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VERSION: June 2026

Suggested citation: Wiley, Drayton, Sarah Reckhow, and Alexandra Stinson-Swartout. (2026). The Fall of Accountability: Federal Education Politics in an Era of Polarization and Regime Decay. (EdWorkingPaper: 26-1492). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/azzk-ze28>

**The Fall of Accountability:
Federal Education Politics in an Era of Polarization and Regime Decay**

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Twenty-five years ago, the United States was on the cusp of a major expansion of the federal government's role in K-12 education policy. The No Child Left Behind legislation passed with bipartisan support and established standards and accountability as strategies to improve education. Until roughly 2013, reading and math scores did improve; however, in the years since, student achievement on test scores has gone down, and this trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last decade, with new and rising challenges for educational outcomes, how has the politics of education at the federal level changed? What happened to bipartisan support for the standards-based accountability regime, and what has replaced it? We code and analyze longitudinal data on changes in party positions, congressional hearings, and executive action on education. After the adoption of No Child Left Behind ushered in a bipartisan education accountability policy regime, K-12 education started to recede from the Congressional agenda. Since 2015, growing attention to K-12 education from the executive branch and increasing partisan polarization around culture war issues have eroded the accountability regime. Executive actions during the Biden and Trump presidencies have steered education towards a broader array of high conflict issues focused on racial equity, gender, and curriculum. These changes have produced policy regime decay and little consistency or direction for state and local policymakers in K-12 education.

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Recent news headlines on educational achievement in the United States have been a drumroll of bad news. A *New York Times* headline from 2022 reads “The Pandemic Erased Two Decades of Progress in Math and Reading.” In 2025, the *Wall Street Journal* reported: “Twelfth Grade Math and Reading Scores in U.S. Hit New Low.” By 2026, the news of backsliding continued, with *ABC News* reporting: “Kids are in a ‘reading recession,’ as test scores continue to decline.” Moreover, these downward trends in test scores are not entirely attributable to the disruptions to schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; instead, recent scholarship has shown that declines in math and reading test scores in the U.S. began in 2013 (Hanushek 2025; Wyckoff 2025; Dewey et al. 2026). Even in an era of information polarization, the concerns about student achievement are broadly shared, showing up in media sources on both sides of the political spectrum (from Vox.com to Fox News), and in think tank reports from Brookings to the Cato Institute.

Given widespread and seemingly bipartisan recognition of these outcomes, how have federal policymakers responded? How have party positions and the involvement of the legislative and executive branches in K-12 education changed since 2000? We examine political party positions and federal institutional action on K-12 education policy assessing changes and trends across more than 25 years. Our findings provide an update on the role of the federal government in K-12 education since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the political backlash that followed (Patashnik 2023). Past scholarship showed that K-12 education policy was distinguished by a notable degree of bipartisan agreement at the national level, including members of Congress, key interest groups, and Presidents from both political parties (Wolbrecht and Hartney 2014; Rhodes 2012; DeBray-Pelot and McGuinn 2009). The adoption of NCLB helped solidify a policy image for education rooted in standards and test-score based

accountability for K-12 schools promoted through federal and state monitoring; these changes ushered in a short-lived bipartisan accountability policy regime at the federal level (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; McGuinn 2006). The view from 2025 looks quite different, as the Trump administration pursues implementation of an executive order to close the federal Department of Education and carries out mass layoffs that have already reduced the department's staffing by nearly 50 percent. Meanwhile, Democrats in Congress have held protests in front of the department's D.C. headquarters, but their criticism of Trump has had little impact.

Our approach extends prior research to identify precisely how and when federal elected officials and party leaders shifted their positions and strategy on K-12 education. By extending and building upon the methods of researchers such as Manna (2006) and Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014), we can assess trends documenting the rise of bipartisanship and its decay. Scholars showed how attention to K-12 education issues at the federal level grew while party issue positions moved towards closer alignment in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Manna 2006; McGuinn 2006; Rhodes 2012; Wolbrecht and Hartney 2014; Hess and McShane 2018). These trends occurred alongside institutional shifts in education, such as the “end of educational exceptionalism” (Henig 2013), which drew education politics out of the exclusive domain of school boards and other education-focused institutions and into the purview of general-purpose governance, such as Mayors, Governors, Presidents, Congress, and state legislatures. While the end of exceptionalism for education politics opened the door to policy shifts such as standards-based reform, required annual state testing, and school choice, it may have also created a welcome mat for education to increasingly follow the partisan polarizing trend observed in other issue areas in American politics (Grumbach 2018; Houston 2024; Collins and Reckhow 2024).

Therefore, we must closely attend to the role of national institutional actors, including both Presidents and Congress, to observe changes in agenda focus and position taking.

We find that the types of involvement by federal government elected officials and the issue positions of political parties have changed substantially since the first decade of the 2000s. Our findings largely align with the concept of policy regime decay— “an erosion of consensus over policy goals, an unraveling of support coalitions, and an exhaustion of institutional capacity to structure the policy process” (Sheingate 2022, 66). First, congressional attention to K-12 educational policy has declined, with fewer hearings and fewer key votes. As a result, Congress plays little institutional role in maintaining accountability policies or oversight of the Department of Education’s implementation of policies. Second, party platform positions shifted away from bipartisan alignment after the early 2000s, with each party pursuing distinct and sometimes opposing goals. Meanwhile, Presidential attention steadily increased during Bush’s and Obama’s terms, with dramatic increases in executive order use during Biden’s presidency and both of Trump’s terms (Flanagan and Wong 2025). However, the more expansive executive actions during the Biden and Trump administrations have promoted ideologically opposing positions. These actions could fuel partisan flames and create policy whiplash for state and local agencies tasked with implementing federal policies.

The Bipartisan Accountability Regime

From the adoption of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 until No Child Left Behind in 2002, the federal role in education policy emphasized supplemental funding to schools that primarily educated students from low-income households. A lack of agreement between the political parties on the appropriate role of the federal government – beyond supplemental funding and support for specific populations of students—mostly limited broad

expansion of the federal role in education for decades (McGuinn 2006). While George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton each incorporated some education policy initiatives into their domestic policy efforts, George W. Bush's campaign for the presidency in 2000 made a rhetorical shift towards a different and far more engaged federal role. Bush argued in a 1999 campaign speech in New Hampshire: "The federal role in education is to foster excellence and challenge failure with charters and choice. The federal role in education is not to serve the system. It is to serve the children." Bush and others who supported accountability policy presented a core challenge to the prior federal regime in K-12 education, which emphasized a limited federal involvement and a focus on resources to ameliorate inequality. A stable policy regime relies on complementary ideas, interests, and institutions that enable coordinated activity on an issue area (McGuinn 2006; May 2015). Yet regimes can change, as new ideas are promoted by new alignments of interests, and new institutional arrangements are established to support these ideas.

No Child Left Behind

The bipartisan adoption of No Child Left Behind is widely recognized as a pivotal moment in education policy, and it now seems linked to a bygone era as American national politics lurches towards greater partisan animosity. As Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014) show using analysis of party platforms, the development of bipartisan support for standards and accountability began to emerge in the 1980s. By 2000, both party platforms strongly supported standards and accountability, including consistent academic standards set by states and annual testing in core subjects as a mechanism to evaluate school quality. Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014) helpfully summarize the evolution of issue positions in both parties:

Significantly, both parties favored policies they once opposed—greater support for federal leadership in education among Republicans and for various reform proposals among Democrats. The result was a shift from significant polarization on

education policy (prior to 1980) to some (but not complete) convergence on the most salient education policy proposals by the 2000s (p. 610).

Translating these ideas into legislation involved the work of Congress, which held a growing number of hearings on K-12 education during the 1990s, as well as agenda-setting efforts by Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Ingredients for NCLB emerged during the 1989 National Education Summit of governors hosted by George H. W. Bush, which set performance goals for schools and students. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) adopted during the Clinton administration tied Title I funding to the “creation of content and performance standards for students receiving such aid” (Rudalevige 2003, 29). These ideas promoted at the federal level drew upon the efforts of Governors from both political parties who had promoted state level standards and accountability testing in schools (Henig 2013).

When George W. Bush ran for the presidency in 2000, he promoted a set of policies adopted in Texas, including annual reading and math testing in grades 3 through 8 and requirements for progress tied to funding. Congressional negotiations over the NCLB proposal were heated and lengthy—eventually drawing alliances from Republicans who previously wanted to eliminate the Department of Education and Democrats who were deeply skeptical of annual testing (Rudalevige 2003). Furthermore, key interest groups aligned with each party helped to promote accountability policies—including business interests focused on economic competitiveness and civil rights organizations focused on equity in education (Rhodes 2012). According to McGuinn (2006), the adoption of NCLB brought about a policy regime change:

The passage of No Child Left Behind fundamentally changed the ends and means of federal education policy from those put forward in the original ESEA legislation, and in so doing created a new policy regime. The old federal education policy regime was based on a policy paradigm that saw the central purpose of school reform as promoting equity and access for disadvantaged students. With NCLB, federal education policy has

embraced the much broader goal of improving education for all students and seeks to do so by significantly increasing accountability for school performance (p. 219).

