

The Determinants of Conflict on Governing Boards in Public Organizations: The Case of California School Boards

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of extrinsic and intrinsic factors on decision-making conflict on governing boards in public organizations. Using survey data from more than 700 school board members in California, I investigate the degree to which various characteristics of the environment in which the board operates, processes the board implements, and traits of board members themselves predict how often the board experiences division among its members and how well its members report being able to work together. The findings point out that external characteristics play a large role in predicting intraboard conflict. In particular, boards in urban districts with large numbers of nonwhite students and more active interest group environments experience greater conflict. However, internal characteristics also make a difference. Boards that use more professional decision practices and whose members share a common vision for their work experience conflict at substantially lower rates. Also, whereas ideological heterogeneity among board members positively predicts conflict, contrary to expectations, racial diversity is associated with less division among board members.

INTRODUCTION

Governing boards provide oversight to many kinds of public organizations. The two most widespread examples are municipal governments and school districts, which typically are governed by city councils and school boards, respectively. However, many other government entities are governed by citizen boards, including parks and utilities commissions, zoning boards, and some state-level commissions. Because these boards play key roles in setting policies, monitoring performance, and formulating organizational strategy, how well their members function together as a governing unit can have significant implications for the management of the organization and for the organization's ability to meet its goals.

This article examines a key component of public boards' abilities to function well: the degree of conflict and division in decision making among board members. Although conflict among leaders and team members in *private organizations*, that is, firms, has received

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a good deal of theoretical and empirical attention (Wall and Callister 1995), conflict on boards in public organizations has received very little. Research on the topic in the corporate management literature indicates that although some conflict is inherent in social processes, large degrees of intraboard conflict can lower decision quality. Furthermore, excessive divisiveness may undermine boards' efforts to define and achieve common goals and make boards less effective. The link prior studies have observed between conflict and ineffectiveness on private sector work teams and other groups suggests that understanding conflict on governing boards in public organizations is an important area for study.

Perhaps in no other context is public board effectiveness more important than in that of school boards, both because of the ubiquity of the institution and because of the impact that board decisions can have on schools. Virtually all of America's public school children are governed by policies set by one of approximately 15,000 local school boards (Hess 2002), yet we know surprisingly little about the citizen members who sit on school boards or about how they work together to make decisions (Land 2002; Kirst 1994). Although there is little systematic work in the area of school board decision making, several qualitative studies have hypothesized an association between lower school board conflict and greater board effectiveness (Merz 1986; Danzberger 1994; Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan 1992). Moreover, scholars have suggested that conflict and turbulence have increasingly characterized school board decision making in recent years (Wirt and Kirst 2001, 123). The potential impact of conflict on governance quality, together with the growth of conflict as a feature of school board decision making, makes the school board an especially relevant arena for assessing the determinants of governing board conflict.

Because there is no centralized source—even within the different states—that collects systematic information about local school boards and their decisions, most research on school board effectiveness has been limited to studies of single cases or small nonrepresentative samples (Wirt and Kirst 2001, 139). In contrast, this article uses survey data from a stratified random sample of nearly 700 school board members that covers the entire state of California. These data contain information on a variety of board member characteristics, attitudes, training, and elections, as well as board procedures and decision-making processes. The use of a data source of this scope and depth allows for the drawing of more general conclusions about the nature of conflict in decision making on public boards.

The goal of this study was to identify both extrinsic and intrinsic factors that lead public boards to experience higher degrees of contentious decision making. It draws on disparate strands of literature on private, nonprofit, and public organizations to form hypotheses about potential contributing factors and then uses survey and administrative data to test these hypotheses. Consistent with prior case study evidence, I find that the external environment matters a great deal both for the quantity of decisions board members report as characterized by divisiveness and for their reports of how well their boards work together. In particular, urban districts and rural districts both report higher levels of board conflict than do suburban districts, as do districts with large numbers of minority students. Larger boards, boards in more active interest group environments, and boards whose members are elected from single-member districts all experience greater conflict. Several intrinsic factors make a significant difference as well. Whereas boards that are more ideologically diverse report greater conflict and more difficulty working together, boards that are more

racially diverse report lower degrees of board conflict. Boards whose members share a common vision and that score higher on an index of professional decision-making practices experience less division as well.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on school board decision making and on conflict among decision makers in various sectors. A simple framework is developed for making predictions about what factors are likely to be associated with greater conflict on public boards. The data and analytical methods employed are described, and the results on the determinants of conflict and division in school board decision making are shown and explored. The final two sections conclude with a discussion of the findings, limitations, and directions for future research.

CONFLICT AND GOVERNING BOARDS IN CONTEXT

Multiple strands of literature come together to create the context for this study. The first is work on school board decision making, found mostly in the education literature. The second is a broader body of work on the role of governing boards in organizations in the private and nonprofit sectors. The third is a literature on group decision making, including work on the role of conflict in influencing the quality of group decisions.

Research on School and Other Governing Boards

The recent literature in education on school board decision making is exceptionally shallow given the scope and authority of the institution. A review article by Land (2002) describes a handful of rigorous qualitative studies but also notes that much of the existing work is “expert opinion” about how school boards ought to operate to govern effectively that is based on a small and inadequate evidentiary base. With a few exceptions, Land summarizes this literature as “frequently relying on anecdotal evidence, rather than data from carefully designed research studies, to support [its] conclusions” (265).

Land’s caveat notwithstanding, scholars have identified a number of characteristics or practices that promote effective school board governance. One of the most frequently referenced is the assertion that school boards should focus on policy rather than administration. For example, Carol et al. (1986) draw on nine in-depth case studies to argue for a redefinition of the role of the school board in district governance. They conclude that effective boards avoid micromanagement of the superintendent and focus their efforts on broad policy decisions rather than on day-to-day administration. In another example, Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997) identify characteristics of high-quality board governance through a study of boards in 10 districts. They observe that micromanagement of the central office tends to characterize boards in low-achieving districts, as does confusion about separation of responsibilities among decision makers. Other studies highlight the importance of positive relations between the school board and superintendent. Anderson (1992) cites maintenance of this relationship as one of the most important characteristics of effective boards. Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan (1992) note the importance of training of board members on managing their relationships with their superintendents. Carol et al. (1986) and Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997) make similar linkages. Still other studies have noted the importance of such factors as frequent and purposeful self-evaluation (Campbell and Greene 1994; Carol et al. 1986; Robinson and Bickers 1990) and

ongoing training and professional development (Carol et al. 1986; Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan 1992).

This work on school board decision making and effectiveness fits into a broader and better developed literature on the impact of governing boards and board characteristics on organizational performance. For example, work on organizations in the nonprofit sector has linked the effectiveness of board decision making directly to the effectiveness of the overall organization (Herman and Renz 1999, 2000). Studies have found impacts of boards of directors members' interpersonal and strategic competencies (Brown 2005), commitment to the organization (Preston and Brown 2004), and intentional efforts to improve board management (Brudney and Murray 1998) on nonprofit organizational performance. Other studies have emphasized the use of specific board processes (e.g., Herman, Renz, and Heimovics 1997). In the literature on boards of trustees in private firms, scholars have examined the role of such characteristics as board size (e.g., Eisenberg, Sundgren, and Wells 1998; Pfeffer 1972), board composition and structure (e.g., Coles, McWilliams, and Sen 2001; Dalton et al. 1998; Dulewicz and Herbert 2004; Kula 2005; Pfeffer 1972), and board practices (e.g., Dulewicz and Herbert 2004; Kula 2005) in determining firm performance, as measured by financial outcomes. The results generally have been mixed, with a review by Korac-Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2001) concluding that research has failed to uncover "universal associations" between board attributes and company performance.

