ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Political Science

The New Education Politics in the United States

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Keywords

education, public policy, school districts, polarization

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school district politics rose to prominence on the nation's political agenda, as school boards grappled with controversial decisions about reopening schools and implementing mask mandates. A growing number of political scientists are using newly available data and innovative research strategies to examine policy responsiveness, elections, segregation and inequality, state takeovers, interest groups, democratic deliberation, and public opinion—all while focusing on the unique context of education politics. We illuminate the distinctive institutional and policy context of US education politics and review new research in the field, including growing evidence of partisan polarization and the continuing significance of race for influencing power and decision making about schools in the United States. The field has made great strides in the last decade; we highlight the emerging themes from that already rapidly growing literature, while pointing out areas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Political science has long seen education as an important component to understanding politics. The relationship, though, has not always been spelled out in detail. For decades, the political science literature has accepted educational attainment as one of the leading predictors of political and civic participation (Verba et al. 1978, Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980, Leighley & Nagler 2013, Fraga 2018). Through this empirical consistency, the field has acknowledged the importance of education. The notion that education is political, however, remained for decades on the periphery of the study of American politics. That has dramatically changed, as education policy issues such as school choice, school funding, and history curriculum have become politically salient and divisive national issues. In this review, we survey the new politics of education and discuss the findings and implications of a growing field of research.

In order to understand what is new, we must first understand the old politics of education. The study of education politics emerges from two long scholarly and political traditions. On one hand, there has been a somewhat romanticized concept of locally governed, democratically responsive education. The democratic vision has roots in work by reformers and scholars like Horace Mann and John Dewey—featuring common schools in every community and educational systems that facilitate the development of civically minded citizens. What became the empirical trend that education shapes political participation is rooted in the theoretical idea that one of the primary purposes of schools is to create democratic citizens. Although a recent review of the scholarship shows that the causal pathways linking education to political participation remain unclear, the belief in the importance of this relationship is widely held: "Philosophers, leaders, and researchers have long viewed education as the bedrock of democracy" (Willeck & Mendelberg 2022, p. 105).

This tradition operates in contrast with a deeply held fatalist conviction that politics corrupts education. Politics is in the way of what is best for kids. This line of study views individuals as motivated by self-interest. Through this perspective, the politics of education is part and parcel of the larger politics of competing interest groups. The skeptical view of politics in education has animated the reforms of administrative progressives such as Ellwood Cubberley, who sought to distance political control from the school administration. This view also motivated the market-based perspective of Milton Friedman, whose system of vouchers would largely supplant political institutions for funding and governing K–12 education.

Existing somewhere between these two poles is the everyday politics of American education. The ordinary experience is neither inherently corrupt nor ideally democratic. Yet, it animates intensely growing debates because of the high stakes. Underneath the politics of education is an American school system that has implications for everything from the future of the workforce and career opportunities to the state of social inequality to the vibrancy of a liberal democracy. These high stakes have drawn politics of education scholars into a complex area of study. Increasingly, the growing field of political science research on education politics in the United States is grappling with difficult empirical questions in this messy middle ground.

The problem of governance and the challenges of institutional design for public education have animated key works in political science. Some seminal research in the field took up the fundamental questions about whether democracy is good or bad for education, providing concepts and findings that drove the field for many decades. For example, Wirt & Kirst (1972, p. 36) pointed out the paradox of education politics and the persistent tension between politics and governance: "Politics is a form of social conflict rooted in group differences over values about using public resources to meet private needs, [whereas] governance is the process of publicly resolving that group conflict by means of creating and administering public policy." The centrality of education to personal and family values motivates conflict over what it looks like as a practice. Yet, our shared

interest in a quality education system creates the constant longing for leaders to resolve that very conflict.

The inevitability and sustainability of conflict, however, create an opportunity for making claims about politics as corrosive to education. Chubb & Moe's (1990) influential book pinpoints democratic authority and bureaucracy as the twin causes of low performance and lack of improvement in American public education. As they argue (p. 188),

> America's traditional institutions of democratic control cannot be relied on to solve the schools' bureaucracy problem—for it is not the schools but the institutions that are the real problem. They inherently breed bureaucracy and undermine autonomy. This is not something that is temporary or the product of mistakes. It is deeply anchored in the most fundamental properties of the system.

By identifying "institutions of democratic control" as a fundamental problem for public education, Chubb & Moe's (1990) account falls firmly in the tradition of politics as the source of problems for education, and they propose a system for school choice as a preferable alternative to enable school autonomy and separate schools from democratic governance and bureaucracy. As the school choice movement gained momentum in the last 30 years, their work offered an institutional and political rationale for advocates seeking to expand vouchers and charter schools.

Taking a very different approach, the Civic Capacity and Urban Education project, led by a team of political scientists in the 1990s, produced a body of work advancing a theory of civic capacity that prioritized democratic engagement and civic action as crucial components for sustaining school reform efforts (Henig et al. 2001, Stone 2001, Stone et al. 2001, Clarke et al. 2006). This research involved in-depth analyses of politics in urban school districts, and many cases showed examples of extended political conflict, little sustained attention to educational quality or equity, or a lack of interest in education issues among local political elites. However, these scholars also highlighted cases where political processes could produce civic capacity, drawing together grassroots groups and elites to be involved in shared goals to improve education (Stone 2001). According to Stone et al. (2001, p. 615), "Civic capacity is the conscious creation of actors seeking to establish a context in which extraordinary problem solving can occur." The concept of civic capacity enlivened the notion that democratic governance can be a vehicle for positive outcomes in education.

