Preface

More than a decade ago, I began to study teachers unions in American politics and their influence on American education more generally. Then a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame, I was warned by a number of scholars about the risks of writing about such a controversial topic. Their concerns have proved to be well founded.

Few unions or education reform advocacy organizations were willing to share data with me. Given the highly charged political timing—which included the rise of the Tea Party and the Great Recession—many of the teachers and elected officials whom I attempted to survey were understandably guarded. In Wisconsin, where a gubernatorial recall was being waged over the curtailment of union rights, teachers were more than eager to share their views, yet many feared I was an undercover operative working for either a pro- or anti-labor group. And whenever I presented my findings—no matter how persuasive or measured—someone was displeased that those findings might be used to advance a policy agenda with which they disagreed.

What I have come to learn is that no aspect of American education is as polarizing as the nation’s teachers unions. According to one former US Education Secretary, the National Education Association (NEA)—America’s largest union of public employees—is a “terrorist” organization.¹ Not to be outdone, in 2014, then-NEA president Lily Eskelsen García blasted education reformers’ support for tying teachers’ evaluations to their students’ progress on standardized tests as “the mark of the devil”!²

Of course, as humorist Finley Peter Dunne once wrote, “politics ain’t beanbag.” Insofar as teachers unions are central to the politics of American public education, we should expect hard-hitting rhetoric. Yet despite their deeply entrenched and polarized perspectives, teachers union
supporters and critics both agree about two basic facts: first, the unions are unquestionably the most politically active and organized interest in education politics; and second, researchers have paid far too little attention to them.

Ultimately, it was the combination of these two factors—the unparalleled activism of teachers unions paired with scholarly inattention to them—that convinced me to pursue this project. The final product is a study that helps to explain how one of the most important interest groups in post-war American politics amassed political power, leveraged it into policy influence, and fought back to regain its strength after an unexpected period of labor retrenchment.

A lot has happened since I first embarked on this project in the late aughts. The Great Recession, the Obama-era coalition of Democrats for Education Reform, and the rise of the Tea Party led some observers to begin writing the teachers unions’ obituary. For a brief time, I too grew concerned that the project might not reflect the current political reality. But a funny thing happened in the final eighteen months or so leading up to the book’s completion—teachers unions made an impressive comeback. In Wisconsin and New Jersey, anti-union governors Scott Walker and Chris Christie were put out to pasture, replaced by union allies in Tony Evers and Phil Murphy. Several states rolled back the controversial teacher tenure and evaluation reforms they had adopted during the Obama years, after the federal and foundation dollars that had incentivized states to undertake that work dried up and disappeared. Meanwhile, in 2020, Virginia Democrats used their first governing trifecta in over two decades to make Old Dominion the first southern state to authorize teacher bargaining in half a century.

At the federal level, teachers unions reclaimed their traditional VIP status within the Democratic Party, as President Biden made it clear that he would tack away from his former boss’s school reform agenda. Biden even gave serious consideration to appointing a union president to run his department of education (DOE). While he ultimately pulled back from that decision, in just the first few months of his presidency, Biden appointed several teachers union officials to important education posts, hosted the presidents of both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at the White House, and made certain that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consulted closely with the unions before updating their scientific guidance on reopening schools during the pandemic.
Speaking of COVID-19, it strikingly revealed—in a way that nothing else could—just how little influence teachers unions had lost during the challenging decade of the 2010s. During the pandemic, several studies showed that elected officials’ decisions about when and how much to reopen public schools were influenced more by teacher-union resistance than by scientific or public health considerations. By the time I had wrapped up the book, I realized that it contained the answer to a puzzle that I could not possibly have anticipated when I first set out to write it. Namely, it helps explain how teachers unions could bounce back from such a challenging decade to quickly regain their footing after so many people had written them off for good.

