

White Voters, A Key Piece of the Puzzle: Education, Race, and Electoral Politics

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ABSTRACT

In 2004, Jennifer L. Hochschild challenged political scientists to give greater attention to education policy and politics. Although it challenges Hochschild's interpretation of the politics of school vouchers, this article demonstrates her central assertion that the era of school desegregation continues to impact American politics. Internal campaign strategy documents from presidential election campaigns reveal how the two parties have arrived at different school voucher positions because of the different challenges each party faced as a result of the battle over school desegregation. Republican strategists were concerned that white voters believed their candidates did not care about people of color. Supporting vouchers for urban Black children allowed Republicans to reassure white voters of their racial sensitivity. In contrast, Democratic candidates were more concerned that they might alienate white voters by taking another position that seemed to pander to Black voters. Strategists' perceptions of white voters' attitudes toward education and race comprise the thread that connects the past to the present.

More than a decade ago, Jennifer L. Hochschild (2004) challenged political scientists to bring their expertise to bear on the politics and policies of education in the United States. Hochschild identified “three puzzles” from the era of school desegregation—1954 through the early 1990s—which she believed had the potential to inform a broad range of political science debates. One puzzle is why Republican politicians have long supported vouchers despite the fact that Republicans had fought for neighborhood schools during the school desegregation battles of the 1970s, whereas Democratic politicians have long opposed vouchers yet supported school desegregation. She continued by asserting that each party's current voucher position places it at odds with its “constituents' preferences.” White, “well-off suburbanites,” a key Republican constituency, are not supportive of vouchers because they do not want an influx of urban students into their schools; African Americans and Latinos, key Democratic constituencies, support vouchers.¹ Examining this “puzzle” between each party's voucher position and its constituencies' preferences demonstrates the importance of Hochschild's (still-unanswered) call for political scientists to bring fully their expertise to bear on examining education—particularly the continued influence of the history of school desegregation on American politics.

At the heart of Hochschild's question about vouchers is an assumption that candidates should be responsive to voters' preferences. Examining education as an issue in presidential election campaigns provides important insight into this interaction between candidates and voters. Scholars have argued that voters have images of each party, which impacts their evaluation of candidates and parties (Baumer and Gold 2007; Hayes 2011; Norpoth and Buchanan 1992; Philpot 2004; 2007). Less clear is how candidates and campaigns make sense of voters' party stereotypes when taking positions on issues. Internal presidential campaign strategy documents prove to be underutilized sources in understanding *why* each party has taken its respective voucher position and *how* it has sought to frame the issue. Both winning and losing candidates' campaign papers, housed in 13 archives, reveal that political strategists struggled to counter negative images created for their respective parties during the era of school desegregation.² For both parties, this meant crafting strategies for using education as a campaign issue to target white voters.

Indeed, scholars have placed politicians' appeals to white moderate voters at the center of their examinations of electoral politics since the late 1960s but have largely overlooked the role of education. Several have documented white voters' professed commitment to a norm of equality after the civil rights gains of the 1960s (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Mendelberg 2001; Philpot 2007). This equality ideology asserts that everyone should be treated the same while denying the salience of race in creating inequalities in American society. Other scholars (Hess and McGuinn 2002;

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Ravitch 1983) observed what Hochschild noted: the emphasis that Americans have historically placed and continue to place on education as essential to an equal opportunity society. During the era of school desegregation, campaign strategists from both parties were greatly influenced by campaign research and polling showing that white voters were committed to equality of educational opportunity but simultaneously denied the existence of racial inequality in American society.

How the two parties arrived at different voucher positions in their appeals to the same white voters reflects the different challenges that each party faced with these voters as a result of the battle over school desegregation. Republicans' resistance to desegregation efforts led campaign strategists to become concerned that white voters perceived their party as one that did not care about people of color. Support for vouchers provided a position that was consistent with Republicans' market-based ideology while having the added benefit of creating a compelling narrative for white voters of Republican candidates' concern for Black children. Additionally, vouchers supported Republican efforts to target Catholic voters, formerly a solidly Democratic Party constituency (Axelrod 1972; Petrocik 1987).

In contrast, Democratic campaign strategists became increasingly concerned about Republicans' charge that Democrats pandered to people of color. Democratic candidates did not need to use vouchers to reassure white voters of their racial sensitivity or to appeal to Black or Latino voters. They had a range of other issues to use in targeting these voters. Democrats' support of public school choice, but not vouchers, increased as white voters grew more comfortable with the policy, one that was consistent with their belief that public schools were a key institution in creating an equal opportunity society. Regardless of party, white voters comprise the key piece of the voucher puzzle.

