

CHAPTER 1

.....

The Puzzle of Outside Money

SOMETHING PUZZLING is going on in America's school board elections. On the one hand, increased state and federal oversight of education policy has reduced the power and autonomy of local school boards. On the other hand, national reform donors and competing national interest groups are transforming dozens of local school board elections into major electoral battlegrounds, with millions of dollars in campaign funding and professional campaign consultants. These elements seem, at least on first glance, to be inconsistent. Are school boards increasingly antiquated and marginalized governing institutions in a system driven by encroaching state and federal oversight? Or are they recognized by national actors as strategic fronts in education policy debates and as essential venues for developing and translating policy into practice?

This puzzle reflects important changes in the landscape of American education politics. School boards are intensely local, often celebrated as "the crucible of democracy," but more recently portrayed as old-fashioned and dysfunctional, so much so that some school reform leaders have advocated for eliminating them altogether.¹ Traditionally, school board elections have been sleepy affairs where most candidates spend less than \$1,000. In 2010, for example, less than 3 percent of candidates reported spending more than \$25,000.²

Of the more than 13,500 school districts in the United States, the vast majority are independent governments, separate from cities and counties, and overseen by elected school boards. Most school board elections still fit the model of low-interest and low-spending local politics. But in a handful of recent electoral cycles, some school board contests have received the hot glare of national attention and efforts at outside influence. “The money keeps flowing into local school board races and education ballot initiatives from outsiders with deep pockets,” wrote Valerie Strauss in the *Washington Post* in 2012.³ The next year, a local radio station in Los Angeles reported that an “unprecedented \$1 million donation” from Michael Bloomberg to influence Los Angeles school board elections “ups the ante in a school board race that is on its way to breaking fundraising records.”⁴ Four years later, unions squared off against education reformers supporting charter schools, combining to spend nearly \$15 million and making the 2017 Los Angeles Board of Education race “the most expensive school board election in U.S. history.”⁵ An *Indianapolis Star* op-ed noted in 2015 that “big money donors” (such as Bloomberg and Sheryl Sandberg) have “put being on the school board out of the reach of ordinary Indy citizens.”⁶ The November 2017 San Diego County School Board election, “an obscure race that few even know exists,” nonetheless attracted non-local donors like Michael Bloomberg, Alice Walton (of the Walton family, which founded Walmart), Reed Hastings (owner of Netflix), and Doris Fisher (Gap Inc.), and according to one account “is likely to run into the millions of dollars this season, while in the past, those costs were unlikely to pass a few thousand dollars.”⁷

Outside money is not specific to education politics; it has become a widespread feature of Congressional elections and is beginning to show up more often in local elections. “The out-of-state money is crazy,” declared US Secretary of Health and Human Services Tom Price, about a high-profile June 2017 special election to fill his vacated congressional seat in Georgia.⁸ Even local races for district attorneys are targets for outside money; an organization funded by billionaire George Soros, for instance, has funneled more than \$18 million into state and local races, including funds to help candidates for prosecutor support massive television advertising.⁹ As an extreme case of localized politics, school board elections can provide insights

into the power, universality, and outer limits of the outside money in local politics.

This book takes on the challenge of outlining and beginning to solve the puzzles of how and why some once-sleepy local school board contests have become flashpoints of national donor interest. We argue that the involvement of wealthy individuals and national organizations in local school board elections is a sign of a new stage in the evolution of the United States' multilevel system of setting and implementing education policy. We characterize this new stage as "the nationalization of local education politics." Nationalization is not to be confused with centralization within our federal system. Unlike centralization, which involves the shifting of power and authority up and out of local arenas, nationalization reflects a growing realization on the part of national political actors that local arenas continue to be important as sites for agenda setting and political engagement over educational issues. With nationalization, the formal boundaries of local districts operate less as walls demarcating the separation of the local from metropolitan, state, and national politics than as the meeting place where national and local actors form alliances around competing visions of what schools should be.

A key mechanism for the development of nationalization in education politics is the role of donors. Funding from out-of-state individual donors and organizations could enable a new pathway for elite influence in local school district governance, and crowd out or overshadow some local voices. Political scientists have started to closely examine the relationship between wealth and American politics in the context of growing socioeconomic inequality, often focusing on the behavior, attitudes, and political influence of the affluent.¹⁰ In an era of growing wealth inequality in the United States, a small class of extremely wealthy individuals is well positioned to play an outsized role in funding political campaigns. Based on research on federal elections, we know that the role of very wealthy contributors is growing; for example, the percentage of campaign contributions from the top 0.01 percent of the voting age population grew from under 20 percent in the 1980s to 40 percent by the 2012 election cycle.¹¹

Major donor interest in federal elections for the presidency and Congress is a widely reported aspect of American politics, and political

parties and political action committees (PACs) invest heavily in raising donor funds and maintaining donor connections.¹² Yet the mobilization of a billionaire donor living in California to contribute to a school board candidate in Indianapolis is more puzzling. A donor in New York City might feel a direct stake in the election of a Congress member in Idaho because that member will be voting on legislation that affects the whole country, but the direct impacts of local school board decisions rarely travel beyond district borders. Local school board elections are not usually in the sights of major political party fundraising, and school board candidates are hardly household names, even in their own hometowns.

