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Representation, Partisanship, and Equality in Education

Racial inequities in access to quality education are one of the most persistent issues in American politics. African-American educational attainment lags behind all other groups in the United States and appears resistant to most policy levers. *The Politics of African-American Education: Representation, Partisanship, and Educational Equity* brings together the results of a major national study focused on the local politics of education. The study stresses four major themes.

First, racial disparities in education reflect, in part, political inequities. Although a wide range of factors influence the educational attainment of African Americans including income levels, housing patterns, employment opportunities, and myriad social factors, the correlation between African-American political power and access to quality education for African American students has persisted for more than two hundred years. Within the African-American community, consistent response to the lack of educational opportunities has been to mobilize politically through interest groups (such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), protests, or politicians (by running for electoral office). The political side of educational equity will be the primary focus of this study rather than sociological or economic variables. We argue that while research sometimes overlooks this aspect of educational processes, it can be one of the most important in determining what opportunities are afforded to students.

Second, representation is an effective instrument for addressing African-American educational inequities. This study views political representation broadly to include African-American school board members, school administrators, and, most of all, school teachers. Representation in school politics occurs through a cascade effect with school board representation influencing administrative representation which, in turn, directly affects teacher representation. Increases in school board representation predict increases in administrative

representation, and increases in administrative representation predict increases in teacher representation. Among these groups, African-American teachers are consistently associated with better educational outcomes for African-American students in policy outputs (gifted class assignments, special education assignments, suspensions, and expulsions) as well as in policy outcomes (test scores, graduation rates, and preparation for higher education).

Third, electoral and governance structures create biases in the political and bureaucratic systems that influence how representation and other factors affect African-American education. Electoral structures such as at-large elections are designed to bias electoral results to discriminate against numerical minorities. At-large elections also alter the relationship between constituents and the representative in ways that influence the policy positions that representatives take and their ability to enact policies. The independent school district, in turn, is designed to filter out the influence of electoral politics, particularly partisan politics, and substitute a neutral professional bureaucratic process. These theoretical biases play a major role in the current study, though much of what we thought we knew about these structures is inaccurate as reflected in the study's fourth theme.

Finally, partisanship permeates the local education process despite nonpartisan elections and other structural barriers. African Americans find willing coalition partners among white Democrats who share their views on race and education. This coalition shifts the political cleavage in elections from one of race to one of partisanship such that African Americans are much more successful in Democratic majority districts than in Republican ones, and this partisan advantage works best in at-large elections. The influence of Democratic partisanship does not stop at the voting booth. In Democratic majority jurisdictions, African-American school board members are significantly more successful in hiring African-American administrators and teachers. The partisanship influences are even felt at the classroom level. African-American teachers are always more strongly associated with positive outcomes for African-American students in school districts with a Democratic majority. The differences are frequently large, and in many cases we find no representational impacts of African-American teachers in Republican majority school districts.

Although this book is about African-American educational politics, the implications address broader questions related to representation and political structure. That political structures create biases is a common theme in political science (Knight 1992), and the study of such biases is prevalent in both US and comparative politics, particularly in regard to the design of electoral systems (see Chapter 3). The examination of school districts generates variation in electoral structures that does not exist at the federal level or, for the most part, at the state level in the United States.

Although the bulk of representational studies in terms of race or other factors linked to representation focus on legislative bodies, bureaucracies can also represent certain interests and have some clear advantages in the process (see

