

# Evaluating Equity

## A Framework for Understanding Action and Inaction on Social Justice Issues

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This article relies on a case study of a policy evaluation to illustrate how issues of social justice arise for action or inaction in a political environment. The article uses the case study to show that social justice issue formation is shaped by the personal beliefs of the actors, the prevailing political culture, the evolutionary path of the issue, and the larger context of the social environment. These multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory systems interact in ways that make action on injustice and inequity by political actors more or less likely.

**Keywords:** *social justice; policy evaluation; political issue formation*

In 2002-2003, I contracted with a State Department of Education to conduct an evaluation of the state's charter schools.<sup>1</sup> The state was located in the Southeast and, like many of these states, had a history of segregated schools that it had struggled to overcome. In recent years, policy makers had attempted to move past this legacy by investing heavily in education. Additionally, the state was an early adopter of the high-stakes accountability policies that would eventually be part of the No Child Left Behind Act. The reaction by State Department of Education officials to my initial evaluation belied this more progressive stance. Officials were unwilling to publicly acknowledge that parents could, and had, set up charter schools with the expressed intention of segregating their (White) children from children of other races. I, who had been actively researching the politics of education, became stymied by the politics at work in this instance and was surprised by

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the political rationale for denying what I believed to be such an obviously egregious attack on the state's progress toward greater educational equity. Knowing both the Department of Education officials and some of the state leadership personally, I did not believe this was simply a case of racist behavior. So why, then, were they willing to ignore racist effects of their policies? And why was I unsuccessful at convincing them that state policies were having such deleterious impacts? In this article I attempt to provide a framework for understanding how evaluation research, especially research highlighting inequitable outcomes, is situated within multiple and overlapping political spheres. In providing this framework, I will illustrate how the politics of evaluation operates when issues of social justice are involved.

### Political Naïveté

Policy evaluations are inherently political and have been acknowledged as such by many in the evaluation field (Greene, 1997; House, 1990; House & Howe, 2000; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000; Worthen, 2001). These evaluations are recognized as political given their integral part in providing information used in decision making on important public issues. As Carol Weiss (1991) has stated, evaluations are political in three ways:

- (1) Programs are created and maintained by political forces;
- (2) higher echelons of government, which make decisions about programs, are embedded in politics; and
- (3) the very act of evaluation has political connotations [signaling, for example, which programs are important enough or in enough trouble to be worth evaluating]. (p. 231)

Although evaluation researchers may have come to accept the political nature of their enterprise, few have attempted to explain how politics shapes and influences the evaluations they undertake. There are a number of explanations for the lack of attention given to understanding the politics of evaluation. First, Jennifer Greene (2003) has suggested that the ways evaluators view their relationship to politics hinder a full engagement and discussion of politics in the field. Greene has characterized evaluation researchers as one of three types: (a) those who aim for political objectivity and neutrality via methods that attempt to do the same, (b) those who acknowledge the value-laden quality of evaluations and endeavor to engage with multiple value perspectives to provide nonpartisan credibility to their evaluation practice, and (c) those who intentionally and directly engage with the values of an evaluation context to explicitly advance particular values and interests.

Thus, researchers of Types a and b purposefully structure their research in ways that attempt to neutralize the impact of politics on their work. These researchers assume, as House (1993) states, that “society expects for evaluation to be based on scientific authority. . . . The more objective and less ideological evaluation becomes, the more useful it is” (p. 30). Researchers of Type c, though ideologically oriented in their methodological approaches, see their research as advancing a political agenda more so than being directly influenced by one.

Conceptual work on the politics of evaluation has been further hampered by the lack of attention paid to it in the field’s *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and *Educational Evaluation Standards* published by the American Evaluation Association (n.d.). *Guiding Principles* provides no guidance for evaluators about the political contexts of evaluation. Nor do the *Guiding Principles* make any reference to the political nature of the research work. *Evaluation Standards* provides guidance only on maintaining the political viability of an evaluation with less emphasis placed on helping evaluators understand the how or why of the political context. For example, the only standard mentioning politics, Feasibility Standard 2, states,

The evaluation should be planned and conducted with anticipation of the different positions of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained, and so that possible attempts by any of these groups to curtail evaluation operations or to bias or misapply the results can be averted or counteracted. (American Evaluation Association, n.d.)