The connection becomes less puzzling when we consider the role of major donors in education policy more generally, including the role of living philanthropists, such as Bill and Melinda Gates, Eli and Edythe Broad, and more recently, Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan. These individuals have given millions (or in the case of the Gateses, billions) to fund education reform initiatives in local school districts. Philanthropic funding to influence educational policy, and public policy more generally, has been growing since the 1990s.¹³ While not every philanthropist is also a major political donor, some donors do appear to coordinate their philanthropic and political contributing. Eli Broad is a prominent example of this; as David Callahan writes in his book on mega-philanthropy, *The Givers*, “Broad’s political donations in California have worked in tandem with his philanthropy . . . Broad has pulled multiple levers of power to reshape education in LA—levers only available to the super-rich.”¹⁴ Furthermore, these donors often aspire to more than local change; they hope that local education reform efforts in places like Newark and New Orleans will become national models for other school districts to follow. Thus, major donors can be agents of nationalization through their ambition to support favored policies on a broader scale.

In this book, we examine both the mechanisms and consequences of nationalization. Our empirical evidence begins with individual donors—tracing the flow of money from outside donors, investigating the mobilization of money through organizations, and exploring the possible motivations of both individual and organizational donors. We zero in on the relatively small cluster of wealthy donors who give

large donations in elections outside the states in which they live. These donors are generally aligned with a particular set of strategies to improve education—including charter schools, alternative modes to teacher preparation, and test-based accountability—and they have managed to capture the label “reformer,” broadly implying that those who resist them and their agenda are simply protecting the *status quo*. They are new actors in a landscape that has often been portrayed as dominated by teacher unions, and as we will demonstrate, they and the organizations they work with often lock horns with teacher unions and others who see them as destabilizing, ineffective, or a basic threat to public education itself.

The high-profile elections where national forces collide often occur in districts with high rates of poverty and where the majority of students are nonwhite—indicating a wide demographic gulf between the wealthy outside donors and the students attending school in cities with big-money elections. But the local communities are not simply a backdrop: national reformers and teacher unions are competing for the attention and support of local donors, voters, and groups, making for a political brew that is more complicated and interesting than commonly understood.

Next, we examine the targets of outside money, including the candidates and their campaigns, and we situate these campaigns within the broader local political context. Candidates are not passive actors. Many are acutely aware of the changing landscape, offering insights to the myriad of ways they work with and/or respond to the arrival of outside funding. Finally, we consider the consequences of outside money for local education politics, including media coverage, voter turnout, and campaign strategy. We assess the possibility for positive consequences—that outside money could raise the quality of campaigns, improve the visibility of local elections and candidates, and increase voter turnout—as well as for negative consequences, such as growing negativity in campaigns or media coverage that focuses on donors and national issues at the expense of local-issue attention. Our findings are not uniformly positive or negative for outside money, but we do provide evidence that outside money has observable consequences for local education politics—consequences that can affect who runs for local office and the kinds of issues covered in a campaign. These

findings show how a selective process of nationalization, facilitated by outside donor involvement, can alter the strategic opportunities of individuals and organizations at the local level. If outside donations are stones tossed into the pond of local electoral politics, our research is an attempt to describe the size and shape of the stones, the identities of the throwers, the locations where the stones land, the direction of the ripples on the pond's water, and the places where water sloshes onto the shore. There are thousands of local school district "ponds" in the United States, and we chose five—in these five, the tossed stones have recently become particularly large and numerous.

OUR CASES

To examine this new nationalization of local school board elections, we dive deeply into recent school-related elections in five cities: Bridgeport, Connecticut; Denver, Colorado; Indianapolis, Indiana; Los Angeles, California; and New Orleans, Louisiana. We selected these cities because each has had high-profile elections in at least one recent election cycle. As such, they are not representative of the thousands of school boards that continue to hold elections under the radar of national politics. But neither are they unique. Based on newspaper reports we identified forty-three localities with at least one school board election featuring outside money between 2009 and early November 2017 (see appendix A for a complete list). By examining our five cases intensely and with a variety of methods, we provide a window into the local contextual factors that attract national interests to a local election and the processes that are activated *when* the local arena comes to be regarded as having national significance. By examining multiple election cycles, we can observe variation in levels of outside money for candidates within the same urban area.

