The Crucial Mythology of the American Teacher

By

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Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts
With Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut                  April, 2014
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I’d like to thank my two Thesis advisors Professor Miller and Professor Skillman, both of who offered me more time and energy than I had any reason to expect;

From essentially the beginning of my time here, Professor Miller has always been unbelievably generous toward me with her warm guidance and illuminating insights. While I have no doubt I’ll always remember her advice on how to read more quickly, write more clearly, how to speak more carefully, but one day, I hope to learn how to ask questions half as well as she does.

Thanks Professor Skillman was brave enough to jump onto this project mid-stream. He immediately spoke directly to me in exactly the way I have always liked to hash out intellectual problems. There aren’t many people who are willing to have the same argument with me again and again until I’m totally convinced I understand exactly what’s going on. I’m equally grateful for the challenges he presented me with, and his awesome patience as I puzzled in and around them.

Thanks to my loving parents, Lynn and Michael for their countless levels of devoted support. I try to have everyone I know meet them, in the hopes that they’ll subconsciously assume that someday I’ll grow up to be as cool as them. We’ll see if that trick still works after I graduate college.

Thanks to Jesse Docter and Leonid Liu who are among other things, the perfect combination of tolerant listeners and snarky friends.

To Danny Blinderman for the above, and also draft work

Finally, thanks to Michael Migiel-Schwartz, who was always willing spend an hour or two on any question I had, and never once complained that I straight up stole his thesis topic.
Introduction:

During his first presidential campaign in 2000, then Governor George W. Bush told the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that he had a plan that would defeat the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” After the applause died down, Bush went on to insist: “It is the role of education to leave no child left behind”.\(^1\) With this speech, and others like, it President Bush sought to cast himself as a new kind of Republican, a “compassionate conservative” who was completely committed to confronting the core cause of poverty and injustice: unequal educational opportunity. Before exploring this rhetoric any further, I should be clear about one thing: it would be a big mistake to freely accept Bush’s assertion of what the role of education is in society. Sociologists and economists who study education are very far from consensus regarding the contention that unequal educational opportunity is a central cause of poverty.\(^2\) In light

\(^1\) (Bush, 2000, and elsewhere)
\(^2\) (Raz, 2013, p.8)
of this, teachers’ unions, and others who hope to oppose Bush’s proposals for education reform, tend to reject the idea that soft bigotry, of the kind Bush implicitly accused educators of, has anything to do with the intergenerational poverty. Rather, they argue, the hard realities of poverty are what cause so many disadvantaged children to be left behind. Although this is an extremely important dispute, it is an enormously complicated area of study, and I cannot hope to resolve it here. Instead I argue that, regardless of the actual merits of this claim, teachers’ unions, and by extension those who support them, should be extremely reluctant to reject completely the ideological framework that assigns them the task of realizing the promises of the American Dream.

While it is clear that an aspirational view of American liberalism has generated a series of unrealistic educational expectations and consequent negative repercussions for teachers’ unions, I challenge the notion that there is another way to conceive of schools which better advances the teachers’ case. To support my claim, I consider the implications of two ideologies that are currently being considered by radical factions in the Union. The first conceives of the school’s purpose as generating democratic, rather than economic, opportunity. The second ideology prioritizes local autonomy, thereby opposing external educational standards. These ideologies represent two, interrelated methods for opposing liberalism in education. After discussing their implications at length, I find that, if successfully adopted, they are likely to generate even more serious problems for teachers’ unions.

To understand the context for these ongoing ideological disagreements, I must first note that the political future of teachers’ unions is currently in flux. America’s two largest teachers’ unions, the Nation Education Association (NEA) and the American
Federation of Teachers (AFT) have weathered the last several decades relatively well, at least when compared to other large sections of the labor movement. Unfortunately for the teachers’ unions, it is evident their comparative success has thus far been conditioned on preserving their increasingly uncertain ties with the Democratic Party. While prospects for labor movement look dire overall, unions who represent government employees, and specifically teachers, have been spared the worst labor’s collapse in the US economy. With teachers, as well as many other public sector workers, this protection can be traced to a historically stable relationship with the Democratic Party.

In a more general sense, the prospects for organized labor in the US private sector are not uncertain; rather they are in free-fall. Unions face an increasingly competitive global marketplace, where their relatively high-paying contracts put their companies at a pronounced disadvantage. This and other factors have contributed to a stagnation of American wages across the labor market, further diminishing the collective bargaining power of workers. Across the country, weakening labor laws can be seen as both a cause and affect of slipping union power. In either case, the growing success of “right to work” legislation is emblematic of the harsh reality today’s unions face. While the precise implications of each of the various phenomena can be quite difficult to parse, the underlying statistical reality establishes that this is an unquestionably bleak movement for the American labor movement. Between 1995 and 2004, union “density,” or unionized worker per laborer in a given sector, fell in every section of the economy with the exception of agriculture. But even this can hardly be celebrated as an optimistic data point for the labor unions, as actual membership in Agriculture sector fell over 30%, with

3 (Lawrence, 1993 p.7)
4 (Farber, 1984)
a density rise resulting from the simple fact that the un-unionized farmworkers were disappearing at a slightly faster rate across the period. Taking a broader view, private sector union density has fallen from over 35% in 1955 to 7.9% in 2004.

In recent decades the public sector has proved to be a much more hospitable environment for organized labor. In the same fifty year period, density numbers for public sector workers fell, but only by 3.7%, representing the best change in density other than agriculture. And unlike in agriculture, absolute membership numbers went up, with the labor movement adding over a quarter of a million members in the public sector since 1955. The simplest explanation for why public sector unions, and specifically teachers’ unions have fared better, than their private-sector counterparts, is that they have been shielded from broader market trends by their inherently close political relationships with elected officials. Given that state and municipal law directly manages teachers’ salaries and working conditions, it is their political relationships, not market trends which determine their fate. Across this period, it is evident that whims of legislative politics have, on the whole, been less adverse to public sector unions than trends have been in the rapidly globalizing private sector.

Teachers’ unions are also protected by the fact that, at least until recently, their profession has been entirely insulated from the sorts of outsourcing and mechanization threats that have been wreaking havoc onto other unions. While there have been some indications that this might be about to change, it remains the case that the teaching profession is largely unharmed by outsourcing and mechanization. If anything, there has

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5 (Masters, 2006 p.483)
6 (Masters, 2006 p.484)
7 (Masters, 2006 p.484)
8 (Gray, 2013)
been increased focus on schools, to train students in increasingly demanding ways. While Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has repeatedly called for schools to prepare students with “technological literacy,” virtual classrooms and other laborsaving innovations are still exceedingly marginal in American public education. And for obvious reasons (starting with busing costs) international outsourcing has been completely unproblematic for teachers unions. These underlying market realities protect teachers’ to a certain extent, but public education policy around issues of salary, teacher tenure, and even the use of labor saving technology is up to legislatures and municipal officials. This confirms that teachers are inherently dependent on their relationship with elected officials.

Given this dependence, it was crucial for teachers’ unions to cultivate a longstanding and durable relationship with the Democratic Party. It can be tempting to shrug off this relationship as a natural or inevitable relationship between different advocates for higher levels of public spending. However as union historian Majorie Murphy shows in her book *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and The NEA, 1900-1980*, in the early stages of teachers’ unions at the turn of the twentieth century, the organizations were clearly separate from, and often at odds with, local party machinery. In places like Chicago, home of the first teachers’ union, education federations originally fought against city-wide political leadership, as Democrats in city hall were attempting to centralize their control over the school, often by eliminating local superintendents. This was done in an attempt to protect a coalition with urban communities who also feared centralized control would be detrimental to their democratic authority. However, Murphy

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9 (Duncan, 2010)
10 (Harden, 2008)
11 (Moe, 2011)
12 (Murphy, 1990, p.5)
finds that once the communities and unions lost this initial battle for local control, teachers’ unions were forced to re-align with more macroscopic political machinery, and their new bosses were increasingly politically, rather than locally aligned. Murphy goes on to conclude that the systematic push for “professionalization” in teaching, especially with regard to the addition of college education requirements, contributed to this re-alignment of the teachers away from their communities, making them more dependent on centralized political power.

Over the course of the twentieth century, teachers’ unions became Democratic Party stalwarts, playing integral roles in many of the most important liberal victories in US history. Despite the fact that, as Education Historians Harvey Cantor and Robert Lowe put it “Education was never more than a marginal concern in the 1930’s,” teachers’ played an important role in getting Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected President. After the election, President elect FDR invited the mayor of Chicago Anton Cermak, a staunch ally of teachers unions and a promoter of federal support for education to visit him in Miami, to discuss policy plans. This meeting is most often remembered not because of the influence wielded by municipal unions, but because the Mayor was killed in an attempt on the President-elect’s life. While the assassination is obviously the more dramatic event, the historical trend on display was that municipal unions were gaining unprecedented attention and influence in the Democratic Party. Shortly after taking office, FDR provided much-needed temporary relief aid to schools struggling in the midst of the Great Depression, but never intended to expand the aid to schools into a

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13 (Murphy, 1990, p.6)
14 (Murphy, 1990, p.12)
15 (Kantor and Lowe, 1995)
16 (Murphy, 1990)
permanent program, as he did with some of the most famous New Deal programs. The
civil rights movement solidly established teachers unions established as leading voices in
the institutionalized American left. Unions provided active support to civil rights
activists, with northern unions shipping members south to participate in historic protests
and actions, most notably the famous “March on Washington”. In supporting Johnson’s
Great Society programs teachers unions quickly became integral players in expanding
federal aid to education. As conservative education scholars Patrick McGuinn and
Fredrick Hess write,

The combination of the NDEA and the ESEA dramatically increased federal funding for
education both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total education spending. Between
1958 and 1968, for example, federal spending on education multiplied more than ten times,
from $375 million to $4.2 billion, and the federal share expanded from less than 3 percent to
about 10 percent of all school funding. The beneficiaries of federal aid to education—
particularly teachers’ unions, parent groups, and state and local education agencies—quickly
became a powerful political force in Washington and fought hard to protect existing programs
and to create new ones.

This quote accurately represents how, over the course of the twentieth century,
and particularly in the 1960’s, teachers’ unions transitioned from active supporters of the
national liberal agenda to heavily invested stakeholders in National policy decisions.
Teachers’ unions found their burgeoning relationship with the national Democratic Party
to be an extremely lucrative asset. In the years following the Johnson Administration,
federal funding for education continued to skyrocket. Even after controlling for
inflation, expenditures on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA,
Johnson’s flagship education bill) went up almost four fold between 1983 and 2001.

Conservative commentators tend to juxtapose those expenditure figures, with statistics

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17 (Kahlenberg, 2009)
18 (McGuinn and Hess, 2005 p.7)
19 (L. a. R. S. Burke, 2012)
20 (“Department of Education,” Toward A New Golden Age... 2004)
showing that that math and (especially) reading scores have shown very little improvement over that period. For many observers, this proves that you can’t improve education by simply “throwing money at the problem”\textsuperscript{21}. Until recently, however, teachers’ unions were able to overcome such arguments and promote steady increases in federal education spending.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the acrimonious debates over school funding and student performance, there is one indisputable result of increased spending on education, and that is a more powerful teachers’ unions. ESEA funding is offered to a wide variety of education initiatives, including curriculum development, increased support staff, teacher raises and smaller class sizes. Unsurprisingly, each of these spending initiatives is in agreement with one or more of the core policy priorities of both of the major teachers’ unions. Without putting too fine a point on it, poverty targeted Title 1 funding, and ESEA funding more broadly, has grown to fulfill an expanding list of the stated wishes of unions. Given the importance of this program to teachers’ unions, it is especially notable how the growth in the program is conspicuously flatter in the Republican presidencies between the years 1980-1992 than in either the Carter or Clinton Presidencies. For several years under Reagan total funding for education actually fell\textsuperscript{22}. This suggests that teachers’ unions have been depending on their relationship with Democrats to advance their core funding objectives.

In addition to seriously augmenting the help teachers receive from the Federal Government, historically Democrats across the country have worked to support the teachers’ unions’ priorities. In the past several decades, we’ve seen a progressive

\textsuperscript{21} (L. Burke, 2010)
\textsuperscript{22} (“Department of Education,” \textit{Introduction: No Child Left Behind}, 2005)
strengthening of tenure laws mostly Democratic-controlled states\textsuperscript{23}. Similarly, Democrats have helped to sponsor increases in municipal- and state-level education funding, bringing American education spending (per pupil) to over $8,700 in 2004 the 2\textsuperscript{nd} highest in the world behind Switzerland\textsuperscript{24}. By contrast, Republicans are far more likely to slash education budgets, reverse policies in support of teacher tenure, and be generally adversarial with respect to teachers’ union priorities\textsuperscript{25}.

Given this, it is unsurprising that teachers’ unions are among the Democratic Party’s largest and most loyal donors. Between 1989 and 1995 the NEA reported over $25 million in donations to federal candidates, 94\% of which went to democrats. The AFT gave nearly $3.5 million, 99.7\% of which went to democrats\textsuperscript{26}. Given these fundraising realities, the GOP’s opposition to teachers’ unions’ priorities seems entirely understandable.

While the GOP’s opposition to the interests of teachers’ union remains, it is not as staunch as it used to be. To illustrate this contrast, we can look to a former rising star in the Republican Party, Barry Goldwater, who in 1960 published the famous book \textit{A Conscience of a Conservative} in which he took time to criticize the wage setting “monopoly” that unions had come to enjoy\textsuperscript{27}. In the chapter entitled “Freedom from Labor,” he also critiques what he sees as the corrupting influence of Unions on politics. Goldwater writes:

\textsuperscript{23}(Murphy, 1990)  
\textsuperscript{24}(“Department of Education” \textit{Toward A New Golden Age...}” 2004)  
\textsuperscript{25}(Gabriel, 2011)  
\textsuperscript{26}(Hess, 2006, p.36)  
\textsuperscript{27}(Goldwater, 2007 p.51)
In order to achieve the widest possible distribution of political power, financial contributions to political campaigns should be made by individuals and individuals alone. I see no reason for labor unions- or corporations- to participate in politics.\textsuperscript{28}

Admittedly the fact that Goldwater did not like unions is not interesting, he was a conservative Republican, with many interests and allies that were opposed to unions. What is much more interesting is the fact that, in 1960, Barry Goldwater, a rising star in the Republican party, who would go on to win his party’s nomination for president in 1964, was willing to take a stance against corporate giving, in part because he feared the influence of organized labor. Back then, unions were a dominating (and from where Goldwater was sitting, adversarial) force in American politics.

Today, looking back at this policy stance immediately calls to mind the 2010 Supreme Court case \textit{Citizens United v Federal Election Commission} (130 S. Ct. 876, 558 U.S. 310, 175 L. Ed. 2d 753 (2010)), which prohibited government restrictions on the gifts given by corporations and labor unions. By and large, liberals who saw it as a threat to democracy bemoaned the ruling, while conservatives hailed the court’s decision, claiming that the ruling vindicated the right of free speech.\textsuperscript{29} In today’s political landscape, it’s unthinkable that a credible Republican candidate for president would take a stance against the ruling or its implications. The fact that Barry Goldwater did, points to radical changes that have transpired in the relative political and economic power of unions and corporations. It suggests that teachers’ unions, along with unions more broadly, are seen as considerably less of a threat to conservatives today than they were in Goldwater’s time.

\textsuperscript{28} (Goldwater, 2007, p.49)  
\textsuperscript{29} (Bossie, 2014)
The teachers’ union loss of political power has further manifested itself in various important education policy contexts. While there were early warning signs, the unions’ increasingly rocky relationship with the Democratic Party became obvious with the 2002 passage of the President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act. This act represents one of the first national political failures of the teachers’ unions. While NCLB is nominally a Republican bill, it was co-sponsored the outspoken liberal Senator from Massachusetts, Edward Kennedy, who one of the most prominent elected Democrats of that time.

For the signing ceremony on January 8th, 2002, Kennedy and several of his fellow legislators joined President Bush, at a high-school in co-author John Boehner’s (R-OH) district to celebrate the historic signing of NCLB. The Bill’s passage had been a tremendous political victory for President Bush, who had successfully secured overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress. It passed the House 384-45 and the Senate 91-4, indicating overwhelming Democratic support for its measure.

Surprisingly, Kennedy and Boehner represented some of the most ideologically polarized factions on Capitol Hill, but nonetheless had come together to pass sweeping education reform. In light of the historically ironclad alliance between Democrats and teachers’ union’s, the widespread support for Bush’s education bill signaled a new willingness of the majority of Democrats to forfeit or trade against key union priorities. The NEA loudly opposed the bill, and actually attempted to sue the Bush administration for imposing an unconstitutional unfunded mandate on states. Among other infractions

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30 (Cross, 2004)  
31 (Rhodes, 2012, p.154)  
32 (Dillion, 2005)
against teachers’ unions, Democrats agreed to encourage the spread of charter schools, place increased emphasis on “high stakes” standardized testing, and even promote the closure of certain struggling schools. Whereas before Democrats had been reliable and unwavering allies for the teachers’ unions, in 2002 even some of the most committed liberals were willing to compromise against unions interests. Clearly something had happened to which had disrupted the smooth functioning of this alliance.

Those skeptical of this claim might attempt to argue that NCLB is an historical anomaly. It is true that in the months after the September 11th attacks, there was a push in Congress for a strong show of bipartisanship, coming together, and renewed resilience and hope. Based on this, it would seem possible to suggest that NCLB is not evidence of significant tectonic shifts in the relationship between teachers’ unions and the Democratic Party, but rather, in light of the tragic events of 9-11, the first item on the President’s agenda was allowed to pass without the typical lobbying and embittered bickering.

However, that argument rests on an obstinately narrow reading of history. In 1999 President Clinton’s aides were hard at work drafting an education plan that looked a great deal like what would become NCLB. In an interview with Andrew Rotherham, who served as Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy under Clinton, I was able to confirm that the proposed bills he was working on already included the basic language and structure of NCLB. The failures of those Democratic bills can be more plausibly - explained as historically situational, as the Republican’s were extremely resistant to

33 (DeBray, 2006 p.126)
giving the White House a major policy victory in a presidential election year.\textsuperscript{34} The fact that a Democratic president wanted to sign a bill with higher accountability measures for teachers, and a correspondingly greater emphasis on standardized testing\textsuperscript{35}, demonstrates that NCLB was not a hiccup but a broader trend in the Democratic Party’s approach to education.

There remains open debate about whether or not NCLB represented an ideological or purely political shift in how Republicans and Democrats discuss education. In her book \textit{Politics, Ideology and Education}, political scientist Elizabeth Debary argues that, despite all the talk about how transformative and groundbreaking the NCLB was, and how it represents a “new equilibrium” in the ideology of education politics, she insists that there is little evidence that ideologies about education have actually been transformed.\textsuperscript{36} Debay thinks changes in policy and rhetoric can be attributed to material and coalitional shifts, such as the weakening influence of what came to be known as President Johnson’s “iron triangle,” a political power structure between Committees, agencies, and outside interests that protects federal spending in particular agencies.\textsuperscript{37} Debay posits that as Congressional committees became weaker relative to the House and Senate leadership, the established centers of influence for teachers’ unions were suddenly unavailable to them. Patrick Mcguinn insists that ideology has shifted in education debates, and that this shift will allow for more aggressive reform in the future, regardless of political circumstances\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{34} (DeBray, 2006, p. 4)
\textsuperscript{35} (McGuinn, 2006)
\textsuperscript{36} (DeBray, 2006, p.4)
\textsuperscript{37} Debray, 2006, p. 147
\textsuperscript{38} (McGuinn, 2006, p.196)
Both DeBray’s and McGuinn’s books were published in 2006, and since that time, history has been kinder to McGuinn’s assertion that there has been a substantive ideological shift in education politics. In 2009, as part of President Obama’s first major piece of legislation, began “Race to the top” (RTTT). Imbedded within the economic stimulus package passed in response to the financial crisis, RTTT was a competitive grant program that incentivized states to adopt newer education policies in line with the administration’s priorities. Pro-union advocates such as Deborah Meier, Diane Ravitch, and Michael Apple, have all decried RTTT as based on of the “same bad principles as NCLB.” Examination of the proposal it is clear that the anti-union advocates have a point: RTTT incentivized the expansion of Charter schools, increasingly stringent national academic standards, and more aggressive measures for enforcing “accountability” on teachers’ based on student performance. All of these were the key pillars of NCLB against which the Unions have repeatedly objected. So, given that President Obama leads the Democratic Party in a distinctly different period of time than did Bill Clinton, and Ted Kennedy it cannot be reasonably claimed that Democratic support for NCLB is a random aberration. These three prominent voices suggest something has significantly shifted within the Democratic Party.

To put it simply, the Democratic Party has accepted Bush’s contention, which lies at core of speech before NAACP, and his flagship education bill, that schools can meaningfully combat poverty. This means that whenever they are shown to fail at their charge, seriously disruptive changes should be made in the schools to incentivize success

39 (Manna & Ryan, 2011)
40 http://www.nea.org/home/18138.htm
while eliminating ineffective people and practices. Arne Duncan in a interview with the National Association of Elementary School Principals” had this to say about NCLB:

“We are going to hold folks accountable for results but give them room to be creative and innovative. Local principals know what’s best for their children and communities, and we want to give them much more room to operate. College- and career-related standards for every single child are going to become the norm, and soon… We can fix the things that are broken and move in the right direction through the reauthorization process.”

While perhaps not on par with the energy of Bush’s rhetoric before the NAACP, Duncan, an Obama appointee and lifelong Democrat, has clearly bought into the core premise of NCLB. He expressed his belief that America can combine innovation with high expectations in a fashion that can produce the same high performance out of “every single child.”

