

[UPBEAT MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Domingo Morel is a professor of political science at Rutgers University. His latest book is called *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy*. In it he takes a look at what happens when school districts are taken over by state governments. He joined us in the studio to talk about his book.

DOMINGO Well, thank you for having me. So defining a state takeover.

MOREL:

INTERVIEWER: He first became interested in the topic of school takeovers when something happened in Central Falls, Rhode Island.

DOMINGO In the city called Central Falls that many of your listeners may be familiar with in 2009 there was a firing of all of the teachers in the local high school. And I remember President Obama at the time mentioning this in one of his speeches, mentioning Central Falls, and I remember Secretary of Education Arne Duncan talking about this as well. And so I was puzzled at why the President of the United States and the Secretary of Education are talking about the smallest city in the smallest state.

INTERVIEWER: Right, one square mile.

DOMINGO Yeah, right, one square mile, exactly.

MOREL:

INTERVIEWER: Morel started looking into why this mass firing might have happened.

DOMINGO And so I started doing a little bit of research in Central Falls and I realized something that was happening there was that you had a majority Latina school board and they were-- although many people were unhappy about this, the Latino community was essentially not as disappointed with this. And there was this growing kind of empowerment, Latino political empowerment happening in Central Falls. And the research, political science is pretty clear about the schools being a foundation of political empowerment and that from the schools and the school boards then we start to see-- that opens up doors for other levels of political empowerment like at the city council, mayoral level, and so forth.

But what was interesting about this was that that majority Latina school board was in place because of a state takeover of the Central Falls schools back in the 1990s exactly. And at the time, although there was a significant Latino population in Central Falls, they had-- they didn't have any political representation either at the school board level, city council, or mayor's office. And the first representation came when the state took over the school district, abolished the elected school board, which was made up of all white members at the time, and appointed Latino members to the school board. And that was the first time that Latinos had any representation in the City of Central Falls.

INTERVIEWER: The reason the school board became majority Latino was because the state of Rhode Island took over the Central Falls School District. This is something state governments often do.

DOMINGO
MOREL: And so they take over a school district that they deem failing in one way or another and then that's not it because several states have different approaches to how they take over school districts. On some cases-- and this is the research that I'm really-- started-- this aspect of the takeover is what really got my research started is some states take over a school district and abolish the school board, the locally elected school board, and then appoint a new one.

INTERVIEWER: In the case of Central Falls the takeover led to increased representation for the town's Latino community.

DOMINGO
MOREL: And so I argue that here is a potential for a local community that has been historically marginalized, an opportunity that a state takeover may have provided, and indeed I provide evidence to suggest that it has been a positive for-- politically for the City of Central Falls and for the academic system-- school system in Central Falls. And so that's how I started the research.

[CALM MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: So Morel started looking into other places where state takeovers happened.

DOMINGO
MOREL: Oakland, Baltimore, Detroit, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: He wanted to know if this process had the same effect in other cities as it had had in Central Falls.

DOMINGO

And so I find evidence to suggest that-- which was a hypothesis that I had established,

MOREL:

developed, that communities are affected differently. Communities with high levels of political empowerment are more likely to feel the negative side of an intervention and communities with a low level of political empowerment may actually have doors open for them as a result of the takeover.

And so I constructed a data set because we didn't have a data set and so-- going back to the 1980s, from 1980 to 2013 when I was doing this research, and found evidence that indeed what we saw happening in Central Falls is actually happening in other places, that communities and particularly Latino communities that have very low levels of political empowerment at the time of the takeover seem to benefit from a takeover in terms of descriptive representation on school boards.

But at the same time that I'm doing that, there's other findings. That same data set that I was able to create showed what I mentioned earlier about the different types of takeovers.

INTERVIEWER:

What Morel noticed was that state takeovers often happened in cities with high levels of black political empowerment.

DOMINGO

In some cases they leave the elected school board in place and in some places they abolish

MOREL:

the school board and don't replace it at all. And so we see and from my research that this affects communities differently and African-American communities in particular face the most punitive and disruptive type of state takeover.

So the argument, as the argument goes and justifying a state takeover is because, again, these schools are underperforming. And so in my research, I pushed that argument and to question if that's really the motive behind it. And so in order to find that answer we have to look-- go back a little bit in history. And I go back to the 1960s and 1970s and looked at the type of dynamics that started to unfold post-civil rights and find that there is-- after the 1960s there was a greater centralization of power at the state level. And that greater centralization of power at the state level, I argue, was a response to black political empowerment in US cities.

INTERVIEWER:

This started happening in the '70s and '80s, Morel says.

