**President Barack Obama and the School Choice Divide in Education**

**Abstract:** Opponents of court-ordered desegregation plans in the 1960s and 1970s touted freedom of choice plans. Such plans perpetuated highly segregated school districts; they were not a constitutional means of ensuring equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. In the early 21st century, advocates of school choice emphasize a parent’s right to choose where their children matriculate. Akin to a past era, those touting choice are neglecting the reality that choice has profound implications in a democratic republic. The emphasis on individual choice ignores the contemporary truism that citizens are interconnected and the choices that people make have a discernible impact on others. The author provides a juxtaposition between defenders of traditional public education in the common school vision of Horace Mann, on one hand, and advocates of school choice in the philosophical vein of Milton Friedman, on the other. Former President Barack Obama is analyzed using the dual perspectives about education reform. A discussion of John Dewey’s democratic ideals is included to counter the assault on public education by those who seek to privatize the great equalizer in American society.

**Keywords**: Barack Obama; common school; school choice; individualist creed; democracy

Barack Obama ascended rapidly in politics and only lost one election. He served in the Illinois Senate from 1997-2004. He was elected in 1996 and was subsequently reelected in 1998 and 2002. In 2000, he unsuccessfully sought a U.S. House seat. He announced in 2003 that he would seek a U.S. Senate seat from Illinois in 2004. He defeated Republican Alan Keyes and garnered 70 percent of the vote. He served as a U.S. senator from 2005-2008, as he resigned when he won the presidency (Ballotpedia.org, 2023).

Both of Obama’s presidential election victories occurred by garnering more than 50 percent of the popular vote and with 365 Electoral College votes in 2008 and 332 in 2012 (see Table 1 for a breakdown of both elections). At least in the Electoral College, the size of the Obama victories was analogous to the two elections won by Bill Clinton in 1992 (370) and 1996 (379). Obama captured more than 50 percent of the popular vote in both elections. With the Ross Perot candidacies in 1992 and 1996, Clinton did not surpass the 50 percent threshold in either of his elections.

Obama’s ascendency to the White House is historic. He is the first African American in history to be elected president. He is the first nonwhite to serve as the leader of the free world. Despite giving the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he was not considered a top-tier candidate in 2008. Many believed that Hillary Clinton would be the first woman to win a major party’s nomination for president in 2008 and perhaps be the first woman ever elected president in U.S. history. Yet it was the 1983 Bachelor of Arts graduate from Columbia University and the J.D. recipient from Harvard University in 1991 who earned that distinction (Ballotpedia.org, 2023).

**Introduction**

The focus of this analysis is on a polarizing, divisive issue between contemporary Democrats and Republicans in education policy. Should parents be afforded a choice when it pertains to the schools their children attend? What are the implications of school choice, both positive and negative? What appears to be a benign issue is anything but, for the matter of school choice has a rich history in the United States and there are profound consequences for society one way or the other. Specifically, an examination of Barack Obama’s philosophical and policy views on school choice will be provided during the context of his presidency in the early part of the twenty-first century.

**Background context**

The school choice debate over the last 40 years has occurred in a manner that is advantageous for advocates and quite disadvantageous for those who embrace the common school vision of the nineteenth century, as applied to the present time. Horace Mann, the nineteenth century education reformer, embraced the premise that all children, regardless of background, should assemble in the same building to gain knowledge through a formal education. In 1837, Mann became the first secretary of the newly established Massachusetts Board of Education. He served in this position until 1848 and wrote 12 annual reports that became very influential in the common school movement (Fife, 2013, pp. 13-14). In his second annual report in 1838, Mann contended that the common school was the appropriate venue for school children to gain knowledge that they otherwise would not obtain. He wrote in a stark manner that it was incumbent upon common (public) schools:

to prepare children for resembling the philosopher, rather than the savage, it is well to begin early, but it is far more important to begin right; and the school is the place for children to form an invincible habit of never using the organs of speech, by themselves, and as an apparatus, detached from, and independent of, the mind. The school is the place to form a habit of observing distinctions between words and phrases, and of adjusting the language used to various extents of meaning (Mann, 1891, Volume 2, p. 513).

