

CHAPTER 4

PERSONALIZATION OF INTEREST GROUPS AND THE RESULTING POLICY NONSENSE

The Cobb County School Board's Evolution Debate

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The role of interest groups in the functioning of our democracy is unclear. While some researchers argue that interest groups serve a number of important functions,¹ others contend that their participation has negative consequences.² Compounding this uncertainty is the recent rise in the use of grassroots influence tactics by these groups.³ In today's political environment, interest groups are less likely to approach policy makers as groups and increasingly more likely to attempt influence through individual contact.

While most political scientists have concentrated their investigation of interest groups at the state and national level (Bjork & Lindle, 2001), evidence suggests that local school boards are not immune to their influence.

A study by the American Association of School Administrators indicated that more than 90% of school superintendents in large urban districts reported that interest groups exerted pressure on school board policies and operations. Further, more than half of the superintendents (57%) acknowledged that interest groups were active in their communities (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Other studies have also suggested that school boards are susceptible to interest group influence (Arocha, 1993; Danzberger, 1994; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; McCarthy, 1996). This chapter attempts to clarify the role(s) of interest groups in school board policymaking, and more generally, in the functioning of our democracy.

The chapter examines the relationship between school boards and interest groups by investigating the events surrounding the adoption of science textbooks and the subsequent science curriculum policy adoption process by the Cobb County (Georgia) School Board over a period of approximately six months. The case study method was chosen to better understand interest group influence on school boards (Stake, 1995). This instrumental case study was constructed by relying on multiple sources of information as suggested by Yin (1989). These sources include: observations of school board meetings, interviews with interest group members and school board members, media coverage of the adoption and subsequent science policies, and documents produced by the school board and the interest groups.

Contrary to scholars who attribute a positive role to interest groups in a democracy, the case illustrates that the interest groups involved in Cobb County impeded both the textbook adoption and subsequent policymaking related to science curricula. The Cobb County case illustrates that interest group actors may operate out of a sense of personalism and that such personalism can result in the absence of policy or policy nonsense. A discussion of the implications for interest group influence, policy creation, and the democratic functioning of school boards concludes the chapter. Particular attention is paid to how school superintendents interested in improving school board policymaking should respond to district characteristics, norms, and processes that result in ineffective school politics.

COBB COUNTY AND THE ADOPTION OF SCIENCE TEXTBOOKS

Cobb County is one of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia's wealthiest and most conservative school districts. The median income of its 608,000 residents is \$58,000. In the last presidential election, 60% of its residents voted Republican (Cobb County Board of Elections and Registration,

2002). Six of the seven school board members are Republicans. The county is also the home of some of Georgia's most conservative politicians, including former Speaker of the U.S. House Newt Gingrich and former U.S. Representative Bob Barr.

The Cobb County School System is the 28th largest district in the United States, the second largest in Georgia, and one of 11 districts located in the Atlanta metropolitan area. It has a student population of 96,000 that grows, on average, 2,700 students a year. Eighty-one percent of its students pursue some form of post-secondary education. The system includes 103 schools with plans to build 12 more in the next few years. The system employs 12,000 people, approximately 8,000 of whom are classroom teachers.

This district has had a long history of controversy over the teaching of evolution. In 1979, the county adopted a policy on the subject that stated,

The Cobb County School District acknowledges that some scientific accounts of the origin of human species as taught in public schools are inconsistent with the family teachings of a significant number of Cobb County citizens. Therefore, the instructional program and curriculum of the school system shall be planned and organized with respect for these family teachings. The Constitutional principle of separation of church and state shall be preserved and maintained as established by the United States Supreme Court and defined by judicial decisions. (Cobb County School District, 1979, OCGA, 20-2-50; 20-2-57; 20-2-59)

At the same time, the county also adopted regulations to guide the implementation of this policy. These regulations stated:

- The curriculum would be organized so that no student was compelled to study the origin of human species.
- The origin of human species would not be taught at the elementary or middle school levels.
- The study of the origin of human species would not be required for graduation.
- Elective opportunities to investigate theories of the origin of human species, including creation theory, would be available.
- All high school courses offered on the origin of human species as electives would be so noted in curriculum catalogs and course listings (Cobb County School District, 1979, OCGA, 20-2-50; 20-2-57; 20-2-59).