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AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, NOT DESEGREGATION

During the late 1960s and 1970s, both parties' presidential campaigns tried to understand a conundrum: white voters claimed to support school desegregation but vehemently opposed the most readily available tool to desegregate schools—busing. As a Hubert H. Humphrey campaign report explained, “An important distinction needs to be made here—the distinction between integration and equal opportunity. There is considerable opposition to integration...but these same voters are not opposed to allowing Negroes equal opportunities to a good education and a good job” (Quayle and Company 1968). Humphrey's team argued that the “important distinction” white voters drew between being against race-conscious policies to desegregate schools (i.e., busing) and their commitment to equal educational opportunity grew from “deep roots of racism” grounded in their ignorance of racial inequality in the United States. A Humphrey adviser explained that “white America has very little idea how black America lives.” He continued, “70 percent think Negroes are treated the same

as whites; 65 percent believe business firms do not discriminate against Negroes in hiring practices; and 50 percent do not believe trade unions discriminate” (Holmes 1968).

In 1972, George McGovern's team shared this perception of white voters as ignorant about racism in American society but concerned about nonwhite students' access to a quality education. His strategists concluded that white voters would be receptive to an education message emphasizing “that money spent on busing could be more efficiently applied to the upgrading of classroom facilities and perhaps better pay for teachers in the cities” (McGovern Campaign 1972). Four years later, Jimmy Carter's team agreed with its predecessors. A Carter campaign report stated: “Perhaps partly as a compensation for their opposition to busing, voters express strong support for Federal aid to education as a way of solving part of the same problem” (Cambridge Survey Research 1976).

Simultaneously, Republican strategists were drawing the same conclusion about white voters' commitment to equal opportunity but rejection of race-conscious policies (i.e., busing) to ensure equal opportunity. Richard Nixon's political advisers wrote that when it comes to race-conscious policies such as busing, Americans “profess to believe in” the principle of “egalitarianism” even if they “often find themselves in the position of betraying it in real world situations” (Harper 1972a). Later in the 1970s, Gerald Ford's team acknowledged that many of the white voters who rejected busing to desegregate schools were “good government people who used to be strong on civil rights” (Melady and Lee 1976). Thus, any school desegregation message had to demonstrate a concern for nonwhite students, just not to the extent that Ford would advocate for busing.

Republicans faced the additional struggle of voters' perception that the Republican Party did not care about people of color.

Strategists argued that education was the perfect political issue to reassure voters of Republicans' compassion. For Nixon, his claim to support “quality education” for all students was an attempt to reassure middle-class voters that he cared about the “educationally disadvantaged in segregated schools” (Harper 1972b). A strategist advised Ford to express concern for the disadvantaged because “relatively few Americans perceive the Republican Party as a political organization that has compassion and concern for the lives of the average citizen, particularly people of below-average economic status” (Belin 1975). Another Ford strategist argued that support for “better and more education” would demonstrate a strong commitment to an issue that all voters valued without including divisive race-conscious policy proposals (Teeter 1975).

By the end of the 1970s, both parties had successfully pivoted away from the contentious school desegregation debate. In doing so, they effectively replaced debates about remedies for the constitutional violation created by school segregation—that is, the violation of nonwhite students' rights under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment—with a benign call

for “quality education for all students.” This was a move aimed at appealing to white voters’ contradictory commitment to educational equality and ignorance (or denial) about racial inequalities. In the future, this shared understanding of white voters’ racial attitudes would lead the two parties to take different positions on school vouchers.

REPUBLICANS PLACE VOUCHERS IN A CIVIL RIGHTS FRAME

In the 1980s, Republican strategists were increasingly concerned that white voters perceived their candidates to be racially insensitive. As a Reagan campaign strategy memo stated, appeals to Black voters “would certainly beam a positive message to white voters who like their Presidents to demonstrate that they are broad-minded” (Hannaford 1980). Republican strategists argued that vouchers provided a racially sensitive message to appeal to white voters. Students of color also provided a sympathetic rhetorical proxy for Republican efforts to target Catholic voters with pro-voucher messages. Such messaging did not risk alienating white voters who otherwise might see vouchers as a way for Catholics and whites to avoid desegregating schools.

At first, Republicans found that vouchers were a solution in search of a problem. Having run in 1988 on a promise to be the “education president,” President George H. W. Bush’s team was dumbfounded after the election to learn that Americans were rather satisfied with their schools. As a domestic policy adviser explained, “The public is more satisfied than one might think about the quality of their schools,” although voters did believe “that the nation’s inner-city schools have ‘gotten worse’ over the last several decades.” Voters supported efforts to improve those schools (Porter 1989). Bush’s team set out to get “education consumers agitated about the poor quality of our educational system” to justify its education reform efforts in order to keep Bush’s campaign pledge (Kolb 1990).

