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Suburban State Legislators and School Finance

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Much contemporary research suggests that suburbanites constitute a relatively distinct political group given their comparatively strong support for low taxes and local control of government services. This article considers whether suburban preferences in the areas of taxation and local control affect state policy decisions on school funding. Specifically examined is the proposition that suburban state legislators are more likely than those from urban and rural areas to oppose educational funding plans that use statewide taxes. The analysis begins with a case study of Illinois, but includes comparisons with three other states. A number of tentative conclusions are drawn from the analysis, including the observation that partisanship seems more important than region in explaining suburban legislators' voting patterns on school funding.

The migration from cities to suburbs has been one of the most notable demographic developments of the post-World War II era in the United States. While scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s showed that suburbanization had little impact on political behavior, more recent studies have called this conclusion into question. Contemporary research suggests that suburbanites are distinct in that they are especially likely to sup-

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port low taxes and favor devolution of services to local levels of government (Gainsborough 2001).

This article considers whether suburban preferences in the areas of taxation and local control affect state policy decisions on school funding. Specifically examined is the proposition that suburban legislators are more likely than those from urban or rural areas to oppose educational funding plans that use state-wide taxes to equalize resources. The analysis begins with a case study of Illinois. Due to the limits of case studies in reaching general conclusions, comparisons with three other states—Michigan, Georgia, and Maryland—are also included.

BACKGROUND

Historically, conflict among regions has played an important role in shaping state policy choices (Palmer 1972). During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, urban-rural tensions defined many intra-state political battles. According to Key, “the differences between metropolitan people and the outstates form an enduring basis for party competition...” (1956, 230). Before the Supreme Court’s *Baker v. Carr* decision, rural areas often had the upper hand, as “malapportionment in the states imposed serious handicaps on the states’ capacity to deal with contemporary social issues” (Palmer 1972, 32).

After the states redrew their legislative districts according to population criteria in the 1960s, metropolitan areas gained greater representation in the legislatures. As a result, policies that responded to urban concerns found greater favor (Van Horn 1996, 2-3). Meanwhile, however, the balance of power in metropolitan areas themselves was changing, as suburbs grew in population, and many cities lost residents. As of the 1990 Census, over half of the U.S. population resided in the suburbs, and suburban legislators accounted for a majority or plurality in many legislatures. According to Nardulli (1989, 16), the result has been

the emergence of "a new regional force in state politics, one that looks as imposing as the burgeoning cities of a century ago."

In purely demographic terms, then, the suburbs appear to be well-positioned to exert political power. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why they may not dominate legislative policy decisions. First, suburban interests may be too diverse to allow a cohesive coalition to develop. While some suburbs may fit the stereotype of well-off, homogeneous enclaves, "the suburban bloc includes a growing number of aging towns beset by urban migration, fiscal scarcity, and a whole range of problems not too different from the cities they adjoin" (Erhenhalt 1993, 8). As a result, Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom (2001, 232) believe that suburbia will not speak with one voice, and that political coalitions pitting urban areas and older "inner" suburbs against more recently settled areas are emerging. Given their size advantages, cities would probably retain the upper hand in such coalitions.

A second factor that may limit suburban power is that suburban legislators may not promote a regional agenda. To begin with, legislators may not respond directly to their constituents' concerns. While Rosenthal *et al.* (2003) argue that constituency preferences are a key factor in determining legislators' votes, a study of school finance votes in the New Hampshire legislature found that legislators often voted against their constituents' wishes (Campbell and Fischel 1996). The increasing prominence of interest groups in state legislatures, documented by Thomas and Hrebenaar (1999) may reinforce any tendencies toward non-responsiveness. Specifically, Weir (1995) argues that rising interest group influence in state legislatures has undermined the power of regional coalitions.

Whatever regional conflict does exist can manifest itself in a number of areas. In this article, I focus on education finance, specifically efforts to equalize funding among richer and poorer

districts through increased state responsibility. Efforts to equalize education funding have pervaded state politics for over 30 years. Since 1970, every state has tried at least once to equalize school finances (Hoxby 2001). Moreover, good schools are a primary reason that people choose to live in the suburbs, but education funding is an issue that resonates in all regions (South and Crowder 1997).