Other Whig reformers such as Henry Barnard, Horace Eaton, John Pierce, Calvin Stowe, and Calvin Wiley, worked to achieve the goal of implementing common schools in the United States (Ogren, 2005). Barnard was a delegate to the Whig national convention in 1831; subsequently he served in the Connecticut General Assembly from 1837 to 1839. Like Mann’s situation in Massachusetts, Barnard became the first Connecticut state commissioner of education. Once the Democrats returned to majority status in the state legislature in 1842, they eliminated Barnard’s position, contending that the position did not warrant the state’s expense. The following year Barnard became Rhode Island’s state superintendent of education. When the Connecticut legislature reestablished the office in 1850, he returned to his former position and served until 1855. After the Civil War, Barnard served as the first U.S. Commissioner of Education (Groen, 2008, p. 255). The fundamental premise of the Whig common school reformers was a belief system—that society would be a better place if citizens were more educated and embraced the fundamental tenets of a republican form of government.

Horace Eaton was the first superintendent of schools in Vermont from 1845 to 1850. He also served simultaneously as governor of Vermont from 1846-1848 (National Governors Association, 2023). In his first annual report in 1846, Eaton presented a shocking account of the state of public education to the state legislature (Potash, 1997). He noted a number of defects in public education. The “paramount evil,” according to Eaton, was the lack of qualified teachers (Bush, 1900, pp. 15-16). But there were numerous challenges: low attendance by school children; an excessive number of small school districts; schoolhouses in need of repair; low attendance; and the urgent need for a uniform system of textbooks (Bush, 1900, p. 15).

John Pierce became the first superintendent of public instruction in Michigan in 1836. He helped to launch a system of public schools in that state and served as superintendent until 1841 (Hoyt & Ford, 1905). His vision of the common schools is summarized in this manner:

Education is necessary in order to bring man into a perfect harmony with his surroundings and the great universe, so that he may be of the greatest service to the government. Every human being has a right to a good education. The state is under obligation to furnish it, and property is liable for it; and, as a failure to do this imperils the state, its duty is to see that every child within its boundaries is properly educated (Hoyt & Ford, 1905, p. 95).

Calvin Ellis Stowe wielded similar influence in Ohio as Mann did in Massachusetts regarding the development of public schools. Stowe was the husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the renowned anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) (Reynes, 2007, p. 155). After visiting the Prussian system of education (similar to Mann and others), Stowe offered the following common school vision:

If our republic is to be prosperous and happy, all our children must be instructed in the elements of science and religion. Our youth should receive the instruction necessary to make them intelligent and efficient men of business; and our farmers, mechanics, and manufacturers, should be made acquainted with those branches of science most essential to the prosecution of their respective employments. For the accomplishment of these purposes, there must be institutions for the training of well qualified teachers (Stowe, 1836, pp. 75-76).

Stowe was an unabashed advocate of all states having a general secretary of education (Jeynes, 2007, p. 155).

Calvin Wiley was North Carolina’s first superintendent of common schools. He served from 1853-1865 (North Carolina History Project, 2023). Like his common school contemporaries, his theory of education was based on the Jeffersonian notion that popular education is the basis of a republican form of government (Jarrett, 1964, p.276). Mann and his contemporaries shared a vision about common schools in America. Joy Elmer Morgan, once the editor of the *Journal of the National Education Association*, articulated the common democratic ethos shared by these educators:

When Horace Mann was born in 1796 George Washington was still president. The young Republic was trying to get started. The ideal of democracy was fighting for its very life. Critics on both sides of the ocean prophesied its early doom. The wonder is that with centuries of despotism and special privilege woven into the lives of men, our forefathers should have had the courage to try a new form of government. Horace Mann saw clearly that the American experiment at self-rule could not hope to succeed without universal education emphasizing the highest moral, civic, and cultural values. He saw that there could be no real equality or democracy unless people had the opportunity to develop their talents and their tastes. If you want confirmation of that statement, if you want to see the real importance of the American school, ask yourself what hope there would be today for the children of any poor family if the boon of free schooling were denied them (Morgan, 1936, pp. 4-5).

