

Dahill-Brown, S. (2012). **The State of American School Governance: Who's in Charge and Does It Matter?**

Despite the importance of schools for their communities, few political scientists have studied education governance in the United States. As a result, the discipline has failed to understand a major institutional upheaval in American politics. Across the country it seems that state governments are attempting to assume greater authority over curricular content, school structure, and funding. Because education policy has long been dominated by local institutions, heated debates have arisen over which level of government is best equipped to produce a democratic process, while also providing efficient and equitable student outcomes. I draw on multiple sources of data to measure centralization across several domains of governance and use these indicators to estimate change in state authority for all fifty states. I find that state authority has generally increased, yet many states have maintained decentralized systems in the face of considerable pressures to the contrary. I subsequently test for linkages between the degree of centralized authority at the state level and changes in school operations and educational outcomes, paying particular attention to inequality in both resources and achievement. I estimate a series of models in which lagged governance scales are the primary independent variable of interest, controlling for other time-varying state level factors as well as state and year fixed effects. Political economy literatures offer competing hypotheses regarding the consequences of centralized governance, however I find that increased state authority is strongly associated with decreases in high school attainment gaps. Administrative centralization of school governance, in which states promulgate academic policies and regulations, is associated with increased educational spending, higher rates of high school graduation, and degree attainment within states. This finding is robust across several specifications. These effects are small for the overall population but substantial for at least two traditionally disadvantaged groups: women and African Americans. All together, these effects suggest that administrative centralization may have contributed to more rapid closing of attainment gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in recent years.