While NCLB was heralded after its signing in 2002, it was also quickly met by skeptical reactions—including many concerns raised by scholars regarding political backlash and feasibility of implementation. Hochschild (2003) pointed out the long, convoluted, and loosely coupled chain of control in public schooling from elected officials through school administrators to teachers and finally to the students who would take the tests. Others highlighted how NCLB focused narrowly on reading and math outcomes that could be measured on tests, leaving other goals of education out of the picture (Rothstein et al. 2008). Meanwhile, Moe (2003) anticipated widespread opposition from teachers' unions to implementation of NCLB accountability systems by using "their considerable clout to block or eviscerate those aspects of accountability that are most threatening to their interests" (p. 98). These expectations would ultimately bear fruit as the countermobilization to NCLB developed.

Bush-Obama School Reform

Nonetheless, the framework of accountability policy and interest alignment to support the use of standards and performance assessment remained the predominant approach at the federal level from the George W. Bush administration to Barack Obama's administration. For example, Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) program also enhanced the federal government's role in education to promote accountability policies (McGuinn 2012). The funding for this program was authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act legislation, but the competition was developed through the executive branch rule-making process. With RTTT, states were incentivized to adopt teacher performance evaluations linked to standardized test scores, as well as the Common Core State Standards (Boser 2012). The Obama administration persisted with promoting accountability policies like test-score based teacher evaluation, despite strong

opposition from a key Democratic party interest group: teachers' unions (Finger 2024). Although RTTT relied on a competitive federal grant program, which only some states won, the policy ideas built on the accountability framework started with NCLB (Manna and Ryan 2011).

The time frame from roughly 2000 to 2015 has been described as “Bush-Obama Era School Reform,” which calls attention to the striking continuity in policy goals and approach across presidential administrations from different political parties (Hess and McShane 2018). Analysis of national media coverage also shows high attention to school accountability from 2003 to 2013, but media coverage of accountability has been 90% lower since 2018 (Dewey et al. 2026). Both Bush and Obama expanded the role of the federal government in education; both supported accountability through standards and testing; both supported school choice; and both were willing to dismiss critics within their own party to pursue this agenda.

The Regime Weakens

The tides of education policymaking began to turn with the use of NCLB waivers and the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. During the Obama administration, it became clear that states could not meet the accountability targets set by NCLB, and the administration designed a state waiver process (Dewey et al. 2026). These waivers came with strings attached, requiring adoption of policies favored by the administration, such as college and career ready standards and turnaround programs for the lowest performing schools (Hemelt and Jacob 2017). The waiver process sparked additional backlash to NCLB, including Congressional Republicans who saw it as an overreach of federal power (Saultz et al. 2017). Emerging from Congressional hearings and debate over ESEA reauthorization, ESSA was the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA to pass through Congress and shifted authority related to accountability policy back to states. While much of the federal government's obligations and

powers pertaining to vulnerable students remained intact, states were given more flexibility in how they hold low-performing schools accountable and how they use federal funds (West 2017). ESSA allowed states more autonomy to create their own accountability frameworks, improvement timelines, and school-improvement interventions (Dewey et al. 2026). This delegation and decentralization of the accountability regime was, as former Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander argued, “the most significant devolution of power to the states in a quarter of a century, certainly on education” (Klein 2016).

In sum, the interest group, political party, institutional, and idea alignment of the accountability regime reached a peak from the adoption of NCLB until about 2015; however, it has been on shaky ground for the last ten years. We systematically examine the fractures in this regime and uncover the contours of federal education politics that have emerged in the aftermath. What has happened to accountability ideas on the federal agenda, and what has replaced them? Is there ongoing coordination or alignment among federal institutional actors or partisan officials on education politics or has this coordination been replaced with conflict? What priorities (if any) have emerged as new issues or goals for education policy at the federal level?

Data and Methods

Drawing on Manna (2006) as well as Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014), we trace actions within federal institutions concerning education policy, partisan positions, and issue definitions. Executive orders, presidential party platforms, CQ votes, congressional hearings, and TV advertising data were all collected to determine how the importance of issues within education has changed over time. Analyzing executive and congressional action in addition to party

platform and advertising allows us to understand a robust spectrum of governmental activity and how the government communicates issue definition and the education issue space to the public.

Although the focus of our study is K-12 education politics in the U.S., we do not exclude policy discussions including higher education from our data collection and coding efforts. We made this decision based on recent scholarship showing the convergence of K-12 and higher education policy and politics (Loss and McGuinn 2016). For example, Dougherty and Henig (2016), show how accountability policies have spread to higher education through mechanisms such as performance funding programs at the state level, while the federal government has expanded its role in funding and regulating higher education. Meanwhile, the emergence of culture war politics and polarization is also creating fractures across the K-12 and higher education landscapes (Schickler and Rodriguez 2026; Kogan 2025). These trends make it harder to disentangle or isolate K-12 policy from higher education, since these sectors are increasingly discussed in tandem by policymakers at all levels of government (Loss and McGuinn 2016). Our own research adds to the literature on K-12 and higher education convergence, particularly through the use of presidential executive orders that address both sectors simultaneously.²

Executive orders were gathered by web scraping the Federal Register for all executive orders from the beginning of George H. W. Bush's term to June 1, 2025 for words with the root "teach-" "educat-" and "school." Then, each scraped document was further coded by hand for those that pertained to education policy, rather than happenstance inclusion of root words or using them in non-policy preambles. This dataset was created rather than relying on a preexisting dataset like the Comparative Agendas Project's (CAP) Executive Orders coding to include orders

² When possible, we present data that disarticulates higher education and K-12 policies for clarity of analysis.

which may be excluded from being considered education by the CAP's mutually exclusive issue coding scheme and to further delineate between issues pertaining to education found within the documents (Jones et al., 2025).

Executive orders pertaining to education policy were then inductively coded to contain any number of sub-issue codes related to education policy at the K-12 level or if they were related to any issue within other levels of education.³ For K-12, the codes include: excellence, accountability, teachers, equity⁴, choice, curriculum, discipline, health and safety, sex and gender, religion, and devolution. Additional codes for policy related to other levels of education were included: higher education, PreK, and technical or career education. Finally, each order was coded to determine if it pertained to Covid-19 to better understand the volume of executive order activity on education without Covid's effect.⁵

We built our dataset of Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Key Votes starting with data from Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014) and updating to include the full time series through 2020. We followed their method of identifying votes on legislation related to K-12 education that are mentioned in the annual reports by CQ of "key votes."

The Comparative Agendas Project's database of all congressional hearings pertaining to education from 1990 to 2021 was used to determine a count of committee hearings on K-12 education and conduct inductive sub-issue coding based on the hearing's title and description.

³ See Appendix for codes.

⁴ We code both traditional equity orders, like improving racial minority access to higher education, with anti-equity orders, like attempts to rollback DEI programs in K-12.

⁵ A sample of thirty random executive orders from the Obama administration's second term onward was separately coded by one other coder to calculate a Cohen's Kappa for intercoder reliability. This resulted in an average Kappa of .792 for all issues and no non-degenerate issue with a Kappa below .6. Accountability, Choice, and PreK were all degenerate codes due to uniformity or no variation, and none scored below 93.3% when assessed for naive agreement percentage between coders.

The codes found in the hearings include: choice, parents, finance, safety, accountability, curriculum & assessment, equity, excellence, discipline, teachers, and technology.⁶

Party platforms from 2012 to 2024 were coded as a continuation of Wolbrecht and Hartney's prior research on the types of education policy proposals found in presidential platforms: federal funding, discipline/morality, racial inequality, school choice, targeted groups, standards & accountability, and teacher quality (Wolbrecht & Hartney, 2014). Each of these platforms were coded holistically for each code on a range of -1 to 3, indicating a position against the issue at -1 to multiple policy proposals in favor at 3. Additionally, we determined the proportion of paragraphs in each platform's education section which referenced K-12 and higher education and the proportion of paragraphs that were holistically about either K-12 or higher education. This, combined with calculating the proportion of pages each platform devoted to their education section, allowed us to better understand the degree of importance each party placed on communicating their education policy.

Finally, presidential television advertising data was obtained from the Wesleyan Media Project from 2000 to 2020. Each of these datasets were filtered for the television ads that aired for each of the Republican and Democratic nominees in the general election; then, each year's ads were determined to concern education if they were marked by the Wesleyan Media Project as containing their education/schools code or their school lottery code.

⁶ Codes were generated inductively. A sample of thirty random hearings was separately coded by one other coder to calculate a Cohen's Kappa for intercoder reliability. This resulted in an average Kappa of .771 for all issues and no non-degenerate issue with a Kappa below .609. Discipline, Teachers, and Technology were all degenerate codes due to uniformity or no variation, and none scored below 90% when assessed for naive agreement percentage between coders.

Results

We present our results by federal institutional sector, starting with congressional attention, then political parties (including party platforms and campaign ads), and concluding with executive action. This progression starts with the federal institution that has most fully backed away from education policy action (Congress) and ends with the institution that has increased intervention in education policy (Executive).

