

Political Responsiveness Writ Large or Small?

Michael B. Berkman and Eric Plutzer. 2005. *Ten Thousand Democracies: Politics and Public Opinion in America's School Districts*.

Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 206 pp.

In this finely crafted book, Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer ask a simple question: Does school spending around the country reflect people's variable "tastes" for education? The answer appears to be yes. Culling a wide variety of data sets, new and old, the authors report that citizens' support for public education is a huge predictor of per-pupil expenditures, suggesting that school boards may yet attend to the core interests and priorities of the public they are meant to serve. In so doing, Berkman and Plutzer manage to advance, perhaps inadvertently, a powerful defense of local governance.

And not a moment too soon. For some time now, political commentators and social scientists have called for either the radical restructuring or the outright abolition of school boards, insisting that Progressive Era notions of accountability and professionalism have persistently given way to graft, waste, and interest-group capture. According to Chester Finn, these numerically common but politically obscure governing institutions do far more to subvert the public will than to advance it.

There may still be some tranquil towns and leafy suburbs where the platonic ideal of the elected local school board flourishes: with the community's foremost citizens running in nonpartisan elections, then selflessly devoting themselves to the best interests of all the community's children. But in the parts of U.S. education that cause the greatest concern,

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namely cities large and small, today's typical elected local school board resembles a dysfunctional family, comprised of three unlovable sorts: aspiring politicians for whom this is a stepping stone to higher office, former school-system employees with a score to settle, and single-minded advocates of diverse dubious causes who yearn to use the public schools to impose their particular hang-ups on all the kids in town (Finn 2003).

Rarely, it would seem, do average parents (much less average citizens) find voice in these local governing institutions.

The findings of Berkman and Plutzer, however, offer a more optimistic view. Even after controlling for a host of socioeconomic district characteristics, the authors find that mass public opinion routinely informs school spending patterns around the nation. Moreover, Berkman and Plutzer report that some increasingly popular institutional reforms would appear to strengthen the observed relationship between public opinion and school spending—specifically, switching from elected to appointed boards and integrating school finance decisions with other municipal governing arrangements. With mayoral and state takeovers on the rise, a newfound era of democratic responsiveness may yet take hold in major urban settings around the country.

The most provocative findings in this concise and accessible book concern the role of teachers unions. A number of prominent scholars, most notably Terry Moe and Caroline Hoxby, have documented the ways in which teachers unions distort systems of democratic accountability. Through voter-turnout drives, direct mailings, and donations, Moe and Hoxby have shown that teachers unions have established themselves as the most powerful force in education politics today. But according to Berkman and Plutzer, unions do not reduce, much less undermine, democratic responsiveness. Observed correlations between public opinion and school spending are equally robust in states with strong unions as in states with weak unions.

It is quite possible that unions exert more influence over the ways in which districts allot their resources than the total amount they actually spend. Nothing about the work of Berkman and Plutzer speaks to the possibilities that unions systematically reshape hiring and firing practices, curricular and scheduling decisions, or teacher-training programs in ways that contravene public preferences and priorities. But if Berkman and Plutzer are right, the influence of unions nonetheless appears circumscribed. Even when unions are unified and strong, they cannot flagrantly subvert public sentiment when trying to pressure local districts to spend more on public schools.

These findings, then, have profound implications for our understanding of local democratic control. Whether they are correct, though, isn't immediately apparent. Berkman and Plutzer, after all, face a basic empirical challenge—namely, to measure citizens' preferences for education. And this is no small task. For, as the authors themselves lament, there currently exist no data sets that measure mass support for public education in each of the nearly 15,000 school districts nationwide, and given the monumental costs associated with assembling representative samples in each district, the authors are in no position to construct one.

The authors therefore propose an alternative strategy. Rather than observe citizens' preferences directly, Berkman and Plutzer attempt to infer them on the basis of citizens' demographic profiles. The idea is straightforward enough: after establishing that education usually correlates positively with support for school spending and owning a home and being white correlate negatively, the authors rely on readily available data on local

education, homeownership, and racial patterns in order to impute district opinions. Where there are more highly educated people, renters, and nonwhites, Berkman and Plutzer impute higher levels of support for school spending, and where there are fewer such people, they impute lower levels of support.

Of course, the execution of the technique, which they label small polity inference, is far more complicated than all this supposes. For starters, the composition of the relevant “public” itself is difficult to establish. Does it consist of the population of adults within each district? Adults with children? Adults with children in public schools? Adults, no matter their parental status, who actually turn out to vote in school board elections? Lacking clear answers to these questions, not to mention the data required to distinguish them, Berkman and Plutzer opt for the most inclusive option, assessing the composition of all adults within each school district.

The troubles, however, do not cease here. Although the authors document how different characteristics correlate, one at a time, with support for school spending, they unavoidably confront serious challenges when trying to check the interactions between these variables. They note that “a suburban, black college graduate in Georgia” and a “white, urban high school graduate in California” have, on average, very different views about public education spending (p. 10). But when simulating district preferences, Berkman and Plutzer consider the independent influence first of state, age and race combined, then state and size of place combined, then state and education combined, and finally state and homeownership status combined, but never all the interactions that comprise either a suburban, black college graduate from Georgia or a white, urban high school graduate in California. Further, with only census data to distinguish each district, Berkman and Plutzer wholly ignore other important factors that surely inform public support for education spending, notably political ideology. Their models, instead, depend entirely on a handful of demographic controls.

Additional concerns arise about their chosen measure of school support itself. Their question, drawn from different General Social Surveys implemented over the course of a decade, reads as follows: “Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the nation’s education system?” The trouble, of course, is that people’s beliefs about the adequacy of current school expenditures depends in part on their current levels, and as the authors themselves establish early in the book, actual spending varies widely across the nation. Additionally, as worded, the question does not strictly measure people’s attitudes about school spending but rather the government’s commitment to reforming an existing school system. Rather than asking whether enough money is being spent on public schools per se, it asks whether enough is being spent on “*improving* the nation’s education system.” And finally, the source of school funding varies markedly from district to district, in some places relying predominantly on local sources and in others on state and federal governments. There is reason to worry that people’s answers will reflect these differences. In those districts that rely almost exclusively on local funding, increased education spending may trigger higher tax burdens, but in those that draw from state and federal coffers, increased spending may represent a genuine windfall.

Collectively, these concerns raise foundational questions about the core findings of Berkman and Plutzer. But one should not exaggerate them. Many of these problems are not of these authors’ making but instead spring from limitations in the available data sets. The authors go to some length to demonstrate the validity of their measure of public opinion. To their credit, they estimate a series of statistical models that are sufficiently flexible to

allow the influence of each demographic control on public support for school spending to vary across states, an important innovation that duly acknowledges the importance of regional differences across the country. The findings presented in this book warrant serious consideration, and they will serve, I suspect, as the industry standard for some time.

Most importantly, perhaps, the authors state the strengths and weaknesses of their own research design quite explicitly. All hands are above board here, as Berkman and Plutzer illustrate the rich possibilities for conducting quantitative research on local education politics. *Ten Thousand Democracies* exhibits all the qualities of serious statistical work: a clear question, the application of appropriate methods to answer the question, and a measured assessment of the findings. If more scholars took their cues from this pair when studying education politics, the field would shine a bit brighter than it currently does.

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REFERENCE

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