Education funding presents complicated dilemmas for suburban politicians. On the one hand, suburbanites should favor local financing of the schools through property taxes, over statewide sales or income taxes, as the latter require them to foot the bill for education in less affluent rural and urban areas (Thomas 1998; Schneider 1992). On the other hand, however, high property taxes have been a suburban hot button, since at least the tax revolt of the late 1970s. A poll of Chicago suburbanites, for example, showed that nearly three times as many respondents were concerned with the issue of rising property taxes as were worried about school quality.¹ Suburban politicians, then, may feel pressure to oppose statewide education funding, while trying to ease their constituents' local tax bills. Emphasizing the latter as a policy goal may lead to conflict between suburban legislators and those from other regions who fear that property tax cuts will lead to shifts in funding formulas. Further complicating the picture is the fact that the actual policy impact of regional redistribution through the legislative process is uncertain. While court-ordered plans to change education funding formulas have generally reduced inter-district inequality, some redistribution schemes can actually harm poorer districts as well as wealthier ones (Murray, Evans, and Schwab 1998; Hoxby 2000).

¹ Stanley Ziemba, "Suburban Dream Loses Luster for Many Residents," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 August 2001, p. 4-1.

The following sections examine suburban legislators' votes on school finance issues and contrast them with those of representatives of other regions. The analysis begins with a case study of Illinois. Illinois was chosen because it is fairly representative of national trends. According to Barone (2001, 494), "its mixture of blacks and whites and Hispanics, immigrants and pioneers, city-dwellers and suburbanites and farmers, the affluent and impoverished, heavy industry and high-tech, make it a rough proxy for the nation." No matter how representative, however, single state case studies are more valid when they include comparisons to other states (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002, 418). Therefore, subsequent sections contrast Illinois' experience with those of states that differ on relevant cultural, regional, and demographic variables.

The analysis requires that the concepts of "suburb" and "suburban legislator" be clarified. Unfortunately, a consensus definition does not exist (Jackson 1985). Rusk (1995, 6) considers suburbs to be the areas lying outside the borders of a central city, but within a metropolitan region, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Building on this definition, I define "suburban" in the four states under consideration as the metropolitan area population living outside a central city of at least 250,000. The population restriction focuses the analysis on larger expanses that include several legislative districts.

Based on this definition it is possible to identify suburban areas for each of the four states in the analysis. For Illinois, the relevant territory is defined as Cook County outside of Chicago, as well as seven surrounding counties—DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will. In addition, five counties in the St. Louis metropolitan area—Clinton, Jersey, Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair—fit the definition. Suburban areas of Michigan are defined as Wayne County, excluding Detroit, and Lapeer, Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, and St. Clair counties.

In Georgia, the suburban area consists of Fulton County (excluding Atlanta), plus Barrow, Butts, Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Coweta, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gwinett, Henry, Newton, Paulding, Rockdale, Spalding, and Walton counties. Finally, Maryland has suburban areas surrounding Baltimore and Washington, D.C. For Maryland, the following counties are included: Baltimore (excluding Baltimore City), Anne Arundel, Carroll, Harford, Howard, and Queen Anne. The Washington, D.C. suburban counties are Calvert, Charles, Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince George's.

All of the designations above are based on U.S. Census Bureau (1992) definitions of metropolitan areas. For Atlanta, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was used. For Detroit, the Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) was the relevant metropolitan unit, and for Chicago the Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) defined the suburban region. Only portions of the relevant metropolitan regions that are in the four states studied are included in the analysis.

Suburban legislators are defined as those who represent districts in the counties listed above. Because legislative districts must be equal in population, many districts span suburban and urban or suburban and rural areas, however. In such cases, legislators were classified according to where their district offices were located. In other words, if the office or official address is in a suburban area, the district is defined as suburban, if not it is categorized in the appropriate urban or rural category. This approach makes it possible to replicate this study in the many states where population breakdowns of legislative districts are not available.

ILLINOIS CASE STUDY

Background

An individualistic culture, regional conflict, and the legacy of the Chicago machine interact to shape Illinois' political context. Elazar (1984) identifies Illinois as an individualistic state where professional politicians focus on benefiting themselves and their allies, rather than pursuing an abstract public interest. Quixotic, or even idealistic, efforts to find statewide solutions clash with the state's pragmatic parochialism. According to a leading textbook on the state's politics, "good services and good schools everywhere would be nice, the voters and their leaders seem to say, but if it means consistently higher tax effort, perhaps the current system will be good enough after all" (Gove and Nowlan 1996, 218).

