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David Sink

*University of Alabama, Birmingham*

Michele Wilson

*University of Alabama, Birmingham*

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THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICAL CULTURE AND  
FISCAL FEDERALISM: STATE BLOCK GRANTS IN ALABAMA

David Sink, D.P.A. and Michele Wilson, Ph.D.  
University of Alabama in Birmingham  
Urban Studies Department

ABSTRACT

Political culture and intergovernmental relations together shape specific policy actions of a state government within the constraints of its economic condition. Although financial resources provided a state government strongly influence the level of its policy outputs, the political and administrative dynamics appear to affect the exact nature of that policy. A case study of state block grant implementation in the state of Alabama provides an opportunity to observe these variables in action. In particular, the prominent role played by the executive branch appears to have influenced strongly the decisions made concerning social services, health policy, and community development.

A state's political system of inputs, decisions, and outputs operates within a political culture and a complex intergovernmental partnership, which together shape the formation and execution of public policy. To consider one without the other is incomplete, as if the distribution of resources were determined solely by regional peculiarities or federal mandate. Both are dynamic, though regional political cultures appear to have changed more slowly than federal-state relationships. In order to understand state policy, we need to understand how their interaction impacts the ways a state government, its leaders, and institutions do business.

One recent opportunity to study the shaping of state policy outputs involves nine state block grants which were enacted by Congress as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (P.L. 97-35). Starting October 1, 1981 (FY1982), the state of Alabama assumed responsibility for seven of those block grants.<sup>1</sup> Although modest by comparison with President Reagan's intentions, these health, social welfare, and community development programs return considerable, though not complete, decision-making control to the states. The importance of that control has been diminished somewhat with severe federal budget reductions. Organizational structures, budgetary response, eligibility standards, and program oversight are left largely to state devices. It is the adoption and implementation of these block grants which serve as substance for this discussion of cultural and intergovernmental dynamics in the politics of social welfare in Alabama.

Southern Political Culture and Alabama Government

Political culture is a useful concept for linking social and economical factors with political performance. Its theory and application to public policy combines

psychological interpretations of individual political behavior with macroanalytic group and societal variables common to political sociology (Pye, 1965: 8-10). According to Elazar (1972), political culture is a particular pattern of orientation to political action, a value framework shared by residents of a state which establishes common goals and actions to achieve them. It is the product of history and geography within the United States, of migrations, religions, and attitudes toward power and the role of government.

Elazar identified three major political subcultures that jointly inhabit the U.S. Although each has national proportions, individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic subcultures are tied to specific sections of the country (Elazar, 1972: 93).

To understand government in Alabama is to realize the enduring strength of the traditionalistic political subculture. The people of Alabama, and the South in general, are characterized by a traditional culture which "reflects an older, precommercial attitude that accepts a substantially hierarchical society as part of the ordered nature of things, authorizing and expecting those at the top of the social structure to take a special and dominant role in government" (Elazar, 1972: 99). Political competition is limited in scope, both in political party structure and participation (Hanson, 1983: 31). An appropriate mission for state government in a traditionalistic subculture includes maintaining and encouraging the status quo or existing order. Change comes slowly, usually at the behest of an elite.

This traditionalistic approach to government manifests itself in specific fiscal indicators and is underscored by the relatively poor economic conditions of the state. There exists a strong tendency to distrust government and corresponding refusal to support it. It appears that Alabama state government suffers from both a relative inability and unwillingness of the populace to sustain it. The former may be seen in Alabama's rank of 48th among all states in fiscal capacity (ACIR, 1981), and median family income of \$13,674, almost \$9000 below the U.S. median. The latter is indicated in numerous statistics. For example, Alabama ranks in the bottom five states in the nation in Aid For Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) payments, the adequacy of AFDC grants, in state contributions to welfare payments (Albritton, 1983), and in elementary-secondary education spending (Wirt, 1983: 306-20).