This is a daunting and perhaps even impossible standard to apply to educators. As nearly every pro-union advocate points out, the accessibility of the American Dream is defined by a number of things outside of the control of public schools. In response to these severe challenges, many union advocates have rejected the core premise that schools are responsible for providing measurable gains in upward mobility. These advocates argue that in light of the tremendous obstacles that poverty places in the way of educational success, schools and teachers should not be held accountable for any measurable aspect of their student’s academic outcomes.

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42To be clear, here I am only going to challenge the implications of two relevant pro-union talking points: I think it is problematic for teachers’ to abandon the idea that the obligations of NCLB are unreasonable Many pro-union scholars also challenge the accuracy and legitimacy of the particular standardized testing metrics that NCLB uses to assess student outcomes. Responding to this secondary critique requires knowledge of psychometrics I don’t have.
This brings us to the core ideological problem analyzed in this thesis: if teachers’ unions wish challenge the notion that they are, in part, responsible for realizing the aspirational goal of American meritocracy, they have to advance another politically articulable purpose for public education. If Unions succeed in challenging the idea that schools are capable of making society more just by generating upward mobility, but fail to articulate an alternate purpose for education, Democrats and other policy makers will have little to no loyalty to the union or indeed, anyone in the teaching profession more generally. While I concede that, from the teachers’ unions’ perspective, it would be desirable for them to eliminate the often-unreasonable expectations that American liberalism places on public schools. It threatens’ teachers if schools are expected to be springs of equal opportunity in an otherwise strikingly unequal society. However, I challenge the idea that there is a better ideological or political framework for the union to make its case on behalf of their members. At the very least, it is unclear what that alternative would be. In the following three chapters, I consider three commonly offered radical responses to the now dominant justifications for education policy; finding each, in turn, to be inadequate response for the union. While the reasons I give differ between each of these chapters, the conclusion I reach is the same throughout: namely none of the options I consider provides the teachers’ unions with the rhetorical basis they need to defend themselves from outside attacks. Furthermore, each alternative justification for education policy is actually provides an inferior political basis for public teachers’ unions to justify and defend public schooling.
First, by looking to the work of progressive era theorist John Dewey, I consider the possibility that his theory of substantive democracy could serve as a justification of public education. I offer this first because in my opinion it is the most compelling alternative to equal opportunity. However, the intellectual history of Dewey’s argument is tragic and he ended up undercutting his own democratic goals. The fact that Dewey was unable to protect public schools by arguing for his vision of democracy, should give teachers’ unions pause if they attempt to disassemble upward mobility as a basis for funding education.

The second chapter looks considers the possibility that the union champion localism, as a possible means of resisting the current federalizing and standardizing trends education politics. This strategy has many advantages, not the least of which is that it helps to align the union with already existing political factions and ideological frameworks which heavily favor local control over education. However, toward the end of this chapter I show how localism can serve to undermine the core structural basis of the teachers union, ultimately posing a more substantial threat to teacher unionism than the federal policies the unions hope to combat.

The third chapter offers a rebuttal to a strict reading of historical materialism that would render the rest of the discussion irrelevant. An orthodox Marxist, would argue that it fundamentally irrational to believe ideological analysis should compel the unions to adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward capitalist ideologies because education politics is controlled exclusively by financial material interests. I respond to this by examining the case study, already introduced above, of the relationship between Democrats’ and teachers unions. I finding that there are shifts in the
relationship that cannot be explained by citing the profit motivations of powerful financial interests. While it does not provide specific explanation for why education policy has been changing, the finding does suggests that teachers’ unions should be sensitive to the other claims made here that there are deeply threatening problems lodged in the anti-liberal alternatives.

I conclude by summarizing the argument and a briefly discussing the implications and possible recommendations for teachers’ unions going forward.
Chapter 1, Dewey the democrat:

More democracy is not always enough

For a committed democratic theorist, John Dewey has a strikingly un-democratic legacy. For most of his career he studied and taught philosophy. During that time he constantly struggled over questions of how to make American society, and societies like it, into better functioning, and more participatory democracies. Dewey ambitiously envisioned progressive public schooling as an arena in which a society could reconcile class conflict, empower people to fully realize their true selves, and effectively replace what he called the chaotic “dualisms” of modern life with a more holistic and harmonious society. Although his philosophy makes his intentions toward democratic equality abundantly obvious, his historical legacy is far more muddled. Despite many education practitioners’ purported faithfulness to his doctrines, there is virtually no evidence that his theories offered significant support for these goals. Instead, as education historian Diane Ravitch has deftly shown\(^{43}\), Dewey’s legacy helped to form countless supposedly “progressive schools” that served a myriad of factionalist social, political, and economic aims, and yet, he utterly failed to advance his one true goal of real democracy. In part, this is because Dewey never expressed his philosophy in terms that resonated with American ideology. Instead, when making his arguments for education reform, Dewey relied heavily on his positive, and radically progressive, definition of “democracy”. Dewey defined democracy expansively, as a “Mode of associated living” While he is certainly a competent philosopher within that framework, unfortunately it was not the

\(^{43}\) (Diane Ravitch, 2000 p.)
definition of democracy that most Americans, are used to a more limited, strictly political meaning of that term. By making his arguments in this unfamiliar language, Dewey unfortunately downplayed the concept of equal opportunity, thereby forfeiting contests with other progressives over the politically powerful mythology of the emerging “American Dream”. Dewey’s approach incorrectly assumed that Americans would be compelled by his promise of Democracy alone, and the result was that Dewey’s ideology was severely abused and misappropriated by those forces in education politics that possessed more clearly communicated and culturally intelligible goals.

The political failures of Dewey’s work should serve as a cautionary tale for today’s progressive education advocates, especially the staunchest supporters of the teachers’ unions. Under the mounting pressure of “high stakes accountability”, teachers’ unions and their allies have increasingly sought to discredit the idea that their members should serve as stewards of the “American Dream,” or that they should be held as substantively responsible for the deeply held social value of equal opportunity. They see the increasing calls for equal opportunity in high-poverty schools as a dangerously naïve (or nefariously disingenuous) threat to public school systems. Instead of focusing on economic opportunity, they hope that people can re-conceive of schools as expansively democratic institutions, in need of protection against powerful capitalist ideology. Instead of merely delivering equal opportunity, these neo-Deweyians want school to be the central space for where democratic associative living can take place. This view has led many advocates to both explicitly and implicitly downplay teachers’ role as key sources of upward mobility. In doing so, advocates for teachers unions are forfeiting a relatively powerful ideological position, and are in fact committing the same error that helped to
doom Dewey’s democratic agenda for education. So long as people are made to believe teachers are powerless in the face of inequality and poverty, education policy will continually worsen for teachers. Rather than suffering the same failures that doomed the democratic goals in the progressive education movement in the 20th century, if teachers’ unions take strategic ownership of their assigned role in combating intergenerational poverty, they will have a far better chance of winning favorable policy outcomes for themselves and for their students.

A Purely Pragmatic Criticism

As quick disclaimer: before I analyze the history of the un-democratic education reform Dewey inspired, I wish to clarify that I wholeheartedly agree with Dewey’s definition of democracy, and think it is a meaningful element of any real understanding of modern democratic society. While the following will be a close analysis of Dewey’s writing and theories, fundamentally, it is a critique of the political tactics suggested by his rhetoric, and not the theory itself. Dewey’s observations about the democratic purpose of education are insightful, important, and even invaluable to those who seek to expand and strengthen democracy. Dewey is particularly insightful when he chidingly recounts the well known, but “superficial” observation that a popular suffrage requires a minimum level of education to create an informed electorate.44 Unfortunately, this “you must be able to read to be able to vote” trope has proven just to be easily co-opted by those promoting anti-democratic restriction of suffrage, as it has been to justify funding for a public school system. Instead, Dewey reminds us that democracy is more than a form of

44 (Dewey, 1916, p. 110)
government, is a “mode of associated living”, entirely dependent on shared experiences to function. In a passage that is laudably emblematic of the progressive tradition in which it was written, Dewey advances a compelling argument as to why everyone should actively work to realize this stronger, positive conception of democracy:

“There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences, otherwise the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves. And the experience of each party loses in meaning, when the free interchange of varying modes of life experience is arrested. The evils thereby affecting the superior class are less material and less perceptible, but equally real. Their culture tends to be sterile, to be turned back to feed on itself; their art becomes a showy display and artificial; their wealth luxurious; their knowledge over-specialized; their manners fastidious rather than humane.45

In my view, this passage remains both insightful and poignant to this day. Therefore the following section should not be read as an attempt to contest Dewey’s crucial perspective on what counts as meaningful democracy, but rather as an attempt to understand Dewey’s work in terms of its historical impact.

Given that agree with the fundamentals of Dewey’s theory of democracy, it might seem logical to simply discount all criticisms of Dewey’s legacy as problems of practice, unrelated to the his theoretical work. Such an argument could instead merely catalogue the ways that future education practitioners misapplied Dewey’s theory, and then trace all educational failures and problems with implementation to their transgressions against Dewey’s otherwise coherent theory of democracy. In following this argument, I would criticize education practitioners, while absolving Dewey and his theoretical positions. This type of argument is common in the study of social theorists, as it generally helps to

45 (Dewey, 1916, pp. 97-98)
clarify and refine a substantive understanding of the core theories that a particular thinker is known for.

There are two major reasons I am not following this line of argument in this chapter: the first reason has to do with the nature of my project, while the second has to do with the content of Dewey’s theory itself. In terms of this project, I am most interested in analyzing the practical legacy of thinkers like John Dewey by examining how policymakers and educators interpret Dewey’s work, and let it shape their own. In some ways, the basis for the “pure democratic theory” of Dewey, which I have above agreed with, is as divorced from this project as Dewey’s Ph.D. dissertation on Kant at Johns Hopkins University. To the extent that this project concerns Dewey, it is with regard to his functional legacy, ie how his writings have informed and continue to inform our educational policy debates. The second reason for this approach is, quite simply, that Dewey himself was an adamant proponent of type of political and historical analysis.

Given Dewey’s staunch position in favor of pragmatism, it strikes me as particularly fair and apt to assess Dewey’s legacy as it was practiced. This is because Dewey often repeated his “pragmatic” intent that all intellectual contributions, including philosophy, endeavor to both intentionally change, and be actively changed by the social settings in which they are composed. For example in his magnum opus, Democracy and Education Dewey proclaimed that it was essential to maintain a “continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies [its] environment.” 46 This meant Dewey thought it was important for all thinkers to stay in touch with the details of their surroundings, while also engaged in intentionally changing them in accordance the

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46 (Dewey, 1916, p. 400)
principles of his or her thought. Accordingly, Dewey, along with Charles Peirce, and William James, are known as founders and key contributors to the American philosophical school of “pragmatism”. As Peter Novick argues in his 1988 book on the American historical profession, “The proponents of a ‘Pragmatic notion of truth’ sought to supplement, rather than supplant, the notion of truth as ‘correspondence to’ or ‘agreement with’ reality, which none of them denied was relevant, but which, because of ambiguity in key terms, they thought inadequate.”

According to the biographer Jay Martin, Dewey in particular took pragmatism to meant something slightly stronger. Quite simply: “An idea is true and truth is organic only in ‘specific action’.” By Martin’s telling Dewey rejected the truth of any knowledge that was not engaged in “specific action”. Rather than merely seeking to supplement thought, Martin argued, Dewey sought to overhaul all knowledge not currently in practice. Whether you accept Novick or Martin’s reading of Dewey, it is exceedingly clear that Dewey wanted to be judged, not just on the abstract truth or falsehood of his theories, but more substantively on the impact those theories had, and the legacy his ideas had in American society.

To this end, Ravitch wrote a cutting criticism of Dewey in her 2000 book: *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, in which, she traced ways that the actual impact of Dewey’s philosophy undermined his central, democratic ideals. In her work, Ravitch successfully demonstrates that Dewey’s work utterly failed to live up to his pragmatic goals. While she offers impressive and useful historical

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47 (Novick, 1988, p. 140)
48 {Martin, 2002 #10@129}
49 (Diane Ravitch, 2000) It's worth noting that this book was published before Ravitch “switched” her ideological orientation on education reform. Now known as one of the fiercest critics of the modern education reform movement, prior to her publishing *The Death and the Life of a Great American System*, Ravitch was an outspoken advocate education reform, choice, and accountability. Later in this project, I will consider her current, realigned positions.
analysis, Ravitch does not analyze Dewey’s actual writings in her critique. Thus it leaves open the question of whether her historical analysis can be read as a substantive textual criticism of Dewey’s writing. I seek to contribute to her historical argument, specifically by tracing the ways the theory and structure of Dewey’s writings contributed to the political failures Ravitch observed. In concurrence with Ravitch, I will argue that that the core elements of Dewey’s progressive theory had a destructive and anti-democratic legacy.

Democratic Pedagogy, Undemocratic Legacy

Dewey’s central contribution to pedagogical theory was his radically child-centered prescriptions for educational practice, which challenged nearly every aspect of how education was being practiced in America at the time. In his 1900 book *The School in Society*, taken from a series of lectures given at the University of Chicago, Dewey criticizes modern schools as being designed so as to develop “the dependency of one mind upon the other”\(^{50}\). Therefore, he argues that everything in the schoolhouse, from the rows of boards, desks, to the method of instruction, denies the fact that children are “intensely distinctive beings”.\(^{51}\) It is clear he aspired to create classroom that recognized children as individuals with entirely distinct learning trajectories. To this end, he concludes his second lecture of the collection with a particularly lofty suggestion:

> Unless culture is to be a superficial polish, a veneering of mahogany over common wood, it surely is this— the growth of imagination in flexibility, in scope, and in sympathy till the life which the individual lives is informed with the life of nature and of society. When nature

\(^{50}\) (Dewey, 1900, p. 32)

\(^{51}\) (Dewey, 1900, p. 33)
and society can live in the schoolroom, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then shall there be an opportunity for this identification, and culture shall be the democratic password.\footnote{(Dewey, 1900, p. 56)}

Dewey’s theory is radical in that he argues educational practices should be “subordinated to the substance of experience.” With this he is not only suggesting all pedagogy must have a pragmatic justification in the real world, but also that all teaching must speak to the particular lived experiences of children, and not the prescriptive requirements decided on by the teacher. Dewey’s argument supports educational initiatives that empower students to realize the full social meaning of their lives. In language somewhat reminiscent of Karl Marx, Dewey argues that educational failures in this regard have manifested themselves as disaffection and a kind of alienation from the self. “How many of the employed are today mere appendages of to the machines they operate! This may be due in part to the machine itself or the regime which lays so much stress upon the products of the machine; but it is certainly due in large part to the fact that the worker has had no opportunity to develop his imagination and his sympathetic insight as to the social and scientific values found in his work.”\footnote{(Dewey, 1900, p. 22)} Despite some similarities in their descriptions of the fully industrialized worker, Dewey, unlike Marx, sees education as a meaningful remedy to the oppression in daily life of factory workers.\footnote{While Dewey Doesn’t ever explicitly cite him, it’s worth noting that this solution to worker alienation was probably first suggested by Adam Smith, in Chapter one of Book five of The Wealth of Nations.}

A Marxist, or other critic, might be tempted to dismiss Dewey’s writings as an idealist fantasy, lacking meaningful application because it fails to , but the historical record shows that a great many education practitioners sought to implement Dewey’s
ideals. In addition to Dewey’s Lab School in Chicago, in the “progressive era” there was an increasing number of experienced-based and child-directed schools all across the country. Diane Ravitch identifies John Dewey as having been the spokesperson for a progressive education movement that sought to and eventually succeeded in using the schools as an instrument of societal reform. Even today, several public schools and academies bear Dewey’s name, while many other’s claim to further his legacy. Unfortunately, precisely what that legacy is a different matter.

As Ravitch shows, Dewey’s legacy in American public education ironically served to undermine democracy by separating and stratifying students along racial and class lines, and ultimately denying most students access to the liberal education necessary to qualify for most types of high paying (professional) work and recognizable social status. Unfortunately, instead making education more accessible for all students, Dewey’s educational theory inspired the creation of progressive, child-centered private schools affordable to a very select group of affluent students, while spurring the establishment of separate, markedly inferior, vocational schools for working class, minority, and other disadvantaged children. These different schools each stemmed from radically different interpretations of Dewey’s philosophy, during the progressive era, they made up one coherent political consensus known as “progressive education”. Their alliance was largely due to their perception of a common enemy: traditional academic curriculum that was currently being taught in schools. Ravitch argues that the progressives’ victory over traditional education was in fact disastrous for most public

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55 (Diane Ravitch, 2000, p. 59)
56 (Diane Ravitch, 2000, p. 57)
57 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 60)
58 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 60)
school students because by attempting to make education custom fit to students based on their different needs, the different “tracks” that emerged formed major barriers to equal opportunity. “Slowly but surely, the meaning of ‘democracy’ was redefined by progressive theorists. Instead of a ladder that stretched from kindergarten to the university and was open to all students, there would be many paths leading to different destinations: the future professional would prepare for college; the future farmer would study agriculture; the future housewife would study household management…”59 I discuss this more in depth toward the end of the chapter, but for now simply take note of how these segregated tracks served to threaten the ideal of equal opportunity was threatened.

While this critique of Dewey’s legacy is compelling, the actual meaning of Dewey’s arguments should not be cast aside due to the errors committed by some of his followers.

As Ravitch repeatedly acknowledges, Dewey never supported school segregation based on class or race, and in fact rejected the entire premise of separate vocational schools as “undemocratic”.60 Dewey made this point in the very first paragraph of *Schools in Society*, where he wrote, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy… Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up can society by any chance be true to itself.”61 This statement is relatively forthright in its condemnation of any and all stratified methods for education. It is clear

59 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 95)
60 (Diane Ravitch, 2000, p. 85)
61 (Dewey, 1900, p. 3)
that Dewey would reject any educational system that fails to fully empower children with their full human potential.

This commitment against structure and stratification led Dewey to reject all, or nearly all, educational systems, thereby inviting further reinterpretation and amendments of his work. As a classic example, Dewey extends his progressive critique to the Socratic approach of “drawing out” pupils’ innate understanding and abilities. While conceding that it is a more sympathetic conceptualization of pedagogy, Dewey argues “It’s difficult to connect the idea of drawing out with the ordinary doings of the child.... he is already running over, spilling over, with activities of all kinds. He is not a purely latent being whom the adult has to approach with great caution and skill in order to gradually draw out some hidden germ of activity”\textsuperscript{62}. This position severely limits an educator’s options. The prescriptive model of teaching is critiqued because its “center(s) of gravity” in education is anywhere but the children themselves.\textsuperscript{63} In this fashion Dewey has radically challenged the traditional curriculum-driven, and Socratic question-driven methods for cultivating knowledge. Having disparaged traditional techniques for teaching, Dewey then leaves educators to try and surmise what he meant by “harnessing” and “directing” the child’s activities. The fact that they chose undemocratic options is partially the fault of Dewey’s all-encompassing critique. In response to Dewey’s broad-brushed criticism of educational practice, Ravitch points out that, that by failing to put forward a particular educational model, Dewey effectively lent the power of his progressive critiques of traditional “liberal” education to people whose agenda ultimately made public education less, rather than more democratic. In the end his inability to

\textsuperscript{62} (Dewey, 1900, p. 37)
\textsuperscript{63} (Dewey, 1900, p. 35)
articulate a specific goal for education undermined his stated purpose for discussing education. While Ravitch does not substantiate her claims with evidence taken from Dewey’s philosophy, or from other works that focus on Dewey, as we have seen from Dewey’s absurdly restrictive pedagogical prohibitions, her argument is further supported by the impossibility of following Dewey’s pedagogical recommendations. Simply put, Dewey’s writings did not immediately appear to have a practicable educational method, so when people did implement his ideas, they were almost exclusively in service of their own agendas. More often than not, those alternate proposals egregiously violated Dewey’s central democratic principles.

The “social efficiency movement” led by California principal David Snedden, is a particularly stark example of the misappropriation of Dewey’s writings. The ideals of this movement depended heavily on Dewey’s claim that education should be tailored to the needs of children, with special attention paid to the role that each child is to play in broader society. 64 Dewey made this claim repeatedly, but it is perhaps best articulated in School and Society, where he posits:

> From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the schooling in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school its isolation from life. When the child gets into the schoolroom he has to put out of his mind the ideas, interests and activities that predominate his neighborhood. 65

It was from passages like this, that the social efficiency movement correctly interpreted Dewey’s a desire for wholesale replacement of traditional curriculum. However, stark ideological differences quickly emerged when Snedden and his allies began to promote

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64 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 60)
65 (Dewey, 1900, p. 67)
separate vocational schools for the majority of students, on the basis that working classes or “producers of utility” had no meaningful use for a liberal education. As discussed above, Dewey balked at the idea of separating students as an absurd violation of most of his central democratic principles. In an argument published in 1914 in “The New Republic”, Dewey forcefully responded to Snedden’s proposal, writing chidingly “It is natural that employers should be desirous of the burden of their preparation to the public tax levy. [And] There is every reason that the community should not allow them to do so”. It is telling that, in responding to Dewey’s scornful criticism, Snedden reacted as if simultaneously surprised and wounded; this is because Snedden liked to portray himself as a promoter of Dewey’s theory. In his retort, also published in 1914 by “The New Republic”, Snedden wrote “We have… reconciled ourselves to the endless misrepresentations of numerous reactionaries and the beneficiaries of vested educational arts and traditions, but to find Dr. Dewey apparently giving aid and comfort to the opponents of broader, richer and more effective program of education… is disappointing.” The structure of his argument makes clear that Snedden thought that the fundamentals of Dewey’s theory supported the vocational school agenda. After finding enduring disagreement, he attempts to shame Dewey with bold, militarist language that draws a stark dichotomy between the traditional practitioners, and Snedden’s “progressive” reformers.

