

Local Control, Democracy, and the Separation in the Public Opinion of School Finance Reform

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Abstract

What role does a person's support for local educational control play in determining her attitude towards equity-minded school finance reform? This article reports estimations of binary and ordered probit models of two state public opinion polls and discusses newspaper coverage from the same two states to determine if and how local control has such an effect. The results from both analyses show that a person's commitment to local financial control is a consistent predictor of her evaluation of finance reform but that her commitment to the democratic virtues local governance can provide is not. These results can help predict when attitudes about local control will and will not affect people's evaluations of other education policies.

Introduction

Efforts to centralize K-12 public school funding at the state level to ensure greater spending equity between poor and rich school districts have been among the most contentious policy proposals of the past 30 years and almost always excite tremendous opposition.¹ To explain this opposition, some observers have invoked the country's tradition of locally controlled public education. Schooling in the United States began in schoolhouses that each town operated, and local control of public education remains a cherished ideal (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Today, polls show that a majority of the public prefers education decisions be made locally, rather than at the state or

¹ For example, in New Jersey pundits have attributed Governor Jim Florio's failure to win re-election in 1993 campaign to his school finance reform plan and the tax hike that accompanied it (Scovronick & Corcoran, 1998). In 1998 Republicans in Vermont were able to ride discontent over the state's reform plan to a majority in the state's House of Representatives for the first time in 16 years (Associated Press, 1998).

federal level (Hochschild & Scott, 1998). By shifting the source of school funding from local to state sources, school finance centralization appears to be incompatible with strong local control. Reed (2001) finds that nothing erodes popular support for school finance reform more than fears that it might compromise local control. Ideology, partisanship, class, age, and race are all significant determinants of reform evaluations in certain states, but commitment to local control is by far the most important determinant (see also Briffault, 1992; Carr & Furman, 1999).²

Reed's (2001) findings represent a decided improvement on the existing studies of the public opinion of school finance reform, but they also leave several interesting questions unanswered. Most education scholars agree that local control of American public education has been in decline for at least 50 years (Finn, 1992; Johnston & Sandham, 1999; Killian, 1984; McGuinn, 2005; Nappi, 1999). Today, often the most important "decision" local actors make is whether to implement federal or state policy willingly or to attempt to bend it to their own purposes (Malen, 2003). The public has supported most policies that have led to the centralization of education decision making. Sixty-three percent of the population favors using standardized tests to hold schools accountable to national and state learning standards, a proposal that transfers authority in curriculum and student evaluation away from the local district. Fifty-seven percent of the public approves of the expansion of the federal role in public education under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Phi Delta Kappan and the Gallup Organization, 2002). One might ask why localism would matter in some education policy debates like school finance reform but would not in others.

This article explores the public opinion of school finance reform with a particular emphasis on the role of localism. The field of political science has conducted extensive research into which factors shape public opinion and whether attitudes about intergovernmental relations can affect policy preferences. Guided by this body of research, binary and ordered probit models of public opinion polls were estimated from two states where contentious school finance debates have occurred to test whether one's commitment to local education control is a significant predictor of her attitude on reform

2 Political science scholars have found that local government is more popular than state and federal government and people's evaluations of the proper distribution of responsibilities among the levels may influence their policy preferences (Arceneaux 2005; Kincaid & Cole, 2005; Schneider & Jacoby, 2003).

even when more conventional determinants of social welfare policy attitudes are controlled. Hypotheses were additionally tested by analyzing media coverage of reform movements in these same two states. Results suggest that commitment to local control is a consistent predictor of a person's evaluation of reform, but it is a commitment to a very specific type of local control. The public seems not to value the ability of local educational control to promote the democratic virtues of small-scale governance. Instead, the public values local financial control of school taxation and spending priorities. These results cannot specify exactly why the public values local financial control, but previous scholarship offers the desire to maximize the services one receives while minimizing their tax budget and the desire of suburbanites to wash their hands of the problems of inner city schools as hypotheses to both explain these results and guide further research. Discussion of the results can help explain the American public's mixed feelings on local control. The public will support reform proposals that centralize aspects of educational governance but leave the basic structure of education finance in tact, but reforms that compromise local financing or pupil assignment face significant barriers.