Five Urban Districts

A persistent challenge in studying urban politics has been finding the right balance between single case studies and cross-city research. Those who know individual cities well know that those cities have unique characteristics that evolved out of local culture, demography, economic strengths and weakness, influential leaders, and shared history.

But those steeped in knowledge about any one city might be less likely to spot patterns and tendencies that emerge when one looks across a range of cities as they tackle similar tasks. For various reasons, the field of urban politics “seems to have embraced complexity and richness in context at the expense of parsimony, a research strategy that has been instrumental in fostering a deep understanding of many key aspects of urban governance but that also has to some extent obstructed a systematic comparative analysis of urban governance.”¹⁵ We make an effort in this book to lean the other way—to use our cases to search out patterns and commonalities—but local context remains important and often particular, and when idiosyncrasies of place intervene, we try to make that apparent as well. In this section we offer an initial orientation to the cases, via short capsule summaries, and follow that with a discussion of how the cases compare to other large school districts and to one another.

Bridgeport, CT. Bridgeport school board elections were historically low-profile events that drew low turnouts and were rarely, if ever, featured in the national news. But events in 2011 and 2012 thrust the city onto the national stage. The result was a spurt of high-profile and big-dollar clashes featuring reformers who drew support from wealthy outside donors on one side, and the state teacher union and the Working Families Party, a progressive organization that draws on union support, on the other.

Interest in Bridgeport education politics peaked after the July 2011 state takeover of the Bridgeport district, in which the mayor, governor, state board of education, and a majority of the local board voted to have the state appoint a new school board to replace the locally elected one. This appointed board then hired as superintendent a nationally known education reformer, Paul Vallas, who had previously served in high-profile roles in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Louisiana. The state takeover was overridden by the Connecticut Supreme Court in February 2012, leading to a September 2012 special election to select a new elected board. Reformers responded by successfully pushing for a November 2012 referendum to end school board elections and place the mayor in charge. Wealthy donors from elsewhere in Connecticut, as well as out-of-state donors such as Michael Bloomberg, were drawn

to the fracas by the perceived opportunity to cement an institutional change that would create a local regime more supportive of the reform initiatives they favored, such as teacher accountability and charter schools. Despite this support from the national reform community, the mayoral control referendum was defeated. In subsequent school board elections, outside money dropped precipitously. Thus, unlike our other cases where outside money can be found in multiple election cycles, Bridgeport's national attention was short lived. In addition to donations to school board elections during and immediately after the 2012 conflict, we also look at campaign contributions to groups for and against the referendum itself.

It should be noted that, unlike most school board elections, Bridgeport's are partisan. Even more unusual, school board candidates run on a party slate, and state law requires that at least one-third of the board's seats be held by the minority party. These aspects make Bridgeport's electoral structure somewhat unique and elevate the importance of political parties. The Bridgeport case provides a window into the resilient power of localism to generate a backlash against outside money.

Denver, CO. Although lacking the bitterness and polarization that has characterized urban school reform in a number of large cities, Denver has been on the national educational reform map for more than a decade. Its image as a hub of school reform began to come into focus after Michael Bennet—a rising star in the Democratic party who later would become a US Senator—became superintendent in July 2005. Even before Bennet, Denver had begun to attract attention for two reasons: for providing strong mayoral leadership without having adopted formal mayoral control of schools, and for instigating a teacher performance pay plan collaboratively designed between the district and the teacher union. As a further signal that Denver was a district known for urban school reform, the group Stand for Children, a national organization focused on school reform, opened a Colorado office in Denver in April 2009. Denver is also home to the Colorado chapter of the group Democrats for Education Reform.

With reformers holding a narrow edge on the elected school board, Denver became the focus of out-of-state campaign contributions in

2011 and 2013. An early sign of the growing contentiousness was a push, launched in January 2011, to recall Nathaniel Easley, who had been elected to the school board in 2009 with teacher union support but subsequently voted with reformers on a controversial strategy to aggressively intervene in failing schools. Reformers, supported by the governor and others, successfully resisted that recall effort. What followed in November 2011 was an election the *Nation* labeled “America’s wildest school board race.” Reporter John Nichols observed the involvement of national donors and organizations in Denver and posed the question: “[W]hat happens when all the pathologies of national politics—over-the-top spending by wealthy elites and corporate interests, partisan consultants jetting in to shape big-lie messaging, media outlets that cover spin rather than substance—are visited on a local school board contest?”¹⁶ National money was an issue in Denver again in 2013; Michael Bloomberg was the largest single individual donor in an election in which the reform candidates solidified their hold on the school board. The Denver case illuminates the increased coordination of national donors, national reform organizations, local elites, and local reform organizations. While such coordination was high, it is also notable that it was not a guaranteed recipe for victory; reform candidates in Denver were not universally successful at winning their respective races.

