

# Rethinking the Iron Triangle: The Role of Organized Interests in the Making of Teacher Evaluation Policy

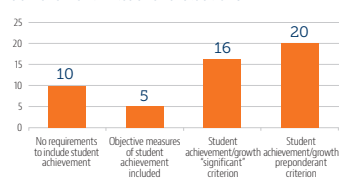
Leslie Finger

Department of Government, Harvard University, lfinger@fas.harvard.edu

## The Puzzle

States have dramatically revamped their teacher evaluation systems over the last six years, driven by incentives in Race to the Top (RTTT) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers. As part of RTTT and the NCLB, the Obama Administration required states to create teacher evaluation systems including student achievement as a “significant” factor. There has been substantial variation in the weight that states have given student achievement.

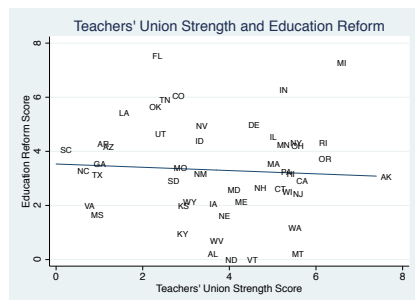
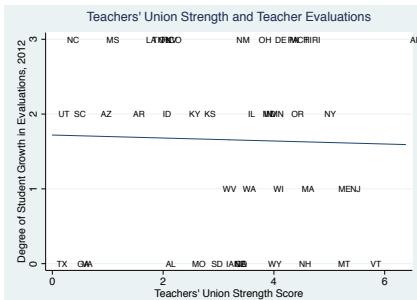
State requirements for including student achievement in teacher evaluations



Source: Doherty and Jacobs 2013

## The Conventional Explanation

The conventional wisdom attributes this variation to the opposition of strong teachers' unions, who oppose accountability-oriented reform policies and are deeply embedded in the policymaking apparatus (Peterson et al. 2014, Moe 2011). Yet the research on teachers' unions' impact on state education reform policymaking is far from certain. Moreover, in my own efforts to find a relationship between teachers' union strength and the degree of student outcomes in evaluations, I have failed to find a relationship. This is the case for other education reforms as well.



## Another explanation: Education Reform Groups

It may be that teachers' unions are up against strong opponents whose presence as advocates and penetration of the bureaucracy and the legislature rival their own. Using mixed-methods, I find that education reform groups are key to the passage of outcome-oriented evaluations by opening up the “iron triangle” of teachers' union influence.

Ordered Logit	DV = Evaluation strength					
	(1) 2010	(2) 2011	(3) 2012	(1) 2010	(2) 2011	(3) 2012
Number of PIE Groups	15.33* (6.226)	8.924* (4.271)	10.67** (3.918)	10.60* (5.186)	8.611* (4.282)	10.28* (4.035)
Performance Pay	2.890** (1.090)	1.731** (0.663)	0.919 (0.674)	2.093* (0.843)	1.617* (0.666)	0.690 (0.684)
Teachers' Union Campaign Spending	-0.121 (0.539)	0.447 (1.394)	-0.167 (0.345)	-0.0804 (0.518)	0.560 (0.415)	0.149 (0.343)
ALEC Choice Score	-0.279 (1.893)	2.129 (1.312)	2.780* (1.233)	0.705 (1.678)	2.540+ (1.406)	3.831** (1.413)
NAEP '09	-0.179* (0.0798)	-0.0563 (0.0428)	-0.130** (0.0433)			
Graduation Rate				-0.0320 (0.0527)	-0.0625 (0.0471)	-0.167** (0.0516)
Percent Urban	0.0426 (0.0381)	0.0369 (0.0273)	0.0232 (0.0227)	0.0284 (0.0362)	0.0261 (0.0275)	-0.00789 (0.0230)

## The Mechanism

My fieldwork indicates that education advocacy groups lead to policy change via two paths, one sparked by the presence of business reform groups and the other by citizen reform groups. The existence of business or citizen reform groups determines whether reformer power runs through the bureaucracy or the legislature. In both cases, reform groups encourage to the involvement of national organizations, who support their bureaucratic (citizen groups) or legislative (business groups) efforts. The resulting law might be equally strong, but will vary in the degree to which the policy is spelled out in statute or delegates responsibility to the bureaucracy, respectively.

## Bottom line

Reform groups matter as much or more than teachers' unions to the passage of education reform and may pursue different policymaking strategies based on the type of group. This has implications for our understandings of who is influential in education policymaking and how interest groups manage to achieve their agenda even in the context of existing entrenched interests.

## Works Cited

Doherty, K. M. and Jacobs, S. (2013). Connect the Dots: Using evaluations of teacher effectiveness to inform policy and practice. Technical report, National Council on Teacher Quality.  
 Moe, T. (2011). *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and American Public Schools*. Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.  
 Peterson, P. E., Henderson, M., and West, M. R. (2014). *Teachers versus the Public: What Americans Think about Schools and How to Fix Them*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C.

## Case Studies

To further test this finding and determine the mechanism, I undertook comparative case study fieldwork in West Virginia, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. 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.

		Kentucky	West Virginia	Minnesota	Wisconsin
<i>Potential Confounders</i>	Achievement	low	low	high	high
	Graduation Rates	low	low	high	high
	Urbanization	low	low	medium	medium
	Legislative Control Year of Eval Law	Split	D	R	R
	Teachers' Unions Ranking* (out of 50)	30	23	16	15
<i>Predicted Probability of Evals with Significant Student Growth**</i> 50-State Median Predicted Probability = .0003		.105	.133	.0004e-5	.0005e-3
<i>Explanatory Variable</i>	Reform Group?	yes	no	yes	no
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	Significant growth in evaluations	yes	no	yes	no