Chapters 5 and 6). The examination of school districts allows us to trace a single issue, educational equity, down to the implementation level in order to determine the full ramifications of representation. Many studies of representation stop at the legislative level and do not follow through to determine how legislative actions actually shape public policy as it works its way through the bureaucracy. Although representation as a process does not guarantee results, examining the full range of the policy process from legislation to top bureaucrats to street-level bureaucrats allows us to determine how much legislative representation actually matters in this policy area.
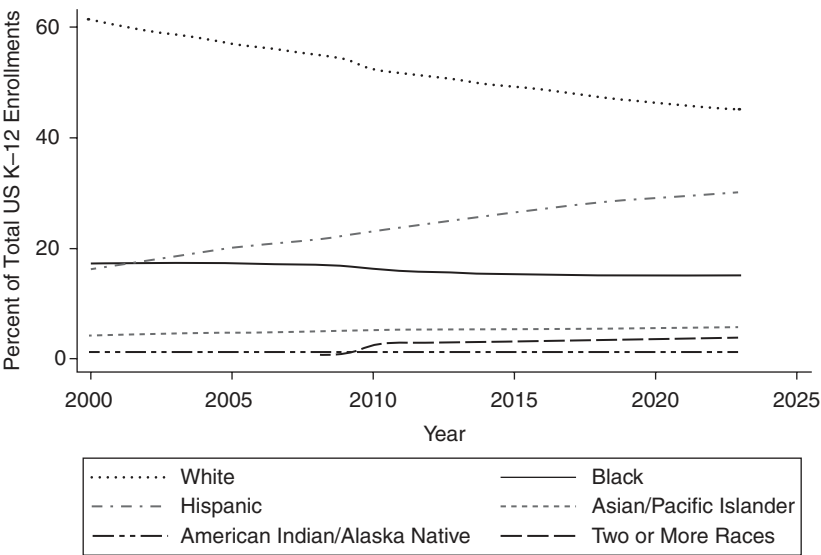
Why Study Education?

The study of partisanship and race in the context of K–12 education is important for several reasons. Education is an issue salient to both political parties and to the mass public. Nearly fifty million students are in the nation's primary and secondary school systems, and these numbers are likely to continue to grow over time (US Department of Education 2014). Yet, our educational systems have been consistently criticized as underperforming for the last three decades. Both federal and state governments have implemented a number of accountability systems intended to improve educational outputs and provide relief about the future ability of the United States to remain a dominant world power. The United States now spends more ($11,841) per pupil than most other countries on education (National Center for Education Statistics 2015). Yet, data continue to suggest that much work remains to be done. Critics of US education frequently cite the Program for International Student Assessment, which ranks the United States twenty-seventh in math, seventeenth in reading, and twentieth in science out of thirty-four countries (Program for International Student Assessment 2012).

The demographic characteristics of schools are also changing at rates faster than the general population. While the US population overall is expected to grow older, given the aging of non-Hispanic white baby boomers, the American fertility rate has also increased, in large part because of recent immigration into the country (Passel, Livingston, and Cohn 2012). This means the country's youth are more diverse than ever before, with nearly 50 percent of children five and younger identifying with a racial or ethnic minority group. Further, the rate of change among the many racial and ethnic groups in the nation's schools varies greatly. As seen in Figure 1.1, the proportion of Latino students is growing rapidly while the percentage of black students, as well as Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native American/Alaska Native groups, are much more stable.

Why Study African-American Education?

Demographic changes may also raise questions about why research should focus on black student outcomes as opposed to one of the other minority

FIGURE 1.1. Share of student racial and ethnic groups in the United States, K–12 education, 2000–2025.

groups, especially given the trade-off in the growth of Latino students and the decline in the share of non-Hispanic white students. Although full studies of all minority groups in US education are worthwhile, a study of African-American students is especially needed.[1] Black students are persistently performing at lower levels than their peers, and solutions to this problem are few and far between. The problems of African-American education go well beyond the realm of education. Educational deficits in performance and attainment lead to larger gaps in long-term employment, health, housing, social capital, and contact with the criminal justice system.

A recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) highlights the persistent barriers facing black students in the classroom. For the 2011–2012 school year, the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate was 67 percent for black students and 84 percent for white students; half of the African-American student population (compared to 11 percent of white students) in the country generally attends schools where graduation is not always the norm (Editorial Projects in Education 2008). On average, the performance of African-American high school seniors in math and reading is similar to that of a thirteen-year-old white student (Wiltz 2012). Unsurprisingly then, these

[1] The politics of Latino education differs substantially from that of African-American education in terms of access to representation on school boards, school administrative staffs, and teaching (see Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004).

