

# Where There's a Will There's a Way: The Role of Political Will in Creating/Producing/ Shaping Education Systems for Learning

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## Introduction

**“There is nothing that is not political. Everything is politics” – Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 1924**

In past decades, the world has witnessed a massive expansion of schooling in low- and middle-income countries. At the same time, the world did not witness a massive improvement in learning in school (Pritchett, 2013). Recent evidence actually suggests most developing countries experienced a significant deterioration in learning (measured by long-term trends in literacy) per year of schooling since the 1960s (Le Nestour et al., 2020).

Why is it that governments did not demonstrate similar commitment to learning as they did for schooling? Recent studies emphasise that there is no ‘politics of education’ as the politics of schooling must be fundamentally different from the politics of learning. As has been recognised since the 1970s (Boli-Bennet and Meyer 1978; Boli et al. 1985), a politics of schooling must explain not why countries are so different, but rather why they are so much the same in access and increase in grade attainment, even across very different national income levels and political regime types (i.e., both democratic and autocratic states expanded schooling). In sharp contrast, a politics of learning must explain why some countries do so very well while other countries, even at similar levels of national development, do so very badly (Pritchett and Sandefur, 2020; Bruns et al., 2019; Hickey and Hossain, 2019; Levy et al., 2018; Pritchett 2018).

Vietnam is a striking case in point. Vietnam’s PISA performance showed Vietnamese students performing better than those in the UK or the USA. It is very hard to explain Vietnam’s achievement of high and equitable levels of learning in terms of level of income, the characteristics of the students going into schools (Glewwe et al., 2021), or the standard correlates of performance identified by PISA (Dang et al., 2020). A large multi-disciplinary team of researchers has been working on the question of why Vietnam has been so successful for years and, when pressed, one researcher’s

## Key Points

- In this Insight Note, political will is defined as “the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem.”
- There are three necessary conditions for a meaningful prioritisation of learning in education systems:
  - First, the highest authorities of a state must have the political will to prioritise learning.
  - Second, the highest authorities of a state must define learning goals as universal goals and want to get every child learning, as opposed to regarding education systems as selection or filtration systems that cater only to a few high-performing students.
  - Third, the highest authorities of a state must employ a long-horizon view to reap the long-term benefits of a learning-oriented system.
- Depending on the political context, there are different ways in which political will is formed, as citizens’ power to hold their state to account varies. As a result, the responsiveness of states to their citizens’ priorities varies as well.
- This Insight Note introduces a typology to distinguish between different political contexts with distinct processes of political will formation. This typology can also be used to describe the different ways in which political will may be fostered in contexts where it is lacking.

answer was: “because they wanted it.”

This Insight Note is very much a struggle to take “because they wanted it” seriously as key to the politics of learning.

“Because they wanted it” challenges the widespread maintained assumption that low learning outcomes can be traced back to technocratic, resource, input, programme design, or implementation problems, which, if solved, would lead to improvements and that these problems can be solved at a ‘management’ level. “Because they wanted it” highlights the importance of political conditions and dynamics that create binding constraints to education reform, to improving learning outcomes, and to aligning education systems for learning (Bruns and Schneider, 2016; World Bank, 2018). Pritchett (2019b) underscores this important difference by distinguishing between the proximate determinants of learning (such as time on task and teachers’ presence/absence from the classroom as an observable indicator within the education sector itself) and the political and policy determinants that represent the deeper causes of high teacher absenteeism. Viewing teacher absenteeism as a management failure alone rather than a result of an overall system failure, dysfunctionality, or incoherence can lead to ineffective policy recommendations that do not take into account the political, social, and historical dynamics in which the education sector is embedded (ibid; see also Bruns and Schneider, 2016).

This Insight Note argues that political will is a decisive factor in explaining both the homogeneity in the expansion of schooling and the heterogeneity in the expansion of learning, and introduces three takeaways as necessary conditions for a meaningful and sustained prioritisation of learning:

1. The highest authorities of a country **have the political will to prioritise learning**.
2. The highest authorities of a country **want to get every child learning** (as they define learning goals as universal goals).
3. The highest authorities of a country **adopt a long-horizon view** to reap the benefits of a learning-oriented system for the long haul.

That said, there are good reasons why many disdain appeals to ‘political will’ and why political will is described as “the slipperiest concept in the policy lexicon” (Hammergren 1998: 12).<sup>1</sup> My purpose is not to invoke political will as a *deus ex machina* or an exogenously given characteristic of a country like its latitude. I explore what political will is (and who needs to have it), how one can identify it, and how it arises in different political regime types. To make “because they wanted it” a workable and useful insight, we need to dig deeper into questions such as: “How do some countries come to want to and others not?” and “What, if anything, can be done to foment the wanting to?”

As will be shown, the standard RISE Systems Framework is only partially capable of explaining how the political will of the highest authorities of a state is formed. Therefore, an additional typology of political regimes is introduced to distinguish between different modalities of rule and state-society relations. This typology not only helps in separating different ways in which political will is formed, but also outlines different pathways for how political will may be fostered, depending on the type of regime.

The Insight Note is structured as follows: Section 2 defines the term ‘political will’. Section 3 hones in on the three key points and offers empirical examples of political will and prioritisation of learning. Section 4 discusses the formation of political will in different political contexts and highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the RISE Systems Framework in capturing the different modalities of political will formation. Section 5 introduces a typology of political regimes that can help guide analysis on how political will is formed in different regime types and how interventions to create political will may have to look different depending on the type of political system. Section 6 concludes.

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<sup>1</sup> Other authors commenting on the vagueness and lack of analytical merit of many definitions of political will include: Thomas and Grindle, 1990: 1164-1165; Corrales 2006: 36-37; Levy 2018: 22. For a discussion of political will as a binary vs. continuous concept and political will as an individual-level vs. group-level concept, see Post et al. 2010. Persson and Sjöstedt 2012 discuss two additional problems of common definitions of political will: Circularity (i.e. lack of success in reform efforts is explained in an ex-post analysis by the initial lack of political will, not distinguishing between being unwilling and unable to implement successful reform) and voluntarism (i.e. attributing political will and political behavior to the political actor alone, without taking into consideration the opportunities and constraints of the political and social context and the influence of other stakeholders in the system).

## Defining ‘political will’

Before discussing why and how political will matters for aligning systems for learning, a definition of the term is required. I follow the proposal developed by Post et al., 2010. The authors first offer a general definition of political will: “[P]olitical will is the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem” (Post et al., 2010: 659). They then identify four subcomponents of this definition and develop a list of indicators to operationalise the analysis of political will: (1) A sufficient set of decisionmakers (2) with a common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda (3) is committed to supporting (4) a commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution (ibid).