DOMINGO

Because at the national level there was a pro-civil rights agenda that was-- that took place at

MOREL:

the national level and we can go back to the war on poverty, LBJ's Great Society, so yes, the Voting Rights Act of-- the Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act, but equally as important, the

Economic Opportunity Act, which sent lots of dollars to cities, to localities to address issues of poverty. And so at the national level we see that forming, at the local level we see that populations in cities are increasingly becoming-- the African-American population become the majority and eventually start to gain political power in these cities.

And so to break that-- [INAUDIBLE] I mean, what I call a federal urban access conservative forces start to emerge at the state level.

INTERVIEWER: As a response to black political power in cities state governments tried to centralize their power.

DOMINGO
MOREL: A centralization, not a decentralization but a centralization of power at the state level, and as a response to what's happening in cities, black-- the growth of black political empowerment, and that provides the conditions for then states to take over local school districts. And because it's a response to the rise of black political empowerment, we see that the most punitive acts, the highest number of state takeovers indeed happen in, are targeted to black communities.

INTERVIEWER: And black communities, Morel found, almost always suffer from these takeovers.

DOMINGO
MOREL: And, yes, people will argue that, well, school systems are struggling and so why, you know, why can't we justify a takeover if school systems are struggling? The response that I would say is that many school systems are struggling. It's not just black school systems that are struggling, many school systems are struggling. And if the state is indeed interested in supporting these school systems then it seems to me that the proper course, like what we do in other school districts, is come in and support the community, not remove the community.

[ORGAN MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Morel gives an example. In New Orleans after Katrina the school districts were taken over by the state.

DOMINGO
MOREL: So it's interesting because you have certain people who say it's a huge success, former mayor Mitch Landrieu saying it's a huge success, Secretary, again, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan saying it's a huge success, several researchers who pointed to increased test scores in the district say it's a success. You know who's saying it's not a success?

INTERVIEWER: The people of New Orleans?

DOMINGO The people of New Orleans, particularly the black people, black community in New Orleans.

MOREL: And so what surveys are showing that the African-American community there is-- thought that the schools were better pre-Katrina compared to post-Katrina.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

DOMINGO Right? And part-- I'm engaged with a colleague looking at this question about New Orleans, I

MOREL: briefly talk about it in my book but-- about New Orleans and what is it that's leading to that. And what we argue in this and in our research is that that shift has taken place is a loss of political empowerment for the black community. So the black community prior to Katrina, black teachers represented the largest black teaching force in the United States. And so there's 75% of the teachers in New Orleans were black, prior-- and that was reduced by 25%.

So that's one major thing, right, so the loss of employment and the black middle class that teachers represent, there's the loss of that. The other part of it is that they do create-- the state creates a Recovery School District, basically pushes to the side the locally elected school board, and they have a new school board that's responsible for governance of the charter schools, which eventually become 90% of the schools, the largest charter school experiment in the United States in New Orleans. And so that's another aspect of removing the community from the decision-making process.

And then charter schools are also have their independent governing boards that are not-- and recent research also shows that these independent governing boards are not representative of the community. So while African-Americans represent 60% of the population in New Orleans, 60% of the charter school board members--

INTERVIEWER: Are not.

DOMINGO --are not. Right, they're white. So the community is responding, we argue that they're

MOREL: responding to this loss that's taken place. And yeah, it's OK, you may have improved test scores according to the research, the mayor might be happy, the Secretary of Education might be happy, but the people, where it matters the most, people are not saying that they're happy.

[SOMBER MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: While state takeovers are rare Morel says the data on where they happen paints a clear picture of racism.

DOMINGO

You know, so one of the things that I remember talking about this early on in one of the earlier stages of the project, and I said it was about 100 school districts that had been taken over, so you know, it's 100 school districts. We have thousands of school districts in the United States, how can that be, you know, how can it be such a big deal?

MOREL:

Well, when you take a look at that, for example, students in Maryland, African-American students, 60% of African-American students have attended a school district that is either under state control or was at some point under state control. And then we can go through states, Illinois, New York, obviously Michigan, and in some of these states where you have-- and in the South, for instance, where you have majority of African-American populations who are in school districts that have been under state control. And so what I say, you know, I mention that that means that the likely-- that it increases the likelihood that that school system that these students are attending are being led by people that are politically hostile to that community.

[SOMBER MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER:

So how do we improve failing school districts without disempowering communities? One solution Morel offers is pretty simple. He wants to increase federal support for local governments.

DOMINGO

Exactly, they get the federal government to support localities in greater ways, education being one of them, but other ways as well, to provide protections that at the time were very clear was needed and today people may think that are not as needed but clearly are.

MOREL:

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you so much.

DOMINGO

No, thank you for having me.

MOREL:

[BRIGHT GUITAR MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER:

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