Whig Party politics in this time-period influenced politicians such as Mann (Groen, 2008). In 1848, Mann won the U.S. House seat for the eighth district in Massachusetts. He succeeded John Quincy Adams, who died in office. Not only was Mann an ardent advocate for common schools; he was also a strident abolitionist on the slavery issue (Fife, 2013). Indeed, Mann’s life work is a testimonial to the reality that public policy and American politics intersect as elections have consequences for the fate of all public policy issues. The vision of Mann and others has continued into the twenty-first century. Yet a libertarian ethos exists, one that seeks to undermine the notion that all children from diverse backgrounds should be educated together and learn to get along as productive members of a free society. This philosophy is a direct threat to democracy, as it encourages citizens to look inward and ignore the effect that their choices have on the greater community. Under the illusion of freedom and liberty, the libertarian worldview in question is radical in nature, and it is gaining power and strength in the contemporary world, especially in the Republican Party (Hudson, 2008). As presented in a recent Cato Institute report:

School choice is a central debate in education policy today, with advocates of charter schools, vouchers, and private schools arrayed against defenders of the government-run public schooling model. While many states have adopted some kind of school choice program, some politicians denounce this trend as a stalking horse for segregation or a corporatist dystopia. The modern school choice movement was pioneered by 20th century libertarian theorists, though not all of them agreed on what type of reform was best. Understanding their views is critical to understanding the debate over school choice in the 21st century (Cato Institute, 2019).

Note the terminology utilized in this report. Opponents of choice are unsavory “politicians” who support “government” schools. This type of rhetoric, of course, is nothing new. It is part of a systematic, multi-generational effort to undermine citizen support for public education.

**The libertarian philosophy and school choice**

Supporters of the Republican Party have embraced the libertarian economic philosophy at least since Ronald Reagan’s first presidential election victory in 1980, if not when Barry Goldwater was the GOP presidential nominee in 1964. The tangible results of the rightward shift in the GOP over the last half-century or more are quite apparent. Hudson (2008) observed that although a small number of Americans identify themselves as adherents to the Libertarian Party, the reality for at least two generations of American politics is that the Republican Party has absorbed many libertarian ideas as mainstream. At one point in American history, the ideas in question were considered by many citizens to be radical in nature (Doherty, 2007). Clearly, the market-based ideology championed by numerous prominent libertarian thinkers has become the foundation of the Grand Old Party today (Fife, 2013).

**Friedrich Hayek (1889-1992)**

Hayek was an Austrian-born economist who won a Nobel Prize and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom as well. He was a strong believer in classical liberalism, where individual freedom is paramount, free of government intervention. To him, free and unregulated markets were not only plausible economically, but were also essential to a more free and democratic society. During his life, he witnessed the rise of more government intervention, which led him to conclude that individual freedom would inevitably wane (Hayek, 1944). Hayek’s vision of individual freedom was predicated on individual freedom of choice, free of government interference. Yet what if individuals making free choices in an unregulated market have negative consequences on others? The libertarians do not have a tangible response to this fundamental reality. They never have, which is why Republican President Theodore Roosevelt made a case for government intervention in the early twentieth century on a plethora of issues (Milkis, 2023). As it pertains to numerous public policy issues (e.g., education; transportation; banking; security; housing; health care; arts and culture; and communications), many scholars contend that more government intervention would enhance the goal of promoting the general welfare in the vision of the framers of the Constitution (Conn, 2012; Hudson, 2020, 2008; Fife, 2018, 2013).

