POWER THROUGH CENTRALIZATION: 
A SPECULATIVE HISTORY OF HAWAII SCHOOLS, POLITICS, 
AND MODERN CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTIONS

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Introduction
Unequalled by that of any other state in its degree of centralization, Hawaii's structure of government resulted from historical as well as geographical factors. Honolulu, with its well-developed harbor, logically became the business center of the island chain. Commercial interests became so widespread, in time, and so powerful that business and political decisions emanated from the same circle of men. The pervasive influence of this circle soon extended to control of the educational system. Once this happened, island education, initiated in the early 1800s by Calvinist missionaries, no longer provided schooling for spiritual enlightenment and salvation; rather, it served the practical and secular needs of an economy dominated by agriculture and controlled by a few families. More than one observer has noted that centralized government, including a centralized educational system, well suited the purposes of island rulers until late territorial and early statehood days. If the future of immigrant laborers and their children was shaped by limited occupational opportunities in Hawaii, what purpose was there in a traditionally liberal, primarily academic education for all? Limited education for a few could be more easily controlled through centralized rule.

Immigrant laborers, educated just enough to serve happily in sugar and pineapple fields, may have been a reasonable goal for an earlier time. By the 1950s, however, it was not as valid a goal. By that time, the state's economy had expanded and Hawaii was committed to the notion of public education in the American tradition; an education where equal educational opportunity was a dominant theme. A new challenge confronted island leaders in politics and education: how did centralized government work for or work against equality of citizenship and equality of educational opportunity?

The year 1954 marked the birth of a viable two-party system in Hawaii. In that year, Democrats won stunning victories at the polls over fifty years of Republican power. Reacting against a half-century of centralized, oligarchical rule, Democrats decided that home rule, with its promise of public participation in local decisions, was imperative. In educational matters, extension of the home-rule principle found expression in advocacy of an elected school board: electing board members would involve the lay public in educational decision-making.

Jack A. Burns, acknowledged leader of the Democratic Party, underscored his party's goals in education when he answered the question: "How would you improve Hawaii's educational system?" He said:

By supporting with every force at my command a change in the Constitution for election of the State School Board. By providing for a decentralization of the power of the central office. . . . By getting people closer to the Department of Education and more directly concerned in its activities and with more say.

Decentralization thus became an increasingly important political and educational issue.

Work-Study Project
The question of centralization versus decentralization in island government and education began to interest me as my dissertation topic took shape. Fortunately, although historical in nature, my topic suggested many related present-day work-study experiences. Schools and Politics in Hawaii, 1950-1970 touches events of the day at several points. The interrelationship of schools and politics is fairly universal, unlimited by time or geography. My specific topic, though limited to the 1950-1970 time span, is a timely one. Arguments for and against
centralization of government and of the educational system persist and remain unresolved today.

After considering the work-study alternatives, I decided upon in-depth study of education proposals, discussions, negotiations, and behind-the-scenes deals which occurred in the 1950, 1968, and 1978 Hawaii State Constitutional Conventions. Besides my general interest in the recurrent theme of centralization in Hawaiian educational history, a special facet of this interest was that island Republicans historically favored centralization of government and of the public schools, while Democrats advocated a more decentralized "democratic" grassroots approach. My goal was to see if this partisan difference revealed itself during the last three constitutional conventions.

In short order, it became quite clear that study of the written records of the conventions alone would only describe the final decisions. The machinations typical of most decision-making went unrecorded. In a sense, public records and documents frustrate the historian by virtue of their very clarity, simplicity, and "official-ness." In political history, especially, significance often lies in what is not included in official accounts. Interviews of Convention delegates seemed necessary, but the resulting information was marked by shortfalls of all oral history: selective memory, personal interpretation, and, in this instance, partisan outlook. Nevertheless, the interviews did give some dimension to the bare outline of events and decisions. Newspaper accounts of the modern constitutional conventions found at the main branch of the Hawaii State Library System gave further depth to my research, as did interviews with analysts and observers of politics and education in Hawaii.3

As my work-study files thickened, it also became clear that confining my study to the three most recent conventions would result in narrow and superficial understanding. After all, the systems of government and education were sanctioned by every constitution in the history of the islands. Moreover, the roots of these systems were basically the intermeshing of two cultures: the ancient Hawaiian feudalism and the peculiarly ambivalent New England penchant for autocracy and democracy. Research materials on earlier constitutions and the cultures which produced them exist in varying degrees of completeness in the Archives of Hawaii and the Hawaiian and Pacific Collections at the University of Hawaii’s Hamilton Library. The Archives store most complete official government reports and documents. The Legislative Reference Bureau, located in the State Capitol, also houses relevant material, particularly with regard to legislative matters.

