Political Control and the Power of the Agent

Terry M. Moe
Department of Political Science
Stanford University and Hoover Institution

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Most of what modern governments do, they do through bureaucracies of one sort or another. Because this is so, anyone who seeks to understand government must pay serious attention to bureaucratic organization and performance, and, more fundamentally, to the political control relationships—especially the relationships between political authorities and bureaucratic subordinates—that provide the key means of ensuring that bureaucracies do what they are supposed to do rather than moving off in their own directions (or doing nothing at all).

Political scientists have made a good deal of progress in studying these issues. Since the new institutionalism swept the discipline some two decades ago, offering up powerful new tools for institutional analysis—agency theory, transaction cost economics, theories of repeated games, and other components of the new economics of organization—political scientists have put these tools to aggressive use in developing theories of political control, and in showing that virtually every aspect of bureaucracy, from creation to structure to performance, is shaped by the ongoing efforts of political authorities to get public agencies to do their bidding.

These are exciting theoretical developments, and they are revolutionizing the study of bureaucracy. In the grander scheme of things, however, this line of theory is still in its infancy and has a long way to go before it can provide a balanced, reasonably comprehensive understanding of bureaucratic government. There are various reasons for this, but in this paper I want to emphasize one in particular.

When political scientists study political control, they tend to construe the relationship between the political authorities and their bureaucratic subordinates in terms of agency theory. The political authorities are the principals, the bureaucratic subordinates are the agents, and the analysis centers on the “principal’s problem” of devising a structure of rules and incentives that best induces the agent to pursue the principal’s own interests (Bendor, 1988). The focus of these political analyses, then, is invariably on the political authorities and how they go about structuring public agencies, overseeing them, and rewarding and sanctioning them. The conclusions they draw, moreover, invariably emphasize that the political authorities are substantially successful in controlling what the bureaucracy does (e.g., McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast, 1987, 1989; McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984; Calvert, McCubbins, and Weingast, 1989; Bawn, 1995, 1997).

What these analyses tend to overlook is the political power of the agent—which, in a democratic political system, could well be considerable. For it so happens that the political authorities are subject to election, and this means that the bureaucrats, either through their own numbers and resources or through those of their political allies, can exercise electoral power in determining who gets to be a political authority, what their preferences are, and what choices they make in office. In many cases, there may be a real question as to who is controlling whom.
In the analysis that follows, I have two aims. One is to make a case for the political power of the agent, and thus for a reorientation of current theories to provide a more balanced understanding of political control. The second is to carry out an empirical analysis to illustrate some of the important issues raised by this expanded theory of agency, and to explore a few of its basic implications. The empirical analysis focuses on what is probably the most common form of public agency in American government, the public school, and on the bureaucrats who carry out the core activities of the public school system--its teachers. I’ll be presenting some new data, preliminary but (in my view) quite interesting, on the role of teachers in elections.

Toward a Broader Theory of Political Control

Although it may come across as hyperbole, I think it is accurate to say that, with the possible exception of social choice theory, the new economics of organization has provided political science with the single most powerful basis for theory-building in the discipline’s entire history. In short order, it has transformed the study of political institutions from a theoretical backwater into an exciting, fast-developing field whose theories--about legislatures, bureaucracies, the courts, elections--are not only at the cutting edge of the discipline, but, owing to their common foundations, are helping to integrate these disparate aspects of government into a far more coherent and intelligible whole (see, e.g, Weingast, 1996; and Mueller, 1997).

Theories of political control have been at the very center of all this, and today are a prime means of explaining how institutions emerge and why they behave and take the structural forms they do. These theories trace their origins to an influential article by Weingast and Moran (1983), who singled out the legislature as the key governing institution and asked about its capacity for controlling the bureaucracy. Taking aim at the then widely held notion, especially among those in public administration, that the bureaucracy acts with substantial autonomy (e.g., Wilson, 1980), the authors pointed to major control mechanisms the legislature can wield--the budget, appointments, monitoring and reporting requirements--and argued that these are sufficient to bring about compliance by bureaucratic agencies. The legislature, they said, is in control (see also Weingast, 1984).

This analysis gave impetus to four new streams of work on political control. Three of them essentially focus, as Weingast and Moran did, on ex post control. These are studies of the extent to which political authorities are able to constrain and direct the behavior of public agencies that have already been given a structural design and location in government and are in the process of administering and making policy.

The first stream consists of empirical studies that provide concrete measures of bureaucratic behavior, and carry out statistical analyses to determine whether that behavior is responsive to the influence of political authorities--which include not just legislators, but also presidents and the courts. The rather consistent conclusion is that political authorities do exercise control over the bureaucracy (e.g., Moe, 1982,1985; Wood, 1988; Wood and Waterman, 1991, 1994; Epstein and O’Halloran, 1999).

The second consists of spatial models that seek to understand political control by arraying the relevant actors--the agency and some set of political authorities--along a unidimensional policy continuum, and, based on assumptions about their motives and legal powers, exploring their strategic behaviors and the equilibrium policies (agency positions) they produce. As with the first stream, the consistent conclusion here is that all the major political authorities--legislators, presidents, and the courts--are successful in exercising control over the bureaucracy.
Largely because the focus in these models is on new legislation as a control mechanism, with presidents appearing as veto-players and the courts serving to reverse agencies if they stray from their legislatively imposed mandates, the emphasis tends to be on the legislature as the key controller (e.g., Ferejohn and Shchipan, 1990; Eskridge and Ferejohn, 1992).

The third stream of work on ex post control is much smaller than the other two and has had less influence on the literature, but it is intellectually important on the merits. It looks at bureaucratic control in a multidimensional policy world and shows that, while agencies are constrained by the political authorities (whose legal powers allow them to reverse agency decisions that go “too far”), the agencies are able to take advantage of multiple majorities inherent in multidimensional choice in such a way as to move around with impunity within certain areas of the policy space—often giving it substantial discretion in policy and a capacity to avoid strict control. This theme of bureaucratic autonomy, however, runs counter to the rest of the literature and has largely been ignored (Hill, 1985; Hammond, Hill, and Miller, 1986; Hammond and Miller, 1987; Hammond and Knott, 1996).

The final stream of work is arguably the most consequential. It is not on ex post control, but on how political control can be exercised ex ante—through the very design of bureaucracy itself. Here the seminal article is one by McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987; see also 1989). Writing for a conference primarily made up of legal scholars, they argued that the “administrative procedures” so dear to the legal community are not explained by principles of fairness or the public interest, but are mechanisms by which legislators exercise control over the bureaucracy. In particular, they argued that, by placing rules and requirements on government agencies, imposing decision procedures and criteria, specifying appeals processes, determining what types of personnel will occupy agency positions, and the like, the winning coalition in the legislature can compensate for whatever informational advantages the agencies might initially possess—notably, their expertise and experience and the secrecy of their decision processes—and constrain the agencies to move in directions the coalition desires. In designing such a control structure, moreover, the coalition can do so in such a way as to embed its own interests in the organization of government, “stacking the deck” to ensure an enduring flow of benefits for its own constituencies. As McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast see it, this is a far more effective means of gaining control than trying to rein in wayward agencies ex post. If the structural design is right, agencies will be largely under control from the outset, and control problems later on will be minimized. Agencies will be on autopilot, doing the coalition’s bidding with only minor need for midcourse corrections.

A spate of similarly oriented studies soon followed, giving rise to an extraordinarily productive literature that has shed important light not only on political control per se, but on much larger issues of bureaucratic origins and structure, democratic accountability, the durability of public policy, organizational effectiveness, and the connections between structure and behavior (see, e.g., cites). This is a literature, then, that uses political control as a springboard for developing theories of political institutions more generally (e.g., Horn, 1995; Epstein and O’Halloran, 1999; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Moe, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1994a, 1994b; Mueller, 1997).

