Chapter 1

Introduction

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Education is a basic function of government everywhere in the world. Part of the reason, of course, is that all nations want their children to learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic. But there is much more to the story than that. For education systems can serve many other purposes as well—with far-reaching consequences for societies, their citizens, and the governments that operate them.

An education system can be a means of boosting human capital and economic growth. But as a prime source of money and jobs in the hands of politicians, it can also fuel the fires of patronage and corruption—and stifle productivity. It can be a means of advancing social equity and upward mobility, but also of entrenching the existing class structure. It can be a means of integrating immigrants into the nation’s culture, but also of imposing a common culture on diverse ethnic groups that don’t want it. It can be a means of socializing citizens to democratic norms, but also of socializing them to authoritarian ideology and control. It can be a means of promoting religious tolerance and secularism, but also of privileging one religion at the expense of others (see., e.g., Darden, forthcoming; Goldin and Katz, 2009; Kosack, 2012; Cremin, 1961; Green, 1991, 2013; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015).

Education, then, is an institutional arena of enormous potential, a shaper of the fundamentals of human society. Precisely because this is so, governments have strong incentives to put this potential to use by getting actively involved in the design, control, and operation of education systems for their societies—and these systems, as a result, cannot help but be profoundly influenced by the political processes through which governmental decisions get made. In great measure, education systems are what they are, and indeed, the schools are what they are—everywhere in the world, regardless of the nation—because politics makes them that way.

The United States was a late bloomer in building a public education system. While Prussia and France began building their systems more than 200 years ago, the American system did not take shape until the early 1900s, when Progressive-era reforms—achieved through political battles that lasted decades—purged American education of party machines and patronage and created a system based on bureaucratic administration, expertise, and nonpartisan local democracy: a more “rational” structure far better suited to socializing the nation’s new waves of immigrants, preparing young people for the workforce, and providing free and easy access to secondary education and pathways to upward mobility. Although the U.S. was not a leader in developing a public education system, it was a leader in developing a system that (for its time) achieved remarkable equity—bringing schools to the masses in a way that far exceeded what was then happening in most of Europe (not to mention the less-developed world), where, well into mid-century, nations were still fighting political battles about bringing “comprehensive education” to their own systems (Cremin, 1961; Tyack, 1974; Green, 1990, 2013).

As Goldin and Katz (2009) have argued, the U.S. system of extending education to the masses, and doing it early, was consequential for more than social equity. It also had enormous consequences for the national economy—providing valuable reserves of human capital that would
give this country great advantages over others, and serve as an engine of economic growth that propelled the U.S. to economic dominance during the 1900s. Whether other (or many) nations saw this connection between education and economic growth early on is unclear. But it is clear that social equity was a burning political issue, that parties of the left were committed to it, that many parents and children wanted new opportunities—and that, over time, other nations throughout the world followed roughly the same path that America did in expanding their public school systems to include ever-larger populations of children.

This era of expansion, which occupied not only the more advanced nations, but also, increasingly, the less developed nations, was essentially a worldwide era of institutional formation in which virtually all nations were building, staffing, funding, and expanding their educational institutions for the first time. In the process, over a period of many years, those institutions became established as the institutional status quo (e.g., Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal, 1992; Archer, 1979; Green, 1990, 2013). From that point on, nations would find themselves on set institutional paths that, for reasons that political scientists well understand—having to do with path dependence, including the protective role of powerful political constituencies—would be very difficult to depart from should governments decide that these institutions needed to be changed (Pierson, 2004).

And that is what happened. The 1970s and 1980s saw the dawning of a new era for public education, but also for government in general. Two developments were mainly responsible. First, nations were collectively plunged into a shockingly new and different international environment of globalization, technological innovation, and intense economic competition. In the realm of education, this new environment led them to see human capital as crucial to their ability to compete in the new “knowledge economy,” and to demand from their education systems much higher levels of academic achievement. Second, and at roughly the same time, the developed world was faced with the so-called “crisis of the welfare state,” the onset of fiscal austerity, demands for governmental efficiency, and rising disaffection with centralized, bureaucratic modes of governance—which led to pressures for neoliberal reforms of governmental institutions in general, and education systems in particular, that put a premium on decentralization, accountability, and markets: sharp departures from the institutional past.

As this new era took hold, then, the sheer quantity of education was no longer enough. The emphasis now was on performance—on academic excellence—which the existing institutions were not specifically designed to provide, at least at the levels the modern world required. The stage was set, then, for a new type of education politics. For this was an era in which reformers would seek major change in entrenched institutions inherited from the past—and thus, inevitably, would face political resistance from the defenders of the institutional status quo. Other issues would remain, of course, regarding equity, race, religion, and myriad other lines of social cleavage, depending on the nation. But across the world, what was distinctive about the modern era—which continues to the present day—is its historically new emphasis on performance and the political pursuit of institutions that might be capable of providing it. The politics of the modern era would be a politics of performance-based reform (e.g., Wiborg, 2013; Jakobi, Martens, and Wolf, 2010; Blossing, Imsen, and Moos, 2014).

These are the broad outlines of what we see as the two major eras in worldwide systems of public education: the era of institutional formation and the era of performance-based reform. Distinguishing between these two eras, and appreciating why they are different and distinctive, is essential for understanding their politics and, in particular, for understanding how politics through time has driven processes of institutional development and reform in the realm of
education. This is a vast subject matter that one book can only begin to explore. Our strategy here, given the enormity of the challenge, is to focus on certain aspects that we think are especially important--key pieces of a much larger puzzle--and in so doing, to construct a useful foundation that other scholars can build upon going forward.