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66 (Labaree, 2010, p. 165)  
67 (Labaree, 2010, p. 166)  
68 (Labaree, 2010, p. 166)
Despite the fact Dewey is regarded as having won a complete rhetorical victory over Snedden, Dewey’s legacy remains one of anti-democratic stratification, because it was Snedden’s interpretation of Dewey’s ideas that began to set education policy. In the context of the progressive era, it did not matter whether or not Snedden completely manufactured his “disappointment” from Dewey’s resistance to his idea; even if he was being earnest, his disbelief was undeniably founded on an extraordinarily selective and poor reading of Dewey’s work, which completely ignored the radical integrationist implications of Dewey’s democratic values. Nor did it matter that Snedden’s responses failed to give any honest treatment to Dewey’s sharpened democratic critique of his policy proposals. These facts now contribute to Dewey’s status as one of the greatest American philosophers, while Snedden is often called names like “the stock pedagogue-philistine”, “half-educated”, “anti-intellectual” and “insane”. However, in terms of the actual historical trajectory of education during the early parts of the 20th century, Snedden is the clear winner of this dispute.

At the time of Dewey and Snedden’s 1914 debate in “The New Republic”, there was a growing consensus in the nation’s school system in favor replacing various traditional school programs with separated, vocational training programs. While many labor voices, such as those of the AFL, were critical of separate education for their working-class constituents (Margret Haley of the Chicago’s Teachers’ Union labeled vocational schools as “scab hatcheries”), the NEA proved extremely excited about the shifts in schooling. The NEA chose Snedden to chair a committee entitled “the

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70 (Labaree, 2010, p. 167)
71 (Labaree, 2010, p. 180)
72 (Murphy, 1992, p. 111)
Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education”, which released a report in 1918, calling for high school curriculums to change in to reflect the mechanization of the workforce. In Dewey-inspired language they argued, “The purpose of democracy is so to organize society that each member may develop his personality primarily through activities designed for the wellbeing of his fellow members and society as a whole”. 73

They then went on to recommend different curricula for various vocational trajectories such those people “likely” to end up with careers in “agricultural, business, clerical, fine arts, and household arts”. 74

In the years after the report was released, a number of school systems aggressively began to implement the committee’s recommendation to increase school tracking and segmentation. Spurred by the onset of recently developed IQ testing, as well as the systemized use of racial and gender discrimination in sorting children vocationally, the NEA commissions’ recommendations spread quickly through out American school system. By the 1920’s, IQ tests were most often used to recommend, and often dictate, children’s academic or vocational “track” and curriculum. 75

In cities across America, there was an increasing variety of curriculum options available to students. As an extreme example, by 1923, Los Angeles offered 18 different curriculum tracks while many cities such as New Orleans and Newton (MA) were not far behind. 76

There are two causal reasons for Dewey’s failure to overcome Snedden’s vocational proposals: the first is material, and the second is political. The material explanation is fairly straightforward. As Dewey himself acknowledged, industry leaders

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73 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 124)
74 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 125)
75 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 160)
76 (Diane Ravitch, 2000b, p. 198)
had a vested interest in using public tax money to complete the sorts of vocational training employers would otherwise have to provide at their own expense.\textsuperscript{77} Given Dewey’s diagnosis of the power and interests of industrialists, the victory of vocational schooling could be attributed to the disproportionate power industrial leaders have in shaping American politics, especially during the progressive era\textsuperscript{78}. The labor movement, which sometimes stood in opposition to industrial interests, actually supported industrialists in this case. This included American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers, whose eventual decision to support vocational schools in part reflected a desire to expand the labor union movement by taking the opportunity to teach union-sympathetic values in industrially oriented schools.\textsuperscript{79} In this way Gompers hoped to turn what Haley had called “Scab Hatcheries” into something like ‘scab prevention centers’. It’s clear that a wide array of material interests lined up with Snedden’s proposal. In the progressive era, labor unions, together with industrial capitalists, were formidable voices in favor of vocational education.

With the NEA, the AFL and big business interests, all backing an increasingly fragmented and discriminatory education system, Dewey found he had to do more than just disavow the education reforms being put forward in his name. As a self-described pragmatic philosopher, Dewey had charged himself with articulating his ideas in some way that helped to overcome this daunting opposition. For reasons already discussed, Dewey felt that, in order to be meaningfully “true”, his thoughts had to be shaped in such a way that they directly and productively confronted the world he lived in. Furthermore, Dewey claimed this was possible, insisting: “No doubt that the practical influence of

\textsuperscript{77} (Labaree, 2010, p. 66)

\textsuperscript{79} (Murphy, 1992, p. 112)
[political philosophies] has often been exaggerated in comparison with the influence of circumstances. But a due measure of efficacy cannot be denied to them on the ground which is sometimes proffered; it cannot be denied on the ground that ideas are without potency." For a further exploration of this claim in contemporary education politics, look to Chapter 3. For now, it is enough to conclude that by Dewey’s own account, he was charged with the task of developing some positive ideology capable of affecting positive political change.

To do this, Dewey tried to stress what was, in his view, the essential ingredient in all meaningfully positive social reform: real democracy. Dewey’s vision of democracy insisted that all people were to be given a complete and richly applicable education. An education that would facilitate everyone’s attainment of any and all social goals including the full exercise of their political, economic, and social rights. In following this argument in Democracy and Education Dewey tried to show that if education policy were to limit certain people’s education to only marketable or socially efficient skills, that would effectively deny their ability to realize their full democratic rights. In his later works, Dewey goes further than those policy recommendations, making clear that he thinks democracy should be a significant factor in all human interactions. “The idea of Democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be fully realized, it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry and religion.” Working within this expansive definition of Democracy, Dewey hoped to highlight the false premises of Snedden’s agenda for education. With this quote, Dewey argued that even if Snedden’s claims were true, and a socially efficient

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80 (Dewey, 1927, p. 8)
81 (Dewey, 1927, p. 143)
curriculum was necessary for individuals to attain prosperity in the modern industrial age, that should signal the need for democratic reforms in the factory, but certainly not anti-democratic reforms in the school.

As I clarified in the opening of this chapter, I see nothing wrong with this argument. Dewey’s objections seem perfectly logical to me: In the face of starkly anti-democratic efforts to segregate the school system along the unethical lines of racist and sexist perceptions of ability, Dewey was right to insist that democratic values be held more dearly than the illusive and rapidly moving target of industrial prosperity. However, in consistently responding with his obstinate insistence about the power of positive Democracy, Dewey missed crucial political opportunities.

In the vast majority of Dewey’s writing, his argument pre-supposes his positive conceptions of democracy. Citing Plato, Dewey radically contends that slavery exists anytime a person doesn’t have a personal stake in the social serviceability of their conduct. With this, Dewey argues that progressive education is necessary to emancipate people from any and all situations where their actions become divorced from their personally understood and crafted role in society. Dewey’s views here directly conflict with more traditional liberal notions that suggest, by allowing individuals to make choices, we can each best assess what we need for ourselves, without an external standard of ‘social sociability”. Dewey made it clear he was completely committed to judging policy solely on the basis of whether or not democratic ends are served. In doing so, he discards two other liberal frameworks that could have supported his case in politically powerful ways.

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82 (Dewey, 1916, p. 98)
The first strategic misstep was Dewey’s radical dispute with the American Constitution, which contributed to his catastrophic failure to appeal to most American constituencies and interest groups. This is largely because Dewey, like other progressives, critiqued the concept of constitutionalism “wholesale.” In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey challenged the very premise of constitutionalism: “Vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range”.\(^{83}\) With this Dewey is in essence opposing doctrinal faith, or fundamentalism of any kind if you find yourself somehow unquestionably committed to something, you are already missing large portions of what you should be considering. Point of Historian William Forbath puts it sharply it in his 2001 article for the Fordham Law Review on welfare rights: “John Dewey [and other’s] critique of the old Constitution extended to constitutionalism in general. Constitutionalism was just what the laissez-faire jurists insisted: a limit on the democracy’s capacity to reconstruct its social environment by redistributive means”.\(^{84}\) Instead of engaging with constitutional concepts, or framing his arguments in terms of Progressive democracy vs. stale, dated order Dewey chose to oppose the American Constitution altogether.

In light of the conservative nature of the progressive-era United States Supreme Court, it’s obvious why a democratic theorist like Dewey opposed institutional constraints of “constitutionalism” which placed prohibitive constraints on nearly everything he hoped to accomplish. Dewey actually defined education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience

\(^{83}\) (Dewey, 1927, p. 212)
\(^{84}\) (Forbath, 2000 p.1830)
and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience,”

85 and to the extent that Dewey was committed to the practice of funding education with public tax dollars, his entire ideology was essentially a democratic attempt to ‘reconstruct’ society by ‘redistributive means’. 86 For the majority of Dewey’s lifetime, the U.S. Supreme Court held federal income tax laws to be unconstitutional, meaning American Constitutionalism stood directly in the way of many of Dewey’s political goals. His opinion of constitutionalism is undoubtedly shaped by that fact. Given this, it is especially understandable that Dewey would be tempted to discard the entire concept of constitutionalism as democratically worthless.

With that said, Dewey’s principled objections to the constitutional framework unnecessarily put him in conflict with the large section of American political discourse that is so often conducted under the auspices of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the “founding father’s” intentions. Instead, Dewey made disparaging and condescending remarks about the U.S.’s constitutional tradition. Repeatedly, Dewey painted Constitutional commitments as irrational “religious” standards that should be discarded in the face of scientific thought. In his discussion of Constitutionalism and the Supreme Court, Dewey scornfully remarked:

If “holy” means that which is not to be approached nor touched, save with ceremonial precautions and by specially anointed officials, then such things are holy in contemporary political life. As supernatural matters have progressively been left high and dry upon a secluded beach, the actuality of religious taboos has more and more gathered about secular institutions, especially those connected with the nationalistic state. Psychiatrists have discovered that one of the commonest causes of mental disturbance is an underlying

85 (Dewey, 1916, pp. 89-90)

86 It is also worth noting that furthermore, Dewey died the year before Justice Earl Warren took the helm at the United States Supreme Court, and just two years before the Warren Court's famous decision in Brown v. Board of Education, meaning he missed most of the courts most progressive education decisions.
fear of which the subject is not aware, but which leads to withdrawal from reality and to unwillingness to think things through.87

Here Dewey directly implies that people who remain committed to constitutional ideals are mentally disturbed. Less directly he suggests similar afflictions influence those with religious convictions. Even if one accepts Dewey’s conclusion that constitutions should be entirely subservient to the democratic will or populist majorities, Dewey’s words here serve to recklessly disparage a vibrant tradition in American politics. Even granting that political tradition of constitutionalism was not worth engaging with, this kind of unnecessarily disrespectful and uncompromising language pushed Dewey’s rhetorical approach far outside of the mainstream of American politics.

While Dewey may have felt strongly that he need not conform to some set of century-old, undemocratic principles, had he been less strident in his opposition to making such appeals, he might have found additional political power under the constitutional framework, just as the democratic pragmatists of the civil rights era ultimately did.88 As the co-authors Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas Pangle (historian and political scientist respectively) conclude, the principles of democratic education had many proponents at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Benjamin Franklin, for instance, insisted, in line with John Locke’s treatise on education, that the nation’s youth must be actively taught in order to function as “politically sophisticated citizens”.89 Thomas Jefferson, whom Dewey often cited,90 was even more sympathetic to the ideal of democratic education, and specifically anticipated Dewey’s arguments about the relationship of education’s to a community’s participation in democracy in the words of

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87 (Dewey, 1927, p. 170)
88 (Yamamoto, 1996, p.821-822)
89 (Pangle, 2000, p.29)
90 (Martin, 2002  p.396-397)
The Pangle’s: “These two themes [participation and education] go hand in hand in Jeffersonian democratic thought- and, we may add, in the kindred thought of John Dewey.”\(^91\) Between Jefferson’s and Franklin’s writings, Dewey could easily have initiated an “originalist” constitutional or political argument in favor of his educational proposals from the founding fathers’ works. More recent constitutional language, such as the “equal protection” and “due process” clauses of the 14\(^{th}\) amendment provide even more constitutional basis for arguing in favor of democratizing education. As Thurgood Marshall demonstrated in his arguments before the court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which these elements of constitutional law can provide tremendously forceful, if inadequate, support for those pursuing the goals of democratic education. This suggests that Dewey’s radical rejection of constitutionalism may have been, tactically speaking, premature. His goals may have benefited politically if he had made a committed effort to incorporating his work within this influential intellectual tradition of constitutionalism.

Dewey’s second, and even more severe miscalculation lay in his underestimation of the intense political force bound up in the myth of the American Dream. Due to his unwavering commitment to democratic principles, Dewey sought to extract all prescriptive liberal values from education, leaving only his uncompromised commitment for child-led intellectual and human growth.

To be clear this is not because Dewey rejects the social value of equal opportunity. Quite the contrary, in an essay on Freedom Dewey writes:

> In short each one is equally an individual and entitled to equal opportunity of development of his own capacities, be they large or small in range. Moreover each has needs of his own, as significant to him as those of others are to them.\(^92\)

\(^91\) (Pangle, 2000, p.27)

\(^92\) (Dewey, 2008, pp.119-120)
As we can see here, in discussing general political and social values, Dewey makes compelling use of the trope of “equal opportunity,” and the by implication the “American Dream”. However, Dewey fundamentally rejects the use of this argument in the context of education, but not because he takes a particular issue with the ideal of upward mobility itself. Rather, on a theoretical level, he insists that it is overly limiting and ultimately corrosive to impose any kind of external standard on curriculum and educational practice. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey concludes his chapter on the “Aims in Education” by writing:

> A True aim is thus opposed at every point to an aim that is imposed upon a process of action from without. The latter is fixed and rigid; it is not a stimulus to intelligence in the given situation, but is an externally dictated order to do such and such things. Instead of connecting directly with present activities it is remote, divorced from the means by which it is to be reached. Instead of suggesting a freer and better balanced activity, it is a limit set to activity. In education the currency of these externally imposed aims is responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish.93

In condemning loyalty to external values within schooling, Dewey makes it clear that he opposes any effort to allow the capitalist goals of economic opportunity to dictate educational practice. Read in the context of Snedden’s proposals, Dewey’s objection allows him to reject the interests of industrialists out of hand. Industrial sponsored vocational schools were clearly motivated by externally defined conceptions of economic efficiency, and were subsequently imposed on the educational process. This is in clear violation of Dewey’s conception of how educational frameworks were supposed to be formed from within the school, and really within the child. However, Dewey’s opposition to “externally dictated order(s)” extends beyond Snedden’s social efficiency movement, to any political principle with a particular educational agenda. By suggesting the political ideals should not have any external agency over education, Dewey’s framework

93 (Dewey, 1900, p. 129)
delegitimizes all externally defined educational aims including those promoting equal opportunity or social mobility.

In line with the rest of the rest of this argument, I am not responding directly to Dewey’s views on this question. Perhaps in a political vacuum insulated from pressure, Dewey’s vision of unencumbered education would, in point of fact, serve in the best interests of children. I’m certainly not arguing that the social aims of liberalism are objectively superior to the child-driven educational endeavors that Dewey argues should take precedence. That would be a technical, rather than political dispute, and its not one I’m prepared to dispute with anyone, least of all an experienced educator such as Dewey. However, history has made that disagreement irrelevant. Dewey’s rejection of political aims such as the mythical “American Dream”, relies on a false choice between politicized and apolitical education. The unsurprising historical reality is that Dewey utterly failed to remove political concerns from educational practice. Whatever you think of Dewey’s staunchly held belief that schooling be motivated only from within, pragmatically speaking, history has proven it to be a politically inadequate proposal.

Snedden was able to outmaneuver Dewey in part by arguing that his proposals could meaningfully expand the economic prospects of children. Taking up the language of opportunity (although notably not equal opportunity), Snedden composed a successful argument for segregation within public schools along racial and gender lines. While Dewey was insisting that the school should be space without external agendas, Snedden and other advocates for industrialized schooling were promising prosperity to all who learned to be both efficient and subservient industrial workers. As intellectual historian Walter Drost put it, in his book *David Sneden and Education for Social Efficiency*,
“Snedden readily admitted that vocational education was not ‘all of education,’ but he argued that the right kind of vocational education at the right time meant opportunity for the rank and file of youth... Opportunity for this class was to be found in the competition of employers for skilled labor. Their ‘mobility’ was the physical mobility of labor attracted by a higher wage from one industry or region to another.” When compared with Dewey’s opposition to all externally imposed purposes for schooling, this account of Snedden’s argument illustrates just how imbalanced the political contest was between the two progressive-era thinkers. While Dewey was preaching that students should be given the chance to shape their own -democratically determined- educational trajectory, Snedden was stressing that his reforms would immediately expand economic prosperity for impoverished students. Regardless of the relative merits of their respective philosophies, in retrospect, it was naïve and destructive for Dewey to forfeit his position in the debate over which social objectives should be given controlling power in schooling. He might have been right to argue that schooling would benefit if it were somehow isolated from external and ideological obligations, but committing to such a position was simply impractical. His politically insulated school was a purely fictional ideal, and never had any chance to make a real impact on people’s lives.

In summary, history has shown that Dewey’s rejection of two of the most widely recognized tenets in American liberalism did not yield democratic results. Despite his alleged pragmatism, Dewey remained doggedly abstract with his educational philosophy. In the end he was then easily bested by the explicit promises of increasing prosperity that were made by the social efficiency movement. Predictably, Dewey failed to construct an ideological vacuum around schools. Dewey wanted to ensure it could be governed purely

94 (Drost, 1967, p.32)
by each child’s particular experiences, insights, and ambitions, but this never happened. Unfortunately for students, Dewey utterly failed to effectively mount challenge Snedden’s anti-democratic initiatives.

The Echoing Strategic Errors of Progressive Educational Doctrines

Dewey’s failures during the progressive era recommend caution for teachers’ unions and others hoping to protect the interests of today’s educators. In the wake of the 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind, there is an emerging reactionary tendency in amongst advocates for public education. An increasing number of teachers’ union officials and scholars sympathetic to teachers’ unions, have begun to argue more and more fiercely that educators should not be held accountable for student performance given the numerous external influences on children’s education. Their arguments highlight the pronounced influence that systemic poverty has on educational outcomes. In holding that educators cannot be asked to overcome the complex systems of structural oppression, some advocates reject the very premise of allowing the aspirational liberal ideal of equal opportunity ideology to influence classroom experience. In light of the history of Dewey and the progressive era education reforms, teachers’ unions should soften these positions if they wish to effectively serve in the interests of their membership.

Analytically, there is one critically important difference between the two arguments I’m comparing here. Dewey’s argument is essentially normative, arguing that economic considerations of equal opportunity should not control classroom. In the present day however, the teachers’ union’s is arguing in positive terms that they cannot
overcome structural poverty, because schooling is simply incapable of making up for the severe inequalities of our society. In terms of their analytical merit, these are two completely unrelated statements, the first we would need to debate in the realm of political theory, and the second we could only resolve with copious amounts of student-and neighborhood-level data. However in terms of their political implications, the two conclusions made by Dewey and the Union are virtually indistinguishable. Once the union has challenged the legitimacy of meritocracy animating purpose for schools they are immediately charged with finding another one. If the best they can come up with is democracy as a “mode of associated living,” then there’s every reason to believe that a modern day social efficiency movement will prey on their rhetorical weakness.

To be clear, in this next section I’m not defending any of the particular education reform initiatives. In general I agree large portions of pro-union criticism, which holds that many aspects of ed-reform are based off willfully ignorant understanding of the constraints that poverty places on students and educators. As a dramatic example, the Bush administration’s bill requires that by this year, 100 percent of all tested students score “proficient” on standardized state tests in reading and math. This requirement may have allowed President Bush to give NCLB its politically compelling name, but the expectation that it could be met within our existing school system is truly absurd, bearing no functional relationship to the observed capabilities of schools systems or educators. The unrealistic nature of this requirement is evident in the skyrocketing “failure” rate of schools. Strikingly, by 2012, 98% of schools in Illinois failed to make what the NCLB terms “Adequate Yearly Progress”95 in student academic performance.96 That year, well

95 (Lawrence, 2012)  
96 (primarily as measured by standardized test scores)
over 90% of schools in Massachusetts were America are failing to meet the original “adequate yearly progress” standards, despite the fact that the state led the country in on national achievement exams. These numbers illustrate the fact that the skyrocketing rates of school failure are largely due to the aggressive, accelerating nature of the obligations written into the federal law. The law mandates serious sanctions follow a failure to perform to these absurd obligations. These measures threaten the jobs of teachers, and the stability of communities, in some cases prompting mass firings and even school closures. It is, of course, both reasonable and prudent that today’s teachers’ unions passionately oppose any measures that establish unrealistic standards for public schools, and then use their contrived failure to meet those standards as a basis for disrupting the power, prestige, and employment of public school teachers. In my personal opinion, protecting against such arbitrary and disruptive measures is one of the most important functions teachers’ unions can perform.

However, pro-union rhetoric has increasingly challenged not just the reasonability of particular education reform proposals, but it has occasionally gone further, attempting to reject the very liberal premises that are often used to justify the today’s efforts at education reform. In response to claims that teachers must take responsibility for student outcomes, some opponents of reform have sought to shield teachers from sanctions by rejecting the legitimacy of liberal ideology in schools. These scholars and activists argue that the aspirational liberal myth of American meritocracy is so morally bankrupt; it should be excluded from rhetoric and discussions policy regarding public education.

