

Coalitions for Children: A Comparative Analysis of Child Protection Policies in Indonesia and the United States

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Abstract

This study compares the role of advocacy coalitions in forming child protection policies in the United States and Indonesia, looking at the problems that arise from their different political and governance systems. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) in the United States aims to reduce the number of children in foster care by encouraging family-centred interventions. However, its implementation has been uneven across states due to political opposition, a lack of resources, and the fact that the federal system is not highly centralized. Consequently, marginalized communities, especially in rural regions, encounter limited access to child protection services. In Indonesia, Child Protection Law No. 35 of 2014 faces analogous challenges in rural areas, where local governments lack the necessary resources, political commitment, and coordination with national entities to effectively implement child protection legislation. This study suggests that policies work better in cities than in rural areas. For example, Jakarta benefits from better policy implementation and resource allocation. The findings show how important it is to improve inter-agency collaboration, strengthen local governance, and get more political support to fix the problems with child protection services. To make sure that all children are equally protected, both countries need to focus on implementing policies at the local level, especially for vulnerable children in areas that don't get enough services.

Keywords: advocacy coalitions; child protection; decentralized governance; policy implementation



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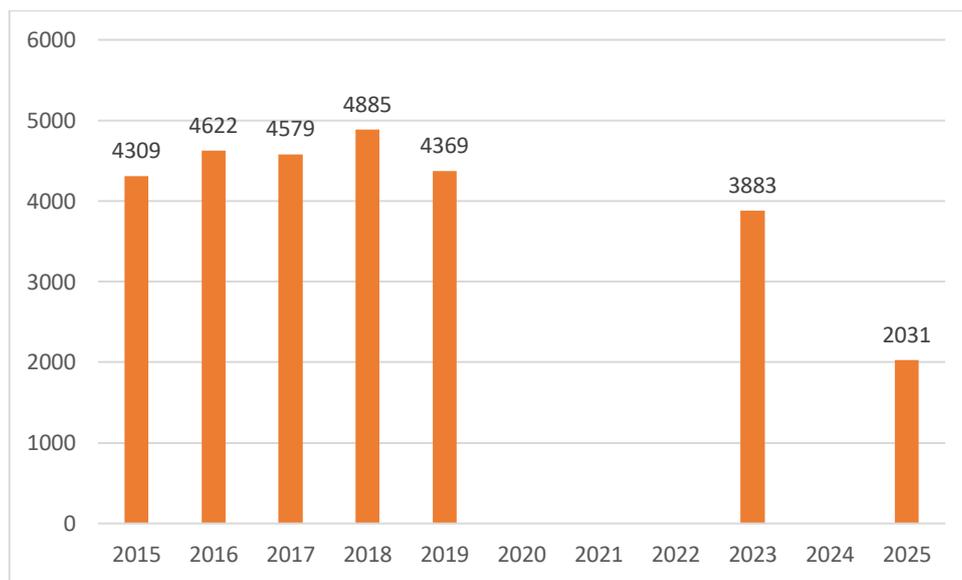
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Introduction

Child protection is an important part of public policy because it has a direct effect on the development of human capital, social resilience, and the long-term health of the nation. Child protection is a strategic priority for governments because the health and happiness of children are closely linked to social and economic outcomes (Cahyono et al., 2023; Cahyono et al., 2023; Cahyono et al., 2023). Even though many countries have laws and institutions in place to protect children's rights, these rights are still being violated. This ongoing problem shows that protecting children is not only a moral issue, but also a problem that governments have to deal with all the time (Lestari et al., 2023). Neglect, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, child marriage, and physical abuse are all ways that children's rights are violated. Each of these problems poses a serious risk to the safety and growth of children. UNICEF says that more than one billion kids are abused or exploited before they turn 18 (2023). This number shows that global child protection systems are still not working well and that laws alone are not enough to keep children safe.

This situation shows that we need better ways to govern, better ways for institutions to work together, and policies that go beyond just following the rules (Maemunah & Sakban,

2022). The high rate of child rights violations shows that there are big gaps in the way current policies are put into action. A lot of the time, laws and rules don't have enough institutional capacity or coordination. Because of this, child protection policies often don't work as planned. The law in Indonesia says that the government must protect the rights and health of children. Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection was passed to make this promise stronger, but reports of violations have continued to rise (Pujianti et al., 2023). The Indonesian Child Protection Commission's data from 2015 to 2025 show that cases of abuse, exploitation, and neglect are on the rise. This pattern shows that there is a big difference between the rules and how they are actually used.

