

**A Social Movement Analysis of the 2022 San Francisco School Board Recall & Modern
Counter-Movements to Public Education**

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Introduction & Contextualization

When San Francisco, California is mentioned, many words come to mind: progressive, liberal, and others that describe the heavily Democratic community in northern California. Starting in 2020, however, a massive storm was brewing in the San Francisco community. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in public schools moving to remote instruction across the nation, including in San Francisco's Unified School District (SFUSD). Additionally, there were nationwide demonstrations calling for racial justice in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. This movement resulted in widespread conversations about systemic inequities that impacted everyday systems in the United States, including housing, jobs, and schools. School systems across the country attempted to show that they cared about racial equity, acknowledged that many schools were named after former slave owners, and understood that other systemic issues needed to be resolved.

While seemingly unrelated and unconnected moments in time, there were forces seeking to bridge the gap between anger at the education system for being inequitable and those who were extremely opposed to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families that placed Black Lives Matter signs in their yards, engaged in demonstrations or donated funds to protest efforts were also angered by the continuation of virtual learning, sparking anger at the SFUSD school board. While schools were fully moved online and buildings were empty during the 2020-2021 school year, the SFUSD school board moved forward with a proposal to rename over 40 schools, including those named after Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and even former mayor and current California Senator Dianne Feinstein (San Francisco school board drops plan to rename 'injustice-linked' schools). This sparked outrage

from community members, especially those angered at what they viewed as the school board's inadequate response to distance learning and COVID-19 as a whole, and the SFUSD school board became a nationwide story. This effort was later suspended a few months later following this outcry, leaving even community members who seemingly supported equitable school policies confused and increasingly ridiculed by the national and local media. (San Francisco school board drops plan to rename 'injustice-linked' schools).

While the school board was under fire mostly by those angered by remote learning and for their effort to rename currently closed schools, there were additional controversies surrounding the school board. Alison Collins, who was a school board member at the time, had made tweets in 2016 that were described as many Asian Americans as offensive, including saying that Asians use white supremacy to get ahead and that the Asian community was not vocally against Donald Trump (The strange and terrible saga of Alison Collins and her ill-fated Tweets). Collins, the only Black woman on the school board, believed she was sharing her experiences about anti-Black racism, but instead the tweets resurfaced and damaged her credibility and the school boards credibility even more, especially with the large Asian community in San Francisco.

On February 19, 2021, organizers began an effort to "recall" three members of the SFUSD school board: President Gabriela Lopez, Vice President Faauuga Moliga, and Alison Collins. After collecting around 50,000 signatures for all three members, the election was scheduled for February 15, 2022. The other four members of the school board were not eligible to be recalled at the time, but almost certainly would have faced an election as well if they were, complicating the dynamics as we examine and discuss the recall effort (San Francisco Unified School District recall, California (2021-2022)). In the end, all three members were swept out of

office with the widest of margins. Moliga was removed by a margin of 44.2 percentage points, Lopez 50 points, and Collins 57.2 points (San Francisco Unified School District recall, California (2021-2022)).

This analysis will use the 2022 San Francisco school board recall election as a case study for a social movement analysis of the emerging counter-movement to public education. It will point out the ways a counter-movement frames their issues in a way that vastly outpaces the given social movement, and show that a counter-movement can expand the repertoires of contention far beyond their stated, narrow focus. Ultimately, this analysis will show that the emerging movement that is anti-CRT and pro-school reopening is a broad, all-encompassing counter-movement to movements in education enhancing equity that frames itself as truly equitable to draw in more followers and achieve the ultimate objective of discrediting public education as we know it.

Literature Review

The social movement literature included within this analysis will include topics including counter-framing, the nature of movement/counter-movement relations, the utility of social media with counter-movements, and pre-emption playing a role in the vitality of a counter-movement. Firstly, an article from Steven Boucher, Anne-Kathrin Kronberg, and Regina Werum details the homeschooling movement and the framing and agenda setting of a countermovement. It explores the counter-movement against further limitations on homeschooling after it was legalized in the United States in 1972, while providing for a definition and contextualization of the agenda setting through counter movements. Overall, it provides a more comprehensive look into conservative education politics and how they interact with a counter-movement especially when dealing with largely unpopular issues and attempting to frame it in a certain way.

Framing is further contextualized within this analysis by Mallena Taylor & Mary Bernstein. Taylor & Bernstein's exploration of the Tea Party Movement and their connection to the stigma neutralization model is used to show the efforts that San Francisco school board recall organizers went through to court the support of Democratic voters in order to win the recall. The stigma of being a "conservative" in San Francisco is debilitating, leading to the need to neutralize that stigma. Additionally, the issue of denial is brought in to show the framing of equity and other issues as not important or relevant compared to virtual learning (Taylor & Bernstein 2019, 142.)

