School Choice, Productive Efficiency, and Left-Wing Politics:
A Discussion Paper

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Comments most welcome.

Abstract

In this discussion paper, I propose a theory of partisan policy-seeking in which left-wing parties are seen to have incentives to pursue market-/choice-based schools policies, but only when they do not fear future right-wing governments. While such policies are potentially Pareto superior — with respect to left- and right-wing goals — to typical (second-best) bureaucratic education systems, an inability for right-wing parties to make a credible commitment not to use this superior schools policy to pursue more inegalitarian ends can lead the left-wing parties to prefer the second-best policy. Some tentative cross-national empirical evidence from Sweden and the USA lends support to the argument, as do developments in schools policy in New Orleans during the ‘post-Katrina’ period.

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1 Introduction

This paper begins with the observation that the politics surrounding school choice is sharply divergent across countries. Not only does the politics surrounding policies of this sort vary dramatically across countries, it appears to do so in a rather counterintuitive way. While school vouchers and other school choice policies are dismissed as right-wing attempts to destroy public schooling in that stronghold of the Right, the USA, they are embraced by all sections of society in that bastion of the Left, Sweden. The puzzle, then is how school choice — and especially various manifestations of school vouchers — appear to be at once too right for the Right and just right for the Left.

At root, my proposed explanation for this puzzle is that, while market-oriented education systems offer the prospect of greater efficiency and egalitarian outcomes, an inherent characteristic of such systems is the great ease with which governments can change their distributive consequences. In a competitive schools market, the degree to which the education system redistributes to the least well-off is critically determined by market regulations such as restrictions on school selection and ‘voucher’ top-up. By contrast, more bureaucratically-directed schools systems have far less malleable distributive outcomes as governments are constrained by patterns of organised (teacher and administrator) interests that limit the opportunities for change. The result, as perceived from left-wing parties, is a potential trade-off between efficiency and the survival of educational redistribution under future right-wing governments. Where the likelihood of right-wing government falls, the left-wing parties come to feel more comfortable in constructing competitive schools systems.

As described above, the puzzle is constituted of profoundly political phenomena. Somewhat surprisingly, then, the comparative politics literature has tended to overlook issues surrounding education policy. This omission is all the more noteworthy as public education systems are seen to have the capacity to radically affect the distribution of skills, employment, and therefore of wages within countries.

This (re)distributive capacity of education systems has its theoretical underpinnings in the concept of ‘human capital’ associated with the likes of Pigou, Mincer, and Becker (Pigou, 1928; Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1964). Simplistically, wages are a function of productivity, which is a function of skills, which, in turn, is a function of education. For an individual, then, more human capital will tend to lead to higher wages. Thus, the distribution of human capital, and therefore the distribution of resources for education should impact the wage distribution for each cohort passing through school and into the labour market. The idea that higher education leads to higher wages is termed by Card and Krueger (1996) as “one of the most firmly established empirical regularities in economics”.

Education is highly politically salient for at least two reasons. First, based on the underpinnings provided by ‘human capital’ theory, education policy has important implications
for the distribution of earnings in the future. Second, the levels of (mainly public) expenditure on national education systems necessarily create hugely influential special interests.\footnote{We can make a crude calculation of the importance of education expenditure. Figures from the OECD (2005) for the years 2000/2001 show a cross-country mean expenditure of approximately 5% of GDP and a cross-country mean “size of government” of approximately 40% of GDP. This implies education consumes around 12.5% of total government expenditure. A large slice of the government pie to fight over, to be sure!}

One particularly salient aspect of this second component of education politics is the position occupied by teachers’ unions.

In the US context, writers such as Hoxby (1996), Moe (2001\textit{b}, 2003), and Troy (2004) have been highly critical of what they perceive as the pernicious effects of teachers’ unions on education systems that results from their goal of protecting members’ interests. By contrast, with roots more in the first component of education politics — the distribution of education across a society — others have perceived teachers’ unions as a valuable left-wing bulwark against the Right. The existence of these two components of education policy help explain why opposing factions within the debate of how best to improve public education systems have been so adept at talking past each other. More importantly for our purposes here, the interplay of these competing conceptions of union influence over education policy goes a long way to explaining the differing education politics across countries.

### 2 School Choice and Competition

Before outlining in more detail a theoretical account that holds the promise of bringing order to the puzzle of the politics of school choice, I spend time in this section discussing precisely what is meant by ‘school choice’ and ‘competition’ in the schools sector, more generally.

The underlying logic of choice policies is to raise the ‘market accountability’ of schools at the expense of ‘bureaucratic accountability’. That is, to increase the incentives for schools to respond to the wishes of their ‘customers’ directly — i.e. parents and students — rather than the diktats of a remote education bureaucracy. But the reasoning goes further than simply removing the dull hand of administration from educational provision. It is held that the incentive for schools to respond to customer preferences will have positive implications among individual teachers as well. If parents can more easily move their children away from poor quality teachers, there will be incentives for head teachers better to monitor and remove those educators who fail to meet high enough standards.

