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## The Presidential Platform on Twenty-First Century Education Goals

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**Abstract:** As social and economic problems change, so do the goals of education reformers. This content analysis of presidential debates transcripts, state of the union addresses, and education budgets from 2000 to 2015 reveals the ways in which presidents and presidential candidates have framed education goals thus far in the twenty-first century. Using Labaree's (1997) framework of competing goals in American education, we found that democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility made their way into education discourse. Democratic equality occurred most frequently, followed by social efficiency, then social mobility. Presidents also used these goals in concert, applying symbolic language of equity to promote education policy initiatives framed as bolstering economic growth, America's global competitiveness, and the opportunity for individuals to achieve the American Dream. Implications for federal education policy trends and frameworks for understanding the education goals of U.S. presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are discussed.

**Keywords:** federal policy, politics of education, education goals

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### **La plataforma presidencial sobre las metas educativas del siglo 21**

**Resumen:** Así como cambian los problemas sociales y económicos, también cambian los objetivos de quienes quieren reformar la educación. Este análisis de contenido de las transcripciones de los debates presidenciales, mensajes presidenciales, y presupuestos educativos entre 2000-2015 revela las formas en que los presidentes y candidatos presidenciales han enmarcado las metas educativas en el siglo XXI. Utilizando la perspectiva de Labaree (1997) sobre los objetivos conflictivos de la educación americana, se encontró que nociones de igualdad democrática, eficiencia social y movilidad social entraron en el discurso educativo. La noción de igualdad democrática fue la más frecuente, seguida de eficiencia social, y luego movilidad social. Los presidentes presentaban estos objetivos de manera coordinada, con un lenguaje simbólico de equidad para promover iniciativas de políticas educativas que impulsaran el crecimiento económico, la competitividad global de Estados Unidos, y brindar oportunidades para que los individuos alcancen el sueño americano. Se discuten las implicaciones de esas tendencias y modelos para comprender los objetivos de la educación usados por los presidentes de Estados Unidos en el siglo 21.

**Palabras clave:** política federal; política de la educación; metas de educación

### **Plataforma presidencial nas metas de educação do século 21**

**Resumo:** Assim como problemas sociais e econômicos mudam, as metas dos reformadores de educação também. A análise deste conteúdo de transcrições de debates presidenciais, estado dos discursos de sindicatos, e orçamentos da educação de 2000 a 2015 revela as maneiras em que presidentes e candidatos presidenciais têm enquadrado metas de educação até hoje no século 21. Utilizando a análise de Labaree (1997) de metas competitivas na educação Americana, encontramos que a igualdade democrática, eficiência social, e mobilidade social construiu o caminho deles para o discurso da educação. Igualdade democrática ocorreu frequentemente, seguido de eficiência social e, então, mobilidade social. Presidentes usaram, também, essas metas em conjunto, aplicando linguagem simbólica de capital para promover iniciativas de políticas de educação enquadradas como reforços para o crescimento econômico, competitividade global dos Estados Unidos, e a oportunidade para os indivíduos de conquistar o sonho Americano. Implicações para as direções de política de educação federal e estruturas de compreensão das metas de educação de presidentes norte-americanos no século 21 são discutidas.

**Palavras-chave:** política federal; políticas educacionais; metas de educação

## **Introduction**

Americans have long viewed education as an antidote to society's ailments, while acknowledging that the antidote itself is in need of repair (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This "Education Gospel" (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005) or "school syndrome" (Labaree, 2010, 2012) both critiques the current status of education while reaffirming its importance for national and individual needs. These needs have shifted over time; as perceptions of social and economic problems change, so do the goals that education reformers seek to achieve (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The twenty-first century has heralded in new events and trends drastically shaping the world outside of the schoolhouse walls: the meteoric rise of the Internet and social media, a shift in types of jobs available due to an economic recession and the ascendancy of a knowledge-intensive global marketplace, a spike in international and domestic terrorism, prolonged military engagement in the Middle East, and high levels of immigration and human displacement (Bottery, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Spring, 2010; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Zhao, 2010). These changing social and economic contexts may signify a shift in education goals as well.

The federal government's role in education policymaking has also shifted. Since the 1990s, the federal government has wielded increasing power in the education policy arena, with initiatives like the voluntary national standards movement, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Race to the Top (McDonnell, 2005). The influence of federal actors is seen not only in the laws they pass, but in the language they use to attach meaning to education policy agendas (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). While federal congress wields the power of the pen, the president holds the power of the bully pulpit, a term used to describe the words delivered from a powerful position, such as that of the President (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). The particular philosophies espoused by the federal executive branch can strongly influence the creation, adoption, and implementation of education policy at federal and state levels (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Meier, 2002).

The first two presidents who heralded in the twenty-first century, President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, wielded the power of the pulpit with the enactment of landmark education policies (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top). Underlying the text of these policies are values and ideals denoting education's purpose in American society (Smith, 2004). The 2016 presidential election that stands before us will bring forth a new leader, whose rhetoric will likely reveal what he or she believes about the purpose of education in this country. To understand how this rhetoric compares to that of his or her predecessors requires an understanding of how past leaders used the president's pulpit to frame the purpose of education and how straight or winding these purposes have been. Thus, the present study reveals the ways in which presidents and presidential candidates in the United States have framed education goals since the start of the twenty-first century. Specifically, we examine 1) the dominant twenty-first century education goals prevalent in presidential political discourse and 2) the extent to which these goals compete with or complement one another. Because the executive branch of the U.S. federal government uses language to imbue educational policy initiatives with meaning (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007; Edelman, 1985), this examination of presidential discourse contributes to our understanding of recent directions federal education policy has taken, future courses of action, and who is meant to benefit: the public good or private individuals.

### **Competing Education Goals: Equality, Efficiency, and Mobility**

Policymakers and the public who elects them have projected a multiplicity of goals and values upon the U.S. public education system since the very founding of the nation, including equity, efficiency, and liberty (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Stone, 1988). Labaree (1997, 2010) has traced these goals over the history of public school in the United States, arguing that three competing goals - *democratic equality*, *social efficiency*, and *social mobility* - have been at the root of education conflict and ineffectiveness in the United States. We use these three competing goals as a framework to test and to understand 21<sup>st</sup> century presidential discourse around education policy. Because this framework was developed from a temporal historical perspective, this allows us to compare and contextualize current trends from their historical antecedents. Further, the framework encapsulates the values of equity, efficiency, and liberty – values representative of the “chronic values conflicts” among those who shape the U.S. public education system (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005, p. 13; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

*Democratic equality*, reflective of the value of equity, frames education as a public good that prepares people for citizenship and political participation in a democratic society. Democratic equality includes *equal treatment*, *equal access*, and *citizenship training*. *Equal treatment* works to promote a shared sense of community membership and to reduce class and racial conflict by providing equal educational experiences for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and ability. This is

illustrated in policies that promote desegregation, school finance redistribution, and affirmative action and enforce the same high education performance standards for all students. *Equal access* emphasizes that all Americans should have equal opportunity to receive an education at all levels, from preschool to the highest university degrees. *Citizenship training* teaches civic virtue and commitment to serving the public good. Examples of citizenship training include curriculum related to social studies, civics, democratic government, and the liberal arts that familiarizes students with the full culture of their society.

*Social efficiency*, reflective of the value of efficiency, similarly frames education as a public good, yet with the purpose of creating a productive workforce. This goal emphasizes *vocationalism*: education programs such as vocational schools and community colleges that train students in skills for particular jobs. Another manifestation of social efficiency is *educational stratification*, a vertical distribution of education levels that mirrors that of the job market. The highest level of education one reaches (e.g., middle school, high school, community college, four-year university), the “track” on which one is placed in an institution, or the comparative ranking of the institution one attends at a given educational level indicates one’s place in the workforce. Both vocationalism and stratification serve the purpose of preparing youth to carry out economic roles in the free market.