More specifically, this book focuses on elementary and secondary school systems--the basic education systems that virtually all governments provide--and explores key features of their politics in 11 nations across the globe. Obviously, the details vary from country to country, often quite dramatically. The politics of education is starkly different in Sweden than in Mexico or France, and their education systems reflect those differences. That said, politics in all nations is heavily shaped by power and by the interests of those that exercise it--and in every chapter of the book, the politics of education will be approached from the standpoint of this common analytic framing, lending a measure of structure and unity to chapters whose substantive contents are in some ways quite different (Moe, 2005; Pierson, 2015; Korpi, 2006).

Any serious effort to understand the world’s education systems needs to study, for any given nation, how power is structured within the politics of education--who wields political power, how they wield it, what their interests are, what the relevant coalitions are, how their power and interests connect with the party system and the larger apparatus of government, and more generally, how the type of political system and its institutions shape the way power and interests find expression in the political process. And all this needs to be done, of course, across nations and over time in order to provide for an enlightening comparative understanding of education systems throughout the world.

The scholarly literature at this point is almost a tabula rasa on these scores, and has not viewed its agenda as one of systematically exploring the politics of education and the structure of power and interests that drive it (see, e.g., the review in Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2011). This book is an attempt to change that. Here at the outset, there are many ways such a new research program might be pursued. We have chosen one tack--a focus on the political role of teachers unions--that we believe stands to be especially productive as a basis for future progress. Here is why.

**Teachers Unions, Politics, and Vested Interests**

Anyone who follows education in the United States knows that the teachers unions have played a central role in that nation’s politics of education for decades. Yet scholars rarely study them as political actors. An exception is Moe’s *Special Interest* (2011), which seeks to understand the American politics of education through the theoretical lens of power and interests, and marshals evidence to show that the teachers unions--since their first emergence as key actors during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s—have exercised great power in the American educational arena, and have been the leading opponents of education reform.

Informed observers may disagree about just how powerful the teachers unions are. In recent times, moreover, the unions have lost some important political battles--the stand-out being No Child Left Behind in 2001--and are clearly on the defensive. But there is plenty of hard evidence to show that, by any reasonable account, the teachers unions are major political forces at all levels of American government when official decisions are made about the policies, organization, funding--and reform--of the public schools. The unions are not the only political actors that matter. But they are absolutely central to the political controversies, struggles, and
decisions that make the public schools what they are--and in particular, they are absolutely central to the politics of performance-based reform that has so consumed the modern era.

That being so, scholars who seek to understand the American politics of education need to pay serious, careful attention to them. A different way to put this is that scholars who do study the teachers unions will learn a great deal about how the American politics of education works, why it works as it does, and what it implies for the education system more generally. That, in fact, is a key argument of Moe’s *Special Interest*--which isn’t just a book about teachers unions per se, but rather a book about how the American politics of education can be understood.

As we look across nations, there is good reason to believe that the United States is not an outlier with respect to the prominent political role of its teachers unions. American government and society may be exceptional in many ways, and American exceptionalism is a long-standing theme in the study of comparative politics. But in our view, the fact that its teachers unions are highly organized, politically very active, and play central roles in the politics of education is likely to be an exceedingly common fact of political life across all nations (aside from authoritarian or very poor ones), however diverse they may be and however different from America in other respects. By studying the teachers unions, then, we believe we are studying something of universal importance to the worldwide politics of education.

There is a strong theoretical basis for this belief (see Moe, 2015). The place to begin is by recognizing that educational institutions are not unique. In fundamental respects, they are just like all other governmental institutions. And most important from the standpoint of our analysis, all government institutions--across all areas of public policy, everywhere in the world--naturally and inevitably generate *vested interests*. This happens, and is literally unavoidable--whether it is in health care, defense, transportation, international trade, or public education--simply because certain people and groups receive benefits, often in very different ways, from what specific governmental institutions do. The benefits may take the form of services, public jobs, business revenues, power, status, or simple opportunities for corruption, nepotism, and patronage. But wherever there are governmental institutions, there are people and groups with vested interests in what those institutions do, in their structure and operation, in their funding, and indeed, in their very existence.

In ordinary language, the term vested interest tends to be used when the intent is to convey something negative. To label groups as vested interests is to criticize them, to voice disapproval of their behavior. But this negative connotation is entirely unnecessary, and it is not at all what we are getting at here. To say that a group has a vested interest in a particular issue or institution, or to say that the group “is” a vested interest (a common word-usage that we will often employ here, for convenience), is to say something that is entirely objective, and also important and revealing, about the nature of those interests. On purely scientific grounds, the concept of vested interest has great analytic value as a basis for theory--and as a basis for progress in understanding why the politics of governmental institutions works as it does.

What is distinctive about vested interests, and what is distinctively valuable about their theoretical role, is that they arise from the very institutions whose development, stability, and change we want to explain. They are not just special interests. They are rooted in specific institutions, they benefit from those institutions, and they have incentives to get organized--if the stakes are high enough, and if they can overcome their collective action problems--to seek active and powerful roles in politics in order to protect and enhance their benefits. These roles may involve pressuring for new programs and spending, and thus for expansions of their institutions. But they may also involve--and almost always do involve, especially in an era of reform--taking
action to oppose reforms that, by bringing change to the status quo, would threaten their institutions and benefits.

