

Do Teachers Want Democracy?

Deliberative Culture and Teachers' Evaluations of Schools

Abstract: Teachers have become important actors in national, state, and especially local politics. Most research on the political behavior of teachers focuses on their relationship with public sector unions. While extremely useful, little is known about how teachers form the evaluations of schools and districts that motivate their political behavior. I propose and test a new theory of how teachers evaluate school performance that centers on deliberative democracy. I argue that, in addition to student performance, teachers factor in how “deliberative” school districts are when evaluating school performance. Using two separate survey analyses, this article finds that teachers of districts with a stronger deliberative culture are significantly more likely to give positive evaluations of school performance. Moreover, in deliberative culture districts, teachers and students are more likely to be included in decision-making at the school level. This latter relationship holds true even for teachers in districts with the high levels of student poverty.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, teachers, teacher satisfaction, decision-making power

Introduction

Teachers have been dissatisfied. Since 2018, public school instructors in the United States have been participating in organized strikes (Van Dam 2019). The demonstrations range from statewide efforts in politically conservative states (West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and a conservative-leaning Colorado) to local-level walkouts in progressive cities (Los Angeles, CA, Oakland, CA, Denver, CO). The most consistent demands have been larger pay and improved conditions, but deeper analyses find teachers asking for something else as well: *agency*. When journalist Alia Wong (2019) interviews teachers who walked-out in Los Angeles, she notes that, “several striking teachers told me that better pay is a relatively low priority for them,” and one teacher she interviews, “says he’s fighting to ensure that the aloof, uninspiring public schooling he received doesn’t repeat itself.” In sum, teachers are showing that they want more than pay and resources; they seem to also want the power to play an active role in changing school conditions for the better.

The activism teachers have shown invites a question often-overlooked in political science: what do teachers – as political actors – actually want? Most of the work on the political behavior of teachers focuses on their relationship with public sector unions (Moe 2009; Hartney and Flavin 2011; Anzia and Moe 2014). These studies primarily highlight teachers as agents of a special interest that can be mobilized. While extremely useful, we know very little about how teachers form the evaluations of conditions in their schools and districts, which motivates their political behavior. The small amount of research that does exist links teachers’ evaluations to school district performance (Favero & Meier 2013). This paper proposes and tests a new theory of how teachers evaluate their work conditions – a new theory that centers on the importance of public deliberation. I argue that teachers in districts with a commitment to routine deliberation

with the public – or what I call “deliberative culture” - are more likely to feel satisfied with the conditions of their schools. This occurs because a strong deliberative culture provides an infrastructure through which teachers can exercise political agency as problems arise.

I perform two separate analyses to test the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers’ evaluations of schools. First, utilize a national survey of teachers to test the extent to which individual teachers’ perceptions of their districts’ deliberative culture correlates with their evaluations of the schools. However, deliberative culture should be a district-level phenomenon, where local institutions extend their legal legitimacy to the public by incorporating them into the decision-making process. Therefore, deliberative culture should create an inclusiveness that trickles down to the street level. So, I conduct a secondary analysis in which I employ superintendent perceptions of their districts’ deliberative culture as an aggregate measure that I then match to teachers’ evaluations of how inclusive the district is of teachers and students, respectively, when it comes to decision-making at the school level. For this second component, I focus on the districts of the most populated county in the United States: Los Angeles County.

Teachers’ Political Evaluations

There is tremendous debate in the local and urban politics literature on the types of indicators or heuristics that residents of cities use to make political evaluations, but the vast majority of that literature focuses on members of the general public. In fact, much of the recent work demonstrates the importance of retroactive assessments of government performance to how urban residents evaluate local candidates (Berry and Howell 2007; Arnold and Carnes 2012; Hopkins and Pettingill 2017; Flavin and Hartney 2017; Oliver et al. 2012) and the quality of local public services (Chingos et al. 2012; Holbein 2016). This work is good at explaining positive evaluations in places where local governments perform well (and negative evaluations in

places where local governments perform poorly). These studies show that, when things do (or do not) go well, people remain attentive and take notice. That work relies on residents accessing information of government performance to mediate performance-based evaluations (Schueler and West 2015; Clinton and Grissom 2015). However, when city residents face high costs to information access or a lack mobility to act on indicators of low performance, a sense of inclusion derived from routine public deliberations can lead to positive evaluations of schools (Collins 2018a).

This evaluations debate in local and urban politics has yet to incorporate teachers. Most of what the literature reveals on the politics of teachers focuses on their relationship with public sector unions. For example, there is evidence that links teachers' ability to collectively bargain with state legislatures to the low student performance (Moe 2009; Hoxby 1996). Related research links teachers' involvement with unions to state government decision-making around school choice and performance pay for teachers (Hartney and Flavin 2011), the protocol for teacher transfer (Anzia and Moe 2014), and teachers' salaries as well as class size (Rose and Sonstelie 2010). Evidence also suggests that teachers' political activity with unions can influence school board election outcomes (Moe 2005). It has been well documented that teacher's involvement with unions play a major role, but considerably less attention has been paid towards understanding how teachers evaluate schools.