Indianapolis, IN. Like Bridgeport, Indianapolis has been less visible on the national stage, yet it, too, was recently the site of significant outside funding for school board elections. Indianapolis differs from our other case study cities in that Republicans have governed it during the time period we examine; Mayor Greg Ballard (2008–2016) was a Republican, and both chambers of the state legislature were Republican controlled.

Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) has long focused on providing educational alternatives for students, including magnet schools and charter schools. Some of these alternative schools performed well on Indiana state assessments, but many traditional public schools struggled. In 2011, a report from The Mind Trust, a local nonprofit based in Indianapolis focused on education issues, called for changes to district leadership and policies. The report seems to have prompted

widespread interest in the 2012 school board election, including interest from large national donors.

Three new members were elected to the IPS board in that election, all of whom received contributions from Michael Bloomberg, and all of whom generally supported the vision of national school reformers, such as increasing the number of charter schools and supporting school choice. With the support of the recently appointed superintendent, Lewis Ferebee, the board enacted changes to IPS, including radically restructuring both leadership and curriculum at low performing schools, which were labeled priority schools. In 2014, IPS again held school board elections that attracted national donors such as Reid Hoffman, Michelle Yee, and Sheryl Sandberg.¹⁷ The election marked the highest-spending campaign in IPS school board history. This level of spending has not been without local controversy; the role of Stand for Children was a central focus of a live radio interview with school board candidates. All three incumbents in 2014, each backed by the Indianapolis Education Association, lost their re-election bid. Three new members, all endorsed by Stand for Children, were elected to the board, continuing a pattern of electing reform-minded candidates.

Los Angeles, CA. California is often thought of as a national bellwether, a leading indicator of cultural, demographic, and political changes that subsequently appear elsewhere. Los Angeles, with more than one thousand schools and a budget of more than \$7.5 billion, is the second largest school district in the nation. Governing the massive and sprawling Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) can be a full-time job, and, as of 2017, school board members are paid an annual salary of \$125,000 for their service. This salary makes the LA Board of Education distinctive as compared to the vast majority of school boards around the country; Hess and Meeks, in their national survey of school board members, found that only about 7.5 percent made more than \$10,000 per year and a little over 62 percent were paid no salary at all.¹⁸

Compared to the other cities, Los Angeles has a longer history of big spending in local school board elections. In the late 1990s, Mayor Richard Riordan helped raise millions for school board candidates. More recently, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa followed in Riordan's

footsteps by stepping into school board electoral politics by mobilizing donor support for a PAC that backed his preferred candidates. In the 2007 election, Villaraigosa helped raise \$3 million for the PAC, and mayoral-backed candidates won a majority on the school board.

Since then, PACs supporting competing slates of reform- and union-backed candidates have been a common feature in Los Angeles school politics, with candidates highlighting their differences on charter school expansion and union contract negotiations. Union involvement in LA school board elections is not the province of the teacher unions alone; more than seventy-five unions made campaign donations in the elections we cover, and intriguingly, other unions do not consistently support the same candidates as do unions representing teachers; sometimes they even compete head to head.

By 2017, Los Angeles gained notoriety for holding the most expensive school board election ever recorded in the United States, involving a bitter campaign between a union-backed incumbent, Steve Zimmer, and his reformer-backed challenger, Nick Melvoin. In previous elections, individual candidates with national reform backing had not always won, but the sustained efforts by reformers in Los Angeles contributed to the election of a reform-oriented majority in the 2017 election.

New Orleans, LA. The New Orleans education system has attracted national attention ever since the radical restructuring that occurred after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005. The complete disruption of the existing school system, coupled with decades of poor performance, created an opportunity for education reformers to build a new governance structure from the ground up. Starting in November 2005, the majority of New Orleans schools were placed in state control under the auspices of the Recovery School District (RSD), with only a handful of schools remaining under the control of the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board. The RSD began a process that led to the conversion of schools into charter schools operated by charter management organizations. Today, the vast majority of New Orleans public schools are charters, with only a few schools left that are still direct-run, making it distinct from other school districts.

