I

Introduction

The Role of Public Opinion in Education Policy-Making

Everyone has an opinion on education and the education system. Ask your neighbors, your aunt, a vendor at your local market, or a cab driver in a foreign city. Probably only matched by interest in the national football team, people have strong opinions on what is right and wrong with their country’s preschools, schools, universities, and apprenticeship systems – and on what politicians should do about this.

Yet, scholars or journalists examining the politics of education reform in Europe and elsewhere are regularly confronted with a conundrum. On the one hand, promoting education is widely popular among both citizens and policy-makers. Investing in education seems to be the obvious policy response to the social and economic challenges of the “knowledge economy” (Bell 1974; Drucker 1993), as it promotes economic growth and development (Hanushek and Woessmann 2012; Glaeser et al. 2004), while also contributing to maintaining social cohesion and equality (Busemeyer 2015; Solga 2014). As a corollary to the general positive effects ascribed to education, popular support for public investment in education, as documented in existing public opinion surveys, is consistently high and widespread (Ansell 2010; Busemeyer 2012, 2015; Garritzmann 2015). Political parties across the spectrum have been found to subscribe to the goal of improving and/or expanding education in their election manifestos (Jakobi 2011). In sum, these are all indications of why policy-makers should care deeply about the reform and continued upgrading of public education systems at all levels, including early childhood education and care, general schools, vocational training, and higher education.
On the other hand, when we look at the success rate of individual education reforms as well as proposals to increase spending on education, the track record of policy reforms in education is rather mixed. Policy-makers might share a general belief in the necessity of education reform and improvement, but the actual performance of European as well as other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in this regard varies significantly. First, there are stark cross-national differences in the amount of public investment in education, ranging from a low of 3.3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) spent on education in Italy to 6.3 percent of GDP in Norway (OECD 2018a: 267). When looking at changes over time, this data does not reveal a clear upward trend in education spending, despite the fact that spending increases would be supported by sizable majorities in different countries.

Furthermore, moving from spending to actual reform, many education reforms are not necessarily buttressed by supportive public opinion but instead accompanied by bitter partisan conflict over the design of policy reforms and educational institutions. As argued by Moe and Wiborg (2017: 3), the politics of education reform is significantly shaped “by power and by the interests of those that exercise it,” in particular, those actors with a vested interest in the continued existence of the institutional status quo. In line with this idea, political parties have repeatedly been found to pursue very different and distinct reform agendas in the field of education (Ansell 2008, 2010; Boix 1997, 1998; Busemeyer 2007, 2009a, 2015; Castles 1989, 1998; Garritzmann 2016, 2017; Schmidt 2007). For instance, right-wing parties tend to support greater involvement of private actors in education, from churches in schools to business in vocational training, whereas left-wing parties are more in favor of the state playing a stronger role in the provision and financing of education. Parties also differ in terms of their preferences regarding the design of educational institutions. Traditionally, left parties subscribe to the model of comprehensive education, which levels out differences between academic and vocational education. Parties of the political right tend to favor a differentiated model of education, which implies a stronger separation of academic and vocational tracks in secondary and postsecondary education. Furthermore, educational reformers are usually confronted with a number of powerful organized interest groups mobilizing against changes to the status quo. Examples of these groups would be teachers’ unions opposing the decentralization and marketization of education (Moe and Wiborg 2017; Dobbins 2014) or employers’
Introduction

associations and industrial unions jointly defending the autonomy of firm-based vocational training against the encroachment of the state (Busemeyer 2012).

 MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THIS BOOK

This book sets out to document and explain the complex relationship between public opinion and the politics of education reform, covering all sectors of the education system, including early childhood education, general schools, vocational training, and higher education. We develop a new theory to explain the conditions under which public opinion is an important factor not only in the politics of education reform but also in policy-making more generally. Empirically, the book breaks new ground by presenting and analyzing novel representative data on public opinion on education policy from eight Western European countries, collected as part of the Investing in Education in Europe: Attitudes, Politics and Policies (INVEDUC) project (Busemeyer et al. 2018). We complement the statistical analysis of public opinion data with case studies of education reforms in these countries, drawing on insights from more than fifty interviews with policy-makers, stakeholders, and analysts and an extensive screening of primary and secondary source material.