The primary existing study on teachers' political evaluations builds upon the work on public evaluations. Favero and Meier (2013) conduct an analysis of teachers in New York City and find that indicators of student performance were strong predictors of teachers' evaluations of their schools. This finding, like the work on public evaluations, highlights the capacity for indicators of student performance to help facilitate democratic accountability. However, the

New York study still leaves open the question of why teachers make positive evaluations, particular in districts where performance is low and resources are likely to be sparse or insufficient. The study also leaves open the possibility that teachers' positive evaluations of schools in these districts may be the result of local governance practices. The next section describes a framework through which such occurs.

Deliberative Culture

This article offers a new conceptualization of local democratic accountability rooted in the deliberative democracy theoretical framework, which emerges from political philosophy. At its base, deliberative democracy is the notion that discourse between citizens and their representatives should either lead to the most well-reasoned political decisions or at least establish the legitimacy of the institution (Habermas 1985; Gutmann and Thompson 2009; Dryzek 2000; Cohen 1989). Deliberative democracy has tremendous internal debate that this project intends not to enter. Instead, I am interested in deliberation as a form of participatory democracy that places dialogue with (and/or between) the public at the center of institutional behavior.

The deliberative democracy debate surfaces a set of principles that establish the boundaries for what makes discourse democratic. Normative scholars discuss the importance of public discourse in which institutions give equally sovereign individuals the opportunity to exchange viewpoints, ideas, or experiences (Habermas 1985; Gastil 2000). Institutions must also encourage diversity within the backgrounds of the individuals sharing viewpoints (Mansbridge 1983; Fishkin 1991), while individuals involved in the discourse agree to pursue a common interest over individual self-interests (Benhabib 1996). These discussions work best when centered around some sort of legally binding collective decision (Habermas 1985; Cohen 1989),

and the decisions themselves should be the end result of attempts to publicly justify positions or ideas (Gutmann & Thompson 2009; Dryzek 2000). The upshot of the deliberative process is a means through which groups of people use discourse to identify and solve public problems.

There is a growing empirical literature in which scholars have tested components of deliberative democracy. Numerous studies have examined how deliberative democracy functions beyond the United States in countries such as: Brazil (Baocchi 2001) and Canada (Warren & Pearse 2008). Empirical research in the United States has primarily focused on national-scale deliberations (Dahlgren 2005; Neblo et al. 2010), laboratory and field experiments (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Esterling et al. 2011), or studies of small groups (Fishkin & Luskin 2005; Gastil 2000; Ryfe 2002). There have also been studies that focus on U.S. cities (Fung 2009; Mendleberg & Oleske 2000; Karpowitz & Raphael 2014; Asen 2015; Collins 2018b), and this project adds to those contributions by introducing a specific focus on teachers in school districts.

While most of the empirical research on deliberative democracy fixates on the effect of the actual discourse on political behavior, I expand upon this notion to theorize on and measure the implications of institutions that impose a deliberative culture. By focusing on deliberative culture, I am less concerned with the extent to which individuals are exposed to actual discourse. On average, most Americans do not physically participate in public meetings held by municipal¹ governments, although teachers – because of what is at stake economically and professionally as well as their higher than average education levels – should attend meetings and participate in (or at least be attentive to) public discourse on schools more than members of the general public. Thus, the actions of local government officials have the capacity to shape the perceptions of stakeholders regardless of the extent to which they attend public meetings. Public – and sometimes symbolic – efforts at deliberation performed by governing elites send the message

that they take public concerns seriously (even if they don't). Therefore, deliberative culture is a heuristic that public officials can send to their community members that their institution takes input from the public.

The pathway from deliberative culture to positive evaluations of public goods and services travels through the extent to which the local institution is able to extend its legitimacy to the public. Figure 1 illustrates the model. Local institutions employ the principles of deliberation: viewpoint exchange, pursuit of collective interest, collective decision-making (with the public), decision justification, and input diversity. Routine deliberations centered on these principles solidify into a deliberative culture, which makes for a more inclusive policy-making environment. This culture of deliberating with the public and incorporating them into the decision-making process extends the legitimacy of the institution to the public, which gives the public more agency in the district's decision-making.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Deliberative Culture



A concern is that, while public deliberation is commonly associated with engaging a wider citizenry, teachers themselves tend to act as agents of a specialized interest. This raises legitimate concerns. The rate at which teachers join unions has been steadily declining over the past decade,

but still around 70% of teachers are members of public sector teacher unions.² Furthermore, teachers – largely through union leaders – routinely engage in direct discussions with local leaders around salaries, wages, and benefits, and those discussions usually exclude the general public. Thus, for teachers, deliberations can be distinct from *public* deliberations. Teachers, however, wear dual hats. While they do perform the role of the professional with material interests, teachers are also acting as parents, education advocates, and community stakeholders.³ In this sense, teachers have the incentive to be actively involved with public deliberations, when the discussions involve district policy issues that members of the general public feel compelled to weigh in on.