Meanwhile, the complexity of institutional structures, interest group mobilization, electoral processes, and changes in public opinion create a challenging terrain for education politics research. Much like the fields of local government and urban politics—which bear some similarities to education politics, given the highly localized system for governing education in the United States—the study of education politics struggled with long-standing data and methodological challenges. While federal- and state-level data sets are more readily available, a rich understanding of education politics at the local level involves resource-intensive processes to gather data and address substantial complexity and variation in local institutions (Trounstine 2009). Furthermore, education politics in the United States is complicated by the shared and overlapping powers of federalism. New policies can shift these powers to different levels of government, and interest groups pursue their aims in multiple venues. In other words, it can be difficult for education politics scholars to focus on just one level of the federal system when shared authority is inherent to policy design.

Moreover, to frame our review of the field we refer to Michener's (2019) guidance concerning the role of race in the study of the policy process. She argues that race should be more central in our study of a policy area when (*a*) the distribution of benefits is more disproportionate and (*b*) authority and decision making are more decentralized. Education policy in the United States typically fits both conditions. Historical and geographic inequalities in the configuration of school districts strongly overlap with housing segregation and wide disparities in the local tax base of

different communities (Berkman & Plutzer 2005, Trounstine 2018). Additionally, even though state and federal authority over education has increased, local school districts retain substantial authority over budgets, hiring, school construction, and attendance zones—such that education remains a highly decentralized area of policy. Thus, race and inequality are central to the study of education policy in the United States.

Rising to the challenges of data collection and institutional complexity, as well as long-standing normative debates over the relationship between democracy and education, the community of scholars studying US education politics has grown considerably in recent years, contributing new data sets on behavior and institutions, new theoretical frameworks that engage broader theories in political science, and a trove of new empirical findings that add a great deal of clarity and nuance to our understanding of democratic governance and public education. We review the field with a focus on race and education policy; the persistent importance of local politics; the changing context of federalism in education paired with the rise of nationalization of politics; and the role of interest groups, elections, and parties. Across these areas of research, we note new evidence suggesting partisan polarization is becoming more prominent in education policy. In our view, the greatest challenge for democratic governance in our highly fragmented educational system is rising partisan polarization, which could lead to greater divergence between "red" and "blue" states in education policies, greater nationalization of local school board elections, and entrenched ideological conflicts that may hinder pragmatic efforts to improve education. We conclude by highlighting helpful directions for future research.

FROM RACIAL THREAT TO RACIAL EQUITY AND BACK AGAIN

Race/ethnicity as a political construction has been a central fixture in the advancement of the study of the politics of education. The relationship between race and education has been well documented. Historians trace the many ways that racial discrimination and racialized violence fueled everything from how Black students were barred access to schooling in the nineteenth century to the resistance to school desegregation in the twentieth century (Reese 2011, Givens 2021). Meanwhile, political scientists interested in the politics of education have been consistently showing the ineffectiveness of school desegregation efforts. Gary Orfield, for instance, has an entire line of research highlighting what he calls school resegregation (Orfield 1978, Orfield & Eaton 1996). In response to this troubling phenomenon, his work has urged an intergovernmental approach, including deeper federal intervention and more aggressive desegregation plans from districts, which include strategies like increasing investments in magnet schools.

Furthermore, a longstanding tension for the politics of education is the role of the racial politics of states in education policy. This was particularly pronounced during the twentieth century in the US South. Another aspect of the politics of school desegregation is the effort by southern White Nationalists to exercise state power to maintain segregated schools. Racial politics was so deeply entrenched that it took President Eisenhower sending in federal military troops, through a 1957 executive order, to move the legal order forward that was established through the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court ruling. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which included a component that withheld federal funds from any activity or program that permits racial discrimination. Segregated schooling was a primary target. The eventual forced efforts to (initially) desegregate schools triggered massive migration and White flight (Rossell 1975), which altered the racial demographics of cities. More recent research shows that this pattern continues today (Moskowitz 2022).

Much of the early scholarship on race and the politics of education developed in response to the changing demographics of schools. The quest for equitable education after the dust settled with *Brown v. Board* became a question of how to navigate urban politics, where the politics of

desegregation was often highly contentious (Orfield 1983). Several scholars interested in race, political development, and the emerging politics of education began to highlight the implications of expecting schools to function within urban regimes (Rich 1996, Stone 2001). This led to studies of education reform efforts in larger urban cities populated by Black American migrants and immigrants of color from the Global South. The demographic makeup of the cities, this literature shows, became the primary basis for sharing power over schools (Clarke et al. 2006). The education policy literature would eventually highlight the positive effects of Black teachers and principals. Their entry into these professions, however, largely flowed through the urban politics of school reform (Orr 1999).

Scholars of bureaucracy and public management have made extensive contributions to the politics of education by unearthing the relationship between race and representation. More specifically, they have surfaced the importance of representative bureaucracy in translating governance into school-level outcomes. Scholars have found that Black representation on school boards positively correlates with the implementation of more equitable policies (Meier & England 1984), as well as greater satisfaction with schools among Black residents (Marschall & Ruhil 2007). Meier & Rutherford (2016) build on earlier analysis to show the persistence of the positive correlation between Black representation on school boards and equitable school policies. They go on to demonstrate that the effectiveness of Black representation interacts with electoral politics. The importance of racial representation also extends from the boardroom to the classroom. Capers (2019) finds evidence that Black teachers in segregated school districts implement discipline policies more equitably than either Black teachers in desegregated districts or White teachers in segregated and desegregated districts. In other words, even in desegregated schools, many Black students have a segregated experience, including disproportionate disciplinary treatment. Black representation among board members as well as teachers, and the racial context of schooling, can shape both policies and student experiences.