If we take all four of these streams together (or even the fourth one all by itself), it is clear that they have made great strides in moving toward a political theory of bureaucracy and that the process set in motion by Weingast and Moran had been extremely productive. As with any new body of work, however, especially one whose logical framework is largely imported from another discipline, much remains to be done in moving toward a theory that can provide
adequate, reasonably complete explanations. Some adjustments need to be made, some innovations introduced, and some of the theory’s claims modified or discarded.

One of the most important weaknesses of the current literature is that, outside the work on multidimensionality, its theories of the political control do not treat both parties to the relationship as serious subjects of study. Attention centers almost entirely on the political authorities: they are the ones who face a control problem, and they are the ones who are the key actors, creating administrative designs and subsequently wielding rewards and sanctions in order to keep the bureaucracy on the right path. In most analyses, bureaucracy is less an actor than simply a problem to be dealt with. Very little effort is made to understand it as a strategic political actor in its own right, with a full panoply of resources for pursuing its own interests. There can be little surprise, given such an unbalanced framework, that the political authorities appear to be so successful. The bureaucracy hasn’t been given a chance to strut its stuff—and to exercise real power.

Within the standard logic of principal-agent models, one foundation of bureaucratic power has in fact been systematically recognized. In these theories, it is precisely because the bureaucratic agents possess private information--information deriving from their substantive expertise and experience, information about their own skills and characteristics (such as honesty, diligence, faithfulness), information about what they actually do on the job and how it affects valued outcomes--that the political authorities are faced with a control problem. Much of the literature, as a result, is focused on how the authorities can deal with this informational disadvantage, and on which institutional arrangements allow them to do that--monitoring and reporting requirements, for instance, or structures that induce bureaucrats to engage in actions that reveal their true “types.”

Ironically, the first attempt to explore asymmetric information in a political context was Niskanen’s (1972) seminal analysis of bureaus and budgeting, in which he argued that informational control gave bureaus enormous leverage over Congress in getting the budgets they want. This, however, was before the advent of principal-agent models. When the latter began to take hold, the focus essentially shifted to one of how a legislature can use its various powers to gain budgetary control over a bureau when the bureau has private information, and the conclusions shifted toward greater legislative success (Miller and Moe, 1983; Bendor, Taylor, and van Galen, 1985, 1987; Banks, 1989; Banks and Weingast, 1992). In more general perspectives on political control, like that of McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987), the focus is also on information asymmetry as the key to agency shirking. It is no accident that, in this latter work, the prime illustration of political control is the Administrative Procedures Act: through which the winning coalition required public agencies to follow procedures that would open up their decision processes and reveal previously hidden details about what the agencies are doing and why.

There is no doubt that asymmetric information is an important basis of bureaucratic power. In my view, however, it is not taken as seriously as it should be within the existing literature. Even though scholars routinely recognize it is the key source of control problems, they are so focused on the political authorities and so enamored of the authorities’ control mechanisms that the potential power of expertise, experience, and other informational advantages never gets fully explored. Along the way, moreover, the political authorities tend to be modeled in simplified ways that ignore their weaknesses. Congress, in particular, is treated as a unitary decision maker when in fact it is a collective institution that is severely hobbled by collective action problems and transaction costs. Were the latter properties part of the models,
Congress would surely not fare as well in these theories of control, and the bureaucracy would be able to use its private information to much greater advantage.

Be this as it may, there is a second foundation of bureaucratic power that is ignored by these rational choice theories of political control. This is that bureaucrats can exercise political power, very much in the way interest groups and voters can. Their opportunity to do so arises not from any information asymmetry, but from the simple fact that the political authorities are elected. Throughout the literature on political control, in each of the four streams of work, it is well recognized (as one would only expect) that elections are of crucial significance for political control: they determine who gets to hold office, they motivate those who do hold office, and they are fundamental determinants of the policy preferences that office-holders pursue in the politics of bureaucratic control. Yet the standard view, so common that it is taken for granted, is that these electoral pressures arise solely from constituencies of voters and interest groups, and that the bureaucracy itself has no effect on elections at all.

While this assumption may be reasonable enough in some circumstances, it may be wildly inaccurate in others and lead to conclusions about political control that are wrong or misleading. From a purely theoretical standpoint, it is clear that bureaucrats should be well aware that electoral power can work to their great advantage. Through it, they can determine who gets to control them and what the controllers’ preferences will be, and if they play their cards right they can bring about a situation in which they are controlled by authorities who share their interests and will essentially do what they say. In effect, they can wind up controlling themselves. Such extreme good fortune--such extreme political power--is too much to expect in most cases. But it is clear that, by investing in political power, bureaucrats may well be able to buy themselves greater autonomy and promote their own interests. Depending upon their opportunities, therefore, they will often have incentives to do just that.

Empirically, moreover, the history of bureaucratic government shows that bureaucrats have often followed through on those incentives, sometimes with great success. In general, two strategies of bureaucratic power-seeking seem to stand out. The first has long been written about in the traditional literature (but not the rational choice literature) on bureaucracy and public administration: bureaucratic leaders at the top of their organizations can take entrepreneurial action to build coalitions of interest group supporters for purposes of bringing pressure on political authorities. This has involved, most fundamentally, cultivating and mobilizing their agency’s constituency--including, if need be, organizing new interest groups from the ground up (as happened, for instance, when the Department of Agriculture created the Farm Bureau). It has also involved attracting support from other interest groups that do not directly benefit from agency programs, but may support (for ideological or moral reasons) what the agency does. And it has sometimes involved using the media to generate publicity, symbolism, and public support, and to make the agency appear effective and public-spirited (e.g., Wilson, 1980; Rourke, 1984, 1986; Carpenter, 2001).

While the political entrepreneurialism of bureaucrats has long been recognized, it has recently been documented in rich detail by Carpenter (2001), in a book aptly titled The Forging of Bureaucatic Autonomy. Carpenter sets out a theoretical perspective on the conditions under which agencies will or will not succeed in gaining substantial autonomy from the political authorities, and illustrates its value through an empirical analysis of three historical cases: the Post Office, the Department of Agriculture, and the Interior Department. Here is his basic theme:
Autonomy prevails when agencies can establish political legitimacy—a reputation for expertise, efficiency, or moral protection and a uniquely diverse complex of ties to organized interests and the media—and induce politicians to defer to the wishes of the agency even when they prefer otherwise. Under these conditions, politicians grant agency officials free rein in program building. They stand by while agency officials do away with some of their cherished programs and services. They even welcome agencies in shaping legislation itself (p.4).

Important as this strategy of bureaucratic entrepreneurialism has been in promoting the political power of bureaucracy, there is a second basis of power that in my view is at least as consequential—and has been overlooked not just by rational choice theories of political control, but also by the more traditional literature on bureaucracy and public administration. On the whole, political scientists have paid almost no attention to it.

This second basis of power is that bureaucrats can directly affect the electoral fortunes of political authorities through their own numbers and resources. The most potent way that this happens is through public employee unions. Almost nonexistent prior to the 1960, these unions achieved explosive growth from the 1960s through the early 1980s and since have leveled off at about 37% of the public workforce, although the figures are much higher in many states and localities (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2000). During this same period, private sector unions were in steep decline, dropping from more than 30% of the private, nonagricultural workforce in the early 1950s to less than 10% in 1999 (Troy and Sheflin, 1985; Hirsch and Macpherson, 2000). As this happened, the balance of interests within the AFL-CIO, long the leading political force in the American labor movement, shifted steadily from private employees to public employees.

To think of bureaucratic power solely in terms of entrepreneurialism among agency leaders, then, is to overlook the very real power of the ordinary bureaucrats who populate the rest of the system. There are millions of them. They are highly organized. Their organizations have a great deal of money. They can put troops on the ground in political campaigns at all levels of government and in all areas of the country (outside some parts of the South). And they have fundamental interests that, because their employers are governments, can only be pursued through political activity—giving them every incentive to pour their resources and energies into the mobilization of political power.