Regional conflict has also played a central role in Illinois politics. Polls indicate that policy preferences differ among rural, urban, and suburban parts of the state, and that the different areas exhibit at least a mild distrust of each other's legislators (Nardulli and Krassa 1989). From 1901 to 1955 rural areas held sway, fending off the growing power of Chicago by refusing to redistrict the legislature (Frank, Nardulli, and Green 1989). After a population-based redistricting in the 1960s, the existence of the nation's last viable big city political machine allowed the mayor of Chicago to dominate legislative decision making for a brief period (Gove and Nowlan 1996, 43). Through patronage and the power to slate candidates for higher political offices on the Democratic ticket, the mayor could control the votes of city legislators.

While the death of Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1976 threw the Chicago machine into turmoil, demographic trends were already weakening the machine's hold on the state legislature at the expense of the suburbs. In the latter half of the 20th Century, the

suburban population eligible to vote approximately tripled, while the state's overall population grew slowly (Anderson, Blair, and Landy 1997). Changes in the makeup of the legislature have mirrored these demographic shifts. Between the 1960s and 1990s Chicago and suburban areas effectively traded places in terms of levels of representation. During this period Chicago dropped from over 40% of the seats in each house of the legislature to barely 25%, while the suburbs gained what Chicago had lost.

School Finance in Illinois

As noted, one expects suburbanites to oppose statewide income or sales taxes to finance education because these taxes force suburban residents to subsidize other districts. In Illinois, according to Gove and Nowlan (1996, 177) suburban elected officials "chafe at appeals that more of their taxpayer dollars be distributed to Chicago and to downstate schools to reduce disparities in per pupil spending." Further evidence of suburban opposition to statewide funding comes from voting patterns in a 1992 referendum. The ballot question involved an unsuccessful effort to amend the Illinois Constitution to place "preponderant" (at least 50%) financial responsibility for school funding on the state government. While the statewide average vote was 57% in favor, and Chicago residents supported the plan by a margin of 73%, only one of the eight Chicago suburban counties (Kendall) exceeded 50% support (Illinois State Board of Elections 1992).² Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that the suburbs' rise to demographic prominence in Illinois coincided with an erosion in state aid, from 47% of total school funding in 1975 to 27% by the late

² Rob Karwath and Sue Ellen Christian, "Education Amendment Falling Short," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 November 1992, p. 2-1.

1990s³ (Hovey and Hovey 2000). As a result, dramatic differences in per pupil funding between richer and poorer districts appeared. Beginning in the late 1980s, the legislature began to consider various plans to alter school aid. None succeeded, but examining two prominent legislative efforts in the 1990s allows a better understanding of the regional dynamics of the education finance issue, and provides an opportunity to examine the proposition that suburban legislators oppose statewide school funding mechanisms.

The first plan involved the unsuccessful 1992 effort to amend the Illinois constitution to require the state to provide at least 50% of total school funding. Table 1 shows a regional breakdown of the legislative vote to put this proposal on the statewide ballot combining members of both the House and Senate. Legislators were categorized by the area they represent into three categories: "Chicago," "suburban," and "downstate." Only legislators who voted either "yes" or "no" were included in the calculations.

The results show that suburban legislators were far less likely than those from other regions to support an increase in the state's share of educational funding. While at least 80% of Chicago and downstate legislators favored state funding increases, only slightly more than one-third of suburban members did. The table also breaks down the suburban and overall votes by party. The results in the table show a clear division between the two parties that is even more dramatic among members located in the suburbs, as suburban Republicans were especially likely to oppose the constitutional amendment. While about 30% of Republicans overall favored the plan, only 10% of suburban Republicans did. Suburban Democrats' voting patterns essentially reflected the larger party dynamics, however.

³ Rick Pearson, "Taxes May Trip up School-Funding Panel," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 July 1995, p. 2-1.