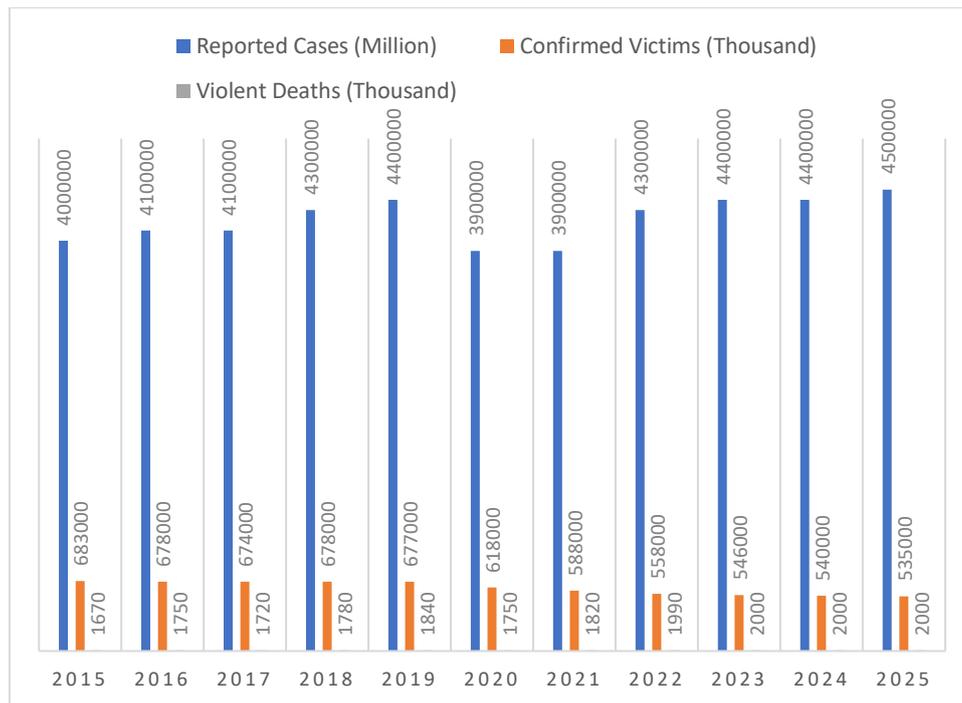


Source: KPAI Reports, Compile by Author, 2025

Figure 1: KPAI Reports of Child Rights Violations from 2015 to 2025

These problems are made worse by a lack of public awareness, poor coordination between agencies, and uneven capacity at the local level due to Indonesia's decentralized system of government. These circumstances lead to disjointed and erratic policy execution across various regions. Previous research state that not knowing enough about children's rights makes people less involved in their communities and makes it harder to hold people accountable for protecting children (Rangkuti & Maksum, 2019; Setyaningsih et al., 2023). As a result, the success of policy implementation often depends on how much local resources and political will there are.

The United States has a more established child welfare system, but it still has a lot of child abuse and neglect. This is a similar problem. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said that about four million cases in 2022 affected about 7.5 million children. Neglect is the cause of most of these cases, which shows that prevention and early intervention are not working well. The ongoing nature of these issues suggests that a more advanced institutional framework does not inherently ensure improved results.



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Compile by Author, 2025

Figure 2: Reports of Child Abuse in the United States (2015-2025)

In reaction to these challenges, advocacy coalitions have played an important part in promoting policy developments in both countries. In the United States, coalitions have supported initiatives such as the Family First Prevention Services Act, which seeks to reduce dependence on foster care and strengthen family-based support systems (Smith, 2021). This reform reflects an increasing emphasis on prevention and early intervention rather than reactive policy responses. It also illustrates how joint efforts can affect the direction of child protection policy.

In Indonesia, advocacy coalitions have also contributed to efforts to strengthen child protection, especially in the education sector. Programs such as Child-Friendly Schools show the importance of cooperation between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. These initiatives intend to create more secure and inclusive environments for children by decreasing violence and other risks in schools. Despite obstacles related to funding and public awareness, local actors have continued to promote child protection agendas at the community level. Within this context, the Advocacy Coalition Framework developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) provides a relevant analytical viewpoint for studying policy change. The framework stresses the role of a coalition composed of various actors who coordinate their actions based on shared belief systems. It also highlights how policy change occurs over time through interaction, learning, and negotiation between competing coalitions. This perspective is especially useful for analyzing contested policy domains such as child protection.