Perhaps the best-known scheme that has such outcomes as its stated aim is the provision of school vouchers. Voucher schemes, proposed for the USA by Friedman (1955),\footnote{See also, Friedman (1962).} are a form of schooling supply in which the state provides vouchers to parents that are redeemable at approved schools. In this way, funding is almost completely separated from the actual provision of schooling — the only remaining link between the state and the school being
through the regulations on curriculum, teacher qualifications, health and safety, student selection policies, and the like, that are required in order for a school to be eligible to redeem vouchers. These latter aspects are far from irrelevant, however. For example, Chakrabarti (2006) shows the importance of student selection regulations for the ‘Milwaukee Experiment’ with vouchers.

Especially in the USA (Kenny, 2005), but also across other countries, the term ‘voucher’ has become rather “politically loaded” (Gill et al., 2001, 1). So, while the school choice agenda is very developed in the USA, it remains highly controversial. One consequence of this has been a bifurcation within the policy debate between vouchers and charters.

The term ‘charter school’ was coined by Budde in a conference paper from 1974 (Renzulli and Roscigno, 2005, 345), before appearing in two of his published works in the late 1980s (Budde, 1988, 1989). The idea is that charter authorities — which may be the state government or individual school districts — grant the right (in the form of a charter) for particular organisations to operate one or more schools in a particular area. These organisations may be for-profit or otherwise. They apply to the charter authority and, if successful, become eligible for per-student funding from the public purse, although the charter is nearly always time-limited, and subject to renewal after a certain number of years. The requirements for successfully obtaining a charter vary widely across states, but revolve around the same issues that limit qualification of schools for the redemption of vouchers. In passing charter laws, some states also include limitations on the total number of charter schools that can operate.

In essence, charter school policies are, or at least can be, remarkably similar to voucher policies (Gill et al., 2001, 9-14), with the distinction between the two very much entangled in debates about the relationship between church and state. Many voucher detractors — including state and federal judges — have opposed them on the grounds that being able to redeem publicly-financed vouchers at religious schools amounts to an unconstitutional breach of the secular principles on which the USA is founded. Still, several voucher programmes have been implemented, most notably in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That programme, like most others that followed (or attempted to follow)3 have been limited to only the inner-city poor who, ex ante, face the worst public schooling options (c.f. Witte, 2001).

Finally, on an empirical note, the diffusion of charter schools as compared to voucher programmes has been commensurate with the rather different political contexts surrounding the two policies. Whereas voucher programmes have faced considerable political opposition that has limited their implementation markedly (Kenny, 2005), by 2006, charter laws had been adopted in 40 of the US states (Wong and Langevin, 2006, Table 2). The adoption of these laws started in Minnesota in 1991 and the states with the strongest such laws — Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and North Carolina — now have around 70% of the country’s charter schools.

3e.g. the Cleveland (implemented), and Washington, D.C. (rejected by the US Congress) reforms.
3 Politics of Education Literature

At this stage, it is helpful to outline some of the existing work in the politics of education. Surprisingly given the importance of education systems to most countries, one of the notable characteristics of the literature is its small size.

In the field of comparative politics, Castles (1989) was among the first to attempt to model the levels of public spending on education using a quantitative pooled time-series cross-sectional approach. He found that left-wing parties appear to spend more than right-wing parties. Busemeyer (2007) and Ansell (2008) draw similar conclusions from broader and longer data sets.

Comparativists of the ‘varieties of capitalism’ school (Hall and Soskice, 2001) have also analysed how education systems are structured in such a way as to produce labour forces with particular types of skills. Estevez-Abe, Iversen and Soskice (2001) claim that education systems, broadly defined, are necessarily contingent on the prevailing structure of the welfare state, which is itself determined by the brand of capitalism in operation: be it ‘coordinated’ or ‘liberal’. Coordinated market economies require workers with skills specific to particular industries or firms, and so tend to have education systems that yield workers with specialised skills. By contrast, liberal market economies have a greater need for general skills that can be used across a variety of different sectors; with resultant differences in their education systems so as to generate such workforces. Iversen and Stephens (2008) develop this line of reasoning into ‘three worlds of human capital formation’, in which partisanship is seen to have a larger role to play.

Finally, and with most relevance to the issues under consideration here, several US-oriented scholars have studied the determinants of the adoption of charter school laws across the US states (Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom and Vergari, 1998; Wong and Shen, 2002; Renzulli and Roscigno, 2005; Wong and Langevin, 2006). There are several findings from studies of this sort, although the most notable for our purposes here is that the Republicans appear to be more likely to adopt such laws. Kenny (2005) studies the far smaller amount of data available on the adoption of voucher programmes in the USA, and once again finds that they tend to be adopted by Republicans.

