefit from qualitative research that includes interviews with policymakers. In a review of diffusion research, Karch (2007) finds that studies identify similar correlations between variables but do not agree on *why* the variables have the effect they do. Qualitative research can help identify patterns in state policymakers' own perceptions of where their policy ideas come from.

Relatedly, qualitative case studies can help verify whether variables at the state level operate similarly across differently situated states, and if they differ, it can identify *how* they differ, and whether and why those differences might matter for policy outcomes. For example, some quantitative analyses require the assumption that "the governments of the fifty states have similar structural features," making it possible to isolate the impact of one variable (Holyoke 2019, p. 501). However, qualitative case study research can assess whether this assumption is correct. For instance, LaCombe and Boehmke (2021) find that public or citizen initiative power takes on different meanings in different state contexts. Case studies can also uncover additional state governing structures that impact policy outcomes, which researchers have yet to consider. Basseches (2019), for example, finds that informal law-making powers of state party leaders in Massachusetts directly shaped environmental policy outcomes.

Second, qualitative state-level case study research can capture complexities or nuances in the policy process and in policy outcomes that cannot be measured numerically. Often, independent variables in quantitative analyses represent formal steps in the policy process such as numbers of bills filed, votes, whether laws are enacted or not, or budget figures. They can even include quantitative measures of certain concepts, such as "legislative professionalization" (Squire 2017). However, many influential factors are not easy to operationalize quantitatively, such as procedures for making bill referrals, rules governing floor debate, and customs as to how committees make decisions. In some states, party leadership determines the number of bills each lawmaker can introduce, which could dampen the breadth of policy proposals in those states. Not only is this difficult to quantify, but it is also subject to change depending on who occupies those positions of party leadership.

Importantly, the outcome of interest in quantitative studies is often reduced to adoption/non-adoption of certain policies or to expenditure in dollars. However, these measures cannot fully capture the multidimensionality of policy outcomes, such as how costs and benefits are distributed among stakeholders (Basseches 2023). For example, Jacoby and Schneider (2001) rely on state expenditure data across the 50 states to draw conclusions about the degree to which public opinion and interest groups influence the states' policy priorities. Yet, expenditure data obscure other important outcomes such as implementation quality (i.e., the degree to which expenditures have their intended impact or reach their intended recipients), which are just as important and may be influenced by entirely different factors. As the authors note, "it is impossible to capture the totality of this highly complex and variegated phenomenon in a single empirical measure" (Jacoby and Schneider 2001, p. 545).

Even when quantitative variables are appropriate for the analysis, qualitative case studies are helpful for testing whether the assumptions that underlie the operationalizations are accurate. For instance,

Grumbach (2018) uses a dependent variable, "average policy outcomes," which is operationalized as "the number of liberal policies minus the number of conservative policies." As Grumbach writes, his measure "relies on three assumptions: first, the ideological direction of policy (whether it is liberal, conservative or neither); second, that policies are of equal substantive importance; and third, that the direction and importance remain constant over time" (Grumbach 2018, p. 421). Yet, qualitative case studies can reveal how partisan policy preferences in the United States change over time. For example, case studies on crime control policy in Arizona, Texas, and Florida reveal that Republican legislators opposed building prisons in the 1970s but championed prison growth by the 1990s (Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Lynch, 2009). Furthermore, even similarly solid "liberal" or "conservative" policies can have drastically different import (e.g., Basseches 2023).

Third, qualitative state-level case study research can heed the subtleties of policy content and the diverse meanings attached to policy content. To compile data sets of legislation, scholars often rely on the legislation name or keywords in the bill text to identify policy content (see tab. 8 in Garlick 2022 for a selected list of scholarly work that has coded state legislation by policy content area). However, case studies demonstrate that legislators often name legislation for political expediency, which results in names that obscure the actual content of the bill. For example, the Inflation Reduction Act passed by Congress in 2022 did not directly target monetary policy but attempted to reduce costs of renewable energy among other climate and healthcare-related measures (Roston and Eckhouse 2022). In other cases, some small details in the legislation can effectively change what the policy is likely to accomplish (because of implementation or other issues). In their analysis of the determinants of third-strike sentencing laws, Karch and Cravens (2014) assume, for instance, that the laws are substantively similar across states. Yet, case studies demonstrate that some states' legislators designed their laws to impact less people than the paradigmatic California law (Schoenfeld 2018, p. 178). By assuming all three-strikes laws are similarly punitive, quantitative analysis can potentially misidentify correlates of punitive crime control policy.

