

APSA | Education Politics and Policy

The Organized Section in Education Politics and Policy of the American Political Science Association

Newsletter

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Table of Contents

From the President.....	2
<i>By Sarah Reckhow</i>	
Essay.....	3
<i>By Asli Canusar</i>	
Essay	6
<i>By Vladimir Kogan</i>	
Interview with Susanne Garritzmann	9
<i>By Jason Giersch & Susanne Garritzmann</i>	
Recent Books, Articles, and more from Section Members	11

From the President

Greetings!

We had a very successful Education Politics and Policy Section virtual conference at the beginning of March. Thank you to all the presenters, discussants, and participants for your engagement, and thanks to the section leadership who helped with the logistics and planning. The program featured both Comparative Politics and American Politics research on education politics/policy, as well as two panels focused on graduate student research. We look forward to continuing this tradition as a low-cost way to enable community building within the section and useful feedback for scholarship in our field.

Our section will also have a full and engaging program for the APSA Annual Meeting in Los Angeles this year. After having the opportunity to review the APSA proposals, I'm so excited about the new research on education politics that is emerging—covering topics from deliberative democracy and civic education to teacher strikes and homeschooling to educational access in non-democratic and post-war contexts. Once the APSA schedule is released, please look for our section business meeting on the program and join us if you plan to be in LA for the conference, and please attend as many section panels as you can. We will also plan an off-site section happy hour during APSA, so section members will have an opportunity to meet and mingle in a more casual setting.

Finally, a big thank you to everyone serving on a section awards committee this year: Elizabeth Sharrow, Christopher Chambers-Ju, Michael Hartney, Anja Giudici, Paul Manna, Julian Garritzmann, Sara Dahill-Brown, and Melissa Arnold Lyon. Our award committees will be hard at work over the next couple of months reviewing the nominations for Best APSA Paper, Best Education Politics & Policy Dissertation, and Best Book on Education Politics and Policy. We look forward to recognizing the award winners soon!

Enjoy the newsletter. If you have suggestions for future issues, please reach out to **Jason Giersch** (jgiersch@uncc.edu).

Sincerely,

Sarah Reckhow

Associate Professor of Political Science, Michigan State University
President and Chair, APSA Education Politics and Policy Section

Essay

By Asli Cansunar

Assistant Professor of Political Science

University of Washington

The Education Dilemma: The Distributive Politics of Education in Diverse Societies

A common finding in the distributive politics of diverse societies is that ethnic and religious favoritism —the notion that co-ethnics or co-religions of the ruling coalition benefit disproportionately from investments in public services— is a defining factor of multiethnic electoral democracies. Intuitively, the political elites profit from allocating goods and services to their group members, whether in emotional terms or through electoral returns. Hence, if public education provision is conceptualized as a pro-poor, redistributive tool, a common argument is that politicians increase the incidence of public schools in co-ethnic localities. As a result, politicians can maximize their re-election chances in upcoming elections by equipping co-ethnics with easy access to education, thus, opportunities for social mobility. Also, they can maximize their group's economic and political power by targeting limited educational resources, such as teachers and educational infrastructures, to their co-ethnics.

However, incumbents may use investments in schooling for reasons other than potential electoral rewards. A large body of historical literature on nation-making and state-building contends that political entrepreneurs in multiethnic societies commonly rely on expanding primary education to force the widespread use of a national language, impose the state's religion, and create an attachment to national values. When states intend to blur ethnoreligious divisions, schools constitute a powerful institution through which governments can apply significant pressure on minorities to learn the dominant group's language or adopt its religious beliefs, thus promoting a state-sponsored ideal of national identity. The long-term benefits of assimilation through primary education, which could increase political stability and the population's cultural homogeneity, could exceed the short-term electoral profits accrued by allocating limited resources to co-ethnics. Thus, in contrast to conventional wisdom, minority groups could receive the same level (if not more) of investment in primary schools as co-ethnic groups.

Yet few theories explain how democratic governments with multiethnic populations solve the "education dilemma" of allocating primary education investments and resources between majority and minority ethno-religious groups. For example, under what conditions do politicians prefer to use primary education for assimilation instead of ethnic favoritism in democracies? When do governments target primary schools to minorities instead of co-ethnics? Under what conditions do citizens comply with compulsory schooling that focuses on teaching values rather than skills?