4 Theory

In this section, I set out my theoretical case in detail. I begin with my assumptions regarding partisan goals, discuss the nature of school choice and competition, highlight the importance of teachers' union 'power resources', and then combine the analysis into predictions regarding the strategic policy choices we should expect from left-wing parties.
4.1 Defining Partisan Preferences

As a first step in the analysis, it is necessary to clarify the underlying preferences of parties of the left and right, respectively. I take left-wing parties to be representing the poorer sections of society and, assuming some element of policy-seeking, that they therefore prefer more redistributive public policies. Similarly, right-wing parties represent the relatively rich and so are in favour of limiting redistribution as it simply transfers resources away from their main constituency.

Given these underlying preferences, to the extent that public education is a universal programme\(^4\) it follows that left-wing parties should have a preference for higher spending on public education. That is, from the perspective of the rich, it would be preferable to concentrate their resources on educating their own children through private means, rather than those of the poor through public means. Indeed, this logic fits with empirical findings of a positive effect from left-wing governments on education expenditure by Castles (1989) and Busemeyer (2007). However, this view is overly simplistic.

As Hanushek (1986) showed, the evidence is far from clear that increases in public education expenditure are associated with increases in what might be termed educational output — e.g. student attainment, drop-out rates, etc. Despite some disagreement (Hedges, Laine and Greenwald, 1994\(^a\); Hanushek, 1994; Hedges, Laine and Greenwald, 1994\(^b\)), it remains a striking feature of the literature that it should be so difficult to discern any positive impact from extra spending on public education.

This apparent zero marginal payoff to extra resources leads Hoxby (1996) to highlight that efficiency of educational production is of key importance. Crudely, educational output is determined by the product of expenditure and efficiency. Thus, she turns to the determinants of efficiency as a way to resolve the puzzle revealed by Hanushek. Her empirical results suggest that unionisation of teachers has a negative effect on efficiency. The puzzle is, therefore, resolved by the extra education spending in the USA since the 1960s coinciding with the rise of teacher unionism.

However, in a less noted finding of the article, Hoxby (1996) also shows that stronger teachers’ unions are also successful at raising educational expenditure. In principle, then, the impact of unionisation on educational production — and, by extension, the redistributive effect of a public education system — is of indeterminate direction. Unions both raise spending and reduce efficiency. These findings regarding the effects of teacher unionism imply an intriguing trade-off for those who are redistribution-minded. I now turn to the implications of this trade-off.

\(^4\)Or at least, that it really does spend taxes from the rich on education for the poor.
4.2 The Positive Effects of School Choice and Competition

Clearly, efficiency improvements in the supply of education are a Pareto improvement — by which I mean that they would (weakly) improve the welfare of net tax-payers and net tax-consumers, alike.\(^5\) The implication of Hoxby’s results is that a policy of reducing unionism amongst public sector teachers is the obvious way to yield these efficiency improvements. Indeed, unionism is arguably the only policy instrument that emerges from the results for this purpose. The other variables that are included in the estimated models are all demographic, economic, or spending-related variables (Hoxby, 1996, Table VIc). This latter category, I will deal with explicitly below.

While unionisation is exposed as a drag on efficient education production, the finding is indicative of broader underlying issues. At root, the theoretical claim for the pernicious effects of unionisation revolve around unions being considered rent-seeking protectionists. By acting as monopoly\(^6\) suppliers of teaching labour, they are able to limit competitive pressures and extract surplus from public sector education spending. This idea of competition being a relevant concern underlies a large portion of the literature on school choice.

Much of the research on the effects of school choice and competition has been conducted using data from a variety of US programmes and pilot policies. Analysing data from the famous ‘Milwaukee experiment’ in which school vouchers were provided to children from poor families, Rouse (1998) discerned positive effect from the programme on maths attainment, but not reading. Witte (2001) comes to similarly positive conclusions regarding the policy, although cautions against the universal roll-out of such a scheme on equity grounds. Hoxby (2000) found that greater Tiebout choice stemming from smaller school districts increased student attainment.\(^7\)

Krueger and Zhu (2004) examined the evidence on the effects of a voucher experiment in New York City, and while cautioning that the benefits found by earlier studies of the programme were overly generous, still found positive effects from the scheme. West and Peterson (2006) analysed the effects of school accountability laws in Florida which gave parents choices in situations where their children attended failing schools, and found that the incentives introduced by this increased competition had positive effects on school performance. Teske and Schneider (2001) and Hoxby (2003) provided surveys of the literature on the effects of vouchers and charter schools and concluded, with Hoxby the more positive, that the increased competition that they induce lead schools to raise the attainment of their students.

In the UK context, Bradley et al. (2000) found that increased competition does lead schools and students/parents to respond in the positive ways in which theory would suggest.

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\(^5\)While I note that the least productive teachers potentially would be losers from efficiency improvements if they lost their jobs, I do not consider this an important aspect of macro education policy-making.

\(^6\)Or duopoly, in the case of the AFT and the NEA in the USA.

