cross-sectional analyses of survey data. Thus, for example, Simien shows that Jesse Jackson ignited symbolic empowerment in 1984, but she cannot illuminate whether memories of his candidacy matter in today's politics. To do so would require greater attention to citizens' political psychology and political socialization, as well as consideration of cohort effects.

Nonetheless, these are all crinkles rather than rips in some of this book's pages. Its main virtue is its re-thinking of the received wisdom about historic firsts. By providing new conceptual footing, Simien positions scholars to make fuller sense of iconoclastic candidates.


doi:10.1017/rep.2017.27

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The landscape of education politics has shifted significantly in recent years. In The Politics of African-American Education: Representation, Partisanship, and Educational Equity, Kenneth J. Meier and Amanda Rutherford contend that political parties now play a prominent role in not just school board electoral outcomes but also in subsequent policy maneuvers and schooling outcomes that follow. Significantly, they argue that this role for political parties has become particularly instrumental in the politics around African-American public education. Meier and Rutherford begin by establishing the extraordinarily high stakes for African Americans in the public education system. After gaining access to the political system and advancing school desegregation, African Americans continue to face gaps in educational outcomes, due to what Meier and Rutherford recognize as “Second-Generation Discrimination” (SGD). They highlight SGD as a form of institutional discrimination against African-American students which persists through the use of academic tracking and biased disciplinary procedures. As public schools are becoming majority-minority, the negative
outcomes stemming from SGD, the authors argue, are a miner’s canary for public education as a whole.

Meier and Rutherford argue that the persisting deficit in outcomes that African-American children experience is, to some degree, the result of politics, particularly partisan politics. They justify this claim with a model relying on three premises. First, African-American population size is a primary resource for access to political power. Second, the ability to access that resource, however, depends on political structure. Third, that resource, under the proper structural alignment, is then leveraged to put African-Americans into critical administrative and staff positions, where they help to improve African-American student performance. The authors introduce significant nuance with the second premise, however, by arguing and providing empirical evidence that the key structural alignment has transitioned from educational institutional structures to political party structures. Simply put, they argue that the difference in political party agendas and the extent to which they incorporate African Americans (or not) plays a central role in African-American school board representation, where the impacts of partisan difference trickle down to impact African-American student performance.

It is rare to find a study of American political behavior that is also concerned with educational outcomes. Meier and Rutherford, however, take up that challenge masterfully by walking the reader from the electoral structure through descriptive and substantive representation, to land at differences in schooling outcomes. They provide new and somewhat surprising evidence that the difference between at-large and single-member district electoral structures is minimal at best. More importantly, they show that African-American representation increases in accordance with the black population of the district. At the surface, this finding seems trivial, but the nuance lies in the fact that the relationship persists across electoral structure types as well as the partisan makeup of the districts. However, their evidence suggests that, in Democratic Party majority districts, establishing a critical mass of African-Americans seems to be the only obstacle to achieving descriptive representation, while as the percentage of Republicans increase the route to representation becomes more caliginous.

One might quarrel with their claim that diverse configurations of coalition politics explain the variations in outcomes across partisan landscapes. There are other possible explanations. As difficult as it may be in a large-scale analysis, for example, offering conclusive evidence that African-American school board aspirants were actually being incorporated into a Democratic Party coalition would be more persuasive. Likewise, it
could be that liberal-conservative ideology is actually doing the work ascribed to partisan differences. Ideology and partisanship tend to experience significant overlap, but the two can function somewhat differently. While partisan politics tends to center around voter contact and message-based persuasion, ideology functions as a coherent set of beliefs that can be transmitted to voters without contact from a centralized partisan institution. Because the authors frame their discussion around issues of discrimination in education, one might consider the possibility that those issues lend themselves to ideological divides taking the shape of partisan cleavages. To their credit, the authors note this issue as one limitation of the study, which in no way takes away from the book’s greater contribution.

The full volume of what the authors achieve in this project is impressive. Along with developing a theoretical and statistical model that advances the study of race and local politics, they provide evidence that the formal electoral arena can impact a range of real-world consequences within our public schools. They connect electoral structures and representation to everything from graduation rates and academic test scores to curricular tracking and school disciplinary outcomes. They substantively engage the deficit that public education systems impose on the lives of African-American children, but they do so leaving room for optimism. Electoral politics, this book strongly asserts, may be a critical mechanism for obviating persisting racial inequality in educational outcomes. Beyond such practical implications, The Politics of African-American Education further illuminates the fact that studying education politics and issues of race are critical to the advancement of political science as a discipline.


doi:10.1017/rep.2018.15

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In the early to mid-2006, millions of Latinos took to the streets to protest the passage of a restrictive immigration bill in the U.S. House, and to