

# Parents' Conflicted Interests with School Choice

BY ADAM MARTIN '20

Scholars have done extensive work to assess opinion on the performance of their local public schools, their support for expanding school choice, and their view on the role education plays in ensuring success later in life. Research has indicated that parents are generally more supportive of their local public schools than the national educational system and that they are personally conflicted between their political views of school choice and of transferring their own children from their local public school to a charter or private school. Furthermore, while school choice is generally favored (depending on the program's structure), respondents in polls have pointed to other means of improving public schools other than expanding school choice. While many respondents now believe that the federal government should be more active in improving education, public opinion on pre-existing efforts to do so is split and can have problematic methodology. Finally, education has been perceived by many to be an important factor towards having a successful career. However, Martin argues that surveys should focus more on the relationship between parents' views on their local schools, the national education system, and the impact of their child's education on their future to their opinion on expanding school choice. These factors in public opinion on school choice are significant because they can indicate whether or not the federal government should be responsible for expanding (or limiting) school choice.

## PART ONE: LITERATURE

There is significant literature on public opinion concerning both educational institutions and policies. While this paper lacks the space to sufficiently cover all the nuances that have been documented, it will cover salient studies that concern opinion on public schools, existing school choice programs, hypothetical expanded school choice programs, efforts by the national government to reform education, and the role education plays in creating a successful future.

### Philosophy Regarding Education

It's important to examine people's view on the role education plays in promoting success because it establishes the importance of maintaining a functional education system for future generations. Research has found that respondents ages 18 to 29 believe that, while education is crucial towards future success, expanding school choice is not among the more popular methods of improving the national education system.

In a 2014 poll conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics, respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 were asked various questions on this topic. Results from this study found that 90% of respondents believed that education is either somewhat or very important towards "achieving the American Dream"<sup>1</sup>; 81% of respondents believed that 'some college/community college' is the minimum level of education needed to be successful; and while 37% were unsure of an expanded school choice program's effectiveness of reducing the wealth gap, 45% of respondents believed that such a program is either somewhat or very effective at this goal.<sup>2</sup> Although this indicates clear support that young adults believe education is important towards future success and that an expanded school choice program would be effective

at reducing the gap between the wealthy and most other citizens, there is also evidence that school choice is not the popular approach among young adults towards providing an ideal education.

In a 2016 poll by the Harvard Institute of Politics, respondents ages 18 to 29 were asked how to improve the education system. When asked to select three solutions among eight, respondents ranked expanding school choice sixth, with only 17% including it in their three selections; the most common response was placing greater emphasis on STEM education<sup>3</sup>. While this series of polls provide insight on young adults' perceptions of education's long term impact, it has limited context over the views of current parents, the demographic that is usually responsible for sending their children to public or private school.

### Local Public Schools and the National Education System

Significant research has been done to examine people's satisfaction with their local public schools and the American national education system. Since the 1980s, Bali notes that while opinion on the American public education system as a whole has declined, opinion on re-

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spondents' *local* public schools has gradually improved. When respondents were evaluated in 2012, 15% reported improvement of their local public schools, 43% reported consistency in their local public schools' quality, and 27% reported that their local public schools have deteriorated.<sup>4</sup> Respondents usually attribute this split between the national education system and their local public institutions to their familiarity with their local schools; however, community pride, increased test scores, and graduation rates within local public schools, and negative media portrayals of the national system have also been cited.<sup>5</sup> This paper noted how support in some demographics has remained unchanged in this time period while others have shifted their views.

