

# Electoral Structures, Venue Selection, and the (New?) Politics of School Desegregation

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Are school desegregation proponents more likely to succeed in local political arenas in the South than in federal courtrooms? To raise that question on the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* may seem absurd. Had local politics in the South been receptive to desegregation efforts, there would presumably have been scant need for the litigation leading to that landmark case. However, the legal environment, national political climate, and political situation in southern school districts have changed considerably in fifty years—in ways that make the question relevant. Today, we suggest, the answer may frequently be yes.

The pursuit of desegregation in federal venues—despite education's being primarily a local responsibility—was a classic example of broadening the scope of conflict through venue shifting.<sup>1</sup> In the civil rights era, the strategy achieved important successes in the South. However, federal court rulings were often the linchpin of desegregation efforts, which reflected a tension between liberalism's pursuit of rights and democracy's concern for popular sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

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Using two case studies, we argue that local venues are more receptive to desegregation efforts than they were a generation ago. Our argument hinges on two assertions about the consequences of federalism for the politics of school desegregation: first, that multiple venues created by the U.S. constitutional system are no longer tightly linked (venue coupling); and second, that local political arenas now provide disadvantaged groups, in this case African Americans, with better opportunities to redress grievances than they did 50 years ago (venue receptivity). We consider these claims with respect to the scholarly understanding of single-member districts, descriptive and substantive representation, political incorporation, urban regime theory, and the Madisonian perspective on the advantages of large jurisdictions.

## Venue Coupling and School Desegregation

As Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones note, a punctuated equilibrium model illuminates many aspects of policy change.<sup>3</sup> They argue that when policy venues are relatively tightly coupled and feedback is positive among them, more rapid and larger-scale policy change is possible than when the coupling is loose and negative feedback predominates.<sup>4</sup> Widespread, rapid desegregation of southern schools after a decade of successful post-*Brown* resistance illustrates this point. By the mid-1960s, all three branches of the federal government were on the same school desegregation page. The 1964 Civil Rights Act facilitated the development and enforcement of tough desegregation guidelines by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. These guidelines contributed to the Supreme Court's reasoning in *Green v. County School Board* and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. In addition to the positive feedback in federal venues, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act together tightened the relationship between federal and local venues by giving the federal government the carrot of increased aid to

local schools and the stick of withholding such aid, which school districts were increasingly coming to rely on, if desegregation did not proceed satisfactorily.

Currently there is little support for school desegregation at the federal level, and many recent court decisions have gone against desegregation proponents. There is also, however, less positive feedback for resegregation efforts among the three branches today than there was positive feedback for desegregation efforts in the civil rights era. More important, on desegregation-related issues, the coupling between federal and local levels has loosened. In the civil rights era, the federal government promoted desegregation, and recalcitrant southern districts could lose federal aid. Today the federal government may be hostile to desegregation efforts, but a district undertaking such efforts runs little risk of losing federal aid.

### Venue Receptivity and School Desegregation

Our second assertion brings together two perspectives—associated with the work of Clarence Stone and Paul Peterson, respectively—that are frequently considered diametrically opposed.<sup>5</sup> Like Stone, we study variations in local political arrangements that affect a locality's congeniality to the needs of the disadvantaged, in this case blacks' demands for school desegregation.<sup>6</sup> However, as Peterson's claims about federalism suggest, it is primarily because of national-level developments rooted in the civil rights era that local venues in our case studies are more responsive now to desegregation efforts than they were a generation ago.

Civil rights era initiatives provoked a backlash that severely weakened the national-level political coalition that facilitated those initiatives. One result of that backlash was the election of Republican presidents whose appointments made federal courts increasingly hostile to desegregation. This judicial hostility is, of course, one reason that local venues are now at least relatively more congenial to desegregation efforts than they were a generation ago. Independent of judicial hostility, our case studies call attention to how civil rights era initiatives, especially the Voting Rights Act, eventually transformed two school districts' politics by facilitating the registration of African Americans and their representation on elected bodies. Thus while the national environment has changed since the 1960s, the politics of these districts continue to bear the stamp of civil rights era initiatives in ways that facilitate desegregation.

