

Political Instability Hypothesis: Ohio and Massachusetts as Case Studies

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Abstract

Governance of Colleges and Universities varies greatly among states. Influences on governance and related changes are generally attributed to academic and economic forces. Rising tuition, access, enrollment trends, academic outcomes, tight budgets and stewardship are some of the factors traditionally recognized as influential to reforms in higher education governance. An alternate theory posits that instability in political institutions and changes in leadership drive alterations to higher education systems. This study argues that a close examination of the current sweeping transformations in Ohio and Massachusetts offer evidence to support the political instability hypothesis.

Establishment of Governance

The United States has 1,036 public higher education institutions with enrollment of over 6.5 million students in both community college and four year institutions. This comprises 45% of all higher education institutions in the country and over 85% of all enrollments.^[1] The largest source of funding from public institutions comes from state governments, thus the largest source of influence comes from state government. Although most public institutions have local Boards that determine operational policies, tuition and day to day management of the college; overall governance and public institution policy typically resides at the state level. It is at the state level that determination occurs in relation to standardization versus heterogeneity of institutions, autonomy versus state mandate, one model fits all versus tiered structure, funding formula versus straight allocation, amount of funding, performance versus academic freedom, etc. The public colleges and universities themselves are basically at the mercy of whatever compels state elected officials.

In general, authority to make all these determinations resides among three bodies of government: state governing boards, legislature and the governor. State governing boards are typically created through the governor's office or legislature, therefore the true determinants of state higher education policy rest between the executive and legislative branches of government. The last decade has seen quite a bit of transformation in higher education. When considering the sheer number and size of higher education institutions, the impact has been great. It is important for administrators, educators, and public officials alike to understand what drives changes to better manage institutions and make more informed decision about change. The remainder of article does exactly that - by using the case study methodology to examine recent research and reforms in Ohio and Massachusetts to help explain why and what drives change in higher education public institutions.

Academic and Economic Influences

Conventional wisdom points to problems in higher education or the economy as the reasoning behind educational policy shifts. Access and student success (or lack thereof) are often the first issues that come to mind. Quality of student and faculty, programs, enrollment, and cost are repeatedly discussed. Economics, loss of jobs, unemployment and the value of higher education to business is also used as reasoning behind reforms in higher education.

Economic pressures have been cited as reasoning behind shifts in governance by MacTaggart (1996) and Marcus (1997). Both found support for economic factors as reason for governance focus. Marcus however noted the existence of political power battles over higher education between the governor and legislature. Enrollment Shifts (Douglass, 2001) and hikes in tuition (Mumper, 2001) have also been associated with governance reform. Many of these studies that find support for academic and economic effects on governance have nonetheless speculated that political variables may provide additional explanation. However, it is only in the last decade, that formal exploration of political motivations has become a central focus and a formal theory.

Political Instability Hypothesis

Despite the logic of academic and economic reasons being the major impacting variables of higher education governance, those factors may only be the crutch used by politicians to substantiate the changes that they are making. Leslie and Novak (2003) state:

"Conceptually, this means that higher education governance reforms ζ along with many other substantive issues decided by states ζ may be best understood as a direct (not indirect) product of political factors. Politics, in other words, is not the residual. Political factors may account for the main effects. Substantive outcomes may be the residuals ζ what happens to higher education governance may well be more or less random fallout from a larger adjustment of political issues."

They used the case study process and examined reform of governance in Minnesota, Kentucky, New Jersey, Maryland and Florida. The study found that political factors were not an offshoot of traditional governance factors, but were the central story of reform. They suggest further study using the case method. The practicality and overtness of political influences can easily be seen using this technique.

McGuinness (1997) was really the first to begin moving politics in governance toward a formal theory. He brought forth the concept that leadership in government and the related political climate brings governance change. He points out that higher education alterations are more likely to occur in states where the players in state government are changing ζ in environments that possess the characteristic of political instability.