students scored significantly lower than every other racial and ethnic group on standardized reading tests. African Americans scored the lowest of all student groups (defined as American Indian, Asian American, black, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, other Hispanic, and white) on all three portions (critical reading, mathematics, and writing) of the SAT and were also the lowest-scoring group for ACT composite scores (in which groups were defined as black, Native American, white, Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, two or more races, and did not respond) (Jaschik 2015a, 2015b). At the school level, more than 40 percent of blacks, compared to 6 percent of white students, attend high-poverty schools while 10 percent of black students and 33 percent of white students attend low-poverty schools (this categorization includes four levels of poverty, see Jordan 2014). Those students in high poverty schools (those where at least 75 percent of students are low income) are then more than twice as likely to be taught by uncertified or out-of-field teachers as compared to schools serving wealthier populations (Almy and Theokas 2010).

These facts highlight that the problematic racial education gap has yet to be closed in primary and secondary schools across the country. Those students who do graduate from high school face further challenges through an access gap in postsecondary educational settings as well as in the workforce. For example, black students continue to have both the lowest high school graduation and college enrollment rates; these students are often underprepared for college coursework because they have little to no exposure to advanced or gifted classes. Of the 60 percent of black freshmen in high school who persist and graduate (Aud et al. 2010), 55 percent enroll in a two- or four-year college immediately following high school. For a school with one hundred black students in the ninth grade class, sixty of these students will graduate high school. Only thirty-three of these sixty students will be college bound, largely to public or for-profit institutions (Aud et al. 2010). This means that only one in three black students who enroll in high school is likely to pursue postsecondary education, and many of these students will not make it to their college graduation. Translating educational opportunities into employment, blacks with less than or the equivalent of a high school degree experienced the highest rates of unemployment in 2008 (22 and 11 percent, respectively, for those with less than high school and those with a high school degree) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). For those who have at least a bachelor's degree, unemployment rates for blacks (4 percent) were only second to those classified as American Indian/Alaska Natives (5 percent). Among working populations, blacks and Hispanics consistently have the lowest median annual earnings across all levels of education compared to their white and Asian counterparts. Though rates of change have varied over time, blacks have consistently had the lowest real median household income throughout the entire span (1968 to 2013) of Current Population Surveys (DeNavas-Walk, Proctor, and Smith 2013).

Although local political control is a well-enshrined feature of US education policy, that local control takes place within the political context created at the

TABLE 1.1. *Party Platforms on K–12 Education*

	Democratic Party	Republican Party
2000	Have well-trained teachers in every classroom	Increased local control and more accountability to parents
	Turn around or shut down every failing school	Assist states in closing achievement gaps
	Ensure high school graduates have mastered certain basics	Expand school choice options and savings account plans
	Allow parents to choose the best school for their student	Ensure all children learn to read by reforming Head Start
	Ensure every eighth grader will be computer literate	Improve teacher training and recruiting (loan forgiveness and Troops-to-Teachers)
	All classrooms will have up-to-date technology	Support special education needs
	Eliminate the achievement gap	Return voluntary prayer to classrooms
2004	Smaller classroom and more individual attention	Continued reform through No Child Left Behind
	Place a great teacher in every classroom	Responsibility should focus on state and local level
	Raise teacher pay	State-specific plans for accountability
	Provide information to parents (parents are our most important teachers)	Every child should be able to read at the end of third grade
	Have strict discipline for drugs or violence in schools	Facility school choice and transparency
	Address the achievement gap, especially with Head Start access	Alternative pathways to teacher certification
	Develop high standards while encouraging school choice	Maintain discipline without fear of liability
2008	Set high standards and develop assessments	Continued accountability and periodic testing
	Recruit high-quality teachers	Recruit, reward, and train the best teachers
	Provide higher pay for effective teachers	Protect teachers from frivolous litigation
	Promote innovation and charter schools	Innovation in school (home school, single sex, varying schedules)
	Support special need populations, including English Language Learners	K–16 dual credit programs and public-private partnerships