### A Brief Tale of Two Districts

Litigation in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) led to the 1971 Supreme Court *Swann* ruling, which allowed intradistrict mandatory busing for desegregation. The school district's desegregation experience was among the nation's most successful.<sup>7</sup> However, CMS' desegregation policies eventually provoked a legal challenge, the reopening of

*Swann*, and a 1999 trial before U.S. District Court Judge Robert Potter, a Reagan appointee active in the 1960s anti-busing movement. At the trial, CMS defended its desegregation efforts, and it appealed Potter's adverse ruling. During the two-year appeal process, and despite the affirmation of the most important part of Potter's decision, a 5–4 majority of the school board fought a determined uphill battle to develop a pupil assignment plan that would facilitate racial balance without violating court orders. The board majority waged this fight against the wishes of the superintendent, the business elite, and many angry citizens. Despite the school system's electorate being 75 percent white, the five-person majority survived high-profile challenges in the two elections (1999 and 2001) following the trial.

As a narrow board majority attempted to salvage CMS' desegregation commitment, a comfortable, 5–2, majority in a Charlotte suburb—Rock Hill, South Carolina—expanded that district's similar, albeit less famous, commitment.<sup>8</sup> In 2001 the Rock Hill School District (RHSD) revamped the elementary school assignment plan to enhance racial and socioeconomic balance at two schools whose percentages of black and low-income children exceeded district guidelines. The reassignment triggered the formation of an opposition group, Neighborhoods United, bitter pupil assignment hearings, and a lawsuit against the board. A settlement allowed reassignment to proceed, but limited RHSD's future ability to pursue racial balance. While the settlement was a partial victory for the board's majority, the election following adoption of the assignment plan was a total victory, even though RHSD's electorate is 77 percent white. Two of the reassignment plan's prominent white supporters were reelected. The third seat on the ballot was held by an opponent of the plan. When he decided against running (for personal reasons), the open seat was won by the field's most racially liberal candidate, a white who distanced himself from Neighborhoods United and defeated one of its members.

None of these elections in RHSD and CMS was a referendum on desegregation. Nonetheless, in both districts, it was desegregation opponents who moved the conflict from the local arena to the federal judiciary. And in both districts, the workings of local electoral politics proved more receptive to desegregation than did the federal judiciary. Little in the conventional wisdom about school desegregation politics anticipates this greater local receptivity.

### *Desegregation politics*

The workings of electoral politics proved congenial to desegregation proponents for several reasons. The first is loosely coupled venues and incremental change with relatively low stakes. As our first claim about the consequences of federalism indicates, the tight coupling of venues and positive feedback among them in the civil rights era facilitated desegregation in the South; now loose coupling facilitates it.

Furthermore, sweeping change was not on the agenda in our case studies. On the one hand, the great changes in attitudes about race relations that have occurred since the 1960s preclude public discussion of a return to state-mandated segregation even though pupil assignment can be contentious. On the other hand, although loose coupling facilitated the desegregation efforts of both boards' majorities, it also precluded, given local political opposition, those efforts being large-scale. Thus CMS' black board members made no attempt to reverse a 15-year drift toward resegregation. Rather, they sought only to minimize the greater resegregation augured by Potter's order. In RHSD the stakes were also small. Prior to reassignment, only two of fourteen elementary schools were racially imbalanced, and the two schools' total enrollment was less than 4 percent of RHSD's total.

### ***Increased black voter registration***

Consistent with our second claim about federalism's consequences, local politics reflects the increase in black registration triggered by the civil rights era. The long-term effects of this increase are illustrated by a comparison between CMS' 1999 and 1970 board elections. Both took place following pivotal trials. The 1999 election occurred shortly after Potter ordered CMS to abandon desegregation; the 1970 election, after the 1969 trial mandating desegregation. In both elections, black incumbents running at large faced challenges from white advocates of neighborhood schools. In 1970, blacks comprised approximately 24 percent of the population but only 14 percent of registered voters, and the white challengers were successful. In 1999, blacks comprised 27 percent of the population and 24 percent of the electorate, and the white challengers were defeated. Increased black registration helps to explain the different outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The importance of electoral structures***

In addition to increasing black registration, civil rights era initiatives, especially the Voting Rights Act and its amendments, have affected school desegregation politics by facilitating racial redistricting to increase black representation on school boards. Although the literature on racial redistricting is large, contested, and evolving rapidly, considerable evidence links district (as opposed to at-large) representation on school boards to increased descriptive representation for blacks. Fewer attempts have been made to link district representation to increased substantive representation; studies that do so generally focus on the hiring of black school system personnel and some measures of racially identifiable tracking.<sup>10</sup>

Our case studies are consistent with the claim that district elections to school boards facilitate increases in black descriptive representation. Our work also indicates how this increased descriptive representation translated into increased

substantive representation by facilitating desegregation efforts. Because the relationship between single-member districts, increased black descriptive representation, and desegregation has received virtually no scholarly attention, we provide additional data on this topic.