Thus, the documents that have been developed to direct evaluation practice fail to acknowledge the central role that policy evaluations play in politics as well as the politics of policy evaluations. Moreover, few evaluation textbooks provide substantial coverage of the politics of evaluations and, more often than not, relegate the topic to the end of the text—almost as an afterthought.

Because evaluation developed primarily as an administrative function during the late 1960s and 1970s, the field itself remains vested in a bureaucratic notion of political process. Most who write about evaluation methods treat politics as a dyadic relationship between the evaluator and the agency staff overseeing the work. For example, Carol Weiss (1991), in writing retrospectively about the political nature of her own evaluation work, titled a piece “Evaluation Research in the Political Context: Sixteen Years and Four Administrations Later.” Thus, evaluation researchers rarely consider how their dyadic relationship with project managers is situated within an organization, within a community, within a state, and within a nation,

all with conflicting and contrasting political ideologies at work. This is perhaps for good reason. Most evaluation results lie dormant and unnoticed except by those especially informed or those especially affected. Occasionally, however, evaluation results rise from obscurity and become contentious, and controversy about the meaning of the results comes to define the evaluation.

The limited view of politics in evaluation work, then, belies the possibly expansive and public nature of some of these studies. The hewing of the evaluation field to a production-of-information orientation tends to underplay and legitimate the disregard of political issues as the consequence of the evaluation work itself. As Stake (2001) states, "Strategies for engaging, coping with, and capitalizing on the political side of evaluation are an important need for the profession" (p. 352).

So despite the acknowledgement by evaluation researchers that their studies can be inherently political, the field has failed to turn to politics scholarship as a source for understanding. In this article, I rectify this situation. Specifically, I draw on the issue-politics literature to provide a framework for analyzing the political contexts of evaluations that involve issues of social justice and equity. I use my case of the charter school evaluation to illustrate how the issue-politics literature provides an understanding of situations that perhaps all too easily get written off as racism, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and so on. The question for this article is not why are evaluations political but why do some issues create political tension in evaluations whereas others do not? And why do some political issues that arise in evaluations garner action whereas others are relegated to the sideline? In understanding how issue politics work within evaluations, I will first provide more detailed background on the charter school evaluation and then apply the issue-politics research in an analysis of this case and the development of a framework for situations of this type.

### **Segregation by Choice**

The evaluation of charter schools that I completed in 2003 is perhaps best characterized as a policy evaluation rather than a program evaluation. The task I was given by Department of Education officials was not to determine the efficacy of individual schools; I was not addressing whether the schools were meeting their objectives. Rather, I was to identify how the charter movement as a whole was operating within the state. The questions I was to address in this evaluation included the following:

1. How did charter schools compare with traditional public schools in the state with regard to student achievement and stakeholder satisfaction?
2. How was the charter school concept being implemented in the state? Descriptively, how were they being organized, structured, managed, and so on? And what curricular and pedagogical strategies were being used?
3. Finally, what implementation issues were arising in charter schools, and what were the impetuses for these issues?

This seemingly subtle difference in purpose between program and policy evaluation would play an important role in my inability to argue that specific schools had inequitable environments. This difference in purpose would also allow department officials to justify inaction on the issues that I uncovered.

The evaluation of the charter schools relied on five sources of data: discussion groups with charter school stakeholders (parents and teachers), site visits and observations at a sample of charter schools, interviews with charter school principals, collection of documents that provided evidence of school practices, and surveys of charter school and non-charter school teachers and charter school parents. In addition, student demographic and achievement data were obtained from state records, and the reports that the charter schools submit to the state each year were reviewed.

A subset of 14 charter schools were selected for site visits for the evaluation on the basis of three characteristics: location within the state, grade levels of the school, and type of charter school. Every effort was made to obtain proportional representation within the sample by region, by school level, and by school type. During each visit, the schools were toured, classrooms were observed, discussion groups were held with parents, and interviews were conducted with teachers. Interviews were also conducted with administrators. Documents were also collected from each of these schools, including information related to curricula and academic offerings and examples of communications with parents.