Conflict and Group Decision Making

A related line of research that has grown out of work on decision making in private firms is the role of interpersonal conflict on outcomes. Conflict is a process in which "one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (Wall and Callister 1995, 517). This process leads to opposition among the parties that results in some pattern of actions and reactions (Thomas 1992). Recognition of conflict as a pattern is important because it emphasizes a time dimension that distinguishes conflict from simple disagreement. Researchers have identified intragroup conflict as an important area for study because of the potential it has to interfere with team performance via the production of tension and antagonism that distracts team members from completing group objectives (De Dreu and Weingart 2003).

Many studies have examined intragroup conflict in private firm settings in the context of top management teams and work groups. For example, Amason (1996) focuses on management teams in food processing and furniture production. He finds conflict to be multidimensional, taking both functional (cognitive and task oriented) and dysfunctional (emotional and focused on personal incompatibilities) forms. Using survey data, he links dysfunctional conflict directly to lower decision quality through the undermining of consensus. Although he notes that functional conflict synthesizes perspectives and thus could lead to higher decision quality, he finds that the two types often occur together. In another example, Jehn and Mannix (2001) observe 51 teams of MBA students from three universities as they engage in consulting activities with local firms. As in the Amason study, the authors hypothesize a negative role for relationship conflict but a potentially positive role for task conflict. However, examining conflict among members at multiple stages of the project, they find that high-performing work groups tend to have lower degrees of both task and relationship conflict throughout the group experience.

Multiple other studies in the literature on group decision making in the private sector have similarly examined conflict as a two-dimensional concept in which one dimension (relationship conflict) is detrimental to the quality of outcomes and the other (task conflict) has benefits (e.g., Jehn 1995; Simons and Peterson 2000). In a meta-analytic review of 30 studies from this literature, however, De Dreu and Weingart (2003) conclude that there is little evidence across studies that task and relationship conflict correlate differentially with team performance. Although five studies they analyzed did find positive relationships between task conflict and performance, the average correlation across studies was negative ($r = -.23$). Summarizing their analysis, the authors conclude that “for team performance, task conflict and relationship conflict are equally disruptive” (746). They also find evidence that conflict has an even more detrimental effect in complex task environments where problem solving must take place over extended time periods, which, note, is likely to be the case with governing boards in most public organizations.

Although the conclusion from analysis of private sector work teams suggests that conflict undermines group decision making, no studies in the private sector management literature have looked at conflict specifically in the context that would be most directly applicable to governing boards in the public sphere: the corporate board of trustees. Data limitations are a likely cause of the scarcity of systematic evidence; the closed nature of most private board decision making and board members' reticence to discuss confidential decision-making processes would make obtaining rigorous data difficult. However, work on boards of trustees in the nonprofit sector suggests that the detrimental impacts of conflict observed on decisions made by private sector work teams extend to decisions made by governing boards as well. Multiple studies support an inverse relationship between board conflict and effectiveness. For example, Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin (1992) find that CEOs of Canadian nonprofit organizations rate their boards more effective when board conflict is lower. Cornforth (2001) finds that nonprofit boards in Great Britain who report being able to manage conflict among themselves were also judged to be the most effective. Brown (2005) draws on data from nonprofit board members and executives in Los Angeles and Phoenix to evaluate the effects of board orientations on effectiveness. He finds that boards characterized by collegial group processes and strong interpersonal relationships among members tend to be more effective when effectiveness is measured by net revenues to the organization.

A few articles have demonstrated a negative association between board conflict and organizational outcomes in the public sector. For example, using data from city managers in Florida, Whitaker and DeHoog (1991) link political conflict and instability on city councils to turnover among managers in municipal governments. Similarly, drawing on national survey data, Watson and Hassett (2003) find that city council stability and support of management are markers of cities with the longest serving city managers.

Qualitative work from the literature on school boards also supports the idea that board conflict can lead to negative outcomes. Carol et al. (1986) cite board factionalism and an inability to manage differences among members as hindrances to board effectiveness that board members frequently mentioned in interviews. In their case studies, Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997) find that poor interpersonal relations between board members and with the superintendent are markers of poor governance, leading them to recommend ongoing team building as a strategy for improving board performance. Hill, Wise, and Shapiro (1989) studied six urban districts that implemented major recent reforms

and find boards' abilities to overcome fractures and reach consensus to be important conditions for change.

PREDICTING CONFLICT ON GOVERNING BOARDS IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Taken together, the research on private sector management and work teams, nonprofit boards of directors, city councils, and school boards suggests that conflict among governing board members in public organizations is an important area for study because it matters for board and organizational effectiveness. Yet, very few studies have attempted to identify what factors predict greater degrees of conflict on public governing boards, a significant omission from the literature given the large potential impact of this variable on organizational outcomes. Here, I step into this gap. Guided by prior work in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors, I develop predictions for what variables contribute to conflict among governing board members in the context of a simple typology of potential factors.

Governing Board Conflict: Forces Without and Within

While acknowledging that the focus of recent group decision-making literature has been on the results rather than on the causes of intragroup conflict, Wall and Callister (1995) enumerate a long list of potential antecedents that prior work either has assumed or examined specifically. In adapting this list and other research to the case of governing boards in public organizations, it is helpful to use a typology proposed by Hung (1998) to describe the roles of corporate boards that makes a useful distinction between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* forces that shape board dynamics and orientations. Extrinsic, or external, factors are those that come from the environment or that the board must take as given, at least in the short term. These might include organizational context variables, the relationships of the board to other organized groups, or characteristics of board elections. Intrinsic, or internal, factors derive from institutional choices, board practices, or characteristics of the board members themselves.

Note that distinctions between extrinsic and intrinsic forces are sometimes arbitrary. For example, board member race characteristics are internal in the sense that they are characteristics of the board members themselves but external in the sense that they are "assigned" to each board by an outside appointment or election process. As another example, board size might be categorized as extrinsic because it is an externally chosen structural characteristic but intrinsic because its real impact on conflict is as a characteristic of the group itself. The following discussion uses the extrinsic-intrinsic dichotomy as an organizing device, recognizing that several of the items placed under one rightfully might be considered as being characterized by the other.

Extrinsic Factors

Studies in private management commonly assume that the complexity of the task environment predicts greater conflict. As Wall and Callister (1995) note, the complexity of the problems with which a group must deal is "more likely to generate misunderstanding, to tap divergent interests or unearth dissimilar goals" (522). Applied to governing boards, the implication is that boards that must wrestle with more difficult decisions and greater uncertainty about policy decisions are more likely to face disagreement over proper courses

of action. Complexity also is closely tied to multiplicity. Boards that face more difficult task environments are likely to have to make a larger number of decisions to address a complicated or uncertain set of problems. Each of these intermediate decisions presents an opportunity for disagreement over goals, values, or directions.