Political and bureaucratic indicators consistent with the traditionalistic subculture are apparent as well. They may be summarized as follows:

#### General Centralization of State Government

1. Because of the general poverty and low taxation in Alabama local jurisdictions, the state government must provide or fund services normally provided by local governments elsewhere. This centralization tends to strengthen the influence of the state government (Sharkansky, 1978: 25, 26).
2. Since Alabama is one of eight states which allow no home rule for their local governments, the state government plays a powerful legislative role over its county and municipal government.
3. In a rural, homogeneous, one-party state such as Alabama, a strong pressure system dominated by an alliance of interest groups, education,

timber and coal, focuses attention on the state capital as the primary decision-making locus for the state (Ziegler and van Dalen, 1976).

#### Strength of the Governor

4. Partly because of an absence of a well-organized Republican party, the Alabama governor (always a Democrat in this century) has gained considerable political strength (Sharkansky, 1978: 25).

5. Because party labels are less important in Alabama than in most non-South states, voters tend to identify with personalities, rather than with parties and issues. This provides the governor an opportunity to attract considerable attention.

6. Both the former "multifunctional" one-party system in Alabama (pre-George Wallace) and the "dominant" faction headed by Wallace tend to reinforce the politics of personality (Palmer, 1977: 68, 69).

7. The Alabama governorship enjoys relatively strong formal strength based on budget and appointive powers, tenure potential and veto powers (Schlesinger, 1976).

8. The state's Budget Management Act of 1976 establishes the governor and finance officer (whom the governor appoints) as central and influential figures in the state budget process (Cowles and Berry, 1982).

9. The Alabama governor traditionally names the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tem of the Senate. These allies are expected to serve as floor leaders for the governor's legislative program (Jewell, 1972).

10. The Alabama governor has become (as have other governors) an important conduit of federal aid to the point where s/he may be called the "federal-systems-officer" at the state level. This role has enabled the governor "to dispense a new style of patronage--of services and programs" (Williams, 1972: 3,4).

#### Weakness of the Legislature

11. Partly because of the relative poorness of the state, Alabama state legislators are poorly paid, well under the national average. This poor support tends to discourage a more permanent body of legislators who need seniority and time to establish policy leadership and strength (Palmer, 1977: 96).

12. Alabama's traditionalistic political culture has been linked with a general lack of support for state assemblies (Patterson, Wahlke, and Boynton, 1973).

13. Similarly, the traditionalistic culture has been shown to hold a less favorable view toward government spending and regulation (Kelleher, Goodman, and Cornwell, 1973). Hence, the legislature has less influence over fewer resources.

14. At the bottom of the Legis 50 ranking based on five legislative performance criteria is found Alabama. (Citizens Conference, 1971).

15. Another study ranked the performance of Alabama legislative committees among the least effective (Rosenthal, 1974). Research and staff capacity are lacking.

Both the economic problems and political characteristics of Alabama state government are apparent. The use of these data as determinants of policy is well-grounded in the literature. Economic variables, especially in states with underdeveloped economies, predict fairly well both political variables and level of policy outputs (Dawson and Robinson, 1963; Dye, 1966; Press and VerBurg, 1979: 42). But, as Lineberry (1977: 46) has cautioned: "If economic factors produce a bigger or smaller pie, then it is reasonable to suppose that political factors determine who gets the shares." Further research seems to confirm this point (Fry and Winters, 1970).

Given the apparent imbalance of power between the governor's office and the legislature, we would expect the chief executive to dominate decision-making that allocates funds to various programs. Secondly, given the traditionally poor support for welfare programs in Alabama, we would anticipate that those state block grants most directly targeted to poor people would suffer. Third, the nature of the block grants, themselves, should affect the economic and political balance of power within state government.

### Changes in Fiscal Federalism

The second intersecting influence on state block grants is fiscal federalism. The term refers to the extensive grants-in-aid program among governments that began in the New Deal, was greatly expanded in Johnson's Great Society, modified by Nixon in the early 1970s, and now modified again by Reagan with his state block grants. What effect do these forms of federalism have on state and local government discretion and flexibility over various social welfare programs? To the point, are the state block grants an extension of the decentralization of power begun by earlier federal block grants and general revenue sharing? The answer is yes and no.