These policies remained in place in the spring of 2002, when the system began the process of adopting new science textbooks as required by state

law every six years (Cobb County School District, 1999, OCGA 20-2-1010).

The district followed an adoption process that included appointing a committee of school personnel to review and rate science texts. Following the review, a citizen advisory committee was convened to assess the textbooks recommended by the internal committee. After that assessment, district administrators chose a set of science texts and placed them on display for 15 days. At the end of this period, the board was to vote to adopt the texts.

However, the week before the adoption vote was to take place, the board received a letter from county resident, Marjorie Rogers, objecting to the chosen textbooks and threatening to file suit to halt adoption. In this letter, dated March 13, 2002, Ms. Rogers raised five objections to the texts:

1. I object to the proposed textbooks in that they do not teach scientific fact, but rather promote the philosophy of naturalism under the guise of "science".
2. I object to adoption of the proposed texts insofar as they present untrue, unproven, or highly speculative comments dogmatically as if they were certain knowledge.
3. I object to adoption of the proposed texts insofar as they present ... "evidence" for evolution which is either untrue or unproven.... Many textbooks contain the UNPROVABLE ASSUMPTIONS that life arose from non-living material, and that all life forms came from a "simple" single-celled organism. No one has ever observed this happening. No lab experiments have confirmed that life could have arisen by chance. Therefore, it should not be presented in textbooks as fact or science. It is a BELIEF.
4. I object to the adoption of the proposed textbooks insofar as they confuse the concept of micro-evolution with macro-evolution, and mislead students to believe that these concepts are the same and that the former provides support for the latter.
5. I further object to the adoption of the proposed textbooks insofar as they violate the Cobb County regulations—IDBD Theories of Origin.

This letter, in effect, reminded board members of the 1979 regulations governing theories of origin.

Board members and administrators in charge of the adoption now scrambled to head off court interference. They consulted attorneys who informed them that the old regulations were in violation of current state

and federal law. This now left them with two problems—how to get textbooks adopted and how to rewrite the Theories of Origin policy.

The board decided to tackle the more pressing problem of the textbook adoptions first. To that end, they considered some of the remedies suggested by Marjorie Rogers in her letter:

1. The provision of supplemental material to students that presents alternate arguments and views on evolution;
2. The placement of a disclaimer in each textbook that highlights the theoretical nature of evolution;
3. The placement of stickers throughout the books in the sections containing objectionable material. For example, “Darwin’s universal tree of life is inconsistent with the fossil record of the Cambrian explosion and with recent molecular evidence.” (from letter dated March 13, 2002)

They did not consider her suggestions to ask for the textbook publishers to eliminate sections involving evolution or that the district glue offensive pages together.

Then in late March, the board held a meeting at which they were to adopt the new science textbooks and also an insert for the textbooks. The board met before a packed house of approximately 150 people to take action. They began their meeting by taking public comment on the issue. Approximately 30 people signed up to address the board with each being given one minute to speak.

The majority of speakers urged the board either not to adopt the proposed texts or to delay action on the issue. Many made personal statements about their beliefs on the subject. But overwhelmingly, these statements were against evolution with only two speakers supporting the textbook adoption. The statements made included:

- Scientists believe evolution to be passé that there must be a creator behind organisms.
- I don’t want anyone taking care of me in a nursing home to think I came from monkeys!
- We have taken God out of school and because of this we have Columbine.
- We need to teach creationism if we teach evolution.
- We believe the Bible is correct in that God created man.
- I don’t expect the public school system to teach only creationism, but I think it should be given its fair share.

Many of the speakers identified their church affiliations. Marjorie Rogers, who also addressed the board, presented them with a petition of 2,318 signatures urging the board to adopt accurate textbooks. She claimed that the petition was circulated in Bible study classes at various churches.

At the end of the public comment, a motion was made to adopt the recommended textbooks. Following this was a motion to include an insert in the texts:

This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

After the meeting, Joe Redden, Superintendent of Schools, claimed that the insert was not a disclaimer but merely reinforced what the texts already convey. He stated, "The books do not present Darwin's theory, the theory of evolution, as fact."