Deliberative culture should actually be useful in either situation, conceptually, because of the central role of institutional leadership as well as the fact that teacher’s evaluations of schools should be multi-faceted. With respect to the former, it is the governing elites of the institution who dictate the effectiveness of deliberative culture. This routine deliberative engagement that incorporates the public begins with the extent to which school board members (or an alternative arrangement)⁴ create such a space. This culture of being open and receptive to dialogue is instrumental both in negotiations *with* teachers over salaries, wages, and benefits as well as public debates over issues like bullying, local responses to state curriculum changes, and non-wage discretionary spending decisions – public debates that *include* teachers. In both cases, how much of a deliberative culture teachers experience or perceive should factor into how teachers evaluate aspects of the district itself.

One of those aspects should be how teachers evaluate the schools in the districts in which they work. These evaluations should encompass the range of experiences that teachers often have – as not just teachers but also parents, community stakeholders, and education advocates. Given the complexity of the teacher’s role in a school district as a professional with additional civic

concerns, the extent to which a culture is in place that promotes deliberation should very much shape how satisfied teachers are with the quality of the schools. The fact that school boards or the governing authority on-hand can employ deliberation both in the material and non-material conversations alike buttresses the expectation that a deliberative culture that can really extend its legitimacy, or decision-making power, to teachers. By regularly incorporating teachers into the dialogue, teachers in these more communicative districts should better approve of the district as a whole. An analogy is that: if sailors have more say over the way that the captain steers the ship, the sailors should be more content with the direction that the ship ultimately takes. Thus, when thinking about teachers, the following hypothesis emerges:

H1: Teachers in districts with a stronger deliberative culture should be more likely to make positive evaluations of their schools.

The structure of school districts complicates teachers from the sailor analogy, though. Teachers are agents of individual schools, which comprise a school district. So, while they can directly steer by being active in school board meetings and district-wide affairs, a suitable proxy for whether districts employ a norm of deliberation is whether districts allow teachers (and even students) to be involved in discussions over decisions made at the school site level. If discourse is regular way of doing business, we should see evidence of communicative behavior at the various branches. Therefore:

H2: Teachers (and students) in districts with a stronger deliberative culture should be more likely to report being included in decision-making processes at the school level.

Lastly, deliberative culture should be really useful for the most vulnerable districts. In poor districts, students typically score lower on academic assessments than their wealthier counterparts. A significant part of this is because teachers in poor districts tend to encounter students with greater challenges, while working with fewer resources at their disposal to meet

those challenges. Because state funding formulas and federal funding appropriations offer limited opportunity for increasing resources year-to-year (Wong 2008), districts have an incentive to find other forms of capital through which to satisfy teachers, particularly teachers in poor districts. A valuable reward should be the sense of agency that teachers are better positioned to exercise when there's a deliberative culture in place. So, we should see evidence of teachers being incorporated into school-site-level decision-making in poor districts in particular.

Accordingly, the third hypothesis states as follows:

*H3: Teachers (and students) in **poor** districts with a stronger deliberative culture should be just as likely to report being included in decision-making processes at the school level as those in middle-and-upper-class districts.*

Research Design

I estimate the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' evaluations of public schools by relying on two separate survey projects that differ in reach: 1) a national survey of local residents and 2) a survey of residents of a specific metropolitan location: Los Angeles County, CA. The responses of school district residents from across the United States (n = 404) comes from a survey conducted in 2000 by the Public Agenda Foundation entitled, "Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Public Engagement." However, the survey does not include district-identifying information. This omission prevents me from appending indicators of actual student performance⁵ or the poverty rate of their districts. The national survey also lacks measures that indicate decision-making in the schooling environment, and such measures are needed in order to evaluate any potential trickle-down effect.

I, therefore, also include the additional component of this analysis that focuses on Los Angeles County. For this second component, I utilize a 2016 survey of superintendents from 44 of the 80 school districts in Los Angeles County, and I collect their responses to questions about

the prevalence of the principles of deliberation in their school board meetings. Thus, I use the superintendent surveys to develop a district-level measure of deliberative culture. I also find two districts in the sample that differed in their deliberative culture scores and also recorded all of their school board meetings. I, then, analyzed the rate of response to public comment in order to help verify the legitimacy of the deliberative culture measure.

I, then, merge the superintendent responses with district-level aggregated survey responses from teachers of those districts who were surveyed through the 2016 California School Climate Staff Survey. I incorporate responses to two questions, in particular, that were posed to teachers about the how inclusive the school is towards teachers and students, respectively. This tests the hypothesis that deliberative culture trickles down. In addition to the different survey response measures, the Los Angeles component also features crucial measures of student poverty rate and academic performance, which allows me to continue to test the hypothesis that deliberative culture should play its largest role in districts where people often lack mobility and low-cost access to information.