Congressional Attention

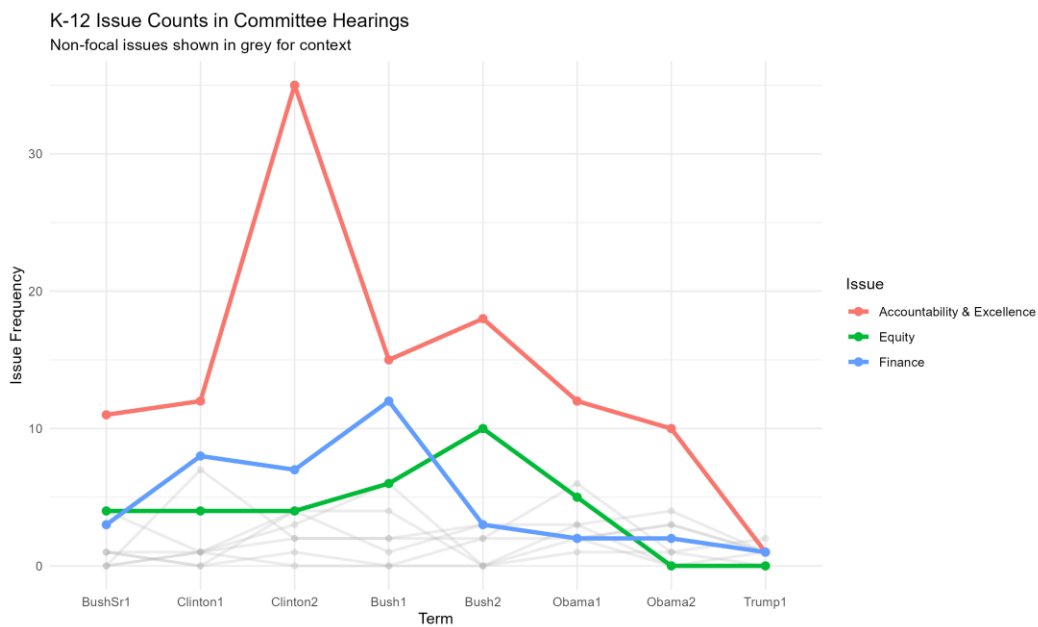
Congressional attention on education has waned over the past 50 years (Table 1). Key votes resulting from congressional hearings peaked in the seventies but dropped steeply after that, with only four major votes in the 2010s – including the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act through the House and Senate. The other two key votes were the confirmation votes for Education Secretary (Secretary King nominated by President Obama and Secretary DeVos nominated by President Trump). The drop-off in the 2010s after ESSA is consistent with the priorities of this legislation, which shifted much of the power and oversight for schools that NCLB emphasized into state purview.

Table 1: CQ Key Votes on K-12 Education per Decade

Decade	Total Number of CQ Key Votes
1960s	12
1970s	19
1980s	8
1990s	8
2000s	6
2010s	4

The consistently lower number of key votes on education does not mean hearings have diminished at the same rate across topics. Evidence of rise and decay in the accountability regime is clear in the decline of hearings that have focused on accountability issues. Our analysis on the number of K-12 congressional hearings on education across presidential terms shows that the biggest drop-off is hearings on accountability and excellence. As seen in Figure 1, accountability has historically made up the largest proportion of conversations in education at the federal level. Despite this, committee hearings on accountability policies steadily trended downward after Clinton’s presidency and began cratering after Obama’s presidency, with the issue only occurring once in Trump’s first term. This is likely a reflection of our earlier assertion that ESSA’s authorization placed this matter back into the hands of individual states. Discussions of finance peaked during George W. Bush’s first term in office, coinciding with the No Child Left Behind act and a historic increase in federal involvement but fell sharply after that and have completely disappeared by Trump’s second term.

Figure 1: Issue Counts for Congressional Committee Hearings (K-12 only)



Discussions of equity have steadily decreased since Bush's second term and have not recovered since. This comes as no surprise given recent Trump-era attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and efforts to defund such initiatives at federal, state, and local levels. The number of hearings on parents, school safety, teachers, and educational technology have always been low aside from a spike in safety hearings in the wake of the Sandy Hook school shooting in Obama's second term in office. Cumulatively, the low number of hearings across K-12 issues and the lack of prominence for any single K-12 issue area shows no emerging consensus about priorities to replace accountability and excellence.

The decline in the volume of hearings is one indication of educational policy regime decay, although it is tied to broader changes in congressional activity. Our findings are in line with other recent scholarship and calls for reform of Congress that demonstrate an across the board decline in witnesses, committee hearings, bureaucratic oversight, and capacity of the legislative branch (LaPira, Drutman, and Kosar 2020; Lewallen 2020; Ban, Park, and You 2022; Rackey and Bell 2024). Whereas Sheingate (2022) saw the entrance of new lobbying efforts after the 2013 Farm Bill as evidence of decay in the agriculture policy regime, we find a broad collapse in the number of congressional hearings on K-12 education since the 2010s. This trend mirrors research on congressional activity in other issue areas. Nonetheless, it is possible that education policy regime development was maintained or redirected within other institutions at the federal level, even as Congressional activity slowed dramatically. To examine other potential venues for activity, we turn to national party platforms as an indicator of issue divergence or convergence on education between the parties.

Party Platforms and Campaign Positions

The level of attention and issue positions of the Democratic and Republican parties on education policy has changed considerably since 2000. We observe these changes through analysis of party platforms in presidential election years and through presidential campaign advertisements and the number of paragraphs in a party's education section that reference K-12 and higher education policy positions.

The analysis of party platforms based on the proportion of content focused on K-12 or higher education in the party's education section (Figure 2) shows that the Democratic party platform attention to K-12 education peaked in 2000. Attention to higher education in the Democratic party platform has climbed steadily since 2000, and the proportion of paragraphs on higher education policy exceeded K-12 policy in the 2024 platform. This evolution coincides with the growing education divide between the policy parties, and the increasing alignment of college educated voters with the Democratic party (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024).

Harris' 2024 platform offers the most striking example of this shift, as it's the first Democratic platform to have more paragraphs about higher education than K-12. One paragraph is dedicated to the American Rescue Plan and education post-Covid, and another paragraph is packed with references to a battery of K-12 issues: IDEA funding, attendance and literacy programs, charter accountability, STEM/STEAM, multilingual education, tutoring, community schools, and family feedback on educational outcomes all share one paragraph of description. Meanwhile, college debt relief, Pell Grant access, and a comparison to Republican policies on higher education each receive their own paragraph (a difference of 213 words on K-12 vs 306 words for higher education). The platform spends more time explaining higher education positions, and in greater depth, than K-12 positions. Even the paragraph dedicated to teacher support and pay is dominated by teacher education affordability and loan concerns, and higher

education teacher diversity initiatives, rather than K-12 policy proposals about teaching in the classroom.

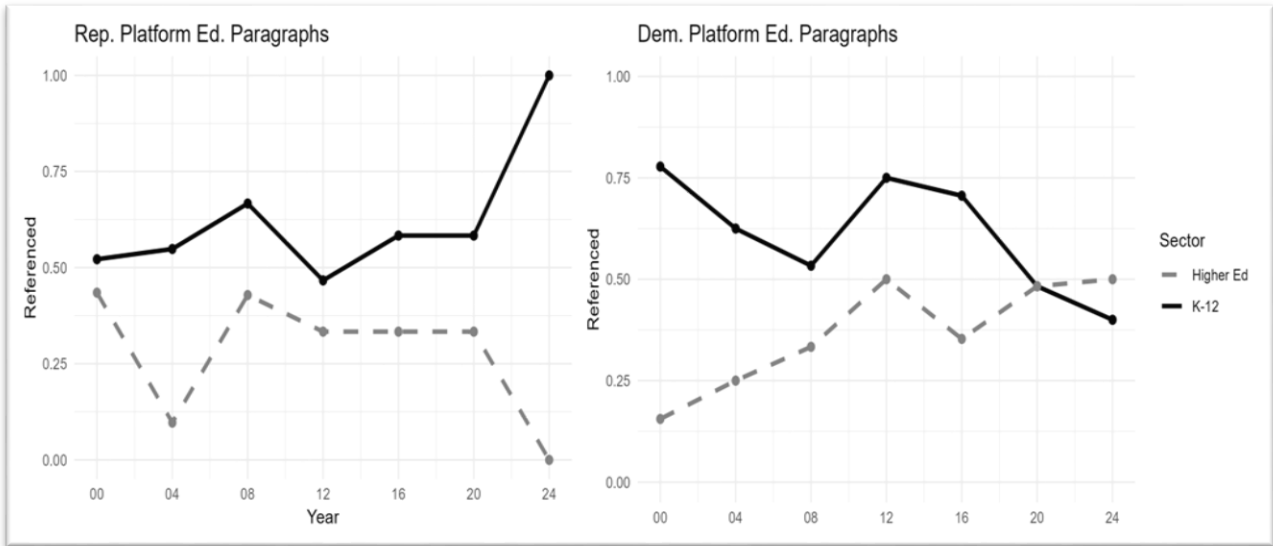
In contrast to Democratic party focus on higher education, Republicans have had a consistently low proportion of their platform dedicated to higher education (Figure 2). The Republican platform has maintained relatively stable in its focus between K-12 and higher education, with the only substantial change in the platform's focus between the two levels of education being in 2004 after NCLB, and in 2024.

