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Introduction

Terry M. Moe and Susanne Wiborg

Education is a basic function of government everywhere in the world. Part of the reason, of course, is that all nations want their children to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic. But there is much more to the story than that. For education systems can serve many other purposes as well—with far-reaching consequences for societies, their citizens, and the governments that operate them.

An education system can be a means of boosting human capital and economic growth. But as a prime source of money and jobs in the hands of politicians, it can also fuel the fires of patronage and corruption—and stifle productivity. It can be a means of advancing social equity and upward mobility, but also of entrenching the existing class structure. It can be a means of integrating immigrants into the nation's culture, but also of imposing a common culture on diverse ethnic groups that don't want it. It can be a means of socializing citizens to democratic norms, but also of socializing them to authoritarian ideology and control. It can be a means of promoting religious tolerance and secularism, but also of privileging one religion at the expense of others (see, e.g., Cremin, 1961; Goldin and Katz, 2009; Green, 2013; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015; Kosack, 2012).

Education, then, is an institutional arena of enormous potential, a shaper of the fundamentals of human society. Precisely because this is so, governments have strong incentives to put this potential to use by getting actively involved in the design, control, and operation of education systems for their societies—and these systems, as a result, cannot help but be profoundly influenced by the political processes through which governmental decisions get made. In great measure, education systems are what they are, and indeed, the schools are what they are—everywhere in the world, regardless of the nation—because politics makes them that way.

The United States was a late bloomer in building a public education system. While Prussia and France began building their systems more than 200 years ago, the American system did not take shape until the early 1900s, when Progressive-era reforms—achieved through political battles that lasted decades—purged American education of party machines and patronage and created a system based on bureaucratic administration, expertise, and nonpartisan local democracy: a more "rational" structure far better suited to socializing the nation's new waves of immigrants, preparing young people for the workforce, and providing free and easy access to secondary education and pathways to upward mobility. Although the US was not a leader in developing a public education system, it *was* a leader in developing a system that (for its time) achieved remarkable equity—bringing schools to the masses in a way that far exceeded what was then happening in most of Europe (not to mention the less-developed world), where, well into mid-century, nations were still fighting political battles about bringing "comprehensive education" to their own systems (Cremin, 1961; Green, 2013; Tyack, 1974).

As Goldin and Katz (2009) have argued, the US system of extending education to the masses, and doing it early, was consequential for more than social equity. It also had enormous consequences for the national economy—providing valuable reserves of human capital that would give this country great advantages over others, and serve as an engine of economic growth that propelled the US to economic dominance during the 1900s. Whether other (or many) nations saw this connection between education and economic growth early on is unclear. But it is clear that social equity was a burning political issue, that parties of the left were committed to it, that many parents and children wanted new opportunities—and that, over time, other nations throughout the world followed roughly the same path that America did in expanding their public school systems to include ever-larger populations of children.

This era of expansion, which occupied not only the more advanced nations, but also, increasingly, the less developed ones, was essentially a worldwide era of institutional formation in which virtually all nations were building, staffing, funding, and expanding their educational institutions for the first time. In the process, over a period of many years, those institutions became established as the institutional status quo (e.g., Archer, 1979; Green, 2013; Meyer *et al.*, 1992). From that point on, nations would find themselves on set institutional paths that, for reasons that political scientists well understand—having to do with path dependence, including the protective role of powerful political constituencies—would be very difficult to depart from should governments decide that these institutions needed to be changed (Pierson, 2004).

And that is what happened. The 1970s and 1980s saw the dawning of a new era for public education, but also for government in general. Two developments were mainly responsible. First, nations were collectively plunged into a shockingly new and different international environment of globalization, technological innovation, and intense economic competition. In the realm of

education, this new environment led them to see human capital as crucial to their ability to compete in the new "knowledge economy," and to demand from their education systems much higher levels of academic achievement. Second, and at roughly the same time, the developed world was faced with the so-called "crisis of the welfare state," the onset of fiscal austerity, demands for governmental efficiency, and rising disaffection with centralized, bureaucratic modes of governance—which led to pressures for neoliberal reforms of governmental institutions in general, and education systems in particular, that put a premium on decentralization, accountability, and markets: sharp departures from the institutional past.