	Democratic Party	**Republican Party**
2012	Invest in Head Start	More money is not the solution
	Raise Standards (using Common Core)	One-size-fits-all does not work; decentralization needed
	Expand school choice options	Expand school choice options
	Protect teachers from layoffs and reward great teachers	Merit pay for teachers and reform tenure system
	Address dropout crisis, especially for students of color	Stress parent involvement, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, English First, and Abstinence Only

state and federal levels. Policies on accountability, quality, equity, efficiency, and especially funding are raised and addressed by state and local governments (see Chapter 2 for additional discussion). These policies may be more or less aligned with the interest of certain groups depending on who is in power. In the 2012 presidential election, for example, the Democratic and Republican Party platforms espoused several opinions about the direction of education. Both argued for equal access, with Democrats stating that education is the "surest path to middle class" that gives all students opportunities (Democratic National Convention 2012) and Republicans arguing educational opportunity and achievement "should be based on talent and motivation, not address, zip code, or economic status" (Republican National Convention 2012). Still, as displayed in Table 1.1, the two parties also diverged on a number of educational goals, perhaps most predominantly with Democrats advocating for higher levels of funding while Republicans argued that higher levels of funding did not constitute a feasible solution. Essentially, although both parties discuss closing the achievement gap and agree that schools are not performing to the level they should be, leaders of the parties have developed different means by which they hope to meet this goal.

Although schools are generally under the purview of local authority (i.e., school boards), national party platforms likely inform the views and opinions of elected leaders at lower levels of governance. School boards are generally elected in nonpartisan races where candidates do not explicitly run with a political party, but this does not mean that politics and ideology is removed from school boards altogether. Voters do not abandon their party-linked values simply because an election is designated as "nonpartisan." Similarly, the elites who contest school board elections are still quite likely to be connected with other officials and have ties to individuals in either the Democratic or Republican Party. In many cases, mayors, with clear party affiliations, may be part of the school board selection process and can have direct authority over education (Edelstein 2006). Given this, current theories of education for minority groups that do not consider partisanship (in this case, African

Americans) are underspecified and require revisions to adequately consider the role of politics.

Existing research on partisanship provides strong support for the notion that racial and ethnic groups tend to identify strongly with a single political party and are less likely to be even split among parties (Frey 2013; Pew Research Center 2012; but see Hajnal and Lee 2011). Since the New Deal era, the non-Hispanic white population has increasingly identified with the Republican Party while blacks have become nearly synonymous with the Democratic Party (Latinos also tend to identify as Democratic but not to the same extent as blacks, see Pew Research Center 2012). And while opinions on whether the American mass public is becoming more polarized were somewhat mixed in the past (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996), most now agree that party elites and supporters have become dramatically more polarized in recent years (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothus 2013; Layman, Carsey, and Horowtiz 2006; Pew Research Center 2014) so that few elected representatives now self-identify as independent or bipartisan. Each party is more internally homogenous, which may have consequences for the representation of minority interests who may no longer be able to make appeals across parties (see Druckman et al. 2013). As politics shift so that the two dominant politics look less alike, representation for minority groups may only become more important. Without such representatives, the interest of minority groups may be overshadowed such that equitable outcomes are not achieved. Instead, minority groups may benefit from seeking to build coalitions with majority groups (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of why this case might exist for blacks and the Democratic Party).

Theoretical Mechanisms Linking Politics, Race, and Educational Opportunities

Politics is the determination of who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell 1950), and winners in political battles are those who can mobilize potential resources most effectively. The study uses a parsimonious theory to examine the politics of African-American education policy that encompasses three general concepts – resources, representation, and structure. The essential arguments are that the translation of resources into representation is affected by structural biases and representation is a major determinant of policy outcomes that benefit African-American students. The general theory will be applied to the ability of African Americans to get elected to school boards; to African-American representation among school administrators and teachers; and to the attainment of educational benefits for African-American students.