Background (Literature Review)

Part of the confusion over local control's role in shaping attitudes may stem from the failure to specify exactly what "local control" means. Usually the public's love for local control is simply posited without much data or explanation to substantiate the claim (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). One particularly striking shortcoming occurs when analysts lump together a host of theoretical arguments for local control's strength without testing each argument's relative importance. No scholar has empirically tested which aspects of localism most affect the public's policy positions, but as discussed below several theorists have offered ideas that one can group into two testable hypotheses that measure distinct reasons for supporting local control.

Tocqueville and the Virtues of Small-Scale Democracy

Since Aristotle, numerous theorists have praised small, local units of democratic governance as the truest form of democracy. According to these theorists, keeping decision making local encourages greater citizen participation and ensures that government can tailor policy to meet diverse local conditions

(Tocqueville, 1969). Local governments serve as “laboratories for democracy” in which each government shares successful innovations and as classrooms in which citizens learn the skills necessary to sustain a democracy (Briffault, 1992; Wirt & Kirst, 1997). People from across the ideological spectrum agree with the National School Board Association’s description of school boards as “the nation’s preeminent expression of grassroots democracy” (Shannon, 1994, p. 387) (see also Deckman, 2004; LaHaye, 1997).

Some argue that a love for these democratic virtues drives opposition to proposals that centralize decision making at the state or federal level. Tocqueville (1969) expressed this idea with his usual eloquence:

The New Englander is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he has an interest in it because he shares in its management...in the restricted sphere within his scope, he learns to rule society; he gets to know those formalities without which freedom can advance only through revolutions, develops a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and in the end accumulates clear, practical ideas about the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights. (p. 70).

Many believe that the public’s support for local finance stems from a similar desire to keep education governance in the hands of the everyday citizen. In discussing opposition to school finance reform in Maine, former Governor John Rettie McKernan, Jr., expressed this sentiment by saying, “we’re the land of the town meeting and direct democracy. People in Brunswick don’t want people in Topsham telling them how to run their schools” (Ferdinand, 1998, p. A3). Those who value this aspect of localism to reject school finance reform because they view it as a threat to the positive democratic goods that strong local governments can provide.

Hypothesis 1: One’s attachment to the democratic virtues local education provides is a significant determinant of one’s position on school finance reform.

Localism and Suburban Separation

The second hypothesis is that people embrace localism because they favor local financial control. Scholars offer at least two sets of justification for

public embrace of local financial control.³ Tiebout (1956) famously argued that local jurisdictions attempt to provide the highest possible level of service at the lowest possible cost so as to win the competition for consumer-voters, who will choose jurisdictions that provide a level of services and costs that they find most beneficial (see also Stein, 1999). The fact that people may pay more for property located in areas that provide the best service/price ratio is particularly relevant to school finance reform efforts. In an attempt to narrow the gap in school quality between affluent and less affluent areas, these efforts threaten to increase taxes on the relatively affluent. Were such a system to succeed, the cost of living in a wealthy area would increase and the level of educational service decrease, a change that would surely depress the real estate market in these areas. Thus, if school finance reform succeeds, voters in wealthy areas may see their property values plummet, an outcome most such residents would feverishly oppose (Brunner, Sonstelie, & Thayer, 2001; Nechyba, 2000).

A second part of the financial hypothesis is the argument that suburban residents favor local financial control because it allows them to avoid paying for services designed to help the urban poor. When policy decisions are made at the local level, more affluent citizens can use municipal boundaries to avoid paying for services for the less affluent. Thus the affluent are able to keep their taxes relatively low while still enjoying a high level of services for their own children. Scholars such as Gainsborough (2001) argue that wealthy residents are aware of this phenomenon and use arguments in favor of strong local government to justify what is at base a desire to minimize social welfare spending. “To suburban dwellers, the appeal of returning . . . power to states and localities is that it allows communities with relatively healthy tax bases and relatively few needy residents to keep taxes low and services high” (p. 17). Supporters of school finance reform believe this localism drives opposition to finance reform. As Texas District Court Judge Scott McCown said, “Local control [is] a code word for the rich spending money the poor don’t have” (Reed, 2001, p. 133). Studies have shown that the desire of affluent whites to remain separate from poor nonwhites affects people’s evaluations of other education reforms like school choice (M. Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Wrinkle, Stewart, & Polinard, 1999).