Bastedo (2005) studied factors that lead to an activist governing board. The case study method was used by reviewing sweeping policy changes in Massachusetts that individual campuses and faculty consider intrusive. He examined two theories to explain this. The first is that of corporate governance ζ that there exists a cultural demand for accountability and improvement. The second is that conservative politicians have engaged in a partisan battle over the mission of higher education. He found that neither explains the passage of such a wide range of policies. Bastedo instead brought forth the concept of institutional entrepreneurship which uses concepts of benchmarking a best practice. He concludes by saying "that activist boards will fail in their policy development if they pursue blatantly partisan political agendas."

Despite the previous mentioned works, McLendon, Hearn, and Deaton (2007) were the first to specify and empirically test the why states incur higher education governance change. Their quantitative study solidified and defined the political instability hypothesis while bringing forth a sound test of it.

They take nine hypotheses based upon previous research and test them against twenty two state higher education reforms that occurred between 1985 and 2000. Their dependent variable was the State adoption of governance change. Independent variable consisted of:

1. Governor tenure ζ testing the impact of the amount of time the governor was in office
2. Legislative control change ζ testing the impact of a shift in political party control
3. Change in Republican legislative membership ζ testing the impact of political party shifts
4. Change in state tax revenues ζ testing the impact of a poor economic climate
5. Change in tuition ζ testing the impact that increases in tuition make
6. Change in enrollment ζ testing the impact of increasing enrollment
7. Coordinating Board ζ testing the impact of a state having a coordinating board
8. Performance funding adopter ζ testing the impact of previously adopted performance based initiatives
9. Regional diffusion of governance reform ζ testing the impact of what had occurred in surrounding states

Variables and the related hypotheses of one through three test political instability, while four through nine are primarily measures of educational and economic climate. The results yield support of political instability, and none for the educational and economic variables. Specifically, all three variables of change in state political conditions showed significant results, while none of the other indicators were supported statistically. Thus, the speculation and concepts brought forth by McGuinness (1997), Leslie and Novak (2003), and others are statistically quantified. Principally, changes in political dynamics are the primary drivers of governance reform.

Revamping Ohio and Massachusetts Higher Ed. Systems

Ohio

On January 1st, 2007, Ohio Governor Ted Strickland started his first term in office. Near the top of his agenda was reform of higher education. It didn't take long for the Governor to push through sweeping changes in higher education governance in House Bill 2, *Regents Advisory Role & Governor Appoints Chancellor* which became effective on May 15th of that same year. The bill empowered the Chancellor and transferred certain powers from the very influential Board of Regents. That bill did the following:

- Makes the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR) an appointee of the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate, with a five-year term.
- Elevates the position of Chancellor to an official cabinet member of the Governor
- Makes the Board of Regents an advisory board to the Chancellor.
- Transfers the powers and duties of the Board of Regents to the Chancellor and authorizes the Governor to prescribe additional duties for the Chancellor.
- Assigns duties to the Chancellor prescribing procedures, producing improvement measures and making final recommendations to the Legislature regarding programs and funding allocations.

To further propel change, on August 2nd of that same year, the Governor signed an executive directive establishing the University System of Ohio which formally links all of the State's public universities, community colleges, and adult workforce centers.

In addition, on March 31st, 2008, the Chancellor brought forth a 10 year *Strategic Plan for Higher Education*. This plan is geared toward graduating more students, keeping graduates in Ohio, and attracting more talent to the state. Some plans to achieve this goal include making higher education available within 30 miles of every Ohioan, making tuition low, a seniors to sophomores program, dual

admittance, increasing workforce centers, and community college partnerships with universities. Accountability will be measured based upon access, quality, affordability, efficiency, and economic leadership.

Massachusetts

The changes in Massachusetts are not as overt and have yet to involve legislative change, but are similarly transformative. Like Ohio, the new Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick took office in January 2007 and immediately began to move on his new Education Action Agenda entitled *The Readiness Project*. Unlike Ohio, where the educational strategic plan was driven predominantly by the Chancellor, Governor Patrick created an eighteen member committee comprised of educational, business and civic leaders. They brought forth twenty-four recommendations that centered around:

- Providing student support necessary to meet academic standards and raise achievement of all students
- Ensuring educators are highly qualified
- Promoting accessibility, affordability, and degree attainment in pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities
- Supporting innovation and collaboration

The plan has a ten year horizon and sets forth short and long-term benchmarks to be met under each category.