He concluded that education was a key issue in making appeals to voters because Bush could discuss the issue of education as one of “giving people the power to control their own lives” (Snow 1992). Such messaging justified voucher programs for all students, was consistent with conservative political ideology, and would demonstrate to white voters a concern for urban Black children.

The Rodney King trial put race and racism in the national spotlight, and the Bush team saw political potential in the situation. As an adviser explained, “This year, we have the historic opportunity to expand our Black base without shrinking our white base.” He concluded that education was a key issue in making appeals to voters because Bush could discuss the issue of education as one of “giving people the power to control their own lives” (Snow 1992). Such messaging justified voucher programs for all students, was consistent with conservative political ideology, and would demonstrate to white voters a concern for urban Black children. To reassure voters that his education voucher program (i.e., the GI Bill for Children) was designed, in part, to help non-white urban youths—rather than help whites continue to avoid desegregating schools—Bush promoted the Milwaukee voucher experience. He was always sure to note that the program was supported by state Democratic leaders and Black community leaders.

In 1996, Bob Dole made education a key campaign issue and repeatedly proclaimed (without citing evidence) the Milwaukee program a success, asserting that it demonstrated that vouchers were the answer for how to close the black–white achievement gap. Such statements seemed to be aimed at minority voters, in particular because Dole called out racial-ethnic minority students by name during campaign speeches as personalized examples of those in need of voucher programs. Yet, internally, the Dole team acknowledged that a key target of such messages was Catholic voters who wanted vouchers for parochial schools (Shea 1996).

In 2000, George W. Bush avoided using the term “vouchers” because his advisers believed it had negative connotations for white voters (Dao 2000). They were sensitive to white voters perceiving Republican support for vouchers, at best, as pandering to Catholics and, at worst, as a way for whites to avoid desegregating schools. Rather than emphasize the solution—vouchers—George W. Bush emphasized the problem—failing urban schools. Bush readily connected race and education in asserting his “compassionate conservatism.” His rhetoric about education as a civil rights issue (i.e., the “soft bigotry of low expectations”) and his commitment to leaving “no child behind” assured white voters that he was a candidate who cared for disadvantaged children of color within the context of caring for all children’s educational quality.

John McCain and Mitt Romney continued to promote vouchers as necessary for improving the quality of education for students of color while avoiding any suggestion that vouchers should be available only to students of color. Their use of Bush’s civil rights frame resulted in confusing discourse. In his nomination-acceptance speech, McCain stressed that many students were trapped in failing schools and needed voucher programs to realize quality education. “Education is the civil rights issue of this century,” he said, before continuing, “Equal access to

public education has been gained” (McCain 2008). McCain did not explain why any students would be particularly in need of vouchers if they had “equal access” or what constitutional violation made education the civil rights issue of the new century. Notably, no Democratic candidate ever challenged a Republican candidate to name that constitutional violation—perhaps because Democrats know that any such discussion will reopen the school segregation debate that puts them at odds with white voters. Romney perfectly captured white voters’ equality ideology when he expressed concern for “minority children” and their “third-world education” in his call for vouchers (Romney 2012).

Certainly, Republican support for vouchers reflects several realities: vouchers are consistent with their market-based political ideology and support appeals to Catholic and, more recently, Evangelical voters. However, the emphasis that Republican candidates put on failing urban schools in promoting vouchers

specifically seeks to present an image of a nation in violation of white voters' equality ideology, one that does not provide equal educational opportunity. Republican support for vouchers does not exist despite white suburban voters; rather, Republicans support vouchers *because* of these voters and their need to hear Republican candidates express concern for children from minoritized populations.

DEMOCRATS WARN THAT VOUCHERS HURT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Republicans used vouchers to reassure white voters of their racial sensitivity. Democrats did not face this same challenge. Democratic strategists were more concerned with losing white-voter support by giving credence to the Republican charge that Democrats were beholden to racial-ethnic minorities. They attempted to counter the Republican voucher position by arguing that it actually undermined minoritized students' equality of educational opportunity. Although Democratic candidates have supported school choice, they rarely primed the issue, and it typically plays a minor role in their education discourse—much less their broader campaigns. They tend to emphasize improving educational quality through increased funding. Strategists argued that this resonated with white, middle-class parents by demonstrating the important role of public schools in creating equal opportunity while also acknowledging these voters' growing concerns about their own children's educational quality in the emerging global economy.

When James Carville said "It's the economy, stupid" he was signaling that the 1992 Clinton campaign understood that white, middle-class voters were anxious about their current prospects and their children's future. Ensuring that *their* children had access to quality education was a new concern for these white voters. At the same time, the Democratic Party's reinventing government program of the 1990s aimed to reassure white voters that Democrats were not committed to providing an entitlement lifestyle to racial-ethnic minorities. Clinton's polling data indicated that voters of all races increasingly supported public school choice. This made public school choice a safe policy for Clinton to use as an example of his "leaner, not meaner" government reform plan (Clinton 1992).