School boards operate within school district contexts that provide measures of the complexity of the board's task environment. These measures of complexity arise from two sources: the number and difficulty of the issues the board encounters and the heterogeneity of the community interests to which the board must respond in governing the district. In practice, many variables that measure the complexity of the environment capture both of these dimensions simultaneously. For example, urban districts and districts with larger numbers of students are more complex both because the number and difficulty of the issues they confront are increasing in the number of people within the district community and because larger urban districts educate more diverse students and employ more diverse personnel, giving the board a wider range of preferences that it must take into account. Conversely, rural districts and smaller districts are more homogeneous and should generate fewer opportunities for board members to confront the goal or value divergence that underlies board conflict. Unified districts—that is, K-12, rather than elementary or secondary only—are hypothesized to be more complex because their wider grade span creates a larger and more diverse set of issues that the board must manage relative to districts with a more homogenous subset of similarly aged students.

Characteristics of the district's student body also contribute to the complexity of the task environment. For example, educating large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is likely to present districts and their boards with larger numbers of instruction and discipline challenges. Lower incomes among families within the school district are also likely to be associated with lower levels of resources on which districts can draw, making these challenges even tougher to solve. As Grubb (2008) points out, these resources need not be monetary but can also be more complex social resources, such as parental involvement, that can impact school outcomes.

Budgetary resources are a feature of the task environment that can contribute to its complexity, although it is not clear in what direction the association will run. On the one hand, the size of the district budget may measure the complexity of the task environment because each dollar allocated represents a decision made about resource use. On the other hand, larger budgets may make the task environment easier to manage because the allocation of a less scarce resource set may require fewer trade-offs and thus fewer opportunities to disagree about member priorities.

Another set of extrinsic factors that may influence the level of intragroup conflict on the board relate to board structural characteristics that determine how and what kind of board members are selected. Three factors are considered especially important. The first is the size of the board. In their study of work teams in the electronics industry, Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin (1999) find group size to be positively correlated with both task and emotional conflict in the work groups they observed. Because larger decision-making bodies must aggregate the preferences of a larger number of decision makers, it is possible that larger public governing boards may tend to experience greater intraboard conflict. However, other studies suggest that group size may reduce conflict. For example, in her study of nurses organized into subunits with a hospital, Cox (2003) finds that larger groups were less likely to express conflict, although the mechanism underlying this finding is unclear.

The second structural factor is whether or not board members are elected in single-member district, or ward, elections rather than in at-large elections. Insofar as school board members from single-member districts tend to represent their electoral districts' interests rather than the interests of the full school district, ward elections may promote board conflict by increasing the heterogeneity of members' goals and preferences. Welch and Bledsoe (1988) observe such a dynamic in a national sample of city councils. Similarly, some qualitative school boards research finds that school boards whose members are elected in subdistricts are more fractious (Danzberger 1994; Kirst 1994). The third factor is the fraction of board members who are appointed rather than elected. Having a larger fraction of appointed members may reduce conflict because members appointed by the same person or group (e.g., the mayor) are likely to share similar views. Land (2002) notes that little research has considered this issue in the context of school boards.

The final group of extrinsic factors examined relate to the electoral environment within which the board operates. In particular, it is hypothesized that greater levels of activity and competition in the electoral environment will exert pressure on board members to pursue some goals or priorities over others, making conflict over those goals within the board more likely. A potential source of external pressure for public governing boards that is more important than in the corporate or nonprofit context is interest group activity. Other studies have identified external interest groups as significant predictors of internal conflict among local decision makers in the public sector. For example, in a study of collective bargaining between firefighters and city governments, Kochan, Huber, and Cummings (1975) find that union involvement in elections and other forms of union pressure correlate positively with conflict experienced among city officials.

There is reason to believe that it may be even more important to look at interest groups when school boards are the unit of analysis because of the significant roles that teachers' unions and other groups are thought to play in the formation of education policy (Hess and Leal 2005). Research suggests that teachers' unions in particular invest in gaining influence among school board members by contributing to campaigns and mobilizing voters, although other groups engage in similar practices as well (Moe 2005). Gaining support among school board members is especially valuable among teachers' unions because supportive school board members can direct district resources to teachers via collective bargaining agreements and other means (Moe 2005, 2009).

Intrinsic Factors

Many studies in the group decision-making literature have demonstrated that characteristics of the group itself are significant predictors of intragroup conflict. Heterogeneity of membership within the group is one such characteristic. Member diversity not only means more and different preferences but increases the number of alternatives "brought to the table," making reaching consensus more difficult (Amason and Schweiger 1994). Moreover, people from different backgrounds may have trouble socially integrating to approach a common problem (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007). Consistent with this view, Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin (1999) find that race and tenure diversity predict emotional conflict on work teams. Ancona and Caldwell (1992) and Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale (1999) find similar relationships. Researchers also note that some dimensions of diversity, such as race (e.g., Sessa 1993), may be more important for predicting group conflict than others, such as gender (e.g., Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin 1999), although Pelled (1996) does observe that

gender diversity predicted intragroup conflict in work teams in electronics manufacturing plants.

For *public* governing boards, member heterogeneity may be even more predictive of conflict because heterogeneous boards are likely to be chosen by heterogeneous communities with heterogeneous policy preferences. Community preference heterogeneity and board preference heterogeneity will be linked if different board members are representative of different constituencies or if they hold allegiances to the specific groups that helped them win office. The process of working out divergent policy goals to reach a collective choice will offer opportunities for board conflict to arise. The analyses that follow examine the contributions of heterogeneity on multiple dimensions, including gender, race, and ideology.

Another class of intrinsic factors that prior work has suggested will predict board conflict is related to member vision and goals. In particular, scholars have emphasized the importance of individual members sharing a common vision for the board's role (Carol et al. 1986; Cornforth 2001; Danzberger 1994). When individual goals for board action are incompatible, conflict is likely to arise (Kochan, Huber, and Cummings 1975). Jehn and Mannix (2001) identify group value consensus as a predictor of conflict among participants in consulting work groups. Similarly, Merz's (1986) analysis of survey responses from 414 school board members in Washington, Missouri, and New Jersey links conflict on school boards to expectations about board members' roles.

A final set of intrinsic factors that should be examined are board decision-making process variables. These may include the board's use of self-evaluation, delegation of decisions to one or more standing committees, or the degree to which the board provides information to board members for consideration in advance of formal meetings. Multiple studies have shown the importance of these "good governance" practices for board effectiveness in the private and nonprofit sectors (e.g., Cornforth 2001; Herman and Renz 2000). Boards employing these processes may experience less conflict because professionalization may serve to bring regularity and routine to the decision-making process. These routines may allow the board to deal more straightforwardly with controversy (Carol et al. 1986). In support of this conjecture, Corwin (1969) finds organizational professionalization to be a key moderating factor for conflict within schools.

DATA AND METHODS

The primary data source for this study comes from an original survey of a stratified sample of sitting California school board members. The California District School Board Member Survey (CDSBMS) was administered by the author to board members in 222 of California's 975 school districts. Districts were stratified by size and chosen randomly. In contrast to the survey methodology used in most previous school board surveys, which randomly selected boards and then surveyed a representative member on each board chosen, the CDSBMS solicited responses from every member of each board drawn into the survey sample. Such a methodology not only allows the analyst to capture the diversity of characteristics, attitudes, and experiences on the board but also should improve the accuracy of board-level estimates.

The response rate for the survey was 63%. Sampling and response propensity weights were constructed to mitigate the effects of sampling and nonresponse bias in the analysis that follows. A full description of the survey methodology and the weighting structure, as

well as descriptive information on board members and their backgrounds, is available in Grissom (2007).

District-level identifiers included in survey responses allow them to be linked to district administrative data. Data on school district characteristics come primarily from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD). Data on median household income and education levels in the districts come from the 2000 US Census. Incorporation of these data sources imposes no reductions of sample size on the CDSBMS data analysis.