Despite this statement, the move was met with displeasure by many present. Marjorie Rogers claimed she was only "partly satisfied with the disclaimer." She also stated she would ask the board to more clearly define alternative explanations for the origin of life and to establish an elective science course that would explore the controversies surrounding the issue. Others felt the board had overreacted to pressure from evangelical parents. One parent claimed, "In an attempt to placate the fundamentalists, they have insulted the intelligence of our children." Another said, "I'm shocked Cobb County is handling it this way."

Unfortunately for the Cobb Board, this displeasure meant the issue was far from over. Within weeks, the American Civil Liberties Union, on behalf of Jeffery Selman, a Cobb parent, filed suit to have the insert removed. In referring to his suit, Selman claimed, "The side for scientific education was asleep. We felt safe. This is the 21st century, for crying out loud. We can't go back to this" (MacDonald, September 7, 2002). A spate of news coverage followed both the adoption and the filing of the suit. And soon after, another petition began circulating among parents that demanded the board maintain "traditional academic standards and integrity in the sciences."

Within this climate, the board still needed to take action on their Theory of Origins policy. In late August, they proposed to change the policy so that evolution would not be banned from the lower grade levels and discussion of "disputed views" would be allowed. The board voted to allocate 30 days to consider such a change. This 30-day period only further instigated those on either side of the dispute and provided additional time for other interests to enter the fray.

In early September, John Calvert and William Harris, co-directors of Intelligent Design Network, held a seminar sponsored by the North Georgia chapter of the American Family Association. The seminar drew about 40 people to the Cobb County Civic Center. The purpose of the seminar was to expose Cobb County advocates to the arguments of intelligent design⁴ and introduce the “wedge strategy.”

The “wedge strategy” is attributed to Phillip Johnson, a retired University of California-Berkeley law professor who began the intelligent design (ID) movement with his 1991 book, *Darwin on Trial*. According to Johnson’s (2000) book *The Wedge of Truth*, the “wedge strategy” outlines a five-year plan involving three ingredients: a) scientific research, writing, and publicity about ID; b) publicity and public opinion in favor of ID; and c) cultural confrontation and renewal. According to Johnson, “The ‘Wedge of Truth’ ... enables people to recognize that ‘In the beginning was the Word’ is as true scientifically as it is in every other respect” (Griffis, 2002, p. 37). And, it “seeks nothing less than the overthrow of materialism and its cultural legacies” (Griffis, 2002, p. 37).

In addition to the introduction of the “wedge strategy” in Cobb County, the National Academy of Sciences asked 30 scientists and physicians in Georgia to lobby the county to remove the textbook inserts. According to board member Betty Grey, the scientists and physicians began contacting board members individually by letter, email, and phone. Two days later, a group of 28 professors calling itself Georgia Scientists for Academic Freedom, petitioned the board and advised that “careful examination of evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged.” Following this, a group of other Georgia professors submitted sets of petitions reinforcing the importance of evolution in science education.

The issue had quickly become the most polarized debate ever faced by the board. They became inundated with individual correspondence on the issue. The school superintendent, Joe Redden, received 39 emails during a two-week period about the board’s actions. Board member, Betty Grey, said she received 173 email messages in one day. Additionally, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* provided forums for those interested in expressing their views on the topic.

The forums drew significant participation on both sides of the issue. Some of the comments made include:

- I do not want my child subjected to a curriculum that ignores the key scientific principles which govern our universe.
- I personally think that it is abundantly clear that the hypocritical religious tyrants who believe in the non-scientific ideas of creationism will not be satisfied until their fanciful, nonsensical opinions

- are forced upon all of society to the exclusion of all other contrary evidence.
- I have already had to remind teachers and a principal to keep their religious views in check. I don't want my child to have any more potential opportunity to have Christian views shoved down his throat.
- Why should we fear this [policy] so strongly? I would only say that those that are so adamantly opposed to any view but their own, are pushing their own "religion."
- I for one don't want my child being told day after day that they are nothing more than a step on the evolutionary ladder towards some higher being and that this is the only explanation of our existence.... May God bless you all in your pursuit of truth and happiness (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* Forums: Teaching the Origins of Life, September 26, 2002 and Reaction to Cobb School Board Decision, September 28, 2002)!

