Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability: Evidence from Retrospective Voting in Local Elections

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Abstract: One important and, to date, overlooked component of democratic accountability is the extent to which it might exacerbate existing societal inequalities if the outcomes for some groups of citizens are prioritized over others when voters evaluate governmental performance. We analyze a decade of California school board elections and find evidence that voters reward or punish incumbent board members based on the achievement of white students in their district, whereas outcomes for African American and Hispanic students receive comparatively little attention. We then examine public opinion data on the racial education achievement gap and report results from an original list experiment of California school board members that finds approximately 40% of incumbents detect no electoral pressure to address poor academic outcomes among racial minority students. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for several scholarly literatures, including retrospective voting, racial inequality in political influence, intergovernmental policymaking, and education politics.

Replication Materials: The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the American Journal of Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: doi:10.7910/DVN/W2HZSO.

To encourage efficient and effective government performance, democratic accountability requires citizens to monitor conditions during elected officials’ terms in office and reward or punish them accordingly at the ballot box (Downs 1957; Ferejohn 1986; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). For example, a large literature finds that the reelection fortunes of incumbent presidents and state governors hinge on how well or poorly the economy performs during their tenure in office (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Cohen and King 2004; Erikson 1989; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Fair 1978; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984; Svolba 1995). Beyond economic factors, citizens also appear to hold city council members accountable based on general perceptions of government performance (Oliver and Ha 2007), mayors accountable for city crime rates (Arnold and Carnes 2012), and school board members accountable for student achievement (Berry and Howell 2007) during their terms in office. In sum, much of the empirical evidence to date suggests that voters generally hold elected officials accountable for aggregated measures of government performance.

One important and, to date, overlooked component of democratic accountability is the extent to which it might exacerbate existing societal inequalities if the outcomes for some groups of citizens are prioritized over others when voters evaluate governmental performance. For example, if policy outcomes for white and racial minority citizens differ, are incumbent officeholders more likely to be punished at the ballot box for substandard outcomes among whites than for substandard outcomes among racial minorities? To that end, this article investigates the...
possibility of racial inequality in democratic accountability using evidence from local school board elections in California. Nonpartisan, single-purpose school board elections provide an ideal arena to examine this possibility because voters are not cueing on party labels, and the electorate has a very visible criterion upon which to judge government performance: student academic achievement in the school district overseen by the incumbent officeholder. Analyzing over 1,500 school board elections from 2004 to 2013, we find evidence that voters reward or punish incumbent board members based on how well or poorly white students are faring in their district, whereas racial minority students receive comparatively little attention (and this finding is irrespective of the numerical size of all Americans are unaware of the racial achievement gap in education, and, among those who are aware, the vast majority believe the gap is caused by factors outside of schools’ (and, by extension, school board members’) control.

Finally, to complement our analysis of retrospective voting in school board elections, we conduct a list experiment embedded in an original survey of California school board members to better estimate the real-world consequences of racial inequality in democratic accountability on the attention devoted to racial minority students. Our survey experiment reveals that approximately 40% of school board members in the sample perceive that their constituents do not hold them accountable at election time for addressing the racial achievement gap in learning. Moreover, board members are not more likely to report feeling electoral pressure from constituents to address the racial achievement gap if they serve in districts where whites are the numerical minority, if they sit on boards with African American or Hispanic colleagues, or if the racial achievement gap is especially large in their district. Taken together, these findings suggest that the stubborn persistence of the racial education achievement gap may, at least in part, be rooted in the lack of any significant electoral pressure being exerted on public officials to improve learning outcomes for racial minority students.

**Evaluating Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability**

Public education represents the largest investment in social mobility and equal opportunity in the United States. However, pitted against this democratic ideal of universal public schooling operating as American society’s “great equalizer” is a long-standing body of research documenting significant disparities in the high school graduation rates and standardized test scores of racial minority students when compared with white students (Coleman 1966; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Neal 2006). These racial inequalities in education directly undermine the egalitarian role that public schools are expected to play in American social and political life. Racial disparities in education outcomes translate directly into social inequalities later in life, including future earnings, employment status, and incarceration rates (Fryer 2011; Heckman and Masterov 2007; Lochner and Moretti 2004). Moreover, given the special role that schools play in equipping citizens with the tools and motivation necessary to participate in American democracy (Campbell 2006; Gutmann 1999; Nie, Junn, and Strehik–Barry 1996), racial disparities in education likely perpetuate and even exacerbate existing inequalities in rates of political participation for future generations (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003).