For the most part, their interests are easily discerned and their demands quite predictable. They want more money, which translates into support for bigger budgets and higher taxes. They want job security, which translates into support for restrictive personnel rules. They want more programs and bigger agencies, which translates, again, into support for bigger budgets and higher taxes. And they want more autonomy, which translates into support for structures that drastically reduce the discretion of managers and political authorities and give employees more control over their own jobs and agencies.

In the standard rational choice models, these sorts of interests and demands—and the political pressures behind them—are overlooked. The political authorities are assumed to act on preferences shaped by voters and interest groups, and these preferences are essentially treated as fixed when the authorities deal with the bureaucracy. If unions of public employees are politically powerful, however, then in reality they are part—and perhaps a very important part—of the interest group constituency that determines what the authorities’ preferences are. And when this is the case, what the authorities prefer and subsequently pursue in their control relationships
will tend to be consistent with the expressed interests of the bureaucrats. What looks like political control may in fact hide a substantial degree of bureaucratic autonomy.

Are the public employee unions really so powerful that they can shape the preferences of political authorities? To what extent are they able to use their political power to evade control and enhance their own autonomy? For now there can be no definitive answers to such questions, because political scientists have rarely singled out public-sector unions (or private-sector unions, for that matter) as interesting subjects of study. Anyone who reads and pays attention to the news, though, is aware that these unions are extraordinarily active in electoral politics and big contributors to campaigns, and that they aggressively lobby within the policymaking process in effort to get what they want from government.

By way of illustration, consider Table 1, which provides figures on campaign contributions during the 1998 state elections in California. The upper portion of the table lists the ten largest contributors to the campaign of Gray Davis, a Democrat who was running for governor (and won). A public sector union, the California Teachers Association (CTA), was the top contributor in the entire state, funneling some $1.2 million into the Davis campaign—far more money than any other group, including those from the Democratic party. The lower portion of the table lists the ten largest contributors to the campaign of Delaine Eastin, also a Democrat, who was running for (and won) the nonpartisan post of state schools superintendent. The CTA was again the top contributor, to the tune of some $262,800.

More generally, of the top ten contributors to the Davis campaign, five of them were public sector unions or associations. If we look only at interest groups, and drop out the three funding sources from the Democratic party, we can see that five out of the top seven interest group contributors were public sector unions or associations. The figures for the Eastin campaign are similar: public sector organizations made up five out of the top ten contributors, and five out of the top eight when party sources are excluded.

These are just examples, and we cannot say for sure how powerful these and other public sector groups really are. Political contributions do not always translate into political power. But it seems quite clear, as the figures from California vividly illustrate, that bureaucrats often do place a great deal of importance on the goal of getting political power, and that they are often very active in politics. Any notion that they are “just” bureaucrats, and that any power they have is due to asymmetric information, is missing much of what bureaucrats are actually doing to further their own interests in the politics of control.

Whatever their real power may be, two implications would seem to follow. The first is that our theories need to be broadened to recognize that bureaucrats, rather than just voters and interest groups, can exercise political power to shape the preferences of political authorities. Taking this possibility seriously would change our whole perspective on the control relationship. Bureaucrats would no longer be agents pure and simple. Indeed, viewed from the world of electoral politics, the authorities might well be their agents. The second implication is that we need much more empirical research on how bureaucrats go about amassing political power, how they exercise it, and how successful they are in promoting their interests and autonomy. For too long, bureaucrats have been studied solely as governmental insiders, and, when involved in politics, as actors who are reliant on others to bring pressure on their behalf. This is too narrow a view of their political role. The fact is, bureaucrats can themselves be powerful interest groups, and they need to be studied as such.
Empirical Analysis

There are many ways to study bureaucratic power, many ways to create a growing and productive research program. Indeed, because so little is now known about the political power of bureaucrats, there are countless opportunities for new research.

My focus here is on public school teachers. Teachers are essentially just government bureaucrats, although they are rarely thought of in this way. They operate a common and extremely important form of public agency, the public school, of which there are more than 90,000 throughout the country, educating about 90% of the nation’s 50 million school-age children. Currently, there are almost 3 million teachers in the public school system. The vast majority of them belong to teachers unions, which represent them in collective bargaining and take political action on their behalf. And quite effectively, it appears. The teachers unions are widely regarded as among the most powerful interest groups in the entire country.

A focus on teachers, then, quickly becomes a focus on teachers unions—which, while rarely studied by political scientists, certainly appear to be prime examples of bureaucratic power. In this paper, as an illustration of one kind of empirical work (among many) that might contribute to a new research program, I’ll present some new evidence on the fundamentals of union power and, in particular, on its anchoring in the electoral behavior of teachers.

Background

Prior to the 1960s, very few teachers belonged to unions. This changed dramatically, however, over the next two decades. The watershed event was the 1961 victory of the American Federation of Teachers in winning collective bargaining rights in New York City. Encouraged by its victory, the AFT launched an aggressive national campaign to win bargaining rights in new districts (especially large urban ones), and the National Education Association—at the time a professional association, not a union—had to decide whether to compete as a union or lose its teacher constituency to the AFT. It decided to become a union. Thus began a fierce head-to-head competition that fueled the fires of unionization throughout the public school system.

Their efforts probably could not have succeeded on a grand scale had it not been for a contemporaneous (but hardly coincidental) change going on in the states. For the first time, many were adopting collective bargaining frameworks that allowed for collective bargaining by public sector workers, and that created rights, duties, and procedures making it much easier for public sector unions to gain members and win contracts and concessions.

In education, and in other sectors of government as well, the unions grew like topsy. The struggle between the NEA and the AFT, accompanied by waves of strikes and labor unrest, brought thousands of school districts under union control. By the early 1980s, the transformation of American education system was essentially complete. The turbulence of institutional change had subsided, dramatic increases in union membership had started to level off, and a new equilibrium had taken hold in which (outside the South) unionization and collective bargaining had become the norm.

This new equilibrium still prevails and is quite stable. The NEA, which claimed a membership of 766,000 in 1961, now claims to have some 2.5 million members, about 2 million of whom are practicing K-12 teachers. It has affiliates in all 50 states and is a political force throughout the country. The AFT has expanded (by its own count) from 70,821 members in 1961 to roughly 1 million members today (about half of whom are teachers). AFT strength is
concentrated in major urban areas. Although it has affiliates in 40 states, most of them are much smaller than the NEA affiliates, and only in New York and Rhode Island is the AFT the dominant teachers union.\footnote{9}

For the teachers unions, as for other public sector unions, collective bargaining is their core function and the bedrock of their success and well-being as organizations. It is through collective bargaining that they attract and hold members, get most of their resources (which come mainly from dues), and wrest all manner of benefits from “management” (government officials). But for these unions especially, there is a close and symbiotic relationship between collective bargaining and politics.

This is obviously true at the local level--where, through effective political action, teachers unions are in a position to determine who sits on local school boards, and thus the composition and preferences of the “management” team they will be bargaining with. This same “management” team, moreover, will make decisions on a whole range of policy issues, from budgets to curriculum to textbooks to class size, that teachers care about and want to influence. Through political power, then, the unions can enhance their power in collective bargaining--and thus their membership, finances, and organization--and better achieve their goals more generally. They have strong incentives to be very political organizations.\footnote{8}

The same is true at higher levels of government. In the first place, policies at these higher levels can be designed to create legal frameworks that make it easier for unions to organize teachers, gain bargaining rights, and win concessions in negotiations. Most states already have such frameworks, but the unions want bargaining laws in the remaining states that don’t have them, and they are want to upgrade the frameworks in the states that do--e.g., by getting agency fee requirements or by expanding the scope of bargaining. Moreover, they would dearly love to see the national government adopt a single bargaining framework that would apply uniformly to every state in the country. In general, the more power they can wield in state and national politics, the better able they are to promote their own collective bargaining activities at the local level and to solidify and strengthen their organizational foundations.