In contrast, *social mobility* – reflective of the value of liberty – deems education a private good that gives individuals a competitive advantage for desired economic opportunities. From this perspective, education serves consumers rather than citizens, stressing *market values* such as choice and competition. Social mobility also requires a system of education that “is structured in such a manner that the social benefits of education are allocated differentially, with some students receiving more than others” (Labaree, 1997, p. 52). Examples of social mobility include a *graded hierarchy*, in which students face increasing chances of elimination as they move up the education ladder; *qualitative differences between institutions* that gives students at higher-regarded institutions a competitive advantage; and *stratified structure of opportunities within institutions* that allows individual students to distinguish themselves from their peers (e.g., ability-level grouping, curriculum tracking, pull-out programs, letter grades, standardized testing, differentiated diplomas.) Additionally, the social mobility goal emphasizes the value of *credentials* (i.e., grades, degrees) that one can exchange for jobs and social prestige and highlights *meritocracy* in the education narrative, namely that winners of the education competition are those with the most merit.

These three goals both contradict and complement one another (Labaree, 1997). On the one hand, they represent tensions in balancing education as a public and a private good (Allen & Mintrom, 2010; Labaree, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Social efficiency, in valuing social reproduction as a means to ensure an educated workforce that can fill available jobs in the national economy, contradicts the goals of social mobility, whereby individuals “can achieve anything within the limits of their desires and personal capabilities” (Labaree, 1997, p. 60). Democratic equality, which promotes the development of citizens who “can engage in the democratic activity for the sake of the community,” contradicts the competitive, individualist nature of getting ahead in the economy (Allen & Mintrom, 2010, p. 445). Labaree (1997, 2012) has argued that contradictory goals have resulted in generations of ineffective school reformers.

Yet, when coupled, goals can also serve as a powerful force in shaping the education agenda. Together, democratic equality and social mobility have helped drive many progressive reforms in the past century. The expansion of secondary and postsecondary education and efforts to reduce segregation serve the purpose of providing equal access to education for all *and* providing more opportunities for individuals to move up the social ladder (Labaree, 1997). Likewise, the inclusion of democratic equality rhetoric in the standards-based accountability and school choice movements broadened their appeal, and resulted in subsequent inclusion into state and federal policy (Labaree,

2010). For example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) made testing and accountability a nationwide reality in part because the bill garnered support from both the business sector seeking to improve the workforce and civil rights leaders working to close the achievement gap (Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009). Similarly, school choice reforms, such as voucher programs in Milwaukee, gained momentum because of the conjoining of African American community activists and conservative right wing organizations (Pedroni & Apple, 2005).

The prominence of these three goals have ebbed and flowed in different eras of American history (Labaree, 2010). Scholars have illustrated that although education for democratic citizenship was a prominent goal in the colonial and revolutionary era of the United States, it no longer frames education policy conversations and has been superseded by a rhetoric of social mobility or social efficiency (Carpenter, 2005; Rothstein et al., 2008). Labaree (1997) contended that social mobility has risen in ascendancy, turning education from a public good that benefits a democratic citizenry and market economy into a private commodity for individual advantage. This is evidenced by the growth of market-based education reforms in state and federal policy, which treat parents as private consumers who can choose the type of education for their children (Vergari, 2007), or by the growth of homeschooling, which undermines democratic goals by turning education into a private good (Lubienski, 2000).

Others have argued that social efficiency has become predominant in federal education discourse (Becker, 2010; Carpenter, 2005; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). Carpenter's (2005) content analysis of presidential addresses from George Washington to George W. Bush revealed that presidents have shifted attention from civic responsibility to economic efficiency over time. Grubb and Lazerson (2005) agreed that throughout the course of the 20th century, vocationalism - a manifestation of economic efficiency - transformed the American education system to have an occupational focus. Others have similarly argued that a consensus has emerged across political lines, and nations, for pushing world-class standards so that students gain the necessary skills to compete in the global economy (Ball, 2012; Mintrom & Vergari, 1997; Smith, 2014).

The goals that politicians attach to particular education policy agendas can also mask realities underlying the rhetoric. Politicians may use ambiguous *symbolic language* to create a "fog" of consensus around issues (e.g., accountability), but this can result in policies that provide "tangible benefits to the few but only symbolic benefits for the many" (Smith, 2004, p. 12; Stone, 1988). For example, numerous studies have pointed to how No Child Left Behind, though framed as a measure to produce greater educational equality for low-income, African-American, and indigenous students, actually exacerbated inequities (e.g., Anyon and Greene, 2007; Cohen & Allen, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Politicians' rhetoric is sometimes meant to persuade others that their propositions are truth, and not necessarily to describe the reality of policies and policy proposals. For instance, it may be difficult for policymakers to achieve the equity goals promoted in federal education accountability policies because accountability reforms have an underlying focus on market-oriented reforms that denote winners and losers (Suspitsyna, 2010). These examples suggest that attaching a particular goal to a policy does not imply that the actual policy is designed to meet that goal, but can serve to make the policy more palatable or mask underlying agendas.

Rhetoric is particularly important for U.S. presidents, who have the constitutional authority to push their education agendas not through appropriations but through the "bully pulpit." Indeed, because education is constitutionally the jurisdiction of the states, Congress and the President have historically used the value of equity or efficiency to legitimize their political reach. For example, the first passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 was framed as an anti-poverty measure. Under Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton in the 1980s and 1990s, the goals of ESEA shifted to emphasize efficiency, illuminated in rhetoric that higher standards and

achievement would prepare students for work in a global economy (Anderson, 2005; McDonnell, 2005).

The present study adds twenty-first century presidential discourse to previous research that has traced the history of educational goals. It further tests whether the goals in Labaree's framework remain relevant in the twenty-first century context. Understanding federal actors' language can provide insights into current and future trends in their education policy agendas (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). In particular, how presidents have attached the goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility to their education agenda highlights how presidents give meaning to education reform initiatives up to this point in the twenty-first century and who may ultimately benefit from the direction of federal education policy initiatives.

## **Methods**

Presidents' educational goals, which provide the rationale for many federal education policy initiatives, reveal themselves in the language of platforms and speeches (Edelman, 1985; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Stone, 1988). Our study utilized directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to collect, code, and analyze the public discourse surrounding education of presidents and presidential candidates. We intentionally chose to focus on the language of presidents and presidential candidates because chief executives have a "unique ability" to put issues on the public agenda (Mintrom & Vergari, 1997) and have increasingly done so with education issues in the past few decades (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007).

Furthermore, within the contexts of nationally broadcast debates and speeches, presidents and presidential candidates frame issues in ways that appeal to the general population (Marschall & McKee, 2002) while carrying the torch of the Democratic or Republican parties and invoking partisan beliefs, values, and agendas (Benoit, 2004). These "torches" signify conflicting ideologies (Spring, 2002). Through presidential elections and tenures over the past three decades, the Democratic Party's education platform has consistently sought to decrease social and economic inequities through expanding an activist federal government. Conversely, the Republican Party's education platform, supported by a coalition of the Christian right and neoconservatives, has promoted individual freedom from government, privatization of public services, and the teaching of social conservative "traditional" American Christian values (Spring, 2002, 2010).

## **Data Sources**

Appendix A provides a complete list of data sources. Our sources included transcripts from each of the three nationally televised presidential debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, transcripts of State of the Union addresses from 2000 to 2015, the White House Budget Messages, and the President's Education Budget as presented to Congress between 2000 and 2015, for a total of 58 documents. (See Table 1). These sources cover the 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 general election, the last year of President Bill Clinton's presidency, the full two terms of President George W. Bush's presidency, and the first seven years of President Barack Obama's presidency. The balance of Democrats and Republicans in the White House during this time period allowed for comparisons between parties to ascertain recent political trends in education goals.

Table 1.

*Data Sources*

Source	Years	N
State of the Union Addresses (SOU)	2000 – 2015	16
White House Budget Message (BM)	2001 – 2015	15
White House Education Budget (EB)	2001 – 2015	15
National Presidential Debates	2000, 2004, 2008, 2012	12
Total		58

*Note:* State of the Union address transcripts, White House Budget Messages, and White House Education Budgets include those from President Clinton (2000), President Bush (2001 – 2008), and President Obama (2009 – 2015). The national presidential debate transcripts were used from the general election between Vice President Al Gore and Governor George W. Bush (2000), Senator John Kerry and President George W. Bush (2004), Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain (2008), and President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney (2012). White House Budget Messages and Education Budgets were retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb>. The presidential debate transcripts were retrieved from the Commission on Presidential Debates (<http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=debate-transcripts>).