**Milton Friedman (1912-2006)**

Freidman was an American economist who, like Hayek, received a Nobel Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was regarded by many as the leader of the University of Chicago school of monetary economics, and he was a member of President Ronald Reagan’s Economic Policy Advisory Board. Friedman is considered by many conservatives to be the leading thinker behind the modern school choice movement (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2023). He espoused the basic tenets for school choice, including education vouchers, in 1955 (Friedman, 1955). He later reinforced his vision of K-12 education by declaring that “[a] far better alternative to political control is to introduce competition in schooling, to give parents a real choice” (Friedman, 1968, p. 100). Friedman did not define K-12 education as a largely public good; he viewed it as a commodity, which parents would purchase in a free market system.

The impact of both Hayek and Friedman on the conservative movement in the twentieth century has been quite profound in the United States. Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980; he served from 1981-1989. He embraced the conservative ideals touted by these two philosophers, oftentimes known as neoliberalism today. Their ideas about limited government and marketplace completion were endorsed and touted by Republican Party leaders, but also became prominent through conservative think tanks including American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Manhattan Institute, Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, among others (Jones, 2012).

Perhaps the most critical study over the past thirty years or so regarding public education was by Chubb and Moe (1990). They contended that the biggest challenge in public education was the government—too much bureaucracy and ineffective organization. They espoused a shift away from government toward a system that relies on markets and parental choice. Five years later, Smith and Meier (1995) offered their case against school choice:

The school choice debate is unlikely to be silenced, or even moderately hushed, by any single piece of research. It is driven by ideology, not facts. Our study will have succeeded if it adds a loud empirical voice to the ongoing argument. The data show that the public would be better served to move away from the undeniable lure of school choice ideology. Its tantalizing simplicity fails to address the complex reality of education in America today. Worse, it is antidemocratic. Education, like the concepts of liberty and freedom, is too valuable a commodity to be marketed to the highest bidder. (p. 131)

Schneider (2016) offered this summary statement about school choice and its implications in a democracy:

School choice. It sounds so simple. Parents choose the taxpayer-funded school that they want their child to attend, and the child attends that school. Or, parents take their part of that tax money in order to choose to send their child to a private school. Parents are empowered and satisfied, and society is all the better for it. Except, it isn’t that simple. Allotting taxpayer money to send children to private schools via school vouchers might be nothing more than a convenient vehicle for enabling segregation, for separating society into “us” and “them.” Additionally, school choice through both vouchers and, much more prevalently, through charter schools morphs into an underregulated operation. Money is squandered. Charter schools actually become more empowered to choose students than are the parents to choose schools. The market model of education drives what becomes a system that worships test scores, and a lower bottom line to ever-higher test scores becomes a more desirable than issues of equity or educational quality. In the end, America’s public school system suffers as it bleeds funding, and America’s children, families, and communities suffer as well (p. xvii).

Furthermore, to promote the justification and cause of school choice in the first place, advocates often distort the state of public education in America, and have been doing so for decades (Ravitch, 2016, 2013). As Labaree accentuates in his research, the common school vision for public education has been supplanted, from a political vision of schooling promoting civic virtue among citizens to one where the education process exists to enhance social mobility among consumers in the marketplace (Labaree, 2010). The key point to emphasize is that consumers are typically making choices for themselves only and are not carefully considering the implications or consequences of their individual choices for the greater common good.

**The harmful reality of the individualist creed**

Social scientists have long contended that Alexis de Tocqueville was the first person to identify the individualist creed in the United States. A French philosopher and sociologist in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Tocqueville traveled widely in the United States and wrote a two-volume (1835 and 1840) account of his observations entitled *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville’s vision of democracy was that individualism was basically a positive characteristic of a free society so long as citizens maintained civic virtue and trust in fundamental institutions of society (Fife, 2018). Tocqueville provided the following assessment of individualism: “Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself” (Mansfield & Winthrop, 2000, p. 482). Individualism could be taken to an unhealthy extreme, however, as Tocqueville prophesied a long time ago: “…it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart” (Mansfield & Winthrop, 2000, p. 484). In public policy terms, those who succumb to excessive individualism will only view policy debates in individualistic terms, disregarding policy implications and consequences for the greater population.