- 1. A sufficient set of decisionmakers:** This component specifies who is involved in the decision-making and implementation process of a policy, what the distribution of preferences looks like among key decisionmakers, and which of these actors could act as veto players to prevent a policy from being implemented (ibid: 661; see also Tsebelis 2002). The more inclusive a political setting, the more complex the stakeholder mapping. In authoritarian or relatively closed regimes, especially personalised autocracies, political will converges more closely with the autocrat’s will or intention as veto players are few.
- 2. A common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda:** This component analyses whether key decisionmakers share a problem definition (i.e., use the same framing) and agree that the government needs to react to this problem (ibid: 662).
- 3. A commitment to support:** Distinguishing between genuine commitment and political lip service is a difficult analytical task. The authors list indicators to capture the strength and credibility of political commitment, such as decisionmakers making credible and binding statements or decisionmakers spending political capital (and risking reputational costs, electoral costs and other pushback, not just through elections but the open opposition of other key constituents) (ibid: 664). For education, one of these powerful key constituents is teachers’ unions (Schneider et al., 2018; Kingdon et al., 2014; Sandholtz, 2020), but even other stakeholders like parents might (at least at first) oppose the disruption of reforms that aim at aligning systems for learning (Cruz and Loureiro, 2020: 13). In any case, it is clear that state actors conduct their own political calculations of opportunities and constraints they find within their political system which guides their decisions and behaviour.
- 4. A commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution:** Political will also becomes visible in the types of policies that are supported to fix the problem. Lip service policies are often short-term fixes or ‘non-solutions’ that decision makers are aware will fail in implementation, perhaps due to a lack of organisational capacity of their bureaucracies (ibid: 668; see also Andrews 2004), or due to a lack of sufficient funding. At the same time, identifying potentially effective policy solutions is not always straightforward, especially for complex endeavours such as improving learning and aligning education systems for learning.

An overview of the definitional components of political will is found in *Table 1*, and an application of this definition to the field of education is offered in Section 3.

Table 1: For each definitional component, Post et al., 2010 propose a range of indicators to analyse political will

Definition Component	Operationalisation	Assessment Targets
(1) Sufficient set of decision-makers	Set of actors capable of approving, implementing, and enforcing public policies	Institutions and political party landscape
(2) With a common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda	(a) Use of similar frame and terminology; (b) Status as “problem” on formal agenda	(a) Commonality and convergence in statements of decision-makers with regard to problem; (b) Importance and prominence of decision-makers discussing problem; volume of discussion
(3) Is committed to supporting	Distribution and strength of specific decision-maker preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Dis-)Incentives for political actors (institutional, electoral, and others);</li> <li>• Allocation of analytical resources,</li> <li>• Credibility and obligation of statements (based on reputational costs);</li> <li>• Positions of key constituencies (domestic and international) and accountability relationships;</li> <li>• Bargaining mechanisms;</li> <li>• Cultural characteristics and constraints</li> </ul>
(4) A commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution	(a) Use of similar frame and terminology; (b) Avoidance of known sources of ineffectiveness; (c) Capacity for policy effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commonality and convergence in statements of decision-makers with regard to proposed solution;</li> <li>• Non-use of short-term “fixes”, knowingly ineffective policies, and diversionary tactics;</li> <li>• Commitments to funding effective solutions</li> <li>• Inclusion of potentially effective sanctions and enforcement mechanisms;</li> <li>• Implementation resources and support of implementers</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Post et al. 2010, p.660

Notably, the authors conceptualise political will as possessing both binary and continuous properties, and reconcile these by positing that the different underlying continuous properties contribute to an overall binary outcome evaluation where a minimum threshold of ‘large enough’ political will is either crossed or not (p.655-656). In this Insight Note, I acknowledge that political will is not a dichotomous variable, but that there are gradations of amount of political will. Nonetheless, I follow Post et al. 2010 in the assumption that it is the passing of minimum threshold that is relevant for analysis, and that the main distinction of relevance for this analysis is not the one between different levels of ‘large enough’ political will, but the one between those above and below this threshold, resulting in a simplified dichotomous categorisation of political will (in yes/no categories, see *Figures 3-5* below). Of course, as political will is going to be met with different levels of resistance depending on the context, the amount of political will that is ‘large enough’ to overcome this resistance will vary.

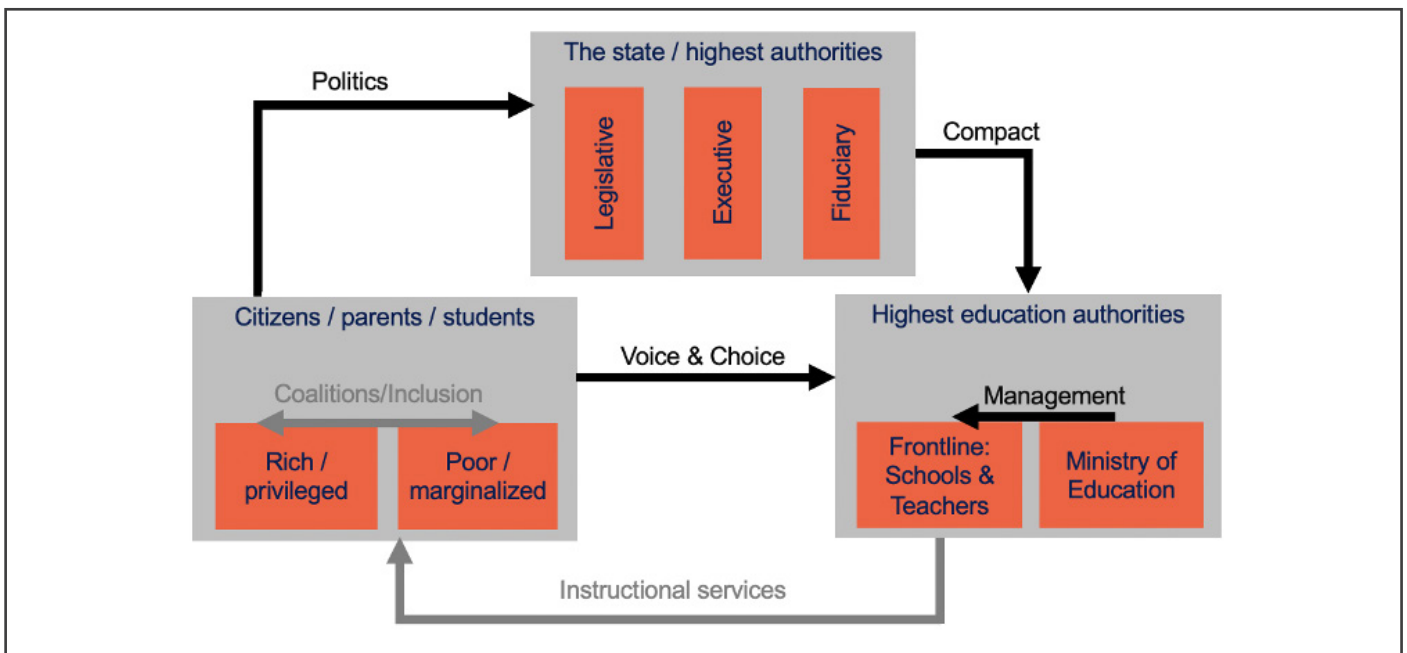
One final element to note about Post et al.’s definition of political will is that while the authors argue that a general definition and methodology around the concept of political will can be developed, the analysis of political will is highly context-dependent (Post et al., 2010: 656). This context-dependent formation of political will for learning will be discussed in Section 4.

