

The “Choice” Bait and Switch

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The word “choice” is rhetorically powerful in American politics. Who could be opposed to it?

But choice is a recent entry in the lexicon of language, used to convince working and poor people that our problems are of our own doing, so we — not the government or corporations or any larger force in society — must fix them ourselves.

Like the phrases “personal responsibility” and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” the rhetoric of choice seduces us into turning frustration with our lot in life towards competing for a piece of an ever-shrinking pie. It tells us not to be angry at our boss, elected officials, the wealthy — whoever is holding us down — but to simply demand better *choices*.

It’s no coincidence that liberals have come to embrace conservative rhetoric and policies — Bill Clinton’s welfare reform, 1996’s Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, is an early example — while often leading the charge for choice. Obamacare, originally a conservative policy, is meant to expand the number of *choices* in the insurance marketplace. “My guiding principle is, and always has been, that consumers do better when there is choice and competition,” Barack Obama said in his initial pitch to Congress. Charter schools, the centerpiece of the “school choice” movement, are most prominent in cities dominated by the Democratic Party, like Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

Likewise, corporate leaders, the wealthy, and conservatives peddle choice as an end in itself. The word “choice” is used thirty-three times in former House Speaker Paul Ryan’s most recent proposal to cut and privatize Medicaid and Medicare. It’s at the core of Donald Trump’s expansion of the Veterans Choice Act, which further privatized veterans’ health care. “We’re going to have choice. There’s no more waiting on lines for twelve weeks, and you can’t get the doctors, you can’t get what you need. So, we’re going to have choice,” Trump said upon announcing the act. Billionaire Education Secretary Betsy DeVos once compared choosing a public school to choosing between a restaurant and a food truck for lunch.

Obviously, who doesn’t want choices? That’s what makes the rhetoric of choice so seductive. But the pitch is always tied to forfeiting our ability to join together and make collective demands. Its use is part of a strategy to replace other freedoms — to struggle together for better pay and benefits, to demand that the wealthy pay more in taxes, to feel safe in our neighborhoods, to hold elected school boards accountable — with a handful of limited individual choices, none of which address the roots of our problems.

All the while, choice is conflated with freedom, concealing the fact that who has money and power matters more than the choices on offer.

For example, the conservative Cato Institute recently argued that if conservationists really want to protect resources and wildlife, they should demand that the federal government lease more public lands. That way, conservationists could simply *choose* to lease the land they want to protect. (No matter that ExxonMobil's annual revenue is \$269 billion, while the largest US conservation group takes in a mere \$171 million.)

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated, reveal an even more dangerous result of the choice obsession. According to proponents, they provide parents with more choice over which school to send their children.

Like traditional, neighborhood schools, some charter schools are effective, while many aren't. Some provide services not otherwise available, like dual-language immersion, while many don't. Yet that's not the real problem: charter schools are a thread that, once pulled, unravels the very concept of public education itself.

Each new charter school siphons funding from public school districts, forcing cuts at already struggling neighborhood schools. Charter schools cost Oakland, California's school district \$57.3 million per year, meaning \$1,500 less in funding for each student who attends a neighborhood school. Some families with the time and know-how to enroll their kids in a charter school might escape the sinking ship, but only at the expense of other students.

“Radical self-interest and self-preservation is the rotten, racist core of the whole ideology of school choice. There is no ‘we’ in this: The entire point is to give individual kids an advantage,” writes Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson.

By peeling us off one by one, the rhetoric of choice erodes otherwise widespread support for universal rights and programs.

Those fighting for abortion rights as part of a reproductive justice framework, particularly women of color, have long argued so. As the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective put it, the “conditions necessary for women to make reproductive decisions about their lives [are] opportunities to work at living wages, opportunities for affordable quality education, responsible and accessible public services such as good health care, quality schools, and accessible and affordable child care, freedom from personal and state violence, and environmentally safe communities.”

When the right to abortion is framed as a choice, enough people are left out of the struggle, particularly poor women and young people, that almost everyone ends up losing what should be a universal freedom.

In short, the rhetoric of choice disguises our ability to demand *justice*.

We should keep this in mind in the growing struggles over public education, health care, affordable housing, and more, whenever anyone — Republicans or Democrats, education reformers or opponents of Medicare for All, CEOs or centrist pundits — makes an argument for corporate-friendly public policies on the basis of “choice.” They're trying to make us forget about the kinds of freedom and rights that can only be won together.