One of these site visits was made to a charter school that had opened in 2000 in a rural part of the state. The community in which the school resides has a long history of tension regarding race. It is infamously known for a massacre that occurred in 1868 when White residents opened fire on a political rally of freedmen, killing 9 and injuring 25 others (Formwalt, 1987). The closest city, 16 miles away, made national headlines in 1961 and 1962 for its mass jailing of civil rights activists. During this period, Charles Sherrod said of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's efforts in the area, "Our criterion for success is not how many people we register. We feel that we are in a psychological battle for the minds of the enslaved"

**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Student Demographics Between Charter School,  
 District, and State, 2002-2003 (in percentages)**

	Charter School ( <i>n</i> = 352)	County School District ( <i>n</i> = 2,708)	State ( <i>n</i> = 1,486,125)
Caucasian	92	25	51
Black	5	71	38
Hispanic	0	3	7
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	0	3
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0	0
Multiracial	2	1	2
Free and reduced lunch	37	75	46

(as cited in Tuck, 2004, para. 5). And following the state legislature's termination of its efforts to overrule the *Brown* decisions in the late 1960s, "segregation academies" were opened for White students by a number of the community's churches (Joiner, 1979).

At the time of the site visit, the community had fewer than 24,000 residents with a median income of \$18,466. The local countywide school district had an enrollment, stable during the previous decade, of 2,708 students of whom 71% were Black, 3% were Hispanic, 1% were multiracial, and 25% were Caucasian.<sup>2</sup> Of the enrolled students, 75% received free or reduced-price lunches (see Table 1). The demographics of the charter school were decidedly different than its host school system. In 2002-2003, the school enrolled 352 students of whom 1% were Asian, 5% were Black, 2% were multiracial, and 92% were Caucasian. Only 37% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).

Although the differences in demographics alone are noteworthy, it was comments made by parents that highlighted the intentionality of the segregation. During the discussion group, one parent described how the school had been founded:

We used to have our children in one of the local academies, but when the state offered the charter school option, a bunch of us got together and decided to apply to open our own school.

And when discussing why they had sent their children to the school, one parent commented,

By opening the school, we could send our children to a school we agreed with without having to pay tuition.

Another parent concurred, saying,

Yes, I like that my daughter gets to go to school with children like her but I don't have to pay the private tuition anymore.

To get a sense of how widespread the previous academy attendance had been, I asked how many of the parents present had sent their children to an academy prior to the charter school being established. Of the 10 parents in the discussion group, 9 had children who had previously attended an academy.

Trying to question the parents further on the lack of diversity in their school, I asked whether any of the Black families that lived within sight of the school chose to send their children. The parents responded that none of the children in the neighborhood surrounding the school attended. They went further to say that these children rode a bus 45 to 60 min each way to the closest district school. When I asked why they thought these parents would choose to put their children on a bus for that period of time when there was a school within walking distance, one parent responded,

We're told we need diversity and getting people of color to come, and I think a gymnasium would help that because we don't have sports and Black families need to send their kids to somewhere they can do their sports.

Later in the discussion, when asked what issues the parents had, one parent commented,

There is a perception by legislators that [our school] is a White school, so we don't get the attention we need.

The parents were upset that their first graders had been the top-scoring first grade class of all schools statewide on the state reading test but had not been recognized for that accomplishment.

Later in the visit, I asked the principal whether she felt the lack of Black students was a problem for her school. She responded,

We are suing for different enrolling criteria. We would like to come out from under the county and go straight to the state. [The] county is trying to limit our enrollment numbers this year and not let us enroll on a first-come, first-serve basis but by race from an old desegregation law from the '60s. The county told us we had to hold 25 spots for other races while we had 150-plus students [all White] on the waiting list.

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The principal went on to incorrectly claim that the county school system was majority White and therefore it was unfair that the school should have to reserve the spaces for minority students.