The fact that Republican candidates have continued to advocate for voucher programs but have increasingly avoided using the term "voucher" suggests that Democrats might have been successful in convincing white voters that "vouchers" hurt students of color and public schools.

In 1996, Clinton's team was concerned about Dole's use of vouchers in his appeals to white voters. As Clinton advisers explained, "We need a better answer to vouchers than we have, especially when the debate focuses on doing something for disadvantaged kids in failing (mostly inner city) schools" (Cohen 1996). However, the Clinton team was cautious about including racial messages in its campaign lest they appear to be pandering to nonwhite voters. Clinton campaign strategists argued that voters supported Clinton's public school choice position because it required a "comprehensive plan to improve public education

and help *all* students"—unlike vouchers, which had less support, because vouchers might "only help a few chosen students" and hurt public schools (Thornton 1996).

In 2000, Al Gore advocated more strongly for school choice than Bill Clinton had, in part because it was a way for him to draw a distinction between himself and his opponent. George W. Bush might not have wanted to use the word "vouchers," but Gore was more than happy to do it for him. In key campaign appearances, Gore charged that his opponent was "for vouchers" and that vouchers "drain taxpayer money away" from public schools; thus, vouchers would hurt more than help students of color and public schools (Gore 2000). In making such statements, Gore was attempting to undermine Bush's claims of compassion for students of color. He further reassured white voters of his commitment to their children by pledging to improve educational quality for all students. Gore promised to "make education the number-one priority" in his budget (Presidential Candidates Debate 2000).

As the first Black candidate to win a major party's nomination for the presidency, Barack Obama regularly shared the important role that education had played in both his and his wife's lives in ways that reflected white voters' own belief in the power of education to create equal opportunity. Obama supported public school choice but it was not a central theme in his education discourse. Often saying that No Child Left Behind "left the money behind," Obama retained the Democratic Party's emphasis on increased funding for schools, particularly urban schools, as necessary to ensure that schools were preparing all students to be competitive in the global economy.

Democratic candidates have not needed to use vouchers to appeal to Black or Latino voters; however, they have needed to be careful about appearing to pander to these voters. The fact that Republican candidates have continued to advocate for voucher programs but have increasingly avoided using the term "voucher" suggests that Democrats might have been successful in convincing white voters that "vouchers" hurt students of color and public schools. Democrats have consistently promised increased funding for *all* students, a reassuring message for white voters with a professed concern for students of color and a more personal concern for their own children's education.

CONCLUSION

The era of school desegregation and each party's resulting voucher position continue to impact American politics. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, both candidates' comments were consistent with their predecessors' use of vouchers, public school choice, and federal funding for education to appeal to white voters. Donald Trump repeatedly described America's "inner cities" as "devastating" and "unacceptable" and called urban public schools a "disaster" (Presidential Candidates Debate 2016a; Trump 2016a). Like Republican candidates before him,

Trump placed vouchers for urban Black parents at the center of his “civil rights agenda” (Trump 2016b; 2016c). Hillary Clinton’s 2016 education message sounded much like Democratic candidates before her. She echoed Americans’ belief in education as a key factor in creating equal opportunity, and she pledged increased funding to prepare all students for a changing economy (Presidential Candidates Debate 2016b).

Beyond reasserting Hochschild’s argument for the salience of education in understanding American politics, the archival record on presidential elections and school vouchers specifically demonstrates the lasting impact the era of school desegregation has had on each political party. Campaign strategists of both parties have given considerable attention to white voters’ attitudes on education and race based on their understanding of these voters’ perceptions of their party’s image. The tension that strategists identified between white voters’ commitment to equality and their denial of the salience of race has implications beyond the era of school desegregation, vouchers, and even education policy. Much of the discussion about the 2016 presidential election continues to focus on the role of white voters: how each campaign attempted to appeal to these voters and how these voters responded to those appeals. This study reveals the extent to which campaigns have considered white voters’ racial attitudes when crafting policy positions and issue frames. More studies of education will allow political scientists to identify how many other puzzles white voters might play a key piece in solving and what this means for a nation committed to equal opportunity.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000100> ■

NOTES

- Both “vouchers” and “school choice” can have varied meanings depending on the specific policy proposal. This article uses the terms in ways consistent with how the archival records use them. Vouchers are state-funded certificates that are given to parents to pay tuition at any school, notably private schools. School choice is restricted to parental choice among public schools, including public charter schools.
- See appendix A for a more complete discussion of the sources and historical methodology used in this study.

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