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**The Effect of Institutional Veto Players on Education Policy Reform in the United
States and Finland**

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Introduction

Education is arguably one of the most important policy areas for industrialized nations. Indeed, much can be said about a country's social priorities by looking at its educational policies and outcomes. The advent of globalization forces nations to focus on their education systems in order to foster opportunity for their citizens in the global labor market. Additionally, educational equality is a necessary catalyst for social mobility and general equality in a society. For these reasons, many nations have attempted to reform their education system in the 20th century. Though the specific methods of these reforms may vary, most intend to promote equal access to schooling with the expressed goal of equality of opportunity. Other issues policymakers must consider are the dynamics and funding of public and private schools, and the national standardization, or lack thereof, of school curriculums (Aldolino and Blake 2011).

Owing to the fact that literally every citizen has a vested interest in education, debates over proper reforms are generally quite contentious. Two developed nations, the United States and Finland, notably differ not only in the ways their policymakers have chosen to address education, but also for their marked difference in educational performance. On the international level, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) serves as an authoritative study regarding the performance of a nation's students. Published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the study evaluates and then ranks nations by their students' scores in math, science, and reading. The disparity in the United

States' and Finland's rankings is shocking: among OECD countries, the United States ranks 25th, 17th, and 14th in math, science, and reading, respectively; Finland ranks 2nd, 1st, and 2nd, easily the highest rankings found in the Western world (Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar, Shelley 2010). More remarkably still, Finland achieves this while spending a paltry 7,085 USD per school age pupil, compared to 11,370 USD spent by the United States (European Union 2009). It is clear that the Finnish system accomplishes much more while spending much less, and due to the sweeping differences in these nation's expenditures and performances, one can reasonably ascribe at least some of the discrepancy to their differing approaches to education policy. There exist crucial, fundamental differences between the political institutions in United States and Finland that have profoundly influenced education policy making in each nation. This paper will first briefly outline the educational systems of these countries, and will then seek to explain the variance in their policy outcomes by looking to institutional differences. It will analyze each country's political institutions and how they create a disparate number of veto players, thereby fostering policy variance with respect to the status quo. Through paying specific attention to each country's history of education reform efforts, it will emerge that a lack of institutional veto players promoted sweeping reform in Finland, while an abundance of said veto players hampered reform efforts in the United States.

Public Education in the United States and Finland

The United States public school system is often referred to as “the great equalizer of American society.” Americans express a *prima facie* commitment to equality of both education and opportunity, yet research shows that rampant inequality exists in American public schools. The federal structure of the United States’ government can at least partially explain this phenomenon. Because of this structure, responsibility for education is shared amongst the federal, state, and local governments. Naturally, this makes any policy coordination difficult, as the different levels of government clash over regulations, mandates, and funding (Aldolino and Blake 2011); however, a study this multi-level approach may actually be greatly harming a significant portion of our students. One study compares exposure to high school mathematics courses across 17 school districts in the United States. The alarming findings show that this exposure is radically different, with one district boasting that 90% of students over 4 math courses, while another has 25% of students taking only one math course throughout all of high school. This grave disparity points to a serious inequality of opportunity since a student’s school district can directly determine his or her exposure to mathematics content (Schmidt, Cogan & McKnight 2010).

The issue of inequality in American Schools is further complicated by the financial structures of school districts. Schools receive only a miniscule amount of funding from the federal government, amounting to only ten cents for every one

dollar spent. State and local funding pays for the remaining expenditures, presenting a problem since school districts are tied to their local tax base. Due to tax revenue varying widely depending on an area's socioeconomic status, this screams of inequality. Reality bears this out: 24 out of 50 states spend less per pupil in their low-income districts than in their affluent ones. Thus, the schools with the most need often receive the least amount of total funding, further entrenching inequality in educational opportunity (PBS 2008).