More generally, the great value of higher-level politics is that state governments (and to a lesser extent the national government) are in a position to adopt virtually any restrictions, requirements, programs, and funding arrangements they want for public education. Whatever policies they adopt, moreover, are typically applied to all the districts and schools in their jurisdictions. When unions employ their political power at these higher levels, then, they can achieve many objectives they might be unable to achieve through local collective bargaining--from bigger education budgets to smaller classes to stricter credentialing requirements--and they can automatically achieve them for entire populations of districts and schools. One political victory can often accomplish what hundreds of decentralized negotiations cannot.

Given the incentives, it is hardly surprising that the NEA and AFT have emerged as extraordinarily active players in both state and national politics. They are active in elections. They are active in legislative politics. They are active in the judicial process. They are active in all sorts of administrative arenas. And by all appearances, they are enormously powerful (Lieberman, 1997; Moe, 2001; Ballou and Podgursky, 2000). A recent academic study of interest group politics at the state level, for example, asked experts to rank interest groups according to their influence on public policy--and the teachers unions came out number one on the list, outdistancing general business organizations, the trial lawyers, doctors, insurance companies, utilities, bankers, environmentalists, and even the state AFL-CIO affiliates. Their influence was regarded as high, moreover, in virtually every single state outside the South: a
measure of the remarkable breadth and uniformity of their political power (Thomas and Hrebnar, 1996).

Part of the reason for their political success, it would seem, is that they spend tremendous amounts of money on political campaigns and lobbying. When compared to other interest groups, they regularly rank among the top spenders at both the state and national levels, and in many states are ranked number one. Probably the key to their political firepower, however, is that they literally have millions of members, and these members are a looming presence in almost every electoral district in the country. Candidates for major office are keenly aware that the unions invest heavily in mobilizing their local activists, that they are highly dedicated and organized, and that they seem to have considerable clout in getting their friends are elected and their enemies defeated (Lieberman, 1997).

Much more could be said about the teachers unions, but this brief overview is enough to get the basic point across: although teachers are “just” bureaucrats in a vast system of government schools, their public sector unions are extremely well organized and funded, they have strong incentives to engage in political action at all levels of government, and they follow through on those incentives aggressively, apparently with great success. This being so, it would be impossible to understand political control relationships in the realm of public education without paying serious attention to the political power of the bureaucrats. Many of the relevant public officials are surely beholden to them. Or afraid of them. Or sympathetic to their demands. Under the circumstances, the prospects for political control cannot help but look a lot different than the literature suggests.

The Data

With so little known about bureaucratic power, new studies are needed on virtually every aspect of it. Most obviously, we need to know how bureaucrats actually exercise power and with what consequences. Do they succeed in getting what they want? But a more complete understanding would ultimately go much deeper than this, exploring (among other things) the sources of bureaucratic power and the conditions under which it does and doesn’t flourish.

The data analysis I’m presenting here is directed to these fundamentals. As I noted earlier, perhaps the teachers unions’ greatest political resource is the fact that they have members in almost every electoral district in the country. Wherever there are kids, there are teachers. These teachers represent a potential source of political activists, who can hit the streets and do what needs to be done in political campaigns: leaflet, ring door bells, man phone banks, and all the rest. But teachers also represent a potentially impressive block of voters--who, if turning out at high rates and voting for union-endorsed candidates, can be a source of real political clout. Their power is only enhanced if the teachers can get their relatives and friends to do the same thing, and if they can act in concert with other school district employees (who are numerous, have similar interests, have relatives and friends, and are usually represented by public sector unions that try to mobilize them).

There are, however, important “ifs” that need to be addressed before these electoral foundations of union power can be well understood. Do teachers and their allies actually vote at higher rates than other citizens? And do they tend to vote for union-endorsed candidates? If the mass electoral base of the teachers unions is to be an effective source of power, the answers to these questions must be yes. If it is no, the unions must rely on other sources of power--on their political activists, for example, or on campaign contributions or advertising.
The analysis of this paper is a first-cut attempt to shed light on the turnout issue. To get data on the subject, I sent letters to all school districts in the state of California requesting the names of their employees and the latter’s zip codes. (I couldn’t get their addresses because the disclosure of such information is restricted by law.) Districts were asked to break their employees down into two groups: full-time teachers and all other district employees (many of whom are maintenance and clerical workers). Positive responses were received from about 160 districts, which upon examination proved to be of varying sizes and from all parts of the state. Because the next step of the research was going to be costly, I then cut the list down to about 70 districts, balanced by size and geography.

This done, I hired two private firms to match the names of teachers and other district employees with the names of registered voters on county voter files. Even with the help of employee zip codes, this matching process is not an easy job, as there are many millions of voter names to be gone through, many duplicate names within zip codes, various ways that some people state their names, and so on. When names are successfully matched, however, the county voter files then provide useful information on each individual, including their age, their party, their gender, their date of registration, the school district in which they live, and, most importantly, the elections in which they voted. Some voter files go back five years, some as far back as ten years.

As of this writing, I have received a finished data set from one of the private firms, which was responsible for the districts located in Los Angeles County and Orange County. It successfully matched 55% of the names I had submitted to them (which was better than I expected). The other firm, responsible for the remaining counties in the state (about 60 school districts in all), is still working on the job, and its data are not available. In the paper for this conference, then, I will be reporting preliminary results from the districts in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

As the analysis will show, the patterns in the preliminary data are quite striking and make good sense, and I have no reason to think that they will change much as new districts are included. A more complete data set, however, would allow me to explore a variety of turnout issues in greater depth than is possible with the current data. It is reasonable to think, for example, that while Republicans are more likely to vote than Democrats among the general electorate, party may have a different connection to turnout among teachers, both because the unions are heavily Democratic in their policies and endorsements and because they are trying to mobilize their entire membership to vote. Similarly, it is reasonable to think that, while older citizens are much more likely to vote than younger ones are, the role of age will also prove different for teachers, with union mobilization prompting more uniform turnout rates than one would otherwise expect. (Addressing these sorts of questions, I should note, requires more than just a broader range of districts. It also requires random samples of registered voters within each district, to get a baseline against which the teachers can be compared. This too is something I’m in the process of doing.)

For now, I’m going to put these more ambitious goals aside, and not push to do anything fancier or more extensive than the preliminary data comfortably allow. I’m simply going to let the data speak for themselves, revealing basic facts and patterns that, while not generated by impressive statistical techniques, are a very useful place to start in exploring the foundations of teacher electoral power.
Findings

In California, 98% of public school teachers are covered by collective bargaining agreements and more than 90% belong to their local teachers union. Almost all these unions--and all unions in the sample of districts we'll be looking at here--are part of the California Teachers Association, an affiliate of the NEA. As Table 1's figures on campaign contributions only begin to suggest, the CTA is a force to be reckoned with in California education, and in California politics more generally. It has members in large numbers throughout the entire state, it has tremendous resources, and it is extremely aggressive in elections and lobbying.

One way that the CTA and its locals can seek political power is by getting their members and allies to vote in large numbers--through union-orchestrated phone campaigns, mailings, meetings, and the like--or by simply having members and allies that are disposed on their own to do so. Despite the CTA’s political formidability, however, there is no guarantee that whatever power it has achieved is actually rooted in teacher voting strength. Mobilizing members, after all, is not so easy. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. Serious mobilization efforts can be very costly and time consuming, moreover, especially if they are to reach all parts of the state; and the local unions, which might be critical in making mobilization a success, may not always be equipped for the job, especially in the smaller districts where they are unlikely to have paid staff. Member voting, then, has great potential for unions as a political resource, but it is also problematic. In practice, members may not turn out in especially large numbers. The unions can easily control their campaign contributions--but they can’t easily control their members.