In the specified time period, party identification and race have all diminished in their salience. In 1983, party identification was a direct indicator of support for public schools, and whites were significantly more likely to support their public schools than racial minorities. By 2012, however, none of these characteristics remained a point of division.<sup>6</sup>

Yet even with this minor increase of general support, Bali has found disparities in several parameters, particularly that rural respondents remain more likely to support their public schools than urban respondents.<sup>7</sup> Bali found that while urban respondents believe their local schools

have improved since the 1980s, urban schools remain less likely to be viewed favorably than their rural counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Others have noted that among parents, satisfaction with their child's school varies considerably along racial lines. Asian parents have been found to be most satisfied with their child's school; Hispanic and white parents have been found to have comparable levels of satisfaction; African-American parents have been found to be least satisfied. Despite this variance in satisfaction, parents—regardless of race—have cited the school's safety, budget, communication of student's academic progress, and teacher effectiveness to be significant factors in their assessment.<sup>9</sup> It can then be argued that the racial gap on school satisfaction for parents comes not from the criteria considered but from the inequality of school access and quality; African-Americans and Hispanics are less likely to attend private schools than their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, other scholars have noted that people are more likely to give their local private schools favorable evaluations than their local public schools, both in urban and rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

A 2003 report polled 300 parents in New York State that have transferred their child to a charter school; 65% of these parents previously had their children attending public schools.<sup>12</sup> The report found that these parents were twice as likely to rate their child's charter school an 'A'—42%

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overall—than rate their child’s previous school an ‘A.’<sup>13</sup> When asked about their child’s previous school, a third of these parents reported that the previous school was inferior in all functional aspects to their child’s charter school. While there is disagreement over which functional aspect the charter school is superior to the previous school in, a general plurality—17%—of respondents reported that the charter school’s academic standing was their strongest attribute.<sup>14</sup> When New York State was divided into the City and Upstate, however, there are noticeable divergences. The study found that parents in New York City are more likely to rate their child’s charter school an ‘A’—49%—than parents in Upstate New York—39%<sup>15</sup>. This rural-urban split comes from varying levels in satisfaction with the charter school’s quality of instruction, safety, different perceptions of classroom disruption, and slightly superior communication of student’s academic progress.<sup>16</sup>

### **Generation Gap, Race, and State Culture in Opinion for Public School Spending**

One metric that has been examined concerning public schools is public opinion for the level of school spending, which is a lens that can be used when analyzing specific demographics, such as age groups, race, and state geography. First, scholars have devoted extensive research to differences in age when evaluating how much funding the public believes schools should receive. It has generally been agreed that older respondents were previously more likely to support public schools while also being more likely to support lower school spending from all levels of government. From the 1980s to the 2000s, however, older respondents have generally displayed less divergence in support from their younger counterparts and have become more likely

to support an increase in school spending.<sup>17</sup> A generation gap concerning school spending has existed because older respondents have been socialized in a system where less school spending was expected, thus as these respondents are replaced by generations that have been educated in a system where more school is expected, the generation gap will continue to close.<sup>18</sup>

Second, race’s impact on public opinion for public schools has largely been affected by their rapid rate of improvement, even as disparities in education access and quality persist. While the gap is not as large as racial inequality suggests, African Americans remain more likely to find improvement in their public schools and increase in school spending than their white counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Hispanics, though, have yielded limited and inconsistent polling results on public school spending.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, opinion on school spending is unique within individual states. Due to the geographic and racial diversity of the United States, the country serves as a breeding ground for multiple distinct state and local cultures, which each foster various opinions on educational policy. For example a “centrist” in Massachusetts is more likely to support higher school spending than a “centrist” in Wyoming.<sup>21</sup> This diversity in culture can also be seen in the demographics within each state, which connects to other splits in opinion. For example, swing states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania have large rural populations and high African-American concentrations within the large cities.<sup>22</sup> In this aspect, various state cultures act as intersections for other salient demographics that factor into public opinion for both local public schools and school spending.