The local school board, the previous spring, had passed a resolution that limited the charter school enrollment to 240 students with no more than 204 of those students being Caucasian. Within a month of our visit, four of the charter school parents filed suit against the school board, claiming that the resolution violated the state law requiring charter schools to admit students by lottery if they had more applicants than spaces. In an interview with one school board member about the impetus for the resolution, she stated,

These people have always wanted to keep their children from going to school with our children, but now they are using our money to [*sic*] and they keep taking more and more children and adding a grade level each year, and all the academies are closing because all their students have started going to [the charter school]. If they are going to use the taxpayers' money to run their school, then they should have to take the students that make up the majority of the students in this district.

The evaluation report I submitted to the State Department of Education was organized around a series of key findings, one of which stated that "parents can use [the state's] charter school law to segregate their children by race." The section that presented the evidence to support the finding stated in part,

The difference between the racial composition of the school and its district is especially troubling for one school—[Charter] School. This school is 67% more White than its school district. Because of this difference, relations with the district are particularly strained.

At the same time the report was due, the State Department of Education put out a request for proposals on the following year's charter school evaluation. I submitted a proposal and won the contract for the evaluation. It was decided during contract negotiations that the next evaluation would focus on whether individual schools were achieving the goals they established in their chartering documents.

Within a week of submitting the charter school evaluation report, a meeting was called to discuss the findings. In attendance was the program manager with whom I had been working, the head of the evaluation unit, and a department attorney. These State Department of Education officials agreed that the problem in this school was egregious but argued that focusing a section of the report on one school violated a decision rule established at the outset of the evaluation that issues would only be reported when they



constituted a pattern in the charter schools. They emphasized that the stated purpose of this evaluation was to describe the charter schools as a whole and identify issues that affected the schools generally. The evaluation was never intended to illustrate problems in specific schools. Given this, they wanted the finding related to this school removed from the report before I presented it to the State Board of Education. In the hallway after the meeting, the head of the evaluation unit volunteered that the attendees were aware and very concerned about what had been happening in that charter school but that the legislator representing the area was a member of the House Education Committee and had cosponsored the original charter school legislation for the state. She felt that they could not name that particular school as a problem given his position on the committee. She went further to say that they would make sure that this school was included in the following year's evaluation, when individual schools would be the focus.

Given the discussion in the meeting and in the hallway afterward, I believed that the State Department of Education officials were as concerned about what was occurring as I. I understood the objections raised in the meeting to be about method and presentation rather than about the finding itself. I therefore decided to see whether segregation of students by race was occurring as a pattern in all the charter schools. In conducting this analysis, I compared each charter school for which demographic data were available to its district's demographics and the demographics of the closest traditional public school. In the state, 12 of the 28 charter schools with demographic data had a racial composition that differed from that of their district by more than 20%. In 10 of these cases, the schools were at least 20% more White than their districts. In 2 cases, the school was at least 20% more minority than its district. There were 3 schools with an exact match of their district's demographic composition. In comparing the charter schools to the closest traditional public school, the pattern was more pronounced: 20 of 28 schools differed from the matched public school by more than 20%, with 18 having more White students and 2 having proportionately more minority students. None of the charter schools matched their neighboring public school exactly.

Following this analysis, I rewrote the segregation finding of the evaluation report to state,

A pattern of segregation by race is beginning to emerge in [the state's] charter schools.

The supporting section provided evidence summarizing this general pattern and listing all the charter schools, their demographics, and the demographics of their districts and their matching school. As further evidence to

support the pattern, I cited a report that had just been released by the Harvard Civil Rights Project (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003). An overview of the findings from this report included the following:

- Of all states with charter school legislation, 19 had specific racial-ethnic balance guidelines. Among the 7 Southern states with at least 5,000 charter school students, only our state had no racial balance provision.
- Only 3 states—Colorado (46%), Florida (52%), and our state (63%)—had greater percentages of their charter school students enrolled in suburbs rather than in cities.
- Our state had the highest Black percentage of total public school enrollment and was the only state in which charter schools disproportionately enroll a lower proportion of Black students.

I submitted the revised report feeling secure that I had sufficiently met their objections: I had established a pattern and I had not singled out any specific school.

