

# Education*Next*

## Educational Freedom Isn't a Threat to Democracy

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Horace Mann – often called the father of traditional American public schooling – just celebrated his 222<sup>nd</sup> birthday. While Mann has been gone from this Earth for quite a long time, his thoughts on the intersection between common schools and democratic ideals continue to hold strong to-day. Because traditional public schools are supposed to teach children how to become proper American citizens, critics of private school choice believe that school vouchers “undermine our democracy.” But recent evidence should curb that concern.

Our just-released study examines the effects of the Milwaukee voucher program on adult voting activity. We use a sophisticated matching procedure – found to replicate experimental results – on student-level data from the most recent longitudinal evaluation of the program to compare voucher students to their traditional public school peers. Each of our analytic models controls for characteristics such as race, grade, gender, baseline math and reading achievement, parent income and education levels, and neighborhood. By the time the students reach 19 to 26 years old, we do not find any evidence that private school voucher students are either less or more likely to vote in the 2012 or 2016 presidential elections than students educated in public schools.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about our study is that the results conflict with conclusions made in a similar study just a few years ago. David Fleming and his colleagues used the same student-level data from the 2006-2012 evaluation of the Milwaukee voucher program and asked students if they would vote in the future. When surveyed, they found that the Milwaukee voucher students were 11-percentage points more likely to report that they would vote in the future than their public school counterparts.

But it turns out that didn't actually happen. Why not?

There are two plausible explanations for these seemingly contradictory results. First, the Fleming-led study simply asked students if they are going to vote in the future. That survey question could be measuring something other than political participation, namely the democratic skill of knowing what the rest of society expects from you. It also is possible that the initial positive effect of private schooling on the inclination towards political participation fades out by the time students reach 19 to 26 years of age.

Our study largely mirrors the experimental results reported by Carlson, Chingos, and Campbell for the New York School Choice Scholarships Foundation Program: no impacts on voter ac-

tivity overall or for any subgroups. Likewise, our study does not find evidence to suggest that access to private schooling through a voucher program diminishes the ability of a democratic society to function properly.

For some, a finding that access to private schooling significantly affects voter participation, in either direction, would be cause for concern. If access to religious schools caused an increase in voting activity, there would be much anxiety about how those students ended up voting. If school choice decreased voting activity, concerns about a weakening of civic values would be strengthened. In other words, a null result from a study with a large sample might be the best thing society could want regarding this question. It certainly looks like educational freedom and democracy can coexist after all.

— Corey DeAngelis and Patrick Wolf

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