So the unions are faced with a challenge, one that affects them on two political levels. At the local level, they need to get members and allies to the polls to influence the outcomes of school board and bond elections, which are crucial for bolstering the foundations of union organization and for securing basic teacher benefits. The unions also need to get out the vote for state-level elections, because the state has ultimate control over funding, programs, rules, and anything else that might bear on public education.

Around the nation, school board elections are often held during odd-numbered years or at off-times (in April or June, for instance), rather than during the general elections in November of even-numbered years. Frequently, they are the only issue on the ballot. The same is true for bond issues. As a result, the turnout among the general electorate is usually quite low, in the range of ten to twenty percent—which tends to give organized groups a major advantage. When few people are voting, any group that can mobilize a bloc of voters is in a good position to tip the election to their side. Thus, teachers unions, which often seem to be the only organized groups in these school elections, should be best off when elections are held at off times or during off years. This would be true, at least, if their members voted in disproportionately large numbers.

In California, it appears that about half the school districts have elections during even-numbered general election years and about half don’t. In our sample, all the districts in Los Angeles County but one (Alhambra City High) have their school board elections in November of odd-numbered years. This is a bonus for the unions. The two districts in our sample from Orange County have their elections in November of even-numbered years. This is not a bonus.

The 12 sample districts are listed in Table 2, which provides a bit of information on them. Most of these districts have more than 10,000 students, making them fairly large as school districts go. The largest is Santa Ana, whose enrollment of 58,043 ranks it as one of the biggest districts in the state and 67th in the nation as a whole.
students on free lunch programs give us a simple (inverse) measure of the affluence of each
district, and it is clear that they vary quite a bit, with Arcadia, Torrance, and Huntington Beach
on one end of the spectrum and Garvey, Montebello, and Santa Ana on the other.

The table also gives us a first look at some information on teachers and Other District
Employees (which I will begin capitalizing, to avoid any confusion), showing what percentages
are currently living in the districts where they work. These are important numbers. Politically,
the unions are much better off and likely to be more powerful if their members live where they
work, and thus have both the incentive and the legal right to vote in their districts’ elections. The
same is true for unions representing the Other District Employees--most of whom, I should note,
are members of the California School Employees Association, a close ally of the CTA.

The findings on this score are quite interesting. The percentage of teachers who live in
their own school districts varies a great deal. In Garvey, which is a relatively poor area, only 8%
of the teachers actually live in the district--which, needless to say, does not bode well for the
local teachers union. In Huntington Beach, which is among the most affluent districts in the
sample, 55% of the teachers live in the district, which clearly puts its union in a stronger political
position. It is hard to know how representative these districts are of the state as a whole. They
are, after all, in a densely populated urban area, where it is easy to cross district boundaries and
live somewhere else. In places that are less densely populated, district boundaries may be
geographically much larger, and many more teachers may tend to live in their districts.

But while the exact numbers may vary depending on circumstances, the phenomenon
we’re observing is probably a rather common one and deserves underlining. Many teachers do
not live in their own school districts, and thus cannot vote in the school board and bond elections
for which their unions need to mobilize support. Moreover, as a simple scatterplot would nicely
show, there is a definite (if imperfect) relationship between the affluence of the district and the
percentage of teachers who choose to live there: few teachers live in poor districts, many more
live in relatively affluent ones. Even in affluent areas, however, a fair percentage of teachers live
elsewhere and cannot vote in local elections.

It is a different story for the Other District Employees. They are drawn much more
heavily from the local environment, and much higher percentages of them live in the district
where they work. This is true in poor districts, but it is also true in the more affluent districts
(which presumably contain some areas where less-well-off workers can live). This gives an
important boost to the unions representing these workers. It also makes them particularly
important allies for the teachers unions. Even so, we should also recognize that from a third to a
half of these workers do not live in their districts and can’t vote in their local elections.

Now let’s turn to the data on turnout in local elections, which are set out in Table 3a (for
1997), 3b (for 1999), and 3c (for bond elections). The school board elections of Alhambra,
Huntington Beach, and Santa Ana are held in November of even-numbered years, and so are
submerged in the general elections. School board elections in the rest of the districts are held in
odd-numbered years, when nothing else is being voted on, and they offer a good opportunity to
study the local electoral behavior of teachers and their allies.

As we ought to expect, turnout among the local population as a whole is downright
abysmal, even in the more affluent districts. In the two off-year elections for which I have data,,
1997 and 1999, turnout varies from a low of 6% to a quite unusual high of 25% (which only
occurred, it appears, because Torrance had a bond issue on the ballot at the same time). The
median turnout in these elections is 11%. For bond elections, it is 23%. Other things (like where
their members live) being equal, then, this low turnout gives the unions a great opportunity to mobilize support and tip the scale toward outcomes and candidates they favor.

Do teachers who live in their districts actually vote at disproportionately high rates compared to average citizens? The answer is a clearly yes. In 1997, for instance, only 7% of the people in the Charter Oak school district voted in their school board election, but 46% of the teachers who live there did. In Claremont, 18% of the registered voters went to the polls, but 57% of the district’s teachers who live there did. These kinds of figures can be recited for every district that had an off-year or off-time election, and the conclusion is the same whether we look at 1997, 1999, or the bond elections. Teachers who live in their own school districts were anywhere from two to seven times more likely to vote than ordinary citizens were.

There remain two downsides from the union standpoint. One is that many teachers don’t live in their districts and can’t add numbers to the disproportionate vote. The second is that, despite the huge turnout disparity between teachers and ordinary citizens, teacher turnout is hardly what it could be, with a median of about 46%—rather than, say, the 80% or 90% that one might expect from a cohesive, strongly led political organization. Despite the fact that teachers who live in their districts have a personal stake in voting, and despite the fact that they have a union that is presumably trying to mobilize them to vote, most of them don’t vote in their local elections.

This said, however, the fact teachers do vote at much higher rates than ordinary citizens gives the unions an important political resource, especially in low turnout elections. Moreover, we can’t forget that these teachers have relatives and friends who can be mobilized for the cause, as well as other district workers and their relatives and friends—which means that a high rate of voting among teachers may actually be signal that lots of allies are voting at high rates too. There may well be a multiplier effect at work.

The ability of unions to mobilize their supporters will depend in large part on what motivates the latter to vote. It may be, for instance, that teachers and their allies are quite self-interested in their approach to elections, and are especially likely to vote when they have a personal stake in the outcome—but lacking such a stake, they may behave much like ordinary citizens. On the other hand, a more sociological take on their motivation might argue that, as people who are decidedly middle class, who are committed to public education, who want the best for the public schools, and who have a public-interested concern for promoting socially beneficial education policies, they are more likely to be politically active and to vote in school board and bond elections.

My data cannot provide definitive evidence on these scores, but they do offer a test that is quite revealing. It turns out that many of the teachers who do not live in the districts where they work do live in some of the other districts in our sample. The numbers are usually not large, but the population is an especially interesting one: these are teachers who live in a district and are eligible to vote there, but they don’t work there. The question is, do these teachers—who are presumably just as middle class, just as committed to public education, just as public-spirited, and so on, as their brethren who both live and work there—vote at comparably high levels in their local school board elections: elections in which they have no direct occupational stake?

Whether we look at the 1997 elections, the 1999 elections, or the various bond elections, the answer is the same: in every case that allows a comparison, the teachers who live in a district but don’t work there vote at lower rates than the teachers who both live and work there. The differences are not always statistically significant—although they fail in just four of sixteen comparisons—but when this happens it is due to the low numbers we have to work with. The
size of the difference is almost always quite substantial. In Claremont, to take a rather typical example, 57% of the teachers who both live and work there voted in the 1997 election, but only 23% of the teachers who live but don’t work there chose to vote.