National Survey

Measuring Deliberative Culture, Evaluations, and Alternative Hypotheses

In order to assess the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' evaluations of the schools in which they work, I, first, operationalize teachers' evaluations through a question on the survey that asks teachers a standard evaluations question: "Overall, would you say that the schools in your district are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?" In forming the statistical measure, I forge the distinction between "excellent" and "good" responses and "fair" or "poor" (good or excellent = 1; fair or poor = 0). I derive the measure of deliberative culture by creating an index based on responses to four questions from the available instrument that best

approach principles of deliberation outlined by the normative literature. The specific wording of the measures used read as follows:

- Collective Decision-Making. *“In general, do your school district's leaders set policy and then get the teachers on board, or do they develop policy in partnership with the district's teachers?”*
 - (Coding: “develop policy in partnership” = 1)
- Pursuit of Shared Interest. *“When it comes to the individual members of the school board, how many do you think tend to represent the interests of specific, narrow constituencies? Would you say a majority, several, one or two, or none?”*
 - (Coding: “one or two” or “none” = 1)
- Viewpoint exchange. *“Do you think the officials and administrators in your school district really listen and take into account the issues that teachers care about, is this not happening, or don't you know enough to say?”*
 - (Coding: “administrators really listen and take account” = 1)
- Viewpoint exchange. *“When district leaders communicate with teachers about school policy, do you think they are usually trying to gain a better understanding of the issues and concerns of the teachers or are they trying to help teachers understand and support what the district leadership wants to accomplish?”*
 - (Coding: “trying to gain a better understanding” = 1)
- Viewpoint exchange. *“Attendance by community residents is almost always high at public meetings about the schools.”*
 - (Coding: “very close to a description of my district” = 1)

Together these questions form the deliberative culture individual-level index measure (DCII), and the index ranges from 0-5. The DCII functions as an individual level measure of teachers’ perceptions of how strong the deliberative culture in their school district is.

Along with the deliberative culture index, I also include additional measures as controls in order to account for competing hypotheses. For instance, I include a proxy for different types of priorities that teachers may have. The baseline expectation is that school funding (which determines work conditions and teacher pay) and student achievement should be key for teacher satisfaction. So, I employ one question in the survey asks teachers to choose their greatest

priority between: “raising student achievement,” “communication between the schools and community residents,” “school funding,” “teacher quality,” or “something else.” The assumptions are that school funding will be highest priority in places where teacher pay is low and/or working conditions are poor. Similarly, raising achievement will be of highest priority in districts where performance is low. I also include controls for factors specific to teachers: years of experience, years with their current school, school district size, and school type (elementary/middle/high). I incorporate questions about parenting – whether they themselves are parents as well as whether they feel that only parents should be responsible for getting involved with schools (as opposed to all taxpayers in the community). The analysis also accounts for perceptions of how active community members are in the schools as well as whether district school board meetings are “dominated by community residents with special interests and agendas.” Lastly, I include whether the teacher respondents actually attended a school board meeting within the past year, as well, in order to determine if exposure to meetings impacts the potential relationship between deliberative culture and teachers’ evaluations of their schools.

Modeling Evaluations with Deliberative Culture

Are individual teachers’ perceptions of school district deliberative culture associated with their evaluations of their schools (H1)? I perform a logistic regression analysis in order to answer this question. The estimations on Table 1 suggest that deliberative culture is indeed positively associated with teachers’ evaluations of their schools. The first column features a model that simply includes the control variables, and the perception of how active the community is in the schools is the strongest predictor of teacher evaluations. The second column provides the estimations once the measure of deliberative culture (the DCII) is added, and it then becomes the strongest predictor with an estimated 0.054 increase in log odds of a positive

evaluation per-unit shift along the 5-point DCII. When calculating the predicted probability of the relationship, the probability of a teacher giving a positive school evaluation increases by 5.4% per every unit shift along the DCII. A full shift from 0 to 5 equates to a 27% increase in probability of a positive evaluation, and the relationship is significant at the 99% level of confidence. Meanwhile, the positive relationship between perceptions of active community and evaluations of schools reduces to only a 0.099 log odds increase (from 0.142 in the initial model), and the level of statistical significance decreases from 99% confidence to 95%. In the third and final model on Table 1, I include an interaction between perceptions of deliberative culture and perceptions of active community, and, although at 90% confidence, only perceptions of deliberative culture remains a statistically significant predictor of teachers' evaluations of schools, when measuring one variable with the other set at zero. In short, when teachers perceive their district to be more deliberative, they are more likely to give a positive evaluation of their schools.

The initial analysis provides evidence to support the expectation that deliberative culture leads to positive evaluations, but more of the full theoretical concept must be tested as well. For instance, the theoretical framing of deliberative culture argues that actual exposure to deliberation is not a necessary condition for susceptibility to deliberative culture (deliberative culture forms a heuristic about the inclusiveness of their district that people can access even without actual exposure to deliberation). Thus, although it should be stronger for meeting attendees, the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' evaluations should still be prevalent without exposure to public meetings. Along with theorizing around discourse exposure, the conceptual framing also casts the expectation that deliberative culture will matter

most in the most vulnerable communities. Thus, the relationship should also be most robust in districts where students face the most hardships.

