A Political History of School Finance Reform in Metropolitan Hartford, Connecticut, 1945-2005

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The School Finance Issue

• Since the 1970s, school funding systems of 45 states challenged in courts
• Political stakes have intensified due to rising increases in public school spending
  – revenues more than doubled during each decade from 1940 to 1990 (Odden & Picus)
The School Finance Issue in Connecticut

• How and why did legislators from metropolitan Hartford’s urban, suburban, and rural districts debate and vote on school finance bills over time?
Significance

• Study emphasizes conflict between urban, suburban, and rural legislative interests and analyzes them in the context of the metropolitan Hartford area


  • Suburban legislators were more likely to oppose statewide financing plans than were those from other regions, even though this opposition did not always mean that the legislation in question failed
CT House Districts (2001)
Definitions: Tax Effort

- The rate at which each town chooses to tax its available property tax base (ENGL = Equalized Net Grand List)
  - The % of the available property tax funds each town allocates for education
  - The key elements of tax effort are that it is a *chosen* rate on an *available* property tax base

![Tax Effort Graph](image)

**Tax Effort (local funds/ENGL) of Selected Towns**

- **Avon**
- **Bloomfield**
- **Hartford**
- **West Hartford**
Definitions: High-need

-Towns that do not have a large available property base to tax, relative to the needs of the school population that they serve.
School Finance in CT: Change Over Time

3 major changes shifted debate:
- suburbanization
- redistricting
- *Horton v Meskill* school finance case

2 new players appeared:
- wealthy & less-wealthy suburbs

mid-1960s -1970s

1945 - 1950s
- Urban areas put forth a high tax effort to fund their schools
- Rural towns needed high levels of state aid to develop their schools

1980s-2005
- Urban areas, rural areas, & less-wealthy suburbs became high need
- Wealthy suburbs put forth a high tax effort
Legislative history records detailed any controversies that arose surrounding proposed bills:

- Education Committee
- Appropriations Committee
- Senate Floor
- House Floor

1945 Education Committee Hearings on Senate Bill 431
### Vote for HB-6004 (1975)

**Result of the vote:**
- **Total Number Voting:** 34
- **Necessary for Passage:** 18
- **Yea:** 27
- **Nay:** 7
- **Absent and not voting:** 2

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### Controversial Roll Call Votes on school finance bills and amendments were analyzed based on the actions of voting Representatives

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#### CONNECTICUT HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**1975 LEGISLATURE**

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- **Abate** 148
- **Alcorn** 55
- **Alston** 122
- **Altschul** 43
- **Ambrogio** 95
- **Anderson** 138
- **Anderson** 106
- **Baldastri** 23
- **Bana** 123
- **Baldacci** 27
- **Bartlett** 57
- **Bergan** 57
- **Bergeron** 117
- **Bensadon** 65
- **Bondareva** 24
- **Brutis** 56
- **Campbell** 118
- **Carroll** 5
- **Compi** 76
- **Clark** 71
- **Clynes** 81
- **Cotterworth** 72
- **Coffin** 77
- **Collins** 140
- **Conti** 71
- **Crestoti** 59
- **Cumming** 12
- **DeFercio** 127
- **DeMasto** 87
- **DeSole** 84
- **Donovan** 36
- **Doto** 33
- **Esposito** 110
- **Euricelli** 102
- **Faulk** 46
- **Ferrari** 15
- **Flynn** 8
- **Gajderson** 48
- **Gilles** 4
- **Gillenson** 28

