

Electoral Politics and School Finance Reform

Jeffrey Henig

From the standpoint of those seeking material goods or social justice, the different levels and branches of government represent distinct decision-making venues. Each has its own rules of thumb for decision-making, its own resources, its own formal rules, and its own alignment of privileged actors. Douglas Reed focused primarily on the judicial arena, with a shift from the federal to the state level and from race to class. My focus here will be the electoral politics involved in school reform, primarily at the local level. It, too, will address some of the related issues of race and class.

To African Americans in the 1950s, the federal courts appeared more promising than local governments as a venue for pursuing their claims. Electoral politics tend to respond to mobilized voter majorities, and at that time blacks in this country were not only in the minority in most jurisdictions but also faced local, racially conservative political regimes that still used both formal rules and informal intimidation to limit black participation. The judicial arena appeared attractive by comparison. It had its own set of obstacles, but at least it held the prospect of decisions that would elevate constitutional principle over political popularity.

Since then, however, both the population and control of the local formal levers of government have shifted from white to black hands in a number of large school districts. Back in the 1950s, some looked forward to this as constituting the best solution for the problems of urban schools. The early assumption was that a predominately white teaching force with low expectations was playing a major role in limiting the achievement of African-American children, so a change in faculty racial composition seemed crucial. Although the racial complexion of the teaching force changed in some cities, the problems remained, and so the new

Jeffrey Henig is Professor and Chair, Political Science, George Washington University; author, *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor* (Princeton University Press, 1994); *Public Policy and Federalism: Issues in State and Local Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1985); *Neighborhood Mobilization: Redevelopment and Response* (Rutgers University Press, 1982); co-author, *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (University Press of Kansas, 2001); *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton University Press, 1999); *Shrinking the State: The Political Underpinnings of Privatization* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

goal became control of the school systems' administrative apparatus. In some increasingly black cities, African Americans then began to be chosen for superintendent and school board positions; often such racial change in administrative control of schools predated the shift in other bureaucracies such as those responsible for police, fire, and economic development. Again, the shift in the race of those in charge did not lead to sharp and clear improvements in educational performance, and again the ante was raised. Many people began to argue that controlling the schools did not matter, absent control over money and power and city councils and mayors' offices.

In *The Color of School Reform*, Richard Hula, Marian Orr, Desiree Pedescleaux and I looked at what we called black-led cities: cities in which the formal control of local government had shifted in large part to African-American hands.¹ We studied Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit and Washington, grappling with the question of why the shift in racial control had not had the impact that some had envisioned.

Most of the education literature provides little help in addressing this question because it contains a terribly naive view of the situation in cities. It depicts education as an apple pie issue about which everyone agrees, and as an arena in which hard issues and the divisions around race and class that are a part of local politics fade into the background. If this were correct, if everyone agreed that education is important, if that belief put white downtown business leaders and neighborhood community activists and parents and taxpayers all on the same page, then the failure of urban school systems to improve could be attributable to lack of understanding about what to do, or lack of coordination in going about it, or self-interested behavior by bad guys elevating their own interests above those of the common good.

The tradition of emphasizing a common objective interest is deeply embedded in the way Americans historically have thought about schools. The literature's similar de-emphasis on cleavages, particularly of race, is not particularly new or surprising. The old fashioned explanation for it is the discomfort that people have in talking seriously about race. A newer set of theories holds that race simply isn't as important as it used to be, and that the story about what affects politics and social change in the country is really about economics.

If we assume, however, that interests are not necessarily common and aligned and that race may continue to be an important source of political motivation and cleavage, we get a very different set of expectations for the city.

	Fragmented interests	Commonly shared interests
Racialized politics	<p><i>Racial Conflict</i></p> <p>(Symbolic & emotive conflict)</p>	<p><i>Progressive Race-based Regime</i></p> <p>(Black officials & community-based redistribution)</p>
Deracialized Politics	<p><i>Politics as Usual</i></p> <p>(Bargaining and patronage)</p>	<p><i>Deracialized Development Regime</i></p> <p>(Economic interest overrides race)</p>

From Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban School Reform*. Princeton University Press, 1999.