For over 40 years—at least since James Coleman (1966) penned his widely influential *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report—social scientists have debated both the dynamics that perpetuate the achievement gap and the policy solutions most likely to eliminate it (Shen and Hochschild 2014). However, apart from some notable exceptions (Hochschild 1984; Meier and Rutherford 2014; Meier and Stewart 1991; Meier, Stewart, and England 1989), political scientists have paid little attention to the interplay between educational, racial, and political inequality. The fact that students of American politics and public policy have had little to say about the interplay between educational and political inequality is particularly surprising given the increased attention national policy makers have given to the racial achievement gap in federal education policymaking (Rhodes 2011, 2012). After decades of inaction by state and local political authorities, in 2002 the federal government took unprecedented steps to address the racial achievement gap in education when it enacted the bipartisan No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Specifically, NCLB’s “theory of action” was based on holding local governments accountable by measuring and making transparent student academic achievement outcomes, with the requirement that information on racial student subgroup performance be made available to parents and the public to “help advance the law’s equity objectives” (Manna 2006, 32).

Although state governments had previously publicized student test score results, many states were notorious for hiding racial achievement gaps by reporting only the aggregate performance of all students (thus
obscribing performance disparities between whites and Hispanic and African American students). As Hess and Petrilli (2006, 23) explain, “[NCLB] is premised on the notion that local education politics are fundamentally broken, and that only strong, external pressure on school systems ... will produce a political dynamic that leads to school improvement.” This is achieved, they explain, through NCLB’s “signature innovation ... that states hold schools accountable not just for the overall performance of their students but also for the performance of individual subgroups: ethnic and racial groups” (Hess and Petrilli 2006, 29). By making racial group test scores (and test score gaps) transparent to parents and the general public, local elected officials were expected to face greater political pressure under NCLB to raise the performance of all student subgroups (including racial minorities) as voters received more detailed performance information that could be used to sanction or reward school boards at election time. However, even after governments publicize this newly available student performance information, it is still possible that voters privilege (or disregard) the achievement outcomes of some groups of students compared to others.

To that end, we test for the existence of racial inequality in democratic accountability by examining the electoral performance of incumbent California school board members seeking reelection between 2004 and 2013. Our independent variables of interest are government performance measured here as student academic achievement among white, African American, and Hispanic students in the school district. Importantly, we use student achievement outcomes that are disaggregated by racial subgroup because we are interested in assessing whether the academic achievement of white students is a stronger predictor of the reelection fortunes of incumbent school board members compared to achievement among African American and/or Hispanic students. Specifically, we tabulate (separately) the percentage of white, African American, and Hispanic students in the district who scored proficient on the English Language Arts and Math standardized exams required under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provisions of the 2002 No Child Left Behind federal education law.

When considering the use of AYP standardized exam proficiency data to measure student achievement (and, by extension, the performance of incumbent school board members), it is important to clarify two aspects of these data. First, California strives to make this school performance information widely available to the public to allow voters to evaluate the quality of their schools and hold elected school leaders accountable for student learning outcomes. Specifically, data on proficiency scores for different demographic groups in each school district are disseminated on the Department of Education’s website in late August or early September, leading up to school board elections in November (roughly two months later). Second, California provides school district–level data on achievement for a particular student racial group only if that group has a minimum of 100 valid test scores in the district, so we have confidence that the student racial group measures meet minimum standards of statistical reliability. In practice, this also means that our statistical models will only include school districts where there are substantial numbers of all three student racial groups.

To test for racial inequality in democratic accountability in California school board elections, we estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{idy} = \beta_0 + \text{Achievement}_{gyd} \beta_1 + X_{idy} \beta_2 + \text{Competition}_{idy} \beta_3 + \mu_y + \epsilon_{isy},$$

where $Y_{idy}$ is an electoral performance outcome measure (victory or defeat, share of total votes cast) for incumbent $i$ in individual school district $d$ during election year $y$. $\text{Achievement}_{gyd}$ represents district-level measures of academic proficiency on state accountability exams for various student racial groups $g$ (White, African American, and Hispanic), $X_{idy}$ is a vector of non-achievement-related district-level covariates that may also influence incumbent candidates’ electoral performance, $\text{Competition}_{idy}$ captures the level of electoral competition facing incumbent $i$ in school district $d$ during a given electoral year $y$, and finally, $\mu_y$ accounts for individual year effects (2004–2013). Including year fixed effects allows us to account for events that might affect incumbent success in all districts uniformly in a given year. For all models, we report standard errors that are clustered by school district to account for the fact that school board incumbents nestled within the same school district are not statistically

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2See Item #2 in the SI for more details about school board elections in California.

3The findings presented below are substantively similar when we use the California Academic Performance Index (API) measure of student achievement instead of proficiency rates under NCLB’s AYP provision (see Table SI-2).

4See Item #3 in the SI for descriptive information on the frequency with which parents of different racial/ethnic groups report using these resources to evaluate the quality of their local schools.