## Who needs to have political will? The role of the highest authorities of the state in the context of the RISE Systems Framework

This Insight Note builds on the RISE Systems Framework to specify whose political will is at the centre of analysis if the goal is to align systems for learning: it is the political will of the highest authorities of the state.<sup>2</sup>

In the RISE Systems Framework, education systems consist of four principal-agent relationships: 'Politics', 'Compact', 'Management' and 'Voice and Choice'. Each of these accountability relationships exists between different actors in the system (Pritchett, 2015; Spivack, 2021).

Figure 1: The RISE Systems Framework



Source: Adapted from World Bank 2004 and Pritchett 2015

**'Politics'** comprises the relationship between citizens of a state (as the principals) and the highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities of the state (as the agent). On the agent side, this typically includes actors such as parliaments, the Presidency, the Chancellery, or the Ministry of Finance. This accountability relationship comprises a wide array of activities of political participation that are at the disposal of citizens, including elections, party activity, or the work of civil society organisations or interest groups such as teachers' unions (Verba et al., 1978; Teorell and Torcal, 2006; Ekman and Amnå, 2012).

**'Compact'** describes the relationship between the highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities of the state (as the principal) and education authorities and organisations (as the agent). Education authorities typically refer to the Ministry of Education, additional ministries with responsibilities of delivering education (religion, human resources, rural development, planning, gender) and other extra-ministerial government authorities in direct relationship with the highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities.

Connecting 'Politics' and 'Compact' is the grey box representing the highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities, often in an abridged and simplified way referred to as 'the state'. While the state is the agent in the 'Politics' relationship and the principal in the 'Compact' relationship, it does more than simply translate or transmit what is being delegated via the 'Politics' relationship into their own delegation to education authorities in the 'Compact' relationship. Between the two relationships of accountability, the actors of the state do their own political calculations

<sup>2</sup> This does not mean political will is not needed or does not occur at other levels of the system, but that this Insight Note focuses on the pivotal role of the state, which is a principal and an agent in the RISE Systems Framework.



and assessments, form their own political will and commitments to certain objectives over others.<sup>3</sup>

## The pivotal role of political will for aligning education systems for learning

The importance and constitution of political will is captured in the following three key points:

In order to align systems for learning...

1. The highest authorities of a country must have the political will to prioritise learning.
2. The highest authorities of a country must want to get every child learning (as they define learning goals as universal goals).
3. The highest authorities of a country must adopt a long-horizon view to reap the benefits of a learning-oriented system for the long haul.

Each of these messages will be discussed in turn.

### Message 1: The highest authorities must have the political will to prioritise learning

Many case studies of education systems that have substantially improved learning point to political will as necessary to deliver broad-based, high-quality learning. A range of recent studies have highlighted the importance of leaders and governments prioritising and delegating learning as a clearly articulated goal in order to align their education systems for learning. This is summarised in *Table 2*.

*Ecuador* saw significant improvements in learning under President Correa's leadership between 2006 and 2017. He had a strong personal dedication to learning and combined this with a clear prioritisation of learning and a coherent strategy of political communication. Among other things, he curbed the power of teachers' unions opposing his reform agenda and generated lasting momentum from the public outcry over Ecuador's poor learning assessment results (Schneider et al., 2018).

In Sobral, a municipality in *Brazil*, Mayor Cid Gomez played a crucial role in the learning improvements that took place in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> This was in part achieved through a clear dedication to and delegation of learning goals (Crouch, 2020; Kaffenberger and Spivack, 2022.).

After a successful pilot stage, the *Kenyan* government scaled up Tusome (an early grade literacy programme) nationwide from 2016 onwards, which resulted in significant improvements in foundational literacy in English and Kiswahili. One element of Tusome was the establishment of clearly articulated expectations around learning for all decisionmakers in the education system, combined with clear benchmarks and a shared vision and understanding of goals among the different stakeholders (Piper et al., 2018; Crouch, 2020).

In *Tanzania*, the government implemented the '3Rs reform', which from 2015 onwards revised the Grade 1 and 2 curriculum and focused 80 percent of instructional time on foundational literacy and numeracy. Preliminary evidence shows that this clear delegation of foundational learning as a priority, alongside other elements such as enhanced instructional support, resulted in large gains in foundational literacy and numeracy (Mbiti and Rodriguez-Segura, forthcoming; Kaffenberger, 2021)

In a political economy analysis of *Vietnam*, London 2021 highlights the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV)

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<sup>3</sup> 'Politics' and 'Compact', as well as the political processes happening within the state, are part of the broader term politics, which is not confined to a single principal-agent relationship, but follows the classic political science definition by David Easton (1953) as the "authoritative allocation of values for a society". Easton's definition and thinking are deeply embedded in a systems perspective and concerned mostly with processes that take place within the political system over the (contested) authoritative allocation of values (ibid; see also Evans 1970). This process of allocation of values in the education system happens at many points and on many levels in the RISE Systems Framework. Not only exists there the politics of schooling and the politics of learning, but there is politics around the participation in learning assessments (Addey et al., 2017), around the choice of language of instruction (Williams, 2019) or in the responsibilities or power given to School-Based Management Committees (Bold et al., 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Gomez was also able to rely on the influence and power of other family members to champion education: "Two brothers were both mayors of Sobral and/or governors or congressmen with some focus on education reform for at least 20 years. One brother was Chief of Staff for the other at least once" (Crouch 2020: 8)

sustained political commitment and the impact of this commitment on public governance as two key factors of the country's success of expansion of access and learning over the past decades. In particular, the organisational structure of the CPV created an accountability mechanism parallel to that of the bureaucratic apparatus, which were mutually reinforcing and strengthened the overall accountability on educational goals within the bureaucracy of this multilevel, decentralised state (see also London, 2019).

Other case studies highlight that the presence of political will on its own is not a sufficient condition to bring about the desired improvements in learning. Political will for reform pushes against frictions or forces of resistance in the system, and the amount of political will present is not always able to overcome the amount of resistance:

When the Aam Admi Party (AAP) took over the government of the city state of Delhi, *India* in 2015, they did so with a strong commitment and dedication to improving learning. In 2016, the government rolled out a large-scale education reform to that effect. But the new government's political will could not be effectively translated by the education bureaucracy into changes at the frontline. India, with its specific historical and social context, had created a strong hierarchy of orders and circulars within its bureaucracy, in which good performance was delinked from learning outcomes and teachers were not empowered to teach but obligated to spend a third of their time on administrative tasks. This 'tyranny of paper', and therefore the internal logic of the bureaucracy, could not be overcome by a change in political will and the reforms that followed (Aiyar et al. 2021).

The empirical examples outlined above show how a clear prioritisation of learning goals was a crucial component in improving learning in the respective contexts. This clear prioritisation, in turn, required some form of political will of the highest authorities of the state. On the other hand, a lack of successful implementation of learning-oriented reforms cannot be equated with a lack of political will. As discussed, political will can be present but not 'large enough' to overcome frictions and forces of resistance.