The same holds true both for Latinx politics and the politics of multiculturalism. Fraga et al. (1986) find a positive relationship between Latinx board members and the volume of Latinx teachers in an urban district. Fraga & Elis (2009) find evidence from California school boards that Latinx representation is linked to a greater number of Latinx professionals hired as school administrators. Meanwhile, at-large elections hurt school board representation for both Latinx and Black communities (Leal et al. 2004, Meier et al. 2005). Rocha & Hawes (2009) find that minority representation on school boards is negatively correlated with racial discrimination against students, and Shah (2009) shows that greater representation of Latinx individuals in positions of leadership in schools is positive for Latinx parent involvement. Furthermore, district retention rate (the rate of students required to repeat a grade) is mediated by the share of minority teachers, with fewer students retained in districts with a high share of Black and Latinx students when there is also a higher share of minority teachers (Bali et al. 2005).

Additional research has added context to the complexity of Black and Latinx school board representation. This line of research mainly examines school boards as organizations. Sampson (2019) conducts qualitative case studies of Latinx school board members and reveals the political pressures they face when advancing equitable policies. Douglass et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of school board members as equity-minded leaders. Grissom (2010) finds that school boards experience lower levels of conflict when they are more racially diverse. Kogan et al. (2021a) examine racial and ethnic representation on California school boards, finding that electoral success for Black, Latinx, and Asian candidates is associated with test score achievement gains for minority students; they suggest that greater diversity in principal staffing could be a mechanism for these improvements. Race becomes important to understand the dynamics of organizational leadership that prove central to the politics of education, as well as governing outcomes.

More recent research on racial equity and the politics of education has focused on civic education and civic engagement. Campbell (2009) provides evidence of the clear link between educational attainment and civic engagement. Campbell & Niemi (2016) demonstrate that civic education requirements motivate students to acquire civic knowledge. At the conceptual level, this line of work has been led by Allen (2020), who argues that "participatory readiness" is a skill that students need to participate in twenty-first-century American democracy. Holbein (2017) finds experimental evidence that the psychosocial skill development that takes place through a quality civic education model directly contributes to political participation.

This work intersects with civic education scholarship over the past decade that has highlighted the alarming overall decline in civic education, as well as persisting racial gaps (Levine 2008, Levinson 2012, Kahne et al. 2016). In an affirmative direction, scholars have offered clear models for how civic education should be used to foster "good citizens" in an equitable way (Westheimer & Kahne 2004, Levine 2008). Nelsen (2021) shows how civic education that features a critical race theory lens fosters political knowledge and student empowerment. However, recent work has also shown the impact of racially polarized education policy issues and their impact on attitudes about civic education. Collins (2022) shows that negative racial attitudes drive opposition to antiracist history and civic instruction in schools.

Partisan polarization seems poised to further shape the public debate on civic education, as well as curriculum addressing antiracism and gender/sexuality, with heightened media and policymaker attention. At the state level, Filimon & Ivănescu (2023, p. 2) identify 16 bills adopted in 15 states in 2021 and 2022 that "banned, barred, or prohibited schools from teaching, providing instruction, or promoting ideas that might present 'race, ethnicity or sex' in divisive ways." A survey of teachers by Woo et al. (2023) finds that state policies that limit instruction on race- and/or gender-related topics have impacted some teachers' instructional practices and choice of curriculum materials. It is still early to gauge how these very active political debates will evolve, but one arena to watch for future responses will be local districts, which retain some key powers to guide curriculum, hiring, and budgets that can also shape instructional practices on civic education, antiracism, and gender/sexuality.

PERSISTENT IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL POLITICS

There is a paradox of education politics. While schooling happens locally, the power over schools is diffuse. Urban school reform research, for example, tends to highlight the conflict between highly populated cities and state governments. Meanwhile, the study of state politics of education has grown into its own line of research. For example, scholars have examined the role of state lobbying in education policymaking. At a more structural level, we now know that the decisions made at the state level determining election rules heavily influence the makeup of local school boards. However, arguably the most pronounced role of the state in the politics of education has been the rise in states rearranging or reallocating power. States have taken control of school districts and kept them under state control. They redirected control to city mayors. In short, we know that, since the mid-twentieth century, states have become more aggressive in asserting their role in education reform. Yet, even as state intervention shifts the landscape of local school politics, studying local districts is still necessary to explain key outcomes.

The growing assertion of the state has overshadowed the persistent importance of local politics. State politics may dictate key aspects of political structures, but scholars show the importance of local education politics to understand consequences of these policies. In particular, we see a consistent trend in which state interventions in local reform efforts tend to be (*a*) racialized, (*b*) mobilizing of resistance, and (*c*) disempowering for local communities over the longer term. For instance, Morel (2018) provides evidence that racialized state takeovers depress Black

political representation at the school district level, despite mass resistance efforts. Schueler & Bleiberg (2022) find that race is an important predictor of state takeovers—with a greater risk of takeover in majority-Black districts—and no evidence that state takeovers produce academic benefits. Nuamah (2023) demonstrates how racially targeted school closures mobilized Black parents, students, and activists, while failing to deliver democratic accountability to those groups. Lay (2022), along with Morel & Nuamah (2020), show how the racially targeted expansion of school choice through charter schools fosters political disenfranchisement over time.