In the politics that surround governmental institutions, then, *vested interests are likely to be key players*. If the institutions are of any size and consequence, moreover, at least some of the vested interests associated with them are likely to have enormously valuable stakes in those institutions—and incentives to invest especially heavily in the requisites of political power, far more so than other groups. There is a reason why, in the lore and scholarship of politics, vested interests have reputations for political power. The reality is, they often are powerful. They have strong incentives to be (e.g., McConnell, 1966; Lowi, 1969; Olson, 1984).

All of this applies across the board to education systems. They, too, automatically generate vested interests. The most obvious are those of parents and children, who have vested interests in the services being provided; but children are inherently powerless, and except in affluent niches, parents are too atomized and weakly motivated to overcome the formidable collective action problems that stand in the way of political organization. Another source of vested interests is the government bureaucracies responsible for running the schools, for they are filled with public officials whose jobs, authority, status, and perquisites are rooted in the existing systems—and, unlike parents, they are already organized and in positions to exercise influence.

Outside the bureaucracy, arguably the most valuable and motivating benefits that educational institutions generate, in terms of deep-seated material stakes, are the jobs they provide for teachers: which translate into incomes, careers, security, and the material foundations of teachers’ lives. These are very positive things, of course, for individual teachers, and it is only natural and normal that they put great value on them. We are not saying, moreover, that teachers—as human beings—only care about their jobs and nothing else, for they surely care about children, their communities, their families, and all sorts of other things, just as other human beings do. The point to be made here, rather, is an analytical one: that as employees of education systems, teachers have *vested interests in their jobs*—and accordingly, they have strong incentives to get organized, mobilize resources, and exercise power in the politics of education in order to protect and advance *those* interests. The teachers unions are their specialized means of doing that—of protecting and advancing their job interests, and not all the other concerns and values that they may have as human beings.

The way to understand the teachers unions, then, is that they arise from these vested interests, are founded on them and oriented by them, and are the organized means by which they are protected and pursued. And because we can expect education systems everywhere, throughout the world, to generate these *same* vested interests, we should expect teachers unions to be a force in the politics of education in every nation where teachers are allowed to organize or have the capacity to. Whether they can be expected to be more powerful than government bureaucrats—in any given nation at any given time—is a complex matter, needless to say; and any good answer would presumably vary with specific conditions. That said, it is important to note that, in every nation, teachers will tend to outnumber government bureaucrats by many orders of magnitude and are guaranteed to be a massive presence. In addition, they will tend to be geographically distributed across the entire country and well anchored in local communities—wherever there are kids, there are teachers—giving them important political advantages that bureaucrats don’t have. At the very least, then, however these considerations of relative power shake out, we should expect teachers unions to be central players in the politics of education everywhere in the world. (Again, for a more detailed argument, see Moe, 2015).
Because, as we’ll soon see, teachers unions are often allied with parties of the left, and because their rhetoric and issue positions tend to square with that of their leftist coalition partners—calling, for example, for greater social equity, higher government spending and taxing, expanded social programs, and so on—it is easy to see them in ideological terms and to infer that they are primarily motivated by ideology. But there are good theoretical reasons for thinking otherwise. Their leaders may sometimes be ideological, and the unions surely do participate in ideological coalitions. But the bedrock of their organizations is formed by the job interests of their members, and we should expect these job interests to be given top priority and to be the driving force behind the unions’ politics and their approach to institutional reform. The teachers unions are interest groups, their fundamental interests are in jobs, and that is the key to understanding their behavior.

Scholars, as we’ve said, have rarely studied education from the standpoint of political power, and even less often have studied the teachers unions as political actors. The literature does contain two books that provide useful surveys of teachers unions across nations, but they were written long ago, before the modern era of performance-based reform had really taken hold, and they do not offer the kind of political perspective that we will be providing here. The first is Lawn’s *The Politics of Teacher Unionism* (1985). It focuses on politics, but it is quite dated now (through no fault of its own), and its chapter-authors “were asked to explore sympathetically the development of a teachers union or a contemporary problem in educational work” (p.3), consistent with Lawn’s concern for providing “a useful source of experience for the necessary defense of teachers and teaching” (book jacket material). Its approach is thus shaped by these normative concerns rather than being strictly theoretical and empirical.

The second is Cooper’s *Labor Relations in Education* (1992). This book is mainly, as the title suggests, about how collective bargaining and other aspects of labor relations in education differ across countries. It is not centrally about politics, nor does it explore issues of power and interest. Some of its chapters, moreover, were written by union representatives rather than by professional researchers. The U.S. chapter was written by Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and the Germany chapter was coauthored by Deiter Wunder, president of the GEW (the largest German teachers union). Both books are informative, however, especially in the histories they provide (before the modern era), and we recommend them to our readers.

Of the scant work that has been carried out on teachers unions in politics, there is a high quality literature on Latin America that stands out. It does deal directly with issues of power and interest—and vested interests—and what it finds is very much in line Moe’s (2011) analysis of the United States: that the teachers unions are indeed quite central to the politics of education, are fundamentally motivated by the job interests of their members, and are the leading opponents of reform (e.g., Grindle, 2004; Murillo, 1999, 2001; Bruns and Luque, 2014). Here is a summary assessment by Merilee Grindle (2004, p.139), whose *Despite the Odds* examines the efforts of Latin American governments to pursue education reform during the 1990s.

> Despite the Odds

> With very few exceptions, teachers unions formed the core of resistance to the education reforms of the 1990s. They were powerful political opponents, even if they had seen their influence diminish over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Institutionally, they continued to be well positioned to confront government policies, making their demands known through strikes and protest actions and using their links to ministries of education and political parties to challenge the power of the reformers. They had the capacity to bring national ministries and
school systems to a halt. They marshaled significant numbers of votes. Their close connections to political parties meant that their leaders were frequently important figures in party decision making and the distribution of government largess when those parties were in power.

