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The True Power Behind the Vote

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THE TRUE POWER BEHIND THE VOTE:
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF LOCAL VOTER TURNOUT AS IT RELATES TO
EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

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The current state of education hails that race, class, wealth and socio-economic factors rightfully remain in the forefront of educational policy; however, the most intrinsic feature of Democracy, voting, remains absent. This aspect, so innate to the American people, has been left unnoticed and out shadowed by these four barriers. Why does this remain to be the case when it has been proven that a mobilized community equates to power? Using the pluralism theory perspective, this paper will look at past inequalities and deeply analyze the relation between community power with an emphasis on local voting elections and the quality of education received at the local high schools in order to answer the question "Can the percentage of voter turnout in a community's local and Presidential elections be a good predictor of educational success or failure?"

INTRODUCTION

Before today's inequalities can be completely comprehended, a general knowledge of the past must be understood. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court reached the verdict that separate but equal was unconstitutional, violating the fourteenth amendment by depriving black citizens of equal protection under the law. This landmark case, best known as Brown v. Board of Education, would virtually change America for years to come. No longer was racial segregation acceptable nor tolerated on a legislative standpoint. Since then, public schools have been forced to integrate, and new legislation has been introduced in attempts to equal the playing field.

In the year 2004, although many strides have been made, people are still fighting for equal education. Because our public school system is dependent on homeownership, the wealthy, those who can afford to buy instead of rent, are assured quality schools with advanced technology, while the inner city schools are left to struggle. One of the original theories of inequalities was derived from studies as early as Charles Murray's Bell Curve. This study, intended to analyze intelligence and class structure in American life, inferred that white people were inherently more intelligent than blacks. The studies were backed by statistical analysis that showed an achievement gap, seemingly proving that whites were more gifted. However, like other sciences, sociology is an on-going study. Therefore, one must continue to look into all of the possible causes behind these asymmetrical results.

Currently, socio-economic status stands as the barrier between educational equity. "Privileged groups protect their advantages until virtually all members reach a given status," (Gamoran 2001). However, is it possible that other barriers exist that are not as prominent but equally important to concluding the achievement gap? This is not intended as "the solution," but rather an addition to the many efforts towards closing the achievement gap, or at least seeing it from a different perspective.

The logic behind this paper is that the active voting population in local elections represents the power to make change in one's community. Similar to the relationship between wealth and power, the local voting population has the ability to elect school board members and local politicians. Although one cannot directly assume that the number of voters equates to a better school, we can associate the number of voters in a local election to the power of that community. If the local voting population becomes politically charged, they ultimately have the power to allocate funds towards school funding, regardless of their tax base. In addition to that assumption, the typical voter in local elections has some type of invested interest in its outcome. Therefore, they tend to be more politically aware of the decisions made in their community, ultimately making them a force to be reckoned with.

RESEARCH QUESTION
& THESIS

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the active voting population in a community's elections and the positive results of their area's public schools. The research question asks, "Can the degree of voter turnout in a community's in local and Presidential elections become a good predictor of educational success or failure?" I

will argue that the voting percentage of a community is a good indicator of academic success.

I will be using the pluralism perspective which is based on "functionalism with emphasis on equilibrium, stability and gradual change," (Adam Rose). I am using this theory because inherent in its definition lies the fact that there are many "competing groups and associations that embody a conglomeration of conflicting interest. Through a process of democratic competition the nature and direction of society are determined," (Talcott Parsons).

The theory directly relates to my paper in that there are different groups who fight for quality of education. The affluent are more likely to receive a quality education because of the allocation of town funding due to their high homeownership rates. The less well off individuals tend to rent, keeping their property value at nothing. Therefore, they must do other things, such as mobilizing their community to vote. In doing such, they are attempting to level the playing field through democratic competition, seemingly altering the direction of educational inequalities.

<u>CASE OF SIGNIFICANCE</u>

The importance of this is relatively simple, in voting in local elections people ultimately tap into a source of

democratic equity, power. For the purpose of this paper, power simply equates to the ability to make change. During these elections not only are local officials selected, but citizens are permitted to directly vote on issues that concern their population, educational reform being one of them. Therefore while socio-economic status remains a barrier blocking educational equality, community power has the ability to offset these inequalities.

In these elections billions of dollars are often allocated, ultimately giving the voters power to create change. Although one individual may not always have the ability to do so, a mobilized front can rarely be ignored.

<div align="center">REVIEW OF LITERATURE</div>

Limited research has attempted to draw a connection between voting and quality of education, there has been considerable information that links community power and decision making. Because this paper equates the power to a mobilized community, it in turn creates a channel for political change, such as educational improvements. In an article entitled "Community Power and Decision Making," Richard Smith replicates and adds to Amos Hawley's "Community Power and Urban Renewal Success," in which Hawley hypothesized that success in any collective action is greatest where community power is most highly concentrated (1963).