Dependent Variables

The primary goal of this study was to test assertions about the predictors of conflict in decision making among members of public governing boards. To measure conflict, I use responses given to two different survey questions. The first is the question of what percentage of decisions made by the respondent's school board are characterized by full agreement, general consensus, and division among board members. In particular, the *percent division* response is used to capture the degree of conflict in decision making. The other measure comes from respondents' level of agreement with the statement, "My school board works together well almost always." Responses are given on a standard 5-point Likert scale. Although these two variables measure somewhat different aspects of conflict, as expected they are highly correlated (Pearson's $r = -.70$).

Board-level descriptive statistics are shown in table 1. On average, respondents' estimates of the fraction of decisions characterized by division were small. The mean response was 9%. This low median value comports with previous work that has noted that most school board decisions are routine and made by near unanimity (Polinard et al. 1994). However, responses also show a significant degree of variability. The standard deviation is 9.6. Furthermore, whereas 26% of respondents report no division, 10% report a percentage greater than 20, indicating that the distribution is right skewed. The mean assessment of how well the board works together is 4.24, indicating a relatively high assessment of good relations, but this measure also shows substantial variation across respondents ($s = .67$).

One worry that arises in the use of subjective data gleaned from surveys is that responses are noisy measures of the underlying latent construct. Intraclass correlations for the two dependent variables are approximately 0.4, suggesting moderate but not strong agreement among members within school boards about the level of board division and the degree to which board members work together well. One implication of measurement error in the dependent variable is bias toward a null finding, making statistically significant results more difficult to obtain. To reduce the potential impacts of noise in these measures, board member responses are aggregated to the board level in the analyses that follow.

Independent Variables

The independent variables included in the analysis follow directly from the discussion of extrinsic and intrinsic factors previously. Measures of the complexity of the organizational environment come mostly from the National Center for Education Statistics' CCD. These include district locale type (urban or rural, with suburban omitted), district size (average daily attendance, expressed in 1,000s), whether the district is unified (K-12), per pupil

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Predicted Relationship with Board Conflict	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variables						
Percent divisive decisions		190	9.01	9.66	0	56.25
Works together well		190	4.24	0.67	1.75	5
Independent variables:						
extrinsic factors						
Complexity of environment						
Urban location	+	192	0.19	0.4	0	1
Rural location	−	192	0.37	0.49	0	1
District size (in 1,000s)	+	192	9	16.94	0.01	114.78
Unified (K-12) district	+	192	0.38	0.49	0	1
Fraction students nonwhite	+	191	0.46	0.28	0.03	1
Median household income (in \$10,000s)	−	192	4.8	1.85	1.63	16.21
Per pupil spending (in \$1,000s)	±	192	7.5	2.38	4.95	28.06
Board structural characteristics						
Board size	+	190	5.14	0.92	3	7
Single-member (ward) elections	+	192	0.13	0.32	0	1
Fraction of board appointed	−	189	0.14	0.2	0	1
Active electoral environment						
Teacher's union donations (in \$1,000s)	+	192	0.14	0.25	0	1
Other interest group donations (in \$1,000s)	+	192	0.23	0.4	0	1.75
Fraction running unopposed	−	186	0.4	0.4	0	1
Independent variables:						
intrinsic factors						
Board heterogeneity						
Gender heterogeneity	+	190	0.32	0.20	0	0.5
Racial heterogeneity	+	190	0.22	0.23	0	0.73
Ideological heterogeneity (fiscal)	+	189	0.36	0.22	0	0.75
Ideological heterogeneity (social)	+	189	0.42	0.2	0	0.75
Common vision and goals						
Common vision index	−	190	0.73	0.25	0.31	1
Common goals index	−	192	0.53	0.25	0	1
Professional processes						
Professionalization index	−	192	3.11	0.81	0	5

Note: Only districts with two or more respondents are included.

expenditures (in \$1,000s), and the fraction of students who are nonwhite. One additional variable, district median household income, is obtained from 2000 census data.

Data on other extrinsic factors are taken from survey responses, including the fraction of the board members reported as being appointed and whether respondents report being elected from single-member districts. Three measures that characterize the electoral environment are also obtained from the CDSBMS responses. The first is a measure of teachers' union influence on elections, calculated as the average amount of monetary donations from teachers' unions to board members' most recent campaigns.¹ The second is a similar measure calculated as the sum of the totals reported from all interest groups other than teachers' unions. These include parent groups, business groups, school reform coalitions, ethnic or racial groups, religious organizations, and other groups. Table 1 shows that these amounts on average to be quite small; the average school board member reports \$140 in contributions from unions and \$230 from other groups. Note that these amounts are underestimates because responses are right censored at \$1,000. The third variable is the fraction of board respondents who report having run unopposed in their most recent election. This variable is taken as a measure of how competitive elections in the district are.

Measures of all intrinsic factors are taken from survey responses. Board size is one of these variables. Heterogeneity of the school board is also considered and is measured on multiple dimensions: gender, race, and ideology. Heterogeneity on each dimension is measured using the Blau (1977) index of variability, a commonly employed mode of operationalizing heterogeneity in the social sciences. The index is computed as $1 - \sum p_i^2$ where p is the proportion of board members in category i of the dimension of interest. A perfectly homogeneous board would have a Blau index value of 0, with more heterogeneous boards having scores closer to 1, although the upper limit of the index is bounded away from 1 as the number of categories shrinks. Thus, for gender heterogeneity, a board in which everyone was male (or everyone was female) would have a Blau index value of $1 - ((1)^2 + (0)^2) = 0$, indicating perfect gender homogeneity, whereas a board with maximal heterogeneity—that is, that was evenly split between men and women—would produce an index value of $1 - ((0.5)^2 + (0.5)^2) = 0.5$. Table 1 shows that boards at both end of the spectrum are contained in the data set. The average value for the gender heterogeneity index is 0.32, a medium level. On average, 48% of California board members are female.

The measure of racial heterogeneity uses responses to a survey question that asked how many board members on the respondent's board fall into one of six race categories. This allows racial heterogeneity to be measured for boards in which *any* member responded, rather than just taking one or two respondents' races as the best estimate for the board as a whole. The average index score for the boards in the sample is 0.22. The minimum value is 0, and the highest value is 0.74 (note that the highest possible value for this six-category race scheme is 0.83). Note that this conceptualization of heterogeneity is distinct from simple race representation and places attention instead on the concentration of power among groups.

Respondents were also asked to rate themselves on a three-value scale (liberal, moderate, and conservative) denoting their general political philosophy separately with respect

1 Respondents were not asked to report exact dollar amounts. Instead, they were provided a series of ranges within which to report contributions. These ranges are converted to dollar amounts using the median of each category. The highest category (\$1,000 or more) is censored at \$1,000.

to fiscal and social issues. Two additional Blau indices were calculated to measure each board's fiscal and social ideological heterogeneity. Both indices yielded ranges from 0 to 0.75 (the maximum possible value), with means of 0.32 (fiscal) and 0.36 (social). Despite these similarities, the correlation between these two index values was just 0.48.