Table 1: Modeling Deliberative Culture and Teachers' Evaluations of Their Schools

	Satisfaction with Schools		
Deliberative Culture (individual perceptions)		0.054***	0.055*
		(0.013)	(0.024)
Achievement Highest Priority	-0.011	-0.021	-0.021
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)
School Funding Highest Priority	-0.029	-0.032	-0.032
	(0.047)	(0.046)	(0.046)
Teaching Experience	0.005	0.005	0.005
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Years w/ Current School	-0.002	-0.002	-0.002
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Large District	-0.072	-0.051	-0.051
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Elementary School	-0.096*	-0.097*	-0.097*
	(0.048)	(0.047)	(0.047)
High School	-0.025	-0.039	-0.039
	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.052)
Parent	-0.010	-0.013	-0.013
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Parents Responsible for Schools	-0.031	-0.026	-0.026
	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Active Community	0.142***	0.099**	0.100
	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.055)
District Meeting Attendance	-0.023	-0.028	-0.028
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Special Interests Dominate	-0.014	-0.012	-0.012
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Female	0.090*	0.084*	0.084*
	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Deliberative Culture X Active Community			-0.001
			(0.028)
Intercept	0.764 ***	0.697***	0.697***
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.075)
n	404	404	404
Dispersion parameter	0.116	0.112	0.112

Table 2 presents two sets of models that each feature a re-estimation of the primary model from Table 1 (column 2) with interactions between the deliberative culture index measure and three variables of interest: 1) whether the teacher physically attended a school board meeting, 2) whether the teacher viewed academic achievement as the district’s top priority, and 3) whether the teacher viewed spending as the top priority. The three columns on Table 2 show the estimation of the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of a deliberative culture and their satisfaction, when controlling for the interaction between perceptions of a deliberative culture and each the three aforementioned variables of interest. The interactions, themselves, show no statistical difference, which suggests that the deliberative culture measure is largely unrelated to meeting attendance and teachers’ views of which issue should their district’s top policy priority. The statistical relationship between deliberative culture and teacher satisfaction remains largely the same as the original model: ~ 5% increase in likelihood of satisfaction per-unit increase across the deliberative culture measure. The results are, once again, statistically significant at least the 95% confidence-level in each model. Teachers are more satisfied with their schools when they perceive their district to be more deliberative, and this holds true whether teachers are actively attending board meetings or expressing concerns about student performance or the funding situations schools are confronting.

Table 2: Modeling Deliberative Culture and Teachers’ Evaluations of Their Schools Interacting School Board Meeting Attendance, Academic Achievement as the Highest Policy Priority, and Spending as the Highest Policy Priority

	Satisfaction with Schools		
Deliberative Culture (individual perceptions)	0.052**	0.049**	0.055***
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Achievement Highest Priority	-0.021	-0.042	-0.007
	(0.034)	(0.055)	(0.034)
School Funding Highest Priority	-0.033	-0.032	-0.029
	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.064)

Teaching Experience	0.005	0.005	0.004
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Years w/ Current School	-0.002	-0.002	-0.001
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Large District	-0.052	-0.051	-0.039
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Elementary School	-0.098*	-0.097*	-0.094*
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.046)
High School	-0.039	-0.038	-0.038
	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)
Parent	-0.013	-0.012	-0.019
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Parents Responsible for Schools	-0.026	-0.026	-0.026
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Active Community	0.100**	0.100**	0.108**
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)
District Meeting Attendance	-0.040	-0.029	-0.029
	(0.059)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Special Interests Dominate	-0.012	-0.011	-0.029
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Female	0.084*	0.086*	0.083*
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Deliberative Culture X Meeting Attendance	0.007		
	(0.026)		
Deliberative Culture X Achievement High Priority		0.012	
		(0.025)	
Deliberative Culture X Spending High Priority			-0.025
			(0.024)
Intercept	0.701 ***	0.703***	0.631***
	(0.073)	(0.069)	(0.077)
n	404	404	404
Dispersion parameter	0.112	0.112	0.110

Los Angeles Analysis

The national-level analysis is important for several reasons. First, it provides initial evidence that deliberative culture could be influencing how teachers evaluate their schools.

Second, it establishes evidence that the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' evaluations is something generalizable across localities. However, as mentioned, there are aspects of measurements that can be refined (measures that capture vulnerability of district residents), and the analysis also lacks evidence of a potential trickle-down mechanism. In order to account for these limitations, I turn to the Los Angeles component of the analysis. Los Angeles County has a total of 80 school districts within its boundaries. These districts include the Los Angeles Unified School District, which is the second largest district in the United States, as well as a range of other large districts, medium size districts, and some districts as small as a few hundred students. These districts, however, all largely follow the same institutional parameters outlined by the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the California Department of Education.