The complexity of urban politics and race has also surfaced through the studies of mayoral control. Through the lens of mayoral power, scholars have looked closely at urban cities and drawn important comparisons. Henig & Rich (2004) highlight the tension between mayor-centric urban reform and openly discussing race as a central feature of the reform efforts. Wong et al. (2007) show how the mayor-centric reform efforts, in shying away from race, have placed the focus on school quality and student performance. Chambers (2006) shows how focus on improved student performance through standardized testing overshadows decreases in minority political representation that occur through centralized mayoral control. Hess (2008) argues that there is very little evidence that mayoral control fosters more organized and cohesive governance.

Local politics research has also surfaced the value of different forms of democratic innovation happening through the politics of education. Fung (2004) offers the accountable autonomy model, showing that decentralizing certain powers to the school level and empowering school-level councils to exercise that power increased political participation among members of marginalized racial and ethnic as well as socioeconomic groups. Collins (2021) demonstrates that school boards increase public trust and interest in public meetings when they institutionalize elements of democratic deliberation. Collins (2018) also shows that school boards are likely to pursue new reforms when engaging in more routine discourse with the public. Marsh (2007) warns that variation in fidelity to deliberative and participatory innovations could weaken their impact. Still, there is strong evidence that deepening the fabric of school districts as democratic institutions has been a critical part of the politics of education.

The nationalization of local politics has added a new layer to the politics of education (Henig 2013). For decades, the focus had been the politics of school reform, particularly in urban cities. Education policy at the national level was largely guided by debates that never fit cleanly onto partisan cleavages. Thompson et al. (2020) trace the policy agendas of modern US presidents and highlight the consistency of intraparty conflicts over school reform, school choice, and other insular education issues. The primary difference they credit to the Trump presidency is his use of specific unilateral action through executive order.

Meanwhile, the story of national politics during the twenty-first century has been deepening partisan polarization. With school boards selected mainly through local nonpartisan elections, education should be institutionally buffered from the national climate (Henig & Stone 2008). For years, that seemed to be the case. However, the national politics of education shifted in 2018, as President Trump initiated the 1776 Commission on patriotic education in response to the growing popularity of Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project. This project centered the history of enslaved Africans within the larger American story and fit within a larger quest to teach American history in classrooms in ways that are honest about America's greatest sin.

The controversy over American history heightened politicization of education nationally to levels not seen since the *Brown v. Board* ruling. The more recent politics of education research has shown the depths of this new nationalization imposing itself on education policy. Houston (2022) finds evidence that partisan polarization has been filtering into education policy preferences in public opinion, with members of the public sorting over time to adopt education policy positions that align with their partisan affiliation.

More recent research examining the impact of COVID-19 on the politics of education reveals additional evidence of national partisan polarization, even when the decisions are made by local school districts and states. Grossmann et al. (2021), as well as Hartney & Finger (2022), find evidence of partisan differences in district-level school reopening policies. Additional research finds evidence of partisan polarization and racial divides among the public over school reopening policies, with liberals and people of color preferring schools remain closed to in-person instruction (Collins 2022, Farris & Mohamed 2022). Singer et al. (2023) produce a detailed case study of school reopening policy implementation and find that, despite the partisan influence of the discourse around school reopening, the normal policy operations centered mostly on public health information and localized needs. Whether the polarization of national politics has a substantial and ongoing influence on the local operation of schools remains an open question and an important area for future research.

CENTRALIZATION, NATIONALIZATION, AND POLARIZATION

The long-standing importance of local politics for education has coexisted with changes in power sharing across levels of government in education. Institutions at the federal and state levels have changed the landscape of local governance—altering school finance regimes, responding to segregation, and creating guidelines and standards for education programming for specific populations of students. In particular, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of growing centralization in education politics—with states and the federal government playing a larger role in asserting authority over local districts. Since 2000, trends have shifted away from growing centralization toward rising nationalization of education politics. As Henig et al. (2019, pp. 26–27) explain, with nationalization, "local jurisdictions...emerge as important strategic fronts in national contests over alternative visions of schooling." Unlike centralization, which involves power shifting away from the local level, nationalization can be compatible with local power and authority. Nationalization involves interest groups, parties, and candidates with nationalized agendas working to influence local school politics, as well as shifts in media and campaign messaging that draw education politics into nationalized—and often partisan—debates. The literature has grappled with tracking both centralization and nationalization of education politics within the context of federalism. Research has examined changes in relative power across institutions, changes in policymaking that shift authority, and political agendas that span jurisdictional boundaries.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, both governors and presidents became more focused on education quality, with some governors taking up the mantle of "education governor" (Rhodes 2012). These executives frequently focused on standards, testing, and accountability policies as their preferred approach to improve education. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 is often portrayed as a watershed moment for federalism and centralization in education—ushering in a new and substantially enlarged federal government role in guiding education policy focused on accountability (McGuinn 2005, Manna 2010, Moffitt et al. 2021). This expanding prominence of federal power in the first decade of the 2000s also coincided with notable bipartisanship in education politics (Manna 2010). However, as scholars have untangled the implications of NCLB and its aftermath, there is much greater attention to the limits of federal power to implement policy in education.