When the board finally met to vote on a policy change, board chair, Curt Johnston, began by stating,

We seem to have been caught in the middle of a dispute between various parties who apparently want to use our curriculum to promote their own views. Much of what has been said in the media regarding our decisions has been misleading, so we wanted to take a moment to clear the air.... We felt the need to revise the policy because the existing policy could be read to restrict the teaching of evolution or to require teaching creationism.... To the parents and the citizens of Cobb County ... we are willing to listen, but we are not willing to cater to any particular viewpoint where genuine doubt exists, be it scientific or religious. (Johnston, September 27, 2002, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* Online)

Following the statement, the board voted unanimously to adopt a policy that reads:

It is the educational philosophy of the Cobb County School District to provide a broad based curriculum; therefore, the Cobb County School District believes that discussion of disputed views of academic subjects is a necessary element of providing a balanced education, including the study of the origin of species. The subject remains an area of intense interest, research, and discussion among scholars. As a result, the study of this subject shall be handled in accordance with this policy and with objectivity and good judgment on the part of teachers, taking into account the age and maturity level of their students.

Rather than clarify the board's position on the teaching of evolution and creationism, the resulting policy appeared to create more confusion. Asked to explain the board's intentions, Chair Curt Johnston responded, "Just what the policy says, no more, no less." Further, Johnston wasn't sure whether the new language allowed creationism to be discussed. Lynn Searcy, another board member commented, "The policy, the language of the policy, speaks for itself." According to Glenn Brock, the board's attorney, the language of the policy was carefully chosen with the purpose of keeping the school district within legal bounds.

Coverage of the vote by the *New York Times* stated, "Georgia School Board Requires Balance of Evolution and Bible" (Zernike, 2002), whereas the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* stated, "School Board Chief Says New Policy Reflects 'Diversity of Opinion' but Doesn't Promote Specific Views" (Johnston, 2002). Others appeared as confused as the journalists. One high school parent stated, "This policy is still not clear. It appears to be intentionally unclear in an attempt to circumvent the laws of our country" (MacDonald, 2002). A biology teacher in the county said, "It doesn't say anything. I don't think it will have any impact whatsoever on my personal teaching" (Taylor, 2002). Another science teacher said he and his peers "were experiencing a mixture of frustration, embarrassment and disappointment." He went to say, "They made teaching science very, very difficult" (Taylor, 2002).

PERSONALISM AND INTEREST GROUPS

Mawhinney (2001) states that much of interest group theory is predicated on the concept that "a free and active group system was critical in a democracy" (p. 189). For example, David Truman (1971) believed interest groups to be at the center of politics. Truman argued that the complexity of government provided a multiplicity of points of access to governmental decisions. And, "this diversity assures various ways for interest groups to participate in the formation of policy, and this variety is a flexible, stabilizing element" (p. 519). These scholars believe the diversity among interests is evidence of a capacity for obtaining broad representation of the beliefs and values of U.S. citizens (Mawhinney, 2001).

In addition to this representative function, many political scientists also believe interest groups serve other important functions in our democracy. Mansbridge (1992) claims

Decisionmakers, including citizens and their representatives, use the information and insights that interest groups feed into the deliberative process to decide what is best for them individually and narrowly, what is best for

the larger groups of which they are a part, what is best for the nation as a whole, and, on the basis of all these considerations, how they want the polity to act. (p. 35)

Wuthnow (1991) also states that these interest groups contribute to the cultural health of our society. And Putnam (1995) argues that these groups, focused on representation of their interests, develop skills of communication and collaboration. These skills then contribute to strengthening our social connectiveness. Thus, these scholars believe that interest groups, through their deliberative function and social aspects, serve to strengthen our society and the conduct of democracy.

However, much of the work of these scholars is predicated on the notion that interest groups do in fact operate as groups. That is, these scholars see interest groups as organizations allowing people to work together to advance collective beliefs.⁵ The organization, in the view of these scholars, acts to represent its members in the policymaking process. Recent evidence suggests that this is not how interest groups currently operate.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, interest groups have shifted their organizational lobbying capacity from centralized, lobbyist-oriented offices, to field-based operations (Goldstein, 1999; Opfer, 2001). Political parties, groups, and campaigns now mobilize *individuals*. As Goldstein argues,

The growth of the mass media has made it easier for representatives and constituents to communicate with each other, and technological advances have made it feasible for groups to generate, virtually instantaneously, thousands and even hundreds of thousands of letters, faxes, phone calls, and telegrams when an issue or bill comes to a head (p. 24).