American education also features a notable emphasis on standardized testing. American students are among the most tested in the world. Current law requires each state to administer standardized tests to students every year, reporting the results to the federal government. The standardized tests are used to evaluate the performance of both teachers and students. Critics point to these tests' inability to measure critical thinking, and claim that the federally mandated focus on standardized testing causes schools to focus too heavily on the results of said tests at the expense of other valuable subjects and skills. Despite the abundance of standardized testing, there are no national standards by which to measure student's ability; each individual state sets their own standards, skewing important data as a result. For example, in 2005 Mississippi claims proficiency in reading for 89% of 4th grade students, while Massachusetts reports proficiency for only 50% of students, although it is considered to host schools among the best in the country. A lack of national standards clearly confounds these results, and for this reason most European governments, including Finland, mandate national standards (although

Finland notably administers only one standardized test, before a student's graduation). Curiously, this emphasis on standardized test testing does not translate into success on the PISA, indicating that perhaps American students are, in fact, receiving a compromised education at the expense of domestic testing results. (PBS 2008)

Halfway across the globe, Finland, a parliamentary democracy of some 5.3 million citizens, boasts an education system that is the envy of the Western world. According to their Ministry of Education and Culture, their education policy stresses "quality, efficiency, equity, and internationalism." They strive to educate every student equally and adequately. Schools even incorporate children with special needs into traditional (in the Finnish sense, at least) classrooms, and holding a child back a grade is practically unheard of. In fact, students with special needs often emerge from Finnish vocational schools with promising career tracks. The government, principals, and teachers all take a vested interest in each student, with the goal of preparing them to function as productive and successful members of Finnish society. Olli Luukkaunen, president of Finland's powerful teachers union, sums up the prevailing Finnish ethos regarding education by saying, "Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this" (Hancock 2011).

Schools grant Finnish teachers an enviable amount of autonomy, in order that they may educate the students how they best see fit. This works because of the

quality and education of the teachers; Finnish schools require teachers to hold a Master's degree in education in order to teach. Since the government funds the entirety of these degrees, they are highly competitive, attracting some of the brightest minds in the country to the teaching profession. This level of autonomy also allows educators to tailor curriculums to specific locales and individual students. For example, Kallahti principal Timo Heikkinen, who heads a school east of the Finnish capital Helsinki, and his teachers designed an environmental science program to take advantage of the nearby forests. Individualized help is not stigmatized, but rather embraced; nearly 30% of Finnish students receive some sort of special help during their first nine years of school. This not only helps curb educational inequality, but also fosters academic success: 93% of Finns graduate from academic or vocational high schools, 17.5 percentage points higher than the United States, and 66% go on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union (Hancock 2011).

The Finns don't rely on heavy standardized testing; the only required test is a matriculation exam at the end of their high school equivalent. In fact, educators denounce reliance on quantifiable statistics; Heikkinen, a Helsinki principal with 24 years of teaching experience says, "If you only measure the statistics, you miss the human aspect." This humanistic, student-focused system has not only yielded the best educational performance of the Western world according to the PISA, but also the smallest gaps between the highest and lowest achieving students amongst OECD countries. Instead of looking to standardized tests to gauge student performance, the highly trained Finnish teachers are trusted to know their students, and thus to

know how to best educate each of them. Principal and veteran educator Karl Louhivuori remarks on the results of standardized testing, “It’s nonsense. We know much more about the children than these tests can tell us” (Hancock 2011).

Institutional Veto Players and Policy Stability

Having provided a brief outline of each country’s respective education system, this essay will now turn towards analyzing each country’s political institutions, comparing them specifically in their number of institutional veto players. A veto player can be defined as an “individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo.” In order for policy change to occur, the unanimous consent of all veto players is necessary, though, not sufficient, to lead to this changed (legislative) status quo. For the purposes of this essay we will focus on *institutional* veto players (those specified by a country’s laws and constitution, i.e. a legislative body) rather than *partisan* veto players (those created as a consequence of the political game, i.e. a majority party controlling a legislative body), and henceforth “veto player” will refer specifically to “institutional veto player.” The number of veto players and their ideological distance from each other significantly affects the winset of the status quo, that is to say, the set of all possible outcomes that could replace the status quo. It follows that the more veto players existing who must unanimously consent in order to change the status quo, the less likely the said status quo will change. This resistance to change is known as policy stability. Countries with many ideologically different veto players would have a high level of policy stability, while countries with few veto players would have a low level

of policy stability. Thus, relatively speaking, it should be easier to change the legislative status quo in a country with fewer veto players, compared to a country with more (Tsebelis 2002).