Resources
Political resources can be divided into those within the African-American community and those from the surrounding environment. The primary internal resource in politics for all groups is population and the ability to mobilize that

population for political purposes such as elections. African-American representation levels and policy benefits should be positively correlated with African-American population. Traditionally, the urban politics literature focuses a great deal of attention on the ability to generate candidates for office, and that ability is linked to socioeconomic status (Parenti 1967; Wolfinger 1965). Although prior studies of African-American educational politics have found only modest relationships between African-American socioeconomic status and electoral outcomes (see Meier, Stewart, and England 1989), three measures will be included in the analysis – African-American median incomes, the percentage of African Americans with a college degree, and the percentage of African Americans who own homes. Higher levels of income, education, and home ownership are generally associated with greater voter turnout levels (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Wolfinger 1980); they are assets that are valuable in attaining positions within the education bureaucracy.

External resources in the community include factors that could be leveraged by the African-American community in political struggles. Potential *allies* are individuals and groups who share some common interests with the African-American community either in terms of educational equity goals or in terms of more general political outcomes. This study stresses the role of Democratic partisans as political allies consistent with a literature that argues that African Americans, particularly when they are a minority of the population, need to rely on coalitions with liberal whites to craft a governing majority (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). Democratic partisans can be interpreted as both individuals likely to support African-American educational goals and also as members of a set of institutions that have their own resources to mobilize voters to contest elections. Unions are a second potential ally of African Americans that have often been featured in the general education policy literature as influential (Katznelson 1981; Moe 2009). Although specific union data linked to school districts is difficult to obtain, surrogate measures are included in the models. Because resources are always relative and because the urban education literature has been greatly affected by social distance theory (Evans and Giles 1986), a measure of white social class (percentage of whites living in poverty) is included in all models.

The final environmental variable included in all models is a measure of the southern region. The meaning of the South in education politics covers a large collection of historical and contemporary variables that often resist further specification. Southern districts maintained *de jure* segregated school systems that were the locus of battles over desegregation and integration of schools. Southern states are also the location of a large number of historically black colleges and universities and, thus, can augment the political resources available to the African-American community. Although the current study was successful in generating election models that were precisely specified enough to render the South variable insignificant, it remained a factor in models of bureaucratic representation and policy actions.

Representation

There are three key positions of representation within a school district: school board member, school administrator, and school teacher. The school board provides the broadest type of influence; its members set overall policy for the schools within the district. The school board also has the important task of hiring a superintendent and providing for other professional personnel. The board in this process is able to determine, to some extent, who is managing the schools. If the school board includes members who represent minority group interests, then there is some likelihood that the board will hire school administrators who also represent minority interest (i.e., political principals seek like-minded agents; see, e.g., Waterman and Meier 1998).

School administrators implement policies approved by the school board but also have some leverage in day-to-day management of resources and personnel within schools. These individuals must approve student-tracking recommendations and disciplinary procedures on a student-by-student basis, and determine how to allocate resources to a number of school programs (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005). These actions are likely to have some direct influence on student educational opportunities for majority and minority student groups. Similar to board members, however, the influence of school administrators on student outcomes (in this case, African-American students) can also occur indirectly through teacher hiring decisions. Just as the values and interests of the board determine who is hired to fulfill administrative roles, administrator values can shape the distribution of teachers. Where more black administrators are employed, the share of black teachers should also rise, all else being equal.

As much education literature has shown, teachers comprise the predominant in-school influence on student learning. While the school board and administrators set policies, they do not have the same degree of hands-on time with students in individual classrooms. Teachers determine how to react to student behaviors, make decisions about student promotions, and determine how much material students will be exposed to in a given day. Substantial literature has demonstrated that the link between teachers and student achievement is strong and persistent. Scholarship groups the effect of teachers into the categories of teaching ability, motivation, and school/classroom situation (Rowan, Chiang, and Miller 1997). The first factor, teaching ability, refers to a teacher's knowledge of a subject matter and training to teach using sound pedagogical tools. Motivation includes the teacher's attitudes and expectations for student achievement and some level of desire to achieve such expectations. The final factor includes teaching time, classroom size, and a host of other environmental characteristics over which the teacher has less control.

The second of these three umbrella categories is likely to be the most important in understanding the role of race and politics in education. A teacher's demographics, socioeconomic status, and other experiences are likely to inform his or her opinions and expectations of the students. Black teachers