The next set of intrinsic factors concern the degree to which board members express a vision and a set of policy priorities that are similar to those reported by their fellow board members. To measure *common vision*, responses to the question "Which of the following best represents your view of your primary role as a school board member?" are used. Possible choices can be labeled "trustee," "manager," "representative," "expert," and "other." "Trustee" was the most common answer, with 75% of respondents choosing it. A modified Blau index is used to create a *common vision index*, with the fraction of each board responding to each of the five categories filling in for p . The modification is that the sum of squared fractions is not subtracted from 1, so that higher values indicate a more positive score for common vision. Common vision index scores ranged from 0.31 (very disparate vision) to 1 (perfect common vision).

The measurement of common goals derives from the ranking responders were asked to give of nine goals that were potentially important to them as board members. These goals include such choices as "building and maintaining good facilities," "choosing the right curriculum for the district," and "increasing parental involvement in schools." The most common first-choice answer was "hiring good central office administrators and superintendents," followed by "allocating the district budget correctly" and "hiring good teachers." To create a measure of goal agreement, the top three priorities listed by each school board member are used. For each policy goal a member named among his or her top priorities, the fraction of the *other* responding members from the same board who also list that policy area as a top three priority is calculated. This fraction is then averaged across the three policy goals for each respondent to obtain a measure of agreement of that person's goals with those of the other members of the board.² The mean of all respondents' agreement measures is taken as the *common goals index* value for the board. Note that this value is only calculated when at least two members from the board responded; otherwise, it is coded as missing.

The final intrinsic factor concerns the board's implementation of good governance practices. Five practices identified as markers of a professionalized board are asked about in the survey. These include the use of consent calendars to discharge routine business, whether the board has briefing packets prepared for them in advance of meetings, whether the board includes outside community members on committees, whether the board has conducted a self-evaluation in the past 12 months, and whether the board has conducted an evaluation of the superintendent during that same time frame. A simple *professionalization index* is calculated as the sum of how many of these practices respondents report employing.

2 As an example, consider a board with three respondents, all of whom choose "hiring good administrators" as their top priority. The first two respondents list "allocating the budget" and "hiring good teachers" as their other top priorities, whereas the third respondent chooses "building good facilities" and "increasing parental involvement." Now take respondent 1. Her first priority is among the top priorities of both of the other respondents, so I assign it a value of 1.0. However, her second priority is shared only by respondent 2, so I assign it a value of .5 to represent that it is shared by only half of the other respondents. Her third priority similarly is assigned a value of .5. To calculate respondent 1's individual agreement measure, I take the average of the three values (1.0, .5, and .5) to obtain .67. A similar exercise is undertaken for respondents 2 and 3, who in this example would have agreement measures of .67 and .33, respectively. The board-level measure would be the average of .67, .67, and .33, or .56.

Methods

Standard ordinary least squares regression models are used to predict the two measures of board conflict. Only boards with at least two respondents are included. Respondent-level variables are averaged, and analyses are performed at the board level using weights to adjust for survey nonresponse. Running analyses at the board level serves multiple purposes. First, from a theoretical perspective, board-level analysis is appropriate because conflict is a property of the group, not of its individuals. Second, aggregating to board level helps alleviate concerns about measurement error and undue influence from outlying observations. For most regressions, the sample size is $n = 184$.

Note that item nonresponse was an issue for three of the variables considered in the analysis. These were the two interest group donation variables and the common goals index. These three variables had no response from any member of 7–12 boards who otherwise would have been included in the analytic sample. Rather than drop these boards, I set the values for the missing variables to the mean for the entire sample and included indicator variables in the regressions for boards with imputed spending or common goal measures. These flag variables were small and statistically insignificant in all models and are not reported in the tables.

RESULTS

To test the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors in predicting governing board conflict, five identical models were estimated for each of the two dependent variables. Table 2 reports regression results when the percent of divisive board decisions is used as the dependent variable. Table 3 reports the same results when the dependent variable is the degree to which the board works together well.

Extrinsic Factors and Divisive Decisions

Model 1 in table 2 includes all measures from the three groups of extrinsic factors: complexity of organizational environment, board structural characteristics, and level of activity in the electoral environment. These results show support for most but not all the predictions drawn from prior literature about the relationships among these four factors and board conflict.

The weakest results are found for complexity of organizational environment. As predicted, urban boards experience a greater percentage of divisive decisions than do suburban boards (3.6 percentage points more, on average). This difference is significant at the .10 level. However, counter to a task complexity argument, rural boards are also found to have more division than suburban boards. In fact, the null hypothesis that urban districts and rural districts have the same amount of conflict cannot be rejected at any reasonable level ($F = 0.24, p = .62$). Moreover, boards in districts with larger numbers of students experience less divisiveness, with conflict in decision making falling about 2 percentage points for each 10,000 students. Rather than increase conflict on the governing board by presenting it with larger numbers of more difficult challenges, larger organizations promote greater consensus. Notice that these results maintain over all five specifications presented in table 2, reducing concern that the results may be driven by omission of another important characteristic.

Table 2
Predicting School Board Conflict (dependent variable = percent divisive decisions)

	1		2		3		4		5	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Extrinsic factors										
Urban	3.56*	2.08	4.92**	2.17	5.42**	2.21	6.12***	2.00	4.58**	1.92
Rural	3.81***	1.35	3.92***	1.34	3.40**	1.32	3.52***	1.32	3.47***	1.31
District size (in 1,000s)	-0.18**	0.09	-0.11**	0.05	-0.11*	0.05	-0.13**	0.06	-0.14*	0.07
Unified district	1.80	1.85	1.74	1.87	1.96	1.84	2.20	1.87	1.42	1.68
Fraction students nonwhite	9.51***	2.90	13.10***	3.57	14.18***	3.63	10.12***	3.08	11.20***	3.26
Median household income (in \$10,000s)	0.15	0.25	0.35	0.26	0.33	0.27	0.29	0.26	0.31	0.26
Per pupil spending (in \$1,000s)	-0.22	0.21	-0.35	0.22	-0.32	0.20	-0.34*	0.20	-0.22	0.21
Board size	1.55*	0.90	2.07**	0.97	2.19**	0.96	1.72*	0.98	2.10**	0.94
Single-member (ward) elections	6.01**	2.69	4.77*	2.64	4.36	2.68	4.18	2.54	6.00**	2.47
Fraction of board appointed	1.71	3.09	-3.16	2.58	-3.04	2.47	-1.19	2.64	1.61	3.19
Teacher's union donations (in \$1,000s)	8.74*	5.29							10.07**	4.63
Other interest group donations (in \$1,000s)	0.46	3.68							-0.87	2.98
Fraction running unopposed	-2.37	1.61							-2.65	1.68
Intrinsic factors										
Gender heterogeneity			-1.30	2.90	0.63	2.74			-3.09	2.76
Racial heterogeneity, board			-6.69*	3.76	-6.41*	3.55			-5.90*	3.41
Ideological heterogeneity (fiscal)			5.73*	3.29	5.14	3.19			6.72**	3.18
Ideological heterogeneity (social)			-0.67	3.21	-1.15	3.22			-0.68	2.99
Racial heterogeneity, population					-7.76	5.03				
Common vision index							-6.88***	2.20	-6.98***	2.15
Common goals index							-0.36	2.82	0.37	2.80
Professionalization index							-1.77	1.18	-2.37**	1.20
Constant	-4.66	5.28	-8.77*	5.18	-6.89	5.10	5.22	6.34	3.42	6.54
Observations	184		184		184		184		184	
R^2	0.262		0.246		0.259		0.277		0.353	

Note: Districts with two or more respondents included. Survey weights used to adjust for nonresponse.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Predicting School Board Conflict (dependent variable = school board works together well)