Bellah et al. (1985) reflected on Tocqueville’s vision of individualism in the mid-1980s during the Reagan era. The scholars determined that President Reagan defined citizens by their occupations, thereby viewing the citizenry in economic terms but not as a polity. As the researchers noted 35 years ago, Reagan’s interpretation of individualism has been transformative. The transformative nature of this philosophy has been devastating, for this notion of individualism suggests that selfishness, isolationism, and an indifference, or even antipathy, towards others is acceptable because people should do whatever they wish free of government interference. Though adherents to this ideology purport to be conservative or traditional, it would be difficult to sustain the premise, for the architects of this republic, admittedly flawed as all humans are, did not embrace such an ideology and instead promoted civic virtue and the need for citizens to subjugate their own self-interest to advance the greater common good. Not surprisingly given this radical ethos, civic participation rates in the latter half of the twentieth century plummeted (Putnam, 2000). So much for the ultimate communitarian appeal made by John F. Kennedy at his inauguration, “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country” (American Presidency Project, 2023).

This kind of an individualist creed has not always existed in the United States. A spirit of public service pervaded this country during the early decades of the republic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal, and the activist social movements of the 1960s (Gawthrop, 1998). But as Hudson (2020) opined, Americans have succumbed to radical individualism, and have degenerated to egoism as opposed to being focused on social connections that bind citizens together in a common democratic ethos. I concur with Hudson’s assessment. While this debate does not lend itself to exact empirical measurement, it is the case that Americans are more inclined to embrace the individualist creed to a higher level than peers in other democracies (Pew Research Center, 2016). The vision that it is acceptable, and even preferable, to put individual needs ahead of the greater common good is clearly evidenced in the contemporary school choice debate in the United States.

**The school choice debate**

In 1902, education philosopher and progressive thinker, John Dewey, shared his views on the important task of educating America’s children in a liberal democracy (University of Chicago Centennial Catalogues, 2023; National Endowment for the Humanities, 2023). He clearly understood the reality that all parents want what they perceive is best for their children on an individual level:

We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent. That which interests us most is naturally the progress made by the individual child of our acquaintance, his normal physical development, his advance in ability to read, write, and figure, his growth in the knowledge of geography and history, improvement in manners, habits of promptness, order, and industry—it is from such standards as these that we judge the work of the school. And rightly so. Yet the range of the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (Dewey, 1990, pp. 6-7).

Dewey originally published *Democracy and Education* in 1916 during the Progressive Era. In the book’s title, he links democracy with education. The reality across the country is that everything that happens in classrooms and school buildings contributes to the development of citizens in the American republic. When he wrote the book, he advanced a critique that was common from the perspective of progressive reformers, one that Cremin (1965) depicted:

…industrialism is destroying the traditional home, shop, neighborhood, and church; they are no longer performing their educational functions; some other institution must take on these functions; *ergo*—and here, Dewey takes the *grand jeté* of twentieth-century educational theory—the school must do so (p. 7).

Both Mann and Dewey shared the egalitarian belief that public education was the basis for active citizenship in the American democracy and that public schooling could further the democratic way of life (Cohan and Howlett, 2019). Kaestle (1983) describes the common schools as “pillars of the republic.” This vision of a common ethos, of course, emanated from the common school movement of the 1830s and 1840s, which was spearheaded by Horace Mann (Mann, 1891; Messerli, 1972; Fife, 2016, 2013).

During Mann’s time, the new common schools had to compete with the existing parochial schools. Despite being a very religious person, he advocated nonsectarian schools so that the taxpayer would not be compelled to support a religious doctrine that would be disagreeable. Although his beliefs about the teaching of religion in the public schools would not comport with contemporary approaches, he contended that taxpayer money should not fund parochial education. His philosophy of the role of the state in educating children was analogous to the one expressed by Thomas Jefferson in his famous letter to the Danbury, Connecticut Baptists on January 1, 1802 (Library of Congress, 2023). The vision espoused by Jefferson and Mann prevailed in education policy debates for generations; it was later altered in by the U.S. Supreme Court justices in a case involving education vouchers in Cleveland, Ohio.