*Rock Hill School District.* Under Justice Department pressure, in 2000 the electoral structure changed from seven members elected at large to two elected at large and five elected from single-member districts, two of which were majority-minority. Consequently, in the November 2000 election, the previously all-white board acquired three new members. Two of the new members were black, and all three were from single-member districts located on Rock Hill's south side, which is generally less affluent than the north side and has historically had less representation on the board.

The policy consequences are illustrated by Mildred Douglas, one of the newly elected black members. In 1996, during a previous reassignment debate, she addressed the board, lamenting a projected increase in racial imbalance.<sup>11</sup> Her concern, shared by the NAACP, went unheeded. In 2001, when the board again discussed reassignment, Douglas was a member and made desegregation a high priority, as did Elizabeth "Ann" Reid, the other African American. Since several white board members also viewed racial balance as important, it became the board's top priority for the new assignment plan.

One of the votes against reassignment came from the newly elected white member, whose south-side district included many supporters of Neighborhoods United. However, on another high-profile issue involving desegregation—the location of a new high school—this white member voted with the board's black members. That vote further indicates how single-member districts affected policy. The three board members from the south side wanted a site there; they secured a fourth board member's support, and the school is under construction on the southern site, despite the preferences of the superintendent, the board's chair, and many affluent citizens who advocated a northern site. Since RHSD plans to achieve racial and socioeconomic balance at all high schools, the southern site will require generally shorter transportation times for black and white working-class students than a northern site would have. This is a significant departure from past practice because when RHSD previously sought balance in pupil assignment, it typically paid more attention to the preferences of affluent white families for shorter transportation times than to the similar wishes of other families.

*Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.* In CMS, the 1995 switch from exclusively at-large representation to a system in which six board members are elected from single-member districts and three are elected at large also affected the board's racial composition and its policies. In the previous twenty years, CMS typically had two black board members, but that

number jumped to three in 1995 and to four by the start of the 1999 trial. The 5–4 majority that prevailed on crucial desegregation issues consisted of the four African Americans and a white liberal, Louise Woods, whose electoral success can be attributed to single-member districts. Unsuccessful running at large in 1990, Woods sought a district seat in 1995 and was the only winning candidate not supported by the daily paper or business elite. However, a strong grassroots campaign organization—easier to build in a district than system-wide—overcame those disadvantages. In 2001, business elite support for Woods’s challenger helped him raise three times more money than she did. But she won handily, with the same strong grassroots organization and the benefit of six years of constituent service.

### Similar Situations Elsewhere?

Although CMS and RHSD are located in the same metropolitan area, they embody a wider range of experience than their geographic proximity might suggest. In addition to the organizational differences between a suburban school district and a large urban system, Rock Hill and Charlotte reflect the contrasting civil rights histories of their states. North Carolina typifies southern moderation and a tempered response to the civil rights movement. South Carolina, along with Mississippi, had, as V. O. Key noted, a tradition of making “the white-supremacy case most bitterly, most uncompromisingly,”<sup>12</sup> and South Carolina responded to the civil rights movement with violence. The 1961 Freedom Ride illustrates these differences. In Charlotte, the most severe harassment was a single trespassing arrest, and the case was dismissed the next day. However, as the freedom riders entered South Carolina, they were, as Representative John Lewis recalls, “in real trouble.” He was beaten, and Rock Hill became the first place “blood was drawn on the Freedom Ride.”<sup>13</sup>

Ample opportunity exists across states and even within many states to investigate the extent to which the relationships observed in our case studies can be found in other school districts. For example, in South Carolina alone, there is a wide variation in electoral arrangements among the state’s 85 school districts with approximately 45 percent electing members entirely from single-member districts, 28 percent entirely at large, and 18 percent from a combination of at-large and single-member districts.<sup>14</sup> Desegregation levels also vary widely.<sup>15</sup>

The causal links we find among single-member districts, increased black voting, increased black descriptive representation, and desegregation are more likely to be found in other districts when, we hypothesize, certain conditions are present. The first is that blacks constitute less than 50 percent of student enrollment—a figure we consider a good first approximation of a single demographic condition conducive both to desegregation and to increasing black descriptive representation by single-member districts.<sup>16</sup>

The second set of conditions involves black political activity, especially mobilization and emphasis on desegregation by black leaders. National survey data indicate differences between a new generation of black elected officials and an older one that attended segregated schools and lived through the civil rights era.<sup>17</sup> All six black board members in our two cases attended segregated southern schools and strongly support traditional civil rights goals. Thus our case studies and inferences from national data lead to the hypothesis that the age of black board members affects the relationship between descriptive representation and commitment to desegregation.