From 2012 to 2020, the Republican platform on education saw little change: many of the sections are copied verbatim from the prior years' platforms and the 2016 platform was adopted as the 2020 platform without changes. The 2024 Republican platform looks unlike any prior platform. For each issue area, the platform includes a list of items mentioning some concrete policy proposals; for example, the platform mentions reinstating the 1776 Commission on civic education. However, most of the content uses broad generalities to describe Republican Party stances (i.e. Parental Rights, Universal School Choice, Love of Country, and Freedom to Pray) and contrast these with Democratic positions. For example, under the heading "Knowledge and Skills, Not CRT and Gender Indoctrination," the platform states: "Republicans will ensure children are taught fundamentals like Reading, History, Science, and Math, not Leftwing propaganda."

The official 2024 Republican platform includes no reference to higher education; however, if we were to include Project 2025 as extension of the 2024 Republican platform, we find several issues in K-12 and higher education that the administration has acted on during Trump's second term. These include restructuring income-driven repayment plans for student loans, changes to Title IX categories concerning sex, and attempts to change higher education

accreditation processes (Burke 2023). Overall, the 2024 Republican platform provides a sketch of the ideological priorities of the party in K-12 education, but the specifics of potential policy positions across the K-12 and higher education sectors are more likely to be found in Project 2025.

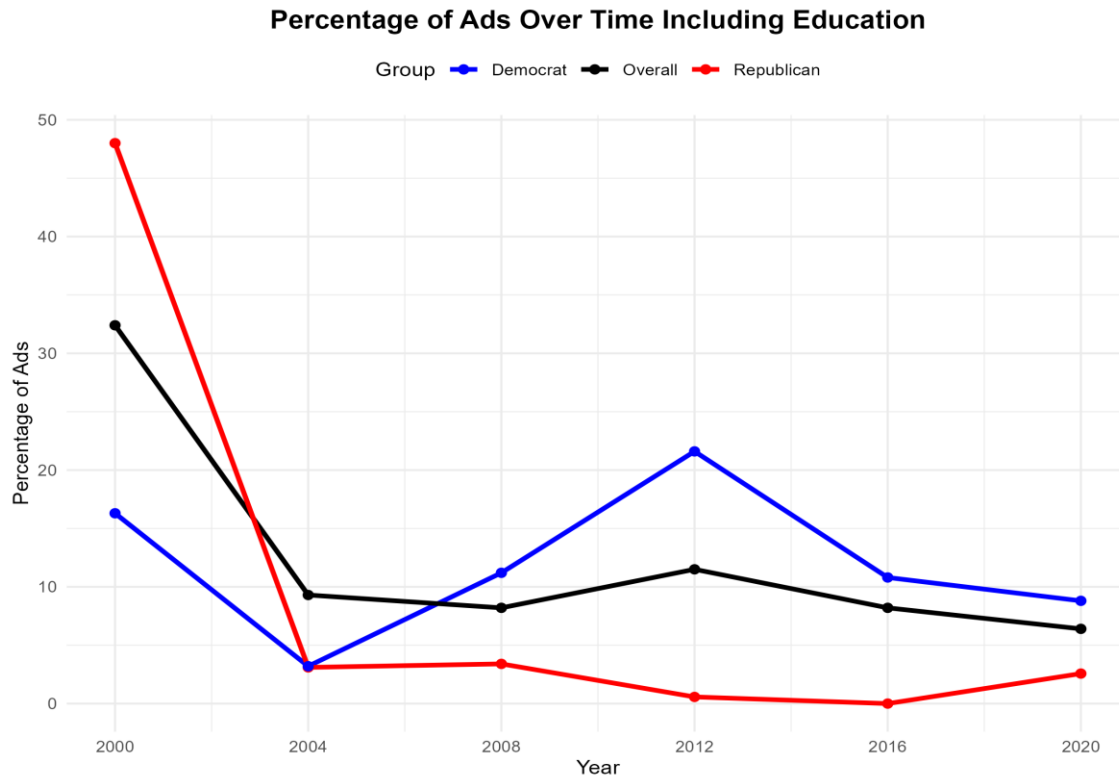
Figure 2: Republican & Democratic Party Platform- K-12 and Higher Education



A somewhat different picture emerges if we turn to attention to presidential campaign advertisements on TV (Figure 3). The coding for presidential campaign ads includes all topics related to education/schools, so higher education is included. It was the Republican presidential campaign (with candidate George W. Bush) that aired the highest percent of ads including mentions of education in 2000, at nearly 50 percent of all ads. This is not surprising given Bush’s emphasis on claiming the issue for the Republican party and his subsequent legislative push for NCLB. The Democratic campaign for Al Gore was quite a bit less focused on education in TV ads. For the Democratic party, attention to education in presidential ads peaked in 2012 during President Obama’s second campaign. For example, the Obama campaign ran a negative ad attacking Romney for stating that “class sizes don’t matter.” (Obama for America 2012). Ads

focused on education issues became rare in both parties' campaigns by 2020. Combined with platforms, this indicates that public advertising on education has become much less of a focus for both parties after 2000, but the discussion on the substance of K-12 education, its relationship to higher education, and the issues that constitute the space is becoming more contested.

Figure 3: Presidential Campaign Ads on Education



Issue-specific coding of the party platforms allows us to explore the positions and priorities of each party on K-12 education in more detail. By following the coding procedures of Wolbrecht and Hartney (2014) and combining our data with theirs, we can develop a time series of party platform positions for K-12 education from 1948 to 2024 (Figure 5). The dashed line in the figures shows the point in time where the coding of positions comes from Wolbrecht and Hartney (1948 to 2008) and where our coding has been added (2012 to 2024). A score of 3 indicates strong support of multiple policy positions or significant proposals, 2 indicates one

proposal in favor, 1 indicates vague support, 0 being no mention, and -1 indicating opposition to policies related to that issue.

The panels in Figure 4 feature four issue areas that demonstrate the moment of partisan convergence in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Standards/Accountability), as well as policy issue areas where the parties have diverged. The Republican party has maintained consistent focus on full-throated support for school choice (including private school choice), while Democrats have reduced their support since 2012. Similarly, after a moment of convergence on issue priorities related to school discipline/morality in 2004, the Republican party has moved towards strong focus on these issues, while Democrats have not. Finally, racial inequality is an issue that has drawn increasing focus and prioritization in the Democratic party, while the Republican party has moved in the opposite direction.

The collapse of accountability within each party's platform is particularly striking. In 2012 the Democrat's platform called on states to enact policy to raise standards for students and teachers and proposed working with states to turn around struggling schools. By 2016, that language was paired with opposition to high stakes testing. By 2024, all that remained on accountability and standards was a call to increase accountability for charter schools and "uphold rigorous academic standards." For the Republicans, the 2012 platform called for assessment on core subjects and applauded states for raising academic standards. The 2012, 2016, and 2020 platforms are extremely similar, and in many areas use identical language. However, even in these similar paragraphs the testing and accountability language has been entirely scaled back.

For example, here is a 2012 Republican Party platform excerpt on accountability (*italics added for emphasis*):

More money alone does not necessarily equal better performance. After years of trial and error, we know what does work, what has actually made a difference in student

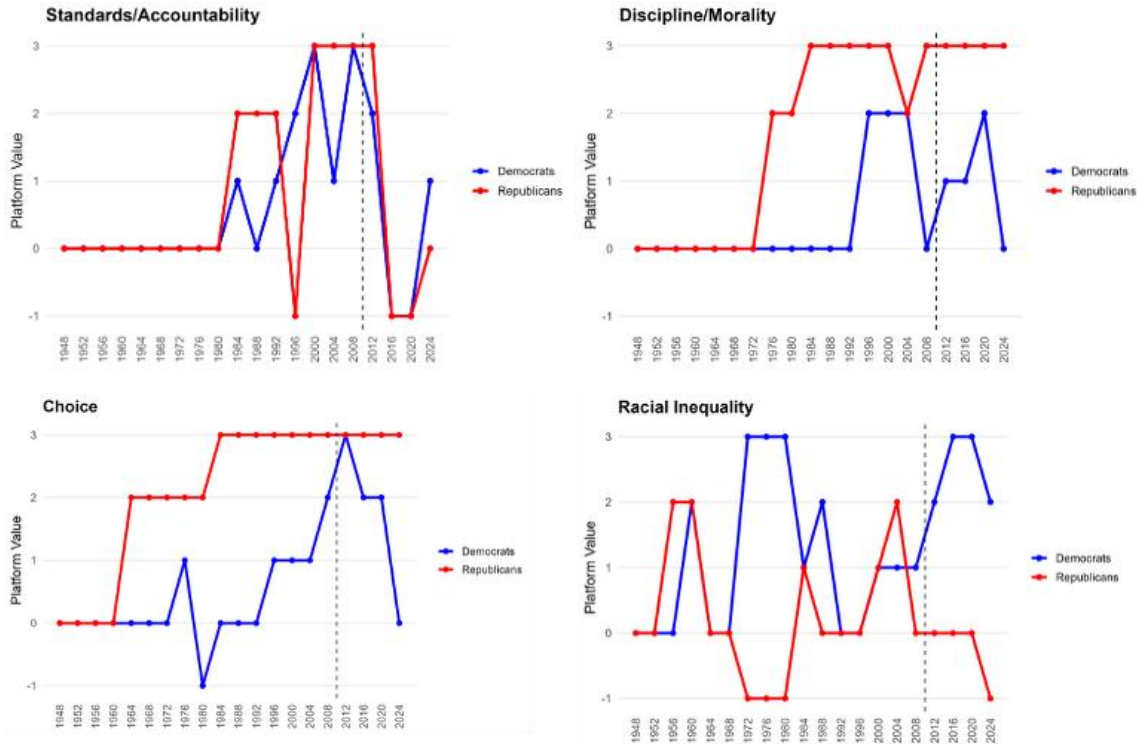
advancement, and what is powering education reform at the local level all across America: *accountability on the part of administrators, parents and teachers; higher academic standards; programs that support the development of character and financial literacy; periodic rigorous assessments on the fundamentals, especially math, science, reading, history, and geography; renewed focus on the Constitution and the writings of the Founding Fathers...*

By comparison, here is an excerpt from the 2016 and 2020 Republican platforms that begins the same way, but has noteworthy revisions:

More money alone does not necessarily equal better performance. After years of trial and error, we know the policies and methods that have actually made a difference in student advancement: Choice in education; building on the basics; STEM subjects and phonics; career and technical education; ending social promotions; merit pay for good teachers; classroom discipline; parental involvement; and strong leadership by principals, superintendents, and locally elected school boards...