Approximately a month went by without any response to the report. I contacted the program manager in the Department of Education to ask when the report would be scheduled for presentation to the board. She informed me that she and her colleagues had decided they would handle the presentation of the report internally. She further said that they also had realized that they had not received adequate appropriation levels to contract out the following year's charter school evaluation and as a result had decided to conduct a much abbreviated evaluation internally. Immediately I became suspicious. I asked her to make sure that I received a copy of the final formatted report before it was sent to the board. At that point, she confessed that they had removed the section on segregation entirely.

After many meetings and e-mails between myself, officials, and attorneys in the department, I requested that my name be removed as author of the report that was being presented to the board. For their part, the Department of Education staff promised a two-prong strategy for dealing with the problem. They would recommend an amendment to the charter school legislation that required racial balance, and they would recommend the charter not be renewed for the school that had originally drawn my attention to the issue when it was considered the following year.

The strategy developed by the Department of Education failed. The recommended legislative changes for charter schools never made it out of the House Education Committee. The charter for the school was renewed the following year by an independent panel charged in the original charter legislation with this task, overriding contrary recommendations by both the

department and the local school system. The local school board's efforts to require the school to limit its enrollment and give preference to a specific number of minority applicants also failed. Both the segregation that is occurring at that charter school and the larger pattern of segregation across all the charter schools remain a hidden issue in the state.

In subsequent years, that school has continued to grow and prosper just as it was when I visited. Although at the time of the evaluation the school was a combined elementary and middle school, the charter school is now a comprehensive prekindergarten-through-12th-grade school. In 2004-2005, the school had 519 students, 91% of whom were Caucasian, 6% Black, 1% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 1% multiracial; 37% of them received free or reduced-price lunches. The State Department of Education ranked the school as the Number 1 charter school in the state in terms of achievement and parental satisfaction in 2004-2005. The school is still without a gymnasium but now offers softball, tennis, track and field, and competitive cheerleading to its students.

### **A Framework for Understanding**

It would be easy to write off the unwillingness to expose the charter school by the state's Department of Education officials and their lack of immediate action as situated in racist beliefs. And in my more emotional moments about this evaluation, I certainly leapt to that conclusion. However, attributing racist intent to either the individuals involved or the department as a whole is both too easy and too simplistic. Attributing racist intent to explain the outcomes of my evaluation misses an opportunity to examine the mechanisms at work in instances where issues of equity and justice are at stake. As Foucault (1980) has argued,

Let us not, therefore ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc. In other words, rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects. (pp. ix-x)

As stated previously, the State Department of Education had been taking proactive policy positions in an effort to close the educational gaps that existed

between Blacks and Whites as well as between rich and poor. They had developed a state-run prekindergarten program, had offered state-sponsored scholarships for college tuition, had recently revisited the school-funding system without having been prodded by litigation, and were an early adopter of an accountability system that held schools responsible for the achievement of all disaggregated groups of students. The individual officials involved also had track records that would have indicated a will to act on this issue. I had worked with them on previous evaluations where they had showed a proactive concern for equity. As a friend, I was well aware of the program manager's politics, and both she and her supervisor were people of color. So why did they not act? Why would they choose to effectively bury the issue?

### **The Intersection of Personal Beliefs and Political Culture in Social Justice Issues**

Although the state as a whole had in recent years adopted policies that were specifically targeted at alleviating gaps in educational outcomes, this shift involved a fundamental change in beliefs about the role of government in ameliorating social problems. This shift in political culture had been away from a belief that the best way to ameliorate social problems was through government intervention and the assurance of personal rights to a political culture that sought to balance government intervention and personal rights with responsibility. This shift in the wider political culture is accompanied by a concomitant shift in normative definitions of equity where the definition is rooted in the distribution of outcomes rather than the distribution of access.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the prevailing political culture in the state was not one of either egalitarianism or individualism, as specified by most political scientists (Hofstadter, 1948; Huntington, 1981; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Lipset, 1963; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Myrdal, 1944); rather, the political culture lies somewhere in between the two. In this political culture, individuals have a right to expect certain outcomes but not specific programs or processes. Furthermore, both the individual and the government share a responsibility for assuring that these outcomes are achieved—the government by creating the structures which allow for achievement, and the individual by putting forth the effort to do so.