TABLE 1
ILLINOIS
COMBINED HOUSE & SENATE MEMBERS VOTING
ON EDUCATION FUNDING, BY CATEGORY
 (in percents; raw numbers in parenthesis)

	Total Legislature	Chicago	Downstate	Suburbas	Suburban Republicans	Suburban Democrats	All Republicans	All Democrats
1992 Constitutional Amendment to Increase State Responsibility								
Yes	65 (109)	82 (40)	80 (47)	36 (22)	10 (4)	95 (18)	29 (21)	92 (88)
No	35 (59)	8 (9)	20 (11)	64 (39)	90 (38)	5 (1)	71 (51)	8 (8)
1997 Income Tax Increase/Property Tax Cut Legislation								
Yes	53 (62)	93 (27)	54 (21)	28 (14)	6 (2)	75 (12)	12 (7)	90 (55)
No	47 (56)	7 (2)	46 (18)	71 (36)	94 (32)	25 (4)	88 (50)	10 (6)
1995 Tax Cap Legislation								
Yes	74 (125)	50 (20)	69 (37)	89 (68)	100 (61)	47 (7)	99 (96)	40 (29)
No	26 (45)	50 (20)	31 (17)	11 (8)	0 (0)	53 (8)	1 (1)	60 (40)

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the *Journal of the Illinois House of Representatives* (1992, 1995, 1997), *Journal of the Illinois Senate* (1992, 1995), *Handbook of Illinois Government* (1991, 1995, 1997).

In 1997, Governor Jim Edgar proposed a plan to raise personal income tax rates 25% to increase and equalize school aid and provide some property tax relief.⁴ This bill passed the House

⁴ Rick Pearson and Courtney Challos, "Senate GOP Passes own School Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 May 1997, p. 1-1.

but died in the Senate Revenue Committee on orders of suburban State Senate president Pate Philip, who feared that the bill would pass a floor vote (Wheeler 2003). Table 1 also breaks down the House vote on this bill by regional and party categories. The results generally parallel those in top rows of Table 1. First, as expected, suburban legislators were less likely to support this approach than were legislators from other regions. They claimed that the bill treated their school districts unfairly, because the tax relief received under the plan would not be enough to insure funding at current levels for wealthier areas. As one suburban state legislator, speaking in floor debate expressed it, "I came here with the idea that I wanted to help other children, but not at the expense of our own districts. Our homes will not be worth the money that they were if our education system goes down.... I cannot understand a system that is essentially going to bankrupt people that have large mortgages...and then send our tax dollars across the state to fund other people" (State of Illinois 1997, C01-D01). Second, as was true of the vote on the constitutional amendment described above, suburban Democrats and Republicans differed greatly in their voting patterns. Specifically, 75% of suburban Democrats supported the plan, compared to only 6% of suburban Republicans. In a slight departure from the vote pattern on the constitutional amendment, however, suburban members from both parties were less likely than their counterparts from other regions to support this plan.

In sum, the regional differences in education finance votes were as expected. Still, there were key differences among Democratic and Republican legislators representing the suburbs, with Democrats more likely to support statewide funding schemes. These variations probably reflect the different impact that statewide funding would have on wealthier or poorer suburban school districts, as suburban Democrats are most likely to represent "inner" suburbs or older industrial cities that have be-

come incorporated into larger metropolitan areas. In fact, eleven of the fourteen suburban Chicago Democrats had districts based in Cook County, which also contains Chicago, and one of the remaining three represented Joliet, a former manufacturing center. This pattern provides some evidence for the proposition that a city/inner suburban coalition will occur. At the time of this vote, Republicans maintained a slight edge, 13-11, in Cook County House districts, but dominated the Chicago suburbs outside of Cook, 18-3.

Suburban opposition to statewide school funding schemes exists in tension with an aversion to property taxes. One way to resolve this tension is for suburban politicians to use their increasing numbers to redirect existing funds toward districts they represent, at the expense of other regions. In Illinois, this scenario has involved efforts to shift state school dollars to well-off suburban areas through property tax caps. For example, suburban House Republican leader Lee Daniels stated after the 1994 elections that he wanted to use his newly-achieved position as Speaker to cut suburban property taxes and replace the lost revenue with more state school aid (Pearson 1994). He achieved partial success the following year with legislation that capped property taxes in the Cook County suburbs of Chicago. Opponents of the cap included many Chicago and most downstate Democrats who feared that limiting local support for suburban schools would, in fact, trigger more aid from state sources.⁵ As one downstate legislator argued, "We know that this is going to allow for many of the school districts in northern Illinois who are much wealthier than ours to receive some portion of state in-

⁵ Rick Pearson and Susan Kuczka, "Edgar Makes Plans to Ink Cook Tax Cap," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 February 1995, p. 2-3.

crease, and I know that there is only so much money in the pot" (State of Illinois 1995, F05).