3 By no means are these justifications mutually exclusive.

Hypothesis 2: One's desire to retain the financial benefits local school funding makes possible is a significant determinant of one's position on school finance reform.

Other Factors that may Influence Attitudes on School Finance Reform

A person's commitment to local control is not the only thing that may drive her resistance to school finance reform. As described below, the factors that education and political science scholars have found that influence people's policy evaluations on other similar programs may also affect attitudes on school finance. Political science studies have linked a person's symbolic attitudes like partisan identification, ideology, and racial prejudice to a host of relevant policies, including school funding (Swenson, 2000; Wood & Theobald, 2003), school desegregation (Citrin & Green, 1990; Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980), and social welfare spending (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Gilens, 1999). Because education and the welfare of children have traditionally been considered "women's issues," women may be more likely to support school funding increases than men (Kahn, 1994). Several factors related to a person's calculation of their self interest may also affect attitudes on finance reform. Bowler and Donovan (1995) have found that people's resistance to state and local taxes varies with their income and whether they owned property.⁴ Parents with school age children are more likely to become active in anti-school desegregation movements (Green & Cowden, 1992). Older residents are more likely to favor reductions in school spending, especially when older whites perceive their higher taxes will benefit minority children (Poterba, 1997). Residents of poorer communities might favor finance reform because their districts would benefit. Tedin (1994) found that self-interest variables and measures of symbolic attitudes were equally responsible for a person's position on school finance reform. As this literature suggests, public opinion scholars of attitudes may expect self interest and symbolic politics to have a much larger effect on evaluation of finance reform than either of the local control hypotheses.

⁴ Political science scholars are generally skeptical of claims that financial self-interest influences people's policy evaluations when the monetary stakes are large and visible, and the connection between the proposal and higher tax rates is clear. School finance reform may meet these criteria—it promises to redistribute a huge amount of money, it is always one of the most contentious issues in state capitols, and opponents of reform often stress how it might lead to higher taxes (Scovronick & Corcoran, 1998).

Choice of State for Analysis

For this analysis Alabama and Texas were selected because data sets discussed in greater detail below from these states had measures of the key concepts and because both states have had visible school finance reform movements. On January 19, 1991, a group of parents filed the *Harper v. Hunt* lawsuit against the state of Alabama, charging that its school funding system, with its high reliance on local taxes, did not allow less affluent districts to provide a quality education, and therefore violated the state constitution. In 1993 Montgomery Circuit Judge Gene Reese ruled the existing funding system unconstitutional and mandated that any new system fund different school districts more equally. Critics dubbed the response that Governor Fob James and the Alabama legislature crafted the plan its critics dubbed “Fobin Hood,” because it relied on redistribution of existing funds from relatively affluent districts to poorer districts to achieve greater equity.

Texas is the home to one of the longest running school finance reform battles in the nation. It was a Texas case, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court found no federal constitutional responsibility to remedy school finance inequities and left the issue to states. In the late 1980s, 13 poor school districts filed the *Edgewood V. Kirby* suit. In 1989 the Texas Supreme Court unanimously upheld a lower court ruling for the plaintiffs and suggested that an equitable finance system “does not preclude the ability of communities to exercise local control over the education of their children” (Ascher, 1993). Even today concerns about school finance continue to dog the state. In 2004 the Texas Assembly called a special session to revisit the issue, and more affluent districts had filed a case seeking to overturn the *Edgewood* remedies. Throughout this debate some Texans championed local control and sought to protect local power against the perceived centralization that finance reform would cause (Killian, 1984; Pagel, 1995). The debates surrounding the finance reform movements in these two states mirror many of those of other states, but obviously further research is necessary to extend the findings reported here.