This study applies the Advocacy Coalition Framework to a comparative analysis of child protection policies in Indonesia and the United States. The comparison is analytically

important because the two countries operate under different governance arrangements and institutional structures. Indonesia's decentralized system places substantial responsibility on local governments, whereas the United States' federal system assigns primary responsibility to states within a federally regulated framework, such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. These differences provide a useful basis for examining how governance contexts shape coalition strategies and policy outcomes (Jones & Smith, 2022; Setyaningsih et al., 2023).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the configuration and strategies of advocacy coalitions in both countries. It also seeks to assess how these coalitions influence policy formulation and implementation in their respective systems. Furthermore, the study aims to identify similarities and differences in coalition dynamics and policy outcomes across the two cases. While existing studies have examined child protection policies and advocacy coalitions separately within national contexts, comparative analyses that systematically apply the Advocacy Coalition Framework across different governance systems remain limited. The main contribution of this research lies in its comparative application of the Advocacy Coalition Framework to child protection policy, which provides empirical insights into coalition-based policy processes under different institutional settings.

Literature Review

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) in Public Policy

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), introduced by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith in 1993, is a prominent model for analyzing policy change in complex political environments. The framework defines policy subsystems as arenas where advocacy coalitions, consisting of diverse actors, coordinate actions based on shared core beliefs. These coalitions function within institutional contexts influenced by external events, resource allocation, and public opinion, all of which affect policy outcomes. Sabatier (2007) notes that coalitions interact through both competition and cooperation as they seek to influence policy change over time.

The ACF literature consistently identifies belief systems, resources, policy learning, and coalition competition as central explanatory mechanisms. Belief systems shape how actors define policy problems and justify preferred solutions. Resources determine the ability to influence decision-making through legal authority, financial support, expertise, access to decision makers, and public legitimacy. Policy learning describes how coalitions adjust strategies and preferences in response to new information, experience, and policy outcome evaluations. Coalition competition, as demonstrated by Weible (2007) and Weible et al. (2009), underscores how ongoing interactions among rival coalitions in contested policy arenas influence the direction and pace of policy change.

However, critical perspectives highlight significant limitations of the ACF. Nohrstedt (2010) contends that the framework often overlooks marginalized actors and power imbalances within policy subsystems. This limitation is especially pertinent in child protection, where children and other vulnerable groups are frequently underrepresented in policy debates and decision-making. Accordingly, this study considers representation,

resource access, and coalition competition as both analytical variables and indicators of whose interests are prioritized in child protection policy processes.

Child Protection Policies and Advocacy Coalitions

The literature on child protection policies consistently shows that advocacy coalitions play a crucial role in shaping policy agendas and implementation outcomes, although their effectiveness varies across contexts. Okeke et al. (2021) demonstrate that in Nigeria, strong networks, shared beliefs, and effective resource mobilization enable coalitions to elevate maternal and child health issues on the policy agenda. Similarly, Cairney (2012) argues that coalitions enhance policy responsiveness through lobbying and engagement in policy learning, particularly when they are embedded in broader policy networks and capable of mobilizing public support. These studies suggest that coalition effectiveness depends not only on formal authority but also on strategic interaction, learning processes, and access to political and social resources.

Indonesian existing studies point to a persistent gap between policy ambitions and implementation capacity. Lestari et al. (2023) demonstrate that collaboration among government, academia, business, media, and society can enhance child protection outcomes, but highlight that coordination issues and limited local capacity, particularly in rural areas, continue to pose major challenges. This aligns with Mazmanian and Sabatier's argument that institutional capacity and public support are crucial determinants of effective policy implementation (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983). Maemunah and Sakban (2022) further illustrate that non-governmental organizations can exert pressure on local governments to strengthen legal protections for vulnerable children, although entrenched political interests often constrain reform efforts and increase the importance of external alliances and media attention.

Cahyono et al. (2023) reinforce this pattern by showing that weak administrative capacity and limited awareness of children's rights hinder the effective enforcement of national child protection laws. Taken together, these studies indicate that coalition effectiveness in child protection policy is shaped by a combination of belief alignment, resource availability, and institutional context. However, this body of literature remains fragmented, as most studies focus on specific actors, programs, or localities without integrating these factors into a single analytical framework that explains how coalition dynamics translate into policy outcomes..