The chart above lays out four different scenarios for the kinds of educational change that will occur, depending on whether you assume (as in the lower two quadrants of the chart) that race is becoming unimportant and politics is becoming deracialized, or (as in the upper two quadrants) that race still constitutes an important cleavage. The other dimension is whether you assume (the right two quadrants) that people share interests when it comes to education and agree both on its importance over other priorities and on what must be done, including what must be done for low-income and minority students. Conversely, do you assume that interests are fragmented, that groups approach politics with more parochial concerns and try to carve out the biggest possible piece of the pie for themselves? Those factors generate the four scenarios.

The upper right progressive race-based regime represents the optimistic scenario shared by many within the minority community in the 1950s as they envisioned the possibility of minority control of cities. It was based on the assumption that once African-American leaders attained positions of political power, they and the parents of children in these schools would share a common progressive agenda, and would agree about the importance of investing in education.

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Another optimistic scenario, depicted in the lower right, was about the deracialized development regime. It was based on the notion that race would become increasingly less important and the still predominately white local business leaders and the new black leaders would share a common interest in building up the schools as a tool for economic development and growth.

Then there were two less optimistic perceptions. The first was one in which race continued to be a source of symbolic and polarized conflict; the second predicted politics as usual after racial change. That meant that schools would continue to be a source of patronage and that neighborhoods would battle over getting the bigger share of the teachers or the capital budget and the like.

What we discovered was that no single one of these four scenarios accounts for the dynamics of school politics in black-led cities; instead, each captures a piece of the story. Our study was part of a larger study of eleven cities, the other seven of which were not predominately black-led.² We found, when we looked at all the cities regardless of racial or ethnic confrontation, that many of the cleavages did not reflect race in a direct or obvious way. On the other hand, we found that race still was – and is – a powerful force as a perceptual filter. It is a baseline definer of patterns of trust; a reservoir of potent symbols that can be divisive or unifying or both at the same time but that have tended to complicate rather than simplify the challenge of school reform.

Most of what we found did not depend upon the racial composition of the cities; in fact, when it came to educational reform, the four black-led cities looked very much like the other seven cities in the larger project. Most of these urban school systems faced tremendous problems. Some of the problems were the result of suburbanization and disinvestment, but roughly half of the cities spent more per pupil on their schools than did the surrounding suburbs.

We concluded that of course the central city schools need and deserve more, but they can and should do more with what they have as well. The problems are those involved with mounting a sustained education reform movement. They do not reflect a lack of effort, a resistance to new ideas, or fundamental cleavages that made it impossible for local black leaders to work with white businesses, foundations or state officials. In all of the cities we studied, there were numerous examples of systemic reform endeavors in which business community and local community leaders came together to elect a reform board, or agreed in other ways. But in all cases, these efforts were sporadic and ephemeral, and had limited measurable long-term gains.

I would therefore argue that the primary challenge is to build a constituency that can sustain school reform, not simply initiate it.

School reform is much more difficult than a lot of the other things cities do. It is harder to address serious school reform than to build a convention center or a sports stadium or other things that cities do well and that bring white and black constituencies together.

In addition, we found that in many ways the predictions imbedded in the more racialized theories of the upper quadrants did not hold up very well. Let me give you three examples.

First: We anticipated a fair amount of polarization by race in the way people reacted to the idea of the business community taking a lead. We expected that business leaders would talk about the importance of dealing with waste and their own expertise in taking over, and that in the grassroots community-based sectors we would find resistance to the idea of business playing a role that was perceived as being imposed on the community. But that is not what our interviews showed. The language across these different sectors was very similar. Some of the strongest, most fervent arguments we heard in favor of business taking a lead in school reform came from community activists at the grassroots level.

The second example of a racialized vision not holding up: We found much in these cities that could be explained by the politics of jobs and patronage. As Douglas Reed mentioned, schools are big business, especially in central cities where the private sector is often constrained. In Baltimore, Detroit and Washington, the school district is the city's largest employer. As many conservative critics argue, the teachers' unions often play a reactionary role, resisting reform out of fear that it will translate into more work or fewer jobs. This is a dynamic that is familiar to many cities because it resembles what they experienced during the Progressive reform era some seventy years ago, albeit with a different racial and ethnic composition.