Black mobilization and support for desegregation are presumably the sine qua non of single-member districts translating into successful desegregation efforts. However, studies of political incorporation indicate that when blacks constitute a numerical minority, their ability to form coalitions with whites is also necessary for obtaining “substantial influence over policy.”<sup>18</sup> In both Rock Hill and Charlotte, the (overwhelmingly white) business elite has sought, and often depended upon, black support to secure the election of pro-growth municipal officials and the passage of bonds for the development of infrastructure. The clout and durability of what Carl Abbott calls a “biracial coalition around economic growth”<sup>19</sup> have varied over the years in both cities. In Charlotte, in the era of that coalition’s greatest political influence, business elite support for school desegregation was highest. We hypothesize that the more important a role such a coalition plays in local development politics, the more successful pro-desegregation black school board officials are likely to be in pursuing their agenda. This hypothesis stems from two tenets of urban regime theory. First, support from the business elite is important for activist governance. Second, governance is not an issue-by-issue process; rather, preferences are shaped by available opportunities, and “once formed, a relationship of cooperation becomes something of value to be protected by all of the participants.”<sup>20</sup>

The importance of black-white coalitions also figures prominently in discussion of policy implications, the most obvious of which would be—if additional research yields findings similar to ours—that desegregation proponents should mount legal and/or political challenges to at-large electoral systems in racially imbalanced school districts. There was both the necessity and opportunity for legal challenges to at-large representation from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. During those years, school desegregation advocates suffered a series of devastating courtroom defeats, but 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act helped create a favorable legal environment for challenges to at-large electoral systems.

However, a series of rulings since the mid-1990s have made federal courts increasingly hostile to challenges to at-large representation. Consequently, local political arenas may provide a promising alternative to federal courtrooms

for challenging at-large systems, just as, we have suggested, they hold more promise for pursuing desegregation. In RHSD, where African Americans sought and relied upon Justice Department intervention under the Voting Rights Act to achieve single-member districts, there was less need for white support than in CMS where, in the absence of Justice Department involvement, alliances with whites were crucial. Especially important was the support of a Republican state legislator from an outlying, predominantly white area, where residents felt ill-served by a school board whose white members all resided in neighborhoods closer to downtown.

Additional research is needed to ascertain the conditions under which black-white alliances to achieve single-member districts in other school systems can have the positive effect on black substantive representation that they had in CMS. Such research might also illuminate the related question of the conditions that—once single-member districts are adopted—could allow blacks on school boards to form winning alliances on one issue with whites who represent white working-class constituencies and on another with whites whose constituencies are middle and upper class (as happened in RHSD with the votes on the new high school and pupil assignment). Of special interest is the question of whether these conditions are different for school boards than they are for other elected bodies and, if so, why?

### Are We All Madisonians Now?

Noting how opposing sides in the contentious literature on racial redistricting have managed to find authority for their conflicting positions in the writings of James Madison, David Canon has paraphrased Richard Nixon's comment about Keynes: "[I]n the area of voting rights and redistricting, apparently 'we are all Madisonians now.'"<sup>21</sup> Whatever the conflicting uses to which many of Madison's arguments may be put, there is little ambiguity in the claim of Federalist No. 10 that larger, as opposed to smaller, republics make it harder for a majority "to invade the rights of other citizens." For this claim, the question of whether we are all Madisonians requires a nuanced answer when it comes to school desegregation. Given that desegregation proponents have historically had to pursue their goals in national venues, much of school desegregation history jibes with Madison's claim about the benefits of larger jurisdictions. However, variations in time in addition to those in size and jurisdiction also must be considered.

Tension between majority wishes and minority rights arises frequently, including, as noted earlier, the era when desegregation proponents pursued their goals in court because of the hostility of white-dominated electoral venues. In our case studies, though, the workings of electoral politics have led democracy's emphasis on popular sovereignty to be consistent with liberalism's concern for individual rights. That this consistency occurs in local politics is not anticipated by either the conventional wisdom about school desegregation or a per-

spective that focuses on spatial and jurisdictional variations in venue receptivity without considering temporal changes.