5Table SI-3 and accompanying text report the characteristics of the districts that are included in the different analyses presented in the article and compare them to the characteristics of California as a whole.
independent from one another (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009; Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007). \(^6\)

We also include a measure of the total number of candidates running in each contest, with the expectation that incumbents will be less likely to get reelected and will earn a smaller share of the total votes cast when there are more candidates in the race. In our models examining whether an incumbent is reelected (or not), we include the number of board seats up for election, with the straightforward expectation that an incumbent is more likely to secure reelection when there are more seats available. In addition, we include a series of covariates to account for other ways in which school districts are different from one another that might affect voters’ evaluations of incumbents running for reelection. These potential alternative explanations include the percentage of students in the district who are African American and Hispanic as well as the increase (or decrease) in teacher salaries over the previous school year. The racial demographic variables are included to account for the possibility that school board members may be less likely, in general, to get reelected in racially diverse school districts. The teacher salary variable is included to account for the powerful role that organized teacher union interests play in local elections, such that board members may face more significant electoral opposition from organized interests if teacher salaries remained stagnant (Anzia 2011; Hartney and Flavin 2011; Moe 2011). By including these control variables, we are better able to isolate the extent to which incumbent school board members are rewarded or punished for student academic achievement in their districts after accounting for other factors (both within and outside the direct control of school board members) for which incumbents might also be judged.

In general, we opt to report parsimonious models since—other than the well-documented political power of organized teacher interests—there is relatively little established theory in the existing literature on the electoral dynamics of school board contests (Howell 2005). Nonetheless, when we include additional control variables for which we have unclear theoretical expectations (e.g., district poverty as measured by the percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, district per pupil spending, average class size in the district), we obtain substantively identical results to the more basic models we elect to present in the article.\(^7\)

### Analysis of California School Board Elections

We begin by modeling incumbent reelection (a binary measure) and share of total votes cast (a 0–100% continuous measure) as a function of proficiency rates on English and math exams for a school district’s white, African American, and Hispanic students as well as the covariates described above. The results of these estimations are reported in Table 1. Each student racial group’s proficiency measure is included separately in the model to allow them to “compete” for statistical influence on incumbent reelection/vote share.\(^8\) Looking first at columns 1 and 2 with incumbent reelection as the dependent variable, we find that the coefficient for white student achievement is positive and statistically different from zero at conventional levels of significance (\(p < .05\)) in both models. Substantively, this indicates that, across districts, incumbents are less likely to get reelected as white student achievement rates decline. For English proficiency, an incumbent representing a district with white student achievement at the 25th percentile (i.e., low performing) is 6.1 [2.2, 9.7] percentage points less likely to win reelection compared to an incumbent representing a district at the 75th percentile (i.e., high performing).\(^9\) For math proficiency, an incumbent in a poorly performing district is 7.0 [3.2, 10.9] percentage points less likely to win reelection. By contrast, the coefficient for Hispanic student achievement is statistically different from zero in only one of the two models, and the coefficient for African American student achievement is statistically insignificant in both models. While the magnitude of the effects is modest, these results do suggest that incumbent reelection

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\(^6\) Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis are available in Table SI-4.

\(^7\) The results from these additional analyses are reported and discussed in Tables SI-6 and SI-7.

\(^8\) Across the school districts in our analysis, white, African American, and Hispanic student proficiency rates correlate around 0.7. While in the high range, this level of correlation is common in studies that attempt to parse out the statistical effects of different groups. For example, in a recent prominent study of unequal government responsiveness to citizens’ political opinions, Gilens and Page (2014) report that the preferences of “average citizens” and “economic elites” correlate across issues at 0.78. Nevertheless, they are still able to detect greater government responsiveness to economic elites compared to average citizens. If anything, in our models of racial inequality in democratic accountability, correlation among student racial groups across districts inflates the standard errors of the regression coefficients and biases against us finding statistically significant differences among the coefficients (Achen 1982). Moreover, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for the student achievement variables reported in the regression models below never exceed a value of 5.

\(^9\) Substantive effects are estimated using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003) and holding all other variables in the model at their mean value. The 95% confidence interval is provided in brackets immediately after the estimate.
fortunes are tied to white student achievement, less so to Hispanic student achievement, and seemingly not at all to African American student achievement. However, as the bottom panels of Table 1 indicate, while we can be confident that the coefficients for white and African American students are statistically different from one another, we cannot be confident that the coefficients for white and Hispanic students are statistically different.10

As an additional (and arguably more fine-grained) measurement of incumbent electoral success, we also model the share of the total votes cast (0–100%) earned by an incumbent board member and report the results in columns 3 and 4 of Table 1. For both English and math proficiency, the coefficient for white students is positive and statistically different from zero, indicating that incumbents earn a smaller share of the vote in districts where white student achievement is low. Using the same comparison of districts at the 25th and 75th percentiles as above, an incumbent earns 1.8 [0.5, 3.1] fewer percentage points of the vote share in a poorly performing district for English proficiency and 1.7 [0.4, 3.0] fewer percentage points in a poorly performing district for math proficiency. By contrast, neither of the coefficients for African American and Hispanic student achievement are statistically different from zero, suggesting that incumbent vote share is unrelated to the academic performance of these two racial groups. In other words, incumbent school board members appear not to be rewarded (or punished) based on how well (or poorly) racial minority students perform in the district.