Extrapolating this framework onto the United States and Finland is simple enough. Their institutional structures are certainly quite different, but as Tsebelis notes, a comparison of veto players and policy stability is much more pertinent when seeking to explain policy outcomes. From a brief comparison of the United States' federal, bicameral, presidential government to Finland's unitary, unicameral, semi-presidential government, the United States will emerge as a nation with many veto players, and thus policy stable, while Finland will stand as an example of policy instability with its single effective veto player. The relative ease with which Finland can change its status quo will prove instrumental in their education reform efforts by allowing for a fundamental overhaul of their education system, leading to an equal and excellent school system.

Perhaps the most glaring institutional difference between the United States and Finland is that the former operates a federal system of government, while the latter hosts a unitary system. A federal system of governance is defined as one featuring two or more levels of government, each with at least one area of jurisdiction which it enjoys autonomous rule. Naturally, the opposite of the federal system, the unitary system, contains only one level of government. The direct effects of the federal system on education administration have been previously noted; however, it has an even larger effect on veto players and consequently policy

stability. Federal systems typically lead to the employment of either qualified majorities or bicameralism (with the United States, of course, featuring the latter), and thus “each one of these two institutional structures generates more veto players, so that federal countries have *ceteris paribus* more veto players than unitary ones” (Tsebelis 2002). The comparison between the United States and Finland illustrates this. The United States requires approval of both houses of Congress, the lower House of Representatives and the higher Senate, in order for legislation to pass into law. Another notable institutional structure of the United States Congress is the Senate’s potential for filibuster, in which a member can halt proceedings for lengthy periods of time. In order to stop this, Senators must invoke cloture, which requires a 60% votes. This introduces an aspect of qualified majority voting, further complicating legislative matters in the United States. In contrast, the Finnish Parliament exists as a relatively straightforward assembly. For all legislation excluding constitutional revisions, the law requires only a simple majority of its 200 members for an act to pass into a law out of a plenary session of Parliament (Parliament of Finland 2013). The relative simplicity of the Finnish system is apparent, and though their Parliament stands as an effective veto player, the United States emerges from this comparison with an additional veto player, complicated by the Senate’s filibuster.

Another important difference between the two nations at hand lies in the organization of their national government. The United States utilizes a presidential system with one directly elected President, while Finland features a semi-

presidential system, with both a popularly elected President and a Prime Minister coming out of the Parliament. In the United States, after a law passes each house of Congress, they send it to the White House for approval by the President. The President then has a few options: he can either sign the bill into law, exercise his “pocket veto” power (leaving a bill unsigned, then Congress adjourning, thereby killing the bill), or choose to exercise his formal veto power. Should the President utilize his formal veto, the bill is sent back to Congress, who can then override the veto with a two-thirds majority (pocket vetoes cannot be overridden, since by definition Congress is not in session). Due to the United States’ two party system, cooperation for such an override is exceedingly difficult, and thus the override of Presidential vetoes is quite rare: out of 1,497 formal vetoes by American Presidents, only 110, or 7.3%, have been overridden by Congress (Peters 1999-2013). Matters are rather different in Finland. Though they do have an elected executive, his power differs markedly from that of the American President. His responsibility lies mostly in the realm of international affairs, heading up foreign policy negotiations, leading Finland in international organizations, and serving as commander in chief of the military. His veto power is perplexing: on the one hand, acts passing Finland’s Parliament do require his confirmation to immediately become law, yet on the other hand, without his confirmation, an act is sent back to their unicameral parliament, which can be pass it again with the same simple majority (The President of the Republic of Finland 2013). Due to the President’s primary function as an international actor and this paradoxical quasi-veto power, we will not consider the

Finnish President as a veto player, as his actions alone do not raise a significantly determinant barrier to the passage of legislation. Accordingly, the United States appears to have yet another extra veto player, further contributing to even more policy stability.