Methodology

To test these hypotheses the National Network of State Polls database (http://www.irss.unc.edu/data_archive/home.asp) was searched for public

opinion polls that people's support for both school finance reform and local educational control. This search yielded several available data sets. Data from Alabama and Texas were selected for the reasons stated above. The dependent variable in each model is support for equity-minded school finance reform.⁵ In the Texas data set, where the dependent variable is a simple "agree/disagree" variable, a binary probit model was estimated. In the Alabama data set, in which it was scaled as a four category "strongly agree/mildly agree/mildly disagree/strongly disagree" variable, an ordered probit model was estimated. Included as independent variables are measures of level of education, age, income, whether the respondent was a property owner, gender, ideology, political party, and race. The author has conducted statistical analyses of similar data from three other states, the results of which are presented in the online appendix available at <http://www.wfu.edu/~shellybt/>. To make results more accessible the marginal effects of statistically significant changes in independent variables in the two models are presented.

Two distinct types of independent variables are used to test the two hypotheses. The measure of Hypothesis 1 in the Alabama poll measured whether respondents supported the establishment of school-based management councils, which divest governance powers previously given to the state and local school boards to a group of parents, teachers, and administrators at each school. They have become a popular reform undertaken in an attempt to return decision-making power to individual schools (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 1999). The Texas poll asked whether respondents favored the state setting standards for local school construction, a policy that would increase state supervision of local activity and compromise local autonomy. Advocates of local control have singled out school construction as one of the most important policy areas over which school boards still have power (Arsen et al., 2005). If Hypotheses 1 is true, support for the local option in these questions should consistently diminish people's support for finance reform. This result would suggest that local control affects people's views on finance reform because people value the opportunities for participation and the ability to respond to local conditions that local educational governance provides.

The two variables used to test Hypothesis 2 measures public support for efforts to take financial authority away from local school districts and vest it in the state. The Alabama poll asks whether a respondent would increase

⁵ The online appendix lists the questions used as dependent variables and measures of the two hypotheses.

state taxes to ensure school funding equity. The Texas poll measures whether people believe the state should provide money for local school construction. If Hypotheses 2 is true, high levels of support for the local option in these variables should consistently diminish people's support for finance reform. Such a result would suggest that such people's affinity for local control affects their evaluation of finance reform because they value localized finance.

The hypotheses were also tested through an analysis newspaper coverage from *The Birmingham News* and *The Houston Chronicle* of each state's finance reform movement for three years before and five years after each poll used in the statistical models was searched using the *Chronicle's* search engine and Lexus/Nexus for all articles containing the phrases "local" and "school finance" or "school funding." These searches returned 13 articles from the *Chronicle* and 24 articles from the *News*. In these articles instances in which either the reporter or an official quoted in the story cited reasons consistent with both Hypotheses 1 and 2 were cited as a justification for opposition to reform were counted. Of these, 9 *Chronicle* and 15 *News* articles contained language consistent with one of the two hypotheses. This examination is not a comprehensive content analysis, nor are these passages included to claim that attitudes about localism are the sole or main factor determining opposition in each state. They are included to provide additional evidence that the dynamics the statistical models demonstrate and concerns about localism were present in the debates.

Results

Statistical

Table 1 presents estimates of an ordered probit model of the 1994 Capstone Poll Omnibus Spring Survey, a poll the University of Alabama conducted as state government debated its response to the *Harper* decision. The measure of Hypothesis 2 is a statistically significant predictor of attitudes on finance reform, with increases in the Hypothesis 2 variable associated with decreases in support for finance reform. Expressed in terms of marginal effects, people who approved of raising state income taxes to ensure equity were 1.9 percent more likely to support reform than those who opposed the plan. The effect for the measure of Hypothesis 1, a person's support for school-based management councils, is not statistically significant. The extent of a

Table 1

Ordered Probit Estimates of Attitudes on School Finance Reform in Alabama, 1994

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Coefficient (S.E.)</i>	<i>Change in variable from this to this</i>	<i>...changes probability that R supported reform by this much⁺⁺</i>
<i>Local Control Variables</i>			
Support for School-Based Management Councils	.2313 (.2522)	From "favor" to "oppose" (1,2)	-2.9%
Support Ensuring Equity with Higher State Taxes	.1603 (.1063)*	From "favor" to "oppose" (1,2)	-1.9%
<i>Controls</i>			
Education	.0340 (.0727)		
Age	.0635 (.0481)		
Rural Resident?	.2525 (.1397)*	From "non-rural" to "rural" (0,1)	-3.2%
Income	-.0840 (.0408)**	From "less than 10K" to "more than 90k" (1,8)	+3.6%
School-Age Children	.0901 (.1423)		
Gender	-.1574 (.1359)		
Ideology	.0608 (.0692)		
Party	.0413 (.0975)		
Race	-.4446 (.1948)**	From "white" to "nonwhite" (0,1)	+3.0%