A very recent survey and analysis of the overall literature on education reform in Latin American by Bruns and Luque (2014, p.47) offers the same basic assessment. As they summarize it:

Teachers are…the most powerful stakeholder in the process of education reform. No other education actor is as highly organized, visible, and politically influential. Because of their unique autonomy behind the closed door of the classroom, teachers also have profound power over the extent to which new policies can be implemented successfully.

By studying teachers unions and their political activities, then, we are likely to learn a lot about the politics of education generally, the power and interests that drive it, the roles of governments and parties, and the broader consequences for education systems. Theory suggests that, for the great majority of governments throughout the world, the teachers unions aren’t likely to be just marginal players or interesting in their own right. They are likely to be organized, active, and at the heart of things--and we should expect that, by studying them and exploring their role in education politics, particularly in the modern reform era, we can gain perspective on the larger whole and generate new ideas for moving the research agenda forward. In a very meaningful sense, the teachers unions offer us a window into the world of education. And as scholars, we can take advantage of it in deepening our understanding of how that world works.

The Literature

Given the profound importance of education to nations and their citizens, and given the inevitable role of politics in shaping education systems in all their aspects, there ought to be a lively, well developed body of social science on the topic, exploring how the politics of education actually works and what its various determinants are. But political scientists have never shown much interest in studying these things. As Gift and Wibbels (2014, p.292) recently observed, “One could argue that no single policy domain lies more clearly at the heart of the key social, political, and economic dynamics of our age…In academia, the salience of education is reflected in booming research programs in economics and sociology…Political science, however, is oddly underrepresented among social science disciplines in the study of education. It is hard to identify a community of political scientists who are dedicated to the comparative study of education.”

The vast literature on comparative politics has been animated by grander issues--the rise of the welfare state, the onset of retrenchment and austerity, the role of party systems and their left-right dynamics, the role of unions and businesses in shaping the “varieties of capitalism,” and so on. Elementary and secondary education, as a specific realm of comparative political study, has largely been off the field’s radar screen (but not entirely, of course--see, e.g., Ansell and Lindvall, 2013; Busemeyer, 2009, 2014; Wiborg, 2009; Stasavage, 2005; Ansell, 2010; Kosack, 2012; Klitgaard, 2007; Iversen and Stephens 2008). To the extent that education and its politics have been central to the comparative politics literature, the focus has been on vocational education, job training, and higher education (Busemeyer, 2014; Thelen, 2004; Iversen and Stephens, 2008; Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2014; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012).
In the field of American politics, political scientists have given education short shrift. Aside from rather small and sequestered literatures on the politics of urban education reform (Henig et al., 2001; Stone et al., 2001; Reckhow, 2012), No Child Left Behind (McGuinn, 2006; Manna, 2006; Rhodes, 2012), and governance (Henig, 2013; McGuinn and Manna, 2013), education has not been an integral part of the political science mainstream and has essentially been pushed to the periphery.

The other social science of obvious relevance here—the field of education research—has generated a voluminous body of work on education in general. But little of it deals with the actual policy process, elections, special interests, power, and other matters that explain how politics shapes public education (for an exception, see, e.g., Kirst and Wirt, 2009). When it does deal with politics, the analysis is often a mixture of empirical, normative, and aspirational components—focusing, for example, on issues of inequity, poverty, and social justice and arguing that political leaders should do more to promote better social outcomes (e.g., Friere, 1996). There is a growing literature on globalization and neoliberalism that is very much in this vein, criticizing the apparent impacts of these forces on education systems and social equality and arguing, among other things, that the political power of business is behind them (e.g., Burbules and Torres, 2000; Zadja, 2015).

For the most part, however, the education literature is so focused on schools, students, and teachers, and it views the larger political system as so remote from the immediate subject matter of schooling, that the role of politics and power in shaping the education system hasn’t been subjected to serious empirical examination. When education scholars look beyond schools to study matters of government, they tend to study “policy” and its impacts—much as labor economists do more generally. The focus is typically on whether policy X has impact Y, not on the politics—and power—that would explain why X was adopted and how it was implemented.

Across all these fields of study, two recent books deserve special mention as pioneering efforts to bring education into the political science mainstream. The first is Busemeyer’s (2014) *Skills and Inequality*, which attempts to integrate education into larger literature on the welfare state by showing that key lines of theoretical thinking central to that literature—arising from Esping-Anderson’s three models of welfare capitalism and theories of partisan politics—help to explain why particular countries developed the distinctive systems vocational and higher education that they did. The second is the edited volume by Jakobi, Martens, and Wolf (2010), *Education in Political Science*, quoted above, which is an explicit attempt to make education a more serious topic of research within political science, and uses a “governance” perspective to explore a broad and eclectic range of educational topics and issues, mostly related to higher education and international organizations. Neither book brings elementary and secondary education—the most fundamental and universal of all educational institutions across nations—to center stage. But both deserve high praise as agenda-setting moves to put education squarely on the political science map.

We also want to highlight a recent article by Ansell and Lindvall (2013), which brings quantitative evidence to bear on the historical evolution of primary education. This is an innovative analysis that is especially promising as a basis for future research. Ansell and Lindvall explore the political and societal factors—for example, control by social democratic parties, the presence of an established church—to explain why the emerging education systems of 19 of today’s modern welfare states took on the institutional forms that they did, with attention to three key dimensions: centralization, secularization, and subsidies to private schools. This is the most analytically sophisticated study yet of the formative period of modern
educational institutions, and a significant step forward in our understanding of why different nations took off on very different paths—and remain on different paths today.