Smith's account looked at Hawley's research in attempts to clarify patterns of relationships by types of policies. He analyzed two theoretical relationships of power. "One position is based on the argument that the adoption and implementation of various community policies is related to a concentration of power within the community," (1976). The opposing position argues "for outputs as related to a dispersion of community power." Although seemingly different these arguments are fundamentally the same. The first argument explains that the degree of success gained by a group in a collective effort is best when the population is more concentrated. While the second argument is based upon the theory that a more diffused population in a community can draw upon various resources for innovating new programs. In theory, neither is in error, and both are created upon the same base, community. Throughout both Hawley's and Smith's research, the community is the driving force to create change. Therefore, drawing from both Hawley and Smith, the mobilized voting community ultimately has the power to create change in their community.

In an article entitled "Voting on School Finances: A Test of Competing Theories," Everett Cataldo and John Holm look at the issue of a community as it directly relates to school financial referenda. Their study seeks to understand "voting behavior in school financial referenda by analyzing the combined effects of socioeconomic/attitudinal variables and

community factors on voting in a tax election in Cleveland, Ohio." The significance of this study is that school financial elections are the most important and frequently used technique of direct democratic policy making in the United States (Cataldo 1983). One estimate had 7,000 tax levy and budget elections occurring across the country each year, with voters deciding on over $3 billion annually in school bonds alone (Hamilton and Cohen 1974:6). This demonstrates that voters have the potential to let their voices be heard on a number of issues at least once a year.

DEFINE AND OPERATIONALIZE

Throughout the paper there are roughly six concepts that must be understood in order to follow this research: Community, mobilized community, power, educational inequalities and the productivity of public schools. The first term is community. For the purposes of this paper the community is drawn up of town borders. Unfortunately there was not enough time to gather information based upon voting by school districts. I received several thousand pages worth of voter information from the voter records file from the Connecticut State Registrar which would have taken me at least an academic year to completely sort through. Therefore instead of using voting districts I used town borders. The

community is simply stated as the area in between school and town borders in which people live. Unfortunately there are some overlaps of town and school districts, those people were either not included in this study are grouped into a bordering district. There are nine communities picked for this research, chosen to represent Connecticut's diverse setting. The towns chosen are: Ansonia, Bloomfield, Brideport, Farmington, Glastonbury, Hartford, New Haven, West Hartford, Windsor, and Stamford.

The next term is mobilized community. For purposes of this study a mobilized community is the degree of voter turnout in an election. Therefore a community that is mobilized will have a high voter turnout, while one that is relatively lowly mobilized will have a weak voter turnout. A week turnout is defined in Presidential elections as 70% turnout or lower, while in local elections 45% or lower is defined as weak. All terms and percentages were chosen arbitrarily.

Power may quite possibly be the most loosely defined term in this proposal. Power simply equates to ones ability to create change. In some communities money equates to power. In other towns where there is a lack of wealth communities must present different ways to create power such as vote.

The final concept is educational inequalities. As for this proposal, educational inequalities are measured as a

significant difference between the educational outcomes of people from dissimilar demographic backgrounds. Because educational factors remain fairly difficult to assess on a national standpoint, standardized test will be the determining factor of the quality of education amongst the students. It should also be noted that this research simply studies public schools. Private, parochial and charter schools were not included in this study.

METHODOLOGY

It took a little while to completely understand how I wanted to conduct the research. Initially I wanted to say that the more mobilized a community, the better the educational system would be. After attempting to defend myself numerous times I could not find a true defense for my thesis without finding some other spurious relationship that would easily offset my statement. Therefore I changed my argument, stating that voter turnout is a good predictor of educational success or failure. That argument was much easier to defend and seemed to be quite fitting with the results you will see below.

Every election year the Secretary of State posts election results via the internet. From this information on the website and additional materials received I charted the number

of voters registered, active voters, and the percentage of the voter turnout for nine pre-selected towns in Connecticut.

As mentioned previously, these towns were selected because they represent Connecticut's extremely diverse setting, both in relative size and various socio-economic statuses. Although I am not completely ignorant of the state of wealth and poverty in Connecticut, I cannot say that I possessed enough knowledge previous to this study to skew the results of the project.

Once I gathered the voting results I then visited the Connecticut State Department of Education website and looked up the No Child Left Behind Data that lists the CMT and CAPT scores for every school in the state. For the purpose of this project I equated the quality of education to the standardized test score average of each individual school along with the drop out percentage for that year. I began to group these schools by town lines in hopes to gain a better understanding for the quality of schools per town. Because it would take longer than a semester to gather information based upon voting jurisdictions I was forced to conduct this study along the town/city boundaries. Subsequently, larger school districts such as Hartford tended to have more schools that fall underneath their town lines than smaller towns like Ansonia. So instead of comparing one school in a small district to several schools in a large district, the average scores from

each district were compared. I wanted to analyze the drop out rates as well, because I didn't want to just study standardized test due to its extreme controversy with bias and other sorts of test score inequalities. By studying the test drop out rates it allowed me to look into each school and gather information of their ability to retain schools. If a student isn't in school then they aren't learning and that is a reflection of your school system and neighborhood.

