A Tale of Two Court Cases:
Analyzing Public Responses to School
Finance Rulings in CT

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A tale of two court cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plaintiffs</th>
<th>Horton 1970’s</th>
<th>CCJEF 2010’s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT funding violated equality provision; disadvantaged students</td>
<td>ECS formula did not fund schools in equitable manner; disadvantaged students</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Court</td>
<td>Ruled CT funding structure unconstitutional, because it disadvantaged some students</td>
<td>Ruled distribution of funds unconstitutional, because it did not satisfy constitutional demands</td>
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<td>Defendants</td>
<td>State defended current system, but acknowledged problems</td>
<td>State argued plaintiffs’ challenge was not a question of constitutionality and appealed</td>
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Research question

How do respondents’ reactions to the 1970’s *Horton v. Meskill* school finance ruling compare to the 2010’s *CCJEF v. Rell* ruling?
1. Although respondents reacted to the 1977 Horton ruling with clarity, their counterparts had more complex reactions to the 2016 CCJEF decision.

2. All respondents felt that students should be held to higher academic standards.

3. Horton respondents emphasized concern over taxes and school transportation; CCJEF counterparts were mainly concerned with special ed and teacher issues.
Other scholars on public responses to school finance reform

- People like concept of equal education opportunities; views shift after it becomes personal (Reed 2001)
  - Public opinion polls

- Few legal and political actors agree on which ed. funding system is most efficient and equal (Stiefel et al. 2011, Denardis 2010)
  - Public opinion polls

- My analysis of public responses allows me to understand views on school finance reform through reactions to specific cases
Methodology

- Primary resources: Completely public media resources
  - quotes to journalists, op-ed essays, editorials, and letters to the editor
- *Horton*: 18 responses over 7 years from Hartford Courant
- *CCJEF*: 23 responses over 1 year from Hartford Courant and CT Mirror
Findings:

1. Reactions shifted from being black and white in the 1970s to being grey, or complex, in the 2010s

2. *All* respondents emphasized a want for holding students to higher academic standards

3. *Horton* respondents emphasized taxes & transportation; *CCJEF* respondents drew attention to special ed & teachers’ issues
1. The shift from black and white to hazy grey opinions

Horton respondents:

“[Local School] Board members agreed [with the decision when it came out] that the state does not carry its fair share of education costs.”

-Nino Cazonetti, President of CT Association of Boards of Education (1984)
1. The shift from black and white to hazy grey opinions

CCJEF respondents:

“Judge Moukawsher is to be **applauded**. The excellent decision came, however, containing **very dark poison**. He proposed that certain children with severe disabilities be denied a public education”

-Andrew Feinstein, Special Education Lawyer and Parent (2016)
2. Students and higher standards

Shared concerned regarding academic standards:

“When the state provides more funds [...], let us hope that it also provides a better quality education. We do not have a lot of frills unless we have a good grounding in basics as well.”

-Norman Wickstrand, Consultant (1978)
2. Students and higher standards

Shared concerned regarding academic standards:

“A major problem driving what Judge Moukawsher called Connecticut’s ‘irrational’ education and financing systems is the lack of expectations for all of its students.”

-Nicholas Fischer, Former Superintendent (2016)
3. A shift in what influenced respondents’ stances

Horton respondents talk about tax reform:

“I believe that it is morally wrong that our school systems are supported by property taxes.”

-Carl Hurwitt, Community Member (1978)
3. A shift in what influenced respondents’ stances

CCJEF respondents talk about special education:

“[State Rep. Matt] Ritter said he agreed with about 85 percent of Superior Court Judge Thomas Moukawsher’s ruling [...] but disagreed with parts [...] surrounding special education.”

-Russell Blair, Hartford Courant Reporter (2016)
Significance

- CT has a rich history of struggling over school finance structure

- Analysis of policy dialect and responses is useful for people who want to make an impact on this struggle
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3. A shift in what influenced respondents’ stances

Horton respondents talk about school transportation:

“[A] new school finance plan introduces new sliding scales based on town wealth for [...] student transportation.”

-Antoinette Martin, Political reporter (1979)
3. A shift in what influenced respondents’ stances

CCJEF respondents talk about teachers’ issues:

“The State Attorney General made the right decision to appeal the part of the Judge’s ruling that imposed mandates on [...] determining how teachers are evaluated.”

-Sheila Cohen, President of CT Education Association (2016)
Limitations

- I obtained *Horton* documents within a 7 year time period as opposed to 1 year time period for *CCJEF*

- I only used one source for *Horton* documents, whereas two sources were used for *CCJEF*