Measuring Deliberative Culture

When it comes to public engagement, the districts are all required by law to hold regular public meetings (like most school districts in the United States). However, districts do have discretion over how much they commit to school board meetings as sites for public deliberation with teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders. This analysis seeks to capture the variation in that commitment and explore its implications. Through a partnership with the Loyola Marymount Center for the Study of Los Angeles, I collected survey responses from 52 of the 80 superintendents (65% response rate), during the 2015-16 academic school year. The survey featured six questions that aim to assess districts' commitment to a deliberative culture in their school board meetings. The questions each attempt to measure different principles of deliberation surfacing in the normative literature: viewpoint exchange, pursuit of collective

interests, collective decision-making, decision justification, and input diversity. As a result, the specific survey instrument asks superintendents the following questions:

“The following questions ask you to reflect on school board meetings in your district:

- Viewpoint Exchange. *“Are community members open-minded when considering different viewpoints on a topic?”*
- Pursuit of Shared Interest. *“Are community members interested in pursuing district-wide interests (as opposed to group/individual interests)?”*
- Pursuit of Shared Interest. *“Are board members interested in pursuing district-wide interests (as opposed to group/individual interests)?”*
- Collective Decision-Making. *“Are community members involved in the policy-making process along with district officials?”*
- Decision Justification. *“Once a policy decision is reached, do district officials take time to justify decisions to community members?”*
- Input Diversity. *“Does a demographically-diverse representation of individuals provide input at board meetings (as opposed to a homogenous group)?”*

Superintendents are given the response options “always,” “usually,” “sometimes,” or “never.” I assign the following values for each response: always=3, usually=2, sometimes=1, never=0. I, then, use these coded superintendent responses to create an additive index across the districts, where each district’s score ranges from 0-18. I will refer to this index as the deliberative culture district-level index measure (DCDI).

Verifying the Measure of Deliberative Culture

The measures indicating perceptions of deliberative culture at the local level provide an efficient way to conduct what amounts to a very rare comparative study of deliberative democracy within local institutions. The primary challenge that emerges with relying on administrative perceptions, however, is determining the accuracy of those observations. Due to the absence of district identifying information, the national dataset provides no opportunity to

verify the perceptions of the local residents. Once again, however, the Los Angeles dataset becomes extremely useful. Through the ability to actually identify the districts that the superintendents represent, I am able to find out more information about the public meetings. I locate two districts within the sample that record their school board meetings and make those recordings publicly available online, while also differing in their DCDI scores. As a result, I observe one district where the superintendent's responses made for an above-average DCDI score, and a different district where a low score was assigned. The latter was the rarer instance in that districts are not required to record and post meeting recordings, and the vast majority of the districts who scored low on the DCDI also happened to be districts that do not record meetings and post them online. Nonetheless, I will refer to the above-average DCDI-scoring district as "District A" and the below average district as "District B."

Table 3 shows the specific DCDI score differences between District A and District B. District A received an above average score of 13 (out of a possible 18), while District B received only a score of 7. In looking to verify the extent to which the score matched with the proceedings in the districts, I observed each meeting for each district that took place from September 2015 – May 2016, which amounts to a total of 20 meetings. The meetings last on average close to 2.5 hours. In total, this project includes over 55 hours of video analysis. When observing the public meeting video recordings, I look for two specific indicators of deliberative governance: the number of members from the public who address the board and the number of responses to public commenters from members of the governing board. I record these frequencies for each month. I also, for each month, divide the number of responses to public comment by the total number of commenters. Through this, I produce a measure of the rate of board response per comment for each month.

The very top of Table 3 displays the rate of board response per comment for both Districts A and B. The difference in board response rates suggests that District A is indeed more deliberative. District A, which had the higher DCDI score, had a rate of board response to public comment (26%) that was double the rate for District B (13%). Beyond the statistical frequencies, the quality of the discourse in District A was much more related to policy decision-making (e.g. facilities upgrades, project contracts, teachers salaries) while public commenters in District B largely consisted of students led to the meetings by their teachers to be recognized for academic or extracurricular accolades. District B largely discussed policy issues (e.g. contracts, social-emotional learning programs, dual-language immersion programs) towards the very end of meetings with no public presence.

Table 3: Comparing Public Meeting Observations

	District A	District B
Response to Comment Per Month	26%	13%
Total Public Comments	105	190
Total Response to Comments	25	22
Democracy Index Score	13 (of 18)	7 (of 18)
Viewpoint Exchange	2	2
Decision Justification	3	1
Diversity	2	0
Common Good (Community)	2	1
Common Good (Board)	3	2
Collective Decision-Making	1	1
Enrollment Size	5,000 - 10,000	5,000 – 10,000
Percent Student Poverty	> 40%	> 20%
Ethnic Diversity Index*	60	59

Note: All estimates are averages except elite perceptions. Elite perceptions measures are scored responses to superintendent surveys. Approximate averages are not provided in order to preserve the identity of the district superintendents.

** The state of California provides the Ethnic Diversity Index. This measure captures how evenly distributed the racial-ethnic composition of the district relative to the state. Scores range from 0-100. Higher scores indicate more diversity. According to the Education Data Partnership, the highest score in the state is currently 76.*

Overall, the meeting observation evidence suggests that the deliberative activity being observed in the video recordings of meetings aligns with the superintendents' perceptions of their districts. There are obvious limitations here. With only two districts observed, the results are not definitive. Furthermore, the coding scheme does not reveal information about the nature of the comments or responses (although I provide additional context on meeting discussions). Still, the theoretical mechanism proposed in this article is one in which a culture of routine deliberation fosters inclusion, and this meeting analysis provides a piece of supporting evidence that the superintendent survey responses are measuring the extent to which routine deliberation occurs. The rest of this article examines the extent to which these differences in routine deliberation trickle down to the school level.