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), in a 30 year time series study of Roper survey data, demonstrate that the organizational strategies of interest groups play a crucial role in determining individual participation in politics. As they conclude, "The strategic choices of political leaders—their determination of who and when to mobilize—determine the shape of political participation in America" (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 36). This shape of political participation is increasingly more individualistic.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) found that the proportion of Americans making issue-based contact with national policymakers doubled, from 11% of the population in 1967, to 22% of the population in 1987. Additionally, Goldstein (1999), in an analysis of National Election Study data, found that more individuals are contacting Congress to convey their feelings on issues and that this contact has been sharply increas-

Table 4.1. Percentage of Respondents, by Religious Tradition that have Heard a Sermon or Participated in a Church Discussion Group on a Political Issue during a 12-month Period

<i>Evangelical</i> (%)	<i>Mainline</i> <i>Protestant</i> (%)	<i>African</i> <i>American</i> <i>Protestant</i> (%)	<i>Catholic</i> (%)	<i>Jewish</i> (%)	<i>Other</i> (%)
59	64	70	59	64	62

Source: Wuthnow and Evan (2002).

ing since the early 1990s. *Individuals* are now more likely to participate when *interest groups* recruit and mobilize them to participate.

Religious interests play a key role in mobilizing individuals for political participation. Wuthnow and Evans (2002) show that many clergy feel it is appropriate to engage directly in political activities and encourage participation from the pulpit and by arranging special forums, Sunday school classes, or seminars at which key political issues are discussed. As Table 4.1 indicates, the percentage of parishioners who have heard sermons or participated in church discussion groups on key political issues is significant across faith traditions.

Many of the congregants, targeted by clergy, do then engage in political activities. Table 4.2, based on findings from Wuthnow and Evan's (2002) study, show that close to one third of all respondents claimed to have contacted an elected official within a 12 month period. Additionally, one third of respondents in evangelical and mainline protestant traditions indicated they would like to see religious leaders forming political movements. And, more than 50% of respondents in both of these traditions would like to see people from their tradition have more influence in shaping opinion on important social issues. Thus, not only are interest groups in general turning to more individualistic forms of political participation, religious interests appear particularly suited, both in belief and structure, to pursue grassroots tactics.

Table 4.2. Percentage of Respondents Who Contacted an Elected Official in the Previous 12 Months, by Tradition

<i>Evangelical</i> (%)	<i>Mainline</i> <i>Protestant</i> (%)	<i>African</i> <i>American</i> <i>Protestant</i> (%)	<i>Catholic</i> (%)	<i>Jewish</i> (%)	<i>Other</i> (%)
30	32	22	27	67	27

Source: Winthrow and Evan (2002).

The Cobb County evolution case indicates that a byproduct of this grassroots, individual participation is a politics of personalism. Cupitt (1999) defines personalism as “the conviction that persons and personal relations have somehow *got* to be the ultimate” (p.22, emphasis in original). Those who ascribe to this conviction “want if they can to bring everything down to persons, personal experience, personal qualities and personal relationships. Anything else tends to strike [them] as ‘abstract’ and boring” (Culpit, 1999, p. 22). Personal beliefs about how the world came into being became the standard by which political actors influenced the Cobb County School Board and also judged the decisions made. Rarely did interest group actors show respect for, or even acknowledge, the viewpoint or democratic aspirations of others. That is, they seldom mentioned a wider impact of the textbook adoption and subsequent “Origins” policy than on their own child, and when they did it was with a vague reference to “the children” or “we”. In essence, they lacked a grammar of democracy that acknowledges the impact of education policy on all children in a school, district, state, or nation.

This personalistic aspect of the Cobb County case is not unique. Thirty-seven years ago, Rieff (1966) warned that the U. S. was undergoing a cultural revolution—a widespread turn to psychological thinking and corresponding abandonment of morality and public virtue. More recently, Cupitt (1999) has contended that the rise of personalism coincides with the celebrity culture of postmodernity. “In Britain and the United States it is today notoriously difficult to interest the public in any idea at all except *via* a personality—and that includes political ideas” (p. 24). The focus then by Cobb County interests on the personal aspects of policymaking may be part of a larger trend toward a personalism orientation. People with such motivation became more politically involved in order to vocalize and attain their personal needs.