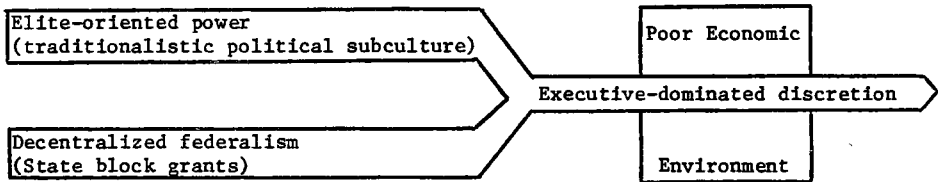
Categorical grants developed under Johnson's administration provide considerable control to the grantor--the federal government (Reagan and Sanzone, 1980: 57-60). Block grants loosen that control (Hanson, 1983: 40-52; Reagan and Sanzone, 1980: 124, 125). The recipient jurisdiction enjoys considerably more freedom. General revenue sharing monies are virtually unrestricted. The tendency of all three, however, is to establish a "vertical" relationship between federal and local governments (or local extragovernmental agencies), effectively bypassing, in most though not all cases, state government. Reagan's stated intention is to strengthen the role of state governments in the process so that the federal monies, however much reduced, become "pass-through" funds that provide states, not local governments, with primary discretion. Hence, the answer is yes, the state block grants appear to continue the decentralization or devolution of power from Washington, but no, local governments do not enjoy that discretion--states do.

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act directs the governor of each state to take charge of block grant implementation, though the legislature is not excluded from the process. In Alabama, those federal funds became part of the General Fund to be appropriated by the legislature. Not surprisingly, Reagan's own governorship appears to have shaped his philosophy about not only the most appropriate part of government to have discretion over block grants, but the appropriate policy actor as well. Although the number of federal mandates attached to each state block grant varies, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have imposed a minimum of regulations on the states' use of the block grants (Beyle and Dusenbury, 1981). Hence, the potential discretion and flexibility afforded governors is considerable.

The inherent difficulty in predicting uniform impact from sweeping change in intergovernmental relations is that states react with great diversity. To expect all states to assume responsibility for state block grants in an equally competent fashion is to ignore the influence of political subcultures, fiscal resources, and resulting state government policy actions. As Radin (1982: 62) indicates: "Arguments for all-encompassing devolution of power to the states do not take into account the state variations and the needs in many states for active federal presence."

In the case of Alabama, the block grants appear to complement government resulting from a traditionalistic political subculture. When two nearly parallel roads intersect, the natural inclination of the resultant route is to continue in the same direction.



Given this orientation, we would expect the incumbent governor to play a central role in the implementation of the state block grants. The lack of support for legislative oversight and active citizen involvement only reinforces such executive domination. We may check this assumption by briefly reviewing a case study of Alabama's first year of block grant implementation.

#### Taking the Block Grants in Stride

Alabama government officials prided themselves in the quickness with which the state took on seven block grants. Whereas the executive branch assumed a leadership role, legislative involvement in the first year of block grant implementation was minimal, providing little in the way of a balance of power to executive branch decision-making or a conduit for public participation and input. After co-sponsoring two sets of public hearings with the Office of State Planning and Federal Programs (OSPFP), the legislature did little with the block grants. Interviews with state legislators revealed much uncertainty and confusion on their appropriate role in the block grant process. Compared to other states, the Alabama legislature has played an extremely minimal role (Beyle and Dusenbury, 1981).

This near-abdication of responsibility to date leads to fundamental questions about the legislative oversight function. Though the Alabama legislature has an

established procedure for reviewing federal fund transfers and their utilization within the state, it has served to "rubber-stamp" executive decisions concerning these block grants. If the federal government is no longer charged with holding the state to its responsibilities, who within the state guarantees fiscal, procedural, and substantive accountability? Thus far, the implementing agencies have been slow to replace federal rules and regulations with their own nor have they established a management audit function.

Because of the brief period between acceptance of the block grants and the beginning of FY1982, the four executive departments responsible for the block grants had little time to institute meaningful organizational change. In the following year (through 1982), however, during which a thorough review and planning process could have been conducted, little was accomplished. Hence, the state entered into FY1983 with essentially the same organizational structure that was in place upon initial acceptance. Interviews with state officials consistently indicated that the executive branch, following cues from the governor, saw block grant implementation as routine business which, at its best, required considerably fewer application and reporting functions. Few perceived the block grant process as an opportunity to innovate or create new means of service delivery. Innovation and creativity had been basic assumptions of devolution of responsibility to the states.