\(^7\)Rothstein (2004) contests the results and Hoxby (2005) rejects the critique as unfounded. It is unclear to me to what extent Hoxby’s findings are really undermined.
Admissions respond positively to exam results, as well as responding negatively to those of competitor schools, and successful schools appear to increase their capacity. Bradley and Taylor (2002) “find strong evidence that the quasi-market has led to a substantial improvement in efficiency (as measured by a school’s exam performance and by the productivity of staff) during the 1990s”. It should be noted that the evidence on the effects of competition in education is not wholly positive, however. For example, Gibbons and Silva (2006) find no positive effect from competition between English primary schools, as well as going on to caution that such reforms have the capacity to exacerbate social stratification.

In Sweden, Sandström and Bergström (2005) studied the effects of the voucher reforms of the early 1990s. They found that the increased competition induced by the scheme did improve student performance — i.e. that the efficiency of the system did improve — while also noting that there was evidence that those gains, while felt by across all sections of society, may have disproportionately benefited the richer. Björklund et al. (2004), in a similar study, concluded that efficiency improvements were probably present, but again signaled caution over stratification.

Explicitly comparative work on the effects of various school choice policies is less common. Bishop and Wößmann (2004) provide a theoretical outline in which a variety of institutional aspects of educational ‘production’ are analysed for positive and negative effects. They emphasise the influences of centralised examinations, the autonomy of schools, of teachers, and of parents. As such, their work touches on several aspects of the process through which school choice is thought likely to have positive effects on efficiency. In subsequent empirical work, this theoretical framework is largely found to have support in the data (Wößmann, 2003, 2007; Schütz, Ursprung and Wößmann, 2008).

At this point, it should be noted that several empirical researchers find that choice and competition leads to increased social segregation (Bradley et al., 2000; Bradley and Taylor, 2002), while some contest these findings (Gorard and Fitz, 2000). What is fairly undisputed is that choice has the possibility of increasing segregation and inequality. Epple and Romano (1998) showed this in a theoretical way. However, as Hoxby (2003) emphasises, and Gintis (1995) makes clear theoretically, these negative distributive consequences are strongly dependent on the specific design of choice and competition policies. The avoidance of these ‘problems’ — as seen from the Left — is surely possible.

As the final point in this section, I will note that the introduction of school choice and competition almost inevitably has a negative impact on the influence, and potentially the membership numbers, of teachers’ unions. The introduction of parents as powerful actors in determining the flow of resources to schools by their very choices comes at the expense of union power (Moe, 2003, 195). For competition to be truly effective, individual teachers will be financially rewarded based on merit — as perceived through market choices — and thus union-negotiated wages will become less relevant. As such, the logic of competition
and choice is anathema to teachers’ unions as it threatens their power and even their very existence (Troy, 1994, 143–147).

4.3 ‘Power Resources’

The power resources theory proposed by the likes of Korpi and Shalev (1979), Stephens (1979), and Cameron (1984) is very relevant in the area of education policy. At the aggregate level, Troy (2004, 140-145) estimates that the US labour movement contributed around $100 million in cash contributions to the 2000 presidential election campaign of Al Gore. However, he estimates that the value of in-kind contributions in the form of campaign workers, election literature, and the like, to be another $300 million. Concentrating just on the teachers’ unions, he claims that they, “maintain more political operatives than either political party, or perhaps both” (Troy, 2004, 90). Further, Moe (2003, 180–181) asserts that,

> their members are located in virtually every political district in the country (wherever there are kids, there are teachers), and they regularly turn out armies of activists to ring door-bells, make telephone calls, distribute literature, and in countless other ways campaign for union-endorsed candidates. No other group can claim such an awesome capacity for in-the-trenches political action.

There are also good reasons to believe that representation of union interests on the boards of local school districts will be larger than merited. Essentially, the combination of concentrated interests in policy among unions and dispersed interest among voters lead to the situation in which union-endorsed representatives are very likely to get elected (Moe, 2001b).

Given the apparent large scale of ‘power resources’ that unions, and particularly teachers’ unions, make available to the Democratic Party, it seems clear that there are potentially strong motivations for the latter to pursue pro-union policies. That is, to the extent that Democrats are office-seekers, they may very well ‘get into bed with labour’. However, in those situations where they are confident of electoral victory, we may very well expect them not to pay the efficiency costs that are implied by such a strategy as they simply do not need to.

4.4 Strategic Policy and the Commitment Problem

Section 4.2 suggested a trade-off between the positive and negative aspects of teachers’ unions for the effectiveness of redistributive public education based on confounding efficiency and funding effects. This points to the possibility of a commitment problem between Democrats and Republicans. Both parties would prefer the efficiency gains from higher competition in the education system, but the Republicans cannot credibly commit not to reduce future education spending in the absence of teachers’ union power. This commitment problem can
be coupled with the finding in section 4.3 that Democrats have an incentive to pursue union-friendly policies — especially with respect to teachers — where they are uncertain of winning elections.