Language concerning testing, standards, and accountability have been removed from a section that is otherwise strikingly similar. Elsewhere in the 2016 and 2020 platforms, the Republican party: “rejects excessive testing and ‘teaching to the test’ and supports the need for strong assessments to serve as a tool so teachers can tailor teaching to meet student needs.” Each party went from supporting assessment and using it as a tool to keep districts and schools accountable to opposing the instruments developed under the accountability regime from 2000 through 2016.

Figure 4: Education Issue Priorities in Political Party Platforms- 1948-2024



The changing partisan issue focus in platforms illustrates potential directions for education policy, directions which are increasingly divergent. Across these findings on party positions, we show shifting partisan attention to K-12 education and increasing polarization on issues other than accountability, where both parties have dramatically reduced their support of these measures. We find that the Democratic party has moved attention away from K-12 and towards higher education since 2012. Additionally, Democratic party platforms in recent years have emphasized racial inequality as an issue priority, while moving away from support for policies that were once areas of bipartisan overlap. Meanwhile, the Republican party platform includes sections on racial inequality that appear closer to the party’s positioning from the 1970s (the era of opposition to bussing), while maintaining strong focus on widespread school choice as well as discipline/morality in schools.

Platforms provide evidence of regime decay via a lack of consensus on what education policy should be about. Bipartisan opposition to accountability in 2016 and 2020 rebounded in

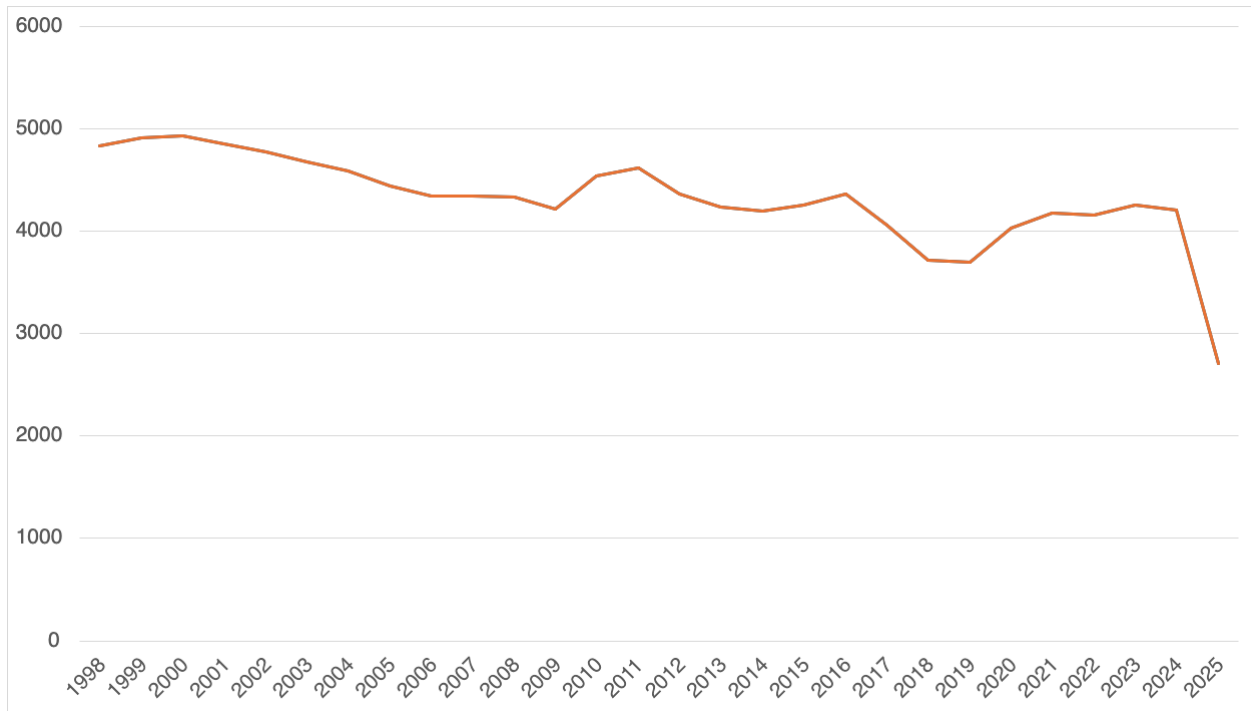
the same direction toward some support by 2024, but every other issue has greater divergence in 2024 than in 2020. Without consensus on what education policy should be about, each party has been unable or unwilling to create high legislative activity in Congress. For a more comprehensive understanding of federal activity, we turn to executive orders to understand how each party has used that branch's comparative alacrity to execute education policy.

Executive Action

We track executive action by examining federal staffing (in the Department of Education) and by analyzing executive orders. Presidential support for staffing and funding the Department of Education had remained relatively consistent throughout the 21st century until Trump's second term (Figure 5). In 2000 the office staffed its peak at 4930 federal employees, dipped to its lowest point pre-Trump point at 3697 employees in 2019, and rebounded to 4209 in 2024 (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2026). By the end of 2025 staffing cuts, the Department had only 2708 federal employees (Office of Personnel Management, 2026). These cuts were consistent with Project 2025 goals of cutting employees in the Office of Civil Rights and federal student aid management (Gedeon 2025; Lieberman 2026).

Trump's cuts are aberrant and significant, but they are not indicative of an executive doing less in education. Instead, the Trump administration has signaled that many of the features of federal education policy, notably equity concerns and loan management, are not fit for the DOE but are still concerns that should be handled by the executive branch. Trump has turned to an unprecedented volume of executive orders on education to set policy and priorities on equity in K-12 and higher education.

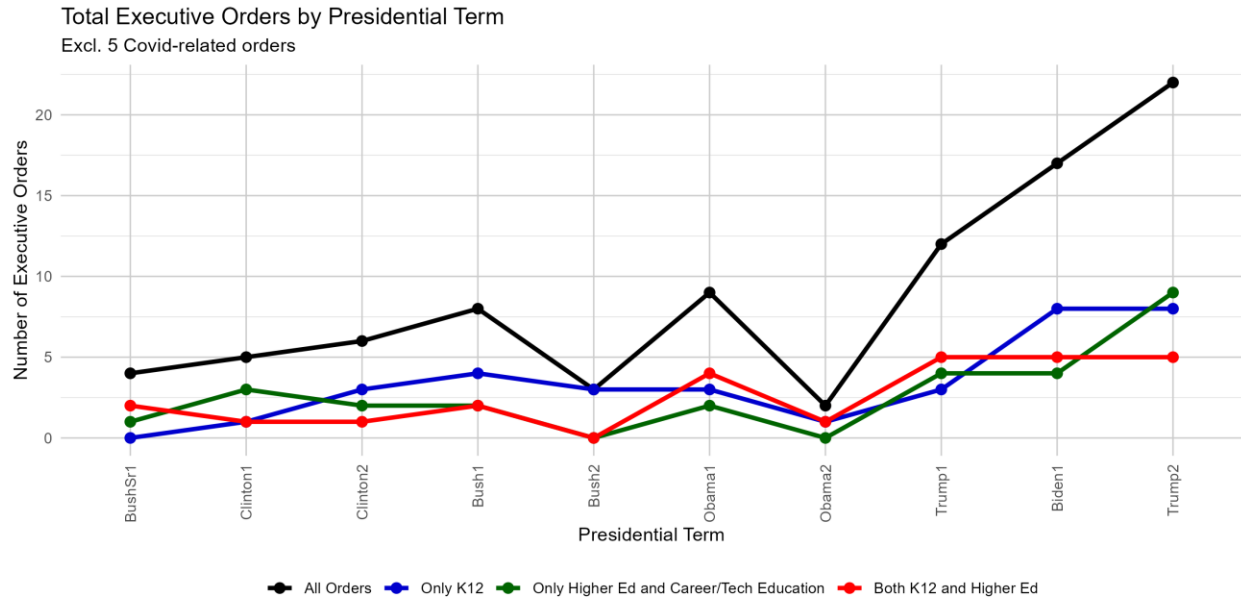
Figure 5: Federal Department of Education Employees by Year



Executive Orders

Executive orders maintained a stable rate of issuance from President George H. W. Bush through Obama’s presidency and have grown dramatically since — this increase in volume has not coincided with a clear growth in any one K-12 issue, but instead dovetailed with growing attention to a range of equity issues and higher education. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama each signed eleven executive orders on education. Meanwhile Trump issued thirteen in his first term, Biden nineteen, and Trump had issued twenty-four through May 2025 of his second term.