Note. Model Summary Statistics: Cut 1 = -.3624 (.6458); Cut 2 = 1.9075 (.6532); Cut 3 = 2.5486 (.6643); $N = 338$; Log Likelihood = -269.9095; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0408$; The dependent variable is a four category variable where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = mildly agree, 3 = mildly disagree, 4 = strongly disagree; * $t < .10$, ** $t < .05$, *** $t < .01$; ++ Calculated by estimating how indicated value change in independent variable would increase the likelihood of a person either strongly agreeing or mildly agreeing with the reform proposal.

person's desire to return decision-making power to local authorities does not appear to have influenced her evaluation of Alabama's finance reform proposal.⁶

Among the other independent variables included in the model Table 1 describes, nonwhites were 3.0 percent more likely to support school finance reform than whites and rural residents were 3.2 percent less likely to support reform. These results may be connected. Plaintiffs explicitly linked their suit to Alabama's segregationist past, arguing that funding for public schools remained low because the state maintained a system of all-white private schools designed to thwart integration efforts. Presumably blacks would support such reforms, and the hostility of rural whites, who some have argued are among the most vehement opponents of racially-targeted redistributive efforts, could drive the effect of rural residency (Woodward, 1966). Income's effect is also significant. People making over \$90,000 a year were 3.6 percent more likely to support finance reform than those making less than \$10,000 a year. This effect shows that economic self interest alone is a poor explanation for the public opinion dynamics of school finance reform. Alabama's more affluent citizens appear willing to support some forms of school finance reform.

Table 2 presents estimates of a binary probit model of the Fall 1988 Texas Poll, a poll conducted by the University of Texas at Austin. The data set includes measures of all independent variables except for a measure of whether a respondent had children. The measure of Hypothesis 2 is statistically significant, with increases in the independent variable associated with increases in opposition to finance reform. Those who approved of the state providing money for local school construction were 2.7 percent more likely to support reform than those who oppose them. The measure of Hypothesis 1--whether a person believes the state should set standards for local school construction--is not a significant predictor of her evaluation of reform. The contrast between the effects of these two variables is striking. The wording of the two questions is very similar, except that one asks if the state should "set standards" for construction while the other if it should "provide funds" for construction. The former asked respondents to consider whether they would sacrifice decision-making power over an issue and does not affect support for reform. The latter asked them to consider whether they would sacrifice their district's financial independence and does have a significant effect.

6 The relatively high support for the dependent variable (89.8 percent) may explain the relatively small coefficients in the model Table 1 presents.

Table 2 shows that localism's effect pales in comparison to that of two other statistically significant independent variables. Increases in the age variable are associated with decreases in support for finance reform, with Texans over 70 were 10.6 percent less likely to support school finance reform than those from 18-29. Older people appear to be unwilling to pay higher taxes for a service from which they will not benefit directly, while younger

Table 2

Probit Estimates of Attitudes on School Finance Reform in Texas, 1988

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Coefficient (S.E.)</i>	<i>Change in variable from this to this</i>	<i>...changes probability that R supported reform by this much</i>
<i>Local Control Variables</i>			
Should state set standards for local school construction	.0267 (.0907)		
Should state provide money for local school construction	.0729 (.0368)**	from "yes" to "no" (1,2)	-2.7%
<i>Controls</i>			
Education	-.0338 (.0491)		
Age	.0550 (.0290)*	from "18-29" to ">70" (1,6)	-10.6%
Rural Resident?	.0683 (.1032)		
Income	-.0210 (.0261)		
Gender	-.1441 (.0902)		
Ideology	.1655 (.0664)**	from "liberal" to "conservative" (1,7)	-12.8%
Party	-.0276 (.0244)		
Race	.0082 (.1160)		
Constant	-.5730 (.3857)		

Note. Model Summary Statistics: $N = 829$; Log Likelihood = -542.3756; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0214$; The dependent variable is a two category variable where 0 = favor, 1 = oppose; * $t < .10$, ** $t < .05$, *** $t < .01$.

residents may want to ensure good schools for their children through additional spending. Secondly, political ideology is a significant predictor of opinion on finance reform, with liberals more likely to support reform than conservatives. In terms of marginal effects, a movement from strong liberalism to strong conservatism is associated with a 12.8 percent drop in support for reform. Conservatives may resent the growth in government and additional spending that accompanies reform, while liberals are generally more supportive of social spending policies.