Similarly, case studies can flesh out policy design nuances that matter. For instance, in the domain of climate policy, quantitative studies often use whether a state passed a greenhouse gas emissions reduction law as a dichotomous dependent variable. However, a qualitative examination of these policies in three adopter states reveals that California and Massachusetts passed greenhouse gas emissions reduction policies with varying degrees of enforceability, and Oregon's policy was purely symbolic, without the necessary regulatory "teeth" to ensure its goals would be achieved (Basseches 2023). While recent research is more attentive to the idea that policy content matters for politics and the policy process (e.g., Koski and Siddiki 2022; Parinandi 2023), the *implications* of policy details are often not visible through quantitative analysis, even when the operationalization of policy content is more granular or refined.

Finally, qualitative case studies can incorporate the *meanings* policymakers themselves attach to policy content and whether and how those meanings change. For instance, a large body of scholarship demonstrates that past policy choices can shape subsequent politics or interest group preferences (e.g., A. L. Campbell 2012; Chen 2009; Finger and Reckhow 2022). This often depends on how politicians or interest groups understand the implications of past policy for their own interests (e.g., Schoenfeld 2010). In another example, understanding the origins and consequences of underlying rules established by state agencies ("administrative burdens") may require the knowledge of outcomes policymakers desire but do not explicitly acknowledge (Herd et al. 2023, p. 12). Policymakers' understandings and intentions are best uncovered through interviews.

CHALLENGES OF STATE-LEVEL QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Many of the benefits of state-level case study research stem from aspects of U.S. states—their rich differences—that also make state-level case studies challenging in practice. We surmise that several challenges have likely kept more researchers from pursuing state-level case studies. These include a lack of sufficient background knowledge and a lack of clear direction for case construction, as well as for

organizing and interpreting large amounts of varying types of qualitative data. These challenges can make case study research seem overly time-consuming and overwhelming. Below, we briefly discuss some of these challenges before turning to solutions and examples in the following sections.

Researchers must gain background familiarity with individual states to develop a good case study research design. Case selection is an essential step in building case studies because it helps determine generalizability, comparability, and potential for theory development from the research. Yet, in order to choose theoretically relevant cases that offer meaningful variation on some dimensions of analytical importance, either between states or within the state over time or across policy realms, while also being similar enough to justify the comparison, researchers must first establish a general understanding about the population of cases. Books such as *Politics in the American States* (Gray, Hanson, and Kousser 2017) and sources such as The National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org) and the ICPSR (www.icpsr.umich.edu) (including the Annual Survey of Governments, bi-annual Arts and Cultural Production, and the Profile Survey of State and Territorial Health Public Health) provide useful data for assessing comparability across states in policy and context. Researchers can even use statistical methods to match state cases (e.g., Gerring and Cojocaru 2016).

Once cases have been selected, there is no one way to build a case study. As Yin (2009, p. 15) writes, "the absence of a strict routine leaves case study investigators with the need (some would say, "opportunity") to make critical procedural decisions." As a result, the mechanics of constructing case studies is often left to trial and error by the researcher. Researchers must determine where to start data collection, what data are most relevant and available for each case, how to keep track of data, how to manage large amounts of data, how to triangulate, and more (Maxwell 2009). Once again, this involves some knowledge of the state(s). State governments differ in terms of the rules that govern law-making processes, which then generate different types of data, and also affect which data are most helpful/relevant for a particular research question. Furthermore, data availability varies. For example, some states record and publish legislative testimony, while others do not. Some states have multiple media outlets that dedicate considerable resources to state politics, while others do not. Lastly, some states have strict rules regarding transparency, while others make it difficult to identify and gather certain types of data.