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- **Giardino** 99
- **Glassman** 14
- **Goodwin** 56
- **Gosselin** 125
- **Grande** 79
- **Grasser** 85
- **Grappo** 63
- **Hansman** 114
- **Haley** 72
- ** Handler** 40
- **Henderson** 112
- **Hermanowski** 51
- **Johnston** 52
- **Kemler** 18
- **Kleinbohn** 8
- **Krupa** 13
- **Lawless** 137
- **Leeney** 124
- **Liskov** 131
- **London** 146
- **Lydey** 126
- **Munson** 127
- **Nunes** 109
- **Orr** 15
- **Pinto** 70
- **Porter** 60
- **Purcell** 50
- **Quinn** 60
- **Reed** 34
- **Russ** 98
- **Sala** 121
- **Palmieri** 74
- **Powell** 105
- **Poh** 132
- **Radzwill** 128
- **Rapoport** 72
- **Reynolds** 116
- **Ritter** 6
- **St. Pierre** 22
- **Scully** 75
- **Serra** 144
- **Shaheen** 19
- **Sherwood** 13
- **Shrink** 91
- **Spilka** 103
- **Steinberg** 92
- **Sweeney** 46
- **Tong** 38
- **Trapani** 37
- **Trentor** 145
- **Tuncano** 29
- **Turano** 120
- **Uccello** 78
- **Villa** 96
- **Walkovich** 109
- **Waldin** 33
- **Walker** 92
- **Weingard** 83
- **William** 11
- **Wright** 77
- **Yacovone** 9

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**YEAS:** 118
**N.V.: 13**
**NAYS: 20**

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**Bill Number:** HB-630

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**Mr. Speaker:** Kennedy
**Dop Speaker:** Morris, B.
Rural v. Urban in the 1940s & ‘50s

- Urban areas had a higher property tax than rural towns
  - representatives of rural towns argued for more state aid to help fund their schools.

“...The buildings have had very little repair for many years. They are drafty with a stove inadequate to heat the room... We investigated and found 81 towns with poor conditions and 21 towns with extremely poor conditions.” - Lt. Governor Snow, 1945 Education Committee Hearings
Rural v. Urban in the 1940s & ‘50s

- However, urban areas chose to tax themselves at a higher rate than rural areas
  - Urban representatives argued for property-tax relief

![Bar chart showing Tax Effort v. Formula Share 1950 for New Britain, Hartford, Bloomfield, and Avon.](chart.png)
Changes in mid-1960s & ’70s

• Suburbanization
  • In 1950, 33% of Hartford County’s population lived in the City of Hartford. By 1980, the city accounted for only 17% of the county population - a decrease of 16 percentage points.

[Graph showing changes in town's population share in Hartford County of selected towns from 1940 to 2000]
Reapportionment

1965 CT Constitutional Convention reapportioned the Senate and House to comply with ‘one man, one vote’ principle

Percent of CT House seats held by 81 small towns:
- before 1965: 43%
- after 1965: 14%
Changes in mid-1960s & ’70s

- **1974 Horton v. Meskill** school finance case
  - held education funding based solely on property taxes to be unconstitutional

- Guaranteed Tax Base (GTB) formula
  - Benefited high-need towns
  - Result: state aid varied according to the level of property wealth and the tax effort of the locality.
Changes in Tax Effort

• 1940s-1950s
  • Urban areas put forth a higher tax effort than rural areas

• 1980s-2005
  • Urban areas, suburban areas, and rural areas all put forth a high tax rate
  • Only the property tax base of wealthy suburbs can support their schools

![Tax Effort of Selected Towns: 1950 & 1990](image)
After Horton v. Meskill: 1980s-2005

- Wealthy suburban areas had a higher property tax base than urban, rural and less-wealthy suburban areas.
- Representatives of wealthy suburban areas argued for tax relief.

![Graph showing ENGL of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Towns]

- The graph compares ENGL (Estimated Net General Levies) for various towns in 1981 and 1991.
- Notable towns include Hartford (Suburban), East Hartford (Suburban), Bristol (Suburban), Windsor Locks (Suburban), Plainville (Suburban), East Granby (Rural), and Hartland (Rural).
- The y-axis represents ENGL ranging from 0 to 6,000,000,000.
After Horton v. Meskill: 1980s-2005

• Representatives of urban, rural and less-wealthy suburban towns argued for state aid to compensate for their lack of property tax base

“Well, one of the things that we do know is that the smallest of towns that are very hard up, that are poor, do not get the same per child help under the ECS formula”-Representative Sawyer, 2005
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