Linking the definition of political will from Section 2 to the context of education, I will use the aforementioned case study of Ecuador's pivot to learning under President Correa analysed in Schneider et al., 2018 to serve as an illustration of the different components of political will:

1. **A sufficient set of decisionmakers:** President Correa himself was highly dedicated to improving learning. He worked with a core team of similarly dedicated staff and managed to secure a high continuity in personnel unlikely in the political context of Ecuador. He not only served three terms as President himself—from 2007 to 2017—but also appointed only three Ministers of Education during that time (compared to a regional average tenure period of two years) and was able to count on a team of long-serving reformers within the Ministry. Furthermore, he weakened the power and influence of veto players. When taking office, the strongest teacher union in the country, UNE (Unión Nacional de Educadores) had a say in appointing high-level officials and even ministers in the Ministry of Education, and possessed enormous mobilising power, representing 90 percent of the teaching force. In several steps, Correa curbed UNE's power by reducing the union's say in Ministry staff appointments and making striking teachers subject to immediate dismissal. Notably, the Ministry changed the practice of automatically deducting union fees from teacher salaries, creating a situation where teachers must actively opt into union membership. These policies reduced UNE to political insignificance by 2014. To be clear, teachers' unions are not necessarily veto players. However, they can undermine reform efforts in systems where their demands oppose a pro-learning and pro-teaching agenda in favour of other ideological or particularistic asks.
2. **A common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda:** Education reform had been central to Correa's campaign for presidency in 2006, and he continued to engage with the public on the importance of a "citizen revolution" that first required an "education revolution" (ibid: 25). This highlights continuity not only in the framing of the problem—both with regards to policy and vis-à-vis the public—but also in communication around the urgency of the problem of a dysfunctional education system.
3. **A credible commitment to support:** As Correa had already highlighted education as a priority during his election campaign prior to the elections in 2007, his legitimacy and reputation were tied to tangible action and success in the area of education and learning. He managed to uphold an authentic and coherent public image, and "[f]ew Ecuadoreans doubted his personal commitment to education quality and equity" (ibid: 27). This gave Correa and his team latitude and public support for far-reaching reforms, not least because Correa used the disappointing results from learning assessments conducted in 2006 as a reason to justify his swift move to improve education quality. He also confronted strikes organised by the teacher's unions immediately and underscored his credible commitment to reform by weakening the political power of the unions.

- 4. A commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution:** Correa and his team tackled several dysfunctions of the education system in turn. Focusing on improvements in student learning and teacher quality, Correa and his team passed a range of laws and policies to increase accountability in the education system. This included the introduction of frequent assessments of learning outcomes through both national and international assessments, as well as a restructuring of the process of teacher training, hiring, compensation, career advancement, professional development, and accountability. Teachers were now hired and promoted based on competencies and performance evaluations instead of seniority, and they could be dismissed if evaluations were consistently poor. The government also offered incentives for teachers to retire early, which created more room to attract well-educated and qualified candidates – thus speeding up the improvement of the teaching force. Twenty-three pedagogical institutes were closed because the quality of instruction was unsatisfactory, and a new National University of Education was created in 2015 to secure high standards of pre-service teacher training. In addition, the Ministry of Education took charge of teacher professional development programmes to ensure they addressed the needs of the teaching force and improved the quality of teaching. Aided by a commodity boom that created additional revenue, public spending on education quadrupled, and the government almost doubled the salary of new teachers in 2011. President Correa himself stressed that spending on education needed to be efficient and enhance equity.

Overall, this case study of Ecuador illustrates the different elements of political will at play. The president used windows of political opportunity well, used his own legitimacy and public support to weaken veto players, and combined personal dedication to education with a clear focus on learning and a coherent policy and political communication strategy. Not least, he was able to generate lasting momentum from the public outcry over Ecuador's poor learning assessment results to strengthen accountability mechanisms around learning goals in the system.

*Table 2: Overview of case studies highlighting the importance of prioritisation and delegation of learning goals in education systems*

Country	Case Study Context	Key Features of Political Activity
Ecuador	Rafael Correa's presidency, 2007-2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong personal dedication to learning and coherent political communication strategy</li> <li>• Clear prioritisation of and improved accountability on learning goals</li> </ul>
Brazil	Learning-oriented reforms in the municipality of Sobral, early 2000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal dedication of Mayor and his family to education and learning</li> <li>• Delegation of clear learning goals</li> </ul>
Kenya	Nationwide scaling of Tusome programme since 2016 after successful pilot phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large, significant improvements in foundational literacy (English &amp; Kiswahili)</li> <li>• Redefined expectations and clear delegation of learning goals</li> <li>• Shared vision and understanding of goals among stakeholders</li> <li>• Enhanced instructional support</li> </ul>
Tanzania	Reform of Grade 1 and 2 curriculum since 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 80% of instructional time dedicated to foundational literacy and numeracy instead of a plethora of subjects, incl. vocational skills and ICT</li> <li>• Clear prioritisation of learning goals</li> <li>• Enhanced instructional support</li> </ul>
Vietnam	Long-standing historical, political and social context factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vietnam as an outperformer on learning outcomes based on GDP level</li> <li>• Sustained political commitment of the Communist Party to education and learning</li> <li>• Interwoven structures of political party and bureaucracy increases accountability around learning goals</li> </ul>
India	Education reforms designed by the new government in the city state of Delhi since 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New government had the political will to improve education and learning</li> <li>• But reforms did not reach the frontline as the bureaucracy's own logic was unable to translate political will and reforms into tangible changes on the ground</li> </ul>

Source: Author



In conclusion, political will is necessary to deliver broad-based, high-quality learning. However, there are different modalities for how political will is formed and sustained in different political contexts. This will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.

**Message 2: The highest authorities must want to get every child learning (and define learning goals as universal goals).**

This second message is a specification of the first, because it is not sufficient for the state to prioritise learning for a select few. If countries want to reach global learning goals, they need to be committed to broad-based, high-quality learning for every child, as opposed to a ‘selection system’, i.e., a system in which the process of schooling serves to filter students rather than to enable learning for all—which usually reproduces social stratification. Learning goals have to be defined as universal goals, as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.1)<sup>5</sup>, and in order to reach their full potential, every child should gain at least foundational literacy and numeracy skills (Belafi et al., 2020).

Despite the repeated postulation of education goals as universal goals in international agreements and agendas, national-level education policies and reforms often do not support learning for every child, for several reasons.

First, a range of countries—including India, Pakistan, and Malawi—have a historical, often colonial, legacy in which education systems were designed as selection systems for the future elites of a country rather than systems providing universal (basic) education (Glewwe and Muralidharan, 2015; Cheney et al., 2005; Banerjee and Duflo, 2011; Watkins and Kaler, 2015). This not only still impacts how different stakeholders, including politicians, policymakers, teachers, and parents, perceive the role of the education system for society (i.e., selection, credentialism and reproduction of social stratification) (see, for instance Watkins and Ashforth, 2019)<sup>6</sup>, but also leads the curriculum in many countries to be misaligned with the median child’s learning levels. When the curriculum advances too quickly, more and more children are left behind and stop learning altogether while in school or drop out as a result of low learning gains (Pritchett and Beatty, 2015; Kaffenberger and Pritchett, 2021; Kaffenberger et al., 2021).

Second, a focus on equity goals around learning can conceal that overall learning levels in many countries are unacceptably low for most children, even those from higher socio-economic status households. Simulations based on FII data by Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2020) show that achieving gender parity in learning outcomes and schooling attainment across ten countries would only increase female literacy by 8 percentage points, from 61 percent to 69 percent, still leaving 30 percent of women illiterate. Analysis of the new MICS-6 survey data from 18 countries also supports these findings, as differences in learning outcomes between boys and girls are small across countries and grades in almost all cases (Silberstein, 2021). Most importantly, equity gaps based on gender, rural/urban location or socio-economic status are small compared to the overall gap that exists to children achieving universal mastery of foundational skills (which Crouch et al., 2021 call “systems-related inequality” due to an overall system dysfunctionality to produce broad-based improvements in learning), and closing these equity gaps would still leave too many children without even basic literacy and numeracy (Akmal and Pritchett, 2021; Crouch et al., 2021).