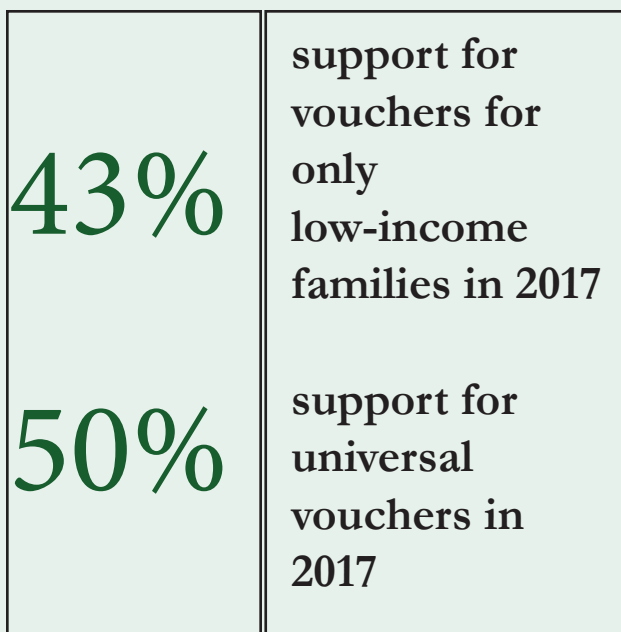
### Existing School Choice Programs

It's important to examine the public opinion of existing school choice programs within communities and states. A 2016 study conducted by Shuls specifically focused on the school districts of two cities—Kansas City and St. Louis. Parents from these two cities have been found to sympathize with the notion of missionary schooling—the act of sending children to underperforming schools (usually public ones) with the intent of bolstering their prestige or ‘saving’ them. When asked whether they would subject their *own* children to missionary schooling, however, parents declined in favor local private schools out of self-interest.<sup>23</sup> Shuls's experiment with parents in Kansas City and St. Louis suggests a divide in school choice opinion among parents; while these parents express reservations politically about expanding school choice due to their negative impact on public schools and their questionable effectiveness of curbing cyclical poverty, these parents also carry a personal self-interest to ensure that their own children receive a quality education, even if fulfilling that desire requires transferring them to a private or charter school.<sup>24</sup> This divide between the political and the personal can make opinion measurement on expanding school choice difficult because it can create a gap between poll results and transfer enrollments from public schools to private or charter schools.

### Expanding School Choice Programs

In regards to expanding school choice, public opinion varies depending on the program's structure, means of providing access to alternatives, and the narratives people are exposed to. One study polled respondents for their support of different methods of expanding school choice. The results found that 60% of respondents favored a

program that would provide tax credits to businesses and entities that donate to organizations that grant scholarships for low-income families to send their children to private schools. Only 54% of respondents favored charter schools and about half of respondents opposed granting school vouchers exclusively to low-income families. However, when these vouchers are provided to families of any income—also known as universal vouchers—favorability increases to 50%.<sup>25</sup> A 2017 analysis of polls conducted by *Education Next* reflects some of these findings while also examining divergence among political parties. Results from its polls include a 65% general support for charter schools; however, Republicans are significantly more likely to favor these institutions than their Democratic counterparts. Vouchers for only low-income families received 43% support while universal vouchers received 50% support—both of these vouchers received more favor from Democrats than Republicans. Programs that provide tax-credits to donors of





65%

general support for charter schools in 2017

scholarship-granting organizations received 65% overall support with Democrats favoring it over Republicans.<sup>26</sup> The noticeable impact party identification has on support for expanding school choice marks an interesting departure from the indicator's now-absent role in support for local public schools. Furthermore, while these polls do suggest a general trend in favor of supporting expanded school choice that is contingent on party identification and the program's structure, these surveys are not designed to make a respondent's philosophy on the role of education in fostering success a salient consideration.