We address these questions in a set of co-authored working papers with Tugba Bozcaga concentrating on Turkey's past. The Kurdish ethnic group, one of the world's largest stateless and transnational communities, is a significant part of Turkey's population (estimated to be around 20%). Through public education institutions, this group has undergone extensive assimilation attempts. However, despite the efforts of the Turkish government, the Kurdish political movement gradually evolved into a violent insurgency.

In the first article, we argue that governments in multiethnic democracies provide primary schools to out-group communities when the incumbent perceives an emerging separatist threat. In these cases, governments use primary education as an assimilation tool to suppress non-core identities before the perceived threat becomes a potentially catastrophic security or territorial problem. Specifically, we show that the government began investing more in primary schools in Kurdish villages than in Sunni-Turkish villages (the dominant ethnoreligious group) after 1958, when the Turkish state started perceiving a Kurdish separatist threat due to the Kurdish independence movement in Iraq. As a result, Kurdish villages experienced a 36 percent increase in the likelihood of receiving a new primary school (relative to Turkish villages) after the external shock (relative to before).

In a second paper, we investigate the conditions under which minorities comply with nationalist schooling policies. The extensive literature on state-building usually focuses on the state's centralization of and the citizens' compliance with revenue collection to evaluate the success of consolidation of state capacity. However, modern state-building usually also involves grappling with the challenge of creating new state-oriented attachments and loyalties. In fact, the top-down pursuit of a central identity and loyalty is essential to the success of the state-building and nation-making project when the local elites are not only rivals to the state in revenue collection but traditionally regulate social and cultural life in their localities.

Hence, similar to the relationship between investments in fiscal capacity and collected tax revenues, there is tension between the state's willingness and effort to create loyal and indoctrinated citizens through propaganda and indoctrination in primary schools and the masses' reactions to these policies. Compliance with compulsory schooling in societies where primary education is not designed as a pro-poor policy to increase the odds of social mobility but rather as an assimilation mechanism is overwhelmingly similar to regressive fiscal policies -- a heavy economic and psychological burden with no immediate or long-term benefits. Thus, just like compliance with tax requirements, compliance with compulsory education policies could be critically low, even in the face of credible threats of sanctions from state institutions. Moreover, maintaining high levels of compliance is incredibly challenging when both the local elites and the central state compete for not only fiscal revenue but also the loyalty of their subjects.

There are two reasons why local elites who depend on labor-repressive agriculture discourage education. First, education can reduce the local labor supply within reach of large landowners in the short term. Second, it threatens the local elite long-term because mass primary education can transform the local population into loyal citizens. Thus, teachers can replace

compliance and loyalty to local elites with compliance and loyalty to the state through indoctrination and national assimilation.

Our analysis of data from rural Turkey from the 1960s corroborates our hypotheses. We find that the percentage of landless farmer families who work for the local landlords (who are predominantly Kurdish) significantly and negatively impacts compulsory primary school enrollment and hence, the nation-making project of the early Republican political elites. We also find that enrollment increased in districts that experienced a decrease in the percentage of landless farmer households through the land distribution reform of 1945.

The existing literature on the role of public education policies in nation-building fails to consider the impact of electoral and distributive factors on education investments in multiethnic democracies with competitive elections. While our papers provide insights into subnational differences in primary education access and adherence, there remains much to be explored regarding the connection between public education policies and nation-building.

Asli's website is www.aslicansunar.com

Essay

By Vladimir Kogan

Associate Professor of Political Science

Ohio State University

How Adult Political Conflicts Impact Student Academic Outcomes

Elected school boards are a quintessential part of America’s political tradition, and local democratic control of public schools a widely celebrated fixture of our education governance model. Given the central role played by schools in promoting human development and facilitating political socialization — not to mention the tremendous tax dollars invested to fund public schools — it is surprising that school district democracy has historically attracted far less attention from scholars of American politics compared to elections at nearly any other level of government — president, Congress, state Supreme Court, and even mayors and city councils.

Fortunately, that has begun to change. Over the last fifteen years, a growing research literature has started to examine how voters decide who to support in such elections, with much of this work focusing on the whether school board incumbents are held accountable for student performance during their terms.

But it is also important to consider whether the causal arrow flows in the opposite direction: Can the decisions that voters make on Election Day — and, more generally, the political and electoral dynamics in a school system — impact student learning in the classroom? This question is particularly timely in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which seemed to have sown emotional and divisive discord in communities across the country over masking, vaccination, school names, transgender athletes, and history and social studies curriculum.