Scholars seeking to challenge the viability of liberalism in education politics have a long intellectual tradition to draw upon. Unsurprisingly, the intellectual tradition of

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97 (Ravitch, 2011)
Marxism provides these radical voices with a number of compelling objections to the liberal aspiration that seeks to build meritocracy within contemporary society. For Marxist theorist John Paringer, the obsession of meritocracy in education politics inevitably serves existing class-based systems of social power. In his book, *John Dewey and The Paradox of Liberal Reform*, Paringer argues Dewey and other liberals ultimately sabotage their progressive aims by retaining a naïve faith that the social power of education can overcome existing inequality of opportunity while leaving intact the capitalist, and therefore largely impoverished, society. Paringer rejects the entire approach of “liberal reform, and the limitations which this form of analysis poses for any educational praxis claiming to be progressive. Reform from this position tends to the ‘limited agenda’ of ‘humanizing inhumanity’”. 98 The former educator and education scholar Deborah Meier advances this line of argument with less abstract language, arguing in a blog post of hers that the ideologies of “meritocracy and elitism are related”. 99

Up until recently, this sort of anti-liberal rhetoric existed almost exclusively in academic settings. Previously, teachers’ union leaders like the AFT’s legendary president Albert Shanker were fully committed to struggling with his opponents precisely over which positions best served the ideals of the American Dream of equal opportunity. 100 In recent years, however as anti-union reforms have been implemented aggressively around the country, the response from supporters of the teachers’ unions’ has grown increasingly anti-capitalist. In response to the unreasonable expectations built into NCLB, and other

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98 (Paringer, 1990, p.3)
99 (Meier, 2012 #18)
100 (Richard, 2013 #19)
reform efforts, they have grown more and more hostile to the widely recognized ideology of American liberalism.101

In the wake of the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike, the victorious CTU president Karen Lewis is seen by many pro-union advocates as presenting a refreshingly anti-liberal alternative method for advancing the interests of public education. This is chiefly because, at least in one case, Lewis’s fiery rhetoric and militant anti-reform positions have been shown to be uniquely capable of besting what many teachers’ see is the steadily advancing juggernaut of anti-union reforms. To be clear, Lewis is not of appealing to the mythical American Dream, publishing a ‘Tweet’ in February of this year that stated “Meritocracy = privilege. If I’m going to fight for something that doesn't exist, let it be justice.”102

Despite her radical rhetoric, or perhaps because of it, some more strident voices within the union have come to see Karen Lewis presenting a newly viable direction for the union. In the words of Seattle teacher Jesse Hagopian, Lewis leadership of the CTU’s strike likely “helped our union see that if you wage battle, you can win.”103 In January of this year, Lois Wiener of Jacobin Magazine argued that “reality won’t go away if teachers show that we want to work with politicians who do the bidding of powerful elites who are explicit about their aim to marketize education and turn teaching into contract labor. When you collaborate with people who want to destroy everything you

101 I should acknowledge here that, this shift reflects the fact that, over this period exploding economic inequality has made the “American Dream” seem all the more fictional. It certainly has diminished political appeal in all contexts. However, examining the general social appeal of this trope outside the scope of this project. Rather than denying that this macroscopic trend occurred, I’m noting occurrences k

102 (K. Lewis, 2014)

103 (Gude, 2014, p.30)
stand for, you’re assisting your own destruction.” Wiener went on to name Lewis as the “Model” for true democracy in teachers’ unions.

Increasingly, it is not just marginalized radicals who are applauding Lewis’s combative style. In what is surely a signal of her increasing prominence, Lewis co-wrote an op-ed with national AFT president Randi-Weingarten that ran in the Wall Street Journal, celebrating the victory of the teachers’ strike over Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Given Lewis’s negative view of “meritocracy”, it is unsurprising that the op-ed did not argue the CTU’s victory would help foster equal opportunity, upward mobility, or preserve the American Dream. These tropes appeared nowhere in her piece with Weingarten. In fact, the only mention of Student performance whatsoever was presented in almost (but not quite) Deweyian language, insisting that the process for assessing student success be determined in close proximity to students as possible. They wrote the strike had “changed the conversation from the blaming and shaming of teachers to the promotion of strategies that parents and teachers believe are necessary to help children succeed.”

On the whole the op-ed shifted from Shanker’s tradition of articulating the empowered teachers role in the promises of American. Instead, Weingarten and Lewis more modestly showcased the fact that the CTU had won, and that in doing so they had protected the democratic voice of their members in policy making.

To be clear, I’m not arguing that fighting to preserve democratic voice isn’t a worth the energy, because it certainly is; my point is simply that if the union finds itself increasingly led by voices like Lewis, they run the distinct risk of repeating exactly Dewey’s mistake. His legacy shows us that the value of substantive democracy does not

\[104\] (Weiner, 2014)
speak for itself in American education politics. When compared with the far more widely recognized ideologies of economic prosperity, and upward mobility, the politics of “real democracy” has not performed well for education in the 20th century. As Dewey’s legacy demonstrates, it is not enough to simply argue that education should be an extremely democratic process. Ultimately, the reformers’ will claims that they promote equal opportunity. However flawed those assertions may turn out to be, they not be reversed by appeals to the notion of democratic empowerment.

At this point, a fair objection to this chapter’s argument is that it unfairly conflates the all too academic political theory of Dewey with the passionate localism and communitarian rhetoric of the increasingly radical teachers’ unions. It is notable that Dewey did not offer a prescriptive ideological message for schools outside of his contention that we should do our best to unlock the power of “child driven democracy”. Lewis, and other radical proponents of teachers’ unions have begun to voice their specific objection to “top down” education reform, which is to say reforms that are enforced by measures from outside the community. Modern reformers have encountered a far more specific type of opposition than Snedden did in the New Republic. In recent years, the ideology of localism and community autonomy has increasingly been adopted to combat the advances of the reform movement. Given this, it would be easy to say that the comparison with Dewey is unfair in light of the ideology of community autonomy some in the of Teachers’ unions have adopted. Given that teachers’ unions are fighting for local sovereignty, we cannot assume they are as politically impotent as Dewey’s abstract attachments to democracy tended to be. In this next chapter I discuss the reasons localism has increasingly been selected as a basis for opposing anti-union policy changes. Then, I
will attempt to show how it is also an inadequate and even self-destructive ideology for pro-union advocates to adopt. Given my eventual determination that localism cannot sustainably support the teachers’ unions, the comparison made in this chapter. Like Dewey, the radical elements of the union present no viable ideological alternative to progressive American liberalism.
Chapter 2, The wrong move:

The Self Destructive Ideology of Teachers’ Union Localism

Understandably, today’s teachers’ unions are looking for a place to hide. The current trend in federal policy, starting with No Child Left Behind, and continuing throughout Arne Duncan’s tenure as Secretary of education, has shown the union that Washington D.C. is increasingly hostile for their priorities. While historically they’ve been able to depend on Democrats to protect them from aggressive reforms, we have begun to see the diverging political interests, agendas, and rhetorical have come into sharp relief in recent years. If previously there was any reason to believe that the Democratic Party’s support for NCLB represented only slight turbulence an otherwise stable trajectory of cooperation with unions, President Obama’s actions since taking office have since shown this to be to be a false hope for the union. As part of his first piece of major legislation, Obama created the conditional grant program “Race to The Top” (RTTT). The administration effectively leveraged the 2008 financial crisis against union accomplishments that had been enacted state-level. Essentially, RTTT conditioned much needed federal funding relief for states with education budget shortfalls, forcing states disrupt the existing status quo in a competition to qualify for federal funds. With
this, the new President signaled that the Democratic Party was going to stay the course set by No Child Left Behind, by forcing states to compete for funds by enacting less seniority-friendly teacher evaluations, “value added” testing models, and school choice measures. For the teachers’ unions, and their allies it is much more than a popular saying that Washington DC politics are toxic; it is increasingly apparent how few real friends they have left at the federal level. Given this it makes intuitive sense that pro-union advocates would seek out alternatives to national politics, and attempt to establish narrative that insulates teachers from this increasingly unfriendly section of American politics. This has led their biggest advocates such as the public intellectuals Dianne Ravitch, Deborah Meier, and Alfie Kohn to make arguments in favor of local control. In this chapter I argue that this strategy ultimately poses an egregious and existential threat to the health and viability of the union. By examining the work of three education theorists who favored local control: Michael Foucault, Paulo Friere, and Milton Friedman, this chapter concludes that localism inherently carries with it many of the intractable problems that led teachers’ unions to oppose privatization, charter schools, and other mechanisms of school choice. Pushing for localism is a major strategic mistake on the part of pro-union advocates, suggesting that teachers will instead have to find a way to work within more centrist, liberal American political tropes.

Historically, teachers’ unions were staunch opponents of localism in Education. The sixties, and seventies the union was one of the biggest proponents of state and federal legislation designed to intervene in the affairs educational affairs of municipal and neighborhood education policy matters. Lyndon Johnson’s omnibus education spending bill “ESEA”, and state teacher tenure laws, are both examples of major union-backed
legislation that imposed union friendly constraints on local communities. With respect to racial politics, the teachers’ unions, and especially the AFT fought a wide range of local resistance against segregation efforts, first against whites reluctant to desegregate, and then, more controversially, against community neighborhood schools in the inner-city which black power advocates wanted to bring under community control\textsuperscript{106}. Recently however, the unfriendly national climate has been making some in the teachers’ unions increasingly weary of external influences.

The national success of the education reform movement has turned the union and its allies into proponents of local control. In an interview with The Washington Post in March of 2013, President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Wiengarten condemned Philadelphia’s “unelected board […] that refuses to listen and instead chooses to pursue the destructive agenda of an out-of-state and out-of-touch consulting group to close schools and eliminate public education, then you have to act.”\textsuperscript{107} More

While the committed union localism emerged in response to national reform victories such as NCLB, it would be a mistake to write off this development as purely reactionary phenomenon. The politics of localism have provided teachers’ unions with new sources of political support. There are three main reasons why pro-teachers’ union advocates have increasingly made use of the language of community “insiders” vs. “outsiders”. Most simply, it can be an emotionally appealing trope when used to actively oppose certain externally imposed standards and testing regimes, as well as fight external mandates for school closing and staff changes. In other contexts, local control rhetoric also allows the union and its allies to align with new political machines, including

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{106} (Kahlenberg, 2013, 93-94)
\textsuperscript{107} (Strauss, 2013)
\end{footnotesize}
populist conservatives such as the Tea Party, to oppose what they both see as a federal
government “overreach”. Finally, the argument against nationally standardized education
has a rich tradition in late-twentieth century social theory and leftist criticism. This is
especially apparent with the theorists Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire who have added
to Dewey’s voice in decrying authoritarian regimes of education, especially those that are
produced or spread by broader social structures of oppression. Union advocates hope that
by aligning with a range of these views, they will be able to offer support to struggling
unions, faced with what they see as increasingly draconian external standards and
regulations.

However even if successful, the attempt to ‘localize’ education debates is will
prove a destructive strategy for pro-union activists, chiefly because the dispersal of
political control to smaller and smaller districts and individual schools will substantively
undermine the material negotiating power of teachers’ unions. By comparing the writings
of social theorists Foucault and Freire with the economist, and education reform
advocate, Milton Friedman, surprising similarities emerge. Most centrally, each thinker
has emphatically argued local control. In light of this relationship, it will be clear that,
whatever their intentions, those who use rhetorical arguments to localize power in
education, will either fail to do so, or actually serve to further isolate and cripple the
power of public teachers’ unions. As these unions, and their allies, continue to push to
localize education politics in an attempt to oppose standardization and new regimes of
educator “accountability,” they run the risk that the process of localization could
seriously endanger union power in essentially the same way that pro-choice proposals do.
For the union, it doesn’t actually matter much if the micro community exactly the same
fashion that Friedman hoped to with notoriously anti-union proposals for privatization schools. I hold that, by fleeing from progressive liberalism to the politics of localism, radical opponents of education reform are actually doing Friedman’s work for him.

The three main thinkers compared in this chapter have been chosen because they each provide commonly cited, and at times compelling, responses to the ideological framework of progressive liberalism. All three have extensive and well known theories pertaining to education and education policy, and while they by no means summarize the full spectrum of educational thought, they do each offer interesting and informative points of disagreement with the conclusions advanced in this project. Paulo Freire, and Foucault offer distinct, but largely harmonious criticisms of progressive liberalism in an educational context. While Foucault and Freire attack progressive liberalism from the left, Friedman argues that public education will always fail if it abandons the competition and efficiency provided by a free market. The most compelling and challenging conclusion offered by each of these authors is that, if managed from the top down, any attempt to reform education for the benefit of disadvantaged students will ultimately be self-defeating.

The curious appeal of 21st century localism

Perhaps one reason the union sees localism as a viable political framework, is that especially in contrast to Dewey’s comparatively dry democratic theory, localism can bring emotional firepower to those participating in education debates. It is easy to see that education politics debates are saturated with nasty, jarringly personal attacks. On May 25, 2013, in the wake of the ousting of California principal Irma Cobain at the hands of Ben Austin and his organization “Parent Revolution,” Dianne Ravitch posted on her blog
“Here is my lifelong wish for [Ben Austin]. Ben, every day when you wake up, you should think of Irma Cobian. When you look in the mirror, think Irma Cobian. Your last thought every night should be Irma Cobian. Ben, you ruined the life of a good person for filthy lucre. Never forget her. She should be on your conscience—if you have one—forever.”^{108} Ben Austin’s Los Angelus organization has less than 30 employees,^{109} (funding dollars?) but this episode, and the attention from Ravitch led to national press attention. In an interview with Politico, Ben Austin replied to Ravitch’s (and others’) vitriol saying “It would be funny if [the instigators] were bloggers sitting around in their underwear in tin-foil hats, but these are thought leaders in the field.”^{110} While this statement is more than a little ironic, his argument does point to a somewhat distinctive characteristic of education politics: on all sides, and at every level of prestige, the rhetoric of education is saturated with ugly and exceedingly personal attacks. While nasty Internet comments are by no means unique to discussions of education policy, in other contexts the accusations that opponents are “loathsome,” “evil,” “hell-bound,” “witches” are usually excluded from the mainstream. Whereas, in education politics, even the most prominent voices can be found hurling those sorts accusations and others on a shockingly regular basis^{111}.

In large part, the distinctively personal character of education debates can be explained by the local and personal nature of education politics. There simply is no way to describe education policy that does not immediately call to mind images of particular districts, and schools, individual educators, and, most importantly, children. Due to the

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^{108} (Ravitch, 2013)  
^{109} (“Parent Revolution”, 2014)  
^{110} (Simon, 2013)  
^{111} (Simon, 2013)
emotional power of these images, there is an ever-present temptation to make all education politics local, to describe policy solutions on a school-by-school basis, to anecdotally showcase the triumphs and failures of individual educators and students. It is likely because of this that Ravitch publicly implores Austin: “Ben, every day when you wake up, you should think of Irma Cobian.” This sort of rhetoric plays on the localized theme in education politics, and often appears attractive to activists looking to employ emotional appeals to support the teachers’ union.

In addition to creating a window for a particular brand emotionally charged personal attacks, the focus on local control in education debates appears to substantially widen the range of potential allies available to the teachers’ union and its advocates. Deborah Meier, a committed pro-union advocate, offers one such bipartisan argument in her book: *Many Children Left Behind: How No Child Left Behind is Damaging Our Children and Our School*:

> A politically selected panel of experts will determine which programs have met the test - immediately ruling out locally designed ones- of “scientific reliability”. New York City was thus obliged to change the way 1.2 million children were being taught to read because the federal Department of Education disproved of its program. Even if it were possible to claim that one pedagogy was superior to another, in the field of education, as in the field of medicine, one solution does not fit all. Depending on the other patient characteristics a good doctor would vary the treatment plan; so it is with a good teacher. The very definition of what constitutes an educated person is now dictated by federal legislation. A well-educated person is one who scores high on standardized math and reading tests. And ergo a good school is one that either has very high-test scores or is moving toward them at a prescribed rate of improvement.\(^\text{112}\)

Meier’s point here has interesting parallels with conservative arguments in favor of states’ rights. It’s clear that Meier thinks that local communities should have greater control over curriculum, as well more authority in education policy more generally. In countering President Bush’s No Child Left Behind bill, Meier draws on several time-

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\(^{112}\) (Meier, 2004, p.67)
honored states-rights arguments. She implies corruption and inefficiency plague the domineering federal government, while also hailing the resilient wisdom stored in local traditions and policies. Interestingly, in the past, a much more conservative has advanced this argument or ‘right-wing’ voices than Meier is generally associated with. While it would be wildly unfair to equate the arguments, it nonetheless seems worth noting that the key concepts in Meier’s argument are present in numerous historical examples of reactionary responses to federal legislation. Most famously these kinds of points were made in response to forced de-segregation, Roe v. Wade, and federal legislation for gun control. These areas of agreement are surprising and deserve to be expanded upon and analyzed.

Unlike the consistently polarized nature of much of the rest of American Politics that often feels frozen in place, the basic structure of debates and coalitions in education politics change rapidly and unpredictably. Recent debates over the Common Core State Standards Initiative (usually shortened to Common Core or CC) have further revealed chaotic intellectual and political fault lines that make up contemporary education debates. Common Core’s (CC’s) proponents, cover a wide range of the national and state-level elected officials who, despite their other differences, see the initiative as a “common sense” approach to ensuring the implementation of “best practices” across the different states’ education systems, eliminating the chaos left by divergent state curriculums. The mission statement for the Common Core State standards Initiative reads “The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them.” Both President Obama and his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have repeatedly celebrated
it the wide range of states that adopted it. Opponents of this initiative describe CC as a centralization of federal power in education, placing key decisions about curriculum further away from the classroom, creating additional layers of bureaucracy in an already over-encumbered education system, and making teachers and students accountable to standards that local communities had virtually no say in shaping. Those opposed to CC are at least as ideologically diverse as those who support the initiative, with a remarkably wide range of outspoken opponents, each stressing a different part of this narrative. Predictably, conservative opponents of President Obama have opposed this initiative calling it a ‘federal takeover of education’.

One such columnist, George Will wrote in the Washington Post:

> Leave aside the abundant, fierce, often learned and frequently convincing criticisms of the writing, literature and mathematics standards. Even satisfactory national standards must extinguish federalism’s creativity: At any time, it is more likely there will be half a dozen innovative governors than one creative federal education bureaucracy. And the mistakes made by top-down federal reforms are continental mistakes.¹¹³

(Emphasis is most certainly his, as I have no grudge against the rest of North America).

Will’s position on Common Core, is unyielding, but it should not be all that surprising. These celebrations of states rights, and the related critique of Washington’s bogged-down inefficiency are fairly predictable coming from the reliably right-wing columnist George Will, given the fact, discussed above, that these arguments represent time honored fixtures of America’s conservative movement. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that George Will relates his objections to the interstate curriculum standardization to problems with nationalizing health care policy (‘Obamacare’), and other issues regarding of the “general progressive agenda of centralization and uniformity.” Will is joined by the Conservative political action committee (PAC): “The

¹¹³ (Will, 2014)
Eagle Forum” which is run by anti-feminist activist Phyllis Schlafly. Schlafly, who is best known for leading a successful efforts to thwart the Equal Rights Ammendment to the US constitution, wrote a column on her forum on October 10, 2012 in which she argued “‘Obama Core” which is what she calls Common Core, “ought to be held unconstitutional because the federal government has no power over education under the Constitution. Furthermore, ‘Obama Core’ is unlawful since it violates federal laws that specifically prohibit the federal government from having any say so over curriculum or tests.”

While it might appear natural that committed conservatives like Will and Schaffly are prepared to passionately resist President Obama from the platform of State’s rights, it is much more striking that these arguments have also been advanced by prominent pro-union advocates from the distant Left. Very similar statements can be found in Meier’s work, which repeatedly asserts that common core is a “radical change in our constitutional division of powers.” Further arguing that “There are a number of problems with our Constitution, but eliminating local control over the education of minors is not one of them” Schlafly and Meier likely disagree as to whether “there are a number of problems with” the US constitution, and even if they did not, they would surely prove unable to with one another which passages were problematic. This makes their concurrence on the unconstitutionality of Common Core an even more striking example of how a push for local-control can surface new agreements between groups in education.

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114 (Schlafly, 2012)
115 (Meier, 2009)
politics like pro-union advocates and far right PAC’s that can usually be assumed to be at odds with one another.\textsuperscript{116}

The impetus for union support for local control can be summarized in fairly simple terms: it is convenient. Teachers’ feel they needed a concrete ideological reason to oppose federal accountability measures. Localism was one strategy they chose, largely because it served a number of the unions needs simultaneously. Most ambitiously, the new framework of localism has the potential to transcend liberal discourse that has grown hostile to the union in recent years. More concretely, local control while solving many of the national accountability traps left that have been left in our recent policy debates over upward mobility obsessed liberal political discourse. While I do not argue that the writings of Foucault and Freire themselves compelled this change, the texts are discussed here because they illuminate specific things about how and the opportunities and costs to the union of advocating for localism in education.

The rest of this chapter examines the theoretical framework which supports the emerging localism in left wing education politics, and subsequently assesses the implications of this shift. Going forward I will present the works of social theorists Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire in terms of currently ongoing education policy debates over federal vs. local control. I will show how they can both be considered important leftist voices for localized education, tracing out the parts of their argument that are particularly attractive to supporters of teachers unions who are hoping to resist adverse

\textsuperscript{116} As a result of her work fighting against equal rights, Schlafly has, and deserves to have, a largely foul reputation. In light of this, I feel compelled to clarify that I am not arguing for the clearly absurd notion that whenever Schlafly’s advocates for something it’s necessarily wrong, or even that having a coalitional relationship with the far-right around standards would be automatically toxic for the union. Instead I am quite simply noting the impressive capacity of local-control politics to create areas of agreement where they would likely have been impossible in the context of traditional federal politics.
changes from federal bureaucrats and other “outsiders”. However, after synthesizing the union’s material interests localism with the theorists Foucault and Friere, the end of this chapter will identify a critical flaw in the emerging pro-localism strategy. Strikingly, these critics’ arguments against top-down control mirrors the work of Milton Friedman in the infamously anti-union 1953 article “The Role of Government in Education” which founded the American voucher movement. The comparison yields daunting symmetries between these three arguments, revealing that each of the three writers ultimately pose many of the same severe threats for the long-term power and viability of the teachers union. In light of the problems that localized education politics poses for collective bargaining, pro-union advocates should reject Freire and Foucault’s local politics with much of the same vehement opposition that they have used to combat Friedman’s voucher proposals. Put simply, localism is a fundamentally toxic political ideology for the power of teachers’ unions, regardless of if it comes out of neo-liberal or anti-capitalist intellectual traditions; unions can find no real sanctuary in the ideology localism.