Modeling Teachers' Perceptions Inclusion in School-Level Decision-Making

In the national survey analysis, I established the positive relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' evaluations of schools. In this secondary analysis thus far, I have described a district-level measure of deliberative culture and provided a supplementary test of the validity of the measure. This final section will use the district-level measure to test the extent to which teachers in districts with a stronger deliberative culture are more likely to experience the inclusive decision-making at the district-level trickling down to the school level.

In order to assess this, I utilize district-level aggregated responses from teachers of schools in districts within Los Angeles County whose superintendents participated in the LMU survey project. The aggregated teacher responses come from the 2015-16 California School

Climate Staff Survey project. All districts do not release reports with aggregated survey responses from their teachers. Amongst the 52 districts whose superintendent we were able to survey, 44 districts publicly released their aggregated teacher responses that included the two main variables of interest, which brings the final N of the analysis to 44. The two main variables of interest are survey items measuring: 1) how well teachers were included in their school's decision-making process and another item about 2) how involved students were. The specific language of the item on the instrument contains the following language:

- *“This school promotes personnel participation in decision-making that affects school practices and policies.”*
- *“This school encourages opportunities for students to decide things like class activities or rules.”*

Respondents were given the likert scaled response options of: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, or not applicable. For each district, I am documenting the percentage of teachers who “strongly agree” with each of the aforementioned statements about school decision-making.

Using the district-level measure of deliberative culture and the district-level aggregated responses about decision-making, I perform an OLS regression analysis to estimate the relationship between the two (H2). However, having district-identifying information allows me to also factor in the student poverty rates of the districts as well as actual student performance. So, the Los Angeles analysis incorporates – for each district – the percentage of students in the district who qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch as well as the percentage of students who reached proficiency in Math and Reading, respectively. Both strands of information were acquired through the California Department of Education.

As far as the actual analysis, the regression results reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between the deliberative culture measure and teachers' perceptions of how well their school incorporates teachers into the decision-making process. Table 4 displays the specific estimates. The first column presents the simple bivariate relationship. On average, teachers of districts are about 2% more likely to profess that teachers are included in the decision-making process per unit shift along the DCDI. A single standard deviation difference amounts to an almost 6% difference. When factoring in the full range of the scale, the difference between teachers in the least and most deliberative districts is about 36%. Columns 2-5 of Table 4 show the relationship between deliberative culture and teachers' perceptions of their inclusion in school decision-making, when factoring in the key control variables. In column 2, the predictive power of the deliberative culture measure holds when controlling for the student poverty rate. Columns 3-5 show more of the same once student performance is factored in. In sum, teachers seem to feel more included in school-level decision-making when their districts are more committed to a deliberative culture.

The correlation between deliberative culture and schools' commitment to including students in decision-making was less robust, initially. However, once I disaggregate the districts based on wealth, differences emerge. When theorizing about deliberative culture, I presented the expectation that deliberative culture's impact should be just as pronounced in districts where the residents are most vulnerable. I find additional evidence of this in the Los Angeles analysis; the estimations are shown on Table 5. When splitting the districts into two groups (one above the average student poverty rate for the sample (55%) and one below), the relationship between deliberative culture and school-level inclusion increases in magnitude. For teacher involvement in school decision-making, the size of the coefficient estimating the effect of deliberative culture

is almost a full percentage higher per-unit shift (2.5% in poor districts compared with 1.6% the wealthier districts). The relationship is also more robust in the poorer districts, which is evident by the statistical significance at the 90% level compared to the 80% level of significance for the wealthier districts.

Table 4: Modeling Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusion in School Decision-Making

	Teacher Inclusion in School Decision-Making				
Deliberative Culture (district-level)	1.970*	1.992**	1.900*	1.739*	1.780*
	(0.733)	(0.730)	(0.720)	(0.730)	(0.724)
Math Proficiency				0.438	0.296
				(0.259)	(0.410)
English Proficiency Rate			0.432		0.194
			(0.272)		(0.429)
Student Poverty Rate		-0.083	0.122	0.149	0.166
		(0.071)	(0.147)	(0.154)	(0.159)
R-squared	0.15	0.17	0.22	0.23	0.23
N	44	44	44	44	44

Source: 2015-16 California School Climate Staff Survey/ 2015-16 Loyola Marymount Center for the Study of Los Angeles Survey of Superintendents

Table 5: Modeling Teachers’ Perceptions of Teacher and Student Inclusion in School Decision-Making Disaggregated by District Wealth

	Teacher Inclusion in School Decision-Making		Student Inclusion in School Decision-Making	
	Low Poverty	High Poverty	Low Poverty	High Poverty
Deliberative Culture (district-level)	1.571+	2.457*	0.688	0.816+
	(0.874)	(1.109)	(0.821)	(0.469)
R-Squared	0.16	0.18	0.04	0.12
N	19	25	19	25