This personalism by interest groups has serious implications for school board policy making and democracy in general. Fiorina (1999) argues that while the mobilization of individuals increases the participatory nature of our democracy, it “increasingly has put politics into the hands of unrepresentative participators—extreme voices in the larger political debate” (p. 409). No matter what the sample studied—state convention delegates, national convention delegates, financial contributors, campaign activists, or candidates themselves—individual participants come disproportionately from the extremes of the opinion distribution (see, i.e., Brown, Powell, & Wilcox, 1995; Erikson, 1990; McCann, 1996; Miller & Jennings, 1986).

Not only do the activists take extreme positions, they also take these positions on issues that the majority does not care about. Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) report that participants

care about different issues than nonparticipants. And, because politicians today are more accessible due to e-mail, fax, voicemail, etc., committed activists have less need to broaden their appeals in order to mobilize a mass following than was previously necessary.

School board members may be especially susceptible to personalistic appeals within this accessibility context for two reasons. First, voter turnout is so low in most board elections that every vote counts.⁶ In this context, a pulpit appeal for or against a school board member, made in a few large-sized congregations could determine the outcome of a school board election. Second, the nature of school board business—education—requires responsiveness on the part of board members. Delay in responsiveness could mean disadvantaging a student or students.

Communitarian scholars have long argued that groups based only on a junction of personal preferences will amount simply to a collection of individuals pursuing private ends. Their members will only practice personal gratification and not act for a common good. Rieff (1966) claims that personalism corrodes any sense of obligation that emanates from outside the self. Thus, democratic participation becomes simply another “personal experience” that one could take or leave. For educational policymaking, the implication is that if the issue under discussion has no personal bearing, attention and action will not result. People become concerned, not with the public good and social policy aspects of education, but only with the individual impact. They ask, “What role should schools play in helping me?” and never ask “What role should schools play in helping us?”

Personalism impacts not only commitment to democratic ideals but also to democratic institutions themselves. Lichterman (1996) argues, “Personalism upholds a personal self that lives with ambivalence towards, and often in tension with, the institutional or communal standards that surround it” (p. 6). It becomes less important whether policies violate the separation of church and state or impinge on the rights and beliefs of others. Personalistic actors are concerned with achieving their own visions even at the expense of others. They are willing to rely on “wedge” strategies and “overthrow ... cultural legacies” to obtain their own ends. Institutions serve utilitarian functions only. People use schools and school boards for their own ends; schools and school boards do not exist to support communities.

Further, personalism reproduces itself. In Wuthnow’s (1991) study of volunteerism in the U. S., he concluded that personalism limits the bonds of obligation that volunteers could produce with those they help and society in general. Practicing compassion because it feels good did not promote a sense of community but simply more individualism. Protesting for or against the teaching of evolution may result in individual satisfaction

through participation and perhaps the resulting outcomes, but it will not lead to a collective sense of efficacy and investment concerning the school curriculum.

The activism undertaken by personalistic motivations in individuals is usually short-lived and results in shifting public attention to issues. Belah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985), in their study of individualism and commitment, suggested that if activists did not define their commitments in terms of communal obligations, those commitments had a precarious basis and did not last long. Personalism might justify impulsive protest but such a political commitment easily fades, only to reemerge in some other short-lived personal enthusiasm. Thus, while interests in Cobb County may have taken intensive action at the time of the textbook and policy adoption, the chance that any would continue to remain engaged in order to determine the impact on actual classroom practice is unlikely.

POLICY NONSENSE

Beyond the impact of personalistic interests on democratic ideals and institutions, the actions of these activists have more immediate and observable impacts on the policy that emerges from the conflict. The fragmentation of the policymaking process due to individual, personalistic participation does not result in cohesive policy. The personalistic politics that were evident in Cobb County created polarized policy positions and compromise was not evident. As a result, the Cobb County Board crafted a policy of nonsense. As Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, commented to the board, "You're just taking the guts out of biology to the point where it makes no sense" (MacDonald, 2002).