As this new era took hold, then, the sheer quantity of education was no longer enough. The emphasis now was on performance—on academic excellence—which the existing institutions were not specifically designed to provide, at least at the levels the modern world required. The stage was set, then, for a new type of education politics. For this was an era in which reformers would seek major change in entrenched institutions inherited from the past—and thus, inevitably, would face political resistance from the defenders of the institutional status quo. Other issues would remain, of course, regarding equity, race, religion, and myriad other lines of social cleavage, depending on the nation. But across the world, what was distinctive about the modern era—which continues to the present day—is its historically new emphasis on performance and the political pursuit of institutions that might be capable of providing it. The politics of the modern era would be a politics of performance-based reform (e.g., Blossing *et al.*, 2014; Jakobi *et al.*, 2010; Wiborg, 2013).

These are the broad outlines of what we see as the two major eras in worldwide systems of public education: the era of institutional formation and the era of performance-based reform. Distinguishing between these two eras, and appreciating why they are different and distinctive, is essential for understanding their politics and, in particular, for understanding how politics through time has driven processes of institutional development and reform in the realm of education. This is a vast subject matter that one book can only begin to explore. Our strategy here, given the enormity of the challenge, is to focus on certain aspects that we think are especially important—key pieces of a much larger puzzle—and in so doing, to construct a useful foundation that other scholars can build upon going forward.

More specifically, this book focuses on elementary and secondary school systems—the basic education systems that virtually all governments provide—and explores key features of their politics in 11 nations across the globe. Obviously, the details vary from country to country, often quite dramatically. The politics of education is starkly different in Sweden than in Mexico or France, and their education systems reflect those differences. That said, politics in all nations is heavily shaped by *power* and by the *interests* of those that exercise it—and in every chapter of the book, the politics of education will be approached from the standpoint of this common analytic framing, lending a

measure of structure and unity to chapters whose substantive contents are in some ways quite different (Korpi, 2006; Moe, 2005; Pierson, 2015).

Any serious effort to understand the world's education systems needs to study, for any given nation, how power is structured within the politics of education—who wields political power, how they wield it, what their interests are, what the relevant coalitions are, how their power and interests connect with the party system and the larger apparatus of government, and more generally, how the type of political system and its institutions shape the way power and interests find expression in the political process. And all this needs to be done, of course, across nations and over time in order to provide for an enlightening comparative understanding of education systems throughout the world.

The scholarly literature at this point is almost a *tabula rasa* on these scores, and has not viewed its agenda as one of systematically exploring the politics of education and the structure of power and interests that drive it (see, e.g., the review in Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2011). This book is an attempt to change that. Here at the outset, there are many ways such a new research program might be pursued. We have chosen one tack—a focus on the political role of teachers unions—that we believe stands to be especially productive as a basis for future progress. Here is why.

Teachers Unions, Politics, and Vested Interests

Anyone who follows education in the United States knows that the teachers unions have played a central role in that nation's politics of education for decades. Yet scholars rarely study them as political actors. An exception is Moe's *Special Interest* (2011), which seeks to understand the American politics of education through the theoretical lens of power and interests, and marshals evidence to show that the teachers unions—since their first emergence as key actors during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—have exercised great power in the American educational arena, and have been the leading opponents of education reform.

Informed observers may disagree about just how powerful the teachers unions are. In recent times, moreover, the unions have lost some important political battles—the stand-out being No Child Left Behind in 2001—and are clearly on the defensive. But there is plenty of hard evidence to show that, by any reasonable account, the teachers unions are major political forces at all levels of American government when official decisions are made about the policies, organization, funding, and reform of the public schools. The unions are not the only political actors that matter. But they are absolutely central to the political controversies, struggles, and decisions that make the public schools what they are—and in particular, they are absolutely central to the politics of performance-based reform that has so consumed the modern era.

That being so, scholars who seek to understand the American politics of education need to pay serious, careful attention to them. A different way to put

this is that scholars who do study the teachers unions will learn a great deal about how the American politics of education works, why it works as it does, and what it implies for the education system more generally. That, in fact, is a key argument of Moe's *Special Interest*—which isn't just a book about teachers unions per se, but rather a book about how the American politics of education can be understood.

As we look across nations, there is good reason to believe that the United States is not an outlier with respect to the prominent political role of its teachers unions. American government and society may be exceptional in many ways, and American exceptionalism is a long-standing theme in the study of comparative politics. But in our view, the fact that its teachers unions are highly organized, politically very active, and play central roles in the politics of education is likely to be an exceedingly common fact of political life across all nations (aside from authoritarian or very poor ones), however diverse they may be and however different from America in other respects. By studying the teachers unions, then, we believe we are studying something of universal importance to the worldwide politics of education.