This raises a further question along the same lines: do the teachers who merely live in a school district vote at higher rates than ordinary citizens do? Here the answer is less clear, and the low numbers advise caution. Statistical significance aside, teachers were usually more likely to go the polls in local education elections than ordinary citizens were—but not always. In 12 of 18 comparisons they did, and in the remaining 6 they did not; indeed, in 5 of these they turned out at lower rates than ordinary citizens. Of the cases when teachers turned out at higher rates, moreover, only 6 are statistically significant. This is somewhat problematic due to the small sample sizes, but it is consistent with the fact that the median difference in turnout rates between these teachers and ordinary citizens is just 7% (a difference that could easily arise from social class alone). For teachers who both live and work in a district, on the other hand, the median difference in turnout rates between them and ordinary citizens is a full 36%.

It would appear, then, that teachers who just live but don’t work in a district are usually much more like ordinary citizens than they are like teachers who both live and work there, at least when it comes to local education elections. This suggests that a sociological take on teachers as primarily motivated by a public-spirited commitment to education is probably quite wrong, at least most of the time, and that teachers are probably very self-interested in their approach to education elections. They turn out in large numbers when their own jobs and occupational lives are directly affected. Otherwise, they are only somewhat more motivated to vote than ordinary citizens are. It follows that, from the standpoint of the union, teachers will be much more easily mobilized when they have a direct personal stake in the election; if they don’t, the union may have a hard time with them and find that a great many teachers stay home.

Now let’s turn to another interesting issue that Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c can shed light on, the issue of how the Other District Employees behave in education elections. I should note that this is a heterogeneous group, containing all district employees who are not full-time teachers. Thus, it includes administrators, nurses, librarians, and part-time teachers, as well as janitors, secretaries, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers. The latter types of rather low-paid workers, however, far outnumber the former types, and some 40% of this entire set of employees is Hispanic. On sociological grounds alone, therefore, we would expect this group of people to vote at low rates in all elections—and in this respect, at least, to be very different from teachers. In more affluent contexts, moreover, they should vote at lower rates than ordinary citizens.

These expectations are quite wrong. In every district for which data are available, and for each of the three sets of elections, these Other Employees voted at substantially higher rates than ordinary citizens do—and at rates that, on average, are just a shade lower than the rates of teachers who live and work in the district. The median difference in turnout rates between them and the teachers who live in their own districts is just 5%—which is stunningly small, given the underlying differences in social class. Clearly, something else is going on here. And that something is probably that these Other Employees—like teachers—approach education elections with their own self-interest in mind, and that their unions mobilize them on those grounds as well.

This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that, when we look at Other Employees who live in a district but don’t work there—and thus don’t have a personal stake in the elections and don’t belong to the local union—their turnout proves to be decidedly lower on average than that of the Other Employees who both work and live there. The former turn out a lower rates than the
latter in 18 of the 19 cases for which there is data, and almost all of these differences are statistically significant. The median difference in vote rates between the two groups is a 18%. It is not uncommon, moreover, for the gap to be as large as 30 or 40%.

As was true for teachers, the Other Employees who live but don’t work in the district tend to look much more like ordinary citizens in their electoral behavior than their colleagues who both live and work in the district do. Although the differences are often not significant, the median difference (in comparisons with ordinary citizens) is 8%, which is virtually the same voting advantage that we found for teachers who don’t live in the district. In this case, though, it seems clear that social class is not explaining why these Other Employees are turning out at somewhat higher rates than ordinary citizens. Indeed, on grounds of their social class, we should expect them to turn out at lower rates.

One possibility, it might seem, is that some of these Other Employees, and some teachers too, are partly motivated by public spiritedness and commitment to public education, enough to make them turn out at somewhat higher rates. The problem with this rationale is that public school teachers would presumably be more motivated by these sorts of values than janitors and secretaries would, in addition to being much higher in social class—yet these two groups (of people who live but don’t work in the district) turn out at about the same rates. This explanation can’t account for that.

The alternative explanation is that some measure of self-interest and union mobilization may well be spilling over to affect the voting behavior of some of these people, even though they don’t have a direct stake in the elections. They may see themselves—and everyone employed by school districts, wherever they live—as involved in a big collective action problem; and because voting is not a very costly act, some portion of them (a distinct minority) may be more willing to vote in order to support the larger, self-interested cause. It is quite possible, in addition, that self-interest is actually more important to people who are socially less advantaged, because there is broader research to show that such motivations may vary with social class. And one more thing: the Other Employees, given their social class, may be especially susceptible to union exhortations to vote—whereas teachers, who see themselves as professionals and middle class, are perhaps less likely to respond. This whole set of factors, rooted in self-interest and unions, could well account for why the Other Employees who live but don’t work in the district tend to vote at rates comparable to their teacher counterparts, when on other grounds they ought to be much less likely to turn out.

Whatever the explanation, the simple fact that these Other Employees turn out at rates comparable to teachers means that these people, and in particular the unions that represent them, are of crucial importance for the teachers unions as they try to exercise electoral influence over district governments. When these unions are on board, and there is no reason they shouldn’t be, the teachers unions more than double their mass-based resources: for there are at least as many Other Employees as teachers in the typical district, and the Other Employees are much more likely to live there than the teachers are. This alliance is potentially of enormous political consequence, and may well compensate for the fact that so many teachers live elsewhere.

Finally, let’s take a look at Tables 4a and 4b, which set out results for the general elections of 1998 and 2000. In a few districts, school boards or bonds are being voted on. But in all districts, people are voting on statewide and national races, and everyone has this in common. It is plain, moreover, that the California Teachers Association is heavily involved in trying to influence state elections and state policy—and that, unlike with local elections, which are largely
the province of local unions, the CTA has strong incentives to see that teachers and their allies vote.

The data on these general elections reveal two striking patterns. The first is that turnout is remarkably high, both absolutely and relative to the turnout of ordinary citizens. In a number of cases, the turnout of teachers and Other Employees is over 90%. The second is that turnout is quite uniform across groups. As with the off-year elections, teachers usually turn out at slightly higher rates than Other Employees do. But here, the people who live but don't work in a district do not tend to vote at lower rates than the people who both live and work there. Among teachers, for instance, the median turnout rate in 2000 for those who live and work in a district was 92%, and the rate for those who live but don't work there was 88%--but in 1998 the differential was just the reverse: teachers who live and work in the district turned out at 82%, while those who just live in the district turned out at 85%. A similar story can be told for the Other Employees.

The fact that turnout is so high across the board suggests that the unions may be doing a good job of mobilizing their members. It is possible, of course, that people are just acting on their own, individual incentives, and that the unions have little to do with it. But this seems unlikely. Clearly, teachers and Other Employees have a direct personal stake in their local school board and bond elections--yet they turn out at rather low rates. They would seem to have less of a personal stake in the state-level elections, which, while certainly important, are much more remote and involve millions of other voters. If they were just acting on their own incentives, absent union orchestration, it is hard to explain why they would turn out at such high rates for state elections and such low rates for local elections.

It is reasonable to suspect that the high, uniform turnout achieved by the public education “community” during statewide elections is due to the active involvement of the CTA and its organizational allies at the state level. They have resources, experience, and staff that the locals just don’t have, they are quite experienced in political campaigns, and they clearly do make an effort to get out the vote. It appears they are successful at it. Moreover, in state elections the unions do not suffer from a vexing problem that plagues their locals in school board and bond elections: that teachers often don’t live in the districts where they work. This residency issue simply doesn’t matter. Teachers throughout the state are members of the CTA, are reachable through its massive organization, and have the legal right to vote regardless of where they live.

One final aspect of the data is worthy of mention. The turnout of teachers and Other Employees was uniformly higher in 2000 than in 1998, by an average of about 10%. The proximate cause, almost surely, was that a voucher initiative was on the ballot in that year. The CTA and its allies pulled out all the stops to defeat it, spending some $30 million and launching a massive get-out-the-vote effort. It appears that, with turnout sky-high, and a good bit higher than the already lofty numbers for 1998, they did their jobs very effectively.