In addition, case study research designs should "use different types of evidence to triangulate or converge on the same research questions. To take advantage of this principle, good case study investigators need to be adept at using different data collection methods" (Yin 2009, p. 8). State case study data can include documents, reports, case files, media sources, and interviews. Yet, managing, organizing, and analyzing the rich qualitative data generated in state-level case studies pose significant challenges.

Finally, researchers must develop a sufficient "contextual lens" to analyze and compare their case studies (George and Bennett 2005). The trajectory of public policy is always couched in macro and micro temporal, political, social, and economic contexts. Consequently, interpreting a case study requires knowledge of this larger environment.

A STAGED STRATEGY FOR BUILDING COMPARABLE POLICY-FOCUSED STATE-LEVEL CASE STUDIES

Below, we introduce a staged policy-focused case study construction strategy that we developed by conducting case study research over the last 15 years. We focus on the nuts and bolts of building case studies because we found a lack of guides on this process, whereas methodologists have written relatively more on case selection (e.g., Beach and Pedersen 2018; Gerring and Cojocaru 2016; Nielsen 2016) and on how to analyze case studies (e.g., García-Montoya and Mahoney 2023; Gerring 2007; Thomann and Maggetti 2020). However, it is important to remember that qualitative case study research is iterative; analysis is done as researchers build their narratives, not just afterward (Stryker 1996). And while rigorous case studies sustain a focus on clearly defined research questions as with any research design, they also require a degree of flexibility as the researcher responds to available data and emergent themes as the project progresses.

Designing policy-focused, state-level case study research designs begins by identifying theoretically or empirically significant policies that are well suited to examination at the state level. Such case studies should focus on policy realms where state lawmakers and institutions have sufficient leeway to establish, modify, or implement policy choices. For example, state case studies would not be well suited to most studies focused on foreign policy or currency valuation, as these are largely the realm of federal policy. But states have considerable latitude in either creating or interpreting laws and policies across many realms, including education, criminal justice, and environmental and transportation policies (along with many others). Indeed, while our research has mainly focused on legislative and executive processes, researchers can and should conduct case studies on state court systems, and other rule-making bodies.

After establishing a policy domain to study, case study construction proceeds in three stages designed to explain how policy outcomes reflect varying interests, processes, and power relations. Staged policy-focused case study construction uses a variety of data types, including news media, legislative/policy documents, and interviews. It is iterative. Researchers build their cases in stages, where data and questions collected in one stage are used to generate data and answers in the next stage. Preliminary ideas about how to theorize the narrative are questioned and revised. And it is systematic. Clear protocols at each stage allow for parallel data collection across cases. By drawing on multiple data types that relate to and build on each other, researchers triangulate as they collect data, which "reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases" (Maxwell 2009, p. 32). At each stage, researchers build their case study by asking a few central questions, such as: Who was involved? What did they do? What happened? When did it happen? How did actors understand what they were doing or what was happening?

Stage one: Building provisional narratives

The first stage of data collection begins with the most accessible data: published or unpublished histories of the state policy of interest. Although deeply researched narratives of specific policy outcomes are rare, all states have some monographs on their history and politics, and researchers should utilize them to gain some familiarity. Researchers can also read other reputable sources on the substantive policy area in the state, such as law review articles or policy reports from state research bureaus (e.g., the California Legislative Analyst's Office), think tanks, or advocacy organizations. Online or podcast discussions of policy issues provide another essential source for this stage, providing more focused accounts of policy problems.

In order to construct case studies systematically, the research process generally moves from the general to the specific. In the first stage, researchers rely heavily on newspaper articles/online news sources (which can be searched systematically) to establish a general sense of the public story associated with the policy of interest. Keeping in mind that media actors make decisions about what to include or exclude, researchers collect news articles from diverse sources across geographical and ideological lines. Within each source, which articles researchers select for inclusion will depend on the breadth and scope of the research question. If researchers are specifically interested in states' implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), they will draw a narrow set of articles that look specifically at the state's reaction to and incorporation of the ACA. If the question pertains to managed healthcare at the state level more generally, the pool of relevant news articles will be wider (and sampling will be necessary) (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005).