In 1995, legislators in Ohio created the Pilot Project Scholarship Program for eligible students in Cleveland specifically. Based on a means test, families that were under the income threshold could receive vouchers to send their children to a different public school, a private school, or a parochial school. Of the students who participated in the program, 96 percent of voucher recipients enrolled in parochial schools. The constitutionality of the program was challenged in federal courts on the basis that it was a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002). A divided Supreme Court upheld the program on the basis that it provided for public and private school choice. If it had not provided a public school choice option, it would not have been constitutional. Ever since 2002, education vouchers have been adjudicated to be constitutional if the state legislatures in question create a public and private school choice option in the law.

The very essence of the *Zelman* decision is libertarian in nature. The five justices in the majority were focused on the issue of school choice, which is primarily a public policy debate. They effectively changed the Court’s precedent on establishment clause cases, not through a new constitutional doctrine, but a focus on choice. The *Zelman* decision had the effect of securing a major public policy victory for school choice advocates in the Friedman tradition. In so doing, the justices in the majority changed their own post-World War II precedent and ignored the counsel of Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey, among others.

Choice advocates have succeeded in framing the issue of K-12 education away from the common good and toward individual self-interest. Whenever individual rights are the focal point of the debate, the predictable outcome is that the politics of self-interest will typically prevail over what may be best for society (e.g., the gun control debate in the aftermath of school shootings, such as the massacre of first graders at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012). Individual rights are paramount in a republican form of government; they must be balanced, however, with the greater common good (Grant, 2008).

**The Obama approach to school choice during his presidential tenure**

Obama was a champion of charter schools during his presidency, as was his Democratic predecessor, Bill Clinton. Many contemporary Democrats, however, are opposed to charter schools, including President Joe Biden. Charter schools are public schools of choice; they are tuition-free for the parents of the children attending but they are run by independent entities, including private companies whose officials are seeking to maximize profit. There are over 7,000 charter schools operating today in 44 states and the District of Columbia involving more than 3 million students (about 6 percent of the total K-12 population) (Prothero, 2018). Charter schools began by state law in Minnesota in 1991 and they differ from traditional public schools in that they were ostensibly designed to free educators to innovate by allowing them to be exempt from certain state laws and regulations. In exchange, and thus the term “charter,” charter schools are bound by the terms of their contract, or charter. This charter details the school’s mission, academic goals, accountability requirements, and fiscal guidelines. The authorizer of the charter school under state law (e.g., state agency, university, or a school district), has the power to close the school if officials do not meet the terms of their contracts (Prothero, 2018).

Obama’s support for charter schools is evidenced in the historic Race to the Top competitive grant program launched in 2009. Obama and his Secretary of Education at the time, Arne Duncan, touted several neoliberal approaches to education in this program: states had to adopt new common standards and tests; expand the number of charter schools; evaluate the relative effectiveness of teachers in part with the reliance of the test scores of their students; and agree to revamp the lowest-performing schools by dramatic steps including the firing of educators and the closing of schools (Ravitch, 2013, pp. 10-18).These types of policies and approaches to education reform were similar to Obama’s immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, and prompted a number of scholars to conclude that his policies did not match the rhetoric about education reform that he articulated in his best-selling book, *The Audacity of Hope* (Carr & Porfilio, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Ravitch, 2013, 2016).

Obama’s support for charter schools was articulated in a presidential proclamation during national charter school’s week in 2016:

Charter schools have been at the forefront of innovation and have found different ways of engaging students in their high school years—including by providing personalized instruction, leveraging technology, and giving students greater access to rigorous coursework and college-level courses. Over the past 7 years, my Administration’s commitment of resources to the growth of charter schools has enabled a significant expansion of educational opportunity, enabling tens of thousands of children to attend high-quality public charter schools. I am committed to ensuing all of our Nation’s students have the tools and skills they need to get ahead, and that begins with ensuring they are able to attend an effective school and obtain an excellent education (Obama, 2016).