Note: The unit of analysis is incumbent school board member running for reelection. The dependent variable is listed above each column. Cell entries are probit (columns 1 and 2) and OLS regression (columns 3 and 4) coefficients with standard errors clustered by school district reported beneath in parentheses.

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both models that the coefficient for white student achievement is statistically different from the coefficients for both African American and Hispanic student achievement. In short, to the extent that democratic accountability occurs for school board elections, incumbent reelection success appears to be tied to the learning outcomes for white students, whereas there is little evidence that incumbent board members are elected for standard learning outcomes for racial minority students.

An alternative interpretation of the analysis reported above is that voters tend to reward or punish incumbent school board members based primarily on learning outcomes for white students because white students make up the majority of students in many districts. In other words, it might make good sense to expect the outcomes for African American and Hispanic students to factor less prominently in the process of democratic accountability because racial minorities, as the classification implies, make up a numerical minority of the population. This is an important conceptual question for any study that compares the relative influence or treatment of different demographic groups in society. For example, Griffin and Newman (2008) grapple with this exact question in their analysis of unequal government responsiveness to the political opinions of African American and Hispanic citizens compared to white citizens and conclude, from a normative standpoint, that political equality may not require equal outcomes for differently sized demographic groups. Instead, they present a less demanding standard of political equality—“proportionality.” As they state, “How can we know if citizens are equal in a proportional sense? We can examine whether minority groups’ representation improves where those groups comprise greater proportions of the constituency” (Griffin and Newman 2008, 16). This standard of proportionality can be applied to the study of racial inequality in democratic accountability as well.

To investigate proportionality, we examine whether the reelection fortunes of school board incumbents are more closely tied to the learning outcomes of African American and Hispanic students as those student groups make up a larger proportion of a school district’s population. Specifically, we create interaction terms that multiply the percent of African American or Hispanic students proficient in English or math by the percentage of African American or Hispanic students in the district. We then present models of incumbent reelection and vote share using the same set of covariates in the models reported above for Table 1. The results of these interaction term analyses are reported in Table 2 and reveal that the interaction terms are not statistically different from zero in any of the four models. Substantively, these results reveal that the reelection fortunes of incumbent school board members do not bear a stronger relationship to the learning outcomes for African American and Hispanic students as those students make up a larger proportion of students in the school district. From a normative standpoint, there appears to be racial inequality in democratic accountability even when the less demanding standard of proportionality is applied.

Statewide, African American students make up only 6.2% of the total student population in California public schools. By contrast, white students make up 25.0% of the student population and Hispanic students make up fully 53.3%. Because many school districts in California have a negligible number of African American students, no student achievement measures are reported for those students, and, as a consequence, those districts are all dropped from our analysis in Tables 1 and 2 above. By contrast, if we drop the African American student achievement variable from our analysis and instead only compare the two largest demographic student groups—whites and Hispanics—we can greatly increase the number of school districts and elections included in our analyses. Columns 1–4 of Table 3 report a series of estimations with the same specification as above but with the variable for African American student achievement dropped from the models. The results indicate that the coefficient for white student achievement is statistically different from zero in the three reelection models (columns 1 and 2) and the two vote share models (columns 3 and 4), whereas the coefficient for Hispanic student achievement is never statistically different from zero. Moreover, the coefficients for white and Hispanic students are statistically different from one another in one of the models and near conventional levels of significance in two others. In short, when the analysis is confined to the two largest demographic student groups—whites and Hispanics—incumbent reelection fortunes are tied to the learning outcomes for white students but not for Hispanic students.

While Hispanic students make up a majority of public school students statewide in California, the models reported in columns 1–4 of Table 3 include many school districts where white students outnumber Hispanic students. Therefore, to subject the question of racial inequality in democratic accountability to even further scrutiny, we conduct the same analysis that compares the two racial student groups but confine the sample to only districts where Hispanic students make up a larger proportion of the student population than white students. In

\[11\] Data are from the California Department of Education for the 2014–15 school year (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/ceffingertipfacts.asp).
Table 2 The Proportion of African American and Hispanic Students in a School District Does Not Condition the Link between Achievement and Incumbent Reelection/Vote Share