In 2012, while most of the schools remained under state control, the local Orleans Parish School Board election was surprisingly high

profile. The District 3 election garnered the most attention from major donors, while races for the other six seats remained relatively invisible. Sarah Newell Usdin, a District 3 candidate who was founder and former head of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit founded shortly after Katrina to accelerate reform, received campaign contributions in excess of \$110,000, nearly four times that of the incumbent. The 2012 race in District 3 showed that national influence can be injected into the race for one school board seat while other races in the same election unfold in a more traditional manner with far less spending and visibility. This is just one example of many we will present that underscore the strategic nature of national engagement.

By 2016, the Louisiana state legislature adopted legislation returning local control of the New Orleans schools that had been governed by the Recovery School District. The legislation specified that the Orleans Parish School Board would resume control of these schools by July 1, 2018, though their status as charter schools meant that the Orleans Parish school district will have much less control over schools than did the district that preceded Hurricane Katrina.

How Unusual Are Our Cases?

Any study that focuses on a small number of cases, as ours does, raises questions of generalizability. Table 1.1 presents descriptive information on an array of indicators of student characteristics, population characteristics, charter school penetration, school spending, and the racial and ethnic composition of the school board.¹⁹ On some variables, our five cases uniformly differ from other large cities. All of our cases have lower white enrollment, larger proportions of students eligible for free lunch, higher poverty among young people, lower professional occupations among the general population, greater income inequality, more students in charters, and fewer white school board members. On other variables, our cases individually differ from other large cities, but with some being above and others being below the average. The Los Angeles Unified School District is, of course, dramatically larger than any of our other cases or of large districts generally; in the United States only New York City has a larger school enrollment. New Orleans, Indianapolis, and Bridgeport have higher-than-average proportions of black students. LA Unified and Denver have a

TABLE 1.1
Our cases as compared to other large school districts

	BRIDGEPORT	DENVER	INDIANAPOLIS	LOS ANGELES	NEW ORLEANS	OUR FIVE CASES	OTHER LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS*
Student population							
Total enrollment grades 3-8 (including charters): 2011-12	10,132	35,212	19,143	284,128	15,923	72,908	23,666
Percent white	7.9	21.4	24.5	9	6.3	13.8	38.8
Percent black	40.4	13.9	57.1	9.7	88.4	41.9	20.7
Percent Hispanic (white or black)	48.8	60.5	17.8	74.9	3.3	41.1	30.8
Percent Asian	2.7	3.5	0.3	6	17.8	2.9	6.2
Percent free lunch	95.2	66.9	67.4	61.3	80.9	74.4	46.4
Percent ELL	11.7	31.4	11.4	23.1	2.1	15.9	13.6
Percent special education	13.4	11.4	18.9	12.4	9.6	13.6	11.7
General population							
Percent 5-17 year olds poor	27.6	25.2	39.1	26.1	36.4	30.9	17.2
Percent BA or higher	17.1	42.3	22	29.1	33.3	28.7	31.1
Percent profession occupation	5.5	15.1	5.8	11.2	12.1	10	18.9
Income ratio 90/10	13	11.8	13.3	10.5	15.6	12.9	9.4

(continued)

TABLE 1.1 (continued)

Our cases as compared to other large school districts

	BRIDGEPORT	DENVER	INDIANAPOLIS	LOS ANGELES	NEW ORLEANS	OUR FIVE CASES	OTHER LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS*
Education reform							
Percent 3–8th graders in charters	9	14.9	21.6	14	94.4	14.9**	5.5
Percent white in charters	1.6	10.5	21.2	25.4	98.8	14.7**	6.1
Finance							
Per pupil expenditure	\$17,344.00	\$14,064.00	\$15,524.00	\$13,979.00	\$10,594.00	\$14,301.00	\$11,018.00
Schoolboard racial and ethnic representativeness**							
School Board % Wht 2012 N=313 5/308	55.6	42.9	42.9	57.1	57.1	51.1	73.3
School Board % Black 2012 N=313 5/308	44.4	28.6	57.1	14.3	42.9	37.5	17.3
School Board % Hisp 2012 N=313 5/308	0	28.6	0	28.6	0	11.4	9.2

Italics—significantly lower than other large cities

Bold—significantly higher than other large cities

^ Colorado data on special education was missing in SEDA data; supplemented by other source

* Grade 3–8 enrollment > 10,000

** Dropping New Orleans where nearly all students are in charters

***National School District Survey (K. Meier)

Source: Stanford Education Data Archive (<http://purl.stanford.edu/db586ns4974>)

below-average black student population but above-average percentages of Latinx students.