This unequivocal support for charter schools may be partly due to a neoliberal vision of education; perhaps it is based on at least perceived public opinion on the matter of school choice as it pertains to charter schools. The reality, however, is that on average, charter schools do not have an academic advantage over traditional public schools. In addition, many charter schools can have the very negative consequence of resegregation (Rotberg, 2014).

As King and Smith (2011) delineated, while a presidential candidate in 2007, Obama informed leaders in both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association that he did not support school vouchers—scholarships funded by taxpayers so that parents may send their children to private (including parochial) schools if they desire. As Democrats have long maintained, vouchers have the effect of endangering the very existence of traditional public schools. However, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama told newspaper editors in Milwaukee that he might change his mind about vouchers if evidence proved that vouchers were effective at assisting children to learn. When he became president, however, he opposed vouchers while maintaining a high level of support for charter schools (p. 193).

**School choice in the American democracy**

It is interesting, and certainly ironic, that advocates of school choice highlight the ability of individuals, free of oppressive government regulation, to make their own competitive choices in the open marketplace. Such an approach to education reform, they contend, will have the tangible result of expanding democracy in America. History is an important gauge for public policy; few would suggest otherwise. It is incumbent upon the current generation not to replicate the mistakes of the past. Accordingly, I maintain that those who embrace the democratic creed should seek to preserve Mann’s common school vision in the twenty-first century (Fife, 2016).

Ravitch (2013) contends that public education is a public responsibility; it is not a consumer product using the marketplace analogy. The entire narrative, going back to the time of Friedman’s (1955) original article, has been a constant neoliberal criticism of public education in the United States. Advocates of school choice have continually bashed the public schools; many Americans perceive that K-12 public education is failing accordingly. Due to the perceived “failure” of public education, choice reformers offer an alternative paradigm, which emphasizes the plausibility of privatization schemes to enhance education in America. School choice advocates have been very adept, and very successful, at promoting the perception that public education is failing, at least since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This effort has come at a high price to democracy in my estimation. Instead of focusing on poverty, income inequality, equity, and the plight of the less fortunate, many have absorbed the libertarian vision as normal, and the analytical framework that they utilize when it comes to education is primarily, if not exclusively, focused on the individual. Framing the issue in such a manner has resulted in more segregated schools and a widening of the gap between the rich and poor. Both these realities, of course, exist in the context of a comparatively wealthy country, where more than 20 percent of all children live in poverty using a very low poverty measure compared to other Western democracies (Fife, 2018).

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

Advocates of the school choice movement have emphasized the notion that parents should be free to send their children to desirable schools without government interference. Through marketplace competition, school personnel must continually improve to attract parents and their children. The goal of the school choice movement is privatization. To pursue this objective in earnest, supporters have used deception, lies, stereotypes, and distortion to promote the notion that public education is in utter disrepair. The consequences of this intentional assault have been replete; supporters of traditional public education have been in a defensive posture for the last half-century or more. One of the great pillars of democracy, going back to the mid-nineteenth century, was Mann’s “common school,” and it is in danger of collapse if we allow it to happen. As Ravitch (2016) articulated, a strong public education system is needed in the United States for a host of reasons. Given the diversity inherent in America’s schools, finding a mechanism to bring people together in a common setting, particularly at a young age, will promote a true civic ethos in America where citizens care, not only for themselves and their families, but have empathy for others as well. We cannot succumb to the politics of destruction on this moral crusade. I call it such because that is one of the many lessons that can be extracted from studying Mann’s vision of the 1830s and 1840s.