**Michel Foucault:**

The French social theorist Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is a forceful critic of institutionalized power in education. He is known for diagnosing important trends in discipline, and power within schools, prisons, asylums, and society more broadly. For Foucault, the essential social function of educational institutions is to repress, and aggressively regulate the space of allowable behavior, in ways that are consistently in the interests of existing social norms and power structures.

As a result of this, it is quite easy to extrapolate what Foucault would have to say about modern efforts at standards-based education reform: when legislators and education
activists seek to correct systemic inequities with targeted reforms based on supposedly objective measures of student performance, Foucault would immediately raise at least two theoretically related objections. The first and most fundamental one would be offered against inherent assumption that is built into the educational reform movement, that by conveying socially agreed-upon knowledge, institutions can have an emancipatory effect on subjugated people. Secondly, Foucault would strongly oppose the assertion that, by forcibly instituting a system of standardized curricular practices, competitive, high-stakes testing, and individual and group-based performance review, disadvantaged students will become more empowered over time. On the contrary Foucault’s work writes off these efforts and claims as tragically ironic because he argues that it was only by the process of institutionalizing, standardizing, and ultimately “disciplining” knowledge that that the most effective modern forms of repression and disempowerment have been solidified. In order to discuss how these objections interact with, and criticize existing political and educational efforts, it is first necessary to illustrate how the argument is constructed in Foucault’s work so that we can carefully trace where it leads.

Foucault’s critique of reform efforts radically challenges the entire premise of schools, and immediately seeks to deinstitutionalize each and every function of public education. In Foucault’s lectures on Knowledge/Power he calls for an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” With this Foucault intends to directly combat the practice institutionally silencing “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”\textsuperscript{117} Specifically subjugated knowledges refer here to the thoughts and Foucault is referring to include the

\textsuperscript{117} (Foucault, 1980, p.82)
thoughts and personal accounts of those deemed ‘delinquent’ by society and put into asylums, but Foucault’s theoretical critique clearly extends much more broadly to all “knowledges” which have been systematically excluded from standardized discourse. While this criticism paints standardized testing, and national curriculum efforts in a negative light, unfortunately for teachers, this critique of hierarchical and preferred knowledge deconstructs, also seeks to eliminate, the entire function of institutionalized education. Far and away the most central role that teachers play is guiding curriculum, by including some ‘knowledges’ and excluding others. This casts the teachers in the same repressive role they hope to cast anti-union reformers.

Foucault’s work presents an exceedingly radical objection to the role that educators play with their students. Foucault’s theory seeks to strip teachers of the power to eliminate certain modes of thought, that individual is no longer a teacher in any recognizable, distinct, or employable sense. Even Dewey, who was harshly critical of most traditional forms of curriculum, insisted that teachers be empowered with discretion to employ the scientific method so as to guide the learning experience.118 He repeatedly described it as their “essential function”.119 Foucault on the other hand, specifically objects to this use of the scientific method, arguing that scientific methodology is the central mechanism of the modern regime of social repression120.

This criticism of hierarchical knowledge is entirely incompatible with the agenda and needs of the teachers’ union. Even if the teaching profession continued to exist, Foucault’s deconstruction of disciplined knowledge would leave teachers with no hierarchical position from which to exercise their particular skill set, or (most

118 (Dewey, 1916 p.224)
119 (Paringer, 1990, p.72)
120 (Foucault, 1980, p.84)
problematically for the union) bargain collectively. This critical understanding of knowledge, central to Foucault’s work, has no place in a coalition with the teachers’ union. This means that normatively speaking, advocates for the teachers’ unions, who hope to advance the cause of teachers, must immediately abandon the idea that they will be able to accept Foucault’s writing wholesale.

Foucault further removes himself from contemporary political conversation by explicitly rejecting the notion of all varieties of educational “reformism”. Foucault implores us to “remain honest” and hold out for systemic and de-institutionalizing change. In the below passage, taken from an interview with “The Partisan Review” Foucault critiques proponents of seminar-style college classes as engaged in a deceitful rendering of an inherently repressive act.

Foucault: Reformism, in the end, is the therapy for symptoms… The reformists preferred the seminar system because there freedom is respected: the professor no longer imposes his ideas and the student has the right to speak. Of course, but don’t you think that a professor who takes charge of students at the beginning of the year, makes them work in small groups, invites them to enter his own work shares with them his own problems and methods. Don’t you think that students coming out of this seminar will be even more twisted than if they had simply attended a series of lectures? {Simon, 1971 #25@199}^{121}

From this it is easy to see why the teachers’ union cannot fully accept Foucault’s critique of education reform. If applied faithfully, Foucault’s theories pose an existential threat to the teaching profession. By arguing against reform, Foucault is actually recommending something fundamentally antithetical to the teachers’ union: a complete overhaul of education that would completely eliminate the “tyrannical” or repressive role of the educator.

At times, however, Foucault seems like an especially appropriate theorist to use against newer educational reform policies, especially those that have promoted increasing

^{121} {Simon, 1971 #1}
standardization and routinization of the curriculum. In *Discipline and Punish* Michael Foucault recounts the development of regimentation in Jesuit education in the 18th century. It begins as follows:

The general form was that of war and rivalry; work apprenticeship and classification were carried out in the form of the joust, through the confrontation of the two armies; the contribution of each pupil was inscribed in this general duel; it contributed to the victory or defeat of the whole camp; and the pupils were assigned a place that corresponded to the function of each individual as a combatant in the unitary group.122

As the students were disciplined, a new regiment emerged:

Gradually - but especially after 1762 - the educational space unfolds; the class becomes homogeneous, it is no longer made up of individual elements arranged side by side under the master’s eye. In the eighteenth century ‘rank’ begins to define the great form of distribution of individuals in the educational order: rows or ranks of pupils in the class, corridors, courtyards; rank attributed to each pupil in the class; rank attributed to each pupil at the end of each task and each examination; the rank he obtains from week to week, month to month, year to year, an alignment of age groups, one after another; a succession of subjects taught and questions treated.123

For Foucault, it is by this exact process of progressive regimentation that members of society are identified, categorized and subsequently repressed by systemic institutional power. There’s a relatively obvious parallel between Foucault’s history of assessment and competitive rankings in 18th century Jesuit colleges, and modern education reform initiatives that depend on standardized testing, individualized “tracking” of students’ standardized test scores over time. Foucault argued that this individualization and regimentation at Jesuit colleges was a necessary part of the process of subtly expanding repressive power. It is clear from his argument that Foucault would consider a system that tracked individual student’s performances on standardized testing to be a part this long-term expansion of increasingly regimented behavior and suffocating social power.

122 (Foucault, 1975, p.146)
123 (Foucault, 1961, p.146-147)
Due to this criticism, it seems viable for the teachers’ union use Foulcault’s theory to reject high stakes standardized testing.

This may serve to articulate some of the unions concerns, but it does not represent a coherent ideological framework for the teachers unions. While Foucault identifies an important perspective with respect to expanding testing the education system, on its own, this critique fails to provide any viable support for the teachers’ union, because it serves as an identical critique for any and all alternative metrics for measuring and justifying educational performance. With the above passage, Foucault critiques not only standardized testing, but also all uses of student and teacher-level data to assess and adjust pedagogical strategies. The union may be wary of “high stakes” standardized testing, but in the above passages of *Discipline and Punishment* Foucault makes an equally strong critique all testing, and of educators tracking and regulating individualized behavior tracking in any way. After all the Jesuit students are being repressed by the “watchful eye of the master,” meaning that is actually the teachers’ behavior which actively oppressing people Foucault’s writing leaves the unions with almost no grounds to differentiate behavioral regulation that the union hates, and the behavioral regulation that the union members use as key components of their job.

Up until this point, my argument for excluding Foucaultian thought as a basis for political action within the union, has more or less exactly mirrored reasoning for excluding Marxist thought from union politics. Both Foucault and Marx are critical of reformist efforts that redress “symptoms” rather than causes, and both men see
educational institutions as complicit in, or in the case of Foucault, the very substance of, broader regimes of oppression. This means that, read absolutely, neither thinker leaves room for the teachers’ union to politically defend their claim that public education is a worthwhile expenditure. It should be noted that neither theorist would have been intrigued, let alone troubled, by my efforts to examine their usefulness to existing political power structures. If anything they would take this finding that their writing cannot be “co-opted” by existing political machinery as an important sign that their theories might have merit. Nonetheless, it seems very clear that there is little chance that current powers of the institutional left could make a wholesale adoption of either Marx or Foucault.

However, Foucault’s work requires a more nuanced analysis than Marx’s, because, despite the radical nature of his broader theory, Foucault unlike, Marx, presents particular critique of the intersection of pedagogy and power that could still be used support the Union’s political positions. In Foucault’s theory, the fundamentalism of Marxist historical materialism gives way to a more broad-based understanding of power. Rather than focusing exclusively on the forces of capitalism, Foucault is actively engaged in a criticism of the myriad ways society represses people. Accordingly, Foucault forcefully advocates resistance to a large number of normative regimes. While it remains clear teachers’ unions could not adopt his entire theory, merit, but despite this, it is also insufficient to write off Foucault as simply a radical, with nothing to add to the modern politics of education.

Unlike his criticism of standardization in education, Foucault’s theory of localism provides the teachers’ unions with a basis for distinguishing themselves from the reforms
they hope to oppose. For example, Foucault presents a compelling critique of how macroscopic power systems insert themselves into more local context in an ever more specified attempt to control people’s lives. In responding to Maxist theory of global revolution Foucault says:

You wonder if a global society could, function without a general discourse on the basis of such divergent and dispersed experiences… We readily believe that the least we can expect of experiences, actions, and strategies is that they take into account the "whole of society." This seems absolutely essential for their existence. But I believe that this is asking a great deal, that it means imposing impossible conditions on our actions because this notion functions in a manner that prohibits the actualization, success, and perpetuation of these projects. “The whole of society” is precisely that which should not be considered except as something to be destroyed. And then, we can only hope that it will never exist again. 124

Here Foucault is criticizing any and all politics that seeks to systematize a macroscopic theory of change. The geographic character of this criticism is crucial for the teachers union. Here, for the first time, Foucault provides a platform with which to differentiate between some types of regulatory behavior and others, allowing the union to put forward targeted criticism against aggressive “outside” and “top-down” reforms. Without this crucial clause, Foucault’s writings were akin to the bluntest of possible instruments for the union, unusable, as they could not discriminate between what to deconstruct, and what to leave intact. Foucault’s opposition to “society-wide” systems of change provides a mechanism that doesn’t equally disrupt all existing educational institutions and policies. With localism, Foucault offers a means to differentiate between nationally imposed reforms, such as No Child Left Behind, and education’s largely decentralized status quo, which the union hopes to largely preserve in the face of national reforms.

Localism is an indispensable element in virtually any of pro-union adoption of Foucault’s framework. It is only by opposing “outside” influence that the teachers union

124(Foucault, 1971, pp.232-233)
can differentiate between the standardized tests they oppose and the quizzes, exams, and behavioral standards that have nearly always been a key part of the teaching profession. Only by pointing to the oppressive scope of national policy can they argue against “common core” curriculum, without arguing against curriculum in general. While Foucault criticizes all structures of pedagogy, he has a particular objection with larger power structures forcibly intervening with pedagogy at a school and individual level. In this way, Foucault’s commitment to localism is the passcode that enables pro-union advocates to extract politically useful meaning from his broadly anti-institutional criticism.

With this established, I now turn to another commonly cited alternative to liberalism: Paulo Freire. The argument I make is similar, and further illustrates the ways in which localism is an essential ideology for those within the Union’s who wish to reject American liberalism in their politics.

**Paulo Freire**

Paulo Freire’s 1970 magnum opus “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” presents many of the same problems for teachers’ unions as Foucault’s works. While the text is filled a cutting line of argument, which effectively assaulsts the core assumptions and theory to modern-day school reform efforts, the text doesn’t offer much shelter for existing power structures such as teachers’ unions. Just as was the case with Foucault, it is clear Freire would despise the new standardized testing regimes, and aggressive “top down” reforms, but most of his writing isn’t any friendlier to union policies and priorities. Accordingly, for pro-union advocates hoping to incorporate Freire’s ideas and rhetoric into a pro-union agenda, localism once again is an essential element of Freire education theory. Only by
incorporating Freire’s biting criticism of education strategies that are controlled outside of the community, can his views possibly advance the union’s cause.

Before I begin to examine the political viability of Freire’s work within the confines of my framework, I must first clarify and qualify the limited scope of this inquiry. This chapter engages in only a highly indirect inquiry with respect to Freire’s work. I am examining the political usefulness of his writing for a particular political sphere: contemporary American politics. Fundamentally, this judges Freire according to criterion he himself made no claim to satisfy. To the contrary, Freire wrote that for all productive thinking about education politics, “the fundamental objective is to fight alongside the people for the recovery of the people's stolen humanity, not to 'win the people over’ to their side. Such a phrase does not belong in the vocabulary of revolutionary leaders, but in that of the oppressor. The revolutionary's role is to liberate, and be liberated, with the people—not to win them over.”

In other words, Paulo Freire would despise the central question of my thesis, as it can easily be restated as what ideological frameworks exist to politically advance and thereby “win over” people to the side of particular stakeholders. Accordingly, it seems obvious that he would wholly reject this project’s central question as destructive and not worth pursuing. There isn’t any intention to respond directly to this criticism. In my choice of discipline and topic, I have already signaled a political disposition that has led me to reject, and overlook these objections raised by Freire, and others like him, who would question whether learning about in order to within a standard political framework

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125 (Freire, 1968, pp. 94-95)
126 Alternatively, he may well have objected to the characterization that he despises the inquiry by saying that: such a simple, par for the course, overly prevalent question is altogether too common and predictable to be worth the energy to required to despise it.
can ever be more than simply re-creative, oppressive, or self-defeating. I am not stopping to defend against this theoretical objection. Defending my choice of inquiry, that is the choice to analyze possible coalitional solutions from within a framework of already institutionalized power, would amount to defending the merit of large sections of the disciplines of political science and intellectual history. Obviously, given the space and time frameworks that circumscribe this project, I must avoid this task. Having declined to engage Freire on his own critical terms, it is nonetheless revealing to examine the ways his work might prove useful or productive to the cause of teachers’ unions.

One method that appears to hold particular promise for those looking to oppose aggressive reforms is Freire’s description and critique of the “banking theory of education”. Freire defines this model as a method of teaching that “turns students into containers or “receptacles” waiting to be filled. The more completely a teacher fills said receptacle, the better the teacher, the more meekly the containers accept the deposits, the better students they are.”\(^\text{127}\) It’s clear that this definition of ‘banking education’ includes the standardized curriculum and examination structure that has driven many recent reform efforts. Freire then goes on to condemn this model of education in an unyielding tone “those seeking an education of liberation must abandon the concept of banking education wholesale. Instead choosing an educational mode that humanizes people by recognizing universal consciousness. Focusing on ‘cognition’ not information transfers.”\(^\text{128}\) His framework clearly and intentionally excludes any kind of reform effort built that is around standards and testing regiments, creating an opportunity for pro-union

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\(^{127}\) (Freire, 1968, p. 172)  
\(^{128}\) (Freire, 1968, p. 179)
voices to incorporate Freire’s work in their efforts to oppose certain kinds of education reform.

However, just as with Foucault’s work, the radical nature of Freire’s writing quickly presents challenges to those hoping to advance union priorities. Teachers are by no means spared this biting critique of deposit-based education. Freire writes, “There are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize”\textsuperscript{129}. On its face this is exactly the sort of “teacher bashing” the union is always policing against. The argument here is not to argue that simply because Freire said there are many bad teachers who practice “banking education” the whole of his theory is spoiled for unions, but instead to show that Freire offers precious little basis with which to differentiate status quo and a more hierarchical education. With passages such as the above, Freire signals, he thinks the status quo is already stiflingly oppressive. It immediately weakens the union’s negotiating position if they accept arguments in which they are cast as agents of “dehumanization”. More to the point, it is not clear how union advocate’s hope to distinguish their own agenda with that of the reformers they oppose.

Intuitively speaking, one possible solution would be to argue that while all pedagogies can be oppressive, the status quo is somehow marginally better than the high stakes testing and standards based reforms, but that ‘lesser of two evils’ strategy is a dead end within Freire’s framework. Like Foucault’s body of work, \textit{The Pedagogy of the Oppressed} harshly condemns reformism. His work clearly opposes efforts to preserve a corrupt and oppressive status quo, even if such efforts are executed in the name of protecting the oppressed people. In what appears to be a thinly veiled criticism of Lenin’s

\textsuperscript{129} (Freire, 1968, p. 175)
theory of the “vanguard class” Freire writes. “There can be no ‘lag period’ between revolutionary action and revolutionary pedagogy of the oppressed. From the very inception of a liberation movement, it must cast aside the very framework of oppressor/opressed.”¹³⁰ On numerous occasions Freire predicts that more piecemeal efforts will always result in destructive and oppressive failures. This, Freire contends, is because “Human existence cannot be silence, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only with true words with which men and women change the world.”¹³¹ For Freire, all reformist arguments are ‘false words’ as opposed to revolutionary words that have the potential to ‘change the world’.

Just as is the case with Foucault, localism emerges as the only viable way for the union to adapt the writings of Freire into useful political talking points. By using Freire’s criticism of reform movements led by oppressors, teachers’ unions can potentially resist federal and state intervention in community schools. “It is necessary to put trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason.”¹³² This means leaving oppressed communities’ ample room to set their own education policy without intervention from entrenched and oppressive political power structures such as state and federal governments. To the extent that Unions can claim their members of the local communities they teach in, that generates a possible means to legitimize their role in the conversation. Only after pro-union advocates accept a position in favor of localism, they can use that position to differentiate between different problematic policies, and can use Freire’s framework as a whole to oppose aggressive top-down reform.

¹³⁰ (Freire, 1968 p. 160)
¹³¹ (Freire, 1968, p. 76)
¹³² (Freire, 1970, p. 53)
Those Union advocates who are attempting to flee the problematic ideological tradition of American liberalism, and more specifically the aggressive, anti-union reforms that it has produced in recent years, are often compelled to adopt localism as the centerpiece of their new, anti-liberal ideology. As these inquiries into the work of both Friedman and Freire have shown, localism is the essential ingredient for unions, in adapting many anti-liberal frameworks to critique modern education reform. As a comparative device, I now examine the works Milton Friedman of a fiercely anti-union thinker, solidly within the liberal tradition

**Milton Friedman**

Milton Friedman, who is one of the most famous economists of the 20th century, is notorious for his education reform proposals that would use vouchers to transform, and in effect, privatize America’s public education system. His proposal, which was introduced in a 1955 essay “The Role of Government in Education,” calls to largely limit government involvement in education to providing a minimal level of financing, while ceding most of the administrative and decision making power to the forces of choice in the free market. Specifically Friedman that suggests that:

Governments could require a minimum level of education which they could finance by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on "approved" educational services. Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum on purchasing educational services from an "approved" institution of their own choice. The educational services could be rendered by private enterprises operated for profit, or by non-profit institutions of various kinds. The role of the government would be limited to assuring that the schools met certain minimum standards such as the inclusion of a minimum common content in their programs, much as it now inspects restaurants to assure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards.  

Friedman's groundbreaking proposal, and related arguments in favor of “consumer” autonomy in education came to be known as the “school choice” movement.

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133 (Friedman, 1955) The document I used was published online, without page numbers. Refer to the URL in the bibliography for more context for these quotes.
Charter schools, private school tax credits, and inter-district public-school choice, are all theoretically related proposals, whose authors and advocates often note their indebtedness to Friedman. Lyndsey Burke at The Heritage foundation, which is a major proponent of school choice proposals, calls Friedman the “pioneer” of school choice movement, crediting him with initiating a wide variety of these choice initiatives that are being implemented across the country.

Today, we have a growing number of innovative school choice options—charters, vouchers, tax credits, online learning, and education savings accounts, to name a few. These options were conceived in the mind of Friedman and are being brought to life by reform-oriented governors and legislators across the country. While these reforms have been a long time in the making, Friedman would no doubt be proud of the progress that has been made on school choice over the past few years. And thanks to his formational work, children across the country are increasingly gaining access to customized education that meets their unique needs.¹³⁴

For right-wing advocates like Burke, school choice proposals are united by the fact that they all tap into the expansive reservoir of human ingenuity and creativity which, in Freidman’s view, is only accessible if “free market” conditions of consumer (parent) and producer (school) autonomy are met.

Many on the left see a different uniting theme of the “choice” proposals that make up Friedman’s educational legacy: they point out that school choice policies can have devastating effects on the collective bargaining power of teachers, and as such, pose an existential threat to the teachers’ unions, and public schooling more generally. As Ravitch, writes “as Charter schools evolved, the charter school movement became increasingly hostile toward public schools… with few exceptions, they did not want to be subject to a Union contract that interfered with their prerogatives as management.”¹³⁵

Admittedly, this in itself, is not surprising, as managers and unions have, by definition, an antagonistic relationship, and it makes sense that charter operators would prefer to not

¹³⁴ (Burke, 2012, p.59)
¹³⁵ (Ravitch, 2011 p.124)
being held accountable by any sort of external constraint. What is more important is that in these new “school choice” contexts, teachers were usually never received any stripped of collective bargaining power. Whereas in district schools with have traditionally strong unions, it didn’t matter all that much whether a school officials wanted to work within the constraints of a hefty union contract, as they were going to be forced to anyway. However, with newer charter operators, where Union’s were not well established, and generally failed to gain a foothold\textsuperscript{136} Ravitch often accuses the “billionaire boys club,” Her term for the pro-reform foundations like Walton, Gates, and Broad which provide resources and advocacy in support school choice, and other aggressive ‘reform’ agendas) of creating a climate which intentionally undermines public schooling in America\textsuperscript{137}. Apple, Meier, also argue that school choice proposals like Friedman’s are thinly veiled attempts to disassemble public education\textsuperscript{138}.