We doubt that many observers of 1960s school desegregation battles would have anticipated that a generation later in southern districts such as RHSD and CMS, desegregation opponents would move the conflict to federal court and proponents would prevail in local elections. Thus our observations illustrate Baumgartner and Jones's claim that federalism "does not so much limit change as it makes such changes less controllable by anyone. The numerous venues provided by federalism make change far more unpredictable than in a unitary system."<sup>22</sup> Such unpredictability may not be exactly what Madison had in mind when he touted the benefits of federalism and a large republic, but surely there is something to be said for it.

### Notes

- 1 Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 1993.
- 2 Hochschild 1984.
- 3 Baumgartner and Jones 1993.
- 4 Generally, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) point out, politics is "governed by laws characterized by negative feedback" in which "a system moves away from its equilibrium for a time, but then returns to the status quo ante." Occasionally, however, "small inputs can cascade into major effects as they work their ways through a complex system." This cascade represents positive feedback and makes for "quick and dramatic change" (p. 16).
- 5 Stone 1993; Peterson 1981.
- 6 Survey data indicates strong black support for desegregation in Charlotte and Rock Hill (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Educational Foundation 2001; Huffmon 2003).
- 7 For a fuller discussion of CMS, see Smith 2004. In 1998–99, CMS enrolled approximately 100,000 students, 42 percent of whom were black and 51 percent non-Hispanic whites.
- 8 For additional information on RHSD and Rock Hill, see Smith, Kedrowski, and Ellis 2002, and Wheeland 2004. In 2001–2, RHSD enrolled approximately 15,000 students, 35 percent of whom were black and 60 percent of whom were non-Hispanic white.
- 9 Had blacks constituted 24 percent of the electorate in 1970, we estimate (based on newspaper accounts and analyses of homogenous precincts) that at least 3,300 more blacks would have voted. Had only 75 percent voted for the black incumbent, he would have won. Conversely, had blacks constituted only 14 percent of the electorate in 1999, we estimate that approximately 10,000 fewer blacks would have voted. That difference would likely have led to the victory of one of the white challengers since he lost by 2,125 votes.

It is difficult to discuss changes in the electorate in RHSD as precisely as in CMS because the former's boundaries have changed, and some precincts cross RHSD boundary lines. Suffice it to say that RHSD resembles South Carolina in that black registration soared following passage of the Voting Rights Act.

- 10 Meier, Stewart, and England 1989; Meier et al. 2003.
- 11 Because of an incomplete reading of a newspaper article, Smith, Kedrowski, and Ellis 2002 inadvertently misrepresented Douglas's views on the 1996 assignment. We have subsequently reread that news story, reviewed board minutes, and interviewed Ms. Douglas.
- 12 Key 1984, 130.
- 13 Lewis 1993, 137–38.
- 14 Percentages do not add up to one hundred because some districts use other selection methods (e.g., appointment). Data obtained from South Carolina School Boards Association.
- 15 For example, of South Carolina's 73 districts with more than one elementary school in the 2003–4 school year, the index of dissimilarity at the elementary level for blacks and whites ranged from 0.20 to 65, with a mean of 26 and a standard deviation of 15. (Computations by the authors from data provided by the South Carolina State Department of Education. The index of dissimilarity is frequently used to measure segregation. Its value ranges from 0 [full racial balance] to 100 [complete segregation] and is an indication of the proportion of students who would have to switch schools for the racial composition of all schools in a district to be the same.)
- 16 In North Carolina districts, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2003) find that desegregation tends to be higher when nonwhites are less than 50 percent or greater than 70 percent of a district's enrollment. However, if black students exceed 70 percent of a district's enrollment, it is more likely that black adults will constitute a majority of the electorate. In such situations, it is frequently hypothesized, single-member districts are less likely to increase descriptive representation because blacks' majority status allows them to win at-large elections.

This article equates *black* with *nonwhite*, an oversimplification that is useful for developing hypotheses and less troubling with reference to the Carolinas than it might be elsewhere because the politics of color in most Carolina districts continue to revolve largely around a black-white axis.

- 17 Bositis 2001.
- 18 Browning et al. 1997, 9.
- 19 Abbott 1987, 257.
- 20 Stone 1993, 9.
- 21 Canon 1999, 249.
- 22 Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 217.

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