From these histories and news articles, the researcher builds a "provisional" narrative with a list of questions and a list of people, organizations, and events to investigate further (George and Bennett 2005, p. 91). The people and organizations mentioned in the articles become the "who." The events mentioned in the articles answer "what happened." And people's commentary and statements become an initial picture of how some people understood what was happening. Of course, the researcher must keep in mind that quotes printed in news articles are made in a specific context to communicate to various constituencies. Researchers should view media accounts as "an important part of the contextual developments to which policymakers are sensitive, to which they are responding or which they are attempting to influence" (George and Bennett 2005, p. 97). In addition, newspapers and similar media tend to present the

TABLE 1 Examples of types of state-level documentary data available for qualitative analysis.

Widely available, all states	Often available, many states[a]	Possibly available, a few states[a]
News articles	Legislative texts (all versions)	Hearing transcripts/ recordings
Legislative texts (final version)	Bill histories, analyses, or summaries	Personal correspondence from legislative offices or committees (print/digital)
Final rules (adopted by agencies/commissions)	Reports from independent/non-partisan government analysts	Personal correspondence from governor's office and/or executive branch agency heads/commissioners (print/digital)
Reports from advocacy organizations	Hearing agendas/minutes/witness lists	
State agency reports	Rulemaking dockets (proposed rules, stakeholder comments, adopted rules)	Interest group position lists compiled by legislative staff
State Supreme Court opinions	Legislative floor debate journals, transcripts, or recordings	
Advisory opinions and interpretations of State Attorneys General	Briefs and written materials in State Supreme Court cases	
Lists of registered lobbyists		

[a]Can depend on the historical period.

perspective of the state, or people in power, who are easily accessible through spokespersons. As such, it is just as important to pay attention to who and what are *not covered* in the news. To address this issue, researchers should use some snowball sampling in the interview stage and use interviewee referrals to identify people who may have been involved in the policy process behind-the-scenes. Researchers should also seek out the perspectives of constituencies with clear stakes in the policy outcome, even if the press does not. Ultimately, the first stage of data collection aims to provide the researcher with sufficient contextual knowledge to identify more targeted data as research progresses, and to develop a systematic data collection strategy.

Stage two: Targeted data collection

The second stage of data collection is documentary or archival, but the specific data source depends on the nature of the substantive question and policy topic. If it involves actions by a specific state agency, or executive office, the researcher will want to locate the records of that agency or office. This includes published sources such as annual reports, and unpublished documents, correspondence, or other material found in a state archive or state library. This can also include agency rulemaking dockets, with both proposed and adopted regulations. If the question revolves around a legal issue, the researcher will examine court records such as initial complaints, court decisions, and negotiated settlements (e.g., Reiter 2016). If the question pertains to legislation, the researcher can search in the legislative archive for people and events from the preliminary narrative, such as bill sponsorship, proposed amendments, and the final disposition of the bill. Based on our experience building policy-focused case studies in 15 states, Table 1 provides examples of the types of qualitative documentary data that may be available, separated into columns based on the likelihood of availability in the largest number of states. In addition, researchers can use Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to gain access to public, but inaccessible documents and electronic correspondence (Walby and Luscombe 2017).

Researchers revisit their research questions and working theories before analyzing these primary sources. One major challenge in case study research is determining how much and what types of data are necessary to collect to effectively address the research questions. The sheer volume of qualitative data can be overwhelming, and researchers must carefully determine what data are essential. Targeted data

collection provides a fuller picture and should be streamlined to focus on the times and places most likely to yield confirmatory or disconfirming indicators of working theories. For example, researchers interested in interest group influence could start by locating position statements on various legislative bills—which often are found in associations' newsletters. From there, researchers look for the answers to the questions they developed in the first stage. The questions will likely include parts of the behind-the-scenes narrative that may be possible to piece together from the documentary record.