The *American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* provides five definitions for nonsense, three of which apply to the Cobb County policy:

1. Words or signs having no intelligible meaning;
2. Subject matter, behavior, or language that is foolish or absurd;
3. Matter of little or no importance or usefulness.

In the first instance, the board endorsed neither evolution nor creationism. They crafted a policy that embodied this contradiction and the result was a message that conveyed no meaning—board members were unsure of the policy's potential impact, journalists conveyed contradictory accounts of the policy's meaning, and observers believed it said nothing.

In the second instance, the board's actions appeared foolish or absurd. Many interests on both side of the issue suggested:

- It will make the community look bad.
- They've made a mockery of science.
- Of course there isn't such thing as evolution—the Neanderthal school boards in Georgia prove it.
- Will the Cobb County approach inspire students, confuse them, or just generate more apathy about their education?
- While the Cobb County School Board is at it why not declare that the earth is at the center of the Universe and that the sun revolves around the earth.
- Cobb County really looks backward now!
- Hats off to the Cobb County School Board for finding yet another way to cripple their students with ignorance.

Thus, not only was the policy without meaning and contradictory, many believed the passage of the policy to be both frustrating and embarrassing.

Finally, the Cobb County policy is nonsensical because it is counterproductive to a desired end. Curt Johnston, board chairman, claimed, "Our teachers are nervous about what they can talk about. This will clarify things." In reality though, the resulting policy was of little guidance to teachers. It states that the policy relies on "objectivity and good judgment on the part of teachers." Thus, teachers were left wondering what they should be teaching in regards to evolution and creationism. As the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* concluded, "Faced with equally impassioned pleas to allow creationism to be taught in the classroom or to ban it, the Cobb County school board chose to do neither" (Taylor, September 23, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

The Cobb County School Board faced a multitude of individuals, mobilized by interest groups, who were concerned with how evolution and creationism should be taught. These participants acted, not to advance a collective belief or out of obligation to education for the whole, but out of individual compulsion or personalism. The conflicting and contradictory nature of the interests did not (a) provide information to improve decision-making (Mansbridge, 1992), (b) increase collaboration (Putnam, 1995), or c) contribute to the cultural health of Cobb County (Wuthnow, 1991). The interests involved did not exert a positive influence on policy-making by the board as some research has surmised they might. Instead, they created a paradoxical and contradictory situation that resulted in policy nonsense.

Participatory democratic institutions can be expected to have salutary consequences only if those engaged are representative of the interests and values of the larger community. When engagement is largely dominated by minority viewpoints, problems of unrepresentativeness arise. How might school superintendents counteract these personalistic tendencies by policy actors so that the resulting board political processes and policies are more representative? Ironically, Fiorina (1999) suggests that the answer is actually more civic involvement; to raise various forms of civic engagement to levels where extreme voices are diluted. Thus school superintendents should attend to district characteristics and processes that limit participation and focus on ways to channel participation in useful ways.

To increase participation, superintendents might first consider whether there are kinds of political engagements that depend upon and reinforce individuality rather than just accommodating it or reining it in. Lichterman (1996) has claimed that "Personalism develops in a kind of community ... in which people create and practice norms of highly individualized expression" (p. 7). If this is the case, superintendents must assess the political arrangements of school boards that reinforce these norms of individualized expression.

Hess and Leal (2001) suggest that opportunities to participate are partly the consequence of community characteristics and may have developed over the years with little planning and coordination. For fear of being overwhelmed by interests, large districts have, for example, limited involvement to only a few access points. Also, Southern districts have traditionally been more hierarchical and less participatory than the national norm. While these districts may have changed enrollment practices to address their past history of limiting access to some populations, they may not have addressed the institutional structures put in place to limit interaction with their communities (Plank & Ginsberg, 1990). In contrast, districts with large percentages of African Americans and those with lower student teacher ratios tend to offer community members more access to decision—making (Hess & Leal, 2001).