The presidential debates were deliberately chosen as situations in which the two candidates had opportunities to showcase their ideologies and positions on policy issues and to juxtapose themselves against the candidate of the other political party (Kraus, 2000). We included the State of the Union and White House Education Budgets because they are pulpits from which presidents present their policy agendas to Congress and the wider public. For example, between 30 and 60 million viewers have tuned in every year since 2000 to the State of the Union. These data sources represent what Edelman (1985) might call a “political spectacle,” wherein politics is a spectator sport played on media “in a world that the public never quite touches” (p. 5). This world is filled with symbolic language and dramaturgy on public stages; the American people, and the Congressmen and Congresswomen who represent them, fill the watchful audience seats (Smith, 2004). In addition, these three sources of data occurred with the same frequency each year or election cycle, allowing us to consistently track trends in goals over time.

### Analysis

We coded all sections of the speeches, debates, and budgets that specifically mentioned education using the qualitative computer software Dedoose 4.5.95. Any sections of the data sources that did not make an explicit connection to education were not included in the analysis. Codes were captured at the paragraph level to capture the policy context in which the goal was situated and whether multiple goals were evoked simultaneously.

Directed content analysis allows the researcher to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). As our purpose was to examine the prominence and relevance of the three educational goals proposed by Labaree (1997) in twenty-first century presidential discourse, theory-generated and *in vivo* coding informed emerging patterns and themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). We developed our initial coding scheme using Labaree’s (1997) framework of *democratic equality*, *social efficiency*, and *social mobility*. Democratic equality initially consisted of the sub-codes *equal treatment*, *equal access*, and *citizenship training*. Social efficiency included *vocationalism* and *economic stratification*. Social mobility comprised of *meritocracy*, *credentials*, *stratified graded hierarchy*, *stratified institutional differences*, and *stratified opportunities within institutions*.

Text on education that did not fit under the *a priori* codes were identified and re-analyzed to determine whether they represented a new goal or a sub-code of an existing goal (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Additional codes that emerged from the data included *categorical investment* under democratic equality and *global competition, jobs, national investment, economic growth, and evidence-based practices* under social efficiency. *Categorical investment* included language that supported the provision of federal money to underserved subgroups of students (e.g., low-income, African-American, Latino, Native American). *Global competition* referred to rhetoric on education ensuring that students were prepared to compete in the global marketplace. *National investment* referred to language that evoked the narrative that investing in education would produce beneficial outputs for the nation. Finally, *evidence-based practices* captured rhetoric related to using research-based practices to maximize skills taught in schools. Documents were also tagged by type, year, and political party. The final list of codes, along with definitions and examples, is delineated in Table 2.

Table 2.  
*Coding Framework*

Goal	Code	Definition/Examples
Democratic Equality	<i>Equal treatment</i>	Universal enrollment, curriculum, and standards; de-segregation; inclusion of all students into the curriculum; affirmative action; financial re-distribution; closing the achievement gap; language of “every child” and “all students.”
	<i>Equal access</i>	Opportunities for students to attend high school, college, and early childhood education (e.g., high school graduation, Pell Grants, college tuition breaks).
	<i>Citizenship training</i>	American history, government, civics, and social studies classes; liberal arts; character education; school safety; health education; drug programs; service-learning.
	Categorical investment	Putting tax dollars into education for underserved sub-groups; includes loan forgiveness for Americorps members working in low-income areas.
Social Efficiency	Individual jobs	Individuals having access to jobs and employment as a result of the education system.
	Global competition	Being competitive for the global marketplace; bolstering math and science.
	Economic growth	Rhetoric that relates education to national economic growth and development.

Table 2 cont'd.

*Coding Framework*

Goal	Code	Definition/Examples
Social Efficiency	National investment	Rhetoric and policy that emphasizes putting tax dollars into education for beneficial outcomes for the nation.
	Evidence-based practices	Focus on social science research as a way to efficiently maximize skills taught in school.
	<i>Vocationalism</i>	Jobs skills/training; community colleges; technical and vocational programs/schools, certifications, and apprenticeships.
	<i>Economic stratification</i>	Vertical distribution of educational attainment; qualitative differences between schools at the same horizontal level; tracking (for future employment).
Social Mobility	<i>Meritocracy</i>	Meritocratic ideology of individuals working hard to move to a higher social or economic station in life; references to individuals achieving the American Dream.
	<i>Credentials</i>	Type of degree, degree attainment, grades, and credits one can “exchange” for social and economic gain.
	Marketization	Privatization of educational organizations/services; valuing market values of choice, innovation, competition, and incentives (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, teacher pay-for-performance incentives, TFA, Troops to Teachers.)
	<i>Stratified graded hierarchy</i>	Students climb through a series of grade levels at which they face elimination at certain points.
	<i>Stratified institutional differences</i>	Distinctions and reputations between schools (i.e. rankings, institutional “grades”; labels as “failing” or not).
	<i>Stratified opportunities within institutions</i>	Reading groups; pull out programs for high and low achievers; letter grades; comprehensive standardized tests to differentiate students; high school college-prep/AP tracks; differentiated diplomas.

*Note:* Italics represent codes derived from Labaree (1997).

After the coding was completed, the researchers wrote memos on democratic equality, social efficiency, social mobility, and code co-occurrences, the latter which paid attention to whether goals appeared in concert or distinct from one another. These memos compared the frequency of sub-codes over time and between Democrat and Republican presidents and candidates, as we expected to see differences across parties due to underlying conflict in partisan ideologies (Lakoff, 2008; Spring, 2010). In comparing parties, reported percentages were "normalized," that is, based on the ratio of the category, so that overrepresentation of one party did not skew the percentage. In these memos, sub-codes were compared to purported goals of each party to see the extent of party alignment as well.

Triangulation of the multiple data sources and peer debriefing of analyses allowed the researchers to ensure credibility (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Two researchers coded the data, building reliability by coding the same set of documents and debriefing to ensure that their codes were the same, coming to consensus on areas in which they disagreed, and discussing emerging codes. Once reliability was established, the researchers continued to meet on a weekly basis to discuss disconfirming evidence and developing themes around presidential educational goals.

## Findings

During speeches to the American people and presentations to Congress from 2000 to 2015, presidents promoted P-16 education policy prescriptions whose range included universal childhood education, standards and accountability, turnaround programs for failing schools, STEM education, charter schools, voucher programs, community colleges, and college loans. As Table 3 shows, the goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility all appeared in presidential education discourse. Democratic equality occurred in 48.2% of the total paragraphs coded, followed by social efficiency (34.0%), and social mobility (17.9%). All 58 coded documents mentioned at least two goals; the vast majority incorporated all three. A temporal analysis further showed that although the frequency of each goal ebbed and flowed over the fifteen years, all goals were always present. (See Figure 1). Rather than compete or contradict one another, the three goals appeared to work in concert towards advocating for an American education system built to bolster the American economy and individual economic success. In the following section, we describe in detail our findings for each of the broad goals and how those goals complemented one another in presidential discourse.

Table 3.

*Education Goal Summary by Document Type and Political Party Affiliation*

	Democratic Equality		Social Efficiency		Social Mobility	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<u>Document</u>						
SOU	77	46.4	50	30.1	39	23.5
Budget	311	49.8	217	34.7	97	15.5
Debates	73	44.0	58	34.9	35	21.1
Total	461	48.2	325	34.0	171	17.9
<u>Party</u>						
Democratic		57.9		62.3		53.3
Republican		42.1		37.7		46.7

*Note:* SOU = State of the Union Address. *n* represents raw counts of codes. Percentages (%) are based on normalized counts and are rounded to the nearest tenth.

### Democratic Equality

Though Labaree (1997) argued that the relative weight of democratic equality among the three educational goals has gradually declined over time, democratic equality occurred most often as compared to social efficiency and social mobility. Democrats favored the theme of democratic equality over Republicans, as shown in Table 3. Democratic equality accounted for 57.9% of the total codes for Democrats, and 42.1% of the total codes for Republicans. Closer analysis also revealed that Democrats and Republicans evoked different definitions of democratic equality in these political texts, neither of which included democratic citizenship, but focused heavily on equal treatment and equal access.