The federal government could not implement NCLB accountability policies alone, given the small size and limited capacity of the federal Department of Education. As Manna (2006) has argued, "borrowing strength" from state education institutions was essential for implementation. Yet, recent work by Moffitt et al. (2021) suggests that centralization of education policy also disrupted administrative capacity at the local level, and technical capacity mainly increased in low-poverty counties. Furthermore, the centralization of education policymaking with NCLB began

to erode after education reform efforts during the Obama administration faced mounting political opposition (McGuinn 2016).

The arc of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as a policy reform illustrates the peak and subsequent erosion of centralized policymaking in education, as well as the growing nationalization of education politics spurred by interest groups and parties. The CCSS were an attempt at national standards that gained momentum in the first decade of the 2000s, but they were not a formal federal policy. Instead, the CCSS were developed in coordination with two national organizations of state officials—the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (McGuinn 2016). These groups worked with a coalition of elite organizations and representatives of universities, philanthropists, unions, and research agencies to develop shared national standards (McDonnell & Weatherford 2013, Reckhow 2016). However, once states began to implement the standards, backlash emerged—first from conservatives, then from progressives. According to Jochim & Lavery (2015), issues that were not addressed during the development of the standards—such as teacher evaluation, costs, and accountability—came to the fore during implementation, expanding the scope of conflict. Analysis of public opinion data shows that disapproval of President Obama was one of the strongest predictors of opposition to the CCSS (Polikoff et al. 2016), and opposition was strongest among conservative Republicans (Henderson et al. 2015). Although support among Democrats also declined during implementation, the issue of the CCSS provided an early signal that the bipartisan support for accountability policies and a stronger federal role in education was eroding. When Congress again reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2015 by adopting the Every Student Succeeds Act, the legislation reduced federal authority and returned key powers related to school accountability to the states (Dahill-Brown 2019).

In addition to centralizing shifts in institutional powers, there have also been jurisdictional shifts in power between special-purpose and general-purpose governments. According to Henig (2013), starting in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the institutional setting of education politics evolved away from special-purpose governments (i.e., school districts and state departments of education) and toward greater involvement of general-purpose government actors including executives (mayors, governors, and presidents), courts, and legislatures. The courts provide a key example of these changes. On race and segregation as well as school finance inequality, court decisions and efforts to "force compliance drew courts deeper into the weeds of education practice" (Henig 2013, p. 87). School district desegregation orders and rulings against unequal state funding distribution systems had catalytic effects, opening the door for legislators and other political actors to respond to problems of educational inadequacy and inequality (Henig 2013).

Furthermore, state education politics involves a broad array of issues that are contested by interest groups and that shape the politics of local school districts—including school finance and school choice policies. Thus, another crucial element of federalism and centralization in education politics involves the conflict and coordination of state and local governments involved with education policy, as well as the various constituencies and interest groups that mobilize in these venues.

School finance is an area where state and local authorities mostly share influence, covering nearly 90% of school funding. Yet, the split between state and local funding of schools varies enormously; in some states, local districts provide most funding for schools, while in others, funds are largely distributed by the state (Kitchens 2021). The role of state funding formulas in promoting funding equity across school districts (or failing to do so) has been a key area of research (Baker 2021). Meanwhile, Kitchens (2021, p. 56) finds that state funding formulas for education are "susceptible to political influence and that parties are able to influence the geographic distribution of education funds to core voters." In other words, districts with a higher proportion of

voters supporting Democrats receive more money in the state funding formula when Democrats control the state government, while Republican control leads to a decrease in state transfers for districts in more Democratic voting areas. There is also research considering how finance shapes governance and control of schools. For example, Shelly (2011) demonstrates how increased financial centralization by states and efforts to reduce inequity across districts by redistributing at the state level do not necessarily reduce local autonomy over school governance. California adopted funding reforms in 2013 that decentralized control over funding and offered school districts new flexibility in spending state funds. These financial reforms were paired with governance reforms, requiring local school districts to involve parents, students, and stakeholders in developing budgets and accountability standards (Marsh & Hall 2018). According to Marsh & Hall (2018), the early implementation of these civic engagement reforms did not live up to the promise, with low participation and relatively shallow efforts at engagement by districts.

School choice policies, such as vouchers and charter schools, are typically adopted at the state level, but their implementation often has disproportionate impact in urban districts and communities. Scholars such as Hackett & King (2019) and Jabbar et al. (2022) have examined how racial politics shapes these policies. Focusing on vouchers (which enable families to access public funds for private school tuition), Hackett & King (2019) demonstrate how race-conscious rhetoric supporting state voucher programs for urban districts such as Cleveland and Milwaukee failed to gain traction with conservatives, who are key supporters of private school choice. The rising prevalence of "universal" voucher policies—which enable families to access vouchers regardless of financial or educational needs—aligns with color-blind framing of the policies, "focusing on individual parents rather than racial groups and eschewing racial language" (Hackett & King 2019, p. 256). Interestingly, direct experience with voucher programs can promote political learning and political activity among parents (Fleming 2014). Yet, the consequences of targeted state voucher programs for local districts can be challenging; Ford (2017) shows that the voucher program in Milwaukee has created such widespread fragmentation that the city governance structure cannot provide accountability for quality education for local students.