The judicial systems of the United States and Finland are the final branches of government requiring analysis. Both countries host Supreme Courts, charged with interpreting the nation's laws and settling high disputes. To ascertain the differences, we must turn to the presence, of lack thereof, of judicial review. Judicial review can be understood for our purposes as a process in which the actions of the legislature can be subject to review, and consequently invalidation, by a nation's high court. Obviously, the ability of a court to invalidate a legislative measure for constitutional purposes would stand as a veto player, and this is exactly the case in the United States. Though there is no expressed provision granting the power judicial review in Article III of the Constitution of the United States of America, this duty was assumed by the Supreme Court in the landmark case *Marbury vs. Madison* of 1803, in which the court ruled that when a law conflicts with the Constitution, it is invalid, establishing judicial review *de jure*. Ever since, acts of Congress have been subjected to the scrutiny of the Supreme Court, which in many cases has struck down laws for clashing with the ideals of the Constitution. The situation in Finland is a different matter. The integration with the European Union and its judicial review practices have led Finland to incorporate more judicial review in its governance since the dawn of the millennium; however, prior to the new Constitution of 2000, judicial

review was explicitly illegal under Finland's first Constitution of 1919. Finland's education reform occurred prior to the passing of the Constitution Act of 2000, so for the purposes of this paper we will treat the Supreme Court of Finland as lacking an effective veto power (Supreme Court of Finland 2013)(Follesdal and Wind 2009). Thus, the United States Supreme Court, through its practice of judicial review (often employed in an activist fashion), constitutes yet another veto player in its respective system of government, while for our purposes the Finnish Supreme Court will not be considered one.

Having analyzed the institutions of the governments of the United States and Finland, it seems clear that the United States has more veto players. The bicameral structure of her legislature gives her two effective veto players to Finland's one. The President of the United States' power to veto legislation, and the significant hurdle it raises for Congress to override it, adds another veto player, while Finland's weak Presidential veto will not be considered due to both the President's primary role as an agent of foreign affairs and the relative ease with which it can be overridden. Finally, the Supreme Court of the United States formalized the power of judicial review under common law, while Finland's Supreme Court lacked any aspect of this power during the time we are concerned, contributing yet another veto player to the United States. The final count of institutional veto players is four for the United States and only one for Finland. Thus, per Tsebelis's veto player theory, the United States will stand as a policy stable country (this is directly confirmed by Tsebelis in his writing), while Finland will generally feature policy instability (also indirectly

confirmed by Tsebelis, as he gives this characteristic to other nations with only one veto player). Therefore, United States will be less likely to institute reforms differing greatly from the status quo, since this would require consent from all four veto players. In contrast, Finland's one veto player, their Parliament, is essentially left to its own devices.

Educational Status Quo, Policy Stability, and Reform in the US and Finland

Using the framework of veto players and policy stability with respect to the status quo, this paper will not reveal how these institutional differences contributed to Finland's ability to completely reform its education system, while the United State's reform efforts did little to alter the status quo. The strategies and outcomes of education reform effort have surely differed between the United States and Finland. The number of institutional veto players in each country, which directly influences policy stability, helped form the climate for each country's education reform. As noted earlier, because of its high number of veto players, the United States displays policy stability. Thus, to change the status quo would require unanimous consent across both houses of Congress, the President, and pending judicial review, the Supreme Court. In contrast, Finland displays policy instability as a result of its lack of veto players, and thus changing the status quo requires only a majority of votes in Parliament. Due to this susceptible climate, Finland was able to institute reforms that actually changed the status quo for the better, while the United States reforms have lead to little discernable improvement due to them not fundamentally altering the status quo.

Education reform in the United States has certainly faced its share of challenges. The United States' federal structure of government often makes large scale reform a difficult balancing act of cooperation between different levels of government. State and local governments must comply with federal mandates, often imposing monetary burdens. For this reason, many politicians, especially congressional Republicans, stand vehemently against federal mandates and regulations. This was seen clearly during the presidency of George H. W. Bush when his America 2000 plan failed to garner widespread approval from his own party in Congress. With Republicans weary of federal power and Democrats skeptical of testing requirements, Bush pulled the bill from Congress at the advice of Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander (Nelson & Weinbaum 2006). Such gridlock is typical of the US electoral system with its many effective veto players, making passage of any reforms that challenge the status quo exceedingly difficult.