For example, Campbell's (2012) case study of penal change in Texas included extensive documentation from the Texas prosecutors' association newsletters that included extensive documentation of the group's lobbying efforts that aimed to shape sentencing laws. These efforts were not part of the "public story," but the association's newsletters provided extensive documentation of the scope, scale, and strategy of prosecutors' efforts to shape the laws they then enforced. By tracing the trajectory of an omnibus bill that rewrote the state's penal code, this study demonstrated how lawmakers deferred to prosecutors' interests and minimized input from a commission that incorporated public input and recommended less punitive sentences for minor offenses (Campbell 2012). By examining how proposed bills change over time, researchers can gain some sense of stakeholders' policy preferences. The lifespan of a bill can signal who has relatively more political power, and thus gets their way, and who is forced to compromise. This insight can be later confirmed or refuted in the next (interview) stage of data collection.

Researchers should also note who is *not* included in the legislative record. Miller (2008) found, for example, that urban community organizations in Pennsylvania rarely testified at state-level legislative hearings on crime control bills in the 1990s even though they could speak to the perspective of those directly impacted by violence. As the researcher reads through the archival record, they should update the media-based narrative from the first stage to include new information about who was (and was not) at the "policy table," how they defined the problems they attempted to solve, the menu of possible "solutions" they considered (as well as other potential solutions that were quickly dismissed and never seriously considered), what they did (propose bills/kill bills/amend bills/adopt compromise language), the sources of information they relied on (and ignored), and their policy positions.

Stage three: Putting the puzzle together

For the third stage of data collection, the researcher incorporates data from stage two to create an updated narrative to identify key people involved in the policy process who may be able to provide information on what was happening behind-the-scenes. Research memos provide a useful platform for centralizing and organizing data and can be helpful in identifying data gaps that can be addressed through interviews with relevant actors. Potential interviewees could include key legislative actors, heads of task forces or state agencies, representatives of organizations who testified at committee hearings, and those outspoken in media accounts (on recruiting interviewees, see Li 2021; Marland and Esselment 2019). Fortunately, because of the dynamics of state legislative policy making, researchers can learn a lot by speaking with just a handful of people. Term-limited legislators, for example, usually focus their efforts on just a few substantive policy areas. Others specialize based on expertise, pet-projects, or committee assignments. As such, every 2–4 years, a limited number of legislators are "experts" in researchers' policy areas of study (Schoenfeld 2018, p. 171).

Interviews with key decision makers are essential to understand how stakeholders understood their options, contextual influences, processes omitted from the written record, or what George and Bennett (2005, p. 103) refer to as the "informal policy track." Researchers use the constructed case study and research memos from the first and second stages to develop interviewee-specific, policy-focused interview questions. While time-consuming, preparation for the interview based on the documentary evidence can move the interviewee from general recollections to a more specific accounting of their actions and motivations (see also Li 2021). For example, instead of asking the political director of a state ACLU to reflect on the progress their organization has made in the last 10 years around access to abortion, the researcher can ask: The ACLU opposed a bill proposed in 2010 that would have restricted women under 16 from

accessing abortion clinics without their parents' permission, can you tell me what the ACLU specifically did to oppose this legislation, and why? Why was this specific bill important to the ACLU? Who were the bill's primary supporters? Other types of questions include the interviewee's role in the decision-making process, their goals at the time, their understandings of their choices, their thinking about their choices, what information they used to guide their decisions/actions, who supported their decisions/actions and who opposed their decisions/actions, and what their perception of the socioeconomic and political context was at the time in question.

Just as the researcher must evaluate the evidentiary value of newspaper articles and other media documents, they should consider how personal recollections or "insider accounts" are biased. For example, people like to portray decision making as a logical process when the reality may have been much messier (George and Bennett 2005, p. 102). Staged case study construction can mitigate this bias to some extent by providing a range of actors involved with the same issue/policy episode but from different perspectives, and by triangulating interviews with each other and with written records or documents. At the same time, the researcher can interpret people's recollections as the most salient aspects *for them* and use all the available evidence to understand *why* these factors or events became the most salient (even if they are remembered incorrectly), which can lead to novel findings. Lastly, researchers must be mindful of the limitations of memory. As historians have long acknowledged, peoples' memories of past events are often shaped by subsequent events or the natural loss of dependable memories.