Our book builds on and contributes to a relatively young but burgeoning literature that analyzes the politics of education reform from the perspective of comparative political science and welfare state research (for overviews, see Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011; Gift and Wibbels 2014; Moe and Wiborg 2017). In recent years, the literature in this field has made significant progress in understanding the determinants of policy reforms in education (see section Public Opinion and Responsiveness in the Case of Education, p. 37, for a more detailed discussion). Research in this tradition, therefore, makes a useful contribution to helping us understand the factors facilitating or blocking educational reforms. Besides identifying the crucial role of partisanship and organized interests, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, scholars have pointed to political institutions (in particular, federalism and electoral systems), demographic pressures, and the availability of socioeconomic resources, as well as processes of internationalization and Europeanization, as factors shaping the dynamics of education policy reform (Ansell 2008, 2010; Boix 1997, 1998; Busemeyer 2007, 2009a, 2015; Dobbins, Knill, and Voegtle 2011; Dobbins 2014; Finger 2017; Garritzmann 2016; Garritzmann and
This existing literature in comparative public policy research has made significant progress in identifying important determinants of education policy output, but it has primarily focused on variables at the macro-level, such as institutions, organized interest groups, and partisan actors. What is missing is an account of whether and how public opinion shapes the politics of education policy-making. Studying the dynamics of public opinion, however, is crucially important to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the process of reforming education (or any other policy field). Moreover, the connection between public opinion and policy-making is of course central to the legitimacy of any democratic system. Again, we find a growing interest in the scholarly literature to study the connection between public opinion and policy output in general (Burstein 2003; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Hakhverdian 2010; Jennings and John 2009; Miller and Stokes 1963; Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), as well as welfare state policies more specifically (Brooks and Manza 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Rehm 2012). However, comparative studies focusing on the role of public opinion in the policy area of education are far less frequent (exceptions are Ansell 2010; Busemeyer 2012, 2015; Busemeyer and Iversen 2014; Busemeyer, Cattaneo, and Wolter 2011; Di Stasio 2017; Garritzmann 2015, 2016; Schueler and West 2016), even though this is an increasingly important domain of welfare state policy-making.

This book connects these different literatures and, in its examination of the role of public opinion in the politics of education reform, addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the preferences of citizens regarding education policy across Western Europe?
2. How important is public opinion as a factor influencing policy change in education reforms relative to other factors, in particular political parties and organized interests? Furthermore this, what are the conditional factors that might explain when public opinion becomes an important driver of policy reform relative to party and interest group politics?

1 We have also started to explore and analyze the data from the INVEDUC survey in a number of other publications related to this book (Busemeyer et al. 2018; Busemeyer and Garritzmann 2017a, 2017b; Garritzmann, Busemeyer, and Neimanns 2018; Neimanns, Busemeyer, and Garritzmann 2018).
Introduction

By answering these questions, we ultimately hope to acquire a clearer understanding of the potential contribution of public opinion to explaining the reform dynamics of European education systems. We focus on education for two reasons: The first is a substantive interest in understanding the political dynamic of this important policy field, which, for a long time, has been understudied in comparative political science and welfare state research (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011; Iversen and Stephens 2008; Jakobi, Martens, and Wolf 2010; Moe and Wiborg 2017), despite the fact that it is a key policy area in today’s knowledge economies. In particular, matters of education policy have rarely been covered in existing comparative surveys of public opinion, as we explain in greater detail later. Therefore, this book introduces and analyzes original data from a representative survey of public opinion, collected as part of the INVEDUC project. The INVEDUC survey provides a wealth of new public opinion data on different aspects of education policy-making, from spending and taxation to governance and from early childhood education and care to adult learning. It covers eight Western European countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and England. The qualitative case studies in the empirical Part II of the book provide new insights into the politics of education reform in these countries.

The second reason we focus on education is that it is particularly well suited to identify the conditional factors that account for the variations in the impact of public opinion on policy-making. We posit that the influence of public opinion depends on two factors: (1) the salience of a particular issue and (2) the degree of coherence in people’s attitudes about this issue. Here, our argument builds on frameworks proposed by Culpepper (2011) and Breunig and Koski (2018) for interest group politics, by Sharp (1999) in her explanation for the “sometime connection” between public opinion and policy-making as well as Soroka and Wlezien’s (2010) influential work on responsiveness and policy feedback. Education is better suited than other policy fields in this respect because both the salience and the coherence of attitudes vary significantly across countries as well as within countries across policy issues and different sectors of the education system. We exploit this variation in order to

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1 This project was funded by a Starting Grant from the European Research Council (ERC), grant no. 311769. The survey data is publicly available via the GESIS data archive, doi:10.4232/1.13140.
arrive at generalizable statements about the importance of public opinion in the politics of education reform. At the same time, we expect our theoretical framework to also be applicable to other policy fields besides education. In the following section, we provide a short preview of the main argument of the book.