Conclusion

This analysis of teacher politics only scratches the surface. But my purpose in presenting it is not to provide a definitive statement about the power of teachers and their unions. It is to illustrate what kinds of issues become relevant when we think of bureaucrats as truly political actors, and to generate some findings that are instructive and worth pursuing as part of a much broader research program.
On the basis of these data, I can’t say with true confidence that teachers are motivated by self-interest rather than a commitment to the public good, or that their unions are mobilizing them, or that they actually have an impact on local and state elections. Better evidence is required before these things can be known for sure. What can be stated with confidence, I believe, is that teachers are not just bureaucrats who do their jobs and leave politics to the politicians. They vote at much higher rates than ordinary citizens do, and they are clearly trying to influence which politicians win office and what the latter’s preferences will be. They are trying to control the political authorities who are supposed to be controlling them.

The teachers are not the only bureaucrats doing this. The Other District Employees, whose demographics suggest that they should be voting at low rates, are voting at rates almost as high as the teachers, and are important allies in the union-led effort to gain electoral power over the governments they work for. The high turnout of bureaucrats, moreover, could well be the tip of a much larger iceberg. I suspect that with better voting data we would find that spouses, other relatives, and friends of these bureaucrats also turn out at relatively high rates, and bolster the group’s political clout considerably.

But the teachers have their political problems as well as their political advantages. Most notably, they have a big stake in affecting school board and bond elections—but because many of them live outside their districts (particularly if their districts are poor), they can’t vote in these elections; and their unions, it appears, have a very difficult time mobilizing the teachers who live in the district but don’t work there. Much the same is true for the Other District Employees. Although the latter are much more likely to live in their districts than teachers are—a fact that makes an alliance with them especially valuable—many don’t live in their districts; and here too, the unions are apparently not very successful at getting out the vote among those who live in the district but don’t work there.

Clearly, much more research needs to be done before we can understand the political power of teachers and their allies. More generally, though—and this is the real agenda here—we need more research if we are to understand the political power that public sector bureaucrats of all types attempt to exercise in gaining control over the political authorities that govern them. As things now stand, very little is known about these groups and what they do in politics. Almost everything remains to be learned.

Whatever progress we are able to make is likely to have a big impact on our understanding of political control, and indeed of democratic government more generally. For wherever there are governments, whether they are at the federal, state, or local levels, there are bureaucrats who have incentives to take political action—for bigger budgets, for higher taxes, for more programs, for greater job security, for restrictions on managerial discretion, for more bureaucratic autonomy—and to exercise control over the political authorities who make official decisions on these matters. The political authorities, moreover, have every incentive to be responsive to these demands as long as the bureaucrats can succeed in bringing real political power to bear—which, at least in many cases, their numbers, resources, and organization make eminently possible.

This is not to say that all groups of bureaucrats are politically powerful. Presumably, some are and some aren’t. The interesting research questions, it seems to me, have to do with precisely this kind of variation and detail: with which groups of bureaucrats are powerful, by what means and under what conditions they are able to become powerful, and what consequences—for political control, for public policy, for the size, cost, and effectiveness of government—are entailed by their exercise of power.
To take one simple example of the kind of variation a research program is likely to uncover, consider the difference between the teachers unions and the public sector unions that represent federal government workers. The teachers unions have members throughout the nation, in virtually every political district in the country--but the federal government unions have their memberships concentrated in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, which puts them at a disadvantage in national elections. Ironically, it is precisely because the teachers unions have a local base that they have a potent resource to employ in federal elections--and it is precisely because the federal unions are organized at the federal level, and lack a far-flung local base, that they are at a disadvantage in “their own” elections. As a result, they may have to rely more exclusively on campaign contributions--which, of course, the teachers unions and other groups will be using too.

To take this one step further, it may well be that national-level bureaucrats actually have a harder time exercising political power than their counterparts at the state and local levels, because as governments get closer to the people (and thus closer to where the bureaucrats in those governments live), the numbers and organizational resources of the bureaucrats become more politically relevant and effective. This hardly rules out bureaucratic power at the national level. Money talks, and so do the political alliances that federal unions can enter into with their powerful friends--like the AFL-CIO, which is heavily weighted with public sector unions. But it does illustrate that the power of different groups of bureaucrats may vary, perhaps considerably, and that different groups may rely on very different resources in their pursuit of political power. These are the sorts of things an empirical research program would begin to uncover once it takes bureaucrats seriously as political actors.

In the meantime, we need to rethink our theories of political control. The prevailing theories treat bureaucrats as mere subordinates, controlled from above by political authorities. But the control relationship can run both ways, and our theories need to recognize as much. The political authorities do have important means of controlling the bureaucrats. But the bureaucrats also have important means of controlling the political authorities, and not just because they have private information that allows them to pull the wool over the authorities’ eyes on occasion. In a democratic political system, the political authorities are elected, and this gives bureaucrats an opportunity to play a role--perhaps a very influential one--in determining who will occupy positions of authority and what their preferences will be. If we assume governmental actors are rational, it would be odd indeed if public bureaucrats and their unions did not invest in this kind of “reverse” control. In many ways, in fact, they would seem to have greater incentives to invest in politics than other interest groups do.

It is time, then, for our theories to treat bureaucrats as truly political actors, and to recognize the political power they may have over public officials. Once this is done, the standard notion that the bureaucracy is “under control” becomes a good deal harder to maintain. And the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians begins to look a lot more interesting.
Table 1: Top Campaign Contributors – California, 1998