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable:</th>
<th>(1) Reelected?</th>
<th>(2) Reelected?</th>
<th>(3) Vote Share</th>
<th>(4) Vote Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exam Subject:</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>−0.004</td>
<td>−0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency × % AA</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Proficiency</td>
<td>−0.000</td>
<td>−0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>× % Hispanic</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Student</td>
<td>0.012*</td>
<td>0.014*</td>
<td>0.101*</td>
<td>0.097*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>−0.025</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Proficiency</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Student</td>
<td>0.015*</td>
<td>0.015*</td>
<td>−0.040</td>
<td>−0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Candidates</td>
<td>−0.140*</td>
<td>−0.140*</td>
<td>−4.746*</td>
<td>−4.750*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.274)</td>
<td>(0.273)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Seats Up</td>
<td>0.376*</td>
<td>0.375*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for Election</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African American</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td>0.199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in District</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.141)</td>
<td>(0.121)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in District</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Salary</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>0.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.143)</td>
<td>(0.143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−0.607*</td>
<td>−0.777*</td>
<td>46.387*</td>
<td>46.234*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.303)</td>
<td>(0.333)</td>
<td>(2.284)</td>
<td>(2.346)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Effects?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²/R²</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2,767</td>
<td>2,762</td>
<td>2,767</td>
<td>2,762</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The unit of analysis is incumbent school board member running for reelection. The dependent variable is listed above each column. Cell entries are probit (columns 1 and 2) and OLS regression (columns 3 and 4) coefficients with standard errors clustered by school district reported beneath in parentheses.

*p < .05 (two-tailed test).

Taking stock of the results presented in this section as a whole, we find consistent evidence that, to the extent that democratic accountability occurs for school board elections, the reelection fortunes of incumbent board members are tied to the achievement of white students in their district such that incumbents who represent districts with substandard white student achievement are sanctioned at the ballot box. In contrast, we find that incumbent reelection fortunes bear, at best, an inconsistent relationship with the achievement of Hispanic students and no statistical relationship with the achievement of African American students. Moreover, we find no evidence that African American or Hispanic student achievement has any greater influence on incumbent reelection.
### Table 3 Comparing White and Hispanic Student Achievement and Incumbent Reelection/Vote Share in All Districts and Only in Districts Where Hispanic Students Outnumber White Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exam Subject</th>
<th>Sample: All Districts</th>
<th>Only Districts with More Hispanic Than White Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White Student</td>
<td>Hispanic Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficiency (0.003)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>–0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pseudo R^2</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White / Hispanic p-value</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The unit of analysis is incumbent school board member running for reelection. The dependent variable is listed above each column. Cell entries are probit (columns 1–2, 5–6) and OLS regression (columns 3–4, 7–8) coefficients with standard errors clustered by school district reported beneath in parentheses. Models include all district covariates from Table 1 and year effects.

* p < .05 (two-tailed test).

Why Does Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability Occur?

Why does racial minority student achievement not appear to factor into the evaluations voters make about school board incumbents at election time? After all, the racial achievement gap is a policy problem that is highly salient among major interest groups, education researchers, and policy makers (Hess 2006; Rhodes 2011, 2012), and bipartisan efforts at the federal level have made narrowing this gap one of the federal government’s leading education policy priorities (Hess and Petrilli 2006; Manna 2011; Rhodes 2012). Yet, we know far less about the attitudes regular citizens hold about the achievement of racial minority students in general and relative to white students. Therefore, in this section, we ask two related questions: (1) Are citizens aware that the racial education achievement gap exists? (2) If citizens are aware, do they believe elected officials are responsible and can do something to solve the disparities? Answering these questions is important if we wish to identify potential factors that can explain the findings above that local electorates retrospect unequally in school board elections. In Figure 1, we explore several different factors that may influence (or not) citizens’ opinions about the unequal educational outcomes for white versus racial minority students and discuss each possibility below.

We begin with the possibility that many citizens may simply be unaware that the education achievement gap exists or of the extent to which it continues to persist (noted by box “E1” designated “ignorance” in Figure 1). Citizens who fit into this category may simply assume that racial minority students are doing roughly the same as white students and thus can monitor incumbent school board performance while in office simply by knowing how well white students are faring. To investigate citizens’ knowledge and opinions about the education achievement gap, we draw on polling data from a nationally representative telephone survey fielded by Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) and Gallup in 2001.\(^\text{12}\) When respondents were as the relative size of those student racial groups increases. In short, voters appear to reward or punish incumbent officeholders based on how well or poorly white students are learning in their district, whereas the learning outcomes for racial minority students receive comparatively little attention at election time.

\(^{12}\)The survey is the 33rd Annual Survey of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools and was fielded May 23–June 6, 2001. It
FIGURE 1 Potential Explanations for Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aware of the Racial Achievement Gap in Education?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance (E1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathetic (E2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopeless (E3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixable (E4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

asked, “Is the academic achievement of white students, nationally, higher, lower, or about the same as that of black and other minority students?” fully 46% of respondents answered that average racial minority student achievement is the same as or better than white student achievement. In other words, nearly half of the population appears unaware of the well-documented disparities in academic achievement between white and racial minority students.