Taken together, it is clear that the Democrats have very strong incentives to pursue union-friendly policies except in those cases where they are confident of electoral victory and this confidence is not contingent on union support. Paradoxically for much of the existing literature on school choice politics, then, the prediction is that electorally secure Democrats will be likely to pursue competition-inducing education policies.

While this hypothesis may be counterintuitive, it is possible to see the seeds of its acceptance in the writings of prominent voucher critics. For example, Carnoy (1993, 186) appears to accept that there are practical ways of achieving (his) desired distributional outcomes from such systems, but that politics gets in the way.

Where is the political support for an inverse voucher scheme [that is of higher value for children from poorer families]? The answer is that there is about as much support for need-based vouchers as for sharply increased public spending on the schooling of the poor. We have to assume, realistically, that any voucher plan would provide equal vouchers for all children, regardless of parents’ income.

At the national level, he may be right. At the state level, there is far more scope for the existence of politically-conducive environments for egalitarian choice policies. It is this possibility that I propose to investigate empirically.

5 Tentative Empirics (Or Potential Case Studies)

In this section, I present some very tentative empirical outlines that appears pertinent to the theory set out above. It is meant not as a ‘test’ of the theory, but rather as a means of highlighting the potential relevance of the ideas proposed in this paper, as well as suggesting further theoretical developments. I also hope to garner feedback as to the sort of evidence that would be required to more stringently test these theories.

I divide these tentative empirics into two sub-sections: the first contrasting the politics of school choice cross-nationally and the second outlining the potentially surprising development of the New Orleans school system in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

5.1 Cross-National Comparisons

Cross-national comparison as a means of examining the plausibility of the theoretical position taken here is somewhat difficult, but still instructive. The difficulty lies in identifying causal mechanisms amidst a whole array of path dependent processes occurring in the area of education policy.
In this section, I present a brief outline of what I consider to be the relevant features of the political contexts and the education systems of three countries — Sweden, the USA, and France — before concluding with some indicative data from a broader sample of countries. The reasons for choosing them are important. The theory presented above suggests that there will be more marked partisan policy making surrounding education in those cases where left-wing parties have a stronger expectation of future (strong) right-wing governments. In this context, the selected countries offer a good, theoretically-derived, comparison as they have experienced dramatically different politics over the past several decades.

5.1.1 Sweden

The Swedish Social Democrats (SAP) held power uninterrupted for 40 years during the middle of the 20th century. They constituted (and continue to constitute) a united party against a more disparate right-wing bloc made up of liberals, conservatives, and agrarians. Indeed, historically, the SAP has found it possible to splinter this proto-right-wing coalition by peeling off the agrarians into an alternative centre-left coalition. Coupled with long periods of electoral hegemony, Sweden has also developed a corporatist mode of interest intermediation that has resulted in a strong and influential union movement becoming firmly embedded in the political process, even when the SAP has found itself out of government. In this way, a powerful left-wing actor has been accorded a near permanent seat at the policy-making table, with the result that the Left, broadly conceived, appears to have the opportunity to block reforms to which it fiercely objects. In short, Sweden has a political environment that has been remarkably agreeable to social democrats over a period of many decades.

In terms of schools policy, the system has traditionally been highly centralised (Helgøy and Homme, 2006, 14). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, Sweden underwent a series of decentralising education reforms. Broadly, the SAP governments of the 1980s concentrated on political decentralisation to the municipalities and greater parental involvement in the organisation and running of schools (Gustafsson, 1987). Part of this process was the devolution of the employment relationship with teachers away from central government to the municipalities. This met with fierce resistance from the teachers’ unions, who went on strike and, interestingly, were supported by the Conservative parties in doing so (Helgøy and Homme, 2006, 14). The employment reform was coupled with a shift in 1990 to block grant allocations for education funding, with a consequent empowerment of municipalities in increased funding discretion.

The election of a right-wing government in 1991 heralded a shift towards more market-oriented decentralisation. The quasi-voucher scheme that (in essence) still operates was introduced such that private schools that met certain regulations became entitled to 85% of the per student spend in public schools for each child that they taught (Miron, 1996,
Combined with open enrollment, the competitive environment of Swedish schooling was therefore much enhanced.

A sceptical reader may object at this point that such a reform hardly lends support to the theory set out in this paper as it was implemented by a right-wing government, not a left-wing government. One response to this objection is that the consensual and corporatist nature of the Swedish political system suggests that the Left could have blocked, or at least hampered, these marketising reforms had they wished to. Perhaps a more convincing argument regarding the policy preferences of the SAP can be made by noting that, upon their return to power in 1994, they did not roll back the quasi-voucher scheme.