Figure 6: Number of Executive Orders on Education by Presidential Term

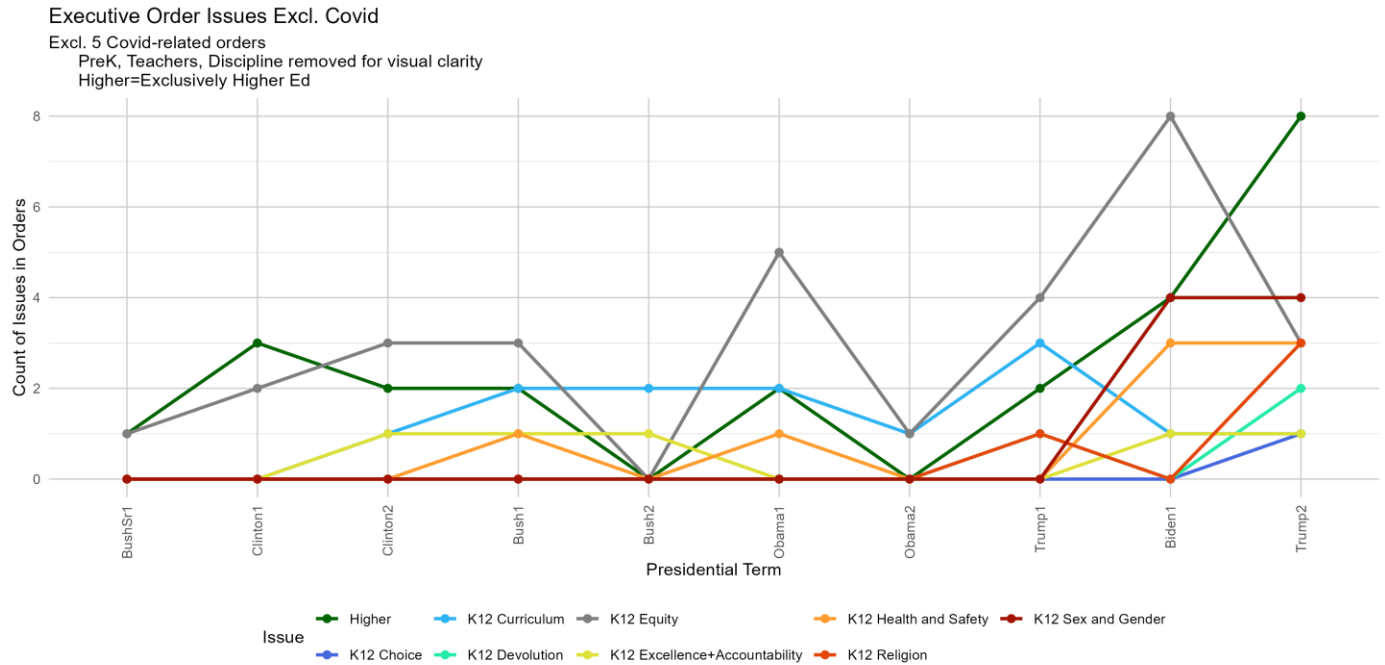


After the Obama administration, the amount of education executive orders has increased rapidly. Figure 6 shows the increase in the total number of executive orders related to education issued by presidents in each of their terms: Biden and each of Trump’s terms have had more executive orders than prior two term presidents. Figure 7 separates these executive orders by issue focus and visualizes two notable trends⁷. First, the number of executive orders attempting to improve or implement school reform, accountability, and excellence policies have never been substantial, only accounting for one Clinton order, two Bush administration orders, one order during Biden’s administration, and one in Trump’s second term. These last two orders were not as comprehensively directed towards reform initiatives as Bush’s Executive Order 13153 (2000): Biden’s Executive Order 14045 (2020) directed resources towards academic afterschool

⁷ Issues were non-mutually exclusive. Therefore this figure doesn’t show the total amount of executive orders on a given issue, but instead the number of times an executive order was signed that pertained to a given issue.

resources towards Hispanic students, and Trump’s Executive Order 14277 (2025) attempts to use an array of AI-driven resources to improve instruction and educational outcomes.

Figure 7: Number of Executive Orders on Education by Issue Code



In contrast, most orders that would take place during Biden and Trump’s terms focus on issues with a high level of partisan disagreement. Respectively, each of their administrations were engaged in a struggle to implement their own agendas and overturn the other’s. Orders pertaining solely to K-12 span a range of educational issues: civic education (Exec. Order No. 13,859 (2019); Exec. Order No. 13,958 (2020)), student health (Exec. Order No. 13,265 (2002); Exec. Order No. 13,545 (2010)), work readiness (Exec. Order No. 13,801 (2017); Exec. Order No. 13,870 (2019); Exec. Order No. 14,278 (2025)) and school safety (Exec. Order No. 14,092 (2023); Exec. Order No. 14,127 (2024)). Notably, equity-related issues are more likely to appear in orders pertaining to K-12 and higher education when compared to orders pertaining to K-12 and not higher education. Sixteen orders were coded as both K-12 equity and relating to higher education, and only ten were coded as K-12 equity and unrelated to higher education.

Trump's first term executive orders are instructive in how the executive's attitudes towards K-12 education have shifted in a new direction. Trump dedicated three executive actions towards instructional changes, more than any president had done in their first term: one for career education (Exec. Order No. 13,845 (2018)), one concerning AI use (Exec. Order No. 13,859 (2019)), and finally his original 1776 civic education reform commission (Exec. Order No. 13,958 (2020)). Trump's first term also saw a continuation of equity-related orders, including executive orders related 'economic empowerment' of AAPI Americans (Exec. Order No. 13,872 (2019)) and Hispanics (Exec. Order No. 13,935 (2020)). However, the valence of Trump's equity and gender-related orders becomes much more focused on overturning recent Democratic-led policies involving equity in his second term; for example, "ending racial indoctrination" (Exec. Order No. 14,190 (2025)) and anti-trans education orders (Exec. Order No. 14,168 (2025); Exec. Order No. 14,187 (2025)) mark shifts towards policies designed to curb the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives started during Biden's administration and a rupture from the continuity of equity-focused orders dating back to George H. W. Bush.

These orders complemented a bevy of other devolutionary orders throughout Trump's terms, ranging from limiting the role of the federal government in personnel and instruction (Exec. Order No. 13,791 (2017)), projected undergraduate degree earnings statements by universities (Exec. Order No. 13,864 (2019)), and directing community service block grants towards school choice (Exec. Order No. 13,969 (2020)). In sum, these executive orders highlight how Trump's first term increased the number of executive orders concerning education and constituted an expansion of what the executive branch was willing to do through orders, taking a more direct stance in what was being taught and directly altering funding opportunities. However, by the beginning of his second term, the volume of orders was progressively

dominated by more openly ideological orders distinct from prior Republican presidents. This volume change occurs very early in his presidency: this research only observes orders through May of 2025. Trump has issued more orders pertaining to education in the first 5 months of his second term than any other president in our data had through their entire presidency.

Biden's administration also expanded executive order use on K-12 education but on different issues. Biden issued eight orders related to K-12 equity issues, more than any previous president. Additionally, Biden issued more orders related to health and safety in K-12 education, even when excluding orders related directly to Covid-19. These included two orders related to gun violence (Exec. Order No. 14,092 (2023); Exec. Order No. 14,127 (2024)) and one which increased mental health and training resources for early childcare personnel and educators (Exec. Order No. 14,095 (2023)). Biden's administration also engaged in directly overturning multiple Trump orders. Biden revoked Trump's 1776 civic education commission in Executive Order No. 13,985 (2021), two and a half months after Trump issued his order. Trump would then reinstate and expand his commission within the first month of his second term in Executive Order No. 14,190 (2025). This sequence of executive orders indicates that the executive role in K-12 has expanded, *and* that the last two administrations have been willing to immediately overturn their predecessors' initiatives, a pattern that continues into Trump's second term.