Table 1 breaks down the vote on tax caps, combining both houses. It shows that, of the three regions, suburbs gave the measure the greatest support. Since Republicans from all regions supported the cap almost unanimously, this result reflects, in part, Republican numerical advantages in the suburbs (61 to 15 among members voting on this bill). Here again, there are substantial differences between Republican and Democratic levels of support, with less than half of suburban Democrats voting for the bill, while all the suburban Republicans did.

To summarize, Illinois' experience suggests that suburban legislators are less likely to support state-level school funding plans than are those from other regions, but they are more likely to favor holding down property taxes. "Inner" suburban Democrats differ from "outer" suburban Republicans in their voting patterns, with the former more likely to be aligned, but not necessarily in lock step with, predominantly city Democratic legislators. The sections that follow examine voting patterns on school finance issues in three other states to assess whether they are comparable to Illinois.

COMPARISON TO MICHIGAN

Michigan resembles Illinois in many respects. Both are large, industrial, midwestern states that struggled economically during the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to Illinois, Michigan politics has historically featured conflict between Detroit and "outstate" areas (Browne and VerBerg 1995, 36-37). As is also true in Illinois, legislative power in Michigan is shifting from the city to the suburbs. In the late 1960s, for example, Detroit accounted for about 22% of the members of the House of Representatives, while the suburbs claimed 28% and outstate areas the remaining 50%. By the 1990s, Detroit had fallen to 11%, while the suburbs had in-

creased to 35% and outstate areas had also increased to 54%. Changes in the Michigan Senate have been less dramatic, but reflect the same general trends. Finally, in the early 1990s, the two states had similar property tax levels, \$914 per capita in Illinois, v. \$984 in Michigan (Hovey and Hovey 1997). Michigan was more dependent on the income tax, however, while Illinois had higher per capita sales taxes.

There are some other differences between the two states as well. First, their political cultures vary. Michigan has a history of more moralistic politics than has been the case in Illinois, leading to a more issue-oriented politics and comparatively high spending on social programs (Browne and VerBerg 1995, 9-13). A second difference concerns the statewide political influence of each state's major city. Michigan does not have the tradition of boss rule that existed in Illinois, which has limited the Detroit mayor's influence in the state legislature (Browne and VerBerg 1995, 37). While the Chicago machine was in its heyday under Richard J. Daley, Detroit was electing a nonpartisan mayor. Finally, unlike Illinois, Michigan made dramatic changes in its school funding system.

Education finance was a prominent issue in Michigan since the 1970s. In 1971, Governor William Milliken proposed a property tax/income tax swap, which failed in the legislature. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, voters rejected eight ballot proposals that would have limited property taxes, usually with a income tax or sales tax replacement (Kleine, *et al.* 1992). The issue became more prominent in the 1990s with the election of Governor John Engler, who had made property tax reduction a central focus of his 1990 gubernatorial campaign (Courant and Loeb 1997). In 1993, Engler backed a ballot proposal that would have cut property taxes for schools and replaced them with higher sales taxes. Opposition in the Detroit metropolitan area doomed this proposal to defeat. Wealthy suburbanites feared that

their schools would suffer under a more state-centered funding system, while voters in poorer urban areas rejected the sales tax as regressive.⁶

Later that year the state legislature altered school financing by first abolishing the property tax, and then submitting an alternative scheme to the voters. Specifically, the ballot proposal featured a sales tax/cigarette tax increase. If that failed, an income tax hike to fund education would have automatically gone into effect.

Table 2 shows the results of each vote for legislators in three categories, analogous to those used in Illinois: Detroit, outstate, and suburban. The vote for abolishing the property tax resembles the results reported in Table 1 for the Illinois property tax vote. Suburban legislators were the most likely to support abolition of the property tax, while city legislators were the least likely to do so. As in Illinois, the voting patterns of suburban Republicans and suburban Democrats differed substantially. Suburban Republicans supported the abolition of property taxes almost unanimously, while the suburban Democrats gave it a much narrower majority. As in Illinois, this result suggests the possibility of a city/inner suburban alliance. It is also apparent, however, that Republicans in Michigan are even more united across regions than Democrats, suggesting that rural/outer suburban alliances are also possible. Table 2 also reports the Michigan legislature's vote on the funding source to replace the property tax. As in Illinois, city legislators were most supportive and suburban legislators least so, although the differences are not as dramatic. Also, suburban Democrats were less likely to support this plan than suburban Republicans, perhaps because of its regressive overtones. Compared to the property tax abolition vote, suburban

⁶ Mark Hornbeck, "Engler: Alienated Counties Killed 'A.'" *Detroit News*, 4 June 1993, p. 1A.

legislators' votes differed less according to party. Finally, the region's Democrats were much less likely to support the plan than those from the city, implying that the possible city/inner suburban alliance apparent on some other votes did not appear in this instance.