While, it is hard to pin down what the wide ranging groups that support school choice intend to accomplish with their proposals (beyond the explicitly stated “greater autonomy for parents in the education marketplace”), it is clear that there is a seriously adverse impact of choice policies on teachers’ unions. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that charter schools, are unionized at a rate of only 12%\textsuperscript{139} nationally while traditional public schools in union friendly states are often closed to non-members meaning they are 100% unionized. Even these numbers understate the There is also evidence that choice minimizes teacher bargaining power. In places where public schools have “market power” over parents, teacher salaries are estimated to be considerably

\textsuperscript{136} (Ravitch, 2011, p.124)
\textsuperscript{137} (Ravitch, 2011, p.219)
\textsuperscript{138} (Apple, 2006)
\textsuperscript{139} (Nicotera, 2011)
higher. None of these findings are surprising, as they merely suggest the Unions’ opposition to choice is rational with respect to their own interests. To be clear, given these harshly oppositional interests, I am obviously not suggesting Friedman’s work is a viable intellectual framework for supporting teachers unions. Such a proposal would be ridiculous. Instead, Friedman is useful in this conversation because he demonstrates just how toxic the politics of localism is for teachers unions. While pro-union advocates like Meier and Kohn are willing to co-opt the ideology of localism when working the tradition of Freire and Foucault, a close examination of Friedman’s work demonstrates that localism is fundamentally toxic for teachers’ unions.

Admittedly, it may seem odd to relate Milton Friedman’s work to that of either Foucault or Freire, as, unlike these other thinkers, Friedman’s work is written with strict loyalty to the framework of neoclassical economics, and therefore produces a sharply different critique of national education policy. Friedman begins his analysis in “The Role of Government in Education” by formally delineating what he thinks is the specific set of the theoretically justifiable reasons for government policy interventions in a “free society” like the United States. Before he initiates serious discussion of his policy prescriptions for the education market, Friedman defines these three possible legitimate reasons for interventions in an explicit attempt to exclude other frameworks or justifications for government intervention from the debate. The list Friedman approves of government intervention is limited to ‘natural monopolies’ where particular market flaws prevent efficient competition, ‘neighborhood effects’ which harm un-consenting parties, a phenomenon also often known as ‘externalities,’ and finally paternalistic concern for

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140 (Hoxby, 1996)
‘irresponsible individuals’ such as children and the insane\textsuperscript{141}. Friedman makes clear he thinks that outside of these three options, no other justifications could serve as a legitimate basis for Government action in education. He bases this restriction with one core assumption: “I shall assume a society that takes freedom of the individual, or more realistically the family, as its ultimate objective, and seeks to further this objective by relying primarily on voluntary exchange among individuals for the organization of economic activity.”\textsuperscript{142}

With this assumption, Friedman’s approach quickly puts him into conflict with Freire, and Foucault, who each see markedly different roles for the free market in educating society. For different reasons, Friedman and Foucault categorically reject the notion that a specifically defined “market failure” is either a necessary or sufficient basis for government intervention in education. While Friedman also allows for “paternalistic” concerns for child welfare, his argument ultimately minimizes and discredits efforts to keep education under the purview of “monopolistic” public officials. The purpose of his argument is to show that the free market would far better satisfy social needs. Both Foucault and Friere would readily object that the framework Friedman uses to justify the privatization of education should be considered far too narrow and insensitive to the needs of oppressed people and communities.

Friere and Foucault would never accept Friedman’s premise, that an analysis of education should be based in the capitalist concerns for “efficiency,” individual bourgeois freedom, and the creative power of competition. Freire, in line with liberal arguments that Dewey presents, suggests that by awarding capitalism increased control over education,

\textsuperscript{141} (Friedman, 1955)
\textsuperscript{142} (Friedman, 1955)
Friedman’s theory threatens education’s essential and unique potential to awaken people, instead allowing investors, and other special interests, to subvert students’ consciousness to profit and their own particular economic agenda. Then, diverging from the liberal tradition, Freire's reaction would go further, positing that the capitalist power always recreates itself in a fashion that is repressive and destructive to the vast majority of people, and that therefore, for-profit schools will always be harmful to the plight and democratic rights of oppressed people. While it’s not clear if Foucault would directly engage the question of whether it capitalists or government officials tend to be more ‘democratic’ actors, it is clear he would oppose any discussion how such institutions could be made to better represent the public's interest, as both have the inherent tendency to systematically suppress, normalize, and police all behavior. Furthermore Foucault would take particular issue with Friedman’s “paternalistic concern” for both “children” and “the insane”.

In light of these severe differences between these different arguments and assumptions, it’s tempting to overlook the central conclusion which each of them reach: Friedman, Foucault, and Freire all provide arguments that staunchly support localized control over education. For Friedman, vouchers would force schools to adapt to become more sensitive to individual consumer's concerns. He writes “The adoption of such arrangements would make for more effective competition among various types of schools and for a more efficient utilization of their resources…. It might also have the ancillary advantage of causing a closer scrutiny of the purposes for which subsidies are granted. The subsidization of institutions rather than of people has led to an indiscriminate subsidization of whatever activities it is appropriate for such institutions to undertake,
rather than of the activities it is appropriate for the state to subsidize.”¹⁴³ Here Friedman is suggesting there will be efficiency gains from closer scrutiny and more immediate accountability brought on by individual choice. This conforms to a secondary ongoing theme in the piece where Friedman repeatedly expresses his preference that local and governments, rather than federal governments to administer any necessary interventions including regulation and funding of vouchers.¹⁴⁴

While teachers’ unions present an array of arguments against choice, most of them do not fully explain the consistency of the union’s opposition to school choice. A great deal of rhetorical energy is invested in condemning how vouchers seek to privatize and introduce a “profit motive” to education, but if this were really the crux of their objection, teachers unions would have a far more conciliatory stance on Charter schools which are, in most contexts, non-profit entities. Similarly the notion that retaining socioeconomic diversity is the driving force behind the teachers’ unions’ opposition to choice rings hallow in light of the abysmal socio-economic diversity existing in many public schools today. If protecting diversity were the true motivating force behind the Union’s anti-choice stance that would necessitate some voucher or charter compromise in those contexts where district schools have been utterly segregated. However no such compromise has been forthcoming.

Ultimately, it is the fragmented localism in choice proposals that is the biggest threat to the Teachers’ Unions. In Friedman’s choice world, teachers unions are being forced to organize progressively smaller school districts, with charter schools’ often being far too small to effectively organize and bargain within. Even if, contrary to many

¹⁴³ {Friedman, 1955 #4}
¹⁴⁴ {Friedman, 1955 #56}
pro-union advocates contentions, we assume charter and private school managers harbor no particular ill will toward unions, the fragmented nature of a choice-driven education market, makes it far, far harder for the teachers’ unions to stay influential at such a widely distributed level. In basic economic theory, it is clear that unions function best when they have a complete monopoly on the labor supply. Therefore the more decentralized the demand for teaching labor, the harder it is for the union to enforce that monopoly. Decentralization, or localism, presents the clearest, and most direct challenge to the Union’s power.

Given that localism is one of the most prevalent and threat to teachers’ union power, the political viability of Foucault and Friere becomes untenable for pro-union agenda. Since localism was an essential method for ‘disarming’ the anti-union portions of these thinkers’ work, it now becomes clear that their work is entirely inhospitable for Union priorities. Advocates who claim to protect Unions should recognize that union power is located outside of the immediate community, and embrace political narratives that rely on federal, and state intervention and support. This means unions must return to the liberal political frameworks the used in the national context. Unions will be forced to compete within the broader context of American politics. Admittedly, this has proven difficult in recent times. But as I have just shown, there is no viable alternative for teachers unions at the local level. It is true the politics of American liberalism, the myth of equal opportunity, and the current political landscape in the country pose some threats to teachers unions. As a result it is understandable that pro-union advocates would be tempted to flee from national and even state-level politics to try to re-frame the debate with the politics of local control. However, ultimately Foucault, Friere, and most
obviously Friedman present theories that are fundamentally at odds with the union. In the end localism is a far more dangerous ideology for the union than the American dream, or related concepts of American liberalism. Having discussed in abstract terms how the localism presents ideological and political problems for the union, I now turn to “parent trigger laws” as an example of how these problems can manifest as new and threatening anti-union disruptions.

Parent Trigger Laws: a case study in the dangers of localism

The Rise of “Parent trigger laws” showcases how the pro-localism rhetoric can create catastrophic situations for teachers’ unions. This discussion relates directly to the beginning of this chapter, where I discussed fallout from a particularly nasty struggle between a Principal by the name Irma Cobain, and her ouster Ben Austin who runs the reform group “Parent Revolution”. It was by making use of California’s “Parent trigger” law that Ben Austin was able to have Cobain fired from her post in 2013. In essence, these laws allow parents in struggling school districts to petition to have their child’s school taken over by new management, usually either a management consulting firm or non-profit. If petitioners are able to collect signatures from a majority of parents voicing “no confidence” in current school leadership, the law “triggers,” a radical shift in school management. In some states the law is written so as to create an entirely new charter school in place of the old school.\(^{145}\) These new entities, are brought in to turn around a struggling school, are usually empowered to re-negotiate contracts, fire staff, and change working conditions. Each of these measures presents a distinct and serious threat to union power.

\(^{145}\) (Cunningham, 2014)
The recent rise of parent trigger laws helps to illustrate the radical anti-union potential inherent in the ideology of local control. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, some union advocates have joined with the far right in calling for parent and community control of schools, in the hopes that this will serve to thwart the steadily advancing pressures of federal reforms. However, as we can see in the case of Cobain, the power of parents is not always friendly to the established school system. Since some pro union advocates have increasingly insisted that the only legitimate authority over education comes from within the community, these are directly complicit in the resulting volatile decisions generated by Parent trigger laws. Parent petitions are about as local as politics gets, and as these initiatives spread across the country, union advocates who favor local control have very little to say in response.

As is showcased by Ravitch, Meier, and others, many pro-union advocates have responded to the rise of parent trigger laws by essentially denying that reform is motivated by anything other than a vested corporate interest. Given that they have assigned localism, given that they each argue that the community’s democratic will should have ultimate power over schools, such advocates are put a particularly awkward position by whenever the community comes to an anti-union decision, especially one as radical and disruptive as the “parent trigger law”. In light of their staunch commitments in favor of democratic community control, advocates like Ravitch having to argue that pro-reform beliefs de-facto illegitimate. While under the a traditional liberal framework, it could easily be argued that these factional community interests are incongruent with the national desire to have consistent, stable, and standardized education policy for all students, Meier and Ravitch have foreclosed that reply given their staunch, theoretical
objections to Common Core. They each end up arguing in a condescending fashion that the signatures of parents are not actually reflective of the democratic will of parents, but rather corporate interests have somehow deceived that parent signatories. Ravitch has actually tired to re-term the measure the “parent tricker law” arguing that the decision should not be considered legitimate because it is passed with the urging of a charter school operator who are preying on the ignorance of parents. There are obvious political problems with pro-union advocates telling parents their expressed opinions about child’s schools can be presumed to be a naïve, and illegitimate. Nonetheless, the ideology of localism has placed the pro-union voices into the unfortunate situation of being forced to reject the basic rational comprehension skills of any parents who opposes them at the local level. The rise of the Parent trigger, and the weakness of the reply both illustrate the severe dangers in store for any union that commits itself to the ideology of localism,

By this point in the argument, I have now established several serious problems that are “triggered” by pro-union adoption of anti-liberal theories that suggest that these alternatives to progressive liberalism raise deep-seated issues for the teachers’ unions. In the tradition of Dewey the problem was that his theories were largely politically empty, arguing for democracy, but failing to motivate people with specifics about why they should care about the issues at hand. By divorcing education from the politically powerful American traditions of constitutionalism and progressive liberalism, Dewey was left without any basis to fight back against anti-democratic education reforms. At first glance, localism seems more promising for the union. By championing localism, some advocates for the teachers’ unions have been able to advance arguments in line with leftist social criticism, in ways that oppose the steadily standardizing influences of federal
and state-level education policy. But as we have seen in this chapter, this ideology has serious shortcomings for pro-union advocates. Not the least of which is that it essentially replicates the explicitly anti-union efforts of the famous neo-liberal reformer Milton Friedman. Given the problematic implications these anti-liberal theories generate for teachers’ unions I have concluded that unless they can find better alternatives than the ones discussed here, radical pro-union advocates would be wise to reject the attempts by Lewis and other’s to break free of the liberal ideological framework, and instead focus their efforts on how best to make their case within such the aspirational myth of the American dream.

There remains one massive undefended aspect of this argument and it is best articulated by the simple questions “So what if there are ideological inconsistencies in the union’s problems? Who says that matters?” These are certainly fair questions. Thus far, my analysis has examined the political outcomes of a union from an essentially “idealist” perspective. The operating assumption, which has gone unexamined until this point, is that compelling ideological frameworks can work to support political agendas in meaningful ways. As we’ll see, not everyone accepts this approach. The most orthodox strains of historical materialism such as those developed by Karl Marx, tend to reject the premise that unions, or any other workers, can improve their position in society simply by better stating their case. From that perspective, it is both futile and counterproductive to analyze the problems and contradictions generated by anti-liberal ideology, because ultimately, the driving forces in education politics are financial and economic interests. If this is correct, my argument is nothing more than a rhetorical exercise, without any implications for teachers’ or education politics more generally. In order to prove my
contention that union should take note of the rhetorical and political problems that radicalizing their ideological framework could create, I must now assess the counter hypothesis that education reform is shaped purely by those with specific financial interest in education.
Chapter 3: Ideological power:

Does it even matter how the teachers’ unions makes their case?

There are many scholars, including David Harvey, Alfie Kohn, and Michael Apple, whose framework challenges both the approach and findings of the foregoing ideological analysis. To concede the obvious, if the financial interests of entrenched economic power are the only forces capable of shaping key trends in education, all the arguments advanced thus far are completely irrelevant recommendations for the teachers’ unions. Given that I have not addressed this objection, the implications of my findings are suspect. While I have shown there to be troubling ideological weaknesses in the recent attempts by union advocates to transcend the politics of progressive liberalism, it is not yet clear that these weaknesses amount to anything. To try and rectify this, I now examine the relationship between the Democratic Party and public teachers’ unions, primarily at the federal level. The goal of this inquiry is to disrupt the allegedly complete narrative that suggests all substantive policy changes in modern education politics comes from a contest between economic interests. I find that recent trends in the relationship between Democrats and teachers’ unions cannot be explained without addressing more
phenomena that are more complex than simply the economics aspects of education. The finding that economic interests do not predetermine the trajectory of the relationship between Democrats and teachers’ unions, serves as an indirect support for my previous findings that unions’ should be extremely cautious in jettisoning the political framework of liberalism

As the relationship between teachers unions and Democrats grows ever more troubled, it raises the increasingly pressing question: why? Given all the support teachers and Democrats have given one another over the years what is driving a wedge between them? There is an immediate temptation is to conflate the shifting alliances with the broader trends of neoliberalism and de-unionization. As unions weaken, they exert less gravitational “pull” on their allies, encouraging Democrats to look elsewhere for political support and contributions. Scholars such as Michael Apple and Alfie Kohn argue that it is obvious that in an era of exploding inequality and increased power to capitalists Democrats chose new positions on education closer to corporate interests, and further from their struggling union allies. While this narrative stretches back several decades, it is clear things have gotten especially bad for public sector unions in the last 5 years as a string of campaign finance decisions by the US Supreme Court, starting *Citizens United v FEC* continuing into last week with the *McCutcheon et. al. v FEC* have made it progressively easier for wealthy donors and corporation’s to give huge sums of money directly to campaigns. However, while intuitive and simple, this explanation ignores several key facts particular to the politics of education. In this chapter, I find that in light of key differences between the situation of teachers’ unions and their private sector counterparts, it is not appropriate to argue that the same financial forces which are said to
cause neoliberalism, fully explain the question of why Democrats have now begun abandoning teachers’ unions.

It has become an extremely daunting task to identify and track the diverse and fluid political positions of those organizations and parties with significant influence on education policy. The increasingly testy relationship between the Democratic Party and the two largest teachers’ unions has grown increasingly hostile and unpredictable. Over the past 25 years, we’ve seen this historically stable alliance grow to be punctuated with sharp, painful breaks on serious policy questions. As discussed previously, at the national level, the Democratic Party now supports high-stakes testing accountability measures for educators, pushes to aggressively expand charter schools, and backs many other proposals that threaten the unionization and job security of teaching profession. In response, the unions have begun openly criticizing a range of Democratic policy platforms, and coming to represent some of the most outspoken critics of the Democrats’ national education policy. At a more local level, union chapters are “breaking ranks”, to back select Republicans over Democrats, who they complain have “taken them for granted”. In 2014, the Illinois Education Association (part of the NEA) backed a Republican primary candidate for governor due to their ongoing dispute with the Democratic incumbent over pension reform. If this trend continues, one of the most powerful alliances in American politics will dissipate.

For teachers’ unions, the stakes are dire, even existential. Historically they have made great use of their friendly relationship with Democrats, relying heavily on Democratic support to pass statewide laws that bolster teachers’ bargaining power and

146 (Simon, 2014)
147 (Uetricht, 2012)
148 (Cameron, 2014)
protect the jobs of their membership. Previously we’ve discussed how relationships with policy makers brought teachers’ unions protection from the globalizing trends that have been ravaging their private sector counterparts. For public school teachers, relationships with politicians necessarily determine many of the basic parameters of their career, ultimately setting salaries, tenure protections, and basic workplace conditions. Given the power politicians have over public schools, the union and its membership stands to lose a great deal if their relationship with democrats worsens.

While Democrats, are less broadly threatened by lost teachers’ union support, they could still experience significant costs associated with their fraying ties to the NEA and AFT. The NEA gave over 20 million dollars in contributions during the 2012 election cycle, with the vast majority of that going to Democrats or Democratic leaning super PACs. Looking specifically at contributions to Congressional candidates for national office, the NEA gave over $7.5 million dollars directly to congressional candidates, with 93% of that going to Democrats. The AFT, which is the smaller union, was even more loyal, spending around $9 million on national Congressional races, with over 99% going to Democrats.\(^\text{149}\) In addition to the substantial financial support, these unions are capable of delivering their membership to politicians as an easily organized volunteer base.\(^\text{150}\) While it’s not immediately obvious that teachers’ support for democrats is rapidly disappearing, the NEA contribution rate did level off in recent years, and in 2012 it had fallen below 2008 levels. The same pattern exists with the AFT, with union support falling below 2006 levels in 2012. Since total giving has exploded during that period, it’s particularly notable that the Unions gifts to have shrunk both as a portion

\(^{149}\) (Center For Responsive Politics)  
\(^{150}\) (Dark, 2000, p. 385)
of fundraising revenue, and in absolute terms. It is certainly noteworthy that Democrats are getting less and less of their support from teachers. This loss won’t necessarily show up as a loss on a balance sheet, because campaign finance resources are exploding as time goes on, but it will surely be felt, as the growth rate in collected gifts tapers would taper with respect to the Republicans.

There is obviously not enough data here to suggest a robust correlation, let alone to verify a particular causal relationship. That being said, it is self-evident that the relationship between Democrats and teachers unions is currently suffering. If examined together, the anti-union shifts in federal policy, and the falloff in union support for Democratic congressional candidates, certainly suggests that, as of this past election cycle, neither entity is getting what everything that it has previously depended on from this relationship.

The clear downsides for both sides that accompany this building turmoil raise an important question: if both Democrats and the unions are suffering in different ways from the new tensions between them, then why do their differences persist? Assuming, for the moment that the teachers’ union and Democrats are led by rational strategists who are aware of the history of their mutually beneficial relationship, there must be some reason that led the union leadership or the Democratic party is willing to walk away from their historically stable alliance.

**The Ideological Accounts of Education Politics**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, rather than presenting a single coherent “answer” or explanation for these emergent differences between Democrats and teachers, scholars have instead provided us with a largely polarized debate, with little to no agreement on a
basic causal mechanisms driving this change. Most people who discuss this relationship characterize the Democratic Party’s shift away from the union in one of two ways, first pundits, scholars and advocates who are more friendly to the union often write about the shifts in education politics as if they were purely the result of changing material pressures, devoid of any ideological principles or ethical impulses, and second group of voices who are more critical of union power usually characterize recent changes as a surprising, and hard won victory of principled commitments to equal access to education over the typically unshakable political power of the materially self-interested teachers’ unions. Admittedly the mutual accusation of corrupted self-interest between political opponents is not, in itself, noteworthy. However, between these predictably opposed political talking points, there exists one surprisingly telling difference in analytical approach. While scholars who are critical of the teachers’ unions often argue that the relationship in question is fracturing due the compelling ideological convictions of reformers, those more sympathetic to the union often claim no such ideological movement is possible, because success in politics is dominated by the distribution of material resources.  