It is important to keep in mind that we are not suggesting that the five districts we are looking at are representative of the broad universe of districts with elected school boards. We do not claim that all, most, or even a high proportion of local board elections across the country are subject to outside money; indeed, we are confident in any given election cycle that most school board elections continue to fit the model of low-profile, low-turnout elections focused largely on individual candidates and parochial concerns. In the case of school board elections, nationalization occurs through a process of selective and strategic targeting by outside donors, with only some elections likely to be targeted at any point in time. To the extent that we will be drawing generalizations, we aim to draw lessons about this process of targeting and its consequences rather than about school boards in general. This approach should not suggest that we are disinterested in how our cases stack up against others. If our five cases were dramatically distinct from the average local school board election, this difference would raise questions about whether nationalization is so severely limited in its likely scope that it has any relevance at all to districts where localism still prevails. However, that is not the case; as we will show, these five cases are similar to many other districts and there are reasons to expect that nationalization will become a factor in additional places that so far have been sheltered from its reach. We are also interested in how our cases stack up against the typical school board election for more substantive reasons. Identifying clear markers that distinguish districts with outside involvement from those that remain parochial can help us get a handle on the motivations and calculations behind the targeting phenomenon.

We see the phenomenon of outside interest in school board elections as one important manifestation of a more general nationalization of American education politics. While a number of important books have highlighted a growing centralization of power, in which states and the federal government have become more assertive in holding local districts accountable and even telling them what to do, our book highlights something else entirely. While centralization implies that local arenas for democratic decision-making are being muscled

aside, we show that national actors are realizing that these arenas are still quite important. Rather than being ignored, marginalized, and bypassed, local school politics is being penetrated by national politics in ways that rattle and reassemble traditional lines of coalition and cleavage, with important implications—some good, some bad—for both democracy and educational improvement.

DATA AND METHODS

Our investigation of nationalization—and its implications—required the collection and analysis of several types of data across our five cases. To identify and analyze school board election donors, as well as the recipients of donations, we assembled a unique dataset of campaign contributions covering multiple election cycles for each city (spanning the years 2008 to 2014). Our dataset comprises more than eighteen thousand campaign contributions from individual donors and organizations, including unions and major reform groups. Unlike campaign donations in national and state elections, donations for school board elections have no central repository, and the laws, regulations, and practices regarding reporting those donations vary considerably from place to place.²⁰ Table 1.2 summarizes the characteristics of all school board elections between 2008 and 2014 in each of our five sites. We include Bridgeport's September 2012 special election to replace the short-lived state-appointed board, as well as the November 2012 referendum that rejected a proposed shift to mayoral control. In Denver, we include a 2011 recall effort that failed.

For each site, we gathered data from the relevant state or local entity that collects campaign disclosures from candidates and organizations.²¹ Campaign finance regulations and requirements for contribution disclosures vary from site to site. These varied regulations likely guide contributions toward divergent recipients. For example, Los Angeles has a \$1,000 limit on contributions to candidates, while independent expenditure committees can raise unlimited funds. In Denver, PACs face contribution limits, but candidates do not.

We ended up with a database comprising 18,809 separate donations across the multiple cities and elections. We gathered two types of donations for each site. We collected primary donations—donations

that do not go through an intermediary to travel to a recipient, including donations made directly to a committee for a candidate, ballot question, referendum, or recall. In addition, we collected secondary donations—donations that pass through an intermediary such as a PAC. Secondary donations include donations to political organizations that, in turn, make primary donations to candidate committees, ballot questions, recalls, or referendums. We included secondary donations only to political organizations that are local and education-focused, including various PACs and teacher unions. This approach allowed us to focus on secondary donations to organizations that are primarily involved in these local school board races, rather than groups that could be mobilizing for other elections as well. However, some of the donors to local education groups are state- and national-level organizations, including state and national unions.

Compiling this dataset took a fair amount of detective work. Both within and across the cities, we had to engage in multiple strategies to make sure we could link donations made by the same individual or organization at different times, even when variants existed in name entry. If an individual at a given address used a nickname or initial for first name in some cases but not in other cases, all entries for that individual were changed to the full first name. If an individual at a given address had more than one spelling for a name, we conducted a search using the individual's place of work or whitepages.com to determine the correct spelling of the name. Any obvious address discrepancies were changed, such as a misaligned city or state or a spelling error in a city or state abbreviation. All street addresses were written out so that *St* is *Street*, *Rd* is *Road*, and so on.