We find a similar pattern of Trump overturning Biden's executive action in his second term. Trump rescinded Biden's Executive Order No. 14,075 (2022), a large order which expanded resources to LGBTQ+ students and directed the executive to fight harmful practices towards these students in the states. Trump's Executive Order No. 14,148 (2025) overturned Biden's order, in addition to equity orders related to Hispanic, Black, and Native American students, and two of his Covid-19 specific orders. This order served as an omnibus revocation of

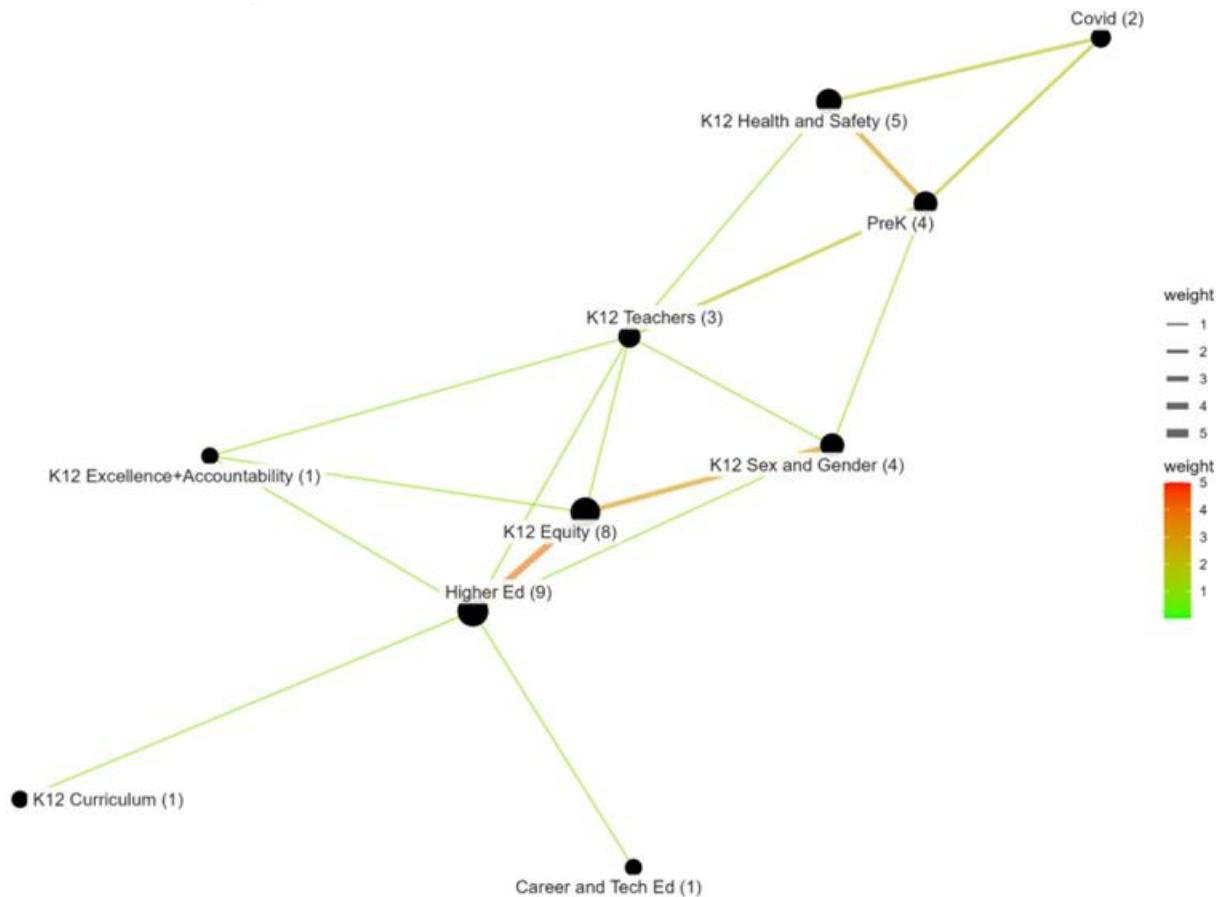
prior Biden administration orders on a variety of education and non-education issues. Trump has additionally issued orders attacking “gender ideology” and schools that recognize trans students (Exec. Order No. 14,168 (2025); Exec. Order No. 14,201 (2025)) and attempting to expand pro-Christian education in public schools and through choice opportunities (Exec. Order No. 14,202 (2025); Exec. Order No. 14,191(2025)).

The volume of orders Biden implemented in his term and Trump in his second term allow us to visualize the co-occurrence of issue codes in executive orders to see which issues are central. In other words, which issues are mentioned most frequently in the same executive orders? This information can provide another viewpoint for assessing the agenda priorities of each presidential administration. Figures 8 and 9 visualize the co-occurrence of these issues in networks: nodes represent the issues, and tie strength indicates the frequency of issues occurring in the same executive order.

Figure 8: Issue Co-Occurrence Network under Biden

Issue Network: Biden

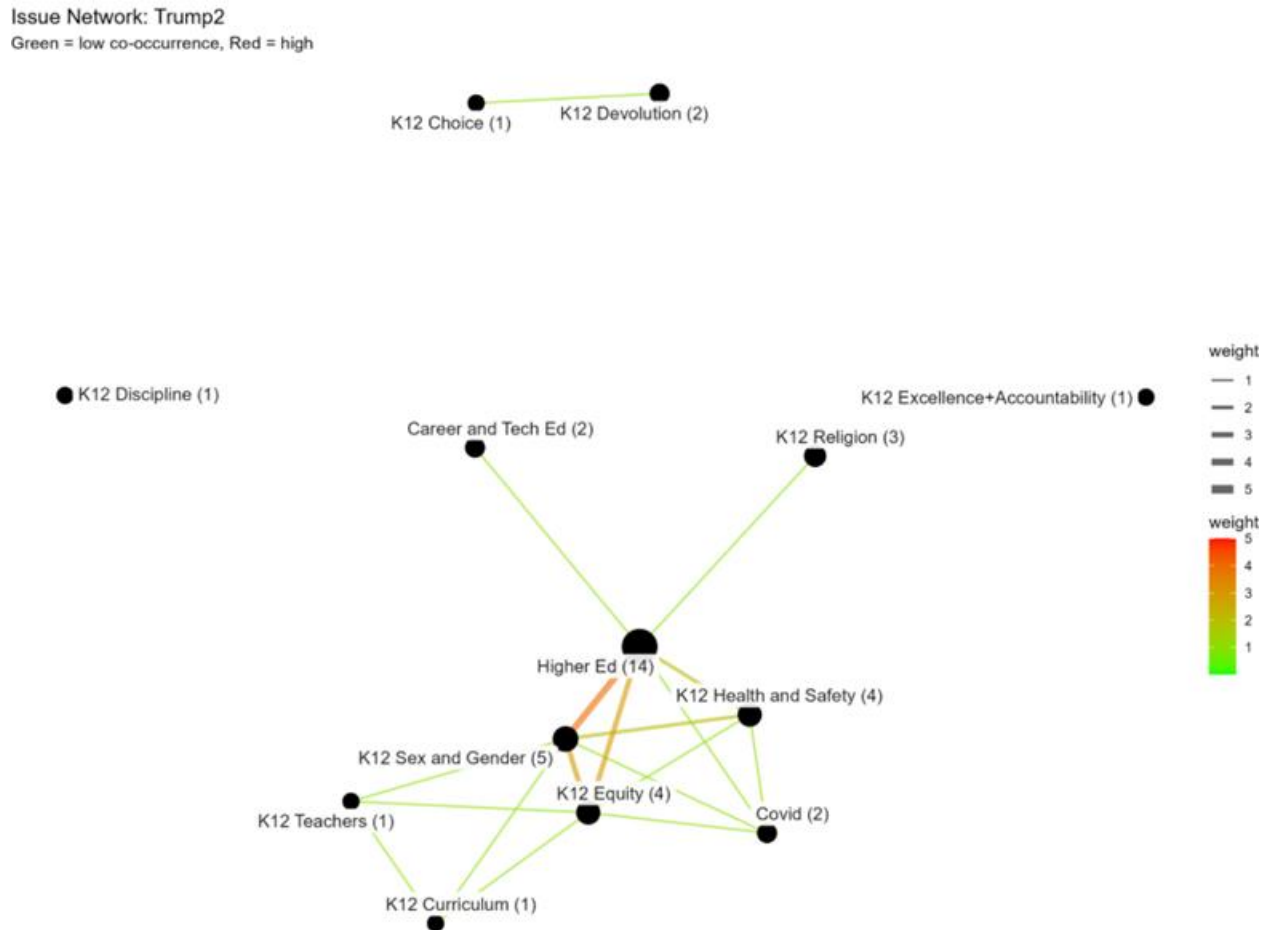
Green = low co-occurrence, Red = high



Under Biden and Trump, K-12 equity (racial and sex & gender) initiatives were frequently tied to higher education orders. For Biden, these orders were cross-sector equity initiatives targeting K-12 and higher education; for Trump, these tended to be orders rolling back these same equity orders. The centrality and bundling of health and safety, sex and gender, and broad equity initiatives across both presidents demonstrates each administration’s willingness to engage with education through executive orders, but mostly on these issues. Meanwhile, K-12 Excellence and Accountability issues sit on the margin of these issue networks, particularly during the second Trump administration. There is nothing here to suggest the survival of the

bipartisan accountability regime. Instead, there is a polarizing nexus of issues that cut across K-12 and higher education focused on equity and racial/ethnic/gender identity and related policies.

Figure 9: Issue Co-Occurrence Network in Trump’s Second Term



Overall, the dramatic increase in education-related executive orders during Biden’s and Trump’s terms have expanded towards more equity related issues, more conservative-oriented policies previously unaddressed through executive orders or congressional action, and the dissonance between these equity and conservative policies has resulted in the overturning of each prior administration’s orders in short timeframes. These actions have expanded the field of

conflict in K-12 education politics but offer little direction or signaling for a consistent federal policy agenda on education in lieu of an accountability regime.