**The Argument in Brief**

Our basic contention is that public opinion matters and can – under certain conditions – become an important driving force of policy change. The framework we outline in the following identifies the conditions under which public opinion is more likely to have a direct influence on policy-making relative to party and interest group politics. These conditions refer to the salience of a particular issue and the coherence of public attitudes on that issue.

We adopt a pragmatic definition of public opinion by viewing it as the aggregate of individual-level attitudes and preferences on a particular issue. Attitudes are individual-level predispositions on abstract and general matters regarding the welfare state and education, whereas policy preferences are more specifically geared toward actual policies. In practice, however, the distinction between attitudes and preferences is blurry, and we use the terms interchangeably throughout the book.

Our framework identifies two central dimensions that condition whether public opinion is an important factor in public policy-making: (1) the salience of a particular issue and (2) the degree of coherence of popular attitudes on that issue. We argue that, first and foremost, a high level of salience is a necessary condition for public opinion to influence policy-makers. We define salience as the political attention devoted to or political importance attached to an issue (cf. Behr and Iyengar 1985; Wlezien 2005) in public debate. If voters care deeply about a particular issue, they are also more likely to hold policy-makers accountable on that matter, which, in turn, enhances the latter’s incentives to heed popular demands on salient issues (Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). If, in contrast, the salience of a particular issue is low, the likelihood increases that other actors – in particular, organized interest groups – will step in and lobby policy-makers instead. This alludes to the central distinction between salient (“loud”) and non-salient (“quiet”) politics that Culpepper (2011) identifies: In the realm
Introduction

of quiet politics, interest groups have a much better chance of shaping policy-making according to their interests, often veiled as technical expertise. Conversely, as political salience increases, argues Culpepper (2011: 177), the influence of organized interest groups decreases, and demands from the (informed) public become the most important factor shaping policy output.

Our framework builds on and significantly expands Culpepper’s (2011) argument, which also emphasizes the role of salience in influencing the politics surrounding a particular policy issue. However, we add a second dimension: the degree of coherence of attitudes (see also Sharp [1999] for a related argument). We argue that the “signal” that public opinion sends to policy-makers is not always loud and clear – even if an issue is salient. When people’s attitudes are incoherent and conflicting, the signal received from public opinion may be loud, but it is also noisy. Thus, we posit that, besides salience, the coherence of public opinion, i.e. the degree of consensus about a given issue at the level of popular attitudes, is a second major factor shaping the role of public opinion in policy-making. If salience is high and popular attitudes are coherent, public opinion sends a loud and clear signal, which has a high chance of being heard by policy-makers eager to seek reelection (we call this the “loud politics” scenario). In this scenario, the ideological positions of the governing parties should be of lesser importance, as all parties have a strong incentive to adapt to the loud and clear signal from public opinion. In a sense, this scenario is similar to the political dynamic of “valence issues” (Stokes 1963), i.e. political issues that are widely popular and seldom face any political opposition.

If, in contrast, popular attitudes indicate a high degree of conflicting opinions among the general public, policy-makers are caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, given the high salience of the issue in question (we are still, broadly speaking, in the realm of loud politics), policy-makers are compelled to take a position and to react to public opinion. On the other hand, they risk alienating large groups of voters if the electorate itself is divided on this particular issue. We argue that, in this scenario, politicians care most about their own voters –

Culpepper’s (2011) framework also has a second dimension, which distinguishes between “governance spaces,” where formal or informal rules are central (Culpepper 2011: 181). Since we are only interested in the dynamics of formal policy-making, this distinction is not relevant for us here.
rather than the opinions of other citizens. Accordingly, in this scenario of loud but noisy politics, policy-making boils down to partisan politics: Political parties selectively represent different electoral constituencies that are characterized by different policy preferences. In the realm of loud but noisy politics, the final outcome of the policy-making process, therefore, depends less on the “average” opinion of the median voter but rather reflects the prevailing balance of power between different parties. In fact, the likelihood of political parties appealing to the median voter diminishes if the coherence of attitudes on a particular issue decreases and the salience of that issue increases, because parties have a strong incentive to demonstrate clear differences to their respective constituencies in this case.