By necessity, the Small Cities-Community Development Block Grant and the Community Services Block Grant required significant organizational adjustments since the state had not been involved directly with either program. Otherwise, in-place agencies and offices were able to include the block grant in established sections. This low level of adaptation may be explainable since several of the block grants are logical extensions of established programs. For example, the Social Services Block Grant is essentially the former Title XX federal block grant (in fact, most state and local bureaucrats continue to refer to the Social Services Block Grant as "Title 20"). Also, the priorities established in the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Systems Block Grant were consistent with priorities of care previously adopted by the state mental health department. Further, since severe budget cuts accompanied most of the block grants (see next section), administrators contend that their current strategy is more "survival" than expansive. That view is consistent with the unfortunate irony experienced in many governments that when creative management techniques are most needed (in times of fiscal stress), there are no slack resources with which to innovate.

#### Governor James' Approach

To accept this explanation as the main reason behind the former state administration's low-key approach may be misleading. Governor Fob James, who succeeded George Wallace in 1979 and handed back the job to Wallace in 1983, sought to reduce the size and influence of state government. Working on that premise, he chose not to establish a separate agency to oversee block grant implementation nor did he concentrate that effort in his own office. Instead, he depended heavily on the line departments for block grant implementation. Formation of an Inter-Agency Council and block grant Task Forces, which met an average of just two times, represented

the extent of any extraordinary effort regarding block grants.

There are positive and negative aspects of this type arrangement. The governor retained some control over the block grants through the power of appointment; however, Governor James opted for a decentralized model in which the departments are primarily responsible for planning and implementation. The Inter-Agency Council, unlike similar bodies in other states, did not include citizens and representatives from outside concerns. Instead, that input was channeled (quite unevenly) through the agencies themselves. In short, the implementation process was extremely bureaucratic in nature.

The Government's Fiscal Response\*

Legislative and executive response in Alabama to federal government budget cuts which accompanied the decentralization of power varies by block grant as Table 2 indicates. The totals are interesting. Overall, the seven block grants were reduced 5.7 percent, as the state's 5.1 percent increase could not offset federal budget reductions of an average of 9.7 percent. An attempt was made by the legislature to improve Social Services funding, but Governor James was forced by the

Table 1  
State and Federal Funding Levels for FY1981 to FY1983

<u>Block Grant</u>	<u>Percent Change State</u>	<u>Percent Change Federal</u>	<u>Total</u>
Small Cities-Community Development	+100%	+15.2%	+17.4%
Maternal and Child Health Services	+83.5	-27.7	+ 9.8
Preventive Health and Health Services	+ 9.4	+23.2	+ 9.4
Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health	- 2.9	- 5.1	- 4.0
Low Income Home Energy Assistance	N.A.	-11.8	-11.8
Social Services	-10.4	-14.7	-13.2
Community Services	<u>N.A.</u>	<u>-39.7</u>	<u>-39.7</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>+ 5.1</b>	<b>- 9.7</b>	<b>- 5.7</b>

Sources: Patrick J. Cowles with Sandra E. Berry and Odessa Woolfolk, "Budget Cuts and Block Grants: The New 'New Federalism' Comes to Alabama," Paper presented at the 1983 meeting of the American Society for Public Administration, New York. Data drawn primarily from the State of Alabama Executive Budget for FY1981-1982 and FY1982-1983, plus miscellaneous state documents.

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\*Data in this section are drawn primarily from a report by Cowles (1983).



exigencies of the recession to transfer monies appropriated for Social Services to the state's welfare program. As Cowles (1983) suggests, whether or not the cut was prompted by an unwillingness to maintain those social services or an inherent incapacity to support them and emergency welfare assistance is unclear. He concludes that "the nature of the economic and fiscal problems faced by the state were (and are) such that its fiscal capacity was, at the least, so severely constrained that the decision to cut must be viewed largely as a function of this constraint" (Cowles, 1983: 31).