Source: 2015-16 California School Climate Staff Survey/ 2015-16 Loyola Marymount Center for the Study of Los Angeles Survey of Superintendents

The relationship between deliberative culture and schools’ commitment to including students in the decision-making is also stronger in poorer districts (H3). When returning to Table 5, a unit shift upward along the deliberative culture measure is associated with an over

0.8% increase in perceptions of commitment to involving students in school decision-making for poor districts. For wealthier districts, that correlation estimation drops to 0.69%. The relationship also fails to reach statistical significance in the estimation for the wealthy districts, while the relationship is at least significant at the 80% level in the districts with higher poverty. Although the difference is somewhat slight, districts with a stronger deliberative culture – poor districts in particular – seem to be sending the message that they want students incorporated into school decision-making at a higher rate. The effect of deliberative culture seems to be noticeably stronger when it comes to incorporating teachers. There are concerns here, especially for the latter finding, primarily because the small sample size limits the kind of extended multivariate analysis that could account for other factors that may be impacting the estimations. Still, the results from this secondary analysis work with the national level analysis add to the previous evidence, which all suggests that deliberative culture seems to factor into how teachers view the schools in which they teach.

Discussion

This article has advanced the argument that how teachers evaluate schools is directly linked to how much of an inclusive decision-making environment that districts create through engaging in routine deliberations with the public. There are multiple strands of evidence in support of this argument. I find a positive statistical association between teachers' perceptions of the deliberative culture in their districts and their evaluations of their schools. I also find evidence that teachers and students are more likely to report being incorporated into school-level in districts with a strong deliberative culture – a trend that is just as strong for teachers in students in districts with extremely high poverty rates. I take this evidence to suggest, in totality,

that teachers form positive evaluations, when districts make efforts to promote norms of deliberative behavior.

This project takes on the rare task of attempting to perform a comparative analysis of non-standard institutional behavior. Establishing and maintaining a deliberative culture is very much a behavior that local institutions (and state and federal institutions as well) often perform, but social scientists have yet to produce a standard measure of such a practice. Previous scholarship as attempted to measure the quality of discourse at public meetings (Steiner et al. 2004; Stromer-Galley 2007). There have also been studies that connect deliberation to individuals' evaluations of deliberations (Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz 2008). However, few studies have focused on measuring institutions' use of deliberation as a behavior that can and should be used to predict other outcomes, such as how various agents evaluate public goods and services (with Collins 2019b being a notable exception). The absence of work in this area is a result of the arduousness of finding empirical evidence to capture the effect of deliberation through random assignment. Deliberative culture, in particular, develops organically when leadership commits to the principles of deliberation through their own will, pressure from the public, or mandates from higher levels of government (Moffitt 2014). Such phenomena are difficult to measure with controlled precision. However, this project makes a valuable attempt through the use of multiple survey analyses and meeting observations, and more work is needed in the future to isolate the effect of deliberative culture in a large-scale comparative analysis. This project is an important step towards better understanding how local governments build and extend power.

The step is important because deliberative culture, as a practice, has significant implications for local governance and public education. Teachers have a deep history of being

strong political actors debating back to the 1950's when teachers began unionizing, collectively bargaining with districts and states, and organizing walk-outs (Kirst 2004). Most recently, we have seen the continuation of teachers entering the political landscape as collective bargainers (Harney and Flavin 2011) and protesters. Even more recently, we have even seen a wave of teachers who are running for political office.⁶ Most of the research on the implications for teachers' political involvement illustrates how they affect (or are affected by) the rules of the game. This research project suggests that, in addition to the rules of the game, the way in which public officials incorporate teachers into the decision-making processes that make or amend the rules of the game influences how they make political evaluations. These evaluations are important because negative evaluations of schools and working conditions are largely what motivate teachers' decisions to challenge state and local governments.

Notes

¹ I refer to municipal governments as a whole instead of just school districts because, while most often school districts are the sites for local government discussions, they can also take place amongst city government officials under situations of mayoral control.

² Estimations are according to the 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey administered to a sample of 40,000 teachers by the U.S. Department of Education. Results were reported by *Education Week*. See:

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2017/10/participation_teachers_unions_down_likely_to_tumble_further.html

³ This is best exemplified by the creation of seats on local school councils in Chicago, IL for teachers to serve on school-level boards and govern alongside administrators and parents

⁴ Deliberative culture could, in theory, be established irrespective of governing arrangement. It can be deployed under mayoral control, autonomous public schools like charter schools, state takeover, etc.

⁵ Although, I use a proxy for student performance: whether teachers identify “raising student achievement” as the most pressing issue facing the district.

⁶ Will, Madeline. “Teachers Aren't Just Running for Office—They're Winning.” *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/09/26/teachers-arent-just-running-for-office--theyre-winning.html>

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Author Biography

Jonathan E. Collins is an assistant professor of education at Brown University. His research focuses on education politics, race, and participatory and deliberative forms of

democracy. Collins holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA).