

# The Politics of State-Level Education Reform in the United States

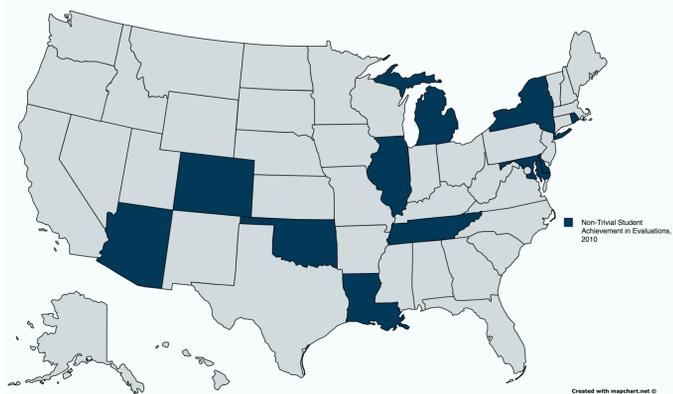
Leslie Finger

Department of Government, Harvard University

lfinger@fas.harvard.edu

## The Puzzle

States have passed education reforms strongly opposed by teachers' unions, questioning the scholarship predicting that policy change should not occur when there are strong vested interests in opposition. This is apparent for the case of teacher evaluations; states have dramatically revamped their teacher evaluation systems, driven by incentives in Race to the Top (RTTT) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers. As part of these programs, states were encouraged to create teacher evaluation systems including student achievement. States had wide leeway in policy design and some created systems that incorporated test score growth as a large portion and some made little change. For those making a large change, many had strong state teachers' unions opposed to it. How did policymakers manage to pass these policies in such states? In other words, **how does policy change occur in the presence of strong vested interests?**



## The Argument

Policy assistance provided by state and national organizations challenges strong vested interests. Policymakers interested in education reform need information, manpower, and commitment in order to be able to pursue policies that will be strongly opposed by teachers' unions. Nationally-supported state advocacy groups offer policymaker allies the research, expertise, policy language, and funding to compete organizationally with well-resourced, focused teachers' unions and get colleagues on board to pass policy change. Where policymakers ideologically open to education reform are in positions of power, whether this means Republicans have a majority in the legislature or a reform-minded actor serves as state superintendent, these resources, which I call "policy inputs," can help them upend the policy status quo.

## Strategy

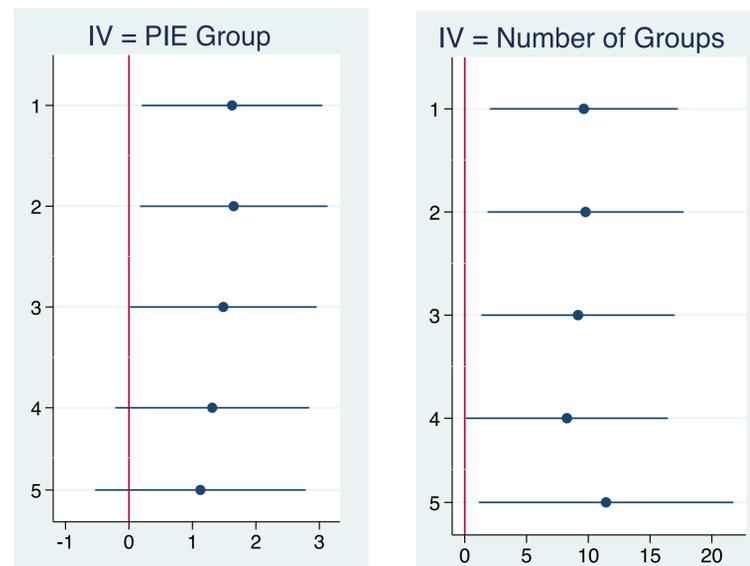
1. 50-state analysis of teacher evaluation policy passage in 2010
2. Four case studies

## Strategy 1

DV: Passage of teacher evaluations with non-trivial amounts of student achievement

Model: Logistic Regression

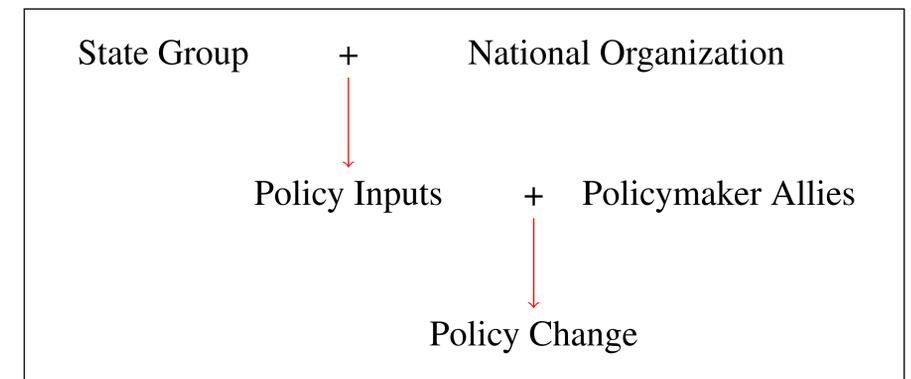
IV: Nationally-supported group & Number of groups



## Finding

Presence of a nationally-supported group increases the probability of teacher evaluations with student achievement 18 percentage points ( $p = .06$ ) and going from no groups to the mean number of groups increases the probability 5 percentage points ( $p < .05$ ).

## The Policy Input Theory



## Strategy 2

To further test this finding and determine the mechanism, I carried out process tracing using data collected during a year of fieldwork in West Virginia, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. I interviewed 192 state and national actors.

## Case Selection

I used my regression results to choose two pairs of states with similar probabilities of establishing outcome-oriented evaluation reform according to my regressions' predicted values and similar values on potential confounders.

Likelihood of Policy Change	Medium Low	Nationally-Linked Reform Group	
		Yes	No
		Minnesota	Wisconsin
		Kentucky	West Virginia

## Findings: Support for the policy input theory

Observable Implication	Kentucky	West Virginia	Minnesota	Wisconsin
Nationally-supported group(s) in state	✓	✗	✓	✗
Group(s) provide policy inputs to policymakers in power	✓	✗	✓	✗
Policymakers use policy inputs from groups to overcome vested interests	✓	✗	✓	✗
<b>Outcome:</b> Teacher Evaluations with Student Achievement	✓	✗	✓	✗