Ardent union supporters have the most straightforward explanation for the increased animosity between teachers’ unions and Democrats: they hold that Democrats have shifted because in recent years capitalists have begun to express an explicit interest in profiting from public education. Michael Apple argues that the logic behind No Child Left Behind, and other anti-union reform proposals, is part of a broader cultural-political

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151 Strikingly, the dispute in the literature mirrors an underlying educational disagreement, with leftists arguing resolutely that the fact of poverty means schools are destined to reproduce unsatisfactory outcomes for disadvantaged students, while the “no excuses” philosophy of aggressive minded education reformers insists that poverty can and should be overcome through hard work and smart policy. Scholars of education politics offer consistent viewpoints as to whether education politics or policy can overcome existing material realities of the world, essentially mirroring the two debates about what determines outcomes for policies and students.
shift away from valuing public services, in a fashion that is both contributing to and caused by an increasingly privatized society. For Apple, “Edison Schools” a for-profit management corporation that bids to takeover, transform, and manage struggling public schools, represents the harsh reality that capitalists are intensely interested in intruding on previously protected portions of the public sector. By the mere existence of a for profit management corporation that targets public schools it is obvious that there are material interests invested in dismantling public education. In Apple’s telling, Democrats have backed aggressive education reform initiatives in accordance with the corporate ambitions of their increasingly powerful corporate backers.

For Apple, only by attributing reform to ascendant market interests can scholars explain the seemingly divergent proposals of centralization of standards and decentralization of school districts. “There is no contradiction between supposedly decentralized market-based models of education and centralization through strong regimes of curricular control, testing, and accountability. Indeed the movement toward marketization and ‘choice’ requires the production of standardized data based on standardized processes and products.”152 Whereas an ideological approach would likely have found these two reform agendas of decentralization and standardization to be contradictory and even fundamentally incompatible, in Apple’s telling the rise of corporate interests in education can simultaneously explain the proposals. He simply argues that in order to create a smoothly functioning market, standardization is an essential ingredient to allow people education to be “priced” according to universal standards. This means that centralized standards, such as Common Core, are actually

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152 (Apple, 2007, p. 111)
prerequisites for the material goals of privatization and ultimately profit. According to Apple it is only by tracing the ultimate goal of profit that each education reform proposals begin to make sense as a larger whole.

Once this suggestion is made, pro-union scholars suggest that the public pressure mounting from private interests is the causal factor driving changes in education policy. When educator Alfie Kohn published his biting criticism of NCLB, titled “NCLB and the efforts to privatize public education, he wrote “their idea of reform turns out to be some sort of privatization. Their the bottom line is not what benefits children but what produces profit.”153 Diane Ravitch has argued repeatedly that charter schools and voucher schools are part of a “deliberate effort” to privatize as much of public education as possible. With each of these scholars, it is easy to see where they track the material impetus for anti-union policies. Public education represents a large public expenditure that, if somehow privatized or cut, would offer companies a massive opportunity for growth and profit.

The simplest and most effective mechanisms for extracting these dollars are voucher programs like the ones Friedman proposed, because they move money previously spent by the government directly into the private sector, thus depriving public schools of funds while expanding a largely unregulated private education sector. As Apple points out in his book _Educating the ‘Right’ Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality_, vouchers bring together two key conservative constituencies, capitalist investors and religious institutions, both of whom have pressing material interests in capturing public funds for themselves. However, given that Democrats by and large oppose voucher proposals that extremely simplistic argument fails to tie shifts in

153 (Kohn, 2004, p. 80)
Democratic policy to private interests. That being said, with only slightly more effort, it is easy to see that testing, standardized curricular aids, and management consulting both have increasingly lucrative roles to play in the rapidly reforming school districts. Acknowledging this, the argument need only gesture at the well-known ties between corporate and financial interests and the Democratic Party, to suggest that there is a financially motivated explanation for the Democrats shift against unions.

This argument has two main advantages: the first is that it is exceedingly simple. By blaming these policies on corporate interests who hope they can profit from privatizing education, these scholars are able to instantly explain all the different multifaceted, diverse policies which weaken teachers’ unions. From an analytical perspective, if these conjectures withstand scrutiny, this argument has the further advantage that it is simple enough to pass any “Occam’s Razor” test. The alternatives in this debate, which will be considered shortly, are all considerably more complex than this simple profit motive, and therefore those alternatives are weaker, to be resorted to only if simpler arguments are shown to be dubious.

The second, and perhaps more substantive advantage, is that this argument fits into broader, widely recognized historical narrative of neoliberalism. In the context of neoliberalism, it is possible to suggest education reform is merely a part of a larger plan to privatize previously public spaces. David Harvey, who is a prominent scholar and critic of neoliberalism, defines it by saying:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is [only] to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate for such practices.  

154 (Harvey, 2005, p.2)
In other words, Neoliberalism insists that the state serve passively and occasionally actively in the interests of parties looking to make private exchanges in the free market. To the extent that there is a viable competitive profit motive in publicly administered industries like education, this framework insists that the state intervene on behalf of private interests, thereby disrupting the institutional power of teachers’ unions.

Harvey’s writing paints anti-union education reform as an obvious application of neoliberalism. He sees it as the natural extension of a broader trend that has already inflicted a great deal of damage on public institutions that can be transformed to provide capitalist profit. In this way, Harvey suggests we read anti-union education reform as part of a larger power grab by capitalist interests, which are well represented within the Democratic Party. The capitalist interests that control the party’s policy platform see a profit opportunity in public school system. It is their hope that, either by cutting funding or by privatizing large sections of the market itself, they will be able to eliminate public surplus, in order to expand private surplus. This suggests that the same forces that brought about privatization, corporate prisons, utilities and a progressively weakened welfare state can be attributed the same education reform efforts which hurt teachers’ unions. In this telling there is no nuance as to why teachers’ unions have received poor treatment at the hands Democratic allies. By this account, teachers’ unions were abandoned solely because they stood in the way of private profits.

However, many political scientists resist attributing the historical shifts in education politics solely to the financial pressures originating with private interests.
Scholars of education politics such as Jesse Rhodes, Herbert Hess, Douglas Mitchell, and Elizabeth DeBray, all present compelling arguments that thoroughly reject the dogmatic simplicity of purely profit-based theories of education. With a number of different approaches, these scholars carve out various theoretical frameworks for considering the impetus for policy changes across the different social spheres. Each of these scholars considers ideological frameworks of education as either important constraints on education policy or even themselves active drivers of political change. The profit motives of private interests, when it is considered as a driver of policy change, is consistently thought of in the context of separate political and ideological constraints. Furthermore, ideology is often asserted to have an agency of its own; one that is separate from the material forces driving education policy. While their theories are obviously more complex, and could sometimes be described as abstract, these non-material narratives each of these scholars agree that they identify important political issues, without which it would be impossible to fully explain trends in education politics.

The powerful agency of ideology in education politics is dramatically illustrated by the landmark decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* of 1954; prior to that there was virtually no federal role in education whatsoever. During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt issued emergency aid to local school systems in order to alleviate some of the pressure that economic collapse had placed on school and municipal budgets. However, unlike some the more iconic legislation included in the “New Deal” Roosevelt insisted that federal funding for schooling remain a temporary response to economic hardship, rather than a permanent obligation in the federal budget\(^\text{155}\). This somewhat uncharacteristically conservative decision by Roosevelt was at least in part justified by

\(^\text{155}\) (Murphy, 1992, p. 144)
the deficient institutional capacity of the federal government at the time. While the Department of Education had been founded in 1867, in the 50’s it was still strictly a research agency, tasked primarily with providing informational support to the nation’s educators. Another obstacle to Federal authority over education was that there was no cabinet level Secretary of Education until President Carter created the position 1979. These institutional deficiencies and the resilient decentralization of the education bureaucracy were consistent with an ideological commitment to constitutional federalism. As Jesse Rhodes explains in his book *An Education in Politics* “Any discussion of education policy making in the United States must begin with an appreciation of the influence of federalism on the governance of schooling… The U.S. Constitution does not mention education and, and policymakers at all levels of government interpreted this silenced to mean that states and, especially localities should take responsibility for organizing and managing schools.” The specific constitutional interpretation in question defers to the 10th amendment, which reserves control over all unspecified rights to the purview of states and individuals. In the 1930’s this historic commitment to federalism in education ultimately trumped the combined efforts of educational organizations, organized labor, and civil rights groups like the NAACP, thwarting a 5-year, nearly half a billion dollar federal aid package to schools. Admittedly while an aggressively federalist reading of the 10th amendment clearly supports the decision to keep education decentralized, from the perspective of 1930’s remained possible to argue that ideology had no real agency over Roosevelt’s decision not to sustain funding for

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156 (“Department of Education” *The Federal Role in Education*, 2012)
157 (Stephens, 1983 p.644)
158 (Rhodes, 2012, pp. 26-27)
159 (Murphy, 1992, p. 145)
education, and that, instead, the impetus for withdrawing federal support came from capitalist’s material disinterest in paying federal taxes to fund education.

However, the argument that ideology can never shape education policy has collapsed in the aftermath of the landmark Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education. When Chief Justice Earl Warren famously found that “In the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place”(Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686, 98 L. Ed. 873 (1954) he reshaped American public education forever. Although the process of racial desegregation was appallingly slow, incomplete, and is even partially reversing itself in many contexts, the impact of this decision was undeniably sweeping, with severe implications for education and education policy in the sixty years since. The decision prompted major changes in federal policy. Of the most significant of these, is that the previously absent federal government was increasingly assertive in education during the decades following Brown. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy both used federal troops to enforce the decision and desegregate selected schools (although almost exclusively in the South). Over time, the justice department began taking increasingly aggressive legal action against non-compliant school districts. With the passage of President Johnson’s “Elementary and Secondary Education Act” in 1965 the Federal government’s desegregation strategy had expanded to putting an integration condition on newly available federal funds, thereby incentivizing more schools to comply with the Brown decision. As education scholar Pedro Noguera put it “The court’s landmark ruling to end apartheid in public education opened the door to a protracted conflict and debate over the meaning of equality and

160 (Kozol, 1992, pp. 179-180)
161 This initiated what would be a long history of federal requirements in public schools receiving national funding dollars: which became the central mechanism by which all federal education requirements are enforced.
equal opportunity in education… [and] brought about significant changes at the federal state and local level with respect to policies governing access to education.” None of this is to say the federal government’s role adequately promoted racial equality or desegregation, but it is impossible to maintain the belief that ideological and constitutional arguments made in Brown failed to substantively change education policy.

The trend of court decisions shaping policy has continued since Brown, proving that the influence political and legal philosophy is more than a fluke or freak historical event; suggesting instead that material actors are often constrained and even overruled by legal ideology. As Lorraine McDonnell and M. Stephen Weatherford write in their essay *Seeking a New Politics of Education*, “Judicial decisions, particularly in school finance, desegregation, and the education of disabled students and those with limited English proficiency, have forged major new policy directions. The courts have influenced education politics both directly and by constraining other political actors.”162 Suggesting that over time the mechanism of legal action has become a central part of efforts to make schools more accessible. Noguera directly responds to scholars who argue that money is the sole controlling interest in education policy, writing “groups and individuals that historically have been subject to discrimination and exclusion have been able to use the courts to press for the elimination of unjust barriers… Genuine progress has been made in expanding the rights of children and even those who decry the continued neglect and mistreatment of millions of children across the United States should acknowledge these gains.”163 It is impossible to write off these legal changes as merely realizations of materialist concerns. Some of these anti-discrimination measures take the form of

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162 (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000, p. 184)  
163 (Noguera, 2003, p. 154)
accommodating the needs of specific individuals and groups. This can be an exceedingly expensive commitment, with disproportionate amounts of money spent educating particular groups of students. While the courts have deemed such allocations to be required by law, (specifically the “equal protection” clause of the 14th amendment) it would be very challenging to argue that such allocations are in profit seeking interests of corporations. This suggests strongly that judicial decision regarding education policy can lend agency to ideological frameworks which are hostile to corporate interests.

However, while the clear historical record of court-led social change in education does challenge the purest forms of historical materialist orthodoxy, that challenge is largely tangential to the this chapter’s inquiry. Today’s education policy changes come primarily from lawmakers, not judges. Teachers’ unions and other private interests advance their agendas in primarily political rather than legal contexts. So while the clearest evidence against private interests’ ultimate primacy in education policy comes from a history of the judiciary, the most relevant scholarship with respect to the central question discusses whether ideology can shape the process of lawmaking in Education. Even though history verifies that justices can, and do act according to principles antagonistic to market interests; this does itself prove that ideological frameworks can shape Democratic positions in education politics. Fortunately, the agency of political ideology is discussed at length in recent scholarship on legislative history of education policy.

Recent scholarship on the Clinton and Bush Years suggests strongly that ideology has a formidable influence in shaping legislation. In her book *Politics, Ideology, and*...

164 (Noguera, 2003, pp. 154-155)
Education, Political scientist Elizabeth Debray argues forcefully that “The Growing coherence of the Republicans’ policy positions made the political process more closed than in the past to outside interests, except those most closely aligned with the party… these questions of which groups and interests gain entrance to access to the legislative process have enormous implications for the substance of federal education policy in the coming decades.”165 Debray’s argument is that the dominant ideological frameworks in politics serve to define the how different material interest groups afforded access to the process of policy making, and in turn has a deeply substantive impact on policy. In some ways this framework mirrors the impact of ideology in judicial contexts. Judges are not law makers, and yet their interpretation of laws and the constitution has historically excluded certain interests from being able to effectively shape policy. Over time the ideology of equal access has proven capable of excluding open segregationists, as well as some advocates hoping to curtail English as a Second Language, and special education spending. Predictably, once excluded from consideration, their policy priorities lost significant ground over time. DeBray’s work draws an important bridge between judicial and political processes, showing how ideological coherence in politics also helped to exclude certain material interests from policy making.

Political Scientist and Education scholar Douglas Mitchell corroborates DeBray’s narrative with his own insistence that ideological shifts have profound implications for education policy. In his 2010 essay “The Surprising History of Education Policy 1950 to 2010” he focuses his historical overview on a number of “surprising shifts” in the way we think about education, which have in turn had serious policy implications. With respect to

165 (Debray, 2006, p. 10)
the role played by teachers’ unions, Mitchell argues “Industrial labor unionization of teachers was surprising because it reconceptualized teachers as vulnerable and exploited workers rather than dedicated civil servants.”\textsuperscript{166} He then argues that this positioned Admittedly Mitchell doesn’t directly engage the obvious possible challenges to his asserted dichotomy between teachers as “dedicated civil servants” and “exploited workers,” however he’s certainly right to suggest that teachers’ unions have powerfully shaped the debate by claiming to be victims of government policy. As Janelle Scott describes, in her article “When Community Control Meets Privatization,” these arguments have often put teachers’ unions into rhetorical and political competition with other groups who are seeking to advance their agenda via the means of asserting they have been victimized by the system.\textsuperscript{167}

While it seems entirely appropriate to assign causal agency to ideological frameworks in education policy, it is obviously possible to aggressively overstate the implications of ideological trends. It’s naïve to attempt to explain the Democratic Party’s shifting positions in their increasingly rocky relationship with the labor movement without including a serious discussion of the rapidly declining power base of the labor movement. Nonetheless Jeffery Bloodworth, a political scientist, argues unflinchingly that these changes can be explained with an exclusive focus on the fundamental ideological incongruence between the older forms of the Democratic Party, and the liberalism of the electoral base to whom they hoped to appeal. In his book, Losing The Center: The Decline of American Liberalism 1968-1992, Bloodworth suggests that

\textsuperscript{166} (Mitchell, 2011, p. 6)  
\textsuperscript{167} (Scott, 2011)
Democrats were forced away from their pro-union and avowedly liberal positions as they realized many of them were electorally unviable, and even un-American.

America, however is not Western Europe. The political environment giving raise to Western Europe’s social democracies simply do not exist in America… If Democrats are to build a viable welfare state, they must come to terms with American exceptionalism’s root cause: Eighteenth century liberalism. The Rosetta stone of America’s antistatist political culture [is] Lockean Liberalism. 168

Bloodworth’s sweeping assertion that the prerequisite political environment for social democracy “simply doesn’t exist” in the U.S. is fundamentally uncritical. By placing the ideological foundations of America’s antistatist nature in Locke’s writing, Bloodworth is removing them from present discussion and interpretation. He is recommending democrats accept the classical liberal ideology which he hurriedly notes America has always been committed to, without a serious consideration of how that ideology has changed over time. Most problematically, Bloodworth’s analysis refuses to engage with those factors which can alter how its core tenets are defined and applied over time. Bloodworth’s book is essentially a series of biographies, tracing the individual successes and failures. He offers minimal consideration of the ways inequality, and globalization can force changes in Democratic policy positions. In Bloodworth’s narrative, Democrats were simply missing a fundamental philosophical reality about America, and they suffered for it. Their subsequent adjustments away from the labor movement represent a correction in response a much-needed epiphany about what functions as America’s ideology. Given that it ignores important trends that contributed to the Democratic party’s shift, this approach is also too extreme. Any consideration of ideology in education politics requires a much more dynamic approach, which at a minimum must somehow integrate the agency of material forces in the policy making process.

168 (Bloodworth, 2013, p. 246)
While this chapter has already shown that considering ideology as a causal agent in education policy debates is quite common in political science, just because it is a commonly practiced methodology in many instances of education policy, does not in and of itself prove that it is an important consideration for this particular question. When it comes to the relationship between Democrats and teachers’ unions, there’s no one prior scholarly work that settles the question of whether ideology plays its own role in driving these two former allies apart. Furthermore, using Occam’s razor, the simplicity of the materialist explanation still demands an immediate response. While I have just shown from prior scholarship that ideological explanation is commonly applied in a similar situation to this one, I still have not shown comprehensive evidence that such an explanation fills in the specific holes left by the simple explanation in this case. At this point I haven’t even located the specific holes left by the materialist argument in this case. In order to challenge this explanation I must now specify particular weaknesses and inadequacies which surface in an effort to explain the strain on this relationship as a function of the interests of profit seekers.

While conveniently simple, the assumption that Democrats behave consistently in line with corporate interests and are thus materially motivated union-busters is a wholly inadequate explanation for recent policy changes. While in broad strokes it may seem appropriate to attribute all-important meaning to the rise of corporate power in education, a closer look shows material conditions fail to explain the significant variation in policy outcomes resulting from this relationship. Furthermore, by looking at the relationship in question in this overly narrow fashion it remains unclear why Democrats are challenging the relatively healthy teachers’ unions, while leaving intact existing private sector union
protections. I now identify three separate but related shortcomings of the purely materialist analysis, which treats education reform as just more neoliberalism. First, the task of modeling this relationship has proven extremely particularly difficult, suggesting that there are difficult to quantify variables that may be hampering the efforts of political scientists. Second, while there are emerging power structures, which are actively pushing for privatization and corporatization of education, the dominant size of teachers’ unions still dramatically overshadows other private education interest, which makes the claim that corporate interest essentially out. Third, the differential treatment of teachers and other unions raises a number of questions, especially because teachers’ unions are considerably healthier institutions, and yet currently democrats seem compelled to brush them aside. Each of these three problems presents an unresolved issue in the struggle to explain education reform by considering only corporate profits for recent tension between democrats and teachers, and the problems cannot be easily explained away without considering the formative role ideology plays in education politics.

There is scarcity of successful studies which effectively model the policy political outcomes of teachers’ union’s lobbying efforts, suggesting strongly that part of what shapes these policies is outside of what can be described with readily available statistics. There have been very few quantitative publications that even attempt to model policy outcomes for teachers’ unions. The few that have been published, often present shaky, inconclusive, and even simply insignificant findings. Studies like “Teachers’ unions and Education Reform” by Lorrain McDonnell and Anthony Pascal, illustrate the difficulty of modeling outcomes for teachers’ unions. McDonnell and Pascal used data from over 150 school districts in three different states to test the hypothesis that traditional measures of
union strength, including the portion of students enrolled in district schools, district spending on education, and other material and demographic conditions in a given school district, could satisfactorily explain the variation in those policy outcomes most important for teachers unions. Their study results were far from conclusive with an Ordinary Least Squares regression of material conditions within the district on a composite score of the eight different policy outcomes they were examining. The model predicted less than 15% of the variation in policy outcomes. At the individual policy level logistic regressions tested the union’s success in particular policy areas. Here, their only statistically significant results were “fragmentary” with the each independent variable showing significance predicting no more than two of the eight policy areas. Clearly there is no dominant variable included here, and the material conditions identified here are incapable of explaining large sections of policy outcomes. Even when all the data was considered together, the model still left more than 85% of the variation in policy outcomes unexplained. From this, the authors conclude that:

The explanation for strong contracts lies in variables necessarily missing from our current analysis. The nature of the relationship between union leadership and the school district management; a teacher organization’s history with respect to strikes, grievances, and arbitration; and the preferences of rank and file members play a strong role in determining who gets what. Only the demographic locational, and quantifiable aspects of the bargaining situation could be captured in the analysis reported here.\textsuperscript{169}

The fact that McDonnell and Pascal had such a difficult time modeling the influence of material interests on education policy, does not show that such relationship cannot exist, or even that it cannot be found by quantitative analysis. Other Scholars such as Kathrine Strunk and Jason Grissom have done just that, in their study identifying a small but statistically significant relationship by examining the voting records of specific

\textsuperscript{169} (McDonnell & Pascal, 1988, p. 66)
school board members. In addition to their general finding that there was a correlation between strong unions and heavily specified collective bargaining agreements (contracts), the authors identified a clear relationships for school board members with union ties and the opposite for those with business ties (although in most of the regressions in the study only the union ties were significant)\(^\text{170}\). Their study examines over 100 different school board representatives, comparing the kinds of support they received in the campaign, with their support for more restrictive collective bargaining agreements. They justify their use of the specificity of the contract as a variable representing positive outcomes for the union because as the from the union’s perspective, it is only by specifying the terms of their contract that teachers can gain substantive input over the terms and conditions of their employment. One considerable advantage of this study is that it compares the influence of teachers’ unions wield on school boards and then compares those figures to those of business leaders. Their work verifies the widely held conception that the two entities are often competing interests with one another, with significant and divergent impacts on education policy. This broader strategy of analysis yields a set of important results suggesting clearly that Union strength, and the electoral behavior matter in shaping education policy. The most relevant contribution of this study is that, by comparing the impact of business support to the impact union support in it considers a far more complete version of the materialist framework for describing social change. Because the materialist framework suggests that policy is shaped by competing material interests, its crucial that efforts to test that hypothesis consider at least two opposing sources of influence.