In short, our theoretical framework (see Table 1.1) has two dimensions – salience and coherence of attitudes – and leads to clear expectations with regard to the conditions under which public opinion is likely to matter. The influence of public opinion is likely to be strongest and most direct in the case of loud politics, i.e. when the signal of the public is loud and clear. Public opinion is least likely to matter in the case of quiet politics, i.e. when the salience is low and the influence of interest groups dominates in policy-making. In Table 1.1, we deliberately depict the realm of quiet politics as spanning across the whole of the second dimension related to the coherence of attitudes, i.e. we do not draw a distinction between two types of quiet politics. The simple reason for this is that if salience is low, the coherence of citizens’ attitudes is not important. Moreover, it is, in fact, difficult to determine empirically whether noncoherence of attitudes for nonsalient issues reflects genuine clashes of opinion or rather incoherent “non-attitudes” (Converse 1964), as it is more difficult to capture preferences on issues that individuals do not care about. Of course, within the realm of quiet politics, there is potential for further differentiation, depending on whether the positions of interest groups are highly coherent or conflicting and on the institutional setup of the interest mediation system. For instance, if interest groups

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have highly coherent and convergent preferences, they are more likely to have a strong influence on policy-making, whereas state bureaucracies or agencies are more likely to prevail in the case of divided interest group positions (Gava and Varone 2016). Expanding our framework to take these factors into account would open up a third dimension, which goes beyond the scope of our argument, although we do try to take interest group diversity into account in the qualitative case studies.

Finally, as stated earlier, the logic of partisan politics dominates in the case of loud but noisy politics. Here, the policy-making process is likely to reflect the unequal balance of power between political parties: Whichever party is in power, it has the means and incentive to move forward with its particular partisan interpretation of what the public wants. This implies that the interests and preferences of certain groups of voters prevail, while others may lose out. The dominance of party politics does not, however, suggest that public opinion does not matter at all in this case. Rather, its influence is more indirect and selective. Citizens’ policy preferences (especially those of the parties’ electoral constituencies) still influence the policy positions of political parties, and given the high salience of the issue in question, policy-makers across the party spectrum have strong incentives to take these preferences into account when forming their positions. However, given the low coherence of attitudes in this case, the signal as to what “the public” actually wants is not clear but is certainly very noisy, such that political parties are able to prevail with their particular “partisan” interpretations of citizens’ demands.

The innovative contribution of our framework is to bring together literatures and theories that have so far remained disconnected from one another. The first of these theories is partisan theory, which explains variation in policy output by referring to differences in the historical or contemporary balance of power between political parties in government (Hibbs 1977; Castles 1982; Schmidt 1996). In its classic version (Hibbs 1977), partisan theory focuses on the economic interests of the different electoral constituencies of parties. These interests, in the aggregate, shape party positions and, in turn, policy output. Although recent literature on party politics increasingly acknowledges the role of public opinion on party positions (Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009; Adams et al. 2004; Somer-Topcu 2015), there is also a large literature that remains faithful to the political economy perspective of classic partisan theory (see Ansell [2010] for an example...
In education policy research). In comparative public policy and welfare state research, this latter perspective dominates, which contributes to an underestimation of the immediate impact of public opinion on policy-making as public preferences and demands are assumed to enter the policy-making process via parties.

In contrast, a second strand of literature rooted in public opinion research (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1983; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Gilens and Page 2014; Powell 2000, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Stimson 1991) studies the direct impact of public opinion on policy-making. From this perspective – actually somewhat reminiscent of Rousseau’s concept of the volonté general – party politics and the influence of organized interests on policy-making are regarded as factors distracting policy-makers from implementing the “true will” of the people (Burstein 2003: 30). Partly adopting a normative perspective, this literature portrays policy-makers as responding either to public demands (which is deemed to be good) or to particularistic partisan interests (which is deemed to be bad). As the bulk of this literature focuses on the United States, it tends to neglect the fact that political parties retain important representative functions in (European representative and multiparty) democracies. In fact, from a normative perspective rooted in party democracy, the perceived or real narrowing of positional differences between parties has been regarded as a sign of a crisis of democracy rather than an indication of responsiveness to the position of the median voter (Kirchheimer 1966; Katz and Mair 1995). At any rate, theories rooted in public opinion research tend to exaggerate the role of public opinion relative to party politics as a determinant of policy-making, both empirically and normatively speaking.

In this book, we aim to bring these two perspectives – public opinion and partisan theory – together by identifying scope conditions, i.e. determining expectations about the impact of public opinion relative to party and interest group politics. We argue that, ultimately, the issue characteristics on the level of individual preferences are decisive in shaping the political dynamics of reforms. Public opinion has a direct impact on policy-making if a particular issue is salient and individual-level preferences are coherent. When the general public’s preferences are incoherent and conflicting, but the issue is still salient, we expect party politics to dominate. Finally, in the case of