The most recent of the United State's major educational reforms, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), stands as President George W. Bush's signature piece of domestic legislation. This bill, passed with rare bipartisan consensus in 2002, aimed to ensure the proficiency of every student in mathematics, science, and reading—conveniently the same subject areas measured by the PISA. The program measures success through standardized tests administered every year, with failing schools facing a penalty of increased regulation. NCLB also affords the parents the right to move their children out of failing schools. Whatever support this act had upon its passing quickly faded upon its implementation, largely because Congress

appropriated \$27 billion less than it authorized for the bill. This essentially forced states to adhere to a complex web of regulations and mandates with insufficient funds, rendering compliance essentially impossible in many cases. Critics also allege that the emphasis on standardized testing causes teachers to “teach to the test,” basically hindering educational progress in the name of a score (Aldolino and Blake 2011). Frustration with the law and attempts to reform it caused President Barack Obama to eventually grant 10 states waivers from the program, allowing them to opt out of NCLB (Muskal 2012).

The essential failure of No Child Left Behind set the stage for future education reforms. The Race to the Top, a Department of Education program funded by President Obama’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, embraced competition by allowing states to compete for \$4.35 billion in Federal Education Funding. The evaluative criteria included: Great Teachers and Leaders, Turning around Lowest Achieving Schools, Standards and Assessments, along with other general success factors (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Though most states applied, it received much criticism for imposing additional federal mandates, many of which had yielded undesirable results in the past (i.e. standardized test scores) (Ravitch 2010). Many governors derided the initiative; Texas’s Rick Perry even abstained from the program entirely, saying, “We would be foolish and irresponsible to place our children’s future in the hands of unelected bureaucrats and special interest groups thousands of miles away in Washington” (Office of Governor Rick Perry 2010). In short, the states longed for more control, choice, and

decentralization. Though there have been several efforts to employ reforms along this ethos, notably voucher programs and charter schools, none have gained the widespread support needed to systematically change the United States educational status quo.

Finland's educational reforms took place in several stages. Their reforms, brought about by their shift from agrarianism to industrialism post World War II, aimed to educate new generations of Finns to compete in the global industrial economy. Prior to the 1960s, students were essentially funneled into programs based on their talent at the end of each school level; high achieving students went on the university track, while the bottom of the class was sent to vocational school. Under this system, most Finns left school after only six years of basic education, and only about a quarter of children even had access to paths leading to University level studies (OECD 2010).

After World War II, there was an enormous influx of students into grammar schools, prompting Parliament to launch three reform commissions. The first two commissions, launched in 1945 and 1946, offered a vision of a more comprehensive, humanistic, and child-centered method of schooling, but were ultimately not acted upon by Parliament. The common school debate resurfaced a decade later with the recommendations of the Commission on School Programs. Under pressure from the Finnish people, who were eager for global competitiveness, Parliament passed the 1968 School System Act, combining Lower Secondary (university track) and Civic School (vocational track), both ages 10-16, into one level of Lower Secondary

education, which equalized educational opportunity through dedication to the belief that all children could achieve highly. These reforms were initiated by a broad left-wing coalition of the Social Democrats, the Agrarian Party, and the Finnish People's Democratic Party. This coalition exemplifies a prototypical Scandinavian Red-Green Alliance, which is characteristic of far left-wing policy, helping to explain the egalitarian nature of Finnish reform. The resulting new comprehensive school, or *peruskoulu*, ensures that every student receives an equal and excellent education (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006) (OECD 2010). This is certainly a radical change to the conditions of a half-century ago, and now every student in Finland enjoys equal access to the world's premier education system, paving the way for true educational equality.