Eulalie Laschever & David Meyer's analysis of movement/counter-movement pairing shows that there is not always rough symmetry between a movement and a counter-movement. In fact, the article goes on to show that a counter-movement often has the advantage with more logistical and financial support, counteracting an advantage in popularity that a movement may have. Similarly, Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap lay out a case study surrounding climate change and the conservative efforts to counter-frame it. In response to the environmental movement, conservatism became a counter-movement in opposition because environmentalism challenges many of the values and beliefs of conservatism and thus must not succeed in their eyes. Additionally, they frame any action towards curbing climate change as more harmful than climate change itself, attempting to discredit scientific evidence to lower the urgency of action. This is used to show the framing process of convincing Democratic-leaning voters in San Francisco to cast their values of equity aside because the solution may be more complicated than they imagined at first, outpacing the movement and delaying meaningful action in any way.

Counter-movements are also capable of framing events or policies to be seen as an immediate or substantial harm. As shown in an article by Pearce Edwards and Daniel Aaron, this

creates a sense of urgency that outpaces the ultimate objectives of whatever the movement is seeking to accomplish. For the purposes of this analysis, the “harm” is seen as not reopening schools to in person instruction, which becomes a catalyst for immediate action (removing the school board members).

Finally, the utility of social media is explored in an article by Jeffrey Oktavianus, Brenna Davidson & Lu Guan. Social media allows for the challenging of dominant values, with algorithms allowing for framing contests to be amplified more so than a typical conversation would allow, especially when holding an unpopular opinion. This allows countermovements to immediately respond to any communication by the movement. If a movement emerges, a countermovement can use social media to hijack the narrative.

Framing of a Counter-Movement

The case study of the San Francisco school board recall of 2022 allows for an examination of a counter-movement that could fail without appropriate framing. With 65% of San Francisco being registered as Democrats and 85.3% of voters casting their votes for Joe Biden in 2020, any allegations of connections to the wider conservative movement or help from the Republican Party could doom any opposing movement (California Election Results 2020 & Current Registration Counts). Thus, supporters of the recall effort needed to avoid these accusations and outpace efforts to delegitimize their counter-movement. This was firstly done by framing the recall as an effort to frame the recall as being focused on the hastening of school reopening, on a lack of fiscal discipline by the board, by framing Collins’s tweets as anti-Asian, and by the name-changing dilemma. These messages are strictly able to be bipartisan, with appeals to both conservatives and progressive citizens alike. They also avoid the image of the

recall proponents seeming to be a counter-movement, and instead appear as though they are fighting for values that the majority of San Francisco citizens hold.

By seemingly running on combating anti-Asian sentiment, accusations of being against equity fail to be made or fall flat on their face. By explicitly mentioning that the tweets made by Collins are racist, the organizers incorporate an aspect of framing that is usually used in reverse: racism does exist, and in this case the “progressive” school board is engaging in these kinds of activities (Taylor & Bernstein 2019, 142.). While many of the more conservative supporters may not wish to engage in debates using the framing of equity and race, the recall organizers do so in a way that appeals to a vast array of people while still providing a material benefit for conservatives in exchange for their support. In turn, this strategy resulted in a widespread belief that the recall was vindication for the Asian community for the tweets, including through the endorsement of the recall by the Chinese Democrats of San Francisco. Additionally, equity is brought in voluntarily by the recall organizers, as they are present throughout their website, advertisements, literature, and social media postings. While the substance of their belief in equity could be interrogated and may not be genuine, the mere fact that it is present avoids surface-level observations that it is not being acknowledged as an issue.

In addition to actively framing to avoid accusations, the organizers of the recall effort were also able to get out ahead of and respond to accusations that the movement for equity and the school board levied. For example, a common refrain of organizers in favor of the school board was that the recall effort was a larger effort to be against public education, and that it was financed by very wealthy people from outside of San Francisco. This accusation was largely true, as around 50% of funding for the recall effort came from large dollar donations (Janfaza 2022). However, the recall organizers continued to frame themselves as being a grassroots movement,

with the message from the movement largely falling on flat ears and not being widely received. In effect, the recall supporters maintaining their image as a grassroots movement and framing themselves as such from the start allowed them to hold firm against credible allegations about their funding and support.

An action as drastic as recalling three school board members, let alone both the President and Vice President, had never happened in San Francisco school board history. This fact provided a large hurdle for recall organizers to engage in, and framing had to be purposely constructed to put their issues in a context that prompted drastic action. In order to accomplish this, the continuation of virtual learning was framed as being more harmful than returning back to school in-person. Abstract issues such as the renaming of schools was deemed not to be an issue, while schools not being in person was deemed a risk to the well-being of students (Taylor & Bernstein 2019, 142 & Edwards 2021, 488). In effect, the school board was framed to not be focusing on important issues that mattered to people, while a narrative that in-person education was the only acceptable method found acceptance among seemingly progressive people in San Francisco. Without serious opposition to this framing, the school board's ultimate solution to instruction, which is a slow-stepped process that takes caution to in-person schooling during COVID-19, appears worse than a drastic and quick return to in-person instruction (McCright & Dunlap 2000, 510).