Discussion & Conclusion

Taken together, our findings are consistent with the argument that federal K-12 education policy has entered a period of policy regime decay, rather than simply issue displacement or withdrawal of federal involvement. The bipartisan regime that emerged after NCLB depended on an alignment of ideas, interests, and institutions: both parties accepted federal oversight of state testing and accountability for schools, Congress remained active in overseeing policy, and presidents largely accepted and operated within this shared framework. Our evidence shows that all three pillars have weakened, if not entirely crumbled. Congressional attention is down, with fewer key votes and fewer hearings, especially on accountability and excellence. Party issue priorities are not aligned, and sometimes the parties are working from entirely opposite directions on K-12 education. Presidents are highly active in educational policy, but they are focused on advancing partisan goals or demonstrating their opposition to the other party. While the infrastructure of accountability remains in place at the state and local level through ongoing implementation of annual testing and adjusting standards, these policies proceed with little federal involvement, guidance, or oversight.

Furthermore, regime decay does not mean that the federal government has withdrawn from education policy. Instead, our results show a shift from aligned congressional and presidential action on K-12 education to a more executive-led and conflictual form of policymaking (Lowande 2024). Presidential interventions—mainly through executive orders—have centered less on durable accountability reform, and instead featured ideologically charged conflicts concerning race, gender, religion, and curriculum. In other words, the decay of the

accountability regime has not produced a federal vacuum; instead, it has produced a more unilateral, polarized, and reversible federal role in education. In our view, there is no longer a regime in education politics at the federal level—the prior bipartisan accountability regime is in a state of decay. Some policies remain in place, some goals related to accountability get traction at the state level, and some advocates have kept the torch burning for accountability (Dewey et al. 2026). But federal education politics in 2026 is dominated by contested equity issues—not accountability.

This research has three notable limitations that present opportunities for further study. First, we have not analyzed public opinion on federal education policy for this study, so we cannot assess the role public opinion played in shaping, or being shaped by, the shrinkage of the federal government’s role in education. Second, the decline in federal action and the accountability regime may be related to the ESSA legislation returning more authority to states, where there is considerable variation in approaches to accountability policy, school choice, and curriculum issues. While recent declines in NAEP scores complicate that potential narrative (Carillo 2025), more research should be done to connect activity in state and federal education policy and each of their roles in shaping national priorities. Finally, while we find evidence of policy regime decay in education, this may also be explained as a larger trend of eroding federal policy effectiveness and growing polarization across policy areas. In our views, these trends are compatible with and closely linked with the specific account of policy regime decay that we demonstrate for education.

The broader implication is that federal education politics is now increasingly detached from the widely recognized challenge that helped sustain bipartisan action: improving student outcomes. This helps explain why the contemporary federal role in education can appear both

intrusive and hollow—intrusive due to broad executive action that requires immediate responses and reviews of existing policies by subnational actors; hollow due to the lack of a stable coalition or lasting policy framework. K-12 education at the federal level increasingly resembles other issue areas that have been reshaped by partisan polarization, such as energy policy, agriculture, immigration, and healthcare.

Is there any way to reverse regime decay or reset federal attention on student outcomes in K-12 education? Our findings suggest that decay is not only driven by partisan polarization over policy but also by Congress's retreat from sustained legislating and oversight in K-12 policy. Many states are enacting bipartisan policies, including initiatives to improve reading instruction, limit or ban cellphone and technology use in classrooms, and expand career education programs. In other words, there are topics with bipartisan issue agreement in K-12 education. Meanwhile, some new issues in education have attracted recent congressional attention. For example, the role of instructional technology and artificial intelligence in K-12 education is a topic of growing concern for policymakers in both parties who are concerned about privacy/confidentiality, screen time for youth, and best practices for instruction. Emerging topics related to technology in the classroom could provide an entry point for congressional involvement.

Nonetheless, there is much to rebuild in federal institutions if Congress reasserts its role, given the decimation of the federal Department of Education. Furthermore, a more active Congress could also amplify conflict, rather than resolving it, using hearings mainly for symbolic confrontations and airing of partisan grievances. Lacking a crystal ball, we cannot discern what the future might hold. For now, political action and policy change to support K-12 students in the U.S. overwhelmingly depends on state and local action.

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Appendix A: Executive Order and Congressional Committee Hearing Issue coding

Executive Orders

Following our web scrape, executive orders were inductively coded to confirm that they were related to education policy via manual coder readings of each document. Documents were identified for their policy relevance using the Comparative Agendas project quasi sentence methodology (Jones et al. 2023). Then, the primary coder read the remaining policy-relevant documents and identified their issue focus. Finally, secondary coders read samples of each issue code to confirm issue pertinence and conduct intercoder reliability tests. Issue codes are not mutually exclusive, and documents may contain multiple issue codes.

Issue Codes

Career and Technical Education: Orders relating to career training and technical skills training through educational bodies, such as K12 career preparation, community college certification, or higher education apprenticeships.

Higher Education: Orders relating to higher education, such as community college, accreditation, or federal funding of university research.

Prekindergarten: Orders relating to prekindergarten educational programs, such as academic or socioemotional preparation programs.

K12 Accountability: Orders relating to the establishment of academic accountability frameworks for states or localities to follow, such as requiring specific reporting procedures to the federal government or tying federal dollars to academic standards.

K12 Choice: Orders relating to school choice initiatives, such as religious school exemptions, charter school funding, or voucher programs.

K12 Curriculum: Orders relating to the imposition or prohibition of curricular standards, or policies intending to promote curriculums, such as STEM funding, civic education, or the inclusion of minoritized populations in fields like STEM.

K12 Devolution: Orders relating to efforts decreasing the federal role in education, such as efforts to close the Department of Education or prohibition of federal policies intending to impose standards on states or localities.

K12 Discipline: Orders relating to prohibitions or alterations to federal guidelines on school discipline policies, such as prohibition of disciplinary policies targeting disabled students or efforts to loosen federal regulations on disciplinary guidelines.

K12 Equity: Orders relating to the protection or equalization of demographic categories in education, including race, disability, sex, indigeneity, gender orientation, gender expression, veteran status, and immigration status. Orders were included if they promoted the protection of these categories or attempting to loosen or rollback protections.

K12 Excellence: Orders relating to programs or policies intending to improve student academic outcomes, including academic afterschool programs, additional tutoring services, or whole child education.

K12 Health and Safety: Orders relating to the physical or emotional health and safety of students, teachers, and staff, such as sex education, school shootings, or school hardening.

K12 Religion: Orders relating to religious expression and religious schools, such as federal funding opportunities for religious schools, freedom of religious expression, or federal investigations into potential religious discrimination.

K12 Sex and Gender: Orders relating to sex and gender expression, such as protections for LGBTQ+ students, programs intending to include women in STEM, or efforts to roll back protections for trans students. Sex and Gender was coded as an additional and separate code from Equity for conceptual clarity and specificity of orders targeting sex and gender.

K12 Teachers: Orders relating to teachers, including compensation, loan forgiveness, employment, certification, or training.

Covid: Orders relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as additional funding, closure policies, or rollback of Covid-19 policies or exemptions.

Congressional Committee Hearings

Using the Comparative Agendas Project dataset on committee hearings relating to education extend through 2024 (Jones et al. 2025), committee hearings and their accompanying executive descriptions were inductively coded by a primary coder, after which secondary coders assessed a subsample of the committees for issue relevance and to assess intercoder reliability. All issue coding was done K12 exclusively.

Accountability: Hearings relating to the establishment of academic accountability frameworks for states or localities to follow, such as requiring specific reporting procedures to the federal government or tying federal dollars to academic standards.

Choice: Hearings relating to school choice initiatives, such as religious school exemptions, charter school funding, or voucher programs.

Discipline: Hearings relating to prohibitions or alterations to federal guidelines on school discipline policies, such as prohibition of disciplinary policies targeting disabled students or efforts to loosen federal regulations on disciplinary guidelines.

Equity: Hearings relating to the protection or equalization of demographic categories in education, including race, disability, sex, indigeneity, gender orientation, gender expression, veteran status, and immigration status. Orders were included if they promoted the protection of these categories or attempting to loosen or rollback protections.

Excellence: Hearings relating to programs or policies intending to improve student academic outcomes, including academic afterschool programs, additional tutoring services, or whole child education.

Finance: Hearings relating to the funding of schools and school operations, such as funding formula, federal grant outcomes, or programs targeted as funding specific populations (women in STEM, disability funding).

Parents: Hearings relating to parent involvement in education, such as parent rights initiatives and parent information programs.

Safety: Hearings relating to the physical or emotional safety of students, teachers, and staff, such as school shootings and school hardening.

Teachers: Hearings relating to teachers, including compensation, loan forgiveness, employment, certification, or training.

Technology: Hearings relating to technology use and adoption in schools, such as digital device use, the internet, or facility modernization

Appendix B: Party Platform Issue coding

Presidential party platforms were issue coded using Wolbrecht and Hartney's coding procedure, and their data was used with their express permission for continuity between our dataset's timeframes. For information on platform issue coding, see their appendix (Wolbrecht & Hartney 2014).

References

- Jones, Bryan D., Frank R. Baumgartner, Sean M. Theriault, Derek A. Epp, Cheyenne Lee, Miranda E. Sullivan. 2023. Policy Agendas Project: Codebook.
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- Wolbrecht, Christina, and Michael T. Hartney. "“Ideas about interests”": explaining the changing partisan politics of education." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 603-630.