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—**The Future
of School
Vouchers**

Terry M. Moe

Not so long ago, educators and their political allies were loudly proclaiming the death of school vouchers. And on the surface at least, they had a plausible case. Election 2000 saw voters give a decisive thumbs-down to voucher initiatives in California and Michigan. Shortly thereafter, a federal appeals court ruled the Cleveland voucher program unconstitutional. The new Bush administration, facing an evenly split Congress, sacrificed vouchers in order to achieve its larger objective, the No Child Left Behind Act. And while all this was going on, *Phi Delta Kappa*, a leading pro-public school journal, was waving around polling numbers showing that support for vouchers had significantly declined among the American public.

But now the shoe is on the other foot. Vouchers are suddenly on the move again. In its landmark decision, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that vouchers for religious schools are constitutional—removing a key legal obstacle to the extension of new voucher programs, giving the concept greater legitimacy and visibility, and lighting a fire

under voucher activists around the country. Meantime, there has been a surge of applications for participation in the nation's existing voucher programs—in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida—as well as a spate of new proposals, both for vouchers and for tax credits, in state legislatures. And *Phi Delta Kappa* is no longer crowing about how unpopular vouchers are with the American public, because their own polling numbers have dramatically changed.

What is going on here? And where is all this headed? Anyone who wants a good answer would be wise not to pay much attention to the ups and downs of current events, which are often misleading. Just as critics were wrong to declare vouchers dead on the basis of a few short-term developments, so proponents would be wrong to think the current rush of good news will continue unabated. It won't.

The voucher issue is more than just a current event. It is rooted in the substance of American society—in mediocre schools, in the crisis of inner-city education, in the glaring inequities of class and race, in the structure of American government, in the distribution of political power. The issue is not going to disappear because a few developments in the near term happen to go badly. And it isn't guaranteed total triumph because a few of these developments go well. This is a long-term issue, and understanding it requires a long-term perspective.

The Fundamentals of Voucher Politics

For the past decade (and longer), school vouchers have been the most controversial reform in all of American education. The idea seems simple enough: that the government should expand the choices of parents by providing them with publicly funded grants, or vouchers, that they can apply toward tuition

at private schools. Its simplicity, however, is deceptive. The voucher idea, if widely and seriously applied, is capable of transforming the entire education system. This is what all the fireworks are about.

Leaders of the voucher movement see the public school system as a stagnant bureaucracy that does not and cannot provide the nation's children with quality education. Vouchers, they claim, would open up a range of new opportunities for these children, generate healthy competition for the public schools, promote higher student achievement, and bring about significant improvements in social equity for the disadvantaged, who are now trapped in our nation's worst schools and desperately in need of choice.

Opponents see things very differently. In their view, the public schools are doing a reasonable job despite the burdens under which they operate, and they deserve more political support rather than less. The real effect of vouchers, opponents argue, would be to wreck the public schools by draining off resources and children. In the process, vouchers would undermine cherished values the public school system has long stood for—common schooling, equal opportunity, democratic control—and create a system driven by private interests.

Both sides believe their own arguments and see themselves as fighting for noble causes. This in itself is enough to fuel political conflict. Yet ideas and values alone cannot account for the explosive intensity of the voucher issue in American politics. There is something else going on, something that profoundly shapes the politics of this issue—and can hardly be described as noble.

The public school system as it currently exists is a huge reservoir of money, power, jobs, and patronage. It spends in the range of \$400 billion every year, it employs millions of people, and it confers tremendous power on those who control

the money and the jobs. Vouchers would affect all this, possibly in very big ways: for when kids use vouchers to go private, money and jobs go with them, and so ultimately does power. For these reasons, the groups that run and materially benefit from the existing system find the voucher issue deeply threatening to their most fundamental interests. And not surprisingly, they are dedicated to opposing it with all the power they can muster.

These established groups are at the forefront of the battle against vouchers. Their undisputed leaders are the teachers unions, which, by virtue of their iron grip over the public schools, have amassed vast economic and organizational resources and huge memberships, and have emerged as perhaps the most powerful interest groups in American politics. For the teachers unions especially, vouchers are a nightmare in the making. Vouchers would lower the number of teachers employed in the public sector, and thus reduce union membership and resources; increase the number of teachers employed in the private sector, where they would be much more difficult to organize for collective bargaining; increase competition among schools, putting union-run schools (which are higher in cost and more bureaucratic) at a disadvantage; and create a more decentralized, less regulated system in which the unions have far less power and control.