It is a political decision to define learning goals with a universal aspiration to have every child acquire at least foundational literacy and numeracy, but it is also a political decision to accept inertia or accept low learning for a majority of children and high dropout rates that are the result of a selection system to (re)produce elites and social status.

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<sup>5</sup> SDG 4.1. states that “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”. This target is measured by the proportion of children that have reached a minimum proficiency level in literacy and numeracy at three points in their schooling cycle: in grades 2-3, at the end of primary, at the end of lower secondary (United Nations, 2015, p.5).

<sup>6</sup> Watkins and Kaler 2015 were able to show that Malawi’s education system serves as an important vehicle for status differentiation and social distinction (p.9). The decline in school attendance rates through the different stages of schooling show this selection effect, especially between entering and completing primary education. Students who do not expect to attend secondary education, either because they expect to fail the difficult national exam at the end of primary school or because of unaffordable school fees for secondary education, are unlikely to even complete primary education. The social stratification objective of education systems is also depicted in the attitude of the Malawian elite (i.e. those who hold a PhD) towards those with less education, who are perceived as ‘lazy’ (Watkins and Ashforth 2019, p.26). Even policymakers share this sentiment of dropout being a failure rather than a rational calculation based on the opportunity costs of staying in school but not learning due to a failing system (ibid).

### **Message 3: The highest authorities of a country must adopt a long-horizon view to reap the benefits of a learning-oriented system for the long haul**

Delivering high quality learning for every child and aligning education systems for learning is no easy endeavour. To highlight this, Pritchett (2019a, based on Bruns et al., 2019) outlines three key differences between the politics of schooling and the politics of learning:

First, expanding schooling is a consensus goal as many stakeholders in the education system stand to benefit. By contrast, reforms to improve learning often bring about opposition from at least a few powerful groups, which increases the resistance that political will has to overcome (Schneider et al., 2018; Sandholtz, 2019). This alters the (anticipated) political trade-offs for politicians who seek reform but also wish to remain in office.

Second, more schooling is essentially a logistical task that can be planned, monitored, and evaluated by ‘thin’, accounting-based indicators, such as the number or percentage of children enrolled or number of new teachers hired (see also Honig and Pritchett, 2019). Improving learning, on the other hand, is opaque in implementation because changing classroom practices is complex and cannot be achieved by ‘thin’, easily quantifiable indicators; it requires ‘thick’ descriptions and accounts-based accountability (ibid). Hence, improving learning is more difficult to plan and implement.

Third, improving access and attainment is a goal that is achievable and demonstrable in the short run, whereas improving learning, let alone aligning a system for learning, is a long-term endeavour in which benefits may only become visible after years or decades.<sup>7</sup> This makes learning a less attractive goal for politicians who need to ‘have something to show for it’ ahead of the next election, compared for instance to electoral promises around the expansion of access to primary and secondary education.

The juxtaposition of the perceived political costs and benefits of the different routes of action available to political actors is summarised schematically in *Figure 1*. Based on the characteristics of the politics of schooling, focusing on increased access and attainment has a stable net benefit to politicians: as a consensus goal that only expands rather than alters the existing system, more schooling is a logistical task that politicians and bureaucrats alike know how to plan, implement and monitor, and can be achieved over a short-horizon time span. Moreover, an expansion of access is popular with citizens, and politicians can be relatively certain to be able to deliver and demonstrate process to renew or consolidate their power and legitimacy of rule (Stasavage, 2005; Habyarimana et al., 2021).

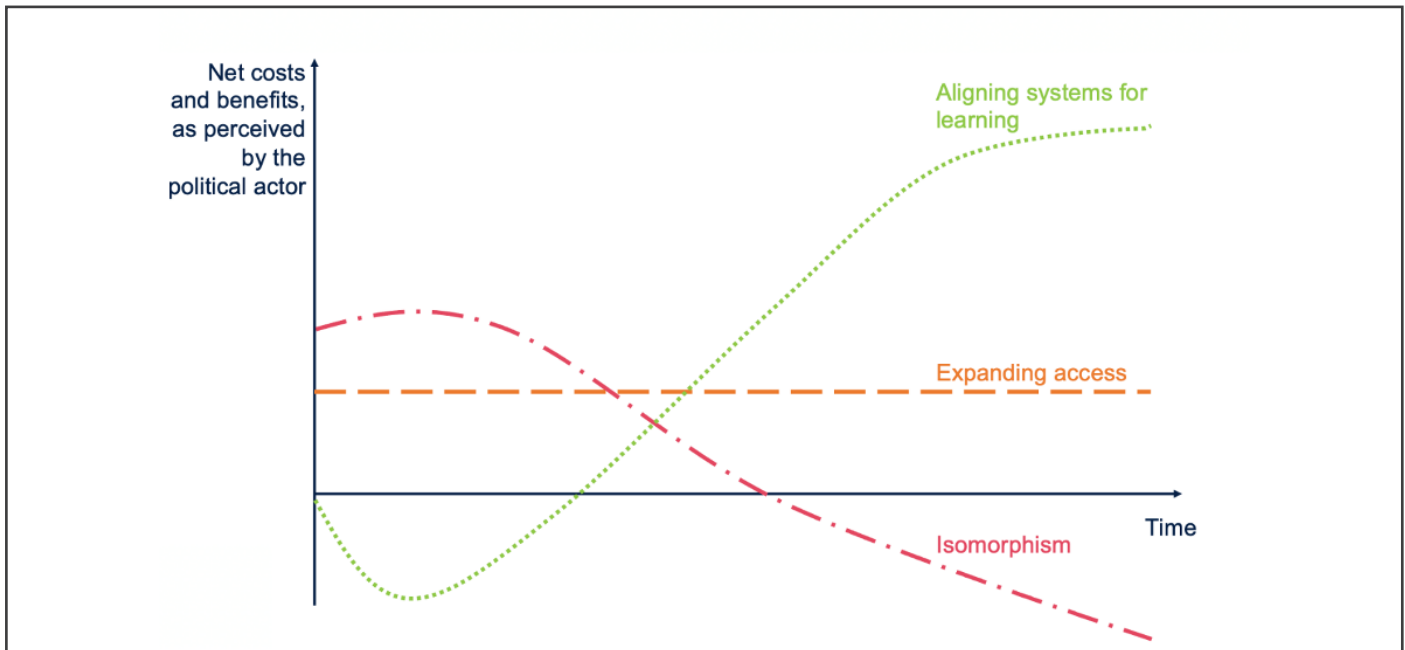
In contrast, the features of the politics of learning point to learning as a much riskier and much more complex objective to pursue politically. Aligning systems for learning necessitates a disruption of the current system and a realignment and change of priorities, processes, performance measures, instructional practices, and many other elements, that will show improvements but only over a longer time horizon (Hwa et al., 2020). Politicians have to anticipate political pushback from powerful interest groups and have to operate under enormous uncertainty about the success of learning reforms. Not least, reforms to improve learning may not be equally successful in all contexts, and voters are sensitive to successes and failures around reforms. In a study on Liberia, Sandholtz (2020) found that while voters rewarded the incumbent in areas where reforms improved learning outcomes, the incumbent lost electoral support in areas where the reform had not led to improved learning. Finally, rather than choosing learning-oriented reform, politicians can instead choose to merely mimic the structures and processes of successful, functioning systems. In doing so, the system remains dysfunctional and cannot deliver better learning. This survival strategy of dysfunctional systems is called isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Pritchett (2013) describes this problem as follows:

“The danger of isomorphic mimicry is that elements that really are part of a successful education system are used tactically by dysfunctional systems as camouflage. Education initiatives that really can improve student learning are copied and implemented in such a way that they do not have any impact on learning and instead protect and further the noneducational objectives of the dysfunctional organization.” (p. 145)

Because isomorphic systems look good from the outside, they gain support (in the form of legitimacy or financial means) and become perpetuated (ibid, p.131). This short-term gain in support is only offset when taking a long-horizon view on the results of a dysfunctional system not focused on improving education.

<sup>7</sup> Le Nestour et al. (forthc.) even report a decline in school quality, analysing the long-term development of literacy rates in 87 countries since the 1960s, using DHS and MICS data. The authors attribute the increase in literacy rates during that period to the expansion of schooling rather than the improvement of learning.

Figure 2: Aligning systems for learning brings benefits only in the long run, compared to a policy agenda focused on access or isomorphic mimicry



Source: Author (adapted from personal communication with Lant Pritchett, 04 June 2021).

Hence, aligning systems for learning and aiming to improve learning outcomes is not a viable political strategy when taking a short-horizon view. Actors need to be focused on the long-term benefits of learning goals, but they might be constrained by their own political system in doing so, especially in environments of quick turnover and high contestation of political power. Yet, actors with long-horizon views can emerge in a variety of political systems.<sup>8</sup>

Political will is an important factor in aligning systems for learning. The highest authorities of a state have to want to improve learning, have to want it for everybody, and have to want it for the long haul.<sup>9</sup> But how does political will come about in different systems? And where it is absent, what are ways in which it could be fostered? The RISE Systems Framework offers insights into understanding the process of political will formation.

## How political will is formed: Strengths and limitations of the RISE Systems Framework

As discussed in Section 2, the RISE Systems Framework defines 'Politics' as one of four principal-agent relationships (see Figure 1), as the relationship between citizens of a state (as the principals) and the highest executive, legislative and fiduciary authorities of the state (as the agent). At the same time, the state is the principal in the 'Compact' relationship.

When capturing the interaction between 'Politics' and 'Compact' and how the actors of the state come to form their political will, it becomes clear that, depending on the context, there are different ways in which political will can come about. As a way of example, two general types will be presented here to demonstrate the different logics and modalities, before presenting the wider spectrum of possibilities of state-society relations in a broader typology.

<sup>8</sup> Literature on political settlements acknowledges this by distinguishing between countries with dominant and competitive political power configurations (Levy, 2014; see also Khan, 2010). Dominant political settlements are characterised by little to no turnover in actors in power, and top-down, (largely) uncontested exercise of power either by an individual or institutionalised by a political party. By contrast, competitive political settlements are those where the actors in power have to compete over staying in power via elections (and this, can be done in a Weberian rule-of-law setting or a personalised, clientelist way) (see also Levy 2018). However, competition over political power should not by default be equated with short-horizon actors. This will be discussed in Section 4.

<sup>9</sup> With thanks to Lant Pritchett for coining these three expressions.

### **Type A: A strong ‘Politics’ relationship can explain the formation of political will and commitment.**

In this case, a strong and functioning ‘Politics’ accountability relationship shapes the ‘Compact’ relationship. Citizens can hold the highest authorities of the state accountable, and these authorities have to be responsive to their citizens. In turn, what the state wants, prioritises, and delegates (in the ‘Compact’ relationship) is representative of what the citizens want, prioritise, and delegate (in the ‘Politics’ relationship). Citizens are reasonably articulate and can effectively delegate their priorities, and the state as the agent has the motivation to be responsive to these priorities. This responsiveness of the state (i.e., the formation of political will as a response to citizens’ priorities) is an emergent property of the operation of the political system.

Examples of this Type A would be what comparative politics literature has termed ‘consolidated’ democracies, which go beyond a minimalist definition of democracy (based on the occurrence of moderately free and fair elections). Consolidated democracies are those in which “patterns of behaviour developed ad hoc during the change in regimes becomes a stable structure in the new system, and when the admittance of political actors into the system as well as the process of political decision-making proceed according to previously established and legitimately coded procedures” (Merkel, 1998, p.36; see also Linz and Stepan, 1996). In these countries, governments are responsive to their citizens because they are tightly controlled by their electorate, not just via elections but other forms of civil society, free media, and the judiciary. The state guarantees and protects rights and civil liberties and provides services to its citizens, and in exchange gains the monopoly over the use of force which its citizens deem legitimate (Lipset, 1960; Luhmann, 1983).

This does not mean that service delivery is always satisfactory, but that the political system allows for avenues for citizens to gain information about the quality of service delivery and to exert pressure onto the political system to improve service delivery where deficient. The public outcry over Germany’s disappointing results in the PISA assessments 2001—which coined the term ‘PISA shock’—is a good example for this. The PISA results catalysed deep changes in Germany’s political discourse and reform agenda as well as in the process of curriculum development and design, not least due to a change in the societal consensus around education goals and outcomes (Ertl, 2006). Similar reactions to PISA shocks were also reported in Denmark and Japan (Breakspear, 2014).

For this Type A, the RISE Systems Framework is well-suited to capture how political will and commitment to learning comes about as both the result of a strong ‘Politics’ accountability relationship and the basis of legitimacy of rule that shape the political calculations of the highest authorities.

### **Type B: A non-existent or weak ‘Politics’ relationship cannot explain the formation of political will**

Not all political systems are characterised by a strong accountability relationship between citizens as principals and the highest authorities of a state as the agent. The degree to which state authorities are or have to be responsive to what citizens want varies significantly by context, because it depends on the mode through which the state gains and sustains legitimacy for its rule in general and certain policies in particular. Similarly, the degree to which citizens can exercise their power through various avenues of political participation (both de jure and de facto) is highly dependent on the political regime in which they operate (Linz, 1964; Geddes, 1999; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007).

This means that in a range of regimes, the ‘Politics’ relationship is non-existent or weak. In either case, citizens cannot reasonably hold their state to account. These states do not have to be responsive to their electorates but can cater to their own preferences or the preferences of a small group that is instrumental in securing their rule and power (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Examples of this Type B would be a range of authoritarian regimes, both personalised and institutionalised/one-party regimes, that restrict meaningful political participation even in the presence of elections (that usually are not free or fair). The state as the agent is not dependent on the principals for securing political survival.

In these cases of an absent or weak ‘Politics’ relationship, how is political will and commitment formed? The RISE Systems Framework cannot accurately capture the formation of political will in these instances. Therefore, a complementary conceptual framework is introduced to better distinguish between the different types of regimes and to explain how political will and commitment is formed as emergent properties of these different types. In a second step, the typology can also distinguish and describe avenues of change available in each type to foster political will where it is absent or weak.