	1		2		3		4		5	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Extrinsic factors										
Urban	-0.24*	0.14	-0.38**	0.16	-0.42***	0.16	-0.41***	0.16	-0.29**	0.14
Rural	-0.28***	0.10	-0.25**	0.10	-0.22**	0.11	-0.23**	0.11	-0.26**	0.10
District size (in 1,000s)	0.01*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01*	0.00
Unified district	-0.06	0.12	-0.06	0.12	-0.08	0.12	-0.06	0.13	-0.05	0.12
Fraction students nonwhite	-0.62***	0.21	-0.75***	0.27	-0.82***	0.26	-0.71***	0.23	-0.59**	0.24
Median household income (in \$10,000s)	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Per pupil spending (in \$1,000s)	-0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Board size	-0.11*	0.06	-0.13*	0.07	-0.14*	0.07	-0.10	0.07	-0.13*	0.07
Single-member (ward) elections	-0.12	0.17	-0.06	0.18	-0.03	0.19	-0.05	0.17	-0.11	0.15
Fraction of board appointed	-0.26	0.25	0.01	0.22	0.00	0.22	-0.07	0.23	-0.25	0.24
Teacher's union donations (in \$1,000s)	-0.90***	0.33							-0.98***	0.32
Other interest group donations (in \$1,000s)	-0.23	0.19							-0.16	0.17
Fraction running unopposed	0.06	0.11							0.07	0.11
Intrinsic factors										
Gender heterogeneity			0.18	0.21	0.05	0.21			0.25	0.19
Racial heterogeneity, board			0.11	0.28	0.09	0.27			0.05	0.25
Ideological heterogeneity (fiscal)			-0.40*	0.21	-0.36*	0.21			-0.43**	0.19
Ideological heterogeneity (social)			0.10	0.25	0.14	0.25			0.13	0.22
Racial heterogeneity, population					0.51	0.31				
Common vision index							0.36**	0.16	0.36**	0.15
Common goals index							-0.06	0.17	-0.10	0.14
Professionalization index							0.08	0.07	0.11*	0.06
Constant	5.55***	0.37	5.64***	0.40	5.52***	0.40	4.99***	0.42	5.05***	0.40
Observations	184		188		188		188		184	
R ²	0.319		0.225		0.236		0.244		0.372	

Note: Districts with two or more respondents included. Survey weights used to adjust for nonresponse.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

District size and locale type obviously are correlated. In fact, the average number of students among urban districts in the sample (39,337) is more than 52 times larger than the average number of students among rural districts in the sample (749). An organization overseeing 39,337 students is likely to be qualitatively different from the one governing only 749, but the results indicate that, at least conditioning on size and a handful of other factors, the two groups' governing boards would experience similar levels of disagreement in decision making.

To investigate these relationships more completely, a series of additional models relating locale type to conflict were run (results not tabulated). The first estimated divisive decision making just as a function of locale type. In this model, only *urban* was positive ($\beta = 6.1$) and significant ($p = .01$), consistent with the environmental complexity hypothesis. Next district size was entered into the equation. Its coefficient was small ($\beta = -0.08$) and statistically insignificant, and little change to the urban or rural coefficient was observed, indicating that size alone is not the sole factor differentiating urban districts from rural ones. In the next model, the indicator for being a unified district, median income, per pupil spending, and the board structural characteristics were all added. Still, the coefficient on *urban* remained large ($\beta = 6.1$) and significant at the .01 level, whereas the coefficient on rural remained smaller ($\beta = 1.9$) and failed to achieve statistical significance, with an F test rejecting the null hypothesis that the coefficients were the same. It was only when the fraction of nonwhite students in the district was entered as a covariate that the rural coefficient jumped to become significant and statistically indistinguishable from the urban coefficient. This change suggests that failing to control for student demography, a strong predictor of board conflict, would mask the otherwise positive association of school board division and rural status because rural districts tend to have fewer nonwhite students. In other words, consonant with expectations, school board conflict is lower in the average rural district in a simple comparison with urban districts, but this similarity dissipates once the very dissimilar distribution of student characteristics across locale types is taken into account.

Consistent with predictions, boards in districts with larger fractions of nonwhite students experience substantially higher conflict in decision making. In fact, according to the results shown in model 1, boards in districts with 100% nonwhite students would be predicted to report that 9.5% more of their decisions were characterized by division among board members than would districts with 100% white students. This is a large difference, considering that 9% is the mean level of divisiveness reported for the overall sample. This coefficient is even larger in all the other columns in table 2.

Besides its link to the complexity of the issue environment the board encounters, the strong predictive power of the fraction of nonwhite students is consistent with another argument less recent work has made about organizational status and conflict. From a sociological perspective, Minar (1966) observes that organizations composed of individuals from lower social status will tend not to command the social resources to manage conflict among themselves. Specifically in the context of schools, Minar argues that this inability to deal with conflict within the organization sets the "tone of the entire system of school politics in the community" (825). This argument suggests that a secondary link between having large numbers of nonwhite students and conflict on the governing board may be a greater intensity of intraorganizational conflict that manifests itself in the decision making governing that organization as well. This explanation is supported by work by Boyd (1975), who finds differences in board culture between high- and low-status communities. In the

former, board members tend to view themselves as elite decision councils, making decisions internally and accepting little input from the organization itself. In the latter, the intensity of conflict forces the board to be more receptive and responsive to potentially heterogeneous community voices (Stetzler 1974).

Returning to model 1 in table 2, observe that, consistent with complexity of task environment hypothesis, unified districts report greater divisiveness, although the effect is not statistically significant. Similarly, we see that median household income and per pupil spending show no significant relationship with board conflict.

The other coefficients shown in model 1 are consistent with the idea that board structural characteristics and features of the electoral environment matter for board divisiveness. As predicted, larger boards report greater division. Each additional board member is associated with a 1.6% increase in the number of divisive decisions, lending support to the conclusion that conflict is more likely to arise when decision processes must aggregate the preferences of a larger number of participants. In addition to the larger numbers of potentially dissimilar perspectives that must be accommodated, larger groups face greater difficulties with cohesion and communication, making it more likely that conflicts are sustained over time (Amason and Sapienza 1997). Thus, although board size has been labeled an extrinsic determinant of conflict because of its structural nature, its effects on conflict likely occur through its influence on the internal dynamics of the board as a decision-making group.

The coefficient on single-member elections is large ($\beta = 6.0$) and statistically significant at the .05 level. Ward representatives are likely to be more responsive to the preferences of their particular voters than to those of the community as a whole. Because of geographic segregation, the constituency represented by a member elected in a subdistrict is different from the constituency elected in an at-large election. In the language of one prominent model of representation, these board members' preferences are determined by a different "median voter" than they would be if they were chosen in a full-district election (Black 1948). Thus, consensus will be more difficult for ward representatives to achieve. Prior work also has suggested that single-member elections encourage board members to view their role on the board—that is, as a trustee of the public good versus as a representative of a constituency—differently (Land 2002). However, because the coefficient changes very little in the full model (model 5), which includes a control for board members' views of these roles, I conclude that differences in perceptions of role orientation are not pivotal in explaining the association between election type and conflict. Note that results for the fraction of the board appointed show inconsistent signs across the models and are not statistically significant, suggesting that not all characteristics of board structure are important determinants of conflict.