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate and Office</th>
<th>Contributing Group</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Type of Group</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gray Davis (Governor)</td>
<td>California Teachers Association</td>
<td>$1,223,237</td>
<td>public sector union</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>California State Council of Service Employees</td>
<td>777,019</td>
<td>public sector union</td>
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<td>Southern California District Council of Carpenters</td>
<td>675,000</td>
<td>private sector union</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Democratic Governors Association</td>
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<td>party</td>
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<td></td>
<td>California School Employees Association</td>
<td>568,932</td>
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<td>AFSCME</td>
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<td>Democrat Small Contributions</td>
<td>525,918</td>
<td>party</td>
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<td>Democratic State Central Committee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>AGI Management Corporation</td>
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<td>Professional Engineers in California Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delaine Eastin (Superintendent of Public Instruction)</td>
<td>California Teachers Association</td>
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<td>California State Council of Service Employees</td>
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<td>Ameriquest Capital Corporation</td>
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<td>California Federation of Teachers (AFT)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Association of California School Administrators</td>
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<td>Carpenters Historical Society of the Bay Area</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Louise L. Gund</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data were obtained from the National Institute on Money in State Politics [www.followthemoney.org](http://www.followthemoney.org).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Percent Students with Free Lunch</th>
<th>Percent Teachers Living in District</th>
<th>Percent Employees Living in District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alhambra City High</td>
<td>19,846</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia Unified</td>
<td>9,574</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Oak Unified</td>
<td>6,803</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified</td>
<td>6,604</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covina Valley Unified</td>
<td>14,163</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey Elementary</td>
<td>7,164</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified</td>
<td>34,256</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwalk – La Mirada Unified</td>
<td>23,410</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmdale Elementary</td>
<td>20,038</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified</td>
<td>23,809</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington Beach City High</td>
<td>14,310</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana Unified</td>
<td>58,043</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NA indicates no available data for the district.
### Table 3a: Teacher and School District Employee Turnout – Los Angeles County, November 1997 Election
(Overall County Voter Turnout = 16%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>District Turnout (%</th>
<th>Teachers (% voting)</th>
<th>Other Employees (% voting)</th>
<th>Comparison of Groups</th>
<th>Comparison of Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Live and Work in the District (N)</td>
<td>Only Live in the District (N)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>15 (140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Oak Unified</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46 *** (48)</td>
<td>7 *** (171)</td>
<td>41 *** (96)</td>
<td>15 ** (85) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>57 *** (72)</td>
<td>23 *** (30)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covina Valley Unified</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49 *** (72)</td>
<td>32 *** (31)</td>
<td>28 *** (242)</td>
<td>10 *** (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey Elementary</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>58 ** (12)</td>
<td>17 * (6)</td>
<td>58 *** (93)</td>
<td>33 *** (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>35 *** (46)</td>
<td>35 *** (330)</td>
<td>26 * (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwalk – La Mirada Unified</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>46 *** (67)</td>
<td>15 ** (13)</td>
<td>35 *** (365)</td>
<td>0 *** (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmdale Elementary</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35 *** (196)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>34 *** (460)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75 *** (299)</td>
<td>40 *** (15)</td>
<td>75 *** (583)</td>
<td>36 *** (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10. Column of “comparison of groups” for teachers indicates whether the difference in turnout levels across the two teacher groups is significantly different from zero, using a one-tailed test. The “comparison” column for other employees does the same for the employee groups. In the columns presenting turnout levels, statistical significance means that the difference between the given turnout level and the corresponding turnout level for the district as a whole is significantly different from zero. NA indicates no available turnout data for the district.
Table 3b: Teacher and School District Employee Turnout – Los Angeles County, November 1999 Election  
(Overall County Voter Turnout = 13%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Teachers (%) voting</th>
<th>Other Employees (%) voting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District Turnout (%)</td>
<td>Live and Work in the District (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Oak Unified</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25 *** (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56 *** (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covina Valley Unified</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34 *** (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey Elementary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25 * (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwalk – La Mirada Unified</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25 *** (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmdale Elementary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39 *** (236)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(also bond election on ballot)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28 *** (342)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10. Column of “comparison of groups” for teachers indicates whether the difference in turnout levels across the two teacher groups is significantly different from zero, using a one-tailed test. The “comparison” column for other employees does the same for the employee groups. In the columns presenting turnout levels, statistical significance means that the difference between the given turnout level and the corresponding turnout level for the district as a whole is significantly different from zero. NA indicates no available turnout data for the district.
Table 3c: Teacher and School District Employee Turnout – Los Angeles County, Special Elections (Bond Measures)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District and Year</th>
<th>District Turnout (%)</th>
<th>Teachers (% voting)</th>
<th>Other Employees (% voting)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Live and Work in the District (N)</td>
<td>Only Live in the District (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhambra City High 1999</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>51 (150)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified 2000</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>46 ** (90)</td>
<td>13 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified 1998</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified 1998</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>67 *** (310)</td>
<td>22 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington Beach City Elementary 1999</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>93 *** (210)</td>
<td>80 *** (179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana Unified 1999</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>88 *** (132)</td>
<td>11 (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10. Column of “comparison of groups” for teachers indicates whether the difference in turnout levels across the two teacher groups is significantly different from zero, using a one-tailed test. The “comparison” column for other employees does the same for the employee groups. In the columns presenting turnout levels, statistical significance means that the difference between the given turnout level and the corresponding turnout level for the district as a whole is significantly different from zero. NA indicates no available turnout data for the district.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Teachers (% voting)</th>
<th>Other Employees (% voting)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Live and Work in the District (N)</td>
<td>Only Live in the District (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhambra City High (also school board election)</td>
<td>79 *** (146)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Oak Unified</td>
<td>84 *** (51)</td>
<td>87 *** (198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified</td>
<td>92 *** (78)</td>
<td>81 *** (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covina Valley Unified</td>
<td>80 *** (74)</td>
<td>88 *** (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey Elementary</td>
<td>67 (12)</td>
<td>50 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>78 *** (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwalk – La Mirada Unified</td>
<td>77 *** (70)</td>
<td>85 *** (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmdale Elementary</td>
<td>75 *** (224)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified (also bond election on ballot)</td>
<td>91 *** (325)</td>
<td>89 *** (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington Beach City Unified</td>
<td>87 *** (197)</td>
<td>82 *** (169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana Unified</td>
<td>88 *** (123)</td>
<td>86 *** (56)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical significance is indicated as follows: ***, ** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10. Column of “comparison of groups” for teachers indicates whether the difference in turnout levels across the two teacher groups is significantly different from zero, using a one-tailed test. The “comparison” column for other employees does the same for the employee groups. In the columns presenting turnout levels, statistical significance means that the difference between the given turnout level and the corresponding turnout level for the county as a whole is significantly different from zero. NA indicates no available turnout data for the district.
Table 4b: Teacher and School District Employee Turnout – Los Angeles County, 2000 General Election  
(Overall County Voter Turnout = 68%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Teachers (% voting)</th>
<th>Other Employees (% voting)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Live and Work in the District (N)</td>
<td>Only Live in the District (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhambra City High</td>
<td>88 *** (191)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>92 *** (66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Oak Unified</td>
<td>91 *** (56)</td>
<td>92 *** (288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(also bond measure on ballot)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Unified</td>
<td>96 *** (97)</td>
<td>92 *** (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covina Valley Unified</td>
<td>92 *** (90)</td>
<td>87 *** (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(also bond measure on ballot)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey Elementary</td>
<td>88 *** (17)</td>
<td>85 * (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montebello Unified</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>88 *** (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwalk – La Mirada Unified</td>
<td>92 *** (83)</td>
<td>80 * (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmdale Elementary</td>
<td>90 *** (288)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance Unified</td>
<td>92 *** (399)</td>
<td>86 ** (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington Beach City Unified</td>
<td>94 *** (246)</td>
<td>93 *** (217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana Unified</td>
<td>93 *** (180)</td>
<td>83 *** (65)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10. Column of “comparison of groups” for teachers indicates whether the difference in turnout levels across the two teacher groups is significantly different from zero, using a one-tailed test. The “comparison” column for other employees does the same for the employee groups. In the columns presenting turnout levels, statistical significance means that the difference between the given turnout level and the corresponding turnout level for the county as a whole is significantly different from zero. NA indicates no available turnout data for the district.
REFERENCES


……………, and Scott Wilson. 1994b. Presidents and the Politics of Structure. Law and Contemporary Problems, 57 (Spring), 1-44.


Endnotes

1 For an overview of this literature and an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, see Moe (1997).
2 For examples of how public sector unions participate in politics and the interests they pursue, see, e.g., Lieberman (1997); Grimshaw (1979); Crouch (1978); and Masters (1988).
3 The figures were obtained from the National Institute on Money in State Politics, which provides data on its website at www.followthemoney.org.
5 For information on the history of the teachers unions, see Lieberman (1997); Murphy (1990); and Berube (1988).
6 For an overview of these developments, see Stern (1988). For quantitative studies showing that bargaining laws gave a boost to public sector unions, see Saltzmann (1977, 1988).
8 For discussions of the basic features of education politics, see Wirt and Kirst (1997). For discussions of the resources and political strategies of teachers unions, see Lieberman (1997).
9 These figures are taken from the Schools and Staffing Survey data set, produced by the U.S. Department of Education (1995).
10 The AFT is politically active in the state, but it is a major presence only in the Los Angeles and San Francisco school districts, whose local unions are jointly affiliated with both the AFT and the NEA.
11 For characterizations of the local electoral context, see Wirt and Kirst (1997).
12 The Los Angeles school district is not in our sample. But I should note that its enrollment of more than 700,000 students puts it in a class by itself. It is beyond large.
13 See, e.g., Banfield and Wilson (1963). I should add that my own, much more recent work on public opinion school vouchers shows that people who are disadvantaged are much more likely to take positions on the issue based on their personal self-interest than more advantaged individuals are. See Moe (2001).
14 For a discussion of California’s 2000 voucher campaign, see Moe (2001).