**From equal treatment to equal access.** Presidents and presidential candidates consistently used language evoking democratic equality in the inaugural years of the twenty-first century. Democrats and Republicans similarly employed language about *equal treatment*, with 45.9% of equal treatment codes coming from Democrats and 54.1% of equal treatment codes coming from Republicans. Yet partisan differences could be found in that Democrats overwhelmingly favored the language of *equal access*, with Democrat presidents and presidential candidates accounting for 73.0% of the equal access codes. This trend reflects the broader Democratic Party agenda to increase educational opportunity for all (Spring, 2002).

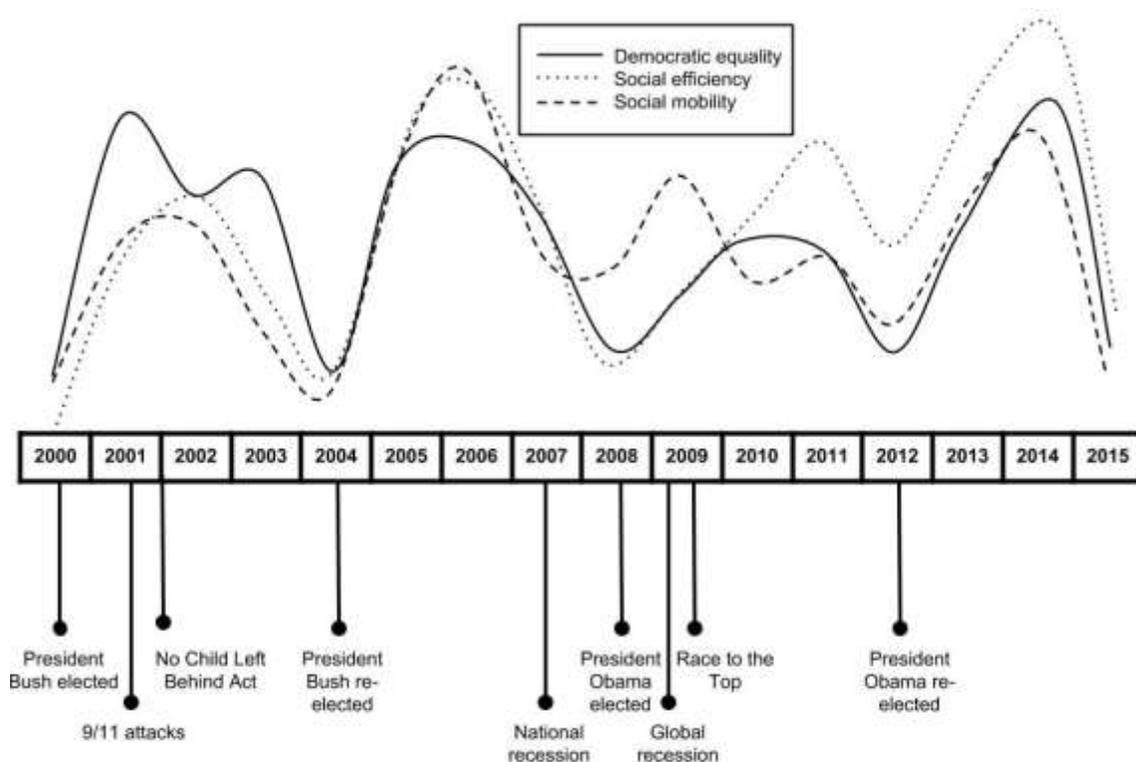


Figure 1. Prevalence of education goals (% of codes) in presidential rhetoric (2000 – 2015)

Equal treatment rhetoric was connected to specific policy initiatives. President Bush framed the landmark No Child Left Behind Act and reading programs such as Reading First as an issue of equal treatment, using symbolic language such as “every child” and creating a narrative that connected accountability to civil rights. “Every child will begin school ready to learn and graduate ready to succeed” became President Bush’s rallying cry in promoting his education agenda (SOU00). In nationally televised debates during the 2000 general election, President Bush evoked language reminiscent of the civil rights era, arguing that reading was the new civil right and proclaiming that “there is nothing more prejudiced than not educating a child” (D2). He emphasized the achievement gap for low-income and minority students and students with disabilities, and criticized schools for their “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

As President Bush geared up for his re-election in 2004, he promoted the stringent accountability measures in No Child Left Behind Act as successfully shifting the attitude toward low-performing students in public schools, and continued to blame the “soft bigotry of low expectations” as the reason that so many public schools were failing students. For example, the 2005 education budget read:

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed into the law the No Child Left Behind Act and forever changed public education in America. Local schools are now held accountable for rigorous achievement goals for all students . . . the soft bigotry of low expectations is being removed from our schools and communities.

The symbolic language of equal treatment continued to make its way into Republican debates, speeches, and budgets after Bush’s presidency. During his 2008 presidential bid, Senator McCain equated education with the “civil rights issue of the 21st century” (D9).

Democrats also used symbolic language of equal treatment when discussing specific policy initiatives. President Obama used language of equal treatment when discussing Race to the Top, turning around failing schools, and increasing educational opportunities throughout an individual’s life. For example, he frequently emphasized that “every child” and “all of our kids” should have access to quality pre-K and a world-class education (D9, BM14, SOU14). Previous Democratic candidates used the language of equal treatment as well. For example, in the 2000 election, candidate Vice President Gore asserted, “I have an obligation to fight to make sure there are no failing schools. We have to turn around -- most schools are excellent, but we have to make sure that *all* of them are” (D3).

Democrat and Republican presidents and presidential candidates have also evoked language around equal access, with equal access becoming the more frequent democratic equality discourse after President Obama took office in 2008. Since 2000, every Democrat and Republican president and presidential candidate has evoked the goal of equal access, specifically when discussing higher education. In particular, there has been bipartisan consensus around policies that promote college affordability, including tax deductions, exemptions, credits, Pell Grants, and increasing opportunities to obtain government student loans. In 2000, Democratic presidential candidate Gore proposed that college tuition up to \$10,000 per year should be tax deductible, so that middle class families could afford to send their children to college (D2). The 2002 education budget under President Bush sought to “ensure that postsecondary education is affordable and attainable for all students” through Pell Grants (EB2). Democrats, however, employed equal access language more frequently. President Obama made college affordability a central issue in his 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns and, once in office, continued to promise that “in an era of skyrocketing college tuitions, we will make sure that the doors of college remain open to children from all walks of life” (BM10).

Universal early childhood education became another issue that Democrats framed as an issue of equal access. In the 2000 election, Vice President Gore campaigned to make high-quality preschool available on a voluntary basis for every 4-year-old in the entire United States; universal early childhood education resurfaced and gained prominence in discourse under the Obama administration. In the 2009 State of the Union address, President Obama proclaimed, "...it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education – from the day they are born to the day they begin a career." The language of "cradle to career" and "college to career" education was found in the 2010, 2011, and 2014 White House Education Budgets, and was coupled with specific proposals in White House Budget Messages, Education Budgets, and State of the Union addresses to "make high quality preschool available to every child" (SOU14). For example, President Obama's 2014 Budget Message stated, "The Administration believes that all children should have access to a high-quality preschool education" (BM14). Its companion Education Budget outlined a proposal consisting of "a Federal-State partnership to provide all low- and moderate-income four-year old children with high-quality preschool," incentives for states to expand to middle class families and full-day kindergarten, and a \$750 million discretionary investment in Preschool Development Grants (EB14).

**The missing rhetoric of citizenship education.** The Founding Fathers and advocates for public education in the nineteenth century envisioned the nation's public schools as a way to train children to be citizens in a democratic society (Labaree, 2010). The findings from this study suggest that this vision of developing students' sense of civic virtue or commitment to the public good was largely lost in the inaugural years of the twenty-first century, as citizenship training was almost entirely absent from the presidential discourse from 2000 – 2015 pertaining to democratic equality. It accounted for only 23 of the 461 democratic equality codes, and was entirely absent from presidential talk and text analyzed in 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2015. Instead, as we discuss in the following section, a social efficiency, STEM-focused vision of curriculum arose. Rather than promote social studies, civics, government, and American history courses "designed to instill in students a commitment to the American political system" (Labaree, 1997, p. 44), President Bush and President Obama largely called for higher quality math and science courses, programs, and teachers to prepare Americans to compete in the twenty-first century marketplace.