In fact, the argument can be taken a step further as the SAP embarked on their own extension to the decentralising, marketising, principle in education that had been adopted. When the Right introduced quasi-vouchers, they left intact the highly centralised system of teacher wage bargaining. So, despite power and employment relations having been devolved to the municipal level, national wage bargaining still occurred between the association of municipalities and the teachers’ unions. Consequently, the latter remained highly influential players in policy-making and had the ability to mute the competitive pressures that would otherwise have arisen in the labour market for teachers.

In this light, the wage bargaining reform imposed by the SAP after 1994 is all the more remarkable in its disempowerment of the teachers’ unions. The new system couples individual-level wage bargaining with union consultation for each personal wage agreement and national bargaining between unions and municipality (employer) associations over the total size of the teachers’ wage pie (Strath, 2004). Thus, the door has been opened for school management to provide financial reward to their better teachers. Söderström (2006) has shown that the effect of this reform has been to reduce the steepness of the “age-earnings profile” such that younger teachers received wages closer to those of older teachers. This outcome is consistent with the idea that more competent teachers are rewarded earlier in their careers than was previously the case and mere ‘seniority’ is now less determining of wage levels.

The Swedish case, then, is one of possibly the most secure political and electoral position for the Left, and a highly decentralised and marketised education system that the Left themselves have been instrumental in constructing. Helgøy and Homme (2006, 16) summarise as follows:


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8Not 100% as it was argued that private schools did not have to meet all of the requirements of an education system; a slack that would need to be picked up by the local municipality.
5.1.2 The USA

As compared to the Swedish case, the Democrats in the USA participate in what Lijphart (1999) terms a ‘majoritarian’ system in which they face a strong and united Republican party. In comparing Sweden and the USA, Swenson (2002) has characterised the Democrats as being markedly more business-funded than their labour-funded SAP cousins. More generally, unions are famously weak, from a cross-national comparative perspective. As such, the prevailing view that the Democrats are notably more right-wing than equivalent parties in other developed democracies would appear, at first glance, to be reasonable. Furthermore, the prevailing political institutions across most states tend to accord large degrees of political discretion to parties that win elections.

With respect to education policy, taking the USA as a single case is actually rather difficult. Constitutionally, education is a state concern, with only very limited intervention coming from the federal government — mainly in the form of targeted funding measures for certain types of schools. A consequence of the state-centric nature of education policy is that there is great divergence between the states in how the schooling system is run. As discussed above, there has been a range of educational reforms across the states in the recent past, many of which have revolved around the introduction of more competitive structures to the system: charters and voucher programmes being the most prominent examples. Nonetheless, the prevailing body of research finds that such reforms display a clear partisanship effect whereby Republican government increases the probability of adoption of such policies (Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom and Vergari, 1998; Wong and Shen, 2002; Renzulli and Roscigno, 2005; Wong and Langevin, 2006).

In terms of unionisation and wage bargaining, Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia actually make collective bargaining by teachers illegal (Moe, 2001a, 160). By contrast, many other states have passed laws such that one union has exclusive representation rights within each school district. In those states, while it is not possible to legally require all teachers to join a union, laws have often been passed that require ‘agency fees’ to be paid by non-members to unions for their representative services. Setting these agency fees close to the standard members’ dues makes the incentive to fully join the union very strong. The funding of schools is also very divergent in the USA, with states varying in the degree to which they tax-and-spend at the state level as opposed to the school district level (via property taxes). As each school district tends to have some degree of tax raising discretion, wage bargaining tends to happen at this level between the unions and the prevailing education bureaucracy.

While the USA, to a very large degree, is more like 50 cases than one, it still offers an interesting unitary comparison with Sweden (and other similar countries). School vouchers

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9That union is nearly always an affiliate of either the National Education Association (NEA) or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).
and school choice more generally are among the most contentious political issues within the United States (Gill et al., 2001, Chapter 1) and this is a divide that has very often been drawn along distinctly partisan lines. The contrast with the Swedish case is instructive even before consideration is given to the supposedly differing natures of the two (relatively) left-wing parties under consideration: the SAP and the Democrats. The puzzle grows even deeper if one adopts the conventional view of market reforms being inherently right-wing when one considers that the Democrats are widely held to be to the right of the SAP.

My contention, then, is that it is necessary to reconsider our notion of policy preferences in this sphere. The theory advanced in this paper provides a solution to the puzzling comparison between Sweden and the USA. The Democrats, fearing Republican control of government and lacking the systematic electoral advantages accorded to the SAP turn to organised (teacher) labour as a means of holding back the right-wing tide. The necessary consequence of this decision is a rejection of the kinds of efficiency-enhancing policies that the SAP has been so comfortable with.

5.1.3 France

Briefly, France also offers an interesting contrast to the Swedish case. Again, it operates majoritarian political institutions and again, left-wing parties have tended to struggle. In the sphere of education policy, Frances has one of the most centralised education systems currently in operation. Moreover, left-wing parties and teachers’ unions jealously guard against any of the more decentralising and choice-based reforms that are common elsewhere. Indeed, both Ambler (1985) and Cole (2001) cite the organisational structure of French education as the reason for the rejection of market reforms. The structure is one in which teachers are civil servants with tenure rights to protect, and there exists an “extraordinarily high” teachers’ union density (circa 80%) when compared with that for the rest of the country, or even in the rest of the public sector (Ambler, 1985, 24).