While the politics of some school choice policies—especially charter schools—initially reflected bipartisan support, there is evidence of growing partisan and ideological polarization in this area (Reckhow et al. 2015, Houston 2022), with Republicans more supportive of charters than Democrats. Shelton et al. (2022) examine attitudes toward private school vouchers in Missouri, a state that adopted a new voucher policy in 2021, and find that conservative political ideology is strongly associated with support for vouchers. Meanwhile, the growth in state legislatures' adoption of universal voucher programs in 2022 and 2023 has the potential to further mobilize or alter power dynamics among constituencies in education politics—both in favor and in opposition to these policies.

The growth of partisan polarization is a trend that is often linked to nationalization of US politics (Hopkins 2018). While this is frequently the case, the literature on education politics has also demonstrated how nationalization of politics can occur through interest group mobilization and competition that do not feature cross-partisan conflict. Henig et al. (2019) focus on campaign contributions in local school board elections to compare teacher union funding and support with new funds raised by reform organizations, leveraging "outside money" from wealthy, nonlocal donors. These donors are often mobilized by national organizations and political action committees that are aligned with a pro–school choice agenda, and their giving is often focused on school districts where the school board has decision-making authority over charter school expansion. Notably, Henig et al. (2019) finds that the elite donors to these school board elections were predominantly major Democratic Party donors who supported charter schools, and their main opponents in local school board elections were supported by a key interest group in the Democratic Party—teacher

unions. In these urban school districts, the nationalization of campaign contributions fueled interest groups and donors competing within the Democratic Party. This brings attention to one more key set of topics in education politics research—interest groups.

EDUCATION INTEREST GROUPS, ELECTIONS, AND PARTIES

The research on parties and interest groups in education politics features work that focuses on specific interest groups and their influence in education politics, as well as studies that consider the broad landscape of organizations mobilized around education policy issues and assessing varied levels of influence. Many scholars have grappled with the ways that political institutions or specific policies empower or enable influence from some groups while other groups are less engaged, and the special role of teacher unions in education politics is an important aspect of this work. Other researchers have focused on electoral politics and representation, looking beyond formally organized interest groups to assess who is represented in school board elections and how. Meanwhile, the role of political parties in education policy is a rapidly evolving topic. Until recently, education politics scholars focused more heavily on interest group influence—perhaps because the nonpartisan local school board elections and a relatively bipartisan era of education policymaking in the 1990s and early 2000s made party influence seem less crucial for understanding education politics. However, as partisan polarization grows more visible in education politics, scholars are grappling with the implications for interest group and political party mobilization, interaction, and influence.

The role of teacher unions as an interest group in education politics is a key topic in the literature. Newer research in the field draws on impressive data gathered on collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) as well as state and local policies that impact unions to shed light on the factors that foster teacher mobilization and influence, particularly in state and local politics. Moe (2011, 2015) offers a theoretical framework for understanding the roles of teacher unions in education politics as special interests and vested interests; in other words, teacher unions are interest groups that provide political representation for their members, and moreover, as vested interests, they arise directly from public sector institutions. A concept closely related to Moe's vested interests and focused specifically on school districts—the public school cartel—was developed by Rich (1996) to explain the alignment of interests among unions and school administrators to maintain status quo policies in local school politics. Moe (2015, p. 306) argues that as vested interests, teacher unions are particularly focused on teacher pay, benefits, and job security, and they "see major reform as threatening." The observation that unions can effectively oppose policy changes— particularly those that impact teacher employment and salaries—is echoed in empirical findings by other scholars studying the politics of education at the local, state, and national levels (Henig et al. 2001, Hartney & Flavin 2011, McDonnell 2013, Finger 2018). While vested interests are more closely associated with the power to block change, often working to maintain their positions and benefits associated with government, Anzia (2011) shows how unions also exercise outsized influence in low-turnout, off-cycle school board elections, which can yield material benefits to teachers in the form of higher salaries.

Complicating these expectations about teacher unions as vested interests with power to draw resources from the public sector, Paglayan (2019) uses longitudinal data to show that state-level mandatory collective bargaining laws for teachers were often adopted alongside penalties for strikes. In the states with strike penalties, "unions had limited ability to extract material concessions" (Paglayan 2019, p. 22). Paglayan's analysis shows that lower student–teacher ratios, higher teacher salaries, and higher education spending predated the adoption of mandatory collective bargaining laws; on average, these collective bargaining policies did not increase educational spending in states. This research shows how longitudinal analysis and investigations of specific policies and

budgetary changes can help us more fully understand the circumstances of teacher union influence and limitations on influence.

New research by Hartney (2022) also takes a long-term perspective to explore how teacher unions became a mobilized and influential interest group. Prior to the 1970s, teachers were not known for being highly involved in politics. Hartney develops a subsidy hypothesis to explain this shift. According to Hartney (2022, p. 15), "teachers unions' membership recruitment, political fundraising, and electoral mobilization efforts have each been aided by government policies that made those tasks easier and less costly, thereby enabling teachers to become a potent force in education politics." Bringing many sources of data to bear, Hartney builds a consistent account that state and local policies that subsidize teacher union organizing enable greater teacher union influence in state and local education politics via elections, advocacy, and influence on workforce policies.