## Social Efficiency

Social efficiency accounted for about a third of the codes for education goals promoted by presidents and presidential candidates. As Figure 1 shows, from 2009 onward, this goal rose to become the most prevalent in the discourse. Most prominent were narratives related to global competition (30.2% of social efficiency codes), jobs (29.2%), and vocational education (20.6%). Democrats more frequently portrayed the purpose of education as obtaining a job, with 64.2% of *individual job* codes coming from Democrats and only 35.8% from Republicans. Although Democrats generally favored this rhetoric, Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama all emphasized education as a means for individuals gaining employment and the nation's economy improving, highlighting the tension of education both as a private and public good.

The presidents differed in that Democrats framed education as a public good more often than Republicans, connecting jobs with national economic benefits (Democrats accounted for 81.5% of *economic growth* codes) and the need for the nation to compete in a global economy (Democrats accounted for 76.6% of *global competition* codes), which peaked in frequency during the 2007 national recession and has steadily climbed in frequency since the 2009 global recession. These differences in how social efficiency was framed again reflects broader partisan goals, with the

Democratic Party emphasizing the need for education to respond to a globally competitive knowledge economy to fix unemployment and reduce poverty and the Republican Party emphasizing increasing human capital to meet the needs of big business (Spring, 2002).

**Jobs for the 21st century global marketplace.** There was consensus among presidents that the role of education was to prepare students for jobs in the “21<sup>st</sup> century” or “global” marketplace. In the 2004 presidential campaign, President Bush highlighted this narrative multiple times. For example, in a 2004 debate he explained, “In order to make sure people have jobs for the 21st century, we’ve got to get it right in the education system” (D6). Likewise, in the third debate of the 2004 presidential election, he portrayed his landmark No Child Left Behind Act as a job stimulus, saying “Listen, the No Child Left Behind Act is really a jobs act when you think about it” (D9). President Obama evoked a similar narrative, portraying education as the means for preparing students for jobs in the “global marketplace” (BM10, EB11). He captured this sentiment in the 2009 State of the Union address, saying, “In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite” (SOU10).

The framing of education as job preparation surfaced in policy prescriptions pertaining to vocational education and math and science education. Vocational education most often came up in speeches and budget plans about community colleges. President Bush and President Obama widely supported community colleges in speeches. In a 2004 debate, President Bush touted the community college system as a “great place to get people retrained for the jobs that exist” and as “providing the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (D6). Similarly, in his 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 State of the Union addresses, President Obama emphasized the importance of community colleges in training people “for new jobs and careers in today’s fast changing world” (SOU12) and urged Congress to “revitalize” the nation’s community colleges (SOU11). In speeches, President Obama shared personal anecdotes of individuals who had gone back to community college for job re-training, which emphasized the connection between education and jobs. For example, in the 2011 State of the Union address, President Obama stated that “Because people need to be able to train for new jobs and careers in today's fast-changing economy, we're also revitalizing America's community colleges.” He then relayed the story of a 55-year-old woman pursuing a community college degree in biotechnology after working in the furniture industry for over three decades. The bipartisan support for education initiatives that responded to the needs of the job market was evident even during campaigns. For example, in the first 2012 presidential debate, President Obama stated, “one of the things I suspect Governor Romney and I probably agree on is getting businesses to work with community colleges so that they're setting up their training programs,” before proposing to “create 2 million more slots in our community colleges so that people can get trained for the jobs that are out there right now” (D10).

In addition, President Bush in his 2004 Education Budget and President Obama in consecutive State of the Unions proposed policies to forge partnerships between businesses, high schools, and community colleges, with the goal of preparing students for the workforce (EB4, EB14, SOU12, SOU13, SOU14). These plans reinforced the social efficiency mantra that education should provide students with the skills and training that business and industry needs. This was exemplified in the 2013 State of the Union, during which President Obama proposed funding that “rewards schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes focusing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)—the skills today’s employers seek to fill the jobs available right now and in the future.” Another STEM initiative that President Bush and President Obama also supported as a pathway to jobs was increasing the number of science and math teachers. In the 2006 State of the Union, President Bush proposed

to train 70,000 high school teachers, to lead advanced-placement courses in math and science, bring 30,000 math and science professionals to teach in classrooms, and give early help to students who struggle with math, so they have a better chance at good, high-wage jobs (SOU7).

President Obama similarly suggested in a 2012 debate,

Let's hire another 100,000 math and science teachers to make sure we maintain our technology lead ... as a consequence we'll have a better trained workforce and that will create jobs because companies want to locate in places where we've got a skilled workforce (D10).

The similarities in the content of these two policy proposals suggest a bipartisan consensus in the need for schools to prepare students for STEM-related jobs.

Presidents also emphasized the role of education in bolstering the national workforce and, hence, the national economy. Specifically, President Bush and President Obama espoused the narrative that investing in education would create a skilled workforce, which would attract employers to the United States and create more jobs. In the third 2004 presidential debate, President Bush argued, "Perhaps the best way to keep jobs here in America and to keep this economy growing is to make sure our education system works" and "Education is how to make sure we've got a workforce that's productive and competitive" (D5). President Obama framed education as an essential part of the plan to help the nation recover from the global recession, which he inherited upon taking office in January 2009. For example, he described affordable college education as an "economic imperative" (SOU13) for the nation. As President Obama summarized in a 2008 debate, "We've got some long-term challenges in this economy that have to be dealt with ... we've got to invest in our education system for every person to be able to learn" (D9). This rhetoric was exemplified in the 2009 State of the Union address, when the President stated, "Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American" (SOU10). These quotes encapsulate the bipartisan agreement over the goal that education should provide *individuals* the skills for employment and the *country* economic prosperity.

**Global competition.** Tied into the narrative that a sound education system will lead the nation to economic recovery and prosperity was an American competitiveness narrative – namely, that a highly educated populace will allow America to get ahead in the global economy. As President Obama explained, "We know that countries that out-teach us today, they'll be able to out-compete us tomorrow" (SOU09). The federal discourse of global competition gained increasing prominence since 2006, seen in language that included international test statistics and emphasized providing students with a "world-class education" and skills "to compete in a global economy" (BM12).

Presidents and presidential candidates placed a sense of urgency in the rhetoric of global competition by suggesting that America is falling behind other countries. Presidents used international comparative statistics in the State of the Union addresses, debates, and White House budgets to illustrate that America is losing the global race for education supremacy. For example, in his 2002 education budget, President Bush decried, "Our high school seniors trail students in most industrialized countries on international math tests." In a 2004 debate, Senator Kerry warned, "China and India are graduating more graduates in math and science than we are" (D5). President Obama used the same discursive tactics in the 2011 State of the Union address: "The quality of our

math and science education lags behind many other nations. America has fallen to ninth in the proportion of young people with a college degree” (SOU12).

Along with dismal statistics about the status of American education, presidential discourse was filled with language that highlighted the need to beat other countries - for example, words related to competition, racing, winning, and being the best in the world. Education programs that President Bush and President Obama promoted in their budgets, such as the “American Competitiveness Initiative,” “Race to the Top,” and the “First in the World Initiative,” evoked this discourse. In the 2006 State of the Union address, President Bush declared,

To keep America competitive, one commitment is necessary above all: We must continue to lead the world in human talent and creativity. Our greatest advantage in the world has always been our educated, hard-working, ambitious people - and we are going to keep that edge.

President Obama also evoked this language in his State of the Union addresses and budget messages with statements such as “if we want to win the future — if we want innovation to produce jobs in America and not overseas — then we also have to win the race to educate our kids” (SOU12) and “the winners of this [global] competition will be the countries that have the most skilled and educated workers” (BM12).