Before turning to the substance of the book, I should say a word about my choice of words and the multiple connotations that words can have. While I have chosen my words carefully, in such a charged policy area even attempts to be neutral can be read as masking value judgments. For instance, some may object to my use of the phrase “subsidized interests” to describe American teachers unions’ relationship with subnational governments after the onset of public-sector collective bargaining. Even though patronage is a classic theme in the study of interest groups, some readers may mistakenly assume that by describing teachers unions as subsidized, I am somehow suggesting that they should not be subsidized. This is not my intent. In a democracy, politicians decide what sort of relationship the state will enter into with various groups of citizens. The relationship between government and teachers is no different. A social scientist’s task is far more modest. My aim is to document the consequences for American education of the relationship that politicians have chosen to forge with organized teacher interests. To that end, readers should grapple with my argument about union subsidization on scientific and analytic grounds, not normative ones.

Still, I am not naive about the political divisiveness of the issues addressed in this book. For example, during this project’s early stages, a former NEA executive director encouraged me to contact the NEA’s research division to obtain some information I had been seeking about an affiliate’s endorsement of school-board candidates in a particular state. Soon thereafter, I received a rather curt note declining my request. Apparently, someone was displeased with an article that I had written showing that states where the NEA had made more political campaign contributions were less likely to enact “reforms” that the union opposed. Initially, I was dumbfounded. A political advocacy organization was upset because someone had demonstrated that they were effective advocates!
Later on, however, I realized that I needed to do more to clarify what policy scholars mean when they use terms like “reform” and “status quo” in their work. Let’s start with what those terms do not mean in this particular context. It is not the case that education reforms are inherently “good” and that existing schooling policies are “bad.” Rather, these terms are meant to distinguish between whether a policy proposal represents a major, minor, or non-departure from existing policy. No more, no less.

Just like everyone else, school reformers tend to view their own ideas in a favorable light. For reformers, only meaningful and even uncomfortable departures from the status quo will improve outcomes for kids. But whether a particular reform works is an empirical question, not a normative one, and this book is not intended to be an exercise in cheerleading for any specific reforms. Even when I turn to the controversial issue of union power and student achievement in chapter 8, I make no claim that raising standardized test scores should be the only, or even the primary, mission of public education. It is essential to recognize that the purposes of public schooling in a democratic society are both varied and contested. Indeed, the goals of education—what outcomes society should value most—have been vigorously debated since the earliest days of the republic.10 While raising student achievement and closing test-score gaps between subgroups of students may be the overarching concern of today’s policymakers, this was not the case for most of American history. These normative sorts of questions about the purposes of schooling, while profoundly important, are not the focus of this book. I encourage readers interested in such debates to look elsewhere.11

Despite these earnest pleas, I still anticipate that readers’ normative views about teachers unions, and labor unions more generally, will color their assessment of both the arguments and evidence that fill the pages that follow. Nevertheless, I tried to be mindful of two distinct audiences while writing the book. One is those who feel strongly that teachers unions play a positive and valuable role in American education while also acting as an important bulwark against conservatives’ efforts to “privatize” public education and weaken labor unions in the United States. The other is those who believe that teachers unions present a significant obstacle to reforming and improving the nation’s schools. These two groups of readers are, it turns out, in good company. Polling data consistently reveal that the public are closely divided along these very same lines when it comes to assessing the role that unions play in American education.12

While my book will not bridge this divide, I believe that its argument and evidence offer something for readers in both camps. In many ways,
this is a textbook example of a policy problem seen through the old adage “where you sit is where you stand.” For teacher-union advocates, my findings will amplify their urgency to elect leaders who will promote policies that enable unions to remain a powerful voice for workers’ rights and strong advocates for their vision of public schooling. For union opponents, on the other hand, my findings will signal that the kind of labor retrenchment undertaken in Wisconsin and elsewhere can modestly reshape the politics of education for the better.

In the end, irrespective of how one approaches teachers unions in particular and education policy more generally, I hope that all readers will come away persuaded that the policies governments enact—even seemingly arcane components of labor law—often have significant and enduring implications for interest group politics, citizens’ political participation, and, ultimately, the distribution of power in American education.