Third: The fact that a majority of the teachers and school administrators were now black rather than white did not result in a dramatic new sense of common purpose among school personnel and the predominately black students and parents. There were many indications of a striking class cleavage within the African-American communities. Black teachers exhibited considerable scorn towards the families and parents, while the parents felt that they were looked down upon and not truly welcome in the school communities. (All of these are of course generalizations with many exceptions.)

On the other hand, we found that race altered the way even these relationships played out – not race simply as skin color and prejudice, but race as a shared political history that resulted in racially framed perceptions and

racially grounded loyalties. Ironically, to the extent that it generated a common purpose and capacity to mobilize, race was manifested less in support of broad school reform than in reaction against reform initiatives that were seen as threatening local institutions that had only recently passed into African-American hands. Again, three examples.

Example one: Conservative rhetoric about the failure of school reform suggests that the unions are simply too powerful, and that they block school reform. But in every other sector in this country the unions have been increasingly weak, and in fact weak unions are the norm in education as well. There is low participation in teachers' unions, in part because many of the teachers live in the suburbs. Why, then, are the unions able to block reforms that they find threatening?

Our answer to that is that they were able to count on their ability to mobilize both the parents and the crucial black church community. Those constituencies supported them in opposing what was seen as an attack on a very valued local institution. Historically, schools in these cities have played a major role in community-building and in providing jobs to educated African Americans when jobs weren't available elsewhere. The leadership of the civil rights movement was made up in large part of educators and the churches, and the remnants of that coalition remain.

Example two: White business leaders and black government leaders spoke similarly about schools. When it came to a long-term working relationship, however, the vision of the business community and city hall working together to raise money and support sustained initiatives did not hold up. Commentators have overestimated the white business communities' objective need to invest in the schools. Many individual business leaders are genuinely concerned and willing to devote time and energy to the cause of local school reform, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Most business leaders see their real responsibility as lying elsewhere, and they reckon that if necessary they can meet their employment needs by hiring workers from outside the city system or training their own workers. When the going gets tough in the school reform enterprise, when the rhetoric flies hot and heavy in what is frequently a controversial area, most of the business community pulls back.

In addition, even when local African-American leaders see a reason to pursue a common agenda with the business community, they perceive themselves as threatened by challengers at the grassroots level who will portray them as being controlled by the white business elite.

Third example: Just as blacks are gaining more control of formal local authority, the reins of power are increasingly being pulled back to the state

legislatures where the racial balance is quite different. That may be coincidental, although I doubt it.

We all know that it is difficult to mount and sustain a collective purpose to address social problems. It is especially difficult when formal authority is as fragmented as it is in the American system of federalism, with its emphasis on checks and balances. And it is all the more so in central cities, where the combination of concentrated poverty and the pull of the suburban exit option exacerbates problems while sapping resources.

Courts can be an important tool to leverage change in some of the structural imbalances, when politics alone would not suffice, but ultimately the courts too need a political constituency if their gains are to be realized and sustained. That is the background story to much of Douglas Reed's *On Equal Terms*.³

Race is potent in this context because it amplifies some of the structural problems faced by cities, and because it is a powerful perceptual filter. It is both personal and rooted in historical experiences that affect the bonds of trust and loyalty upon which collaborative political endeavors depend.

For these reasons, I think there is likely to be a natural tendency for cities to fall back on less demanding and problematic modes of action. They turn to politics as usual, and focus on more straightforward and technical tasks such as downtown development projects. Or they substitute within-group solidarity based on racial symbolism for a pragmatic pursuit of tangible collective gains. Progressive human capital investment-oriented regimes are the hardest to sustain. A development regime, although still a challenge, is easier. Patronage and racial polarization are the equilibrium states towards which we can expect cities to gravitate.

This will remain true unless we can build a civic capacity that will support extensive and extended commitment even in the face of competing needs, and even when progress is so slow and difficult to document that it is unlikely to show up until after current elected officials are long gone and displaced by others.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Henig, Richard C. Hula, Marion Orr, and Desiree S. Pedescleaux, *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. The other cities in the study were Boston, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and St. Louis.

3. Douglas S. Reed, *On Equal Terms: The Constitutional Politics of Educational Opportunity* (Princeton University Press, 2001).