5.1.4 Broad Comparisons

To conclude this section, I present a table from Gorard and Smith (2004) that provides a broader cross-national perspective on the nature of schooling systems. I do not discuss this data here and include it only to help with discussion. A note on terminology is in order, though. In the final column of Table 1, ‘catchment’ refers to the school selection by where a child lives (i.e. ‘catchment area’) and ‘tiered’ refers to the ability of schools to select on academic ability.

[Table 1 about here.]
5.2 New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, and Charter Schooling

Taking a slightly different empirical approach, the development of education policy in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is potentially illuminating. The tragedy of Katrina offers a chance to analyse some of the factors that are important in the politics of education in a pseudo-randomised way. The ‘experiment’ — using language very loosely — being that Katrina offered the chance to investigate what would happen if the entire physical, bureaucratic, and teaching-labour infrastructure of a school system were (literally) washed away. I shall argue below that the (still developing) outcome provides the opportunity for refinement of the theoretical framework presented in the preceding sections.

First of all, what was the political context in which education policy is made in New Orleans? The state of Louisiana has a long history of Democratic domination. The governorship has been held by a Democrat for 42 out of the 54 post Second World War years. Indeed, for several of the remaining Republican years, the governor was actually a former Democrat who had made the party switch largely for reasons of internal state Democratic party politics. Even more tellingly, the upper and lower houses of the state legislature over the period 1959–2007 have had a mean percentage of Democrats members of 88% and 86%, respectively. This dominance drops by an inconsequential amount if the period under study is constrained to a more recent period — say, that after 1990. Furthermore, the minimum share of seats held by Democrats in either chamber for the entire period from 1959 is 59%. At the city level, the Democratic hegemony is equally emphatic with the party holding the mayoralty in every year since 1936.

In the sphere of schooling, the pre-Katrina public school system in New Orleans was essentially composed of a single, city-wide, publicly-administered school district. It was widely held to be utterly failing its students, even by the extremely low standards of some of the more impoverished school districts across country. In an Urban Institute report on Katrina’s aftermath, Hill and Hannaway (2006, 28) wrote that, “New Orleans Parish’s public school system was arguably one of the worst in the country before Hurricane Katrina”. Such a view is borne out by statistics. Waldman (2007) notes that in 2004, 75% of public school students were receiving subsidised lunches and “fewer than half the students who started kindergarten graduated from high school”. Newmark and De Rugy (2006, 12) report that,

over half of those taking the state’s high-stakes tests (4th, 8th, 10th, and 11th graders) did not have “basic” competence in math and English; 68 of the 108 [public] schools receiving performance labels had been rated “academically unacceptable” by the Louisiana Department of Education, 13 more than just the year before.

Data drawn from Klarner (2003).
The political context, then, was one of almost complete Democrat security. The policy context was one of abject failure. Under a traditional left-right view of politics, we may expect that any resulting reforms would be in the direction of higher public spending, centralisation, and a general increase in the size of (educational) government. Such a hypothesis would be in accordance with much of the work in a voluminous literature on partisanship. However, the actual path of reform, for which Hurricane Katrina provided the catalyst, was very different to this.

With the old school district quite literally washed away, state and city political leaders moved quickly to replace the previously failing school system with one dominated by charter schools. This was possible as there was a pre-existing charter law in the state, but this provision had seen only minimal use since passage of the law. Of 53 schools that were to be re-opened in the aftermath of the storm, five would remain with the old school district, 19 would be run by the state administered Recovery School District, and the remaining 31 would be charter schools (Waldman, 2007). These charters included both schools reconstituted from the old school district, albeit under different managerial and bureaucratic auspices, as well as entirely new start-up schools.

To my knowledge, Waldman (2007) provides the most extensive written (but journalistic) description of the development of the New Orleans school system after Katrina. At her time of writing, it was far from clear that either the new charter schools or those controlled by the Recovery School District would be successful. All schools in the area faced severe difficulties in rebuilding educational institutions in an unmanageably short period of time — although Waldman makes particular note of failings by the Recovery School District administration that go beyond the extenuating circumstances. Nonetheless, the purpose here is not to engage in a policy evaluation. Rather, it is to analyse the political motivations and constraints surrounding the reform. In that light, the New Orleans experience may be instructive.

One fact that appears particularly relevant is that, even before Katrina hit, political leaders at city and state level were attempting to reform the New Orleans school system in a heavily charter-oriented direction. An attempt by New Orleans University to open a new charter school in the city in 2001 met with strong resistance from both the school board and, importantly, the teachers’ union (Newmark and De Rugy, 2006, 15). The resistance was strong enough to block the new school.