We then focus our attention only on the 54% of respondents who (correctly) identified the existence of the achievement gap to investigate whether fixing the gap is a high priority and what they think causes the gap to persist. First, we tally responses to the following question: “In your opinion, how important do you think it is to close the academic achievement gap between White students and Black and Hispanic students—very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all?” and find that only 5% of respondents (of those who correctly identified the existence of a racial education achievement gap) answered “not too important” or “not important at all.” In other words, only 5% of respondents who know about the existence of the achievement gap fall into the “apathetic” category (denoted as “E2” in Figure 1).

We then tally responses to the question, “In your opinion, is the achievement gap between White students and Black and Hispanic students mostly related to the quality of schooling received, or mostly related to other factors?” and find that only 24% of respondents believe that the achievement gap is mostly due to the quality of schooling received. Put another way, fully 76% of respondents who identified that the achievement gap exists believe it is due to factors outside of schools’ (and, by extension, school board members’ control, such as home life, culture, poverty, or other wider societal factors. We designate these citizens as being “hopeless” (denoted as “E3” in Figure 1) because, at the very least, they believe that eliminating the racial achievement gap would require far-reaching structural reforms and societal changes as opposed to the (relatively) more minor educational reforms that school boards are empowered to enact. Finally, as one might expect, among only respondents who believe the achievement gap is mostly due to the quality of schooling received, fully 82% believe that schools are then responsible for closing the education achievement gap. We believe this group falls into the “fixable” category (denoted as “E4” in Figure 1).

To summarize our analysis of public opinion about the achievement gap, it appears that two likely reasons we observe racial inequality in democratic accountability in school board elections are that (1) nearly half of Americans are simply not aware of the particular challenges and lagging achievement of racial minority students, and (2) among those who are aware of the
achievement gap, the vast majority do not attribute the gap directly to the quality of education received and, accordingly, do not hold their school board members responsible for the disparate outcomes.

**Do Elected Officials Perceive Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability?**

To this point, we have shown that incumbent school board members are rewarded or sanctioned based upon the academic performance of white but not racial minority students in their district and presented evidence about an underlying mechanism that might help to explain this pattern. Ultimately, however, we want to understand what the practical consequences of these findings are for how elected officials conduct themselves while in office in the real world. For example, do the patterns of voter apathy regarding minority citizens’ social outcomes signal feedback to elected officials that weakens or dilutes the incentives for policy makers to prioritize the needs of racial minority constituents? To learn more about this possible dynamic, we conducted an original survey of California school board members that includes several questions about their perceptions of the racial achievement gap and related electoral implications. Specifically, we are interested in documenting what amount of electoral pressure (if any) school board members feel to address the unequal academic performance of racial minority students. Because there may be significant social desirability bias in asking board members to report how much their constituents care or do not care about racial minority students, we make use of a list experiment to estimate board member perceptions about constituent electoral concerns.

The setup of our list experiment is simple. First, the school board members were randomly divided into a treatment and a control group. Both groups received the same question and were shown response categories that differed only in the number (with the treatment group receiving one additional response item):

Q. School board elections give voters the opportunity to hold board members accountable for their in-office performance. Listed below are four [“five” for treatment group] criteria that voters may consider when deciding whether to support an incumbent school board member for re-election. I’d like you to tell me HOW MANY of these factors you believe are important to the voters in your district. I don’t want to know which of these criteria you think that voters use to judge incumbents, just HOW MANY?

School board members assigned to the control group were presented with the following four criteria:

- Ensuring that students graduate prepared for college and career
- Promoting school safety and student discipline
- Maintaining adequate administrative staffing to oversee standardized testing
- Ensuring that sports teams are competitive and well-funded

School board members in the treatment group were shown these same four criteria with the additional fifth criterion placed in the third response position:

- Closing the achievement gap between white and racial minority students

Note that the experiment provides board members with a great deal of anonymity since they are only asked how many of the presented criteria factor into their constituents’ voting decisions, which, in theory, reduces any disincentive for respondent board members to tell the truth about a sensitive topic like race. Moreover, because board members are randomly assigned to treatment and control categories, the two groups are identical on all observable and unobservable traits. Therefore, any difference between the control and treatment groups in terms of the mean number of items they identify can be directly attributed to the one additional item presented to the treatment group. For our purposes, by taking one minus the difference in means, we can arrive at a point estimate of the percentage of California school board members who do not feel electoral pressure to do something about closing the achievement gap between white and racial minority students in their district.