Newspaper Analysis

The coverage Alabama's school finance reform movement received from *The Birmingham News*, the state's largest paper, suggests that the statistical results accurately depict the roles of both types of localism played in shaping public opinion. Factors associated with Hypothesis 1 do appear to have helped rally opposition early in the reform process. A key strand of this early opposition was the fear of some conservative groups that the curricular reforms the state hoped to pass as part of the finance reform package would force local school districts to teach values at odds with their beliefs. "There is one consistent school of thought in Alabama that assumes what you're going to do is devise objectives to ultimately measure students not against academic performance but against certain values like tolerance for homosexuals or rejection of God," said Auburn University history professor Wayne Flynt (Dean, 1993, p. A1). Certainly the *Harper* plaintiffs did not allay such fears when, during the trial, they explicitly challenged local curriculum control and urged the court to use national standards to rate the system's ability to educate its students. After Governor James's response to *Harper* became public, however, reasons pertaining to Hypothesis 1 all but disappeared from the *News*' coverage of the ensuing controversy, suggesting that arguments consistent with this hypothesis did not resonate outside of a narrow segment of the population. Only four of the fifteen news articles the search of the *News* archives uncovered mentioned language even remotely consistent with Hypothesis 1.

By contrast, eleven of the fifteen articles described citizens opposing finance reform for reasons consistent with Hypothesis 2. In order to comply with the plan, more affluent districts stood to lose millions of dollars from their previous funding levels and to pay slightly higher taxes (Dean, 1995).

Such concerns prompted residents of these districts to offer a vigorous defense of the virtues of local funding. “They want to take away my voluntary tax dollars to fund other schools. It’s like welfare,” said parent Pam Merrell (p. A1). School board members from such districts worried that voters would not support the schools as generously as they had in the past. “If and when we need another property tax increase, how would the voters vote knowing that the money might be taken and used somewhere else?” asked one board president (Pierce, 1995, p. A1).

All nine of the articles from the search of *The Houston Chronicle’s* archives contain language describing opposition based on a loss of local financial control. Generally articles identified how much reform would cost and whether state or local taxes should finance education as the two of the most contentious aspects of the finance reform debate. School finance opponents wanted to avoid an increase in state taxes or a redistribution of locally raised funds from rich to poor districts. A poll found that 69 percent of Republican state representatives did not want to increase state spending, even if this strategy forced localities to increase their own taxes. “They’re going to have to increase local taxes, but local people are going to make that decision,” state Republican Chairman Fred Meyer said. “That’s consistent with Republican philosophy” (Robison, 1990, p. C1). The superintendent from a wealthy district said resistance to reform in his district was based almost solely on its perceived financial effect on the district. “In any redistribution of state funds we would have lost a considerable amount” (Greene, 1988, p. A1).

Of particular concern were proposals to consolidate school districts to achieve more equitable spending. The Texas legislature rejected a 1991 plan to consolidate the state’s 1,058 school districts into 188 larger districts strictly for taxation purposes because of fears that loss of financial control would lead to a more general loss of local control and that the plan would lead to more spending on poor areas at the expense of the affluent (Ascher, 1993). As this last point suggests, much of the opposition to consolidation stemmed from fears over its financial ramifications. A Texas superintendent called consolidation “nonsense. You are probably going to have all kinds of ideas generated to keep from funding the schools to the level they need to be funded to solve the educational problems in the state” (Robison & Markley, 1992, p. A1).