In Illinois, suburban legislators, particularly Republicans, opposed statewide funding while supporting local property tax caps. In Michigan, a somewhat similar pattern was evident among suburban GOP members. These legislators, while supporting both property tax elimination and statewide funding,

TABLE 2
MICHIGAN
COMBINED HOUSE AND SENATE MEMBERS VOTING ON
EDUCATION FUNDING, BY CATEGORY
(in percents; raw numbers in parenthesis)

	Total Legislature	Detroit	Outstate	Suburbas	Suburban Republicans	Suburban Democrats	All Republicans	All Democrats
Property Tax Abolition								
Yes	72 (100)	43 (6)	74 (58)	77 (36)	96 (23)	57 (13)	95 (70)	46 (30)
No	28 (39)	57 (8)	26 (20)	23 (11)	4 (1)	43 (10)	5 (4)	54 (35)
Sales Tax/Cigarette Tax Alternative Financing Proposal								
Yes	74 (97)	100 (12)	74 (55)	67 (30)	71 (17)	62 (13)	74 (55)	74 (42)
No	26 (34)	0 (0)	26 (19)	35 (15)	29 (7)	38 (8)	26 (19)	26 (15)

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the *Journal of the Michigan House of Representatives* (1993), *Journal of the Michigan Senate* (1993), and *Michigan Manual* (1993).

were much more likely to favor the former than the latter. Although the two proposals received almost identical levels of support in the legislature as a whole, 96% of suburban Republicans supported property tax elimination, while only 71% supported the alternative financing mechanism.

Ultimately, the proposal to increase sales and cigarette taxes to replace the now-defunct property tax as an education financing source went to the voters in March, 1994. Although, like its predecessor, it lost badly in Detroit, it did pass statewide and in suburban areas. The either/or nature of the ballot question, which would have forced an income tax hike if it were to have failed, probably explains this outcome, as a more progressive tax would have hit suburban areas relatively harder.⁷ The proposal was most popular in outstate areas, winning 74.7% of the vote, compared to 69.2% statewide. Not surprisingly, rural areas benefited the most from this plan. Suburban areas essentially broke even, while poorer urban areas saw little or no increase in school aid, but got a net tax increase due to the shift toward the sales tax (Courant and Loeb 1997).

COMPARISON WITH GEORGIA

In order to achieve further regional and cultural variation, the third state chosen for comparison is Georgia, a southern state with a traditionalistic political culture (Elazar 1984). Georgia has a higher minority population than Illinois or Michigan, a significant fact, because ethnic diversity tends to undermine support for education spending (Poterba 1997; Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999). As in Illinois and Michigan, reliance on property taxes and differences between rich and poor districts have been a con-

⁷ Mark Hornbeck and Charlie Cain, "Voters Overwhelmingly Back Sales Tax Increase," *Detroit News*, 16 March 1994, p. 1A.

tinuing problem of the Georgia educational system (Fleischmann and Pierannunzi 1997, 287). Georgia also has a dominant metropolitan area and a history of regional divisions in the state (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2002). During most of the post WWII era, these regional divisions have pitted Atlanta against rural areas, but as has been the case in Illinois, the suburbs have emerged as a third political force in the last few decades (Fleischmann and Pierannunzi 1997). Suburban representation in the state legislature is comparable to Illinois, at about 37% in the Senate and 33% in the House in the 1990s. Georgia is less dependent on the property tax than Illinois, but more dependent on income taxes per capita. Sales taxes per capita in the two states are almost identical (Hovey and Hovey 2000).

Beginning in 1985, Georgia operated under a school financing formula known as Quality Basic Education, which critics viewed as providing less than adequate state support and favoring wealthy districts.⁸ After entering office in 1999, Governor Roy Barnes appointed a commission charged with making dramatic changes in the state's education funding system. The following year the legislature acted on recommendations of the commission, supported by the governor, which increased state funding for poorer districts and limited aid to some of the wealthiest districts in the state. To counter opposition to the proposal from some Republican legislators representing relatively wealthy districts, the plan required a local match before the poorer districts would become eligible for more state funding, and increased funding for the majority of school districts.⁹

⁸ Doug Cumming and James Salzer, "2000 Georgia Legislature: Barnes Finds Way To Sweeten Change in School Fund Gaps," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 15 January 2000, p. 1-H; Doug Cumming, "Local Boards Want State to Increase School Funds." *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 24 June 1995, p. 8-C.