According to presidents and presidential candidates, the prescription for winning the global competition was creating rigorous pre-K-12 standards that emphasize science, technology, engineering, and math; increasing financial investment in education; and increasing college access and completion. This emphasis on math, science, and technology as a means to stay globally competitive was echoed in proposals put forth by President Bush and President Obama to recruit more math and science teachers and invest in rigorous programs that would bolster students’ math and science skills, described above. President Bush’s American Competitive Initiative called for “a series of K–12 math and science initiatives designed to strengthen the capacity of our schools to improve math and science learning,” which included more rigorous math and science instruction and course offerings and recruiting “an Adjunct Teacher Corps to bring math and science professionals into high need schools as teachers” (EB7). The rationale for the initiative outlined in President Bush’s 2007 budget exemplified the connection between math and science and America’s global competitiveness:

To remain competitive in the global economy, every student that graduates from high school in the United States, whether they plan to go on to college or immediately into the workforce, will need the strong analytical skills that only a rigorous math and science curriculum can provide. International testing continues to demonstrate that American students are lagging behind their foreign peers in math and science. To address these issues, the President is proposing the American Competitiveness Initiative, which focuses on improving the Nation’s long-term economic competitiveness. (EB7)

President Obama sent a similar message. For example, during a debate in the 2012 general election, he declared, “And what I now want to do is to hire more teachers, especially in math and science, because we know that we’ve fallen behind when it comes to math and science” (D12).

Unlike Republican presidents and presidential candidates, Democratic presidents and candidates also stated that investing in education was key to winning the competition. For example, in the second 2004 presidential debate, Senator Kerry asserted, “I want to fully fund education, No

Child Left Behind, special-needs education. And that's how we're going to be more competitive.” Similarly, in the third 2012 debate, President Obama warned,

If we don't have the best education system in the world, if we don't continue to put money into research and technology that will allow us to create great businesses here in the United States, that's how we lose the competition.

While the actual rhetoric regarding 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs and global competition was similar across partisan lines, this was evoked far more frequently with Democrats as compared to Republicans.

## Social Mobility

Social mobility appeared the least frequently in presidential discourse, accounting for about 18% of the coded data. Language related to *marketization* (55.0% of social mobility codes) and *meritocracy* (about 20.0% of social mobility codes) was employed most often as candidates brought to light private purposes of public education. Though the least frequent goal, social mobility was the most contested one, particularly surrounding the idea of marketization. This reflects broader ideological party differences in twenty-first century American politics around whether public or private entities should control social services such as education (Spring, 2002).

**Choice and markets: Can all be winners?** Marketization was the most frequently occurring social mobility code. Republican and Democratic presidents and candidates all promoted market-based reforms to education, portraying families as consumers and schools as products competing for their business. Every president and presidential candidate - over time and across political parties - supported school choice, particularly charter schools. Support for charter schools was seen in State of the Union addresses, budgets, debates, and campaign speeches. For example, President Clinton extolled the growth of charter schools in his final State of the Union address in 2000, saying, “We know charter schools provide real public school choice” (SOU1). In the 2008 presidential debates, both Senator McCain and Senator Obama agreed on increasing the number of charter schools. White House Education budgets from 2001 to 2014 allocated millions of dollars to increase charter schools, with the intent of “provid[ing] parents, particularly low-income parents, more options for maintaining a quality education for their children who are trapped in low-performing schools” (EB4) and “expand[ing] educational options by helping grow effective charter schools and other autonomous public schools that achieve positive results and give parents more choice” (EB12).

References to stratified institutional differences were salient in President Bush’s arguments that promoted school choice. President Bush evoked images of impoverished children trapped in failing schools, with school choice being the only way to get the children out. In 2000, President Bush stated, “I believe if we find poor children trapped in schools that won’t teach, we need to free the parents” (D1). Again, in his 2007 State of the Union address, he said, “We can lift student achievement even higher by ... giving families with children stuck in failing schools the right to choose some place better.” This reflects an assumption that some schools were better than others, and those that were worse could only be changed by consumer exit.

Contention between Democrats and Republicans arose over one facet of school choice: voucher programs. Republican candidates sought to maximize educational choices for family consumers by providing as many choice options as possible: public school transfers, vouchers for private schools, and magnet schools which draw students from across the normal school boundaries with specialized programs or curricula. Democratic support for choice stopped at charter schools.

Vice President Gore summarized the partisan differences in perceptions of school choice: “I believe parents need more public and charter school choice . . . I don’t think private schools should have a right to take taxpayer money away from public schools” (D1). In the 2000, 2008, and 2012 presidential debates, candidates sparred over vouchers. For example, in the third 2008 presidential debate, Senator Obama stated, “Where we disagree is on the idea that we can somehow give out vouchers as a way of securing the problems in our education system.” Regardless of whether presidential candidates agreed with voucher programs, they all portrayed the education system as needing to provide choice to parent consumers who, as Senator McCain contended, “wanted to choose the school that they thought was best for their children” (D9).

**Meritocracy and the American Dream.** Presidential education discourse also portrayed education as the key to achieving the American Dream, though this language when used alone was largely symbolic, detached from concrete initiatives from which students would benefit (Smith, 2004). Democrats and Republicans extolled the narrative that when given the opportunity to receive a good education, those who work hard can achieve their dreams. In the 2008 State of the Union address, President Bush said, “In neighborhoods across our country, there are boys and girls with dreams. And a decent education is their only hope of achieving them” (SOU9). That same year when running for office, then Senator Obama evoked a similar narrative, saying:

Part of what we need to do, what the next president has to do . . . is to send a message to the world that we are going to invest in issues like education, we are going to invest in issues that relate to how ordinary people are able to live out their dreams.  
(D10)

In his State of the Union address four years later, President Obama continued to deliver that same message: “A great teacher can offer an escape from poverty to the child who dreams beyond his circumstance.”

Presidents also evoked the narrative of education as the means to climbing up the social ladder. President Bush equated education attainment with earning a higher income. In his 2004 budget message, he proposed “lifting children out of poverty and hopelessness by creating good schools.” President Obama similarly promoted education as the key to upward mobility. As he proclaimed in the 2013 State of the Union: “It’s a simple fact: the more education you have, the more likely you are to have a job and work your way into the middle class” (SOU14).

### **Coinciding Goals**

As depicted in Table 4, both Democrats and Republicans used disparate education goals in concert. The language of democratic equality was frequently coupled with language about social efficiency (occurring 145 times together, or in 44.6% of all social efficiency codes) and social mobility (occurring together in 92 instances, or 53.8% of all social mobility goals). As illustrated next, presidents portrayed democratic equality not as the end goal, but rather as a way to create jobs, build a globally competitive workforce, and provide the chance for every American to climb the ladder of success and achieve the “American Dream.” This suggests that rather than arguing that democratic equality should be a goal of the American education system for its own sake, presidents and presidential candidates used the language of democratic equality as the means to achieving goals pertaining to social efficiency and social mobility.

Table 4.  
Co-Occurrences by Code

	Democratic Equality	Social Efficiency	Social Mobility	Total
	<i>n</i> %	<i>n</i> %	<i>n</i> %	<i>n</i>
Democratic Equality	-	-		461
Social Efficiency	145 31.4% DE 44.6% SE			325
Social Mobility	92 20.0% DE 53.8% SM	46 14.2% SE 26.9% SM		171
Total	461	325	171	

*Note:* Numbers represent the raw counts of co-occurrences. Percentages represent the number of co-occurrences out of the total number of codes for democratic equality (DE), social efficiency (SE), or social mobility (SM).

**Democratic equality and social efficiency.** Rhetoric of democratic equality often weaved into statements that had an underlying focus on social efficiency. While presidents and presidential candidates evoked language of equal treatment and equal access, these statements often related back to job training (29 co-occurrences) and America’s global competitiveness (39 co-occurrences). Presidents and presidential candidates from both parties described the importance of providing a high quality education and affordable higher education options to all Americans so that *every* citizen would have the skills necessary to compete for jobs of the 21st century. For example, President Bush argued: “We’ll never be able to compete in the 21st century unless we have an education system that doesn’t quit on children, an education system that raises standards, an education that makes sure there’s excellence in *every* classroom” (D6). President Obama evoked a similar narrative in connecting equal access to higher education with employability and the nation’s economic well-being, seen in statements such as “if we invest now in our young people and their ability to go to college, that will allow them to drive this economy into the 21st century” (D9). Likewise, in his 2012 State of the Union address, he advocated for expanding community college access to “train two million Americans with skills that lead directly to a job” so that “every American has the same opportunity to work.”