The results of the list experiment confirm our earlier takeaway from the analysis of a decade’s worth of California school board elections. The treatment group of board members listed an average of 4.18 criteria as important electoral concerns to their constituents, whereas the control group listed 3.58 items as important (the difference between the two groups is statistically different from zero at $p < .05$). Substantively, that difference of .60 suggests

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15 See Item #4 in the SI for more information on the survey sampling frame and response rate.

16 Table SI-9 reports randomization checks and shows there is strong balance between control and treatment groups.
Table 4 Distribution of School Board Members’ Priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Budget/Funding</th>
<th>Teacher Quality</th>
<th>Learning Gains</th>
<th>Achievement Gaps</th>
<th>Implementing Common Core</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are the percentage of California school board members who rank the issue/problem listed at the top of the column in a given priority position from most important (1st) to least important (5th).

that fully 40% (1 – .60) of school board incumbents do not report feeling electoral pressure from their constituents to make progress on narrowing the racial achievement gap in student learning.17

This 40% overall figure may be less disconcerting, however, if board members serving in more racially diverse school districts or districts where racial minority students struggle disproportionately are more likely to feel electoral pressure to improve the racial achievement gap. To investigate this possibility, we regressed the outcome variable (number of items) in our list experiment on the treatment condition, the percentage of nonwhite students in the board member’s district, and an interaction term that multiplied the percent of nonwhite students in a district by the treatment. An interaction term that is positive and statistically different from zero would provide evidence that board members detect more electoral pressure to address the racial achievement gap from their constituents when they serve in more racially diverse (less white) districts. However, the results of these estimations do not show any evidence that the racial composition of the district influences the propensity for board members to respond to the treatment and report that constituents are putting pressure on them to address the achievement gap. Likewise, in two other similar analyses, we find no evidence that board members who serve in districts where the achievement gap is especially large or on boards where at least one board member colleague is African American or Hispanic are any more likely to report feeling electoral pressure to make progress on the racial achievement gap.18

The fact that such a sizable proportion of elected officials detect little electoral pressure to address the needs of their racial minority constituents (irrespective of the size of the minority student population, the presence of descriptive representation on the school board, or the actual size of the achievement gap in the district) raises several troubling and important questions about the link between democratic accountability, representation, and political equality.

Although we are unable to offer a complete analysis of the likely consequences that occur when elected officials perceive little constituent pressure to address the needs of their racial minority constituents, the results from one of our other survey items are provoking. Near the end of the survey, we asked our sample of California school board members to rank the urgency of addressing five common education issues that are facing elected board members across the country. Specifically, we asked board members, “How urgent are the following issues facing your board and district right now?” Respondents were then asked to rank each issue’s relative urgency from the most urgent issue (ranked #1) to the least urgent issue (ranked #5) in the school district they represent. The issues they were asked to rank are (1) Budget/Funding, (2) Quality of teaching, (3) Improving student learning across the board, (4) Closing achievement gaps among subgroups, and (5) Implementing Common Core Standards.

As Table 4 reports, school board members ranked “closing achievement gaps” among the lowest priorities facing their district. Just over 45% of board members ranked the achievement gap near the bottom of their priority list (either as their fourth or fifth priority).19

Moreover, board member concern about improving the

17 The 95% confidence interval shows the lower bound as 17% of school board members and the upper bound as 63% who report that voters in their community are not concerned with narrowing the racial achievement gap. Although this range is less than ideal due to the difficulties of amassing a large quantity of elected official respondents, we have also replicated this list experiment on a national sample of school board members and uncovered very similar point estimates. Specifically, nearly 50% of board members in our national sample report that the performance of racial minority students is not an issue that factors into their ability to win reelection.

18 The results of these estimations are reported in Table SI-10. Data on the racial/ethnic composition of California school boards were collected by Kenneth Meier and Amanda Rutherford.

19 Similarly, when we assign “points” to each board member’s rankings (with 5 points for their first priority, 4 points for second, etc.),
performance of racial minority students relative to whites is not related to the size of the racial minority student population or to the actual achievement gap in a board member’s district.\textsuperscript{20} Given the results reported above that a significant proportion of school board members perceive little electoral pressure to address unequal educational outcomes for racial minority students in their district, it is perhaps not surprising that few board members then choose to prioritize it as an issue while in office.

**Discussion**

In this article, we uncover evidence of racial inequality in democratic accountability by demonstrating that voters reward or punish incumbent school board members based on how well or poorly white students are faring in the district, whereas, in contrast, the achievement of African American and Hispanic students receives comparatively little attention. We then probe a possible explanation for why inequality in democratic accountability occurs by presenting public opinion survey evidence that shows roughly half of all Americans are unaware of the racial achievement gap in education, and, among those who are aware, the vast majority believe the gap is caused by factors outside of schools’ (and, by extension, school board members’) control. Using a list experiment from a survey of California school board members, we also find that approximately 40\% of school board incumbents report that their constituents do not hold them accountable for addressing the racial achievement gap at election time. Moreover, when asked to rank the importance of various issues facing their district, school board members select closing the racial achievement gap as the least urgent item, and this selection is unrelated to the size of the racial minority student population and the actual achievement gap in a member’s district. When considered together, these findings suggest that the persistence of the racial education achievement gap in American education may, in part, be tied to the lack of electoral pressure exerted on public officials.