Political Instability Hypothesis - The Real Driver

Ohio's changes do not appear to be the result of long debated issues by higher educators or politicians. Rising tuition, enrollment, programming, stewardship, economic climate or the effectiveness of the Ohio Board of Regents were not long standing topics of discussion. Rather, change was initiated almost immediately after the new governor was elected. It was not until that year's campaign were the above matters brought into play.

McLendon et al. (2007) dependent variable was state legislative enactment of governance changes. Specifically, one or more of the three elements had to occur: 1.) a change in the regulatory authority of state boards, 2.) compositional change in the membership of state board, and 3.) a merging or eliminating of existing systems and/or the creation of new ones. The criteria used by McLendon et al. for the dependent variable are explicitly and implicitly met in Ohio: 1.) the Ohio Board of Regents were stripped of power that was transferred to the Chancellor, 2.) the OBR became an advisory Board, and 3.) the new University System of Ohio was created linking all public higher education institutions. The first change explicitly qualifies as an effected dependent variable under their definition. Two and three do not exactly fit their definition, but are similarly impacted. With element two - although the Board's composition was not changed, the role was switched to advisory. In three - it was not legislative change that enacted the University System of Ohio, but an executive order. Although not meeting the strict characterization of the McLendon et al. elements, significant change occurred that was analogous to their transformations.

Governor tenure (a significant independent variable in the McLendon et al. study) applies in Ohio's case. Their hypothesis states that, "States whose governors hold less tenure in office will be more likely to enact governance reforms for higher education." Ohio's governor began reform almost immediately upon taking office. A strong case could be made for element two in Ohio as well. Republicans lost 8 seats in 2006; however the McClendon et al. hypothesis pointed to increases in Republican control, not decreases. Other variables such as legislative control change, changes in tax revenues, enrollment and even Ohio's poor economic climate have not been major issues creating the impetus for change; rather it is clearly driven by the new Governor. Ohio's changes in higher education noticeably support the political instability hypothesis. McGuinness (1997) states "As new political actors and alignments emerge ζ and

new policy agendas displace older ones, existing governance regimes for higher education become vulnerable to change." This is exactly what happened in Ohio.

Massachusetts changes do not meet the strict elements of the McLendon et al. study because there has been no legislative enactment of governance change. However, just as in Ohio, a major plan promising sweeping changes has occurred because of the election of a new governor. Also, like Ohio, Massachusetts Governor began the reform almost immediately upon taking office. Change in legislature power or change in Republican control did not occur and broader economic or educational influence was not the driver. Rather, it was the change in political landscape that led to transformation, specifically a new governor. It is important to note that in both cases, there was a change in political party representation in each state's top office - democrat governor's replacing by republican governors. .

Conclusion

Ohio and Massachusetts are both currently undergoing major higher education reforms that have been driven by changes in the Governorship. Both gubernatorial shifts have been from republican to democrat. In each state it was the change in political landscape that led the transformation. These higher education reforms thus support the premise brought forth by McGuinness (1997) that higher education alterations are more like to occur in states where the players in state government are changing. The cases in this study also substantiate the work of Leslie and Novak (2003) that politics account for the main effects and substantive academic and economic reasoning is the indirect fallout.

Although Ohio and Massachusetts do not represent continuous political instability, reforms were unmistakably driven by political changes not by higher education-specific or economic influences. Ohio and Massachusetts recent examples also strongly support the first true examination of the political instability hypothesis done by McLendon et. al.(2007). From their findings, they theorize that:

"A turnover in administration could present the most opportune time for a governor to seek to maximize control over executive branch agencies, leading to changes in higher education governance we have documented.....structural changes in higher education might hold governors the promise of a relatively simple political victory early in their terms of office."

Their results do empirically provide evidence of the policy impact of governors in higher education and this case study provides further evidence. Further consideration and case study of gubernatorial changes and political party switch in that position would yield interesting examination of higher education reform.

Although counter intuitive to conventional thought, based on recent research, the political instability hypothesis offers a strong new paradigm for explanation of higher education transformation. The recent reforms in Ohio and Massachusetts further solidify justification of this innovative theory that is rich for future study.

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^[1] *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007