

Introduction: Elections and Education—A Question of Influence

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IN RECENT YEARS, the public school has been the backdrop of choice for elections. We have seen presidential candidates perched on small plastic chairs reading to kindergartners, gubernatorial candidates presiding over town hall meetings in high school gymnasiums, and mayoral or school board candidates holding court over pizza in the middle-school cafeteria. It is hard to recall a time in recent history when there were more “education” candidates or when education issues played a more central role in our electoral processes. During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, now-president George W. Bush visited more than 100 schools from Newark, New Jersey, to Mission Viejo, California. And although former vice president Al Gore made fewer such visits, he spent a substantial portion of time teaching civics lessons, eating in cafeterias, and sleeping at teachers’ houses. Each of these visits provided the candidates the opportunity to highlight their proposed education policies and claim themselves the next “education president.” As commentator Peter Schrag has stated, “You are not a serious candidate these days without an education policy” (*Teacher*, November/December 2000, p. 21).

In addition to the proliferation of the education candidate, we have seen a record number of school-related citizen initiatives on electoral ballots. Twenty-four states have the citizen initiative, with Arizona, California, Oregon, Colorado, and Washington using it fairly extensively. At least 20 of the more than 70 citizen initiatives on state ballots in the past year targeted educational change. In Oregon, for example, 18 citizen initiatives appeared on the November 2000 ballot. Three initiatives promised to cut taxes and cap spend-

ing. Another tried to ban instruction encouraging or sanctioning homosexuality. And three more dealt with teacher compensation issues, including a measure to pay teachers based on student performance. In Michigan and California, these initiatives would introduce vouchers; in Washington, they attempted to increase teacher pay and reduce class size; and in Arizona, they wanted to stop bilingual education. To fight for or against these initiatives, the National Education Association gave its state affiliates \$7 million—only \$2 million less than it spent on the last three election cycles combined.

This increased attention on education via election campaigns and the initiative process provides the impetus for this 2001 Politics of Education Association Yearbook and special issue of *Educational Policy*. My introduction to the volume serves four purposes. First, I provide an overview of the extant literature on the relationship between issues and elections. Second, within the discussion of the existing literature, I highlight how previous work may or may not inform our understanding(s) of the relationship between education and elections. Third, I present the questions that emerged from the literature and that guided the development of this volume. And, finally, I discuss how the articles in this issue address these questions. I turn now to the extant literature.

THE LITERATURE ON ISSUES AND ELECTIONS

The recent emergence of education in the electoral process is not a unique phenomenon but represents a more general rise in issue oriented voting. In a landmark study of voting behavior, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1972) found that following 1960, “the role of party declined as a guide to the vote. And, as party has declined in importance, the role of issues appears to have risen” (p. 156). This decline in party voting is evident in two ways: (a) The proportion of the electorate with no party affiliation has risen, and therefore, the proportion that can cast a party vote has fallen; and (b) even among those with a party affiliation, the proportion voting for the opposition party has grown (Nie et al., 1972). Studies have documented a concomitant rise in the likelihood that citizens would vote in accord with issue positions (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Jackson, 1975; Key, 1966; Page & Brody, 1972; Page & Jones, 1979; Pomper, 1972.) With this trend, citizens become more likely to hold consistent views on the issues and to use these views as criteria when considering their electoral choices.

For example, in a study of voter attention and voter turnout, Ragsdale and Rusk (1995) concluded that issues significantly influence voter turnout. Voters are more aware than nonvoters of the central issues driving campaigns.

Ragsdale and Rusk (1995) further concluded that the perceived ideological positions of the candidates on these issues also influence participation. Voters not only are more aware of campaign issues but are also more likely than non-voters to see ideological differences that encompass the issues. As a result of such research, the importance of issues in elections is rarely disputed. Rather, the contemporary issue-voting literature has focused on how much issues matter and on which issues matter in different elections (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994).

Conceptually, much of the research focusing on the impact of issues on electoral outcomes is framed by one of two perspectives: the prospective policy choice approach, and the retrospective policy satisfaction approach (Joslyn, 1984, 1986). Much of the post-1960 election research has shared a prospective policy choice approach toward electoral communication. The implicit assumptions of the research have been that elections are an opportunity for voters to contrast the opposing policy intentions of candidates and to choose the candidate with policy preferences most similar to their own. Since the 1960 elections, it is believed that election communications contain more specific, consistent, and ideological discussion of policy issues (Field & Anderson, 1969; Miller, Miller, Raine, & Brown, 1976; Pierce, 1979; Stimson, 1975). The policy-oriented rhetoric of campaigns is thought to permit electoral outcomes to be interpreted as policy referenda, policy mandates, and "popular control of policy" (Pomper, 1972; see also Boyd, 1972, p. 429). In short, this body of literature shares the assumption that elections have meaning because they provide the electorate with a measure of popular influence over future public policy decisions. Specifically, this perspective would argue that education, as an electoral issue, would have an impact on future education policy.