Finland's greatest strength seems to lie in its teachers. In 1979, Parliament passed legislation reforming teacher education. Prior to this act, prospective teachers enrolled in *seminarium* (a college specifically for teachers) after completing their secondary education. This legislation moved teacher education from these specialized colleges into universities, and provided for the free university education of teachers at the Master's level. Although this act received criticism from University officials who claimed that teaching was a "semi-profession" and not fit to stand in academia, the reform appears quite effective. The quality of applicants to teacher training programs has increased through competition—teachers are now selected from the top 10% of secondary school graduates. At least part of the reason the teaching profession attracts talented young people lies in the great respect shown towards teachers by Finnish society; teachers are respected alongside doctors and

lawyers. Due to their high level of education, schools grant teachers great pedagogical liberty (Hancock 2011). This reform profoundly transformed the teaching profession, leading to an abundance of highly trained teachers whom appear to be instrumental in Finland's educational success.

The 1985 Upper Secondary School Act further reformed the school structure, increasing flexibility for students in both the vocational and university tracks by allowing them to switch between the two while still graduating on time (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006). The Finnish government essentially provides structure, and set of directives and goals for students; most other education policy is left to local districts, schools, and even teachers, a degree of autonomy American educators would surely find enviable. The resulting comprehensive school system is more than just a structure, but a vehicle that fosters learning, growth and development.

According to Sahlberg, Director of the Center for International Mobility and Co-operation, "The Comprehensive School is not merely a form of school organization. It embodies a philosophy of education as well as a deep set of societal values about what all children need and deserve" (OECD 2010). This philosophy, that all children can and should achieve highly, is the cornerstone of Finland's education reform, and the resulting equality that emerged from it.

Conclusions

Hosting significantly more institutional veto players no doubt hindered the United States from truly reforming its broken system. Legislation that promised a clear national direction, complete with standards and a direction, President George

H.W. Bush's America 2000, was pulled from consideration at the behest of his Secretary of Education due to lack of support amongst Senators. Legislation that did pass, for instance, the younger President Bush's NCLB and Obama's Race to the Top, did little but add more federal regulation and mandates while placing an emphasis on standardized testing, all methods that had shown little success in the past, and were already essentially part of the status quo. The story of United States education reform, then, is essentially "more of the same." By proceeding to reform their system using the same guiding ethos, United States lawmakers have not significantly altered the status quo, and reform efforts have not yet produced a significant performance increase in international comparisons.

In clear contrast, Finland's relative lack of veto players paved the way for a series of reforms that actually changed the status quo. Legislation in 1968 created equal access to education for all Finnish students, drastically changing their earlier system in which most students lacked access to university tracks and left after their basic schooling. The 1979 teacher reforms fundamentally changed the teaching profession by requiring an advanced education for all teachers. Because of this, teachers are trusted to know their students and their individual learning styles, and to tailor an education specifically to each one. The success of these reforms is tremendous, as evinced by Finland's PISA rankings (2nd, 1st, and 2nd in math, science, and reading, respectively) and their graduation rates (93%). These reforms were passed through the Finnish Parliament with broad coalitions, passing through Finland's one institutional veto player with relative ease. The far-reaching Finnish

reforms place trust in teachers and confidence in every student's ability to achieve highly, significantly altering the status quo and leading to the establishment of one of the world's premier education systems.

Due to their performance in international comparisons and recent history of reforms, Finland clearly stands as a story of success for far-reaching education reform, while the United States continues to lag behind other nations, stuck in a state of mediocrity perpetuated by educational inequality. United States reforms have not embraced change, but have perpetuated a mediocre system that produces lackluster results in international comparisons. With education reform on the United States political agenda, lawmakers would be wise to look towards the underlying philosophy of reform in Finland. To be fair, the United States is many orders of magnitude larger than Finland, which clearly complicates educational administration. Furthermore, Finnish cultural homogeneity seems to play a role in their embracing their new education system. As is the case with reforming any policy area, there are indeed challenges facing lawmakers seeking to improve education in the United States, but piling on additional mandates, regulations, and standardized tests has not yielded results in the past, and likely will not yield results moving forward. However, due to the abundance of veto players, drastically altering the status quo like Finland did should prove exceedingly difficult. It will require an agreement among many institutional veto players, and likely a strong public opinion in favor of sweeping reform. United States lawmakers would do well to embrace the value of equality and individualism by looking to the success of Finnish education reform, and

thereby create the excellent educational system befitting the great United States of America.

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