Chubb and Moe (1990) propose that school districts have developed rigidly controlled processes to resist interest groups. In essence, as interest group pressure has increased in districts, districts have developed institutional arrangements that limit community access to decision—making. There may be two institutional arrangements that reinforce individualized expression in school board processes. The first, and most obvious, is the structure of the public comment period at meetings. Many boards allot specific time periods for public comment. In Cobb County, they allot 30 minutes. Individuals sign up to speak and the allotted time is divided among those who sign up. The result of this arrangement is a succession

of individuals given little time for substantive input. The arrangement reinforces individual communication and provides no forum for collaborative or joint input—a group representative gets the same time as an individual unless group members all sign up and turn over their time to their representative. Further, the amount of public comment allowed in any one board meeting limits the amount of participation by the public. This time limit becomes especially problematic when contested issues arise.

Second, the use of e-mail and phone calls to contact board members increases the individuality of public sentiment. Board members are available by e-mail and phone in order to appear responsive to their constituents. However, these forms of communication also effect the perceptions of the board members themselves. They come to weigh the importance of an issue based on the number of e-mails and phone calls rather than the content of those messages. E-mails and phone calls get characterized as “for” or “against.” For example, when Superintendent Joe Redden was asked to characterize this kind of contact, he claimed it was “almost evenly divided, pro- and anti-evolution.” And Chairman Curt Johnston said, “I’m just weighing [them].” Thus, these forms of communication do not provide information useful to the policy deliberation but are only individual “votes” on the policy itself. School superintendents need to evaluate how their district’s characteristics and processes may support or impede active political participation by community members.

In addition to district characteristics and institutional norms that encourage personalistic politics, school superintendents must also examine the costs of participation for the average parent or citizen. The demands on time and energy required for participation are sufficiently severe that those willing to pay the costs are disproportionately of extreme viewpoints. Fiorina (1999) argues that to combat this, we must lower the costs of participation. The current structure of school board meetings require those interested in participating to leave their children at home, come to a weeknight board meeting, and sit for hours in order to speak for one minute. School superintendents concerned with improving board policy processes must attend to the ability and willingness of the average citizen to participate within this structure. This may mean reconsidering when people are allowed to participate, the forms of participation, the timing of participation, and the amount of time given to participation.

Further, superintendents must help board members understand the motives of those who try to influence them. Board members must recognize that there is nothing wrong with those who do not participate; rather, there is something unusual about those who do. Fiorina (1999), referring to the Chicago machine’s attitude toward self-selectors, claims that activ-

ists are all too often people “nobody sent” (p. 416). Given the increasingly individualistic nature of interest group influence and the personalistic tendencies of this type of participation, it is essential that board members recognize that the moderate center is not well-represented in contemporary politics. The average citizens are frustrated with government because they too often see the participants locked in a battle over unattractive and unrealistic alternatives. The result is unnecessary conflict, animosity, delay, gridlock, and policy nonsense. Board members must be educated by superintendents to resist the temptation to acquiesce to what Ehrenhalt (1998) termed “quarrelsome blowhards” in order to truly represent the nonparticipating majority.

NOTES

1. See for example Mansbridge, 1992; Mawhinney, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Truman, 1971; Wuthnow, 1991.
2. See for example Berry, 1989; Fiorina, 1999; Hecl, 1989; Knoke, 1990; Lowi, 1969; Wilson, 1990.
3. See for example Goldstein, 1999; Opfer, 2001.
4. According to the website for the Intelligent Design Network, Intelligent Design is a scientific disagreement with the claim of evolutionary theory that natural phenomena are not designed. ID claims that natural laws and chance alone are not adequate to explain all natural phenomena. Evidence that is empirically detectable in nature suggests that design is the best current explanation for a variety of natural systems, particularly irreducibly complex living systems. Intelligent Design is an intellectual movement that includes a scientific research program for investigating intelligent causes and that challenges naturalistic explanations of origins which currently drive science education and research.
5. David Truman’s (1971) widely cited definition of interest groups makes this assumption clear. He defines an interest group as “any group that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes” (p. 21).
6. According to the Secretary of State’s election data for Georgia, voter turnout in school board elections has averaged 8-11% in the last two election cycles. While this can mean a win by as much as 7,000 votes in Cobb County, the number of votes needed to win can decrease to under one hundred in city or small county districts. For example, the largest margin of victory by a Marietta City School Board member (located in Cobb County) in the 2002 election was 200 votes. It is also important to note that one of the churches involved in the Cobb County evolution policy debate, Johnson Ferry Baptist, has more than 5,000 members.

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