Comparative Analyses of Child Protection Advocacy

Comparative research suggests that institutional arrangements play an important role in shaping the strategies and effectiveness of advocacy coalitions. In the United States, child protection policy benefits from greater federal legislative and administrative direction, well-developed evaluation tools, a national data system, more substantial federal funding, and a more extensive response mechanism compared to older adult protection policies (Lu & Shelley, 2019, pp. 273-293).d protection policies across states. In Indonesia, Makarao and Faruqi (2023) identify that the ineffective implementation of child protection policies results

from an intricate interaction of multiple factors, indicating that past formal commitments, a range of institutional and contextual constraints affect policy outcomes (Makarao & Faruqi, 2023, pp. 61-84).

In spite of these contributions, existing research tends to remain either country-specific or focused on specific policy instruments, without affording a theoretically based comparison of advocacy coalition dynamics throughout contrasting political systems. Several studies regularly connect belief systems, resources, policy learning, and coalition competition to variations of child protection policy outcomes under different governance arrangements. This study tackles this limitation by applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework for a cross-national analysis of Indonesia and the United States, thereby linking coalition dynamics relating to child protection policy processes in two different institutional contexts. Guided by this system, the present research positions belief systems, resources, policy learning, and coalition competition as the core analytical lenses for answering the research questions and for explaining the similarities and differences in child protection policy outcomes across the two countries.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the role in shaping the tensions in forming child protection policies in Indonesia and the United States. The study is an empirical qualitative study that relies on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and limited field observations, while secondary data consisted of policy documents, official reports, and publications produced by advocacy organizations and government agencies. This design allows the study to capture both the formal policy framework and the practical dynamics of advocacy coalitions in each nation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including government officials, leaders of non-governmental organizations, and policy experts involved in child protection advocacy. These interviews focus on coalition strategies, patterns of interaction, perceived challenges, and assessments of policy influence. Additionally, field observations were carried out during selected coalition meetings, policy discussions, and advocacy events in order to document interaction patterns and coordination practices among actors. Documentary sources, including laws, policy regulations, organizational reports, and advocacy publications, were analyzed as a shortcoming of the textual and institutional background for each case. The choice of Indonesia and the United States as comparative cases is based on their contrasting governance arrangements, with Indonesia operating under a decentralized system and the United States under a federal system. This contrast provides an analytical basis for examining how different institutional arrangements shape advocacy coalition strategies and policy influence. Data collection in each case follows the same general procedure to ensure comparability across the two contexts. The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis also functions as a form of data triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using theoretical analysis. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to attain familiarity with the data. Second, the data were coded to identify recurring themes related to belief systems, resource mobilization, policy learning, coalition competition, and policy outcomes. Third, these themes were organized into broader analytical categories obtained from the Advocacy Coalition Framework. Lastly, a cross-case comparison was conducted to identify similarities and differences in coalition dynamics and policy influence between Indonesia and the United States.

The comparative analysis focuses on how differences in political structures, institutional capacity, and governance arrangements influence the functioning of advocacy coalitions in each country. By systematically comparing the two cases using the same analytical framework, the study seeks to explain variations in coalition strategies and their impact on child protection policy processes (Smith, 2020). This approach allows the research to move beyond descriptive accounts and to provide an analytically based explanation of coalition-driven policy change. Ethical considerations were carefully handled throughout the research process. All interview participants were informed about the aim of the study, their right to anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and all data were anonymized to protect participants' identities. The study also recognizes practical limitations, including potential difficulties in accessing key stakeholders, language barriers in the Indonesian context, and constraints on field observations in specific locations. Despite these shortcomings, the use of multiple data sources and a transparent analytical procedure strengthens the validity of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Advocacy coalitions significantly influence child protection policy outcomes, yet their effectiveness varies across governance contexts in the United States and Indonesia. In the United States, organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund and the Child Welfare League of America have played a central role in advancing reforms through the Families First Prevention Services Act, benefiting from strong institutional access and substantial financial resources (Jones et al., 2022). However, the federal system leads to uneven implementation because states retain considerable autonomy in interpreting and enacting national reforms. Consequently, the reach and impact of these reforms differ across regions.