Discussion

These findings support Reed's (2001) contention that the strength of one's commitment to local control is a consistent predictor of such opposition, although he may have overstated its strength in relation to the independent variables to which political scientists usually turn to predict people's policy evaluations. Where this study extends Reed's work is in its separation and testing of two types of support for localism. It finds attitudes about local financial control had a moderate but real effect on evaluations of finance reform but attitudes about the democratic virtues local government is said to promote had no effect. Local control matters because the public values its financial ramifications, not because they have a deep attachment to small-scale democracy.

In both statistical models, the variables measuring Hypothesis 2 have a significant effect on support for finance reform in both models. The more a person opposes increasing the state role in funding education, the more likely she is to oppose reform. These measures are also significant in all of the additional models I have estimated and present in the online appendix. The analysis of newspaper coverage also suggests that attitudes about local financial control have been a powerful force in rallying opposition to school finance reform. One should recognize that the effects of the Hypothesis 2 variables are relatively small. Worries about local financial control may be only one of several factors that have an independent effect on people's evaluation of reform in a given state. Even with this caveat, however, the evidence presented here suggests the strength of a person's support for local financial control may have a real effect in shaping people's opinions of school finance reform in many states. By contrast, in neither of the two statistical models is the measure of Hypothesis 1 significant, nor are measures of Hypothesis 1 significant in any of the other models presented in the online appendix. The analysis of news coverage from the two states revealed extremely limited evidence that people feared the loss of the democratic virtues local control is supposed to promote. Simply put, concerns about the democratic virtues of local educational control do not seem to shape people's views on finance reform.

Readers will observe that the measures of fit for the models are quite small. This is unfortunate but not inconsistent with other studies of

intergovernmental relations and public opinion, almost all of which share a similar problem (Arceneaux, 2005; Hetherington & Nugent, 2001; Schneider & Jacoby, 2003; Thompson & Elling, 1999). Despite their relatively poor measures of fit, these studies have revealed valuable findings on how the public thinks about intergovernmental relations. The consistency of the results across the models described both here and in the appendix may help allay most fit concerns. Given the question wording differences of the dependent and local control variables from poll to poll, the data sets could not be pooled. Perhaps the biggest concern with these models is that the complexity of the concepts involved and the limitations of state polling make it challenging to find good measures of the concepts. The democratic virtues that theorists attribute to localism range from increased accountability to increased participation to greater policy intervention. In addition to the urges to maximize one's service-to-cost ratio and to separate one's self from the problems of the poor, other potential reasons to support localized financial control, including anti-tax sentiment and a desire for smaller government, exist. Thus constructing a measure that perfectly captures all aspects of either hypothesis is probably impossible. To compound the problem, poll questions vary from state to state. Thus very few of the measures of the two hypotheses measure exactly the same phenomena. While not ideal measures, similar questions have been accepted as adequate measures of support for localism in previous studies on the topic (Reed, 2001). The methodological limitations of this study mean that these results can not stand as conclusive proof of the role of localism may play in determining attitudes on school finance reform. However, the two models this paper describes and the three models available in the appendix suggest the same dynamics take place in five different states, and the newspaper coverage from two states suggests observers from Texas and Alabama believed these dynamics were part of their finance debates. If one can only regard any generalizations as suggestions, one can at least be confident that they are relatively powerful suggestions.

Given these results, one may be pessimistic about the potential of school finance reform movements for achieving complete success in ensuring equitable spending. Full equity would necessitate major changes in a deeply entrenched system of local funding and thus require widespread public support. These results suggest a sizable segment of the populace enjoy the fiscal advantages that local financial control gives them and that their desire to preserve these

advantages is a critical factor in determining their resistance to reform. The public may accept partial reforms that divert more funding to poor areas but appears unlikely to support a full equity scheme that would force the affluent to pay for the education of other people's children.

These results also help us make sense of how the public values local control of public education more generally. Some commentators have suggested that state and federal education reforms undertake changes designed to aid minorities, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education*, succeed only when they do not greatly disrupt the lives of affluent whites (Bell, 1980). These findings support this claim. Higher levels of the American intergovernmental system may be able to undertake reforms such as NCLB and standardized testing because these reforms do not threaten those aspects of local control people most value. These results suggest that local financial control is something people value and will seek to protect, at least in the formation of their policy preferences. These results suggest that federal and state school reforms that aim to bring resources together across school district lines will be among the most difficult to pass and implement due to the public opposition they are likely to excite.

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