Discrepancies in names of political organizations (i.e., abbreviations in some cases but not others) were corrected by looking up the organization's statement of organization on the appropriate city website. Finally, in many instances, contributions had identical donor names (e.g., Joe Smith) but different donor addresses (e.g., Beverly Hills, California, and New Orleans, Louisiana). To determine whether Joe Smith from Beverly Hills was the same individual as Joe Smith from New Orleans, we first looked at occupations and employers. If this information was unavailable, we did an extensive Google search, which often involved looking at LinkedIn profiles or company

TABLE 1.2
Election sites and characteristics

	BRIDGEPORT	DENVER
School board name	Bridgeport Board of Education	Denver Board of Education
Frequency of elections	Every 2 years	Every 2 years
Timing of general elections (vs. national)	On-cycle	On-cycle
Available data	2009 General	2009 General
	2012 Special	2011 General
	2012 Referendum	2013 General
	2013 General	
Number of board members	9	7
Member terms	4 years	4 years
Partisan	Yes	No
District/at-large	At large	5 by district; 2 at large

(continued)

biographies. In the few cases where a Google search was not helpful, we used the following decision rules: (1) if contributions had identical donor names and donor addresses in the same metropolitan area or state, we assumed the contributions were made by one donor; and (2) if contributions had identical donor names but donor addresses in different states, we assumed the contributions were made by two different donors.

Just over three-quarters of the donations in our dataset were from individual donors; the rest were from organizations of various types. Although many more donations are made by individuals, the donations from organizations are much larger (averaging \$4,055 compared to \$675 for individuals), and in total account for almost twice as much in total funds as are provided by individuals. In chapter 3 we look closely at the individual donors, and in chapter 4 we look at organizations, with special attention to unions and reformers.

In addition to our data and analysis on the extent and patterns of campaign contributions, we gathered other information on large outside donors, compiled biographical information on more than one hundred candidates, interviewed twenty-six candidates, interviewed

TABLE 1.2 (*continued*)
Election sites and characteristics

INDIANAPOLIS	LOS ANGELES	NEW ORLEANS
Indianapolis Public School Board of Education	LAUSD Board of Education	Orleans Parish School Board
Every 2 years	Every 2 years	Every 4 years
On-cycle	Off-cycle	On-cycle
2010 General	2009 General	2008 General
2012 General	2011 General	2012 General
2014 General	2013 General	
7	7	7
4 years	4 years	4 years
No	No	Yes
5 by district; 2 at large	District	District

six local and national expert informants with special knowledge or ties to school board elections in our five cities, and performed a content analysis on 225 media reports. Candidate information was located through extensive internet searches and searches of public records databases. The sample we interviewed was representative of all five cities and reflected all three types of candidates—union-affiliated, reform-affiliated, and unaffiliated. Our expert informants, many of whom had been interviewed previously for other research projects, were chosen less systematically. They held specialized knowledge we deemed important to understanding the phenomenon of outside money in local school board elections, with diverse ties representing both union and reform groups. Some informants had specific local knowledge about one of our case cities, providing us with important contextual background information that helped us round out our understanding of relevant city-specific features that shaped how particular school board elections unfolded.

News articles about every school board election in our five cities from 2008 to 2014 were located using a defined set of search terms

in Google, Google News, and LexisNexis. We included all forms of print media, including major newspapers, secondary newspapers, and personal and professional blogs (e.g., *Chalkbeat*). We coded and analyzed these data sources to examine whether and how outside money made a difference in campaign strategy, candidate visibility, voter turnout, and campaign issue coverage. We provide more information on these various sources of data and the way we analyze them, both in the book itself and in a more detailed methodological appendix that is available upon request.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of how local school governance has been viewed and treated over the years. We suggest three phases in the nation's relationship to localism in education decision-making; in our view, the phenomenon of outside money in school board elections represents the front edge of a new fourth phase. The first phase, in which localism was the dominant value and local decision-making was the dominant mode, was the longest, lasting from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century. The second phase was marked by growing discontent with localism. Distinct constituencies representing different intellectual orientations and political interests took aim at different failures of school boards, some emphasizing amateurism, some bureaucratic rigidity, some indifference to the needs of growing proportions of students from racial and ethnic minorities. These waves of discontent helped set the stage for the third phase, which was marked by growing centralization within the federal system. As states and then the national government became more assertive, it appeared to some that local arenas were becoming less robust, a trend that some celebrated and others decried. But reports of the death of localism have proven to be premature. The injection of outside money into local school board elections reflects that local arenas continue to be important as sites for agenda setting and political engagement over national issues. As we explain in this chapter, we appear to be entering a fourth phase—the nationalization of education politics—in which outside actors selectively engage in local political skirmishes in pursuit of advantage in a battle being waged nationally. They do so not by

an all-out assault to impose their interests on resistant locals, but by connecting with like-minded coalitional partners within the local districts to tip the balance in their favor.