⁹ Doug Cumming and James Salzer, *supra*.

Table 3 shows the combined results of the vote on this bill. Unlike in Illinois, the legislation passed fairly comfortably. Nevertheless, the regional and party patterns are very similar. As was true in Illinois, suburban areas gave the measure the least support. Once again, there were dramatic differences between voting patterns of suburban Republicans and Democrats, with slightly over a third of Republicans supporting the plan and all suburban Democrats doing so. The fact that the voting patterns of city legislators and suburban Democrats were perfectly in synch in this case supports the city/inner suburban coalition hypothesis. Finally, as was true in Illinois, suburban Republicans were less likely to support this plan than were members of their party

TABLE 3
GEORGIA
COMBINED HOUSE AND SENATE MEMBERS VOTING
ON EDUCATION FUNDING, BY CATEGORY
(in percents; raw numbers in parenthesis)

	Total Legislature	Atlanta	Rural	Suburbas	Suburban Republicans	Suburban Democrats	All Republicans	All Democrats
Education Reform Package								
Yes	73 (164)	100 (24)	77 (99)	56 (41)	36 (18)	100 (23)	42 (41)	97 (123)
No	27 (61)	0 (0)	23 (29)	44 (32)	64 (32)	0 (0)	58 (57)	4 (4)

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the *Journal of the Georgia House of Representatives* (2000), *Journal of the Georgia Senate* (2000), and *Members of the Georgia General Assembly* (1999).

statewide, arguing that the bill took away too much control from local districts.¹⁰

In interpreting Table 3, it is important to note that Georgia's education reform bill included reform measures that went beyond financing. Thus, it is difficult to be as sure that vote patterns in the table reflect legislative preferences on school funding issues. It is possible to allay these fears somewhat by examining a failed Senate Amendment to the bill which would have kept the existing finance system in place. While losing 19-35, it carried the suburban region 12-8, while failing badly in the other two. All of the suburban supporters were Republicans. These patterns are consistent with those found in Illinois and Michigan.

COMPARISON WITH MARYLAND

Maryland has a political culture that combines traditionalistic and individualistic elements (Elazar 1989; Barone 2001). It is distinct from the other three states, however, in that the suburban areas dominate. Although, like the other states, it has a significant central city (Baltimore), a majority of the state's population lives in suburban areas. The suburban population is reflected in the legislature, as well. During the 1990s, both houses of the legislature had more than 70% of the members from the suburbs, compared to around 40% in Illinois. Recent research by Gimpel and Schuknecht (2002) suggests that as suburbs grow, intra-suburban political battles replace those between other regions as sources of conflict. For example, education funding battles have pitted legislators from the Washington suburbs against those from the Baltimore area.¹¹ Maryland has lower per capita property and sales

¹⁰ James Salzer, "School Package Passes Senate," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 17 March 2000, p. D1.

¹¹ Michael Dresser, "\$51 Million School Plan Wins Backing," *Baltimore Sun*, 14 December 1997, p. 1B.

taxes than Illinois, but higher income taxes, ranking third in the nation on the latter (Hovey and Hovey 2000).

Like Illinois and the other states discussed above, Maryland has struggled with the school financing issue for a number of years. Since 1970, eleven commissions or task forces considered how to equalize educational funding, but most observers argue that the incremental changes that have been initiated have only made the problem worse.¹² Like Michigan and Georgia, Maryland has been more successful than Illinois in changing its funding formula to increase state support. In 2002 the legislature passed a new system that increased state aid to local districts 35% over five years, financed largely through higher cigarette taxes, although questions remained about long-term funding stability. The legislation was based on the recommendations of the most recent study panel, the Thornton Commission, and occurred in a climate of fear that lawsuits would force action if the legislature did nothing. Baltimore City and rural schools were seen as the biggest winners from the plan.¹³

Table 4 shows a party and regional breakdown of the vote in Maryland. In contrast to Illinois and the other states, suburbanites were as willing to support statewide funding of schools as were those from other regions. Suburban willingness to support statewide funding may reflect the fact that Democrats dominated suburban districts in Maryland, unlike in the other states. Ironically, despite benefiting from the plan, rural legislators were less supportive. Maryland's voting patterns were similar to those in Illinois in the dramatic split between Republicans and Democrats in the suburbs voted, with the former overwhelmingly opposed and the latter strongly in favor of funding equalization. Once

¹² Howard Libit, "Schools Taking a Second Look at State Aid," *Baltimore Sun*, 18 June 2000, p. 1-B.