### **Narrative Policy Framework**

Other scholars have sought to examine the role narratives play in shaping public opinion for expanding school choice programs. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is a theory that examines the impact storytelling has on changing emotions and attitudes on issues versus the impact of empirical data. At the micro-level, there is an emphasis on how issues affect individuals. At the intermediate stage, interest and advocacy groups utilize these narratives to promote their messages. Finally, at the macro-level, these stories are embedded into the institutions responsible for creating and implementing policy. Factors that determine a narrative's success include the viewer's predispositions, level of narrator trust, the story's coherence, and the strength of the characters.<sup>27</sup>

In regards to school choice, two opinion polls have been made about the acceptance of charter schools among residents of Alabama—one of the few states that does not currently have charter schools in operation. While the first poll showed general support for charter schools, the second poll—which was conducted after additional information about the issue was provided—showed a smaller share of initial supporters followed by a surge in the opposition.<sup>28</sup>

In a study, respondents are asked to read two brief opinion pieces. The first one is in opposition to charter schools while the second one is in favor of charter schools. Both of these pieces utilize narrative and focus on characters. The results find that people who read articles that are more in line with their predispositions are more likely to find the author trustworthy and the argument convincing. Furthermore, the unfavorable article is more influential in swaying readers—both those with low knowledge and high knowledge on charter schools—towards opposition than the favorable article does at swaying readers towards support.<sup>29</sup> The results of this study suggest that the NPF does not strengthen the argument in favor of expanding school choice nearly as much as the argument against expansion. Furthermore, the results of the study are also consistent with the second opinion poll conducted on Alabama respondents; respondents are more likely to become opposed to expanding school choice when they acquire more information on the topic, whether this information is conveyed by reading empirical articles or through the NPF.

### **President Donald Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos**

With Donald Trump's election to the presidency and his appointment of Betsy DeVos for

Secretary of Education, there has been a growing debate over whether school choice programs should be expanded. In an April 2017 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 67% of respondents said that if they were writing the budget for the federal government, they would increase spending for education.<sup>30</sup> This is likely a response to the resurgence of the national debate, given how support has historically spiked immediately before new federal programs are rolled out; when Pew asked this question in 2001—when No Child Left Behind was being considered—support peaked at 76% before lowering to 73% in 2002 after the law was passed.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, when Pew asked the question again in 2009—when Common Core was being considered—support peaked at 67% before declining in the four years after Common Core was passed, reaching a minimum of 60% in 2013.<sup>32</sup> If these trends apply to any effort by the federal government to address education reform, it should be expected that any new program passed in 2017 would be a peak for support before lowering in the years afterward, when such a program would be implemented.

### **Role of the Federal Government in Reforming Education**

Despite the surge in support for an increase in education spending, there is mixed data regarding whether this translates to support for the federal government to expand school choice programs. In March 2017, shortly after Donald Trump released a budget proposal, Quinnipiac University asked in a telephone survey among registered voters whether they supported increasing funding specifically for charter schools and school choice programs. The results found that 55% of respondents cited this increase as a

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“bad idea” while only 39% cited the increase as a “good idea.”<sup>33</sup> From this poll, the largest indicator of support was party identification; among the respondents, 68% of Republicans favored the increase, 36% of Independents favored the increase, and only 19% of Democrats favored the increase.<sup>34</sup> However, in a separate poll conducted by Gallup contemporaneously, 59% of respondents agreed with “provid[ing] federal funding for school-choice programs that allow students to attend any private or public school”<sup>35</sup>. This discrepancy complicates opinion findings; however, it does suggest that people are more likely to support expanding school choice if they are assured that they will be granted access to public schools.

In addition to considering the structure of an expanded school choice program, it is important to consider predispositions towards the federal government and the role people feel it should play in improving schools across the United States. In 2000, before the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, 46% of respondents in an American Viewpoint poll agreed that the federal government should become more involved in improving education, while 42% agreed that

local school systems should have more flexibility in their administration.<sup>36</sup> By 2015, a Pew survey found that 70% of respondents believed that the federal government should play a major role in ensuring access to a high quality education.<sup>37</sup> Although there remains opposition, these poll results suggest a general support in the federal government’s intent on reforming education.