There is a strong theoretical basis for this belief (see Moe, 2015). The place to begin is by recognizing that educational institutions are not unique. In fundamental respects, they are just like all other government institutions. And most important from the standpoint of our analysis, all government institutions—across all areas of public policy, everywhere in the world—naturally and inevitably generate *vested interests*. This happens, and is literally unavoidable—whether it is in health care, defense, agriculture, transportation, international trade, or public education—simply because certain people and groups receive benefits, often in very different ways, from what specific government institutions do. The benefits may take the form of services, public jobs, business revenues, power, status, or simple opportunities for corruption, nepotism, and patronage. But wherever there are government institutions, there are people and groups with vested interests in what those institutions do, in their structure and operation, in their funding, and, indeed, in their very existence.

In ordinary language, the term vested interest tends to be used when the intent is to convey something negative. To label groups as vested interests is to criticize them, to voice disapproval of their behavior. But this negative connotation is entirely unnecessary, and it is not at all what we are getting at here. To say that a group has a vested interest in a particular issue or institution, or to say that the group "is" a vested interest (a common word-usage that we will often employ here, for convenience), is to say something that is entirely objective, and also important and revealing, about the nature of those interests. On purely scientific grounds, the concept of vested interest has great analytic value as a basis for theory—and as a basis for progress in understanding why the politics of government institutions works as it does.

What is distinctive about vested interests, and what is distinctively valuable about their theoretical role, is that they arise from the very institutions

whose development, stability, and change we want to explain. They are not just special interests. They are rooted in specific institutions, they benefit from those institutions, and they have incentives to get organized—if the stakes are high enough, and if they can overcome their collective action problems—to seek active and powerful roles in politics in order to protect and enhance their benefits. These roles may involve pressuring for new programs and spending, and thus for expansions of their institutions. But they may also involve—and almost always do involve, especially in an era of reform—taking action to oppose reforms that, by bringing change to the status quo, would threaten their institutions and benefits.

In the politics that surround government institutions, then, *vested interests are likely to be key players*. If the institutions are of any size and consequence, moreover, at least some of the vested interests associated with them are likely to have enormously valuable stakes in those institutions—and incentives to invest especially heavily in the requisites of political power, far more so than other groups. There is a reason why, in the lore and scholarship of politics, vested interests have reputations for political power. The reality is, they often *are* powerful. They have strong incentives to be (e.g., Lowi, 1969; McConnell, 1966; Olson, 1984).

All of this applies across the board to education systems. They, too, automatically generate vested interests. The most obvious are those of parents and children, who have vested interests in the services being provided; but children are inherently powerless, and except in affluent niches, parents are too atomized and weakly motivated to overcome the formidable collective action problems that stand in the way of political organization. Another source of vested interests is the government bureaucracies responsible for running the schools, for they are filled with public officials whose jobs, authority, status, and perquisites are rooted in the existing systems—and, unlike parents, they are already organized and in positions to exercise influence.

Outside the bureaucracy, arguably the most valuable and motivating benefits that educational institutions generate, in terms of deep-seated material stakes, are the jobs they provide for *teachers*: which translate into incomes, careers, security, and the material foundations of teachers' lives. These are very positive things, of course, for individual teachers, and it is only natural and normal that they put great value on them. We are not saying, moreover, that teachers—as human beings—only care about their jobs and nothing else, for they surely care about children, their communities, their families, and all sorts of other things, just as other human beings do. The point to be made here, rather, is an analytical one: that as employees of education systems, teachers have *vested interests in their jobs*—and accordingly, they have strong incentives to get organized, mobilize resources, and exercise power in the politics of education in order to protect and advance *those* interests. The teachers unions are their specialized means of doing that—of protecting and advancing their job interests, and not all the other concerns and values that they may have as human beings.

The way to understand the teachers unions, then, is that they arise from these vested interests, are founded on them and oriented by them, and are the organized means by which they are protected and pursued. And because we can expect education systems everywhere, throughout the world, to generate these *same* vested interests, we should expect teachers unions to be a force in the politics of education in *every* nation where teachers are allowed to organize or have the capacity to. Whether they can be expected to be more powerful than government bureaucrats—in any given nation at any given time—is a complex matter, needless to say; and any good answer would presumably vary with specific conditions. That said, it is important to note that, in every nation, teachers will tend to outnumber government bureaucrats by many orders of magnitude and are guaranteed to be a massive presence. In addition, they will tend to be geographically distributed across the entire country and well anchored in local communities—wherever there are kids, there are teachers—giving them important political advantages that bureaucrats don't have. At the very least, then, however these considerations of relative power shake out, we should expect teachers unions to be central players in the politics of education everywhere in the world. (Again, for a more detailed argument, see Moe, 2015.)

