

The New York Times

The Comforts of the Betsy DeVos War

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February 7, 2017

In these distinctly abnormal times for the republic, with Donald Trump in the White House and a group of unprepared revolutionaries around him, one must be grateful for small doses of normalcy and politics as usual. Thank heavens, then, for Senate Democrats, who just gave us the most predictable of spectacles: a liberal holy war against Betsy DeVos, just confirmed as the new secretary of education by Mike Pence's tiebreaking vote.

A visitor from Saturn might be puzzled by this particular crusade, since none of the things that liberals profess to fear the most about a Trump era revolve around education policy. If Trump is planning to surrender Eastern Europe to the Russians or start a world war with the Chinese, perhaps his secretary of state nominee deserved an all-night talkathon of opposition. If he's bent on domestic authoritarianism with a racist tinge, then it's Jeff Sessions, his attorney general, who presents the natural target for Democratic protest. If the biggest problem is that Trump will nominate allies who are unqualified for their responsibilities, then the choice of Ben Carson to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development seems like an obvious place to draw a line.

But somehow it was DeVos who became, in the parlance of cable-news crawls, Trump's "most controversial nominee." Never mind that Trump's logorrheic nationalism barely has time for education. Never mind that local control of schools makes the Education Department a pretty weak player. Never mind that Republican views on education policy are much closer to the expert consensus than they are on, say, climate change. Never mind that the bulk of DeVos's school-choice work places her only somewhat to the right of the Obama administration's pro-charter-school positioning, close to centrist Democrats like Senator Cory Booker. None of that mattered: Against her and (so far) only her, Democrats went to the barricades, and even dragged a couple of wavering Republicans along with them.

DeVos did look unprepared and even foolish at times during her confirmation hearings, and she lacks the usual government experience. But officially the opposition claimed to be all about hardheaded policy empiricism. A limited and heavily regulated charter school program is one thing, the argument went, but DeVos's zeal for free markets would gut public education and turn kids over to the not-so-tender mercies of unqualified bottom-liners. Just look at what happened in her native Michigan, her critics charged, where the influence of her philanthropic dollars helped flood Detroit's school system with unsupervised charters run by incompetents and hacks.

But the empiricists' argument wasn't particularly empirical. There's no evidence that DeVos-backed charters actually visited disaster on Detroit's students. Instead, the very studies that get cited to critique her efforts actually show the city's charters modestly outperforming public schools.

That "modestly" is important, because it tracks with much of what we know about school choice in general — that it offers real potential benefits without being a panacea. Decades of experiments suggest that choice can save money, improve outcomes for very poor kids whose public options are disastrous, and increase parental satisfaction. (The last is no small thing!) But the available evidence also suggests that choice alone won't revolutionize schools or turn slow learners into geniuses, that the clearest success stories are hard to replicate, and some experiments in privatization (like Louisiana's recent voucher push) can badly disappoint.

So in DeVos, we have an education secretary who perhaps errs a little too much on the side of choice-as-panacea, overseeing (with limited powers) an American education bureaucracy that pretty obviously errs the other way. And wherever you come down on striking the right balance, it's hard to see this situation as *empirically* deserving the level of political controversy that's attached to it.

So why did the Democrats fight so hard? Because in this particular case, the rules of normal pre-Trump politics still apply.

First, when interest groups talk, politicians listen — and the teachers' unions are simply more powerful in Democratic circles, with more money and leverage and clout, than most of the groups leading the charge against other Trump policies or nominees. It's not that liberals aren't genuinely worried about everything that makes Trumpism potentially abnormal and un-republican and authoritarian. But a more normal threat to a deep-pocketed interest group's preferences still turned out to be a more natural rallying point than the specter of creeping Putinism.

Second, even in the age of surging blue-collar populism, upper-middle-class suburbanites haven't lost their influence, and they generally like their public schools and regard school choice as a threat rather than a promise. Charters and vouchers are most appealing to the poor, the religious and the eccentric — to low-income families locked into failing schools and religious conservatives and bohemians with ideological doubts about the content of the public-school curriculum. That's a motley, divided constituency, whereas well-off suburbanites are easier to activate and rally. It's the same dynamic that made it easy to defeat a modest expansion of charter schools in Massachusetts last November: Not only teachers-union-loving Democrats but also lots of Republican-leaning suburbanites, having bought (literally) into the existing system, tend to sympathize with liberal warnings that too much choice could leave their own kids worse off.

Finally, even after Trumpism's disruptions, the older culture-war bogeymen still get liberals excited. Sure, they're officially more worried about white nationalism and the fate of NATO, but wave the cape of looming theocracy, and suddenly it's 2004 all over again. After all, did you hear that DeVos is some sort of Calvinist? That she's actually linked her policy views to her Christian piety? That her support for school choice could conceivably enable more evangelical

and Catholic parents to send their kids to conservative religious schools? (If, that is, they aren't already ... home schooling!)

I don't want to make mock of all DeVos opposition. Senators had every right to vote against her if they felt her underqualified or uninformed. But the fervor and pitch of the opposition basically reflected the present Democratic Party at its worst: unstinting in defense of bureaucracy and its employees, more excited about causes dear to the upper middle class than the interests of the poor, and always girding for the battle with the Real Enemy, religious conservatives, no matter what the moment actually demands.

But again, these are troubled times. Familiarity has its comforts. And a debate this predictable, this pre-Trumpian, came as something of a relief.