### **No Child Left Behind: A Case Study**

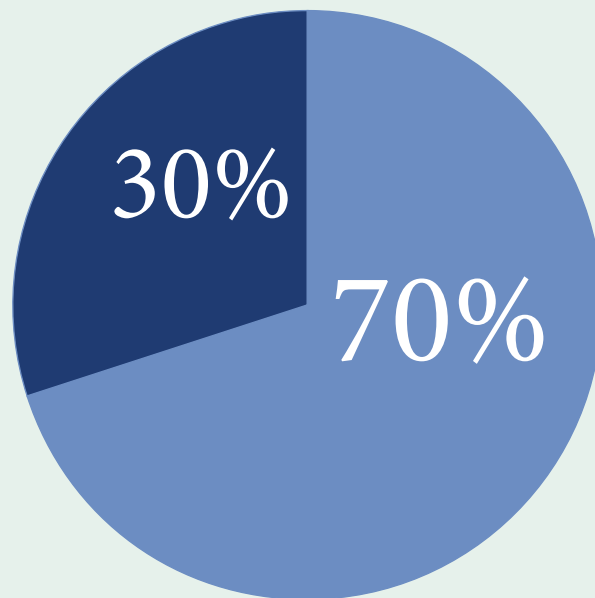
Finally, it’s salient to examine public opinion of previous efforts by the federal government to improve the American education system. This can provide some insight over differences between the people’s expectation of a federal program and the reality and how this can apply to expanding school choice.

One of the most significant federal programs for education reform is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. NCLB requires states to publicly release reports regarding the quality of its schools and punishes schools that receive low test scores multiple years in a row.<sup>38</sup> It’s im-

portant to note that at the time the program was enacted, forty-five states were already publicizing evaluations of their schools.<sup>39</sup> In regards to school choice, schools that fail to improve after two years must provide an alternative for students to opt out and schools that fail to improve after five years must engage in restructuring—which could result in it reopening as a charter school. Existing literature shows that parents’ deciding factor on their attitude of NCLB is their children’s experience with the school they attend. Furthermore, teachers and school administrators are generally against NCLB due to its standardized testing requirement and their belief that the federal government lacks the time and resources to reform the education system wholesale.<sup>40</sup>

Another study sought to further analyze public opinion for NCLB, specifically among parents. Although parents do consider safety, academic standards, and shared cultural factors when assessing schools, research has shown that accountability data has a direct effect on parents’ view on schools, a component that NCLB intended to na-

**Figure 1: By 2015, a Pew survey found that 70% of respondents believed that the federal government should play a ‘major’ role in ensuring access to a high quality education**





tionalize. Parents who receive this data are more likely to choose high-performing schools than parents who don't receive this data, but each state is allowed to establish its own grading scale for evaluation. Jacobsen et al. found in their study that although strong schools receive consistently high marks by parents, these marks are strongest among schools that are assessed on a letter grade rather than a numerical performance index. Conversely, weak schools that are assessed on a letter grade receive lower marks by parents than weak schools that are assessed on a numerical performance index. Thus, there is significant variance of opinion of school performance when good and bad schools are both assessed on a letter grade.<sup>42</sup>

## **PART TWO: PUZZLE**

While the existing literature on support for local public schools and school choice is extensive, it features little on how parents make the connection between their philosophy on education, their opinion on their local public schools, and their support of various school choice programs. It is unclear whether people are considering the state of their own public schools and educational philosophy when formulating their views on school choice programs or if they are considering their view of the national educational system—which existing literature has indicated is divergent from that of one's local public school.

The existing literature covers a breadth of considerations in regards to current school choice programs and the possibility of expanding them, however two fields that deserve more research in the future are the split in opinion between local public schools and the national education system and the split parents have between their political opinions of school choice and their personal decision to send their own children to charter and

private schools. Shuls 2016 has suggested this divide in his case study with Kansas City and St. Louis; however, this analysis is limiting in two ways. First, it only examines parents in two urban school districts within Missouri, which is a state with a large African-American/white gap.<sup>43</sup> Second, the study mostly utilizes open-ended narrative accounts submitted by parents within these school districts. While the notion of a political-personal divide among parents remains valid, there have been few efforts to measure its implications in a systematic method that represents parents in suburban and rural school districts.