## A typology of political regimes on the formation of political will

A variety of regimes, both democratic and non-democratic, have produced good learning outcomes. For every Finland there is a Singapore, for every Canada a Vietnam, China, or Cuba (OECD, 2019). Democracy, therefore, is not a precondition for learning. But as shown in the previous section, the logic of how the decision to prioritise learning was made likely differs depending on the type of political system and the dynamics and constraints it produces.

In addition, if the international community takes learning as seriously as stipulated in SDG 4, ‘working with the grain’, or working with the political realities present in today’s world, is imperative (Levy, 2014). It is important to understand the political system in which education is embedded, understand the state’s motivation and interaction with its society, and identify avenues and limitation of change within these contexts.

Figure 3 introduces a typology of political regimes to help explain the differences in the formation of political will and commitment based on a few distinguishing factors.

The starting point for this typology is the question of who in society has power over leadership selection and turnover, and on whom those in power are dependent to secure their rule.

Borrowing terminology from Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s ‘Selectorate Theory’, within the total population of a country there is a selectorate, defined as the people in a society that have a say over leadership selection (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). As a subset of this selectorate, a winning coalition is defined as the “quantity of selectors whose support the leader must retain to remain in office” (Morrow et al., 2008: 393). In the most inclusive of regimes, the selectorate equals the electorate, and due to this inclusivity, the winning coalition is big. By contrast, both the size of the selectorate and winning coalition diminish in institutionalised autocracies (i.e., single-party regimes) and even more in personalised autocracies, monarchies, or military junta regimes (ibid).<sup>10</sup> In short, the question here is: Whose support must those in power secure in order to remain in office? While power in inclusive democracies is based on broad societal support and legitimation, other forms of regimes can sustain their rule even without the support of a majority of people in their society. In turn, the formation of political will differs depending on the characteristics and size of the selectorate and winning coalition.

Figure 3: A Typology of Political Regimes To Distinguish Between Different Modes of Political Will Formation

Size of Winning Coalition	Big ←————→ Small				No stable winning coalition
Type	Inclusive democracy	Non-inclusive democracy	Institutionalized autocracy	Personalized autocracy	Failed state
Example(s)	Denmark	India	Vietnam; Cuba	Rwanda	Somalia

Source: Author (adapted from personal communication with Lant Pritchett, 04 June 2021).

The typology differentiates between five types of regimes with regards to political will formation: Inclusive democracies have the largest selectorates and winning coalitions. The formation of political will and commitment is described above as Type A. Non-inclusive democracies, such as India, have functioning democratic institutions but de facto undermine the social and political voices of people of lower castes, of people living in poverty, of women, Muslims, and other groups (BTI, 2020). Institutionalised autocracies, or single-party authoritarian regimes, include countries such as Vietnam, Cuba, or Turkey under Kemal Ataturk. Personalised autocracies are characterised by the rule of a single individual or family, such as Paul Kagame in Rwanda, Vladimir Putin in Russia, or the royal families in the Arab

<sup>10</sup> ‘Selectorate Theory’ states that democracies will be more inclined to produce public goods as their selectorate and winning coalitions are big, whereas autocracies are more inclined to focus on the production of private benefits (via clientelism and patronage networks) rather than public goods. However, it is evident that improvement of learning outcomes has happened in autocratic and democratic regimes alike. Therefore, other factors must be at play in the politics of learning.



Gulf monarchies (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017). This constitutes the Type B described above. Failed states are included as a category of states that currently do not have the infrastructure and institutions of a functioning state; Somalia is one such example. However, it is assumed that the formation of political will is not feasible to a sufficient degree in contexts of failed states.

Next, it is assumed that political will to improve learning can be present in any of these regimes (as depicted in the Yes/No differentiation in *Figure 4*), but for different reasons. It is important to note that ‘political will’ as discussed here encompasses all three conditions/messages listed above: The highest authorities have to want to prioritise learning, have to want it for everybody, and have to adopt a long-horizon view on the benefits of learning-oriented reform.

Figure 4: Political will can be present in any regime type, but for different reasons

Size of Winning Coalition	Big ←————→ Small								No stable winning coalition	
	Inclusive democracy		Non-inclusive democracy		Institutionalized autocracy		Personalized autocracy		Failed state	
Type	Inclusive democracy		Non-inclusive democracy		Institutionalized autocracy		Personalized autocracy		Failed state	
Example(s)	Denmark		India		Vietnam; Cuba		Rwanda		Somalia	
Political will?	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	[Y]	[N]

Source: Author

In inclusive democracies, good learning outcomes are part of the public service delivery on which citizens hold their highest authorities to account (see Type A above). The ‘Politics’ relationship of accountability can therefore explain the political will and commitment of the highest authorities in inclusive democracies. Due to its inclusivity, these types will likely define learning goals as universal goals and want to deliver services to all of society. Even though democracies are characterised by frequent elections and possibilities of turnover in leadership, the *raison d’être* of these regimes is a long-horizon view on service delivery for and accountability to its electorate (Dahl, 1971).

In non-inclusive democracies, the ‘Politics’ relationship is present (due to regular and mostly fair elections), but the structure of the political system excludes the voices of certain groups, in fact often seeks to exclude them. Therefore, the highest authorities do not have to cater to all of society. In contexts like these, such as India, the approach of using education systems as selection systems can be sustained, rejecting learning as a universal goal even when they apply a long-horizon view on their own rule.

A range of institutionalised autocracies, including Vietnam, China, Cuba, or Singapore, have managed to produce good learning outcomes over a sustained period of time, prioritising education for many (even if not all in some cases)<sup>11</sup> of their children over a long-time horizon. In these contexts, the ‘Politics’ relationship is not decisive for the state’s priorities or political will to improve learning. For instance, Singapore’s far-reaching education reforms since its independence were part of a larger national survival and economic development strategy to which human capital and skilled labour were instrumental (Goh and Gopinathan, 2008). The ‘Goh Report’ highlighted low literacy as a central issue in Singapore’s education system as early as 1979 (Goh, 1979). These examples illustrate the range of rationales that can exist for the highest authorities of a country to prioritise learning as part of a broader vision and ambition for their nation, even if the ‘Politics’ relationship is not relevant for a regime’s political survival. In other words: The highest authorities may have the political will to prioritise education and learning over the long haul for other reasons than the priorities and scrutiny of their citizens.