¹³ Howard Libit, "Finding Funds for Education is Next Hurdle," *Baltimore Sun*, 8 April 2002, p. 1-B.

TABLE 4
MARYLAND
COMBINED HOUSE AND SENATE MEMBERS VOTING
ON EDUCATION FUNDING, BY CATEGORY
 (in percents; raw numbers in parenthesis)

	Total Legislature	Baltimore	Rural	Suburbas	Suburban Republicans	Suburban Democrats	All Republicans	All Democrats
Increase in State Aid to Schools								
Yes	66 (123)	100 (32)	13 (3)	67 (88)	13 (5)	89 (83)	12 (6)	85 (117)
No	34 (64)	0 (0)	87 (21)	33 (43)	87 (33)	11 (10)	88 (43)	15 (21)

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the *Journal of the Maryland House of Delegates* (2002), *Journal of the Maryland Senate* (2002), and *Maryland Manual* (2001).

again, these patterns are somewhat consistent with a city/inner-suburban coalition or rural/outer suburban bloc. The two major suburban areas had different voting patterns, with legislators from the Washington suburbs supporting the plan 55-14, while those from the Baltimore suburbs supported it by a narrower 32-30 margin. This result may, however, simply reflect the fact that Republicans make up a greater proportion of Baltimore suburban legislators (27 out of 62), than is the case in the Washington area (11 out of 69).

CONCLUSION

I have examined suburban legislators' voting patterns on questions related to education finance. In three of the four states suburban legislators were more likely to oppose statewide school

financing plans than were those from other regions, even though this opposition did not always mean that the legislation in question failed. In Illinois and Michigan suburban legislators were less likely to support more state aid and to oppose higher local property taxes, as well. These tendencies were especially evident among suburban Republicans. Although it may seem paradoxical to oppose both state and local methods of financing education, the pattern is generally consistent with the predictions made earlier in the article.

The analysis of the four states reveals fairly consistent differences in voting behavior between suburban Republican legislators and their Democratic counterparts. The results imply that the suburbs are unlikely to become a monolithic, regional power bloc that dominates state policy decisions. In fact, the findings are consistent with the view that suburbs are becoming the political battleground of state politics, where both parties vie for support (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2002).

Overall, then, the results suggest that party may be a relatively more important factor than region in explaining voting patterns on school funding. In six of the seven votes analyzed, the differences between the percentages of Republicans and Democrats voting for a bill was greater than the difference between suburban legislators and any other region. Nevertheless, suburban Democrats' average margin of support differed from their party's average by at least 5% on four of the seven votes, while Republicans did so on three. The margin was greater than 10% on three of the seven votes for Democrats and one for Republicans. Therefore, while party seems to make a bigger difference than region, region was important on some votes.

The foregoing analysis also implies that Democrats are at least slightly more likely to let regional interests trump party unity than Republicans are. Thus, rural/outer suburban coalitions based in the Republican Party may be more significant than the

city/inner suburban mergers that some writers on urban politics anticipate. This result is especially significant, since Maryland is the only state where Democrats outnumbered Republicans in representing the suburbs, while the Republicans had a clear numerical advantage in Illinois and Georgia.

Two other points worth mentioning are implicit in the discussion. First, demographic trends and regionalism interact with more long-term characteristics of a state's politics to shape policy. For example, it is probably no coincidence that Illinois was the least successful in altering school funding mechanisms, given its individualistic political culture. Second, suburban legislators can use their power at all stages of the legislative process, not just on final votes. In other words, as they become more numerous and fill more leadership positions, they will be in a better position to shape the legislation that comes up for a vote.

Research on more states and issues is necessary before reaching more definitive conclusions. At this point, however, given the partisan diversity of contemporary suburbs and the some-time split between inner and outer regions, it appears doubtful that suburban areas will be able to dominate state government in the way that some cities and rural areas have in the past. While this conclusion may be bad news for the suburbs, it probably has positive implications for state government performance more generally. When the interests of one region dominate, states may be less effective in playing the role of domestic policy innovators that many expect of them in the contemporary federal system.

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