I examined both the CMT Math and Reading scores along with the total scores, which was an autocratic addition of CMT and CAPT scores to gain a general understanding of how each town compared to each other along with the voter turnout This was charted on excel sheet and analyzed. Another chart was tabulated with the 2002 General Election and the 2004 Presidential election calculations, with the drop out rates included. This chart provided the opportunity to look at each state across the board to see how they matched up with other towns.

<u>RESULTS</u>

In calculating the results I was extremely surprised by the consistency of the study. Below are the two listed charts which show my results.

Town	Number of Registered Voters	Number Voted in 2004 Presidential Elections	Voter Turnout	Number of registered Voters in 2002 General Election	Number Voted in 2002 General Election	Voter Turnout
Ansonia	19,358	15,286	78.96%	9,333	4,848	51.94%
Bloomfield	13,991	10,758	76.89%	12,842	7,342	57.17%
Bridgeport	59,102	59,102	63.82%	49,788	19,588	39.34%
Farmington	16,138	13,773	85.35%	14,734	10,051	68.22%
Hartford	49,803	28,987	58.20%	44,563	17,406	39.06%
Glastonbury	22,135	22,135	86.79%	20,588	14,998	72.85%
New Haven	58,094	39,458	67.92%	53,472	21,513	40.23%
West Hartford	40,270	33,755	83.82%	37,392	24,944	66.71%
Windsor	18,568	14,932	80.42%	17,289	9,967	57.65%
Stamford	59,357	47,496	80.02%	55,830	28,916	51.79%
State of CT	2,044,411	1,608,551	78.68%	1,847,247	1,043,792	56.51%

*CMT and CAPT scores for the year 2003, documented by the Connecticut State Department of Education

School District	CMT Math	CMT Reading	CAPT Math	CAPT Reading	Total Scores Pres Election	Voter Turnout	Drop Out Rate for class of 2002
Ansonia School District Averages	69	64	65	61	259	78.96%	16.7
Bloomfield School District	68	60	41	51	220	76.89%	10.1
Bridgeport	48	40	44	54	186	63.82%	30.5
Farmington	96	92	96	94	378	85.35%	4
Hartford	57	39	37	44	177	58.20%	29.7
Glastonbury	94	90	91	94	369	86.79%	1.7
New Haven	55	40	47	60	202	67.92%	18.5
West Hartford	90	85	86	88	349	83.82%	8.6
Windsor	73	67	76	81	297	80.42%	12.4
Stamford	70	67	61	63	261	80.02%	16.9

Based on the information provided above, it is easy to see the connection between the best and worst performing schools and their test score data. The first chart simply shows the towns/cities and their voting outcomes for the Presidential and General elections. You should note that the towns highlighted in yellow, consistently had the worst voter turnout for both elections. This trend of these bottom three schools remains consistent with their drop out rates and test scores. As you can see on the second chart, the bottom three towns (highlighted in yellow) in the areas of test score data and voter outcome are parallel.

Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven continually struggled with their performance on standardized tests, while having a drop out rate much higher than the other towns. Farmington, Glastonbury and West Hartford on the other hand were consistently in the top three.

CONCLUSION

& Further Research

For the purpose of this project, the relationships cannot be denied. The bottom three of Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven remained consistent throughout the study in all categories. The top three towns of Farmington, Glastonbury and West Hartford remained consistent as well. This allows me

to come to the conclusion that in the state of Connecticut in the years 2002 and 2004, the percentage of voter turnout seems to be an appropriate predictor of educational success and failure.

I would love to see this project done on a larger scale over an extended period of time. Unfortunately much of my time was spent on attempting to contact the Registrar of Voters only to gain information that was too large to analyze in one semester. It would also be interesting to see how individual teachers in each town and city felt. I'm sure they could also present other factors that might lead to this happening.

CITATIONS

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Gamoron, Adam. 2001. American Schooling and Educational Inequality: A Forecast for the 21st Century *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 74, Extra Issue: Current of Thought: Sociology of Education at the Dawn of the 21st Century. (2001), pp. 135-153.

The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Dec., 1983), 619-631

PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 26, No.4 (Dec., 1993)
Cataldo, Everett F., and John D Holm. 1983. Voting on School Finances: A Test of Competing Theories

Calvert, Jerry W., and Jack Gilchrist. 1993 Suppose they Held an Election and Almost Everybody Came!

Additional information:

1. Office of Public Information
Connecticut State Department of Education
165 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, CT 06145
Tel (860) 713-6548
2. Information about No Child Left Behind Data could be gathered from the attached website. This information includes SAT and Connecticut Mastery Test scores broken down by school. Additional demographic information is included from 1993 to 2001.
http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/nclb/index.htm
3. Susan Bysiewicz Secretary of the State's Office
30 Trinity Street, Hartford CT 06106
4. The attached website is information on the voting and registration by various demographic backgrounds. Includes both Nation and State information
http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html#e