Chapter 3 looks at the more than fourteen thousand donations made by individuals in our five case cities, with special attention to outside board donors, those who do not live in the district in which the school election is taking place. Some outside donors live within the metropolitan area, some live within the state, and others live in different states entirely. Although those who live outside the state make up less than 8.5 percent of the donations, they account for more than 22 percent of all dollars given by individuals. This chapter identifies the largest outside donors, describes what kinds of candidates they support, and begins to probe the relationships that connect donors to each other. Our analysis highlights the outsized role played by large national donors who contribute to multiple out-of-state school board elections. These thirty individuals, who are also highly involved contributors to federal elections and board members of many prominent education organizations, we call “strategic national donors.” As a group, these donors tend to support the same candidates and organizations, making these few out-of-state individuals unusually influential in the financing of local school board elections.

While most donations come from individuals, organizational donors also are important; our data includes more than 4,500 donations by organizations, and these are the focus of chapter 4. Organizations serve as conduits for giving but also as guides to help individual donors decide whom to support, and as vehicles for recruiting candidates, mobilizing voters, and framing issues and themes. Much of the standard literature on this topic falls into one of two competing camps. One camp portrays a landscape dominated by powerful teacher unions that use their muscle to block reform ideas. The other argues that local districts are increasingly penetrated and controlled by national reform organizations promoting an agenda of market-oriented reforms including charter schools, contracts with private providers, and test-based accountability. Our analysis paints a different picture, one in which both teacher unions and reformers seek to gain tactical advantage, with neither reliably outmuscling the other,

and in which other types of organizations, such as business organizations or nonteacher unions, sometimes emerge as important local allies in the national battles.

In chapter 5 we turn our attention to the candidates: those on the receiving end of outside money, and those who, either by choice or by necessity, rely on local funding only. We present data on the candidates' characteristics and backgrounds, their fundraising strategies and experiences, and their positions on contentious policies. Critics of outside money—whether they focus their attack on national reformers or on union leaders—tend to portray external funding as a corrupting force that selectively recruits sharply disparate candidates pledged to sharply disparate issue positions. While we do find outside-funded candidates who fit that description—either recently arrived reformers recruited from charter school networks and committed to choice, test-based accountability, and tenure reform; or former or current teachers, backed by unions, and committed to resisting the positions supported by reformers—we again find that the realities on the ground are less sharply etched than the typical script suggests. Reform-backed candidates are more likely to be drawn from the charter school sector, but they and union-backed candidates often look like one another in other ways, both demographically and in prior educational experience. Candidates with outside funding, especially those backed by reformers, are able to run more professional campaigns, but all emphasize that their funding primarily comes from local sources and are adamant that donors played no role in the development of their platforms. And while reform- and union-backed candidates differ in their policy positions—as would be expected—those differences are more nuanced than the positions typically expressed in the highly polarized national debates.

Chapter 6 asks the question, “What difference does it make?” Does outside money change the nature of local school elections, and if so, does it do so for better or for worse? Drawing on analyses of local candidate interviews, media coverage, campaign documents, and voting data, we look at four ways that local school board elections can be altered when outside forces intrude upon the local arena: (1) campaign sophistication and local representatives; (2) public attention and voter turnout; (3) displacement of local agenda items and local voices; and

(4) polarization and negative campaigning. As we demonstrate, attention does not always turn to the most well-funded candidates, and outside funding does not always lead overall campaign coverage to become overly negative. In some cases, though, outside influence has shifted the nature of school board elections in important ways. Candidates of all types tend to focus on the same set of nationalized issues, sometimes at the expense of what may be significant local issues. Further, attention in the election often becomes fixated on the money itself rather than on more substantive policy issues. We suggest that the influence of outside donations does not follow a guaranteed path, but rather interacts with local context in ways that can either fuel or dampen the effect of national forces.

Finally, in chapter 7, we take stock of our findings, what they suggest about the evolving nature of education politics, and how our results connect to other trends in national politics. We consider, but ultimately reject, the possibility that the nationalization of local school politics is a product of the moment rather than a fundamental reorientation. While there may be ebbs and flows, with punches and counterpunches still to come, we think the arc is more likely to be toward nationalization's continuation rather than its evanescence. That's because nationalization, as we see it, is not just a discrete reform idea, but a phenomenon with roots in changes in the institutions of politics and governance, as well as in culture, economics, residential and corporate mobility, and technology. The book concludes by discussing what this might mean for education policy and politics in the years to come.