Otherwise, state appropriations increased in the Small Cities-Community Development, Maternal and Child Health, and Preventive Health block grants. The losers were Mental Health, Low Income Home Energy Assistance, and Community Services. The state's smaller decrease (2.9 percent) offset slightly a larger federal cut in Mental Health. The latter two received absolutely no appropriations to offset considerable federal reductions. Though not all the evidence is consistent (i.e. the legislative attempt to increase Social Services funding), it appears that those block grants targeted directly to the state's needy suffered the most. Although it is too soon to draw conclusions, a continuation of this trend could reflect an anti-poor bias on the part of the state.

#### Governor Wallace's Non-Response

Given the pressures of combatting pernicious unemployment and the lingering recession, a Justice Department requirement for new legislative elections, and his own serious health problems, Gov. George Wallace has done little to impact directly the state block grant implementation process. However, his style differs from James' in that he has moved to concentrate more policy influence and power in his office rather than disperse it to the administrative agencies. As a new budget cycle evolves, his office's role will become clear. Long-time observers predict that Wallace will continue to consolidate discretionary power in his office, though he personally adopts a style of detachment. His continuing health problems may prevent any greater degree of involvement.

#### Conclusions

Programs targeted directly for low-income residents suffered relative to other block grants. Of particular note is a major reduction in the Community Services block grant which funds the Community Action agencies and Head Start project. Additionally, Low Income Home Energy Assistance was cut. Conversely, health and community development programs were strengthened by the state government.

Gubernatorial and state bureaucratic dominance of the block grant implementation process is evident. Legislative acquiescence likewise stands out. Given the political subculture and governmental arrangements in Alabama, these findings are not surprising. However, their impact on accountability, on oversight, and on citizen input are of continuing importance.

A significant difference between Fob James' approach to administrative leadership and that of George Wallace is that James sought to remove block grant implementation from the political arena. A review of the case study indicates that James and his department heads "largely saw block grant implementation as routine

business which, at its best, required considerably fewer application and reporting functions." James did not establish a "blue-ribbon" advisory group of state citizens to advise him; he did not establish a separate agency to oversee the block grants, nor did he control that function in his office. Instead, he integrated the process into existing administrative functions, away from the oversight of the legislature and generally removed from regular citizens observation and input. By insulating the planning and decision-making process within the state bureaucracy, he managed a "politics of expertise," to use Benveniste's (1972) term.

James, who entered state government from the corporate world without previous government service nor political experience, said frequently during his term that government should and could be run like a business. Many of his legislative and administrative efforts were in tune with this belief. He valued rationality in planning that could be enhanced by removing administration from politics. In essence, he avowed the concept of neutral competence, to use Kaufman's (1963) term. He eschewed the concept of executive leadership which, according to Kaufman (1963) reflects the belief that state government decisions should be centrally coordinated. In this sense, James may have been bucking the dominant political subculture.

If past performance is useful as an indicator, Wallace will "politicize" the block grant process in Alabama by taking a firmer hold of its administration and by using certain discretionary options permitted by the legislature to influence implementation. This may be opposed by bureaucrats who have enjoyed a relatively free hand under James and who traditionally value professionalism over politics. It also may be opposed by the legislature, not because it necessarily favors a politics of bureaucratic expertise, but because its members may resist added gubernatorial power over them.

Regardless of executive style, the locus of power and discretion lies within the governor's domain. Together, political culture and the nature of the block grants predict this.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The seven block grants assumed by Alabama were: 1) Small Cities-CDBG for which non-entitlement cities apply directly to a state office which reviews applications and makes awards; 2) Community Services, designed to consolidate community action/local initiative, senior services, and community food and nutrition programs, and operated by Community Action Agencies; 3) Preventive Health and Health Services which consolidated programs in rodent control, flouridation, hypertension, home health and health incentive, plus risk education/health education; 4) Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Services for which community mental health centers are required to provide outpatient services, 24-hour emergency care, day treatment, mental hospital screening, consultation and education; 5) Maternal and Child Health Services, designed to bring together maternal and child health programs, crippled children's services, hemophilia, lead-based poisoning, genetic diseases, sudden infant death syndrome, and SSI disabled children; 6) Social Services which covers services provided under the Social Security Act including child care/protective services, adult day care and home maintenance, transportation, family services, health support services, and special services for the disabled; and 7) Low-Income Home Energy Assistance to assist eligible households to meet the cost of home energy.

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