Opportunities & the Repertoires of Contention: From Reopening Schools to Privatization

Given the wide success of the recall effort with all three school board members, the efforts to frame the counter-movement was ultimately successful. However, the question of the long-term legacy of the recall election is still debatable, especially as it was limited in scope to three members rather than the entire board as originally intended. It can absolutely be argued that

this effort was not limited to San Francisco, nor was it actually narrowly tailored to meet the few arguments presented by the counter-movement, especially given the conservative media attention surrounding the recall and nationwide efforts seeking to produce the same result both before and after the recall. Instead, the recall was a strategic blow to a wider movement for equity in public education, with challenges to school boards centering around slow-walked reopenings representing a direct effort to privatize schools and discredit teachers unions (Boutcher et al 2018, 161).

While the counter-movement itself largely avoided adopting controversial stances on issues such as charter schools, it opened the door for expanding the repertoires of contention and providing an avenue for disenchanted progressives angered by the speed of school reopenings. If a parent is angered enough by feeling that their child was harmed and left behind by virtual learning, they may be willing to adopt views they seemingly oppose in order to get their desired outcome. The stigma of issues previously thought to be strictly partisan can be neutralized through deliberate framing, opening the gates for a counter-movement to court more support and make it appear that conforming to the current norm, including public schools, is the issue and not being in favor of an inequitable end to public schooling (Taylor & Bernstein 2019, 142.)

Social media allows for a further expansion of the repertoires of contention, providing for a battleground that makes messaging a constantly evolving contest subject to challenge and the whims of the algorithm (Oktavianus et al 2021, 6). In the context of movements and countermovements, it can make it seem as though a majority position is being outnumbered and is not actually the dominant position. In the case of movements against public education, there is a deliberate effort to use social media to create trends such as inflaming tensions around LGBTQ+ teachers being “groomers” through selective and deceptive information, and students

being indoctrinated through historically accurate lessons about race in the United States. A counter-movement that challenges any attempt to promote equity within schools utilizes these tools to outmaneuver and overwhelm those attempting to fight back, leading to a dominant narrative that convinces supporters to either change their minds or that the fight to preserve equity is too overwhelming to win politically or socially (Oktavianus et al 2021, 12).

In short, what appears to be a situational counter-movement can be used to convert formerly progressive supporters of public education into supporters of inequitable policies. A counter-movement is able to engage and speak to the fears of people, while a movement is stuck responding to an onslaught of information and rhetoric (Laschever & Meyer 2021, 12). Agenda-setting through social media allows for the repertoires of contention to be rapidly expanded after critical hurdles are met, including by expanding anger towards individual school board members and policies to anger about the entire system of public education (Boutcher et al 2018, 162.) Counter-movements have the benefit of being able to outmaneuver accusations of mis-representation, leading to the success of counter-movements that challenge traditional values including in San Francisco.

Conclusion

It is difficult for many to draw the lines connecting a seemingly necessarily school board recall in San Francisco to the larger moment public education finds itself in following 2020. But the San Francisco school board recall in 2022 shows how easily a counter-movement can utilize social movement tactics to outpace and outperform popular social movements. Given the nationwide attention placed on the recall, it is clear that it will have wide implications for social movements seeking to prioritize public education in the United States, especially when doing so by centering equity. Given that the margins of the 2022 recall were very similar to the margin of

votes received by Joe Biden in 2020, many Democrats were clearly supportive of the recall and would possibly be open to further actions as the repertoires of contention continue to evolve.

While this analysis focused on a recall election in a moment in time, it cannot solely be limited to school board electoral politics or 2022 in particular. Failing to account for the dynamics of movements and countermovements will certainly spell trouble for any organized movement to promote equity in public education in the modern day, especially when faced with a bolstered social media presence and a well-funded apparatus focused on these efforts.

The counter-movement on the ground sought to use the rhetoric of the movement for equitable schools against them, using the hypocrisy of school board members against them. They also framed a quick shift to in-person instruction as the only truly equitable solution, considering any other solution a failure and a threat to the students of SFUSD. They did this while fighting back allegations of being funded by large, out of city donations, including by conservatives seeking to make this \$2 million effort a nationwide topic of conversation. All of these tactics and theories came together to a resounding success, and there currently appears to be no large-scale effort to understand and analyze this fact. As it stands, it is likely that these kinds of campaigns will continue to evolve and grow, including the emergence of a narrative of public schools “grooming” children. As victories like the SFUSD school board recall continue to roll in, and the movement/countermovement dynamic continues to play out in favor of a relentless countermovement, more and more people will seemingly shift their minds or become apathetic towards a growing anti-public school movement.

More scholarship is necessary to understand this trend, especially as information around the growing counter-movement to public education is lacking. It was difficult to point to literature that discusses the modern culture wars, as they evolve every single day and seemingly

leave both scholars and movement leaders alike befuddled. Overall, however, it is clear that what happened in San Francisco is not a standalone event, nor is it limited to the members of the board making anti-Asian tweets or renaming schools at an inopportune time. Instead, the demonization of virtual schooling, whatever its faults, serves not just to criticize the actions of specific officials in a certain place in time, but to create and maintain a call to scrap the existing system of public education and replace it. It will be important for scholars to acknowledge this connection and continue to examine it, and this analysis will hopefully be a starting point for doing so.

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