In addition to incorporating interviewee information in the case study narrative, researchers should use the third stage to make sure they understand which formal and informal political and institutional state structures are pertinent to their policy outcome of interest. Some of these may be specifically mentioned by interviewees, such as "the Speaker of the House in the state must approve every piece of Republican-sponsored legislation," others may be implicit, such as the realization from talking to many people that the only bills that make it to the floor are the ones the Speaker of the House has informally blessed (Basseches 2019).

SCALING UP AND MANAGING DATA

Given the time-consuming nature of building a case study, researchers should consider beginning with one case and then consider whether scaling up to a comparative design by building additional cases is necessary to answer the research questions. Single case studies can yield theoretical insights or new explanatory factors that stand on their own (Flyvbjerg 2006) or can be tested through comparative or quantitative research. For example, Schoenfeld and Campbell used one or two state case studies, respectively, for their dissertations. On discovering their case studies generated similar conclusions about causal mechanisms, they looked for other state case studies to confirm or refute their hypotheses. Drawing together eight case studies allowed them to develop a universal explanation for the policy outcomes in question (Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013). Similarly, having discovered the role of state bureaucracies in the partisan administration of policy in separate research (Merriman 2019; Pacewicz 2018), Merriman and Pacewicz joined forces to create a paired case comparison in which similarities in legislative professionalization and policy topic allowed them to focus on such stark differences in partisan ideology (Merriman and Pacewicz 2022).

Beginning with one state case study also allows the researcher to develop protocols for data collection and data management that can be replicated to construct new cases for a comparative study (and ensure the data from additional states is comparable). Protocols can include search parameters for news articles, specific formats for case narratives and research memoranda, and where and how to save documents. Web-based depositories such as Box and Google Drive have made managing documents less burdensome. Other data tools, such as "scraping," can now identify and digitize information from news articles (Bodó and van de Velde 2019). We find that the ideal data management system allows researchers to sequence documents and information by date and connect data points through different types of relationships. For example, researchers can use a relational database program such as MySQL to create connections between people, actions, legislation, and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

As with any research design, case studies are better equipped to address certain research questions than others and offer both strengths and weaknesses in terms of theory building and testing (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007). In this article, we argue that researchers in sociology and political science should leverage state-level similarities and differences in the United States to develop more robust empirical and theoretical accounts of policy making and policy outcomes. We explain why we need more qualitative state-level case studies that center policy as the starting point of analysis. As we outline above, qualitative state-level case studies allow scholars to refine theories of policy making that were designed to explain federal-level dynamics. Qualitative state-level case studies also provide unique insights into otherwise unknown or underappreciated factors that influence policy making, and, importantly, they uncover what those policies mean within state-specific institutional and political contexts.

Other scholars have called for increased state-level policy making research (e.g., Anzia 2019) and have discussed the issues around case studies (e.g., Thomann and Maggetti 2020; Thomas and Myers 2015). However, very few provide practical strategies for building comparable case studies. We propose a roadmap for building case studies to use in empirically rigorous social science analysis of politics and policy. This method helps to solve the "data problem" highlighted by Anzia (2019) and centers policy as suggested by Hacker and Pierson (2014). Staged case study construction standardizes data for case building by collecting similar data in multiple stages. By drawing on multiple data types that relate to and build on each other, researchers triangulate as they collect data. New case study data have the potential to provide powerful insights about the forces shaping the policy process, policy outcomes, and policy implementation closer to the ground where decisions are made.

In sociology, the recent move toward "problem-solving sociology" is highly concordant with studying state politics and policy making through comparative, qualitative case studies. This paradigm encourages policy-focused research that can aid in solving real-world social problems (Prasad 2021). The type of research we advocate here can also help those sociologists who seek to better "speak the language" of public policymakers in hopes of producing research that can be useful and relevant to their activities (Graizbord 2019).

For those interested in political power, interest group representation, policy making process, the significance of different governing structures, and a range of substantive policies where the action is mostly or entirely in state capitals, the largest obstacle to doing this work is knowing where or how to start. Yet, as the digital era makes state-level data more accessible, we hope the staged case construction strategy we lay out here reduces the barriers to entry for scholars in a range of fields interested in politics and policy making.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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