

## The Politics of African-American Education

Based on the 1,800 largest school districts in the United States over a decade, *The Politics of African-American Education* documents the status of African-American education and the major role that partisanship plays. The book brings together the most comprehensive database on minority education to date that centers around three arguments. First, partisanship permeates African-American education; it affects who is elected to the school board, the racial composition of school administrators and teachers, and the access of African-American students to quality education. Second, African-American representation matters. The effectiveness of African-American representation, however, is enhanced in Democratic districts while representation in Republican districts has little influence. Third, political structures matter, but they are not determinative. Two different structures – election systems and the independent school district – create the rules of the game in US education politics and policy but do not limit others from using those rules to change the outcome.

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Kenneth J. Meier , Amanda Rutherford  
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# The Politics of African-American Education

*Representation, Partisanship, and  
Educational Equity*

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*To Diane Jones Meier and Jeff Rutherford*

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## Preface

*The Politics of African-American Education: Representation, Partisanship, and Educational Equity* was truly fifteen years in the making. In 2001 Val Martinez-Ebers suggested that the time had come to replicate the findings of the *Politics of Hispanic Education* and to gather new data for that purpose. This discussion led to the first national survey in 2002 and then two subsequent national surveys. The first paper using the new data for African Americans was presented at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. At that point the project bogged down because we discovered that African Americans were not only overrepresented on the nation's school boards, but they were even more overrepresented with at-large elections even in districts where they were a minority of the total population.

This anomalous empirical finding was not supported by any theory and was the first case of finding African Americans overrepresented in any US political institution (bear in mind this predates the Obama presidency). The project ground to a series of fits and starts that were particularly frustrating because Ken is a policy scholar not an elections person but could not go on to the policy questions without dealing with the electoral anomaly (work on Latino education as part of this project initially got off to a quicker start). Although there were several attempts to solve this problem, for the most part the project remained on the back burner with the hopes that more data would solve the problem.

A large number of graduate students and a few undergraduates devoted time to the project before we stepped back and simply asked: If electoral structures are biased against numerical minorities, how might a minority overcome such a bias? The answer, obvious in retrospect, is by forming coalitions with others and shifting the key political cleavage from race to some other dimension, in this case partisanship. With the electoral question solved, we proceed to the question that interested us the most (How did electoral structure affect the quality of the representation?) and submitted the first paper to a journal.

The editors and all the reviewers of that journal told us pretty directly that we were interested in the wrong question. The election issue was the most interesting and instructed us to deal solely with that. Because Ken was and is a journal editor, he knows that reviewers and editors are always right so we followed this advice. Once the initial article was published, we then turned to tracing out the policy consequences in African-American education again thinking that electoral structure was the key variable. As the analysis on this book progressed, we discovered that we were wrong. Partisanship not electoral structure is the defining factor in African-American education.

The findings of this book will be controversial given the long-standing myth in American politics that education policy is nonpartisan. This myth is widely endorsed by policy makers and also accepted among scholars. Even those scholars who specialize in the politics of education policy frequently see politics in terms of traditional social class distinctions or in the role of unions in urban education. Partisan politics is simply not considered in most discussions of education policy.

Although some might lament our infusion of partisanship into US education policy, neither scholars nor policy makers should hide from the political reality. Education policy, particularly on racial issues, divides the nation into Democrats and Republicans. These differences are so distinct both in terms of elections and in terms of actual policy outcomes that it is fair to claim that for black Americans there are two separate school systems in the United States – those with a Democratic voting majority and those with a Republican voting majority. The differences are so stark that statistical tests indicate that the two sets of school districts should be analyzed separately and not pooled.

This book stresses three basic themes. First, partisanship permeates African-American education; it affects who is elected to the school board, the school board members' ability to represent their black constituents, the racial composition of school administrators and teachers, and the access to African-American students to quality education. The impact on educational outcomes – graduation rates, test scores, and college preparation – shows that partisanship penetrates to the very core of the US education system. Even in such unexpected places as taking and passing advanced placement classes, this study finds partisan correlates despite extensive controls for other factors. The political reality is that an African-American child in a Democratic majority school district receives a significantly better education than an African-American child in a Republican majority school district.

Second, African-American representation matters. School board representation is important in generating bureaucratic representation in administrative roles. Black administrators are the key factor in generating black representation at the classroom level. African-American teachers greatly affect the quality of education received by African-American students. In all these cases, however, the effectiveness of African-American representation is enhanced in Democratic districts; at times, black representation in Republican districts has

## *Preface*

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little discernable influence. As we like to note, African-American representatives get by with a little help from their friends; having political allies is paramount in majoritarian political systems.

Third, political structures matter, but they are not determinative. Two different structures – election rules and the independent school district – create the rules of the game in US education politics and policy. Both structures create biases that are intended to limit partisan politics. The independent school district sought to create a politics-administration dichotomy and limit the influence of politics on the education of children. The use of at-large non-partisan elections attempted to transfer power to business and professions not associated with traditional political parties. Structures that create rules of the game, however, do not limit others from using those rules to change the outcome of the game. Indeed, this book demonstrates that at-large elections now benefit African Americans, particularly in districts with a Democratic majority. Similarly, the independent school districts in this study show a great deal of responsiveness to political forces on issues linked to African-American education.

As students of organizations, we approach the study of race and education from the perspective of organizations. This shapes our approach to the study by focusing it at the organizational level rather than at the student level. Substantial work on race and education uses student-level data, and that work is cited in various chapters. Using organizations as units of analysis can at times be more sensitive to institutionalized processes, and both politics and representation are shaped by institutional structures. The basic processes of representation in schools can occur in a wide variety of ways, and only some of them require direct contact between a student and a teacher within a classroom setting. We see our organizational-level work as a complement to existing studies at the individual level, providing some insights that are not possible with existing individual data sets.

A large number of individuals participated in this project or commented on research at various points. Financial support for the analysis was provided by the Spencer Foundation and the Carlos Cantu Hispanic Education and Opportunity Endowment. We would like to thank the army of graduate and undergraduate research assistants that have contributed their efforts including Seung-Ho An, Bettie Ray Butler, M. Apolonia Calderon, K. Jureé Capers, Kristen Carroll, Warren Eller, Alisa Hicklin Fryar, Fran Hill, Erik Gonzalez Juenke, Miner P. Marchbanks III, Soledad Artiz Prillaman, Rene Rocha, Meredith Walker, and Sadé Walker. We would like to thank seminar participants at Indiana University, Exeter University, the London School of Economics, Macalester College, the University of Houston, the University of North Carolina Charlotte, the University of North Texas, the University of Texas Austin, the University of Wisconsin Madison, and Texas A&M University for feedback on this project at various stages. Numerous colleagues provided comments and criticism but Kim Q. Hill, George Krause, David

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