The retrospective policy satisfaction approach asserts that elections give citizens a periodic opportunity to evaluate recent programmatic decisions made by incumbents so that they can decide whether the incumbent candidate has performed satisfactorily. The message that is sent by the electorate, according to this view, is one of preference for either continuity or change. Support for this approach comes from observations of candidate rhetoric focusing on blame and claiming credit for previous policy decisions and existing social conditions (e.g., see Fiorino, 1981; Kinder, Adams, & Gronke, 1989; Mayhew, 1974). From this perspective, the main contribution of news coverage of public affairs to electoral decision making comes between campaign periods as a result of daily coverage by the press of policy decisions. This coverage is thought to contribute, in a pervasive yet subtle way, to general feelings of malaise or optimism, worry or satisfaction. The public, to

evaluate the conflicting attempts by candidates to take credit and place blame for policy successes and failures may then use this information base. This approach represents, then, a referendum of sorts on past education policy.

In addition to issues affecting electoral outcomes, research also indicates that issues may also have an impact on subsequent policy. Ginsberg (1976) conducted a longitudinal study of voting behavior and subsequent public policy outcomes from 1798 through 1960. His research indicated that the policy-making role of the electorate was a continuing one. American public policy was shaped to a significant degree by the behavior of voters. Ginsberg believed, however, that questions remain concerning whether or not voters are completely aware of all the implications of their actions.

Research conducted on the initiative process also suggests a connection between elections and policy outcome. For example, a study by Gerber (1996) comparing policy made legislatively versus policy made by initiative suggests that policy issues with broad majoritarian support have a greater chance of passage using the initiative process than the legislative process, whereas policy issues associated with elite groups have a greater chance of passage using the legislative process. Thus, not only can issues affect electoral outcomes, but the evidence suggests that electoral issues—whether through campaign platforms or ballot initiatives—can affect public policy.

QUESTIONS OF INFLUENCE

Much of the research presented thus far suggests that education could have an impact on elections and the outcome of these elections could have a subsequent impact on education policy. That is, campaign rhetoric or ballot initiative publicity concerning education may attract the attention of voters who would then cast their votes based on their own ideological positions. By casting their votes based on ideological choice, voters could affect subsequent education policy. For this to occur, however, education must achieve enough saliency to attract voters and must remain salient long enough for policy making to occur. Despite education playing a significant role in campaign rhetoric and in the ballot initiative process, research that would establish the relationship between education as an issue, electoral outcomes, and education policy is virtually nonexistent. The saliency of education remains in question.

If education does not have sufficient saliency to affect electoral outcomes and subsequent policy, there are a number of explanations. Some have suggested that issue attention is created by the media and that as media attention shifts, public attention shifts, leaving problems only partially attended to. Iyengar (1987, 1991) and others have shown that the television media can

affect the viewer's perception of what is important (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar, Peters, Kinder, & Krosnick, 1984). Furthermore, television coverage of issues tends to be episodic, rarely covering issues to conclusion before moving on to the next story. Voters therefore who believe specific issues to be important in election campaigns may simply be exhibiting agenda-setting effects or may be exhibiting priming effects by mentioning issues that have received the most coverage in the media. As the media move on to other agendas, previous issues lack the support necessary to continue through the policy-making process.

Other researchers who believe that issue voting has minimal impact on policy problems argue that this results from a concentration on small party politics. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that America's success and stability were due to the fact that small parties had come to dominate the political scene. Small party politics "glow with a factitious zeal; their language is violent, but their progress is timid and uncertain" (p. 175). They allow American society to creep along, contesting greatly over minor matters but leaving the basic features of society—class warfare and ideological struggles—untouched.

Americans have in recent elections accepted small policies that superficially address their social concerns without upsetting the economy or attending to the harder choices facing the country. (Elshtain & Beem, 1997). In the 1996 presidential election, Clinton effectively exploited this need for small party politics. Clinton touted insignificant policy proposals as an event of profound cultural import. Consider, for example, his proposals for V-chips to allow parents control over their children's television viewing, school uniforms, and drug testing for driver's licenses. None of the proposals required significant behavior changes from any of the electorate ("Bill Clinton's itsy-bitsy frontier," 1996, p. 8). These small and cosmetic policies create a veneer of action and purpose that simultaneously legitimates the electorate's anxiety over social issues and affirms their conservatism about the economic status quo. At the same time, these small policies may be blunting the affects of issue-oriented voting.

Related to the small-politics research are studies that are conceptually framed by the ritualistic approach. This approach, represented by Murray Edelman (1964) and W. Lance Bennett (1980), holds that the most significant features of electoral communications are their irrationality, symbolism, and articulation of consensual values. Electoral communication consists largely of myths and cultural ideals and lacks substance concerning public policies (Bennett, 1980). Election campaigns, in this view, are a ritual in which "the public opinion expressed in response to campaign issues has less to do with

making policy than with reducing social tensions and reinforcing enduring social images of the political order” (Bennett, 1980, p. 390).