The shift to a balance of rights and personal responsibility in the prevailing political culture is evidenced by the language used by the previous governor in introducing the state's high-stakes school accountability policies:

Year after year, the education bureaucracy says: don't mind the test scores, things aren't really so bad—in fact, we're doing a pretty good job. You know,

it's cute when you see an eight-year-old look sheepishly up at the teacher and say "the dog ate my homework." It's not cute when it comes from the people responsible for educating our children. It's time to stop making excuses and start doing something about it. Do we ignore socioeconomics? No. Do we make an excuse for performance based on socioeconomics? No. . . . We have to use an objective standard, and we have to let chips fall where they may. (Barnes, 2000)

In the state's accountability system, schools and districts were given flexibility in determining pedagogy, personnel, and financial expenditures while at the same time held responsible for individual student outcomes. The shift to a focus on individual outcomes was reinforced through the implementation of policies that ended teacher tenure and social promotion of students. The shifting political culture was also evident in the introduction of school choice, charter schools, and demonstration schools, where less concern was shown for how students were educated and more attention was paid to whether they achieved as expected.

The prevailing political culture in the state had not only shifted from a process-based social justice orientation to a distributive outcome conception but had also shifted the level at which judgments of equity were to be made. Brickman, Folger, Goode, and Schul (1981) distinguish between microjustice judgments of the fairness of rewards for single individuals and macrojustice judgments of the fairness of rewards for groups. The rhetoric and actions of state policy makers indicates a microlevel judgment of what is socially just. Their concentration on individual students, teachers, principals, and schools shows they were focused on notions of individual merit and achievement. If individual students can achieve, then a socially just society will be obtained. If individual teachers and individual schools have failing students, then a socially unjust society will remain. In the political culture evident in the state at the time of the charter school evaluation, social policies would be judged unfair if microjustice were not the focus. That is, if the policies were just for groups of students or groups of schools at the expense of individuals or individual schools, they were unfair. This is in contradiction to the intent of policies such as Title I, special education, and affirmative action, which would support inequality at the individual level to raise equality at a macrolevel.

The likely explanation for the lack of action on the part of Department of Education officials to the charter school segregation findings was a contradiction between personal beliefs and definitions of social justice and the prevailing state political culture, which defined justice as equality of outcome at an individual microlevel. Personal beliefs play a significant role in the development and outcomes of political issues, but they do so only in

interaction with the larger political culture. Much of the work on the relationship between belief and political issue prominence has followed Converse's (1964) sociological model of belief system constraint, which viewed the development of political issues as a function of social learning. In this model, political attitudes and beliefs are organized into coherent structures by political elites for consumption by the public. Elites package issues that signal to the masses what it is they are to believe. And in this view, the political culture of the state would determine, without exception, the actions of state officials. However, this view ignores the freedom of the individual to choose among competing explanations.

Converse (1964) also discussed an alternative to social constraint that has largely been ignored by issue-politics scholars. He observed that much of the structure of ideological belief systems in political issues could not be entirely explained relying on a sociological rationalization. Converse (1964) argued that individuals were psychologically constrained as well as sociologically constrained and that

often such constraint is quasi-logically argued on the basis of an appeal to some superordinate value or posture toward man and society, involving premises about the nature of social justice, social change, "natural law," and the like. Thus a few crowning postures—like premises about survival of the fittest in the spirit of social Darwinism—serve as a sort of glue to bind together many more specific attitudes and beliefs, and these postures are of prime centrality in the belief system as a whole. (p. 211)

These individual psychological constraints lead us to take particular positions on social issues, predispose us to favor one particular political or religious ideology to another, and help us to evaluate and judge and to heap praise and fix blame on ourselves and others (Rokeach, 1973). Converse's psychological and social constraint, when considered together, indicate that political-issue formation results from both individual belief and political culture. And definitions of social justice and equity operate at both levels: Both individuals and political cultures manifest definitions that guide action.