When vouchers are being debated in state and national politics, the teachers unions are very adept at talking the talk. They argue in the loftiest language that vouchers would be bad for children or won't really improve the quality of education. But the fact is, these sorts of arguments have little to do with their opposition. If it could be shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that vouchers *are* good for kids and *do* improve the quality of education, the teachers unions would still be vehemently opposed and willing to do anything to stop them. Vouchers

threaten their most basic self-interests—including their very survival.

The teachers unions are not alone in opposing vouchers, of course. They are the ones spending the big money, mobilizing the troops, and directing the charge, but they also have important allies in the broader liberal coalition that add force and legitimacy to the war effort. Much of this liberal opposition—unlike the unions' own opposition—derives from a genuine concern for basic principles, values, and deserving constituencies. The NAACP, for instance, fears that vouchers would promote segregation. The ACLU and the People for the American Way are concerned about the separation of church and state. And liberals in general tend to be supportive of government and the public schools, suspicious of markets, and worried that a shift toward choice would hurt the poor.

Even among the more principled liberal opponents, however, self-interest sometimes plays an important role. Some of these organizations, for instance, receive crucial funding from the teachers unions; and they know that, in order to keep it, they cannot defect on the voucher issue. To take another example: many middle class members of the NAACP and other civil rights groups are employees of the public schools system, which has become a major ladder of social advancement for minority groups. These people have a self-interest in opposing vouchers (and other fundamental reforms) purely because their jobs and powers are at stake.

Self-interest also has a lot to do with why most Democratic politicians are so stridently opposed to vouchers. The Democrats are acutely sensitive to the unions' clout in national, state, and local elections, which is second to that of no other interest group. In part, this clout is due to the enormous amounts of money the teachers unions spend on political campaigns. In many states, they are the number one spenders. But

the key to their electoral strength is that they literally have millions of members, and these members are a looming presence in *every* electoral district in the country, allowing the unions to mobilize a vast array of organized activities—from phoning to leafletting to pounding the pavement—so crucial to ensuring that friends are elected and enemies defeated. Nationwide, almost all of this weaponry is enlisted in support of Democrats rather than Republicans. But the Democrats don't get it for nothing. They earn the unions' much-valued support by toeing the line on important educational issues. And the one issue they absolutely must toe the line on is vouchers. For now, the Democrats are simply in the unions' pocket on this issue. They do what the unions say.

The voucher coalition is a wholly different phenomenon. It is a political movement and, like most movements, it is far less organized than the defenders of the existing system, has fewer resources, and has no institutional base. Self-interest clearly has something to do with its power, but it is a self-interest that seems entirely appropriate and socially desirable—namely, the self-interest of parents who want better schools for their kids. This interest is especially strong among parents who are dissatisfied with their public schools, particularly parents who are poor, minority, and stuck in failing urban school districts. In politics, however, the masses of rank-and-file parents are extremely difficult to organize, and usually play little direct role. There are other constituencies that might be construed as having a self-interested stake in the voucher issue: private schools, for example, and churches. But the fact is, leaders of these groups have usually not been at the forefront of the movement.

The people carrying the cause forward are essentially activists—most of them conservatives, a growing number of them advocates for the poor—who see vouchers as socially benefi-

cial and have no self-interested stake in it. Even the people who have contributed major sums of money—John Walton and Theodore Forstmann, for instance, who recently contributed \$100 million of their own money to fund private voucher programs—have done so because they believe in the cause, and not because they have anything to gain from it materially. There are some Republican officials who have electoral incentives (and thus self-interested incentives) to support vouchers, because they may come from districts in which vouchers are popular. But most Republicans have constituencies in the suburbs, where the schools are okay and vouchers are not a searing issue. The strongest support for vouchers comes from parents in the worst districts—and these districts tend not to be Republican. Thus, when Republicans support vouchers, it is often for reasons of ideology and personal belief, not simple self-interest. The Democrats are much more dedicated to the defeat of vouchers than Republicans are to their adoption.

Any effort to gain perspective on the voucher issue, therefore, must recognize that this is an issue that enters the political arena at a profound disadvantage. It faces an enemy that is one of the most powerful interest groups in the country, sees the issue as a mortal threat, and is totally committed to its defeat. That enemy is supported by a broader coalition that adds considerable power to the effort—and includes an army of Democratic officials who, in occupying pivotal positions of public authority, can be counted upon to protect the unions' vested interests and close ranks whenever the voucher issue comes up.

This combination is tough to beat. In the grander scheme of things, it is simply one illustration of why institutional systems everywhere, not just in education and not just in the United States, are so supremely stable and difficult to change: all systems generate vested interests, and the vested interests

use their considerable power—derived from the system itself—to maintain existing arrangements and