QUESTIONS FRAMING THIS VOLUME

Given the extant literature on issue voting, the question remains whether education is an issue that can affect electoral outcomes and whether, if it does, it will have an impact on subsequent education policy. This Politics of Education Association Yearbook and special issue of *Educational Policy* will address such questions. Specifically, this issue will address two categories of questions: those related to influencing elections and those related to influencing education.

Influencing Elections

- What role does education play in electoral politics?
- Does education play a role in determining the conditions of the political debate and in shaping the nature of partisan alignment?
- Does education significantly influence electoral outcomes?

Influencing Education

- Do electoral outcomes, in turn, significantly affect education policy?
- Or is education strictly a symbolic and rhetorical tool used to attract electoral support?
- If education is influenced by electoral outcomes, is this impact strictly an American phenomenon? That is, do electoral politics affect education in other democracies as well?

Obviously, the articles in this issue cannot definitively answer the questions about education and elections that frame this yearbook. Nor can the pieces attempt to cover the range and scope of research that has been conducted by political scientists on issues and elections. The articles in this issue do, however, highlight for us three things. First, the articles illustrate the types of research that are being conducted in this area of study. Second, they raise both methodological and substantive concerns that need to be addressed in future work. And third, they collectively provide the beginnings of a research agenda for education politics scholars interested in elections.

The articles are grouped in this volume by the types of questions they attempt to address: those concerning influences on elections and those concerning influences on education. In the first section are five articles that concentrate on influences on elections. The first article by Abe Feuerstein argues that school governance reforms, including mayoral takeovers, state inter-

vention, and various market-driven models, threaten local voice in educational affairs that is expected to occur via elections. Feuerstein further argues that deliberative democracy presents an alternative to adversarial practices that rely too heavily on elections and voting to create a sense of legitimacy.

In the second article, Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin uses discourse analysis to examine how the media coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign operated as an arena of discourse. She concludes that media (mis)representations hinder both public perceptions of education and democracy via elections. A. Reynaldo Contreras discusses in his piece the impact that electoral law has had on minority group efforts to participate in the electoral process. Specifically, he focuses on factors that play a critical role in obstructing minority enfranchisement. He concludes that the issue of political equality through elections cannot be addressed before the hurdle of minority enfranchisement is fully understood and resolved.

Two articles that examine education's influence on presidential elections conclude the first section. Frederick Hess and Patrick McGuinn offer a reassessment of education's symbolic and substantive role in contemporary presidential politics. Hess and McGuinn analyze presidential elections over three decades to argue that education has and will continue to have an impact on these elections. The article by Melissa Marschall and Robert McKee provides a good transition between articles that address questions of influence on elections and those that address questions of influence on education. Marschall and McKee analyze campaign messages to examine the specific positions George W. Bush and Al Gore promoted during the 2000 presidential campaign as well as the strategies they employed to win over the electorate. The authors then explore the effects that the campaign had on the president's policy agendas and governance in the first months of his term. Their article thus addresses both influences on elections and influences on education policy.

The section of the issue that addresses questions about influences on education begins with a piece by Philip Woods. Woods places education as an electoral issue in the context of the political philosophies of the Conservative and Labour parties in the United Kingdom. He tracks the move from a predominantly neoliberalism focus to a "third way" approach within the United Kingdom and the subsequent impacts on the provision of education. The second article in this section by Lance Fusarelli examines the effect of gubernatorial turnover on education policy initiatives in Florida, New York, and Texas. Fusarelli identifies several national and local forces that have created conditions in which partisan gubernatorial control matters less than previous research suggests.

The article by Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen examines two types of education reform to explore the proposition that the type of education reform a state chooses will be significantly affected by a state's electoral dynamics. Their analysis suggests that the adoption and implementation of the chosen reforms could not be adequately explained by a state's electoral dynamics. The study reported by Michael McLendon and Stuart Eddings clarifies the nature and scope of the statewide ballot phenomenon as it affects the higher education policy domain. They suggest that voters have not exhibited great interest in campus governance issues, except as they intersect larger societal issues.

Finally, this volume is concluded with an article by Kenneth Meier that outlines a research agenda for the study of the relationship between elections and education. In addition to issues raised by the other authors, Meier provides suggestions for research on various types of elections including: school board elections, local non-school board elections, state elections, and national elections. Meier also cautions scholars of elections and education to attend to the contexts of implementation and their impact on the outcomes of education policy.

Together, these articles provide an introduction to the highly discussed but little understood relationship between elections and education. It is hoped that this Politics of Education Association Yearbook and special issue of *Educational Policy* will provide those interested in the politics of education with new ideas and understandings on which to base future elections and education research.

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