This variation is evident in state-level policy outcomes. Some states have more effectively integrated preventive and family-based services, resulting in measurable reductions in foster care placements. In contrast, other states encounter political opposition and budget constraints that hinder comprehensive implementation (Smith, 2020; Harrison & Doe, 2021). These divergent experiences demonstrate how state-level autonomy influences the extent of national reforms and contributes to unequal access to child protection services. Overall, differences in political support and fiscal capacity are key determinants of the practical impact of reform..

Table 1. FFPSA Adoption and Foster Care Outcomes by State (2020-2022)

State	FFPSA Adoption Status	Foster Care Placement Change	Key Barriers to Implementation
California	Fully Implemented	18%	High institutional support, political alignment
New York	Fully Implemented	15%	Strong institutional backing
Mississippi	Partial Implementation	2%	Political opposition, limited budget
Alabama	Partial Implementation	1%	Resistance to federal mandates

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

A similar pattern of uneven implementation can be seen in Indonesia under its devolved governance structure. While Child Protection Law No. 35 of 2014 establishes a national legal framework, enforcement responsibility mainly lies with local governments. In practice, numerous local administrations encounter continuous challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate institutional capacity, and inconsistent political commitment. Consequently, the existence of national regulations does not guarantee uniform policy outcomes across areas. As a result, considerable disparities emerge between urban and rural areas. Cities typically demonstrate higher levels of policy compliance and greater access to child protection services, supported by robust administrative capacity and well-established inter-organizational coordination. Conversely, many rural regions undergo weaker enforcement and limited service provision due to shortages of trained personnel, inadequate funding, and reduced institutional support (Pujianti et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2023). This difference marks the critical influence of local governance capacity on the effective implementation of child protection policies.

These differences indicate that decentralization, similar to federalism in the United States, results in substantial variations in policy outcomes at the subnational level. Decentralized governance not only provides flexibility but also leads to variable implementation when local capacities and political priorities vary considerably across regions. This pattern demonstrates that effective child protection relies on both extensive national juridical frameworks and the capacity of local governments to mobilize resources, coordinate stakeholders, and sustain political support for enforcement.

Table 2. Comparison of Child Protection Enforcement in Urban vs. Rural Areas in Indonesia

Region	Policy Implementation Rate	Access to Services	Key Barriers
Jakarta	85%	92%	High resource allocation
West Sumatra	45%	60%	Limited resource, political resistance
Bali	70%	80%	Moderate resources
West Nusa Tenggara	35%	40%	Lack of coordination with national bodies

Source: processed by researchers from Lestari et al., 2023.

In addition to aggregate patterns, specific programs demonstrate how local circumstances influence policy effectiveness. The Child-Friendly Schools program exemplifies the impact of institutional capacity and inter-organizational collaboration on implementation outcomes. While governance and collaboration between local governments and non-governmental organizations are recognized as important factors in child protection policy implementation, the available literature on Bekasi Regency, Indonesia, does not provide specific data on the proportion of urban schools adopting child protection measures (Kuswandi et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for further research to assess how supportive local governance environments facilitate the translation of national child protection policy goals into school-level practices.

Conversely, rural regions experience persistent organizational constraints that limit the effectiveness of these programs. Insufficient teacher training, inadequate institutional support, and limited community involvement consistently hinder effective implementation (Cahyono et al., 2023). These constraints diminish the ability of schools and local authorities to apply child safeguarding standards in daily practice. Consequently, policy goals formally endorsed at the national level often do not achieve comparable impact in less favorable local contexts. Collectively, these differences suggest that in both countries, the primary determinant of policy effectiveness is not merely the existence of national reforms but rather the varying capacity and commitment of local governments. When local administrations successfully mobilize resources, coordinate stakeholders, and sustain political support, policy implementation is more consistent and effective. In contrast, the absence of these conditions perpetuates implementation gaps, even in the presence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks. This pattern underscores the central role of subnational governance in shaping policy outcomes.

A direct comparison of the two cases reveals that both federalism in the United States and decentralization in Indonesia produce significant subnational variations in child protection outcomes. In the United States, federal child welfare policies mandate state and local jurisdictions to address child maltreatment, resulting in variations in child protection across states (Lawson & Berrick, 2023). These disparities reflect differences in political

priorities, budgetary capacity, and administrative readiness, which collectively influence the scope and pace of policy change.