A future study could be developed that seeks to determine whether a parent will support a federal school choice program when their opinion of the local school district, national education system, and their self-interest of their child's own education are all salient considerations. The results of this study would provide insight into the level of the education system parents examine most when determining whether to transfer their child to a charter or private school. If respondents' views of the national education system are found to be more salient than their views on their local public school, then it suggests that the federal government—more so than state or local governments—should be a guide for parents in creating a set of educational alternatives for their children.

For this study, a two-part longitudinal poll will be designed and four groups of respondents will be randomly sampled. Two groups—called Group A and Group B—will consist of parents with no more than three children attending local public school, with the youngest child being under the seventh grade. The other two groups—called Group C and Group D—will consist of parents with no more than three children attending local public school, with the youngest child


either in or above the seventh grade. The purpose of dividing the respondents by age of the youngest child is to establish a control for the time a parent will have to cooperate with the local public school district, which can be an external consideration when determining whether to transfer children to charter or private schools. In addition, two forms of the poll will administered within the pool. Form 1 will be administered to Group A and Group C while Form 2 will be administered to Group B and Group D. While respondents in all four groups will be asked the same set of questions, the two parts—Part 1 and Part 2—will be reversed for Form 1 and Form 2 respectively. The purpose of this practice is to establish a control over question-wording effects.

Part 1 consists of a series of close-ended questions regarding the respondent's satisfaction with the local public school. By doing this, this specific opinion will immediately become salient. This will then be followed by a hypothetical question of whether the respondent would transfer their youngest child to a charter or private school if there were no financial, logistical, or administrative obstacles to confront. Respondents in Group A and Group C will answer this part first while respondents in Group B and Group D will answer this part second. From this, it is expected that the results from Group A and Group C will be mostly derived by the respondent's view on their local public school and the age of their youngest child, as these factors will be the most salient by the method in which the question is presented. If there is significant support for transferring the child to a charter or private school, then it can be concluded that opinion on the matter is largely driven by small-scale, individual considerations.


Part 2 consists of a series of closed-ended questions regarding the respondents' philosophy

on education, view of the federal government, and the role it should play in addressing education. The purpose of these questions is to shift to large-scale considerations, making these salient. Afterward, respondents will be asked whether they would transfer their youngest child to a charter or private school under a newly-expanded school choice program. Rather than being a single question, however, this would be several questions as it would account for various hypothetical structures under which the new school choice program would assume. Respondents in Group B and Group D will answer this part first while respondents in Group A and Group C will answer this part second. From this, it is expected that the results from Group B and Group D will mostly be derived from the respondent's confidence in the federal government's ability to ensure access to a high quality education and the extent to which such an education will translate to a successful future for their children. as these factors will be the most salient by the method in which the question is presented. If there is significant support for transferring the child to a charter or private school through an expanded school choice program, then it can be concluded that opinion on the matter is largely driven by large-scale, philosophical considerations.

The purpose of creating two forms with Part 1 and Part 2 reversed is to examine the extent to which the respondent's view of the small-scale and large-scale educational considerations intersect. Because survey results can vary depending on the factors *most* salient at the time a question is asked, it is important to also determine whether the part a respondent answers second can alter their response when asked if they would transfer their youngest child to a charter or private school. If the results indicate a change in



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all groups from the part they answer first from the part they answer second on this particular question, then it suggests that the considerations parents face in the part they answer second either generate contradictory opinions—which supports Bali’s argument—or produce a greater influence than the considerations faced in the part they answer first. This would suggest that the scope that produces that greater influence—perception of local public school or that of the national education system—also has a greater influence in forming parents’ opinion on expanding school choice for the purpose of transferring their own children to a charter or private school.