\(^{170}\) (Strunk & Grissom, 2010, p. 398)
There remains one problem, while the inclusion of “business interests” as a possible causal factor gave rise to a much stronger model than the one in, the explained variance (as measured by adjusted $R^2$) of Strunk and Grissom’s electoral support model is still beneath 35%. While they have found interesting and interpretable results about the influence of material concerns, even at this micro level, their model still fails to explain the vast majority of the variant outcomes in education policy. This leads the authors to conclude, "We do not mean to imply that any of these mechanisms are overly determinative. Board member preferences and behaviors are too complex to be boiled down to simple labels like ‘union-friendly.’ Our argument, however, is that union power influences bargaining outcomes probabilistically: Stronger, better organized unions that are more active in school board politics make more restrictive contracts more likely on the margin." Powerfully, these findings challenge both extreme interpretive methodologies, calling into question the assumptions of those who use solely material or ideological evidence to describe trends in education politics.

Admittedly while the incomplete nature of these statistical models is certainly suggestive, cannot serve as conclusive proof that ideological factors have a role to play in education politics. These models selected particular variables such as union strength, electoral contributions, as well as the behavior of competing interests, but even broadly construed these cannot be said to summarize all possible or even plausible corporate influences on education politics. Therefore it is impossible to write off the hypothesis that material position drives all educational policy changes simply on basis that these particular models were unable to explain the full range of policy variations in the sample. Nonetheless the shortcomings of these empirical models clearly invite alternate
explanations to be offered. More quantitative work could certainly contribute to this effort, but there are strong historical reasons that suggest some of recent shifts in this relationship stems from ideological differences, and therefore these efforts will ultimately be partially found to be partially inadequate. This brings up the second reason to doubt this assertion; it aggressively exaggerates the size of the alternate private interests involved in reforming education.

While its true that the serious tensions between the democratic party and teachers’ unions have emerged concurrently a growing corporate interest in public education, attributing causality to these new interests overstates their size by several orders of magnitude Teachers’ unions are still distinguished supporters of Democrats both in general, while the relatively small collection of other private education interests contribute tiny sums. Unions consistently provide a great deal of much needed campaign support, both financially and in terms of their capacity to organize volunteers. In financial terms the NEA is one of the largest single contributors to the Democratic Party. In 2012 the NEA gave over twenty million dollars directly to Democratic campaigns making them the 9th largest contributor to campaigns. For the 2014 cycle, so far, the NEA is currently the largest single contributor to either Party. The new voices in education politics are nowhere near that size in terms of the support they offer. High profile groups with anti-union agendas “Democrats for Education Reform” gave just over sixteen thousand to Democrats. Employees of the Bill and Melinda Gates that is often cited as an initiator of aggressive education reform gave Democrats under a quarter of a million dollars in 2008, while the organization itself made no partisan donations. Teachers’

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172 (Politics", 2014)
unions remain far and away the largest entity in education politics. While it is true that new interests have surfaced in recent years, they still pale in comparison to the financial and institutional capabilities of America’s teachers’ unions. The surpassingly large size of teachers’ union contributions is an entirely predictable result of still dominant institutional power of the traditional public school system.

While it may or may not be true that vulture like private interests are circling a threatened institution of public education, from a macroscopic perspective the reality is, those private interests have yet to make substantial inroads. According to the National Center for Education statistics, less than five percent of public schools (broadly defined) are charter schools. Faering even worse, voucher programs have failed to spread beyond a handful of experimental trials, and makes only a tiny percentage of students receiving public funding for schools. Similarly, while private management is an increasingly prevalent strategy in struggling, high poverty schools, the vast majority of the traditional, publicly managed school bureaucracy remains in place. None of this is to say private interests are not a substantial threat to the interests of teachers’ unions. To the contrary, this entire project is premised on the idea that public school teachers face serious political threats, with potentially dire consequences. Instead these statistics are offered to show that at the present time, the institutional power still lies in the hands of teachers’ unions, and that private education interests have do not yet have the resources or size with seriously compete with the entrenched power of teachers’ unions.

Despite this mismatch of institutional power within education, many argue that other interests private interests have initiated this process, in the hopes that one day they

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173 (Aud et al., 2011, p. 1)
will be able to make a profit on it. In this narrative, wealthy individuals, investment
interests, and other interests not obviously related to education, have moved in their own
material interests of privatizing public services. Even the firebrand critic of education
reform Dianne Ravitch rejects out of hand. In her 2010 book, in a chapter titled “The
Billionaire Boys Club” she hurriedly discounts the notion that wealthy philanthropists
like the Walton are plotting to profit off their proposed education reform: “Some left
wing critics think the Waltons are pushing privatization so they can make money in the
education industry, but that does not seem credible. It simply does not make sense that a
family worth billions is looking for new ways to make money.” Regardless of if you find
her analysis of wealthy motivations compelling, it is crucially important that her next
argument turns to ideology, tacitly endorsing the basic argument of this chapter. “Why
should it be surprising that a global corporation that has thrived without a unionized
workforce would oppose public sector unions. Nor should it be surprising that the Walton
Family Foundation has an ideological commitment to the principle of consumer choice
and to an unfettered market” (Emphasis added). Obviously this neoliberal ideology
This does not create an ideological opportunity for the teachers’ union. However it
supports my thesis because it suggests strongly that the Union needs to come up with a
compelling rhetorical and ideological narrative with which to combat anti-union anti-
education ideology

While I concur with Ravitch’s conclusion that ideological commitments are
causal inputs, other leftist voices in education politics remain critical of these ideological
explanations, choosing instead to attribute a wide swath of donor behavior to a long-term
plot to profit from education. Responding to this broader allegation poses a much more

174 (D. Ravitch, 2011, p. 203)
difficult challenge than the institutional analysis above. Unlike education policy organizations, individuals and other donors do not usually have mission statements clarifying that their choice to give seeks to promote anti-union reform policies. Furthermore while most non-profit and policy advocacy organization’s fundraising efforts are traceable due to mandatory financial disclosure laws, individual gifts can more easily be hidden, directed through a confusing web of Super-PAC’s, or perhaps most challengingly, given for a wide range of policy reasons which are essentially impossible to differentiate from one another. The clarity and openness of institutional interests and campaign support made resolving that debate feasible, but the unavailability of reliable data means that direct analysis will not serve test the assertion that individual material interests are driving education reform.

However, it is possible to disrupt this hypothesis by discussing its implications in a somewhat analogous case: the relationship between the Democratic Party and private sector unions. If we accept, for the sake of argument, that those anti-union private interests dominate the Democratic Party’s policy agenda without regard to ideological constraints, then we should be able to infer a series of things about the Party’s treatment of other unions. To be clear, it is my view that all the evidence presented thus far in this chapter makes such an assumption extremely unlikely, and furthermore the widespread uses of ideological frameworks in the literature on education politics support my ultimate conclusion that they must be considered to have agency. However, due to the lack of concrete evidence on individual giving, we must entertain this assumption, if only to identify within it a contradiction. As we are about to see, the Democratic Party’s
treatment of private sector unions disproves purely materialist assumptions about education politics.

The relative positions of teachers’ unions and private sector unions suggests that the an entirely corporate motivated Democratic Party should make private sector unions their primary targets. The first reason for this is obvious, corporate interests are directly opposed to those of private sector unions as higher wages and better working conditions automatically reduce the portion of revenue that is taken in as profit. While strong public sector unions can sometimes result in higher taxes, the impact is distant when compared to the directly adversarial relationship between of private sector unions and the capitalists who employ them. Furthermore, given the quickly collapsing membership rolls of private sector unions, opposing their interests puts the Democratic Party at a much lower risk of blowback than offending the interests of the comparatively healthy teachers’ unions. In light of the fact, that since its peak at 39% in the 1954\textsuperscript{175} private sector union density has fallen to under 7% of workers\textsuperscript{176}, while teachers have actually seen significant increase in over that period. Where more recently there have been falloffs in NEA/AFT membership those losses are incidental when compared with the AFL-CIO annual membership losses. Accordingly, having the AFL-CIO as an ally is increasingly irrelevant, but a friendship with teachers’ unions is a far more durable investment

However, despite this evidence that private sector unions should be the primary target of the Democratic Party’s’ reform agenda, recent years have shown private sector unions receiving consistently better treatment than their counterparts in the teaching profession. While welfare reform, and free trade agreements such as especially the North

\textsuperscript{175} (Clawson & Clawson, 1999, p. 97)
\textsuperscript{176} (U.S. Department of Labor "Union Members-2013," 2014)
American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were certainly painful breaks between the Clinton administration and the labor movement as a whole, President Obama has halted, and even reversed this anti-union trend in Democratic policy making. No major Free trade agreements have materialized during Obama’s 5 years (discounting a smaller agreement with Korea), while Union policy domestically has gotten noticeably friendlier. In a 2011 dispute over Boeing aircraft manufacturing, the Obama administration significant political capital standing by a decision to penalize a firm for fleeing unionization. Even more significantly, in the President made several controversial and constitutionally questionable recess appointments of liberal and pro-labor voices to the National Labor Review Board (NLRB) so that it could continue to enforce decisions similar to the one against one against Boeing. While none of this proves Obama is an ideal president for the labor movement, it certainly shows that President Obama is not doing everything in his power eliminate what is left of private sector unions. To the contrary, he seems willing to, on occasion, spend political capital and resources to help protect the surviving elements of the private sector unions. When you compare this to the unfriendly, even aggressive treatment of teachers unions, discussed in the prior chapter, it immediately raises serious questions as to why teachers’ are receiving so much negative attention from the Democratic Party.

As has already been argued, ultimately there is reason to believe that the answer to this question is that there is something teachers’ unions present an especially problematic threat to Democratic ideology, but for the sake of completeness we must consider a final possible material alternative to this conclusion. In an effort to salvage the current model of considering Democrats to be entirely motivated by corporate interest,
it’s possible to argue that Private sector unions are already bleeding to death, and after having already enacted the reforms of the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s the union corporate interests feel less pressure to inflect more wounds on private sector unions. In other words working together, Republicans and Democrats have essentially already obliterated private sector union power, and moved on to ed-reform (and public sector unions more generally) only after neutralizing the more immediate threats to capitalist power in the private sector. This argument is spelled by Andrew Kersten, a professor of history in University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, in his new book on recent political developments in his state: The Battle for Wisconsin: Scott Walker and the Attack on the Progressive Tradition, Kersten writes “Across the nation, conservatives like Scott walker have turned their attention to public-sector unions partly because they have all but conquered those in the private sector… Currently in the United states 11.9% of all wage and salary workers belong to a union. By Comparison in 1983 20.1% were in unions. Union membership in the private sector is a paltry 6.9% while the rate for public sector workers is 36.2%. The reality is simple math.” Kersten’s analysis includes some incidental divergence from the argument I’m trying to detail. He’s obviously discussing the conservative Republican Scott Walker, but the broad strokes of the argument represent an interesting response to my above assertion that the Democrat’s decision to go after teachers unions, while leaving public the private sector unions intact cannot be reconciled within devotedly materialist framework. Kersten’s assertion of the “simple math” of anti-union logic, suggests that corporate interests have begun to focus on public sector unions because the

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177 (Kersten, 2011, p. 36)
private sector labor movement is going extinct and is increasingly irrelevant, at least by comparison to the healthier public sector unions.

However, the math is not nearly that simple. When Kersten uses percentage density rates to describe union strength, he ends up hiding a crucially important fact: while they certainly make up a smaller portion of the private sector, the private unions are still slightly larger than public sector’s unionized workforce in absolute terms. While 6.9% of the workforce is certainly a disappointing statistic for members of the labor movement, from the perspective of corporations, the 7.3 million unionized workers are not “paltry” or irrelevant force. While certainly less formidable than they have been, today’s unions still pose a direct and pressing threat to corporate interests. Private-sector unions are still larger, in more direct opposition to corporate interests, and by all accounts more vulnerable at this point in history than their public sector counterparts. These facts show that attacking teachers’ unions is neither the most profitable option for anti-union reform efforts, nor the path of least resistance toward those material ends. Given this, its requires a highly misleading account of modern labor movement facts to argue that Democrats simply “moved on” when once they had destroyed the private-sector labor movement.

I now address one final counterargument which, while quite simple is very important: One could easily argue that, by nature of the special relationship politicians have as employers or management of public sector employees, the Democratic Party has a special interest in disempowering teachers. In many contexts Democrats are budget managers, and their role in balancing the budget puts them necessarily at odds with
teachers unions who will obviously always advocate for more pay and better benefits. It is obvious that for Democrats, a weaker union means a softer bottom line.

I readily must concede that in many contexts, a desire to cut budgets motivates Democrats to oppose teachers’ unions. Recently this trend can be seen in Chicago, where in 2012 the public school system for the city ran a budget deficit of over 600 million dollars. In light of this deficit, school closings have been surfaced as one strategy that the Democratic Mayor Rahm Emmanuel has tried to use to stabilize budgets. Therefore, its obvious that recent confrontations between teachers’ unions and the Mayors office has stemmed, at least in part, from fiscal issues. As discussed previously, similar saga has played out at the state level in Illinois, with the IEA going so far as endorse a republican for governor, in an effort to protect their members’ pensions. Even the newly elected pro-union mayor of New York City, Bill DeBlasio is embroiled in a dispute over back pay, with Unions threatening to sue the city to collect. All of these examples serve to demonstrate how tough economic times can put budget-controlling authorities at odds with teachers, disrupting past alliances had been stable.

While the pressure for austerity and balancing budgets is likely sufficient to explain tensions between Democrats and Teachers’ unions in some of the above cases, the material realities of the budget constraints are inadequate to explain the full range of anti-union power in the Democratic Party. First of all, as we saw in the last chapter, the history of this tension spans several macroeconomic cycles with evidence of trouble at least as early as the mid and late 1990’s when most public budgets were more relaxed then in prior periods. If the chief motivation for anti-union policy was budget balancing, that cannot explain why the first substantive breaks would occur in periods when in
periods of economic prosperity. More fundamentally, this explanation utterly fails to explain the tension in the relationship at the national level. Democrats in Washington actively oppose cuts to education, and in fact have consistently promoted proposals with significant spending increases attached. In the first three years, No Child Left Behind increased education spending to 24.4 Billion dollars per year, which increased federal spending on education by 40% annually. Furthermore While Race to the Top, was a temporary grant program, it still added a four billion dollars to our national debt. It’s impossible to rationalize this behavior as stemming from a desire to balance budgets. As difficult as some of the provisions in these two programs were for Unions they cannot be described as motivated by a desire to slash education budgets, as they each had price tags that added significantly to the federal deficit and debt levels. This is impossible to reconcile with the narrative that Democrats are busting teachers’ unions to balance budgets.

To be clear, this argument does not prove, or try to prove, the claim that material interests do not play a role in shaping education politics. That would be absurd. Financial contributions play a major role both in shaping which candidates get elected, and which issues they address once in office. State and local budget constraints do force municipal and state governments to make cuts in response to economic changes. Finally there are obviously corporate interests that are hoping that they can manage to profit of public education, and some of those groups are seeking to impact political decisions. This chapter has sought to establish the inadequacy, not the invalidity of material considerations to explain these very trends in education politics. Finding that a material explanation leaves substantial room for additional explanation, the next question which
emerges is what this non-material, ideological source of strife. Having proven that part of what shapes education policy is not simply financial interests, it becomes necessary to examine how people think about education, and its role in society. The finding that financial interests cannot fully explain the current turmoil in the Democratic Party’s relationship with teachers’ unions opens up keeps open the conversation about what ideological frameworks have had negative impacts on teachers’ union priorities.
Conclusion:

Today's teachers' union should be extremely reluctant to openly reject the politically dominant ideal of the meritocratic “American Dream”. In addition to the numerous political problems that presumably associated with abandoning our much beloved national myth, this project has shown that advocates for the teachers’ unions do not have anywhere else to turn. Despite the numerous problematic expectations that have confronted teachers because of our obsession with equal opportunity, this political framework still presents the preferred option for those hoping to advance the Union’s cause. While intellectual traditions that instead focus on substantive and local democracy generate some intriguing ways to push back against today’s reform movement, these alternatives cannot sustain the union over the long run. To support this conclusion I examined two leftist intellectual traditions that do not rely on equal opportunity as a central ideological premise, finding both to have their own, exceedingly destructive implications for the Union.

The first of these alternatives was Dewey’s utterly committed democratic theory, which sought to protect the institution of education from external social ideologies of any kind. For Dewey it was always dangerous to allow existing social myths and rules to have controlling power over education. According to him it was not the school’s job to produce career ready students, because they were to focus on producing democratically empowered students, with empowerment defined not by employers, but by following the lead of the interests and experiences of the children themselves. This theory has great
potential to challenge new aggressive testing-based accountability measures, because it suggests successful education means a different thing with each different child. Unfortunately for the union, history has shown this purely democratic argument to be an inadequate justification to preserve public schooling. People want more than this amorphously defined “empowerment” from their schools, and when a reformer such as David Snedden promises to deliver prosperity and upward mobility to students through education, Dewey’s democratic theory couldn’t put up much of a fight. Dewey’s tragic failure to protect public education from anti-democratic fragmentation should caution unions who express the purpose of public education in democratic and not liberal terms.

Some pro-union advocates, recognizing that on its own the commitment to democracy cannot defend public education from attacks, for the teachers’ unions have begun incorporate localism into their argument. This allows them to passionately oppose intrusions by state and federal governments on the particular neighborhood or school that they work in. Localism and Democracy together can serve as a potent basis for opposing the mandates and interventions imposed from without. The problem with this is that even if this argument successfully de-legitimized high stakes accountability and decentralized power over education, the resulting localized education system would present even more serious problems for teachers’ unions. Historically, the power of the teachers’ unions has come from their ability to negotiate with large government entities. If the NEA and AFT were suddenly asked to organize within every rural and neighborhood school in the country, they would quickly lose a large portion of their current political and economic power. Fifty years ago Milton Friedman realized that localism is fundamentally hostile to teachers’ unions, and it was one of the reasons he cited in his proposal to dissolve large
educational monopolies. In light of this, it is naïve for the teachers’ unions to flee the politics of progressive American liberalism in the hopes that they can build shelter for themselves at the local level. Even if they somehow did so, they would be completing much of Friedman’s work for him.

The last chapter rebutted a strictly materialist counterargument, advanced by Michael Apple, Alfie Kohn, and others that unions need not pay heed to this or any other ideological analysis, because in the end, profit-motivated financial interests are always the root cause of political change. Under this presumption, it is easy to see that politics has no sensitivity to the shape of ideological frameworks, flawed or otherwise. Therefore the previous analysis included would have no real world implications. In an effort to preserve the part of my argument that recommends caution to teachers’ unions, I challenged the premise of this purely materialist argument, and after studying the relationship between teachers’ unions and the Democratic Party, I have shown that financial interests cannot fully explain the current trends in education policy. Given that education politics is, at least in part, controlled by how people think about education, it is fair for me to suggest that Unions should be cautious in abandoning liberalism, given the problems present in each of the alternatives I considered.

The most major shortcoming of this argument is that, by due to space and time, it can only consider a small set of ideological alternatives to liberalism. While I selected Dewey’s democracy and localism because, in one form or another, they are commonly offered as alternatives, I am certainly not arguing that this discussion precludes the considerations of all other alternative ideologies. Obviously, radical politics is not a monolith that can be brushed aside by identifying a single problematic argument.
My only recommendation is that in light of the adverse of implications of these two anti-liberal alternatives, radicals in the union should be more hesitant in casting aside progressive liberalism. Dewey’s failures suggest that they should particular, politically compelling justification for education if you want to have a say in the direction of policy changes. While it’s impossible to say if the 2014 version of the Dewey and Snedden debates would occur in exactly the same fashion, it would be foolish of Teachers’ unions to give up their claim on the American Dream unless they can offer another, pragmatically superior ideology with which to defend their political positions. Given the discussion of localism presented in chapter two, I’m skeptical as to whether or not they can actually do this right now.

One intriguing counter argument that I have yet to address is that, if any of the above has merit for the teachers’ unions why have they failed to realize this, or act accordingly. While not very dramatic, the answer to this is that, for the most part, the teachers’ union has. In most contexts the AFT and NEA still argue that they are the Stewards of the American Dream. Particularly at the national level, Presidents Randi Weingarten (AFT) and Dennis Van Roeckel NEA president both regularly celebrate the American Dream. Just this week Roeckel responded to Paul Ryan’s budget with the rather uncritical announcement that it “Jeopardized the American dream,” thereby implying that there was something real and relatively stable at risk in the pre-Ryan budget America. That’s actually much more subservient to the myth of American liberalism then I’m arguing they need to be. While accepting the goal of meritocracy there’s absolutely nothing wrong with noting that there are problems, numerous cracks to slip through and even ongoing structural challenges generate injustices all across the
system. However, when Karen Lewis rejects meritocracy as an elitist fantasy not worthy of fighting engaging with, that’s different matter. If the union hopes to reconceive of the school in some other radical

I’m not trying to sugar coat it. There’s no doubt that American Liberalism has proven to be a double-edged sword for teachers’ unions. Worse yet, the universalized standards of proficiency have hit teachers working in poor communities particularly hard. While these serious problems for the teachers, until someone identifies a viable alternative, teachers’ unions should not recklessly assume that they can save their schools by waking everyone up from the American Dream.


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