Again consistent with predictions, there is evidence that interest group activity is associated with school board divisiveness. In particular, the coefficient on teachers' union activity is large and statistically significant at the .10 level. The results indicate that for every additional \$1,000 donated by the union to the typical school board candidate, divisive decisions on the board increase by 8.7 percentage points. In model 5, the coefficient is even larger ($\beta = 10.0$). In both models, the coefficient for other interest group donations is positive but small and not statistically significant. One caveat to these results is that, as you would expect, donations by the groups are highly correlated ($r = .65$), meaning that discriminating the effects of one from the other is difficult in a small sample. Instead,

a reasonable interpretation is that a competitive electoral environment with multiple groups attempting to influence decision making spills over into competition among the board members making those decisions. When competition is lower, so is board conflict. Consistent with this observation, the coefficient on the remaining electoral activity variable, the fraction of board members who ran unopposed in their last election, is negative, suggesting that having board members more insulated from interest group politics reduces the amount of division on the board. Note that while this coefficient does not appear statistically distinguishable from 0, the p value in model 5 is .11.

Intrinsic Factors and Divisive Decisions

The next three models for which results are given in table 2 test hypotheses related to the role of the three sets of intrinsic factors: board member heterogeneity, common vision and goals, and use of professionalized decision processes. Each of these columns also includes the extrinsic factors that can be taken as fully exogenous as control variables.³

Prior work predicts that boards with greater gender, racial, and ideological heterogeneity will experience greater conflict. This prediction is considered in the results for model 2. Contrary to this prediction, gender heterogeneity shows no significant relationship with conflict, indicating that the mix of men and women on the board does little to promote or mitigate intraboard disagreement. Even more contrary, the results indicate that boards with greater racial heterogeneity actually experience *fewer* incidences of conflict. The negative coefficient ($\beta = -6.7$) on the racial heterogeneity variable is significant at the .10 level. It suggests that moving from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile in racial heterogeneity for the sampled districts would predict a drop of 2.5 conflict percentage points, about a fourth of a standard deviation. This finding runs counter to popular conceptions that rancor and dysfunction on school boards are driven by race conflicts among members. It also contradicts work from the group decision-making literature that suggests that racial diversity may negatively impact outcomes by increasing conflict among group members (De Dreu and Weingart 2003; Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin 1999).⁴

The unexpected coefficient for racial heterogeneity prompts the question of whether some other omitted factor that is correlated with this variable may be negatively correlated with board conflict. One variable that is likely to predict greater board heterogeneity for race is greater racial heterogeneity in the school district's population. Perhaps it is the case that more diverse communities are more cooperative and that this trait is reflected in board decision making. To check this, a Blau index was calculated for the racial heterogeneity of the district as approximated by the racial makeup of the district's students and added to the model. The result is shown in the third column of table 2. The heterogeneity variable at the

3 Because of worries that the campaign donation and fraction of board running unopposed variables could be endogenous to other factors, they are omitted from models 2 through 4 but included in model 5.

4 As with the finding that rural districts have more school board conflict only after controlling for student race characteristics, note that the association between board racial heterogeneity and board conflict changes sign (although remains statistically insignificant) when *fraction students nonwhite* is dropped from the model. This change is driven by the positive correlation between board racial heterogeneity and nonwhite students in the district ($r = .56$); we might conclude that the negative association between board diversity and board conflict is, in a sense, counteracted by the positive impact of student heterogeneity in those same districts. Race indeed matters for board decision-making conflict, but the role of race is complex.

population level, although negative, is not statistically significant. Moreover, including this variable has very little effect on the coefficient on board racial heterogeneity.

In contrast to the racial heterogeneity results, there is support for the idea that ideological heterogeneity is associated with greater conflict, although apparently only with respect to fiscal, rather than social, ideology. The positive coefficient on fiscal ideological heterogeneity for model 2 is large and significant at the .10 level, indicating that boards with a mix of fiscal conservatives, moderates, and liberals report greater conflict. Conversely, the coefficient for social ideological heterogeneity is small and not significant. This finding that fiscal outlook matters more than social outlook comports with the importance that board members place on budget setting as a component of their work (Grissom 2007).

Finally, the prior discussion of intrinsic factors hypothesized that boards whose members share a common vision for the board and who implement professionalized good governance procedures in making decisions will experience lower decision-making conflict. Measures of these variables are included in the estimation shown in model 4. Consistent with predictions, results indicate that boards whose members express a common vision of their roles on the board report less divisiveness. The coefficient on the common vision index is large, negative ($\beta = -6.9$), and significant at the .01 level. Surprisingly, the common goals index shows no relationship with divisiveness. Note that this is not an issue of a high degree of collinearity among the two indices; the correlation between the common vision and common goals measure is only $r = .06$. As predicted, the sign on the professionalization index measure is negative, suggesting that more professional boards have less contentious decision making.

The final column in table 2 shows the results of including all the extrinsic and intrinsic factors in the same regression. The results are quite consistent with those observed in the other models. With the exception of *other interest group donations*, all the extrinsic factors maintain the same sign as in model 1, and in several cases increase in magnitude once all the intrinsic factors are included. The coefficients for the intrinsic factors are similarly robust. The coefficient on the professionalization index, not statistically significant in model 4, increases in model 5 and becomes significant at the .05 level. The coefficient on the board racial heterogeneity index attenuates somewhat in the full model but remains practically and statistically important. The R^2 statistic indicates that the included extrinsic and intrinsic factors explain a moderate 35% of the variation in school board conflict.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors and “Working Together Well”

Although the percentage of board decisions characterized by divisiveness among members is one measure of board conflict, board members’ assessments of how well the board works together provide a more general assessment of interpersonal relationships on the board. Table 3 shows the results obtained when this measure is used as the dependent variable. These results provide a check on the results shown in table 2. For completeness, identical models to the ones shown in table 2 are estimated and recorded in the table. However, the most meaningful comparison is for model 5 in the two tables.

The results for almost all the extrinsic factors in the final column of table 3 are consistent with those shown in table 2. Both urban and rural board members report working together less well than board members in suburban districts. Boards governing districts with more students report better working relationships, as do districts with fewer nonwhite students. Larger boards report more difficulty working together. Also, boards whose

members receive large interest group donations, especially from teachers' unions, report much greater difficulty. In fact, the teachers' union donation variable has a standardized beta coefficient of -0.36 (not shown), the largest of any variable in the estimation. This result implies that each standard deviation increase in union donations (about \$250) reduces the board's rating of how well its members work together by about a third of a standard deviation (about 0.25 points on a 5-point scale).

One difference with table 2 is the small and insignificant result for single-member election districts, who reported more divisive decision making but do not report greater difficulty working together. This result may indicate that subdistrict politics may affect divisiveness of formal decisions but not necessarily board member relations with one another, perhaps as a result of mutual recognition within the board that each board member must answer to his or her particular constituency in making policy decisions.

A more notable difference between the final models in tables 2 and 3 is that the unexpected negative relationship between board racial heterogeneity and divisiveness does not translate into more positive degrees of working together, although it is worth pointing out that more racially diverse boards do not report *more* difficulty working together either. Taking these two results together, we might conclude that racial heterogeneity plays a subtle role in board member decision-making process but not one that appears to increase conflict among members. This finding contrasts with the coefficient on fiscal ideological heterogeneity in table 3, which is large, negative, and statistically significant, suggesting that ideological heterogeneity has more deleterious consequences for board conflict and perhaps, by extension, on the board's ability to make effective decisions.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to explore the factors that predict greater conflict among members of governing boards in public organizations. Understanding what factors predict board conflict and why is a step toward choosing policies and institutional arrangements that help reduce this conflict or mitigate its negative effects on governance quality. This study identifies several important predictive characteristics of both the external and the internal board environments.