Because, as we will soon see, teachers unions are often allied with parties of the left, and because their rhetoric and issue positions tend to square with that of their leftist coalition partners—calling, for example, for greater social equity, higher government spending and taxation, expanded social programs, and so on—it is easy to see them in ideological terms and to infer that they are primarily motivated by ideology. But there are good theoretical reasons for thinking otherwise. Their leaders may sometimes be ideological, and the unions surely do participate in ideological coalitions. But the bedrock of their organizations is formed by the job interests of their members, and we should expect these job interests to be given top priority and to be the driving force behind the unions' politics and their approach to institutional reform. The teachers unions are interest groups, their fundamental interests are in jobs, and that is the key to understanding their behavior.

Scholars, as we've said, have rarely studied education from the standpoint of political power, and even less often have studied the teachers unions as political actors. The literature does contain two books that provide useful surveys of teachers unions across nations, but they were written long ago, before the modern era of performance-based reform had really taken hold, and they do not offer the kind of political perspective that we will be providing here. The first is Lawn's *The Politics of Teacher Unionism* (1985). It focuses on politics, but it is quite dated now (through no fault of its own), and its chapter-authors "were asked to explore sympathetically the development of a teachers union or a contemporary problem in educational work" (p. 3), consistent with Lawn's concern for providing "a useful source of experience for the necessary defense of teachers and teaching" (book jacket material). Its approach is thus shaped by these normative concerns rather than being strictly theoretical and empirical.

The second is Cooper's *Labor Relations in Education* (1992). This book is mainly, as the title suggests, about how collective bargaining and other aspects of labor relations in education differ across countries. It is not centrally about politics, nor does it explore issues of power and interest. Some of its chapters, moreover, were written by union representatives rather than by professional researchers. The US chapter was written by Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and the Germany chapter was coauthored by Deiter Wunder, president of the GEW (the largest German teachers union). Both books are informative, however, especially in the histories they provide (before the modern era), and we recommend them to our readers.

Of the scant work that has been carried out on teachers unions in politics, there is a high quality literature on Latin America that stands out. It does deal directly with issues of power and interest—and vested interests—and what it finds is very much in line with Moe's (2011) analysis of the United States: that the teachers unions are indeed quite central to the politics of education, that they are fundamentally motivated by the job interests of their members, and that they are the leading opponents of reform (e.g., Bruns and Luque, 2014; Grindle, 2004; Murillo, 1999, 2001). Here is a summary assessment by Merilee Grindle (2004, p. 139), whose *Despite the Odds* examines the efforts of Latin American governments to pursue education reform during the 1990s.

> With very few exceptions, teachers unions formed the core of resistance to the education reforms of the 1990s. They were powerful political opponents, even if they had seen their influence diminish over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Institutionally, they continued to be well positioned to confront government policies, making their demands known through strikes and protest actions and using their links to ministries of education and political parties to challenge the power of the reformers. They had the capacity to bring national ministries and school systems to a halt. They marshaled significant numbers of votes. Their close connections to political parties meant that their leaders were frequently important figures in party decision making and the distribution of government largess when those parties were in power.

A very recent survey and analysis of the overall literature on education reform in Latin American by Bruns and Luque (2014, p. 47) offers the same basic assessment. As they summarize it:

> Teachers are … the most powerful stakeholder in the process of education reform. No other education actor is as highly organized, visible, and politically influential. Because of their unique autonomy behind the closed door of the classroom, teachers also have profound power over the extent to which new policies can be implemented successfully.

By studying teachers unions and their political activities, then, we are likely to learn a lot about the politics of education generally, the power and interests that drive it, the roles of governments and parties, and the broader consequences for education systems. Theory suggests that, for the great majority of governments throughout the world, the teachers unions aren't likely to be just marginal players or interesting in their own right. They are likely to be

organized, active, and at the heart of things—and we should expect that, by studying them and exploring their role in education politics, particularly in the modern reform era, we can gain perspective on the larger whole and generate new ideas for moving the research agenda forward. In a very meaningful sense, the teachers unions offer us a window into the world of education. And as scholars, we can take advantage of it in deepening our understanding of how that world works.