Although such culture war issues have attracted disproportionate news attention in recent years, they have a long history in American schools. Indeed, the libertarian Cato Institute has been tracking local political controversies involving public schools in its “Public Schools Battle Map” for over a decade. In a new paper, I link these conflicts to data on student performance on state assessments in elementary and middle school grades from Stanford Education Data Archive, which combines data from various state tests and puts them on a common scale.

To provide plausibly causal estimates, analysis leverages variation in the timing and location local political controversies. Specifically, I implement a difference-in-differences design — comparing how student academic achievement in a local school district changes in the aftermath of a high-profile conflict compared to a control group of school systems that never

experience a political controversy over the course of the panel. I find that student achievement tends to dip immediately following such an event, particularly in mathematics, declining by about 0.02 to 0.03 standard deviations or roughly 10 days of learning. Estimating these effects separately by the topic of the controversy, I also show that the effects are driven primarily by conflicts over the teaching of evolution and controversies related to race, which produce even larger declines in achievement.

For many readers, these results may not be surprising, given research in other policy domains. There is, for example, a growing literature documenting evidence of a “Ferguson effect” in the aftermath of protests and increased scrutiny following the police killings of African-Americans, with proactive policing declining and, in many cases, crime rates rising. My research suggests there may be an analogous “Loudoun County” effect in education — referencing the turmoil and dysfunction in the ritzy Virginia suburban district in the aftermath of various controversies surrounding social and political issues and subsequent coverups there. The mechanisms are likely to be quite different, however.

Consider two case studies: The first comes from the Coachella Valley Unified School District in California, which in 2013 was accused of racism by American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee over the district high school’s mascot — an “angry Arab,” depicted as a one-toothed, hooked-nose caricature. The controversy attracted both national and international attention.

The accusation came as a surprise to the district’s majority-minority board and its African-American superintendent, who believed the mascot paid tribute to the Middle East as the original source of the date palm tree, the main agriculture product grown in the area. Resolving the dispute would take many months of back-and-forth negotiations involving top district administrators — time that could’ve been spent in many other ways, including improving student instruction or better executing the district’s innovative iPad-for-every-student program. (After winning initial praise, including from President Obama, the iPad program became a focus of criticism from teachers, who argued it was poorly implemented, contributing to the eventual termination of both the superintendent and his three deputies.)

The second is the Dover Area School District, which became the defendant in a 2005 Supreme Court case challenging the district “intelligent design” policy. Once again, the school system became a national laughing stock, attracting widespread media attention. It would go on to lose the case and be ordered to pay the plaintiff’s legal cost. (They generously asked for only \$1 million, half of the actual expense, but a significant sum for a small school district.) Amidst the controversy, voters booted out the anti-evolution incumbents, bringing in a slate of new board members, who immediately fired the superintendent, who they accused of enabling the anti-evolution incumbents, and other top administrators, plunging the district deeper into chaos.

“It was a huge distraction,” a journalist who covered the story for the local newspaper told me. “In terms of the kids, their educational experience was out there for the entire world. It wasn’t just the media coverage of it, it was the fact that the adults — the ones who were supposed to know what was going on — the adults were fighting. And much like a child growing up in a household where people are fighting, it’s not conducive to learning.”

The findings from my research likely have broader implications about democratic accountability in public education, and raise important normative concerns about how compatible local democratic control may actually be with creating an educational system that delivers on its primary objective, which is providing students educational opportunities and skills to live satisfying and productive lives. I tackle these questions in a broader book project, of which the research on adult culture wars will be just one empirical chapter.

As former Kansas City School Board President AJ Crabill, now a governance coach with the Council of Great City Schools, writes in his new book: “Student outcomes don’t change until adult behaviors change.” Sadly, most adults — whether progressive or conservative — seem much more fired up about adult political battles than about test scores. And with parents, who have the most skin in the game, representing a minority of voters in most school district electorates, it’s not surprising that these debates take center stage, even if they come at the expense of student learning.

Vladimir’s website is <https://u.osu.edu/kogan.18/>

Interview with Susanne Garritzmann

Winner of the Best Dissertation, 2022

How did you get interested in studying connections between education systems and political participation?