This study has important implications for several scholarly literatures, including retrospective voting, racial inequality in political influence, intergovernmental policymaking, and education politics. First, retrospective voting theory posits that citizens hold elected officials in government accountable for their performance and visible outcomes while in office (Fiorina 1981). However, an important and overlooked component of retrospective voting is the extent to which it may exacerbate existing inequalities if the outcomes for some groups are given greater attention than others when voters make their decisions at the ballot box. Our finding that voters in local school board elections disregard certain key information about incumbents’ job performance while seizing on other information opens the door for future researchers to investigate other ways in which differential retrospective voting occurs by, for example, investigating whether the well-documented relationship between economic growth and vote share for incumbent presidents (Fair 1978) is driven by the economic fortunes of some groups of citizens compared to others. In doing so, scholars interested in retrospective voting and democratic accountability might begin to wrestle with the sort of empirical realities documented by Harris-Lacewell and Albertson (2005, 662), who note that “between 1970 and 1996, the average income of the poorest fifth of Whites rose by $351 [while] the average income of the poorest Blacks, which began as nearly half that of the poorest Whites, declined by $838.” Simply put, when outcomes vary for different demographic groups, inequality in retrospective voting is a distinct possibility.

Second, clashing against the long-standing belief that public schools can equip citizens with the tools and motivation necessary to participate in American democracy is the distressing fact that the education achievement gap between white and racial minority students likely serves to perpetuate and even exacerbate existing inequalities in rates of political participation (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003). By providing evidence that there is racial inequality in democratic accountability for school board elections, our findings suggest that popular control of school governance may serve to even further entrench existing racial inequalities in political influence (Griffin and Newman 2008). Indeed, because racial minority students tend to receive the least attention from voters at election time despite well-documented racial disparities in student achievement, this article calls into question the premise that popularly controlled public schools are capable of promoting greater equality in political participation (and, by extension, political influence) among future adult citizens (Campbell 2006; Gutmann 1999; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

Third, evidence that local electorates largely dismiss information about the achievement of racial minority students at the ballot box would seem to undermine much of the logic of accountability under the federal No Child Left Behind law. This fact is, we think, applicable

\textsuperscript{20}The results of these tabulations based on district context are reported in Table S1-11.
to scholars’ efforts to understand the role of “performance federalism” in intergovernmental policymaking more generally (Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2016). Since both research and practice suggest that states and localities will rarely take the lead in enacting redistributive policies aimed at ameliorating societal inequalities (Peterson 1981), federal political authorities should be aware of the limitations of using performance management reforms that emphasize accountability through transparency to solve such principal-agent dilemmas in intergovernmental policymaking. The implicit assumption of performance management reform is that “external accountability of the government to the public changes accountability because the public now has greater information available on the level of performance of the government” (Moynihan 2008, 35). However, evidence that voters use only certain aspects of performance information is significant for understanding how much (or little) leverage federal authorities can actually gain over redistributive policymaking when they rely on performance measurement transparency to improve the fidelity of implementation at lower levels of government.

Finally, this article has important implications for debates about how much or little control citizens should exert in the policymaking process for education in particular, and other public services more generally. One of the fundamental reasons for having voters select leaders to oversee the provision of public goods is the belief that democratic control will promote greater accountability and, in doing so, enhance both efficiency and equity. However, whether this actually occurs in practice is an open question. Previous research on the racial education achievement gap finds that state governments enact sweeping reforms to enhance teacher quality in response to sagging performance outcomes among white students, but it finds no corresponding response to sagging performance among racial minority students (Hartney and Flavin 2014). Our findings in this article provide evidence that this lack of responsiveness among policy makers can be attributed to a breakdown in democratic accountability; namely, elected officials do not face sanctions from voters when they fail to deliver educational improvement among racial minority students. Lacking any electoral incentive for action, it is perhaps not surprising that local elected officials do not spend precious political capital enacting often controversial education reforms in response to substandard outcomes for racial minority students. Therefore, this study ultimately calls into question whether voter control of public school governance is a viable avenue to correcting the persisting racial inequalities in education that can have important and enduring effects on democratic citizenship and political equality.

References


Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website:

**Item #1:** Generalizability of California

**Item #2:** Information on School Board Elections in California

**Item #3:** Information on Citizen Usage of Evaluations of Quality of Local Schools

**Item #4:** Information About Our Original Survey of California School Board Members

Tables SI-1 to SI-11