Aside from these exemplary works, what does the broader literature on the comparative politics of education consist of, and how might it be characterized overall as distinct body of social science? A recent review by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2011, pp.413-414) is helpful—and revealing (see also Gift and Wibbels, 2014). Their theme is that the comparative politics of education is an exciting subfield on an upward trajectory. “The past twenty-five years,” they say, “have seen an upsurge in political science work on issues such as the partisan politics of education reform, the comparative political economy of skill formation, institutional complementarities between education and the welfare state, and the internationalization of education”

We agree that there has been an upsurge of various sorts of research. But what kind of literature has been generated in the process? From our own standpoint, their review is quite enlightening in providing perspective on this body of work; but one of the things it reveals along the way (although the authors do not argue as much) is that this is a very sparse, thin, and heterogeneous literature indeed—as our discussion above tends to suggest—to the point that it may not warrant being considered a genuine literature at all. Here are some of its basic features.

1. Much of the work deals with higher education, not with elementary and secondary education. Yet it is the latter, not the former, that is by far the most relevant to all children and families throughout the world, is a far more fundamental function of governments everywhere, and is of far greater salience to public policy and politics—even more so in modern times, with the performance-based pressures of globalization and PISA tests. The comparative politics of education needs to deal, first and foremost, with the politics of elementary and secondary education. To this point it doesn’t do that—and indeed, it often makes no distinction between the two types of systems in building its corpus of theory and research. These are very different systems with very different politics, and the literature needs to recognize as much. (See Jakobi et al., 2010.)

2. Much more central to the field of comparative politics is the study of “skill formation”—which involve the distinctive stakes and incentives of businesses, unions, and workers—as major determinants of the “varieties of capitalism.” But this line of work, important though it is to a larger understanding of the origins and structure of the welfare state, is about vocational education, on-the-job training, and other institutions of worker skill formation, not the politics of elementary and secondary education (Busemeyer, 2014; Thelen, 2004; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Iversen and Stephens, 2008; Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2014; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). Although these two realms tend to overlap, with vocational education often a part of upper secondary education, they are mostly very different realms indeed.

3. Another line of political science research, unlike the others, has actually put the spotlight on elementary and secondary education—and, in particular, on the politics behind its expansion to the middle and lower classes, the levels of financial support that governments provide, and the implications for social equity. We’ve already discussed Ansell and Lindvall (2013). Another notable contribution is Kosack (2012), which focuses on three developing nations and provides an in-depth look at how their political dynamics play in bringing primary education to the poor. Besides these works, there is a fair amount of research that takes spending as its dependent variable, and uses spending data to explore some of the themes arising from the larger literature on the welfare state—having to do, for example, with whether greater funding for education is particularly associated with parties of the left and democratization
(Ansell, 2010; Stasavage, 2005). Exploring these issues is essential for understanding the politics of education. But the focus on spending is narrow, and it limits what this line of work can ultimately tell us.

Finally, we want to reiterate that an especially productive body of comparative research on the politics of elementary and secondary education has been carried out on countries in Latin America. This work, spearheaded by the pioneering research efforts of Murillo (1999, 2001) and Grindle (2004), tackles issues of power and special interest head on in explaining why education reform in those contexts is so difficult—pointing, above all, to the role of teachers unions in opposing governmental efforts to bring change, and placing these conflicts in historical and political context. As a basis for understanding the politics of education and building a strong literature, these studies of Latin America are exceptional contributions; yet they are not included in Busemeyer and Trampusch’s (2011) review of the literature.

We want to be clear that, in our view, Busemeyer and Trampusch are to be applauded for bringing together a vast number of diverse studies that deal (in some fashion) with the politics of education, and for trying to impose order and perspective on a very diverse of scholarly work. The problem lies with the literature itself, and with the fact that, at least for now, there really isn’t a there there. No substantive focus. No theoretical coherence. Little or no connection between the various strands of research.

Obviously, these are deficiencies that can’t be eliminated right away. It will take time and a great deal of new research. Our purpose here is help move the ball forward—in substance, in theory, in focus—and in so doing, to take constructive steps toward a stronger, more coherent, more illuminating literature on the comparative politics of education.

Authors and Countries

Literatures are created by scholars. But they also attract scholars—who build upon one another’s work, generate scholarly communities, and help ensure that, when new research agendas are pursued within their realms of inquiry, there will be many experts to draw upon. Without a real literature, however, none of this happens. And that is the situation we faced as we sought to make this book a reality. For any given country, we needed to find scholars who were knowledgeable about its politics of elementary and secondary education, the structure and operation of both its political system and its education system, and the role of the teachers unions. Yet political scientists rarely study education, and education researchers rarely study politics, so locating and recruiting scholars whose expertise covered the relevant terrain was a challenge.

It took a while, but this challenge was more than met, and we are very proud of the team we were able to assemble. All of our contributors have strong academic backgrounds, and all but one (who is a researcher at the World Bank) hold positions at universities. Beyond that, they are intellectually diverse, with backgrounds that range from political science to economics to sociology to education. They are an interdisciplinary group. They do not, therefore, come at this subject with a common set of preconceptions. Nor do they have a common rooting in a particular literature. What they have in common is that they are all professional researchers with extensive knowledge about the politics of education of specific countries, and about the political role of teachers unions in those countries.