In time, certain people of old Hawaii began to assert themselves across the dry pages of research. To learn more about why their characters seemed stronger and more insistently alive, I spent many days at the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society. The collection of personal papers of missionary families gave me further insight into personalities who shaped politics and education in an earlier day. Among these were Gerrit P. Judd, an extraordinary minister of public instruction who did much to develop the educational system; and several missionary women, whose influences on their adopted land seemed to me to be generally underestimated.

What began as an uncomplicated present-day work-study look into the effect of modern state constitutions upon education became a complex excursion into Hawaii history.

Findings
Study of transcripts of the 1950 and 1968 Constitutional Conventions disclose the presence of party philosophies regarding centralization of government and of the educational system. Election of convention delegates was nominally non-partisan, and most delegates disclaim partisan displays of power during convention discussions.4 Yet, party affiliation of delegates and party stands on issues are identifiable to a remarkable degree in records of discussions which took place during the Conventions.

Non-partisan elections and delegate disclaimers notwithstanding, the decisions from the 1950 Convention on education strongly reflected haole Republican views.5 The majority of delegates claimed that a high degree of centralization would ensure fiscal economy, administrative efficiency, and equality of educational opportunity.6 Those who doubted that centralization had led to equality were, for the most part, non-haole and recognized Democrats or incipient Democrats.7

Democratic efforts at educational reform between the 1950 and 1968 Conventions emphasized decentralized policy-making first, with concerns about equality of educational opportunity playing an important but secondary role. Interestingly, both
Above. Teruo Ihara, delegate to the 1950 and 1978 Hawaii State Constitutional Conventions, was a resource for statistics and information.

Left. Research was done at the Hawaii State Archives. Richard Thompson, Librarian, assists Ms. Dodd.
parties believed that their position would result in greater equality among citizens: the Democrats, because decentralization would mean that more citizens could be involved in educational decision-making; the Republicans, because centralized policy and fiscal control could ensure equal educational treatment of students.

By 1968, three changes had occurred in the State Constitution's article on education. Democrats, by then the dominant political party, provided the major thrust for these changes, the most important of which was a school board elected either on a partisan or non-partisan basis.

Discussions in the 1968 Constitutional Convention, then, did not deal with the Board of Education per se. The questions regarding the elected versus appointed board had been settled legislatively in 1964 and 1966. Probably the most significant Democratic statements voiced in the 1968 Convention dealt with the concept of centralization. By then, a few changes had taken place in Democratic philosophy about centralized government. Federal funds for education had increased, i.e., funds which needed to be funneled through a central, statewide machinery. The realities of power had taken hold—the need for economy and efficiency in governmental operations needed to be measured against participatory government. Democrats now soundly approved of centralized fiscal control over education, believing that it was not incompatible with decentralized decision-making.

Democrats now seemed to be concerned with equality of educational opportunity first, with decentralized policy-making playing a secondary role in their philosophy of education.

An interesting phenomena appears to have taken place between 1950 and 1970: the philosophy of the Democratic and Republican parties regarding centralization of government and of the school system reversed themselves as the fortunes of the two political parties shifted. The Democratic Party, enconced in power in 1970, saw value in centralization; the Republican Party of 1970, eager to share power and regain some of its diminished influence, charged that there was too much centralization in the system.

Political analyst Norman Meller notes this reversal of stands with regard to home rule: ... the Republican party displayed signs of reconsidering its stand on home rule while the Democratic party's ardor for full grassroots government cooled somewhat. The Democratic shift of mood reflects the conservatism which tends to accompany an accession to power, as well as the realization that Hawaii's centralization facilitated the achievement of many of the party's other goals. Democratic legislators, like their Republican predecessors, hesitate to abdicate their newly-won, personalized control over governmental affairs. ... A similar reversal took place in party stands on education in Hawaii—changes which are evident in Constitutional Convention discussions during the period 1950 to 1970. A number of reasons account for the reversal:

— a failure to distinguish clearly among the sometimes compatible, often conflicting, goals of centralized administration, centralized policy-making, and centralized fiscal autonomy;

— a growing awareness of certain benefits of centralized government, such as equality of educational provisions which might not be as easily ensured through local autonomy, particularly in view of increased federal funds for education;

— an inability to agree upon satisfactory trade-off points between efficiency, economy and equality in government;

— an understandable reluctance to share a power base built essentially out of an immigrant history, a history of political assertion and success after years of hardship.