Democrats, in particular, highlighted this connection between equal access and the ability for individuals and the nation to compete globally. Senator Kerry connected expanded access to high school and college to global competition, saying, “That’s how we’re going to be more competitive, by making sure our kids are graduating from school and college. China and India are graduating more graduates in technology and science than we are” (D5). President Obama carried this framing into the 2009 State of the Union address, stating:

Right now, *three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma.* And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education... *This is a prescription for economic decline,* because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that *every child* has access to a complete and competitive education – from

the day they are born to the day they begin a career. (SOU10, italics added for emphasis)

Global competitiveness and access to early child and postsecondary education were similarly emphasized in President Obama's 2014 Budget Message:

Providing a year of free, public preschool education for 4-year-old children is an important investment in our future. It will give *all* our kids the best start in life, helping them perform better in elementary school and ultimately helping them, and the country, be better *prepared for the demands of the global economy*. (BM14, italics added for emphasis)

The proposition that "all our kids" have access to a high quality education did not end at equal treatment. Rather, presidential language portrayed it as a stepping-stone to achieve social efficiency. This line of argument posited that providing a high quality education to every child was essential for providing individuals with jobs, strengthening the economy, and maintaining the nation's globally competitive edge, thus suggesting that equal access and equal treatment were used for economic ends.

**Democratic equality and social mobility.** Presidential discourse also evoked language of democratic equality to promote private interests, particularly around individual school choice (occurring together 53 times in the same excerpts) and the opportunities for individual social mobility (occurring together 20 times). First, Republican presidents and presidential candidates described school choice models, such as charter schools and vouchers, as being about more than just consumer interest. They framed school choice initiatives as a remedy to educational inequities, often evoking language regarding "all children" or "every child" and how education can specifically benefit low-income students. In the 2000 presidential debate, Governor Bush said:

When we find children trapped in schools that will not change and will not teach, instead of saying, 'Oh, this is okay in America just to shuffle poor kids through schools,' there has to be a consequence. And the consequence is that federal portion or federal money will go to the parent, so the parent can go to a tutoring program or another public school or another private school.

His 2007 Education Budget proposed a voucher program, "a new competitive grant program, America's Opportunity Scholarships for Kids, to expand the educational opportunities available to students in chronically low-performing schools." In his final State of the Union address in 2008, President Bush said,

We must also do more to help children when their schools do not measure up. Thanks to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarships you approved, more than 2,600 of the poorest children in our nation's capital have found new hope at faith-based or other nonpublic schools.

These portrayals of voucher programs represent a fusion of marketization as a form of social mobility and the language of democratic equality.

Interestingly, in the 2000 and 2008 presidential debates, Democrats used equity language to attack vouchers. In the third presidential debate between Governor Bush and Vice President Gore, Gore argued,

Governor Bush is for vouchers, and in his plan he proposes to drain more money, more taxpayer money out of the public schools for private school vouchers than all of the money he proposes in his entire budget for public schools themselves. And *only one in 20 students would be eligible for these vouchers...*I think that's a mistake...I think we should make it the number one priority to make our schools the best in the world, *all of them.* (D3, italics added for emphasis)

Although Democratic candidates opposed Republicans' voucher plans under the auspices of democratic equality, in his 2000 State of the Union, President Clinton agreed that everyone should enjoy school choice, saying "we know charter schools provide real public choice" and suggesting that shutting down the worst-performing public schools would "give every single child in every failing school in America the chance to meet high standards."

While the disagreements over whether market-based reforms promoted equity represented a visible tension between public and private goods, there was no disparity in how presidents and presidential candidates connected meritocracy with equal treatment. Members of both parties evoked the narrative that equal educational opportunities provide all children a chance to reach their individual dreams and have a successful future, regardless of their background. A quote from President Clinton's 2000 State of the Union address illuminated these dual goals:

Because education is more important than ever, more than ever the key to our children's future, we must make sure all our children have that key. That means quality pre-school and after-school, the best trained teachers in the classroom, and college opportunities for all our children. (SOU1)

President Bush's 2006 State of the Union address also provides an example: "This year we will add resources to encourage young people to stay in school—so more of America's youth can raise their sights and achieve their dreams." Similarly, President Obama proclaimed in the 2013 State of the Union, "To grow our middle class, our citizens must have access to the education and training that today's jobs require. But we also have to make sure that America remains a place where everyone who's willing to work hard has the chance to get ahead" (SOU14). These were largely symbolic statements that conjoined symbolic language of equal access with that of the American Dream, devoid of concrete policy initiatives.

**A silver bullet.** Presidents and presidential candidates also touted all three goals in a single speech. Approximately 60% of the data sources alluded to democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. Such rhetoric suggested that education was simultaneously promoted as a great equalizer, a solution to the nation's economic woes, and the ticket to the American Dream. For example, a section of President Obama's 2015 Education Budget read, "Reclaiming the top spot in college completion is essential for maximizing both individual opportunity and our economic prosperity, which is why the President has made increasing college affordability and college completion a major focus of his 2015 budget" (EB16). A quote by President Obama during his 2013 State of the Union address further exemplifies the coalescing of goals in one breath:

To grow our middle class, our citizens must have access to the education and training that today's jobs require. But we also have to make sure that America remains a place where everyone who's willing to work hard has the chance to get ahead. (SOU14)

In just a few sentences, President Obama communicated to his audience the importance of education for growing the middle class (social mobility), providing citizens with skills for jobs of the 21st century (social efficiency), and giving every American a chance to succeed (democratic equality). This reveals that in presidential discourse, education policies were framed as benefiting the public good *and* individuals.

## Discussion

The goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility all shaped presidential education discourse in the early part of the twenty-first century. Aided by rhetoric of democratic equality, goals related to individual and national economic well-being dominated the pulpit of the president. This suggests that in the inaugural years of the twenty-first century, the pulpit of the president has framed education as a remedy to fix both private and public economic circumstances, which shapes our understanding of the current state and future directions of federal education policy in a number of ways.

First, our findings corroborate other recent studies that have highlighted the continued tensions of education as a public and private good (Allen & Mintrom, 2010). Similar to previous literature that has pointed to an emphasis in our education system on occupational preparation (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005) and economic efficiency (Carpenter, 2005), U.S. presidents thus far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have touted educational programs as a key to improving the national economy and making the U.S. more competitive in a global marketplace. At the same time, they have portrayed education as a consumer good to provide individuals a path to a job and the American Dream. This suggests that jobs are a consensus issue that satisfies both public and private education goals; therefore, we could predict that education policy initiatives linked to the goal of providing jobs would be politically palatable for federal policy enactment. This is consistent with the positioning of the federal government in the past few decades on passing education initiatives on economic grounds (McDonnell, 2005).

Second, our findings further point to a coupling of education goals in presidential rhetoric, which is reflective of previous studies that have pointed to a conjoining of democratic equality with accountability and choice reforms as a reason why those reforms have successfully been adopted (e.g., Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Labaree, 2010). That presidents attached multiple goals to single education initiatives suggests that, in essence, these goals served as ambiguous symbols that brought together otherwise disparate groups of people with different purposes or different interpretations of the same goal around a shared policy agenda (Stone, 1988). For example, policies aimed to increase college access, community college enrollment and partnerships with industry and high schools, rigorous K-12 standards, math and science programs and teachers, and school choice programs (with the exception of vouchers) were coupled with multiple goals and were supported by Democrats and Republicans. Initiatives related to these topics, therefore, may have greater success in staying on the education agenda and moving from rhetoric to reality in the coming years. This suggests that Labaree's (1997, 2010) historical analysis that concluded contradictory goals resulted in a school reform stalemate is less applicable in today's presidential discourse. Rather, attaching multiple goals to a single reform may propel reforms along. Yet more research is needed that

analyzes whether particular combinations of goals are more effective than other combinations in moving political rhetoric to implemented policies.