In personalised autocracies, leadership has to be responsive only to a small winning coalition, and therefore the ‘Politics’ relationship may be weak or non-existent and does not influence the formation of political will and commitment of the highest authorities. Nonetheless, this is not mutually exclusive with the state and political elite

<sup>11</sup> Despite Vietnam being celebrated for producing continuously high learning outcomes, this conceals inequalities between students that belong to the majority ethnic group (Kinh) and those belonging to ethnic minority groups. In part, this is because “discriminatory attitudes and practices persist in systems and create differential outcomes” (deJaeghere et al., 2021: 2).

pursuing a national development agenda, including education. President Kagame, Generals Park Chung Hee in Korea or Chang Kai Shek in Taiwan put national unity and poverty alleviation at the forefront of their countries' long-term agenda and were instrumental in establishing national priorities for the education sector (Williams 2019; Buckley-Zistel 2009). However, personalised leadership with little responsiveness to citizens and other stakeholders of the system can lead to undesired outcomes in education reforms and policies. In 2009, Kagame's President's Office decided to change the language of instruction in Rwanda from French to English, without sufficient consultation or cooperation with stakeholders responsible for implementation, and without sufficient recognition that neither the majority of teachers nor students possessed the language skills to teach and learn in English (Williams 2019). This led to a system shock that impacted negatively on learning outcomes. The political dynamics of personalised autocracies allow for top-down decision-making that often ignores the need for overall system coherence and shared goals between stakeholders, which can offset a focus on national development and a long-horizon view on the benefits of an educated population. As Williams 2019 summarises:

“Policy reforms focused on learning have not resulted in a coherent and sustained strategy. Until the ruling party sees poor quality education as a threat to its hold on power, thereby producing a sense of urgency leading to a sustained and effective strategy, the situation is unlikely to improve for the foreseeable future” (p.102)

Additionally, the framework can not only be used to describe different system dynamics and rationales through which political will is formed, but can also help describe different avenues to support the creation of political will depending on the type of regime (i.e., how to move from the 'No' column to the 'Yes' column in *Figure 5*). By way of example, this will be shown for the role of information in informing political decisions and therefore fostering political will, but this should be read as a first attempt to depict the logic of the framework and the different avenues of change available (or blocked) based on the type of regime. More research is needed to further carve out these different rationales, both describing the role of information and describing the role that other elements of the RISE Systems Framework (such as financing or support) can play to foster political will in these respective types. For instance, subsequent research synthesis work might include research on various approaches to create supportive environments for reform (see, for instance, Crouch and Healy, 1997 or DeStefano and Crouch, 2006).

Figure 5: How information can help foster political will, depending on regime type

Size of Winning Coalition	← Big → Small								No stable winning coalition	
	Inclusive democracy		Non-inclusive democracy		Institutionalized autocracy		Personalized autocracy		Failed state	
Type	Denmark		India		Vietnam; Cuba		Rwanda		Somalia	
Example(s)	Denmark		India		Vietnam; Cuba		Rwanda		Somalia	
Political will?	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	[Y]	[N]
Role of information in supporting the creation of political will	PISA shock boosts learning agenda		Civil society work (e.g. data collection and dissemination), advocacy		Catalyzing effect if learning is part of a bigger national vision or ambition; otherwise unlikely due to restrictive liberties		Catalyzing effect if learning is part of a bigger national vision or ambition; otherwise unlikely due to restrictive liberties		n/a	

Source: Author

How might the availability of information on learning outcomes help foster political will? This will likely depend on the opportunities and constraints present in the respective system.

In inclusive democracies, the importance and power of information has been made evident by the PISA shock, as described for Germany in Section 3. When citizens are not well-informed about the (comparative) performance of their own education system, making this information available can create the necessary public outcry and pressure to open windows of opportunity for learning-oriented coalitions and reforms. As Jaime Saavedra remembers from Peru's PISA shock: “[S]ome countries have left PISA after bad results. But we didn't go down that route. Instead, we decided to own the problem. (...) Then education was on the front page. Education is never on the front page of the newspaper” (McKinsey, 2019; see also Saavedra and Gutierrez, 2020).

For non-inclusive democracies like India, the role of civil society can be imperative, as is evident in the role that the

non-governmental organisation Pratham has played for India's education system. They played—and still play—a crucial role in collecting learning data and making it publicly available, in implementing large-scale innovations in the classroom through the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach, and in pushing for learning-oriented reforms since its inception (Bano and Oberoi, 2020; Banerji, 2015).

The availability of information on learning outcomes can also steer leadership in institutionalised and personalised autocracies, depending on the presence of an overall developmental national ambition, vision, and agenda. For instance, the previously mentioned 'Goh Report' and its examination of the most pressing challenges in Singapore's education system in the late 1970s awakened leadership to the lack of learning and therefore lack of skilled labour needed to fulfil the long-term economic modernization and national survival strategy. However, it might be argued that the collection of data on learning outcomes in these settings is a result, rather than a cause, of political will for a coherent policy agenda. Authoritarian regimes are characterised by a restriction on political rights and civil liberties, and collecting information against the will of such regimes has proven difficult or impossible. Countries like Rwanda (Matfess, 2015) or Tanzania (Cheeseman et al., 2021) have cracked down on political freedoms and civil liberties, which has also affected freedom of speech and the work of civil society organisations such as Twaweza (The Atlantic, 2019). Therefore, while information can be used to steer an existing reform agenda, these regimes usually do not allow for a strengthening of the 'Politics' accountability relationship via the availability of information on learning outcomes.

## Conclusion

A simple separation of the world's countries into democracies and autocracies is not helpful in explaining either the similarities in expanding schooling, or in explaining why both democracies and autocracies sometimes succeed and sometimes fail in aligning their systems for learning. The highest authorities of a country must have the political will to improve learning for all children, and in doing so must employ a long-horizon view that allows them to focus on the long-term benefits of learning-oriented reforms versus short-term achievements of expanding access or isomorphic mimicry (Pritchett, 2013).

The framework introduced in this Insight Note is a first attempt to specify different types of regimes with regards to how political will is formed in each of them, and how political will could (or likely could not) be fostered depending on the respective regime type. It puts political structures and dynamics at the centre of explaining why the expansion of learning has not been as homogenous as the expansion of schooling in past decades. It argues in favour of a 'working with the grain' approach, in which political realities and contexts have to be understood and adapted to, rather than ignored or changed. Not least, the framework underscores the hopeful message that there exists more than one path to success, that political will can be present in a variety of regimes—albeit for different reasons—and that there are a variety of ways in which political will can be fostered if applied to the specific logic or rationale of the political regime.

These contributions notwithstanding, the framework presented here is only a first step in conceptualising the different system logics. For instance, strengthening citizens' power vis-à-vis the state (i.e., the 'Politics' relationship) can be an important strategy for improving learning. But what citizens delegate and prioritise is also a result of the system they themselves are a part of. Many systems are built around selectionism and credentialism, where passing high-stakes exams is the entry point to wealth and social status. Therefore, citizens and parents themselves can have a variety of priorities for and expectations of the education system, and learning does not necessarily have to be a priority compared to access, credentialism, and other career-building objectives (Habyarimana et al., 2020; Watkins and Ashforth, 2019; Atuhurra and Kaffenberger, 2020). Parents might also be sceptical about the disruptive changes of learning-oriented reforms, as in the case of Sobral, Brazil, where parents did not support the closure of underperforming schools in their area as they did not want to send their children to more distant schools, even if they offered better quality of instruction (Cruz and Loureiro, 2020: 13). Parents might also be misled and misinformed about the amount of learning that their children can hope to benefit from by attending school, equating schooling with learning (Kaffenberger and Pritchett, 2021).

This highlights the importance of a system's analysis of education, including the political, social and historical factors and dynamics that the education sector is embedded in and operates within. An 'All For Education' approach (Levy, 2018) will require an overall realignment of the education system, and will have to entail that stakeholders hold a shared vision and goal for the education system: to get every child learning.

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