Other scholars have investigated the interactions between teacher union contract provisions and policy changes, the implications of teacher union strikes for public opinion and campaigns, and the role of teacher unions in candidate recruitment. For example, Strunk et al. (2022) examine whether state policy changes designed to reduce the influence of CBAs on issues such as teacher evaluation do, in fact, lead to less restrictive local CBAs. They find that state policy does matter—"state policy reforms that were specifically intended to remove discretion from local school leaders and teachers are associated with the content of local CBAs" (Strunk et al. 2022, p. 568). While CBAs are a less conspicuous component of union influence, strikes provide a highly visible example of union political action. Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2021) leverage public opinion data from states impacted by large-scale teacher strikes in 2018, such as West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, and show that parents of school-aged children exposed to strikes in their local community schools have greater support for walkouts and for teacher union rights. Based on preliminary analysis, the authors indicate that these strikes were successful at mobilizing public support, because teachers connected "their grievances to the interests of the broader community" (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2021, p. 15). Meanwhile, Lyon & Kraft (2021) show that teacher strikes increase education issue salience in congressional campaigns. Shifting focus from campaigns to candidacy, Lyon et al. (2022) shows that unions can offer pathways for teachers to run for office, fostering teacher political awareness and offering both material resources and political capital to support teacher candidates.

Looking ahead, we face the important question of how teacher union power and influence could shift due to the 2018 Supreme Court decision *Janus v. AFSCME*, which effectively adopted "right to work" as the legal regime for public sector unions nationally. According to research by Finger & Hartney (2021), the largest national teacher union, the National Education Association, is heavily reliant on member dues and fees to fund its operations and has transferred financial support to state affiliates battling union retrenchment policies. Finger & Hartney (2021, p. 31) anticipate that "without reliable resources from affiliates in strong labor states, *Janus* will make it much more difficult to support those affiliates that have always struggled." The longer-term impacts of *Janus* will likely emerge in the coming years and will be an important avenue for future research on this topic.

Alongside the evolving role of teacher unions in education politics, a wide-ranging literature examines other education-specific interest groups, such as school choice and home-school advocacy groups (Brown 2021, Finger & Reckhow 2022), as well as broader interest groups that have taken up a focus on education, including civil rights organizations and business interests (Manna 2006, DeBray-Pelot et al. 2007, Rhodes 2011, Henig 2013, Manna & Moffitt 2014, Superfine & Thompson 2016, Marianno 2020). This literature has largely advanced from mapping the landscape of education interest group organizations and tracking their activity in education

politics to tracing the factors that enable the rise of these groups and attempting to measure their influence—sometimes in direct comparison to teacher union influence.

Henig's (2013) work on the "end of exceptionalism" in education politics provides a framework for understanding the institutional context that opened the door for a broader set of interests to get involved in education politics. In parallel with institutional shifts toward greater involvement of general-purpose governments in education, there are policy changes that have enabled more market-based or privatizing approaches to public education, including voucher policies and charter schools. Drawing on Baumgartner & Jones's (1993) theory that venue shifts invite new actors into the agenda-setting process, Henig (2013) proposes that these shifts in education politics venues created space for new interest groups to get more involved. Furthermore, several studies have shown how private philanthropy provides crucial resources to support the mobilization of organizations that back education reform policies—such as standards-based accountability, teacher evaluation, and school choice (Scott 2009, Reckhow & Snyder 2014, Scott & Jabbar 2014, Tompkins-Stange 2016, Ferrare & Setari 2018, Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange 2018). Meanwhile, the rise of market-based policies, including charter schools, has transformed some school districts (most notably, New Orleans) with institutional changes that disempower teacher unions and empower school choice advocates (Moe 2019, Lay 2022).

Research assessing the influence of education reform interest groups has focused on comparing resources and mobilization by different groups, examining how differences in institutional context can shape opportunities for influence and how advocacy groups promote their agenda with research. Scholars define "education reform" in different ways, but typically these groups are characterized by support for school choice policies and/or holding schools and teachers accountable for performance. For example, Marianno (2020) assesses the relative influence of teacher union and opposition interests in state policy outcomes focused on teachers, defining the opposition interests as school choice advocacy groups and business groups. Marianno finds that in states where opposition groups spend more resources on elections, legislatures propose more policies that are unfavorable to teacher unions. In a study of the influence of philanthropically funded organizations focused on school reform, Reckhow (2012) finds that school districts with centralized mayoral control can enable these organizations to successfully advocate for policy changes more rapidly than districts with an elected school board. Scholars have also examined how education interest groups blend research and advocacy to promote their agenda more effectively in both local and national politics (Lubienski et al. 2009, Scott & Jabbar 2014, Reckhow et al. 2021).

Overlapping somewhat with the field of research on interest groups are studies of representation (including electoral representation), responsiveness, and democratic accountability in education politics. Many of these studies consider whether groups that may not be mobilized or formally represented by interest groups—such as parents/guardians of schoolchildren, as well as the students themselves—are underrepresented in school district politics, and some scholars focus on underrepresentation by race and ethnicity. For example, Kogan et al. (2021b, p. 1083) examine voter participation in local school board elections in four large states and show that school district electorates are extremely unrepresentative of the student population; "majority-white electorates [determine] the outcome of school board elections in more than two thirds of the majority-nonwhite school districts" in their study. Flavin & Hartney (2017) show that voters respond to White student achievement in elections for school board, but outcomes for African American and Hispanic students are not associated with electoral reward or punishment for incumbent board members. In a similar vein, Payson (2017) finds that test score improvement is associated with re-election for incumbents only in school board elections held during presidential election cycles; off-cycle elections do not produce the same electoral accountability associated with test score

performance. Overall, these studies suggest that traditional off-cycle school board elections often do not perform well for democratic accountability, engagement of underrepresented groups, or interests that lack formal interest group mobilization (Anzia 2013)—further highlighting the importance of interest groups for understanding advocacy and influence in education politics.