This study does pose limitations, however. It is unable to isolate certain personal factors that could also influence a parent’s decision to send their children to a charter or private school, the most notable being the interests of other children a respondent has aside from the youngest. The criteria for random sampling and question wording on the poll is heavily centered around the characteristics of the youngest child when many of the parents either have two or three children. While the presence of multiple children could create a conflict of interest in certain cases when the question is based specifically around the youngest, the allotment of a respondent to have three children is a fair method of ensuring a representative parent sample. Furthermore, the study cannot adequately explain the political reservations parents for expanding school choice programs even as they are interested in providing their own children with a high quality education. Even with these limitations, however, the study would be beneficial to expanding knowledge of public opinion regarding school choice.

### **PART THREE: CONCLUSION**

Existing literature has indicated two divides parents have when it concerns education. One is that between their local public school and the national education system; the former tends to be viewed more favorably than the latter. The other is that between their political beliefs and their personal investment in granting their children access to a high quality education, which its beneficiaries cite as a necessity for future success. Both of these divergences pose an interesting challenge towards understanding public opinion of expanding school choice. It remains unclear the extent to which parents consider their view of their local public school or the national education system when determining their opinion of expanding school choice and whether to take advantage of such a program in regards to their own child.

This ambiguity is important because policy-makers are currently debating the role the state and national governments should play in expanding school choice. Understanding *which* school system—local, state, or national—people are assessing when formulating their opinion on school choice can be an important indicator for determining which level of government should primarily be responsible for providing alternatives.



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## ENDNOTES



- 1 Harvard Institute of Politics, Young Americans' Attitudes towards Politics and Public Science Survey, 2014, poll.
- 2 Harvard Institute of Politics, Young Americans' Attitudes towards Politics and Public Science Survey, 2014, poll.
- 3 Harvard Institute of Politics, Young Americans' Attitudes towards Politics and Public Science Survey, 2016, poll.
- 4 Bali, 2016.
- 5 Bali, 2016.
- 6 Bali, 2016.
- 7 Bali, 2016.
- 8 Bali, 2016.
- 9 Bobrowski et al, 2006.
- 10 Berkman et al, 2005.
- 11 McCully et al, 2003; Shuls, 2016.
- 12 McCully et al, 2003.
- 13 McCully et al, 2003.
- 14 McCully et al, 2003.
- 15 McCully et al, 2003.
- 16 McCully et al, 2003.
- 17 Bali, 2016; Berkman et al, 2005.
- 18 Berkman et al, 2005.
- 19 Bali, 2016; Berkman et al, 2005.
- 20 Berkman et al, 2005.
- 21 Berkman et al, 2005.
- 22 Berkman et al, 2005.
- 23 Shuls, 2016.
- 24 Shuls, 2016.
- 25 Henderson et al, 2015.
- 26 Peterson et al, 2017.
- 27 Ertas, 2015.
- 28 Ertas, 2015.
- 29 Ertas, 2015.
- 30 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2017, poll.
- 31 Pew, 2017, poll.
- 32 Pew, 2017, poll.
- 33 Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, 2017, poll.
- 34 Quinnipiac, 2017, poll.



35 Gallup, 2017, poll.

36 American Viewpoint, National Monitor Survey, 2000, poll.

37 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Pew Governance Survey, 2015, poll

38 Holland, 2014; Jacobsen et al, 2014.

39 Jacobsen et al, 2014.

40 Holland, 2014.

41 Holland, 2014.

42 Jacobsen et al, 2014.

43 Berkman et al, 2005.





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how effective you believe it would be at reducing the gap between the rich and everyone else... Very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, not at all effective)...Allowing parents more choice in where to send their children through school vouchers and more access to charter schools.” GfK Knowledge Networks [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor].

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