Extrinsic factors that are associated with greater board conflict include several measures of environmental complexity, including urban location and the fraction of students who are nonwhite. Some measures of environmental complexity, however, were found to be insignificant predictors or even incorrectly signed, including rural location and district size, suggesting either that these variables are poor measures of the complexity of the problems facing school boards or that other factors are implicated in the relationship between these variables and board conflict. For example, rural school districts in California and elsewhere face substantial challenges related to declining enrollments, scarcity of resources, and attracting and retaining high-quality teachers. Thus, it may have been naive to predict that rural boards would face less difficult decision environments than their suburban or urban neighbors. The evidence presented here indicates that school boards in rural districts face as much or more conflict than boards elsewhere.

Whereas some factors, such as location and the characteristics of the student body, must be accepted by the board as given, other factors, even some labeled extrinsic, are amenable to policy intervention in the short or medium term. Structural characteristics are examples. The results presented here indicate that board size and selection procedures

can have large effects on the degree to which the school board can work together and reach consensus. Consistent with reform suggestions made by education scholars, I find that electing board members in single-member districts is especially predictive of divisive relationships. Insofar as conflict indeed impedes governance quality, the evidence presented in this study supports the idea that at-large elections are more appropriate for selecting school board members (Land 2002), although further work on this topic is necessary. I also find that larger boards face greater conflict, although the recognition that workload challenges for smaller boards in very large districts may outweigh gains from size reductions, among other concerns, necessitates further study before a policy recommendation can be based on this result.

Another important observation drawn from this study is the substantial role that interest group activity plays in the dynamics of board decision making. Direct participation in board member campaigns by teachers' unions is one of the strongest predictors of both measures of conflict that I analyzed. Prior work correlating union strength with academic outcomes generally has found the relationship to be a large and negative one (e.g., Hoxby 1996; Moe 2009). The primary mechanism for this relationship proposed by these studies is that strong unions use their negotiating power to push the district to make management or contract decisions that benefit teachers at the expense of students by, for example, making it prohibitively difficult for districts to dismiss or otherwise hold accountable ineffective teachers. The results shown in this study indicate a secondary mechanism: that union activity can negatively impact the school board's ability to make effective governance decisions by promoting division and disagreement among board members. A less unified board may in turn be less able to bargain effectively with the union, contributing indirectly to the first mechanism. However, it is important to note that these correlations are merely suggestive of a negative role for unions in board decisions because of the potential for endogeneity. For example, one possibility that the present analysis is unable to take into account is that union involvement in school board politics is a result rather than a cause of conflict within the board. Perhaps unions increase their activity when boards are ineffective, either to step into a vacuum created by mismanagement or because they see board discontent as an opportunity to get new members elected who will view them favorably. Further research into the causal pathway connecting unions, school board decision making, and district outcomes, taking possible sources of endogeneity into account, would make a valuable contribution.

Several key intrinsic factors also were found to be significant predictors of board conflict, including racial homogeneity and ideological heterogeneity. Gender heterogeneity was shown to play no role. These results suggest that more gender and racially diverse boards at a minimum experience no greater difficulties in working together and may, in fact, face less contention among members. In contrast, boards made up of members with diverse ideological preferences are likely to face greater difficulties in working out their collective preferences, which leads to greater division.

The finding concerning racial heterogeneity is especially surprising given previous research on racial diversity and conflict in work teams, which consistently has found race to motivate affective and, nearly as often, task conflict. However, as Mannix and Neale (2005) note, the actual evidence tying racial heterogeneity to conflict is far from conclusive. Many studies limit observation to groups accomplishing relatively routine tasks. They also have failed to fully describe and test the mechanisms whereby racial diversity leads to

conflict. For example, deleterious effects on intragroup communication is one commonly suggested mechanism, yet some evidence indicates that mixed racial groups may do a better job communicating than homogeneous groups. In a study of black and white jurors, Sommers (2006) found that heterogeneous groups shared more information with one another and deliberated longer. They also reported levels of conflict that were no different from juries made up of one race only.

Moreover, the issue of racial heterogeneity may be one in which the conclusions from the private sector literature may translate especially poorly to the public sector. Decision making on a school board is a political endeavor, undertaken under the microscope of community members and the media, around a policy issue in which race issues are especially salient. Being part of a racially mixed board may heighten board members' sensitivity to race and, in turn, to their relationships with members from other ethnic backgrounds. Consistent with this view, the Sommers juries expressed greater comfort in discussing race-related issues when their fellow decision makers were more diverse. Gaining a better understanding that the role of diversity of all kinds plays in governing board decision making in the public sector is an important direction for future research.

The findings presented here imply that some amount of conflict is endemic. That is, some degree of conflict arises from characteristics of the decision-making environment and not from choices or orientations of the board members themselves. Yet, the results also show that several factors associated with higher conflict are under the control of the board members themselves and thus can be addressed more readily than variables such as district composition, which cannot be changed, or selection procedure, which can only be changed via amendments to state or local laws or regulations. For example, the results suggest that investment in developing a common vision among board members may have important payoffs for board decision making. Common vision and goals can be the subject of board training or strategic planning. Similarly, the results show that boards that institute professionalized decision-making structures work together better, perhaps, as some qualitative work has hypothesized, because professionalization helps routinize information gathering and debate (Carol et al. 1986). Insofar as a causal path runs from processes to conflict to performance, conflict reduction may be one avenue whereby "better" governance procedures lead to higher decision quality.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the antecedents of conflict on governing boards in the public sector. Using school boards in the state of California as a test case, it finds that conflict among board members, whose capacity for making effective decisions plays an important role in the success of organizational outcomes, is a function of both external and internal factors, including board size and selection procedures, member characteristics, and the environment in which the board operates. Although the specific analysis here focuses on governing boards in public education, the study has implications for our understanding of board dynamics and effectiveness across the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. All boards operate within an environmental context that presents them with varied numbers of challenges at different levels of complexity and difficulty and that forces them to respond to outside pressures, such as those applied by interest groups. Awareness of how the nature of this environment contributes to the character of board relationships allows for boards to take steps to buffer against potential deleterious influences, perhaps by investing in team

building or training in communication. Similarly, governing boards in all kinds of organizations can take steps to establish a collective vision for their work through mission statements and strategic plans and can choose to implement professionalized decision-making procedures to govern their own behavior. Giving boards the capacity to minimize or manage interpersonal conflict is one mechanism through which such exercises can improve organizational effectiveness.

At the same time, there are important differences between school boards and other kinds of governing boards that may limit the degree to which some of the findings here generalize. As an elected body, the school board is political and politicized in ways that boards of small nonprofit organizations or even nonelected public boards, such as zoning commissions, may not be. Although all boards have constituencies in the form of donors, managers, or other stakeholders, it is not clear that the influence of those constituencies on board members has the same impact on board dynamics that subdistrict elections or teachers' union activity appears to have on school boards. In a similar vein, school boards lack features of other kinds of boards, such as the close networking with leaders of other organizations that characterize boards in some areas of the nonprofit sector, that might be important considerations. Nonetheless, there is enough commonality among governing boards to suggest that further inquiry into conflict among these bodies can build directly on this research.

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