The research on political parties and education politics is not as well developed as the work on interest groups, but there is important work on rising bipartisanship in education during the 1990s and early 2000s followed by a turn toward increasing polarization. Using data on party platforms from 1948 to 2008, Wolbrecht & Hartney (2014) show how party positions on topics such as school choice and accountability grew closer after 1990, arguing that a redefinition of education issues to focus on values and excellence helps to explain this convergence. Grumbach (2018) examines policy variation in the states from 1970 to 2014, showing that Republican and Democratic Party–controlled states have polarized on many issue areas; however, education was one of two policy areas (along with criminal justice) that did not polarize during this time period.

More recent studies examining the role of parties and interest groups show evidence of growing partisan polarization. Scholars have investigated factors that could be driving polarization in education, including increasing nationalization of education politics, adoption of polarizing policies, and growing alignment of education interest groups with political parties. For example, Weinschenk (2022) shows that the relationship between county-level partisan votes for president and state superintendent election vote share has grown much stronger over time—for both partisan and nonpartisan races for state superintendent. In other words, even for a down-ballot education-specific office, and even when partisanship is not on the ballot, voters are increasingly supporting candidates for state superintendent who are aligned with the partisanship of their presidential vote choice. Weinschenk suggests that this is evidence of nationalization of education politics, due to the growing alignment of voting patterns for a national office with voting for a state-level education office. Focusing on education interest groups and parties in state politics, Finger & Reckhow (2022) find that campaign contribution patterns of state-level education interest groups have become more polarized since 2000, particularly in states that adopted private school choice policies. In these states, teacher unions more strongly support Democratic candidates for state office, while school reform organizations provide more campaign funding to Republican candidates. Additionally, Bertrand et al. (2024) find that exposure to a nationalized narrative about "critical race theory" (CRT) promoted by conservative interest groups and think tanks leads to greater support for a ban on CRT in school curricula, especially among Republicans. Echoing other streams of research on education politics, the research on parties and interest groups also finds evidence of growing partisan polarization.

RISING POLARIZATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Will partisan polarization become an entrenched feature of the politics of education? This is arguably the leading question confronting the area of study. Polarization is not new to education politics. As we have mentioned, the racial politics in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board* fueled deep levels of racial and partisan polarization. The post–Trump presidency moment presents a political environment that resembles the divisions of the mid-twentieth century.

However, there are differences. The polarization we find emerging in the politics of education comes on the heels of politics driven by philosophies on education reform that were never defined by partisan divides. Even the racial divides differed. Until the 2020s, political factions formed over ideas of how education reforms could address racial and economic inequality. Those factions largely circled around the original debate in the politics of education, which was whether we reform schools as democratic systems or expand more equitable access to market-based approaches.

More recently, the politics of education has transitioned to more explicitly partisan debates over the protection of civil liberties and the embrace of (or resistance to) racial identity politics and multiculturalism, as well as the politics of gender and sexuality. It will be up to future researchers to determine whether the latter is ephemeral or the new normal.

One way that future research can address the lingering question about polarization as well as other questions relevant to the politics of education is by continuing to expand the data terrain. Despite decades of work demonstrating the importance of the politics of education, we still lack widespread access to governance measures that could help researchers answer some of the most vital questions. For example, we still lack a reliable measure of the national school board election voter turnout rate. This is partly due to the complexity of school governance. Election rules drive structural differences by state and even by district. The absence of consistent and reliable data on school board elections and voting behavior presents a significant limitation for the politics of education literature as a whole. Yet, the wide availability of data on schools and education does offer an opportunity to directly analyze the relationship between governance and outcomes.

The data access problem filters into other areas that need further research. We still need a more comprehensive understanding of how the politics of education responds to issues of gender and sexuality. Nuamah (2019) has studied how to support the academic achievement of Black girls, and Rose (2018) analyzes the impact of higher education gender policies on the political advancement of women. In addition to these contributions, the politics of education could greatly benefit from additional research that unearths the implications of patriarchy, misogyny, and heteronormativity for the politics of education. How do attitudes on gender and sexuality impact education politics? The rise in policies negatively targeting LGBTQIA+ students highlights a political tension to which the literature must respond.

Similarly, the politics of education could also advance by incorporating the study of racial attitudes. Coincidentally, one of the first studies from political psychology that finds evidence of negative racial attitudes mapping onto policy focuses on school busing (Sears et al. 1979). Recent research has been finding racial differences in education policy preferences (Collins 2021, Farris & Mohamed 2022) as well as evidence of the racialization of civics and social studies curricula (Collins 2022). However, this provides just a glimpse of the role of racial politics. How strongly do negative racial attitudes map onto these emerging education policy debates?

There are additional areas within education whose relationship to politics has received little investigation. We have some understanding of the politics of childcare and after-school programs, for instance, but it is largely through the study of policy feedback (Barnes 2020). Similarly, there is a small subset of research on the politics of higher education that comes from the study of state politics or federal policy. Rural education is another area that has received less attention from the politics of education literature as a whole. Thus, while the political science literature on education has grown vastly, there remains much more work to be done.

What started as a broad debate has become a blossoming area of study. For decades, politics of education researchers have pieced together theories, data, and analyses that shine a light on the complexities and rewards that politics brings to education. The literature makes it clear that it is impossible to understand educational inequality in the United States without understanding politics. Thus, while we have known for close to a century that one's level of education drives one's engagement in politics, we also now know that politics plays an equally important role in determining one's access to quality education.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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