A similar dynamic may be observed in Indonesia. A comparable dynamic is evident in Indonesia, where urban areas benefit from stronger administrative capacity and more stable inter-organizational coordination, while rural areas remain disadvantaged due to limited resources and weak enforcement. These cross-national contrasts emphasize the significance of local institutional contexts in shaping the practical impact of child protection policies. Policy outcomes are not determined solely by national legislation but emerge from the interaction between governance structures and local implementation capacities. This evidence reinforces the argument that improving child protection requires sustained attention to subnational institutions and their capacity to implement reform agendas.

Table 3. Comparison of Child Protection Policy Implementation in the U.S. and Indonesia

Criteria	United States	Indonesia
Policy Type	FFPSA, CAPTA	Child Protection Law No. 35 of 2014, local reforms
Implementation Rate	20 states fully implemented FFPSA by 2022	Inconsistent in rural areas; urban areas more successful
Governance System	Federal system, state-level autonomy	Decentralized governance responsibility
Local Government Capacity	Varies by state, some struggle with resources	Local governments in rural areas lack resources and capacity

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; Pujianti et al., 2023.

Situating these empirical patterns within the Advocacy Coalition Framework illuminates the mechanisms underlying such variations. The data highlight the central importance of resources and belief systems in forming coalition influence. In both countries, coalitions with more substantial financial resources, technical expertise, and institutional access are more effective in translating core policy beliefs, especially those highlighting prevention and family preservation, into concrete policy outcomes. When dominant political actors share these beliefs, coalition strategies are more likely to succeed. In contrast, regions defined by competing belief systems or fiscal constraints present greater resistance and slower policy change.

Beyond resources and beliefs, the observed differences emphasize the significance of coalition competition and policy learning. In the United States, competition between reform-oriented coalitions and more conservative or fiscally cautious coalitions at the state level accounts for the wide variation in implementation trajectories. In Indonesia, analogous dynamics are observed in policy debates such as tourism, where coalitions advocating for economic benefits through regulation interact with coalitions prioritizing cultural preservation and environmental conservation (Elvita, 2024, pp. 53-94). Gradual adjustments in several regions, including the expansion of preventive services and enhanced inter-agency

coordination, demonstrate ongoing policy learning processes, though these remain uneven and highly contingent on local institutional contexts.

Taken together, the comparative evidence strengthens thCollectively, the comparative evidence reinforces the ACF proposition that policy change is shaped less by formal legislation and more by sustained interactions among advocacy coalitions within specific institutional constraints. The existence of multiple policy venues in federal and decentralized systems compels coalitions to compete, mobilize resources, and modify strategies over time, resulting in uneven and context-specific outcomes. Consequently, similar reform objectives yield markedly different results throughout regions within each country. The comparison demonstrates that coalition strategies, resource access, and belief alignment interact with governance structures to determine the actual impact of child protection policies. Child protection policy calls for not only legal reform but also deliberate efforts to increase local coalition capacity, reduce resource disparities, and institutionalize policy learning throughout regions. From an ACF perspective, sustainable policy change depends on rebalancing power and resources within the policy subsystem and on creating conditions for constructive competition and learning between coalitions. In both Indonesia and the United States, the main obstacle is not a lack of reform-oriented coalitions but the uneven institutional environments in which they operate. Therefore, improving child protection outcomes ultimately requires aligning coalition strategies, resource delivery, and governance arrangements to support more consistent and fair policy implementation.

Conclusion

The findings show that advocacy coalitions strongly influence child protection policy outcomes in both the United States and Indonesia. The magnitude and consistency of this influence are strongly determined by governance arrangements and local implementation capacity. Federalism in the United States and decentralization in Indonesia result in substantial subnational variation, as states and local governments differ in political commitment, fiscal capacity, and administrative readiness. As a result, national juridical frameworks and reform initiatives do not automatically produce uniform outcomes. Differences remain between regions with stronger institutional support and those facing resource restrictions or governmental opposition. The effectiveness of child protection policies therefore depends less on the existence of formal regulations and more on the capacity of local actors to implement them in practice.

Applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the results show the central roles of resources, belief systems, coalition competition, and policy learning in driving policy change. Coalitions with greater access to resources and institutional venues are more capable of advancing their core policy beliefs, particularly those highlighting prevention and family preservation. In contrast, competing belief systems and limited capacity constrain reform in other contexts. The uneven patterns noted in both countries indicate that sustainable improvements in child protection require not only legal reform but also targeted efforts to strengthen local coalition capacity, reduce resource disparities, and promote learning across

policy venues. Aligning coalition strategies with supportive governance arrangements is key for achieving more consistent and fair child protection outcomes.

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