By the 1978 Constitutional Convention, delegates no longer seemed to polarize on educational issues by party. Again concerned with centralization and distribution of power in educational matters, delegates earnestly, but unsuccessfully, tackled questions which had persisted from 1950. These questions were so complicated that they remain unanswered still.

Beyond popular election of Board members, just how much real policy-making power does the electorate have? Is the Board truly responsible for policy formulation? Or, are the legislature and governor, through their power to withhold or release funds, the ultimate policy-makers?

Delegates to all three constitutional conventions rather uneasily decided to leave specific definition of powers of the Board and superintendent, of lay citizens, and of other interested groups to legislative fiat. This definition, they correctly concluded, was more a matter of statutory rather than constitutional concern. The legislature, however, is not likely to address the issue of centralization—the dilemma of government efficiency, economy and
equality as set against public participation in educational policy formulation. A dilution of its own power is at stake.

Conclusion

The meaning of a history, I believe, varies somewhat according to the needs of writer and reader, of storyteller and listener. To the extent that it does vary, history is but a speculative assessment of events and of the people who took part in them. The definitive history is rare.

The meaning of this history for me lies in the potential power of ordinary citizens to step into the vacuum of leadership which exists in educational policy-making in Hawaii. State legislatures are given authority for public education under every state constitution, but practice and tradition can considerably affect the ways in which this authority is exercised.

Definition of this authority can be shaped by ordinary citizens. What is at stake for them is their constitutionally-granted right of participatory government.

Footnotes

3Interview with Richard Kosaki, political science professor, University of Hawaii, on May 3, 1978.
5Many Republican and Democratic delegates insist that work at the Constitutional Convention was non-partisan. The Republican delegate most outspoken on this issue is Elizabeth Kellerman, delegate to the 1950 Convention. Interviews with Elizabeth Kellerman, April 8, 1978 and May 2, 1978. Democrat Teruo Ihara, delegate to the 1950 and 1978 Conventions, admits that the Republicans dominated the 1950 Convention "lock, stock and barrel," but claims just as strongly that non-partisanship was the rule at all three modern conventions. Interview with Dr. Teruo Ihara, October 26, 1978. On the other hand, the opposite view was adamently held by Trude Akau, delegate to the 1950 Convention: she charged that there was "an undercurrent of racism" and paternalism among the delegate majority at the Convention. Moreover, she strongly held that partisan politics was inescapable even in elections and Conventions nominally termed "non-partisan." Interview with Trude Akau, October 24, 1977.
6Hale, or Caucasian, delegates to the 1950 Convention formed 43% of that body; they formed 27% of the 1968 Convention body. Republicans formed 48% of the 1950 Convention body and 28% of the 1968 Convention body. Conversely, Japanese delegates formed 30% of the 1950 Convention body and 46% of the 1968 Convention body. Democrats formed 32% of the 1950 Convention body and 68% of the 1968 Convention body.


7Ibid.

8In 1964, Hawaii's electorate approved three constitutional amendments to Article IX which were proposed by the state legislature. Section 2, as amended, provided for election of Hawaii's school board; Section 3, as amended, dealt with the title and voting status of the superintendent; Section 5, as amended, gave ex officio voting privileges to the superintendent and the president of the University Board of Regents.


10For overview of change in philosophy, see party planks, most of which may be found at the Legislative Reference Bureau, Hawaii State Capitol. The Democratic State Central Committee of Hawaii has published its party platforms, 1954-1976, available at most island libraries. See also The Hawaii Democratic and Republican Party Platforms, 1952-1974, Daniel W. Tuttle, Jr. (compiler), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Department of Political Science, 1965.


12At the time of this study, the work of the 1978 Constitutional Convention was transcribed in draft form. The writer is indebted to George Amimoto, Chief Clerk of the 1978 Convention, for permission to study the draft of the Committee of the Whole's discussion of education.

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