The Literature

Given the profound importance of education to nations and their citizens, and given the inevitable role of politics in shaping education systems in all their aspects, there ought to be a lively, well developed body of social science on the topic, exploring how the politics of education actually works and what its various determinants are. But political scientists have never shown much interest in studying these things. As Gift and Wibbels (2014: 292) recently observed

> One could argue that no single policy domain lies more clearly at the heart of the key social, political, and economic dynamics of our age […] In academia, the salience of education is reflected in booming research programs in economics and sociology […] Political science, however, is oddly underrepresented among social science disciplines in the study of education. It is hard to identify a community of political scientists who are dedicated to the comparative study of education.

The vast literature on comparative politics has been animated by grander issues—the rise of the welfare state, the onset of retrenchment and austerity, the role of party systems and their left-right dynamics, the role of unions and businesses in shaping the "varieties of capitalism," and so on. Elementary and secondary education, as a specific realm of comparative political study, has largely been off the field's radar screen (but not entirely, of course—see, e.g., Ansell, 2010; Ansell and Lindvall, 2015 Busemeyer, 2009, 2014; Iversen and Stephens 2008; Klitgaard, 2007; Kosack, 2012; Stasavage, 2005; Wiborg, 2009). To the extent that education and its politics have been central to the comparative politics literature, the focus has been on vocational education, job training, and higher education (Busemeyer, 2014; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012; Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2014; Iversen and Stephens, 2008; Thelen, 2004).

In the field of American politics, political scientists have given education short shrift. Aside from rather small and sequestered literatures on the politics of urban education reform (Henig *et al.*, 2001; Stone *et al.*, 2001; Reckhow, 2012), No Child Left Behind (Manna, 2006; McGuinn, 2006; Rhodes, 2012), and governance (Henig, 2013; Manna and McGuinn, 2013), education has not been an integral part of the political science mainstream and has essentially been pushed to the periphery.

The other social science of obvious relevance here—the field of education research—has generated a voluminous body of work on education in general. But little of it deals with the actual policy process, elections, special interests, power, and other matters that explain how politics shapes public education (for an exception, see, e.g., Kirst and Wirt, 2009). When it does deal with politics, the analysis is often a mixture of empirical, normative, and aspirational components—focusing, for example, on issues of inequity, poverty, and social justice, and arguing that political leaders should do more to promote better social outcomes (e.g., Freire, 1996). There is a growing literature on globalization and neoliberalism that is very much in this vein, criticizing the apparent impacts of these forces on education systems and social equality and arguing, among other things, that the political power of business is behind them (e.g., Burbules and Torres, 2002; Zadja, 2015).

For the most part, however, the education literature is so focused on schools, students, and teachers, and it views the larger political system as so remote from the immediate subject matter of schooling, that the role of politics and power in shaping the education system hasn't been subjected to serious empirical examination. When education scholars look beyond schools to study matters of government, they tend to study "policy" and its impacts—much as labor economists do more generally. The focus is typically on whether policy X has impact Y, not on the politics—and power—that would explain why X was adopted and how it was implemented.

Across all these fields of study, two recent books deserve special mention as pioneering efforts to bring education into the political science mainstream. The first is Busemeyer's (2014) *Skills and Inequality*, which attempts to integrate education into the larger literature on the welfare state by showing that key lines of theoretical thinking central to that literature—arising from Esping-Anderson's three models of welfare capitalism and theories of partisan politics—help to explain why particular countries developed the distinctive systems of vocational and higher education that they did. The second is the edited volume by Jakobi *et al.* (2010), *Education in Political Science*, which is an explicit attempt to make education a more serious topic of research within political science, and uses a "governance" perspective to explore a broad and eclectic range of educational topics and issues, mostly related to higher education and international organizations. Neither book brings elementary and secondary education—the most fundamental and universal of all educational institutions across nations—to center stage. But both deserve high praise as agenda-setting moves to put education squarely on the political science map.

We also want to highlight a recent article by Ansell and Lindvall (2015), which brings quantitative evidence to bear on the historical evolution of primary education. This is an innovative analysis that is especially promising as a basis for future research. Ansell and Lindvall explore the political and societal factors—for example, control by social democratic parties, the presence of an established church—to explain why the emerging education systems of 19 of