I would argue here that the relationship between individual belief and the larger political culture is reciprocal. Larger political culture is constituted by the collection of individual beliefs. Individual beliefs about issues change with transformations in the political culture, with cues about the consequences of political actions, with information about sources and support for policies, and with the groups with which one identifies. "Political self-definitions and roles reflect the conditions, constraints, and opportunities in

**Table 2**  
**The Intersection of Political Culture and Personal**  
**Belief Resulting in Action or Inaction**

Political Culture	Consistency of Personal Beliefs With Political Culture	
	Consistent	Inconsistent
Supportive	Action	Indecision
Unsupportive	Indecision	Resistance

which people find themselves: that ideology and material conditions are part of the same transaction” (Edelman, 1988, p. 3). The individual political beliefs of people are then relative to social situations, which are themselves a construction of the beliefs of the individuals involved.

Although the interaction between personal belief and political culture on the whole is reciprocal, specific issues do arise, for example, because of unexpected evaluation results. When issues occur, the interaction between personal belief and political culture creates opportunities for action, indecision, and resistance (see Table 2). If personal beliefs are consistent with predominant political culture and the causal claim inherent in the issues is consistent with both, then action is possible. Likewise, when both personal belief and political culture are consistent but the inherent cause of the issue is not, then resistance and obfuscation are the likely result. Indecision and inaction will occur when either personal belief is consistent with the inherent cause of the issue but inconsistent with political culture or vice versa.

In this model of interaction between personal belief and political culture, inaction and indecision are refuges against the kind of engagement that would, if it could, keep everyone’s energies taken up with activism. The Department of Education officials perhaps understood that it would take coercion, propaganda, and the portrayal of segregation in charter schools in extreme terms to extract a change in a political culture that endorsed individual choice and charter schools. A general pattern with one extreme case would be insufficient evidence to halt the advancement of a political culture that would attribute the cause of such outcomes to the choices of individual parents and not to the charter system as a whole. Furthermore, in engaging in such activism on this specific issue, they might also lose political ground gained on others—primarily their accountability policies, which had been founded in the same political culture.

### Political Issue Evolution

The evolutionary process of political issues also plays a role in whether issues of social injustice are acted on. Political issues enter into discussion and therefore existence as legitimate problems to be acted on when they reinforce existing ideologies. As Carmines and Stimson (1989) have written about the evolution of political issues, "Some issues—a minute proportion of the potential—are well fitted into new niches provided by an evolving political environment" (p. 4). This small proportion of issues attracts attention precisely because they fit prevailing notions of causality. They are chosen for attention not because they deserve action but because the current political culture makes action possible.

The explanation or cause of an issue is then politically more important than the possibility of eliminating it through action because the explanation is a justification for the culture itself.<sup>4</sup> "To evoke a problem's origin is to assign blame and praise. . . . Each origin reduces the issue to a particular perspective and minimizes or eliminates others. Each reflects an ideology and rationalizes a course of action" (Edelman, 1988, p.17). Choice as an explanation for school segregation contradicts the larger political ideology requiring greater individual accountability for outcomes. Any affirmation of choice as an explanation for segregation is also an implicit rejection of alternative remedies for the problem, such as government intervention to correct systemic causes of inequity. In this environment, segregation resulting from choice cannot develop into a political issue that results in action.

Furthermore, affirmations of problems often act as a form of inversion in political language. My assertion that parents were choosing to segregate their children reminds those that ascribe to the dominant ideology that there are other parents who are choosing to make better choices for their children. Each assertion of a finding of injustice or inequality caused by choice resonates with the memory, or the anticipation, of other choice outcomes so that there are "radiating networks of meaning" (Edelman, 1988, p. 10) that vary with the personal beliefs, political culture, environmental context, and issues processes of the political actor. Whereas those with personal beliefs contradicting the pervasive ideology in the political culture may hear the evidence of charter school segregation as a denouncement of choice, those with personal beliefs consistent with the political culture will hear the evidence as affirmation that choice is working. Given this inversion,