Over twenty-five years ago, Smith and Meier (1995) conducted an empirical analysis of school choice and determined that “[i]t is driven by ideology, not facts” (p. 131). Those who are enamored with the ideology of school choice should consider the consequences of their policy position on school-aged children across the nation. School choice has a racist history of segregationist policies (Casey, 2017). Americans experienced hundreds of years of school choice, and in many areas of the country, the result was quite predictable—rampant discrimination and lack of equal educational opportunity for all. The progress achieved in civil rights in education since *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* (1954) would regress, and most Americans would oppose such a scenario. The irony is that the support of many Americans for school choice could result in that very outcome. There are negative consequences associated with school choice (*The Washington Post*, 2017; University of North Carolina, 2023). It is incumbent on the nation’s political leaders, and more importantly, citizens, to comprehend the gravity of the school choice movement and to take action to ensure that all children receive a quality education in a safe environment. Education is a public good that needs to be available to all children on an equal basis.

The common school ethos of Horace Mann and others from the early to mid-nineteenth century is still relevant today. Dewey’s progressive vision of the role of public education in a democracy should be considered a sacred covenant between the people and their government. All children, by the sheer virtue of their existence, should be guaranteed a free, quality education that is funded by taxes. The benefits of an educated population are immeasurable. The strong public endorsement of K-12 public education is testimony to the fact that while there will always be a role for parochial education in America, taxpayer funds should continue in perpetuity to ensure that the diversity endemic in the United States is operationalized in an equitable manner where local governments provide a quality education for all their citizens, regardless of their demographical profile. Obama embraced the neoliberal vision of education reform for charter schools and testing and rejected its utility in the voucher sector. Since his departure from the presidency in 2017, it is likely that Democrats will continue to vehemently oppose vouchers and increased reliance on standardized testing to assess student learning, the relative effectiveness of schools and educators, and the assignment of teacher raises based, at least to some extent, on student test scores. Whether Democratic leaders, today and into the future, embrace charter schools and reject the Mann vision, accordingly, is unknown. My simple recommendation is to use the lessons of history and preserve the common school vision in this century. Education is a public good and should be provided for all students in an equitable manner. Our ancestors did not incorporate an individualistic approach to the preservation of the republic. Rather, Mann and others embraced a communitarian approach which was predicated on a simple assumption. American school children should receive an education and be able to participate in the life and vitality of the democratic experiment that was officially launched when the U.S. Constitution was put into effect in 1789. Given the current libertarian nature of the Republican Party when it comes to school choice, I do not find it realistic to look for leadership within the GOP when it comes to supporting public education. Leaders in the Democratic Party need to fully embrace traditional public education and reform it for all children. School choice comes at a cost, and compromising democracy is simply not worth it.

**Acknowledgement**

An earlier version of this paper was presented at Hofstra University’s Thirteenth Presidential Conference on the Barack Obama Presidency, April 19-21, 2023.

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**Table 1**

**2008 and 2012 Presidential Election Results**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Election** | **Republican Opponent** | **Popular Vote** | **Electoral College Vote** | **States Won by Obama** |
| 2008 | John McCain | Obama:  69,498,516 (52.9%)  McCain:  59,948,323  (45.7%) | Obama-365  McCain-173 | N=29  CA (55); CO (9); CT (7); DC (3); DE (3); FL (27); HI (4); IL (21); IN (11); IA (7); ME (4); MD (10); MA (12); MI (17); MN (10); NV (5); NH (4); NJ (15); NM (5); NY (31); NC (15); OH (20); OR (7); PA (21); RI (4); VT (3); VA (13); WA (11); and WI (10) plus NE-2 (1). |
| 2012 | Mitt Romney | Obama:  65,915,795 (51.1%)  Romney:  60,933,504  (47.2%) | Obama-332  Romney-206 | N=27  CA (55); CO (9); CT (7); DC (3); DE (3); FL (29); HI (4); IL (20); IA (6); ME (4); MD (10); MA (11); MI (16); MN (10); NV (6); NH (4); NJ (14); NM (5); NY (29); OH (18); OR (7); PA (20); RI (4); VT (3); VA (13); WA (12); and WI (10). |

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