Our plan in organizing this project was to focus mainly on the developed nations, and to include as well a smaller number of less-developed nations. We sought out experts accordingly,
and the team we’ve assembled provides coverage of 11 nations in total, nine developed and two less-developed. The nine developed nations are the United States, England, Germany, France, Japan, and the Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland. The two less-developed nations are Mexico and India.

At this early stage of research, we think an initial focus on the developed nations makes good sense. These countries have long been central to theory and research in comparative politics, particularly the influential work on the welfare state, and little is known about how politics, power, and the teachers unions have shaped their education systems. As we begin to explore this new terrain, the large existing literature on these nations provides a helpful foundation for moving forward. The research we present here, in turn, contributes to that literature by filling in some yawning empirical gaps, speaking to important theoretical issues, and offering new findings and ideas.

The nine developed nations we study have much in common: they are prosperous, stable, and democratic, with modern administrative systems possessed of high capacity (relative to those of other nations) to deliver public services like education. As such, at least during the postwar era, they represent institutional contexts in which many of the fundamentals likely to shape the politics of education and the role of teachers unions are much the same, and thus are essentially controlled. The politics of education is free to play out on democratic terms, teachers are free to organize and take political action, education systems are bureaucratic and professional. Within these common contexts, however, the developed nations we explore are different in many ways that are potentially of great consequence—including, among other things, their specific governmental arrangements, their party systems, their political cultures, their historical trajectories, and more generally, their type of welfare-state regime: social democratic (the Nordic states), conservative-corporatist (Germany, France), and liberal (US, England). There is great diversity across these developed nations, and a key question is how—and whether—that diversity ultimately matters.

There is even more diversity, needless to say, when we include the two less-developed nations, Mexico and India. Their contexts not only lack the kinds of resources and well-functioning democratic and bureaucratic institutions of the developed nations, but are fraught with clientelism, patronage, and corruption—which are common problems in the less developed world. How do these stark differences show up in the politics of education, and in the role that teachers unions play? And is it possible that, in at least some important ways, these nations actually turn out to look very similar to those that are far better developed?

This book is a first foray into a new and complicated realm of politics, and our aim here is not to proliferate variables, to disentangle all the relevant influences at work, or to explore all the theoretical avenues that might be of interest. We leave that for others in future work. Ours is an early attempt to get the lay of the land—and thus, above all else, to provide basic information that can help fill in some of the many unknowns. This is what each individual country-chapter is designed to do. As things now stand, not nearly enough known—in terms of sheer facts—about the politics of education in the various nations across the world, and even less is known about the power and political activities of their teachers unions. These chapters go a long way toward changing that.

They also do much more. For when viewed together, they provide a very useful empirical basis for making comparisons, identifying patterns, and otherwise gaining perspective on basic features of education politics and the role of teachers unions across the world—and thus for pointing the way toward a larger understanding that goes well beyond the details of
individual countries. This is a task—of summary, of interpretation, of comparative analysis—that is taken up in the book’s final chapter. Again, our aim is not to revel in complexity or to move off in countless “relevant” directions. Nor is it to link every aspect of our analysis to every part of the comparative literature—the broader work on labor unions, say, or on industrial relations or political economy—that our studies might well have relevance for. These are surely worthwhile endeavors for the future. But for now, as we just begin to chart new territory and make sense of it, our approach is nearly the opposite. It is to simplify, to clarify, to establish some basic findings of comparative interest and theoretical value—and to strive for coherence and intellectual order in providing a foundation for future work on the comparative politics of education.

**A Brief Summary of the Findings**

Here is a brief sketch of the perspective that will be fleshed out in the final chapter, highlighting some of the key patterns and findings that arise from the country-chapters.

**The Era of Institutional Formation**

During the era of institutional formation, which saw the emergence, expansion, and institutionalization of public education systems as well as (in developed nations) the welfare state more generally, teachers unions arose in all the nations we’ve studied here—although the United States was very much a laggard, its unions failing to get organized until the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, teachers succeeded—everywhere—in overcoming their collective action problems to form organizations. Indeed, they attracted between 80 and 100 percent of teachers in most of Europe, Scandinavia, and Mexico, and somewhat lower but still high levels in the other nations.

In the early going, teachers unions in most nations were highly fragmented along various lines, reflecting school type (primary, secondary), religion, gender, ideology, region, and more. Over time, however, they became much more unified organizationally (except in India, where even today they remain highly fragmented). In a few countries—Finland, Mexico—this process of consolidation led to one monopoly teachers union, but in all the rest it did not. In some of the latter nations, one union represents elementary (and lower secondary) teachers and another represents (upper) secondary teachers, with the former almost always the more powerful and politically prominent. In the other nations, teachers are represented by two or more unions that are broadly based and compete for members—as is the case in the U.S., for example, with its National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers.

Once teachers unions got organized, they were able to wield a formidable array of political resources. They had mass memberships, they had money to fund political candidates and parties, they could mobilize voters, they could influence public opinion, and they could threaten strikes and other forms of disruption. With governments wanting peace and normalcy—and to win elections—the unions were thus positioned to exercise real political power in the realm of public education. This was the case everywhere. And in the exercise of that power, their behavior—uniformly, across all nations—focused largely on protecting and increasing the number of jobs, and on wages, benefits, transfers, promotions, working conditions, and other job-related issues. That is still true today. Most of what they do in politics can be explained by their members’ vested interests in jobs.
In most countries, the teachers unions emerged and became politically active as their education systems were first becoming institutionalized, and they were essentially woven into the evolving institutional fabric of educational governance through various sorts of corporatist-like mechanisms. In the Nordic nations, the world’s classic cases of corporatism, the unions were integrated along with other interest groups into decision structures designed to promote moderation and balance. In many other countries, corporatist-like inclusion of the teachers unions took place as well—but it was not about balance at all, but rather about handing the unions extensive operational control over jobs and policy (but not wages). Only in the U.S., Japan, and India were the unions not ushered into government through insider corporatist status.