Language about origins is therefore not likely to convert people from an ideology to a contrary one very often or generate an opinion that persists in spite



of exposure to changing language or new situations. Its effect, as already suggested, is to sharpen the issue, sometimes to polarize opinion, and in any case to clarify the pattern of opinion oppositions available for acceptance. (Edelman, 1988, p. 19)

### **Social Environment**

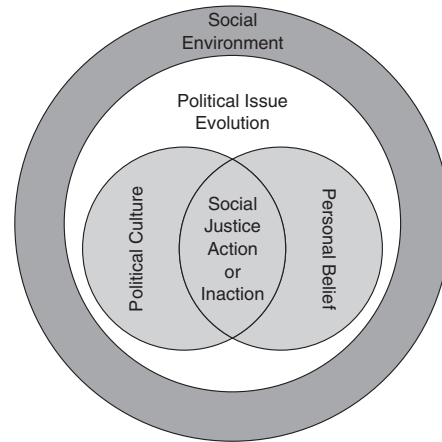
The larger social environment, too, plays a role in the evolution of political issues and the attendant political culture. The environmental context in which a political issue resides affects its longevity. Carmine and Stimson (1989) have averred that a common issue applied in the wider political environment across a long period of time must either adapt to changing political ideologies, taking on a new identity, or become extinct by its inability to adapt. In contrast, in a smaller, closed environment lacking much change, a political issue may continue to live on in its original form.

The divergent reactions to segregation in the one particular charter school on the part of local and state officials highlights the importance of variation in social environment on the political recognition of social justice issues. The local school board identified it as a problem on which they were willing to act, indicating that their personal beliefs and the local political culture were consistent with the causal claims being made by the issue. The local social environment was relatively closed. Its rural location made it less susceptible to change while rooting it in its previous history of segregation. In the local political culture, with the social environment less susceptible to change and outside influences, the issue of segregation remained at the fore; segregation was neither forced to adapt to a changing environment, nor did it become extinct or irrelevant. The state as a whole, however, had been significantly affected by changing demographics, economic and social circumstances, and the political culture of the nation. The issue of segregation in this more open environment had failed to adapt to the changing political culture after time and new issues (for example, school choice) had relegated it to the sidelines.

### **Multiple and Overlapping Systems of Social Justice Issue Formation**

Whether an issue of social injustice or inequity is acted on is determined by the interaction of multiple and overlapping systems. At the lowest level, individuals form personal beliefs that influence their positions and predispose them to political ideologies that assign cause and attribute blame. These

**Figure 1**  
**A Framework of Multiple and Overlapping**  
**Systems for Social Justice Issue Formation**



individuals operate within a larger political culture that influences and is influenced by their personal political beliefs. When potential political issues arise, personal beliefs intersect with the political culture in ways that make action more or less possible. The interaction between personal belief and political culture is further influenced by the evolutionary path of the political issue and its susceptibility within the social environment (see Figure 1).

In this framework, whether social injustice or inequity occurs at the policy and political level is more determined by how these systems interact than it is by the construction of any specific part of the system in isolation. Although I present an explanation of how the framework can explain resistance to policy change that would diminish racial inequalities, it is not my intention to diminish the place of prejudice in politics or in policy evaluations. Rather, I would argue that neither individual belief nor organizational political culture alone is sufficient explanation of political actions on racial equity questions. If we are to develop a realistic description of the politics involving social justice issues, then, as Converse (1964) wrote, our description should be “not one that omits issues and policy demands completely nor one that presumes widespread ideological coherence” (p. 247). Our framework instead should recognize the combination of values and beliefs

about the proper role of government intervention at both the personal and cultural level as influenced by processes of issue evolution and the social environment. It is only within a framework that incorporates the intersection of these multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory systems that we can understand how racial policy prejudice can be camouflaged as “rational” policy choice.

### Notes

1. Both the state and the charter schools mentioned in this article are not specifically named to comply with requirements outlined in the contract for services for the evaluation.
2. Demographic labels used in this article reflect those labels used by the state in the study.
3. My understanding of the differences between definitions of distributive and procedural social justice is based on the work of Iris Marion Young (1990).
4. My assertion that political issues have causal claims imbedded within them is influenced by the work of Deborah Stone (2001).

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