That's a good question! I think it started when I lived and worked abroad for a while. I experienced very different societies, including their stances towards politics, and I felt that the very different education systems had something to do with that. That's when I got interested in the influence of education systems on societies more generally.

I narrowed down on political participation as the dependent variable for my PhD because participation - and in particular turnout - is of huge importance in democracies. In addition, I realized that education scholars have looked at how education systems influence social and economic inequalities, but neglected political inequality so far. So in addition to my personal interest in the topic and its relevance for democracies, I felt that there was a lot to be gained by connecting comparative education research with research on political behavior - and doing that, I found that education systems shape not only social and economic inequalities, but also political inequality.

I feel like I've met some people who see public schools as the best way for oppressed groups to gain political traction and others who see schooling as institutions that reinforce political inequality. Where do you see yourself on that continuum?

My research shows that schools can do both. Schools can be places in which disadvantaged groups can - at least partly - catch up with more advantaged peers in terms of their resources for political participation, but schools can also maintain or enhance the disadvantage of those groups. Which effect schools have, depends on the institutional set-up of the education system: Where education systems are stratified - i.e., in which students have classmates with the same socioeconomic background - schools foster political inequality. Where education systems are not stratified - i.e., where students have classmates from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds - schools can mitigate political inequality. This is because in SES heterogeneous classrooms, students from lower backgrounds have more opportunities to discuss with and learn from peers socialized in more political families as well as to be in more politically mobilizing social networks, all of which increases their likelihood to participate.

So going back to your question, I think that it is less a question of opinion but of educational institutions whether schools reinforce or mitigate political inequality.

Where do you think you might take this line of research next?

Based on my core finding - that education systems shape inequality in political turnout - I see in particular three areas of further research, two of which I am already working in and one of which is a plan for the future:

First, I want to look at other dependent variables, such as perceptions of inequality and individuals' attitudes towards politics and society, and how they are influenced by education systems. I am currently working on different papers using existing data to answer some

questions, but I also need new data to answer others, since data on adolescents' political attitudes and participation are scarce.

Second, I want to study more in detail the micro-level mechanisms I argue to be at work (in my dissertation, I focused on the macro-level). I am currently involved in two large projects in which we collect data on adolescents in Germany, which will enable me to empirically test some of my mechanisms. For example, in one project we focus in particular on how political efficacy beliefs are shaped by experiences in school, and political efficacy beliefs are an important predictor of political participation (see .

And third, based on the insights on mechanisms and relevant variables I hope to gain in my research, I want to develop cooperations with existing surveys of adolescents in a variety of countries and / or gain funding for collecting comparative data on school students' experiences, perceptions of inequality, and political attitudes and participation. Ideally, I would like to set up a cross-national panel survey to better understand how education systems shape adolescents perspectives on politics and society as they grow into voting-age citizens. This would be very costly, but also very insightful!

Did I see you're involved with a project studying individuals' understandings of fairness? That sounds fascinating. Why do you think education is important for perceptions of inequality and fairness?

That's right! Our project PerFair (Students' Perceptions of Inequality and Fairness), funded by the Cluster of Excellence in The Politics of Inequality at the University of Konstanz, is partly based on my dissertation and investigates perceptions of inequality among youth in secondary education in Germany. This age group has so far been neglected, although it is very likely that adolescence is an important formative period for perceptions of inequality - like it is a formative period for political attitudes. Education systems are important because adolescents spend so much time in schools during their adolescence, because they start to realize and reason about inequalities more, and not least because they experience unequal treatment in schools - in the classroom as well as in the education system more generally.

Within this large project, I am most interested in how different school types influence adolescents' perceptions of inequality, on the one hand, and whether perceptions of inequality help explain why some youth engage constructively in politics, others withdraw from politics, and yet others engage destructively. We are in the process of collecting the data right now, and I am very excited about working with the data soon!

Susanne Garritzmann

Researcher at Goethe University of Frankfurt's DFG research group

Researcher at University of Konstanz's Politics of Inequality Cluster of Excellence

Susanne's website is <https://sites.google.com/view/sgarritzmann/start>

Interviewed by **Jason Giersch**, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Recent Articles from the Section

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Wolf, P.J., Greene, J.P., Paul, J.D., Ladner, M. (2023). Education freedom and student achievement: Is more school choice associated with higher state-level performance on the NAEP? *Journal of School Choice*.

Recent Books from the Section

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