Politically, teachers unions were (and still are) usually allied with their nations’ major left parties, which, during the institution-building era, either controlled the government or played influential roles in expanding the bureaucracy and constructing the welfare state. The unions were thus on the winning side as modern government was being created—and they were made integral to it. The left’s center-right opponents, moreover, were not really opponents of the welfare state and not intent on undermining union power. Almost everywhere (Japan being the exception), this was a very good time for the teachers unions, when the politics and institutions of education worked very much to their advantage.

Throughout this early era, there were surely differences across nations in the politics of education and the role played by teachers unions. But what is most striking is that there was so much sameness across nations. As education systems emerged and developed, teachers unions acted on their vested interests to become organized, politically active, involved in government and policy making, and key shapers of their education systems. This happened in social democratic welfare states. It happened in corporatist-statist welfare states. It happened in liberal welfare states. It even happened in the less-developed nations. Details matter, of course. And differences matter. But there is extraordinary commonality here—driven by the power of vested interests that are present and profoundly consequential in every nation.

**The Era of Performance-Based Reform**

The modern era brought a radical shift in environment. In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the disruptive advance of globalization and technological innovation, together with the austerity, retrenchment, and restructuring associated with the “crisis of the welfare state,” governments began demanding much higher levels of performance from their education systems. And they began pursuing institutional changes they hoped would bring it about. Broadly speaking, the approach to institutional reform—often labeled neoliberal—was much the same across nations: emphasizing some combination of decentralization, accountability, and school choice.

The teachers unions entered the modern era of performance-based reform as entrenched players in existing institutions, and the reforms now being pursued stood to undermine their traditional bases of power, their control over jobs and money, and the job security and working conditions of teachers. Major change was threatening to their vested interests. And in all countries, as a result, when governments pursued performance-based reforms of their education systems, teachers unions were opposed—and indeed, were their main political adversaries.

To say as much is not to say that the unions were somehow the “bad guys” in these political sagas, as we take no position here on whether the neoliberal reforms in question were actually good ideas or socially advantageous. The key point about the unions is an objective one: they were major vested interests and, as we would expect on theoretical grounds, they were
indeed threatened by institutional reform—and opposed to it. This imparted a distinctive and predictable structure to the modern politics of education in all countries.

These efforts at institutional reform played out very differently across nations, but here too there is a basic pattern to the results that makes good theoretical sense. And it is a pattern, interestingly enough, that has nothing to do with the regime types—Social Democratic, Corporatist-Statist, Liberal—that have played such central roles in the comparative literature. The operative factor here is more generic: in any nation, regardless of regime type, the extent to which the political system puts formal veto points in the way of governmental action has a lot to do with the capacity of vested interests to block major reform. It is in political systems that free governments from such constraints—thus empowering them to act, and reducing opportunities for vested interests to block—that real reform is most likely. In the developed nations covered in this book, the presence or absence of formal veto points is strongly related to whether governments were able to overcome the opposition of vested interests and bring major reform to their education systems.

The stand-outs, by far, were England and Sweden. Although these are very different types of welfare states, government reformers in both were operating within one-house parliamentary systems that fully empowered them to act. And in both—largely because Labor (in England) and the Social Democrats (in Sweden) moved toward the center to embrace neoliberal welfare-state reforms—successive governments proved committed to using that power over time to bring about major education reform. The result was profoundly transformative. Sweden moved from a centralized, corporatist, heavily bureaucratic system to one that is radically decentralized and makes extensive use of school choice. England moved from a system in which schools were controlled by local education authorities and local unions (often bound by a “social partnership”) to one that subjects the locals to strict accountability requirements and removes huge numbers of schools (and kids) from their jurisdiction through an explosive expansion of school choice. In both countries, the teachers unions strongly resisted—and lost. Institutional change has left them (for the time being) weakened and marginalized, and the politics of education drastically different.

Norway and Denmark, also with one-house parliamentary systems, are in the process of transforming their education systems too—over the resistance of their unions—but it has taken them longer to do it by comparison to Sweden, and their reforms are so far less radical. The main reason is that, while their governments had the power to act, their leftist parties did not move to the center as quickly or as aggressively as Sweden’s did, and for some time were more supportive of the unions in protecting traditional institutions. But the 2000s have seen the leftist parties become more centrist, and the pace of reform has picked up considerably. Here too, then, the teachers unions have been opposing reform all along—but after a modicum of success, they have been largely circumvented and weakened. There are signs in these nations, and in Sweden too, that the unions are beginning to re-establish their power by putting down political roots at the local level; but how successful that will be—absent the great advantages of centralization—remains to be seen.

Finland is like its Nordic cousins in having a one-house parliament, but its reform experience has been starkly different. Much as Sweden did, Finland took successful, aggressive action early on—under a conservative coalition government, against union resistance—to decentralize education, and the result was institutionally transformative. Yet unlike in Sweden, what the union most valued—the national bargaining arrangement for wages and benefits—was protected from those decentralizing reforms, and remained an important power base for the
unions going forward. More generally, the corporatist decision structures that in Sweden had been weakened to circumvent union participation (and blocking), and that had also been temporarily weakened in Finland, were re-embraced over time by Finnish governments—which, from the mid-1990s until 2007, were broad multiparty coalitions that included both left and right parties, leading to a collaborative form of governance that allowed the unions to block any unwanted reforms.