Third, adding to this acquiescence among goals, there was little debate over the goals themselves. Notably, this trio of goals was not contested, even during heated debates during tight presidential races. Regardless of political affiliation, presidents and presidential candidates spoke about the importance of education in securing individual employment, bolstering the national economy, and providing a window of opportunity for personal advancement. They sometimes attached these three goals to different policy initiatives, but presidents and presidential candidates did not dispute the importance of social efficiency and social mobility in the American education system. While both parties evoked the goal of democratic equality, they had different notions of education's role in leveling the playing field: the Democratic presidents and presidential candidates portrayed promoting democratic equality as the role of the federal government (e.g., universal access to high-quality early childhood programs and college affordability), while Republican presidents and presidential candidates portrayed democratic equality as the role of private entities and spoke about it using largely symbolic language (e.g., "every child"). Whether the next elected president is a Republican or Democrat, we therefore might expect the education policies they promote to evoke all of these goals, but to have different foci (e.g., a Democrat might focus on equal access initiatives such as universal health care and a Republican on privatization reforms such as voucher programs).

This also reflects Stone's (1988) assertion that politicians "evoke common goals" to frame policy positions, particularly as Democratic and Republican presidents used the same educational goals to promote different ideologies pertaining to the relationship between government and public education. As Stone (1988) explained, "In a paradoxical way, the concepts unite people at the same time as they divide. Even though a political fight involves conflicting interpretations... people aspire to convince others that their interpretation best fulfills the spirit of the larger concept to which everyone is presumed to subscribe" (p. 29). On the one hand, this suggests that goals themselves are being used as linguistic tools to gain political support, rather than being an end unto themselves. On the other hand, democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility as goals for public education have real consequences for educational programs, curriculum, and structures (Labaree, 1997). Since our data suggest that the debate over actual educational goals is not taking place on the presidential stage, it is important to ascertain who is providing public counter-narratives and where healthy democratic conversations over what goals schools should try to achieve are taking place.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study also provides theoretical insights into the viability of using the three goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility as a framework for understanding U.S. presidents' educational goals (Labaree, 1997). These three broad educational goals remain salient, yet the twenty-first century presidential discourses we analyzed highlighted new sub-categories under these broad constructs. We found that the economic context of the twenty-first century necessitates that *global competition*, particularly related to individual jobs and economic growth, be added to Labaree's (1997) conceptualization of education goals. Global competition fits under the broader goal of social efficiency, as it reflects a new globalized economy wherein the United States is competing with other nations to build a competitive workforce, attract businesses to American shores, and bolster the national economy. In particular, language around global competition appeared most fiercely in education policies related to K-12 math and science education and postsecondary access, with the stated outcomes of such policies being related to employment and the economy.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has the following limitations. First, we were concerned with examining presidential discourse, so we restricted our data sources to those that would provide insight into the presidential *agenda* as opposed to the policies the federal government *enacted*. Future research might use this framework to examine policy documents published by the Department of Education and education legislation passed by Congress. Future research might also use this framework to compare the goals of other powerful education policy actors to see if goals corroborate across branches of government, levels of government, and unofficial actors such as philanthropists and foundations whose influence in national education policy agenda setting has also increased in recent years (Scott & Jabber, 2014).

Second, our data sources only captured the “onstage action” that allocates symbolic values and benefits to the general public watching in the audience rather than tangible, material benefits negotiated “backstage” between political leaders and their allies (Smith, 2004). Therefore, future research should parse out the symbolic or stated goals from actual outcomes and ascertain who actually benefits from such policies. For example, Santos & Sáenz (2014) found that federal government aid programs intended to increase college access, such as tax credits, had an adverse affect on college affordability for Latino students. This highlights the need to conduct similar research about other initiatives on the presidential agenda to unmask underlying, as opposed to publically stated, educational goals. Questions future studies may seek to answer include the following: Does increasing the number of math and science teachers from the private sector increase students’ math and science skills? Do math and science skillsets actually make American students more employable in the eyes of multinational companies? Do all students have equal access to more math and science teachers, or are there continued disparities by geographic location, income level, and race?

Third, we could not differentiate between the influences of party affiliation or changes over time on the relative weight that presidents and presidential candidates placed on each of the three goals. From 2001 to 2008, there was a Republican president in the White House; a Democratic president took office from 2008 until the present. We do not know, for example, if the shift in rhetoric from equal treatment to equal access was a result of the change in leadership or a response to a phenomenon related to time.

Fourth, we only used one framework for understanding education goals. While during data analysis we were open to identifying emerging codes, we still could have missed alternative goals and themes that different analytical frameworks may have provided. For example, while we found overall consensus around goals and reforms, we did not examine concepts such as education governance, which has caused contention between liberals and conservatives in regards to whether the federal government should even have a role in education policymaking (Anderson, 2005). In addition, Labaree’s framework did not illuminate other societal conditions and challenges that education could potentially be framed as addressing, such as civil rights, immigration, the need for intercultural communication skills, environmental sustainability, energy efficiency, global inequities, and homeland security (Apple, 2011; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Spring, 2010). Future research might include these conditions in an initial coding framework to test the extent to which they are mentioned in presidential discourse pertaining to education.

## Conclusion

Fifteen years into the twenty-first century, the overarching educational goals that Labaree (1997) identified as democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility continue to maintain a presence in presidential discourse around education in an oscillating and intricate fashion, albeit with new nuances reflective of changing economic and social circumstances. At the same time, presidential discourse thus far in the twenty-first century has sent one unified message: education should reflect the needs and structure of the economy. The emphasis on job security and economic efficiency, even if it is for the individual benefit for all students, does pose a problem as it overshadowed preparing students for participatory citizenship in a democratic society. Furthermore, an American competitiveness narrative, which frames the global marketplace as one in which citizens and the country must compete, discounts a global citizenship narrative in which students must develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills to live in a pluralist democracy marked by diversity (Banks, 2008). If Americans still believe in the Education Gospel - that education can improve society as a whole - then the goals of education should expand beyond economic purposes. As Americans watch the 2016 presidential contest unfold, they can use these education goals to hear past the rhetoric and critically analyze candidates' underlying beliefs on the purpose of public education in American society purported in education policy promises.

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## Appendix Data Sources

Document	Policy Actor(s)	Date
State of the Union (SOU)		
SOU1	President Clinton	2000
SOU2	President Bush	2001
SOU3	President Bush	2002
SOU4	President Bush	2003
SOU5	President Bush	2004
SOU6	President Bush	2005
SOU7	President Bush	2006
SOU8	President Bush	2007
SOU9	President Bush	2008
SOU10	President Obama	2009
SOU11	President Obama	2010
SOU12	President Obama	2011
SOU13	President Obama	2012
SOU14	President Obama	2013
SOU15	President Obama	2014
SOU16	President Obama	2015
White House Budget		
BM1 (Budget Message)	President Clinton	2001
EB1 (Education Budget)	President Clinton	2001
BM2	President Bush	2002
EB2	President Bush	2002
BM3	President Bush	2003
EB3	President Bush	2003
BM4	President Bush	2004
EB4	President Bush	2004
BM5	President Bush	2005
EB5	President Bush	2005
BM6	President Bush	2006
EB6	President Bush	2006
BM7	President Bush	2007
EB7	President Bush	2007
BM8	President Bush	2008
EB8	President Bush	2008
BM9	President Bush	2009
EB9	President Bush	2009
BM10	President Obama	2010
EB10	President Obama	2010
BM11	President Obama	2011
EB11	President Obama	2011
BM12	President Obama	2012
EB12	President Obama	2012
BM13	President Obama	2013

EB13	President Obama	2013
BM14	President Obama	2014
EB14	President Obama	2014
BM15	President Obama	2015
EB16	President Obama	2015
<hr/>		
General Election Debates		
D1	Vice President Gore, President Bush	2000
D2	Vice President Gore, President Bush	2000
D3	Vice President Gore, President Bush	2000
D4	Senator Kerry, President Bush	2004
D5	Senator Kerry, President Bush	2004
D6	Senator Kerry, President Bush	2004
D7	President Obama, Senator McCain	2008
D8	President Obama, Senator McCain	2008
D9	President Obama, Senator McCain	2008
D10	President Obama, Governor Romney	2012
D11	President Obama, Governor Romney	2012
D12	President Obama, Governor Romney	2012
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