What Katrina provided, then, was the removal of the powerful prevailing teachers’ union — the United Teachers of New Orleans. With its (former) students left scattered across the southern United States and its tax base almost entirely destroyed, the New Orleans school district was forced to make all of its teachers redundant. But the reforms to teacher labour

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11 Even just focusing on a subset of this literature — cross-national studies of welfare state expenditure — the literature is large and fairly uniform in its treatment of left-wing preferences (see e.g Pampel and Williamson, 1988; Hicks and Swank, 1992; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Iversen, 2001; Franzese, 2002; Swank, 2002).
relations went even further than this when the state government stepped in to play a role in the post-Katrina education system rebuilding.

When the state legislature swept 107 schools into the expanded Recovery School District, it nullified the collective bargaining agreement between the Orleans Parish School Board and the union at those schools. Where it once had 4,700 members paying $600 in dues each year, the union now has only 300 members. The only schools with unionized teachers are the 4 schools operated by [the Orleans Parish School Board]. (Newmark and De Rugy, 2006, 20)

What might this course of events reveal about the theory set out in this paper? At one level, it appears to be in accordance with the predictions. A strongly left-wing state has made a strong move to a more competitive system of schooling — at least within one of its major metropolitan areas. Yet this final qualifier is also suggestive of an area in which the theory, as currently expressed, perhaps misses an important factor. While there is evidence of pre-Katrina intent to make the kind of reforms that were seen post-Katrina, the fact remains that these reforms were moving slowly, at best. The reason for this dilatory progress was, in no small part, the strength of the vested interests in the public school system: with the United Teachers of New Orleans in the vanguard of this group. The theory set out above, then, by lacking a firm consideration of interest group politics, seems to miss an important political dynamic.

The importance of this observation becomes clear when one considers testing predictions from the theory. In its current form, the prediction is that strong left-wing parties will prefer competitive school systems. The problem comes with the existence of any correlation between strong left-wing parties and strong teachers’ unions — a correlation that is explicitly anticipated in Section 4.3. Taking account of the political influence of strong unions cuts directly against this prediction. Precisely in those cases where left-wing parties would wish to make schools more competitive, they may face a powerful interest group that precludes them from doing so. Not every state will have a ‘Katrina’.

If teachers’ unions are capable of holding more sway over Democrats (to whom they contribute in cash and in-kind) than Republicans, then this more interest-group-oriented analysis may explain the fairly consistent finding that the passage of charter laws across the US states has been associated with Republican state government.12 One possible way out of this empirical problem may be to develop a model of policy preferences and political campaign contributions. That is, if the broad thrust of the argument regarding left-wing party preferences presented above is correct, then we may expect that teachers’ unions may face a higher ‘price’ (in terms of contributions) for blocking competitive school reforms in those states where the Democratic preference would otherwise be more strongly for competition.

12See references in Section 3.
Happily, data on political contributions from the education sector is available from Toma, Berhane and Curl (2006), so this would appear to be a fruitful line of research.

Nonetheless, even absent a more appropriate empirical approach, the theoretical framework does offer the prospect of some insight. It seems sensible to question the prevailing wisdom regarding the preferences of left-wing parties with respect to education policy in particular, and even the public sector more generally.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this short paper has been to explore some theoretical ideas and match the, in a cursory way, with some empirical evidence. More importantly, the aim has been to provoke responses from those with research interests in this area.

As a final point, I should say that the theory outlined above is, perhaps, overly parsimonious. I can quickly conceive of two aspects that may be important with respect to the political pressures under consideration. First, there may be an important role of extant social segregation in societies when they are considering the adoption of school choice reforms. For example, where segregation is high such that the ‘poor’ and the ‘rich’ do not live within the same (plausible) school catchment areas, the middle classes may have less to fear from school choice as their children are less likely to find themselves in a classroom with a less attractive ‘peer’. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of ‘sink schools’ or ‘bog standard comprehensives’ in which the less well-off in society are forced to educate their children may lead to a willingness to adopt market mechanisms out of sheer exasperation. Indeed, a coalition of rich and very poor appears to have been underpinned the adoption of the Milwaukee voucher scheme (by a Republican governor).

Second, it seems likely that (organised) religion is an important intervening factor. Across many countries, churches have had and maintain an important role in the provision of schooling, albeit often funded by the state. Shifts to parental choice of a redistributive nature would seem to be inherently disempowering of such religious educational actors in that it is likely to increase the competition they face and reduce their discretion over selection of students. As such, perhaps we should expect strong opposition to school choice from churches engaged in educational provision.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Academic selection %</th>
<th>Single-sex %</th>
<th>Religious selection %</th>
<th>Government control %</th>
<th>Choice policy</th>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Free choice</td>
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</table>

Table 1: Summary characteristics of national school systems (Source: Gorard and Smith, 2004, 23).

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