What further distinguished Finland, however, was a unique and remarkable educational event. Quit out of the blue, the 2001 PISA tests of international student achievement revealed that Finland was the best of the best, a rock star among nations—convincing everyone, including the Finns, that their education system did not need reforming. Thus, during most of the 2000s, as other countries frantically sought to improve their schools, Finland was content with its status quo. The union had little to fight against, and its power remained substantial and intricately woven into the system. This unusual situation, however, is beginning to change. The 2012 PISA scores showed a marked decline in Finland’s test scores (after a smaller decline in 2009), and political pressures are building for genuine reform. The union is suddenly playing defense.

Finland aside, then, the developed nations in our sample that don’t put formal veto points in the way of governmental action—England, Sweden, Norway, Denmark—have been largely successful over time in overcoming union resistance and adopting major reforms of their education systems. The other developed countries in our sample—the United States, France, Germany, and Japan—all have political systems that put multiple veto points in the way of governmental action, and thus give vested interests ample opportunity to block. In none of these countries did major education reform occur. Indeed, their political systems actually leave them doubly disadvantaged when it comes to reform: for precisely because their multiple veto points make major change so difficult, their governments have reason not even to attempt the kind of transformative change that occurred in England and Sweden, but instead to scale back their efforts to incremental changes that at least stand a chance of passing.

The U.S. has made marginal progress in advancing school choice and accountability; but as of today, only 6% of students are in charter schools, No Child Left Behind has been eviscerated, and performance-based evaluations—while they have the look and sound of reform—have so far led, in practice, to almost every teacher being rated satisfactory. In France, governments have tried to decentralize their massive, centralized system many times, only to be defeated by union opposition and strikes. In Germany, governments went for many years doing next to nothing, and in the 2000s—thanks to PISA shock—managed to adopt some modest accountability reforms in the form of national standards and tests. In all three countries, the basic structure of the school system remains the same as it was decades ago.

Among the multiple-veto nations, Japan is the outlier. But not because it achieved major change. It is an outlier because the Japanese Teachers Union (JTU) has literally been shut out of power and decisional involvement by the conservative LDP, which has basically had a monopoly on the control of Japanese government (with minor departures) since 1955. Teachers do have vested interests in their jobs; the JTU has been very organized and very active in protecting them; it has opposed neoliberal reforms when they have been pursued; and in the more distant past, it was reasonably successful (despite its outsider status) at using its powers of disruption to block changes it didn’t like. That said, the main explanation for Japan’s limited pursuit of neoliberal education reforms has less to do with the teachers unions than with the powerful national ministry of education—which has deep vested interests in maintaining its own central control, and has long stood in the way of major change.
And then, finally, there are the developing nations of Mexico and India. Both are desperately in need of far-reaching education reforms. Yet, unlike the developed nations, they are saddled with political systems mired in clientelism and corruption. To politicians and union leaders alike, education is an irresistible source of jobs, money, and power that enables rent-seekers to prosper—and in so doing, ensures that the existing education institutions, however unproductive, will be well protected in politics. The details have worked out differently in these two countries, but the themes are much the same. In Mexico, beginning in the late 1930s, a single monopoly union has wielded extraordinary political power—in elections, legislatures, and bureaucracies at both federal and state levels—to exercise considerable control over jobs and policy, and indeed, over politicians. In India, the teachers unions are numerous and fragmented, but even so they are extremely active in electoral politics, they are heavily represented in state legislatures (indeed, they are constitutionally guaranteed at least 12% of the seats in state upper chambers), and they are engaged in corrupt connections with politicians in brokering job favors for members. In both nations, outrages abound. In Mexico, for example, teachers buy and sell their jobs or pass them on to their children. In India, some 25% of teachers don’t even show up for work on any given day.

The prospects for these two countries are not bright. India faces many obstacles in the coming few decades. The system is too fragmented, too unwieldy, too lubricated by the jobs and money that make rent-seeking so profitable and worth protecting. Mexico appears to have a better chance of making genuine gains, but it won’t be easy. There are signs, with the election of President Pena Nieto in 2012—who, with the backing of a growing middle class and business sector, has taken on the monopoly teachers union and championed education reform—that Mexico may be on the verge of the kind of Progressive movement that restructured American government a hundred years ago. The question is: can this nascent reform movement in Mexico succeed in overcoming the powerful vested interests that have governed that nation’s education system for well over half a century?

Other developing nations around the world almost surely face the very same core challenge as Mexico and India. Yes, their citizens could benefit enormously if education could be thoroughly overhauled and improved. But their political and education systems are stacked against it. And most of the people in power don’t want it.

The Road Ahead

In this book, we use the teachers unions as an opening wedge in advancing a larger scholarly agenda. As this summary can only suggest, the various chapters cover a great deal of ground and are highly informative about the histories, politics, unions, and institutions of individual countries. Even more important, when taken together they point to a whole that is much greater than the simple sum of its parts in what it conveys: not only about teachers unions, but also about the bigger picture of education politics worldwide—and about the key theoretical roles of vested interests and governmental veto points in shaping how that politics plays out in national contexts.

Given how little is currently known about the politics of education, this is a useful step forward. But it is only one step in what needs to be an ongoing process of study and exploration that goes well beyond what we are able to accomplish in this one book. Our hope is that the information and analysis we provide here will help to bring the study of politics—and power—to
center stage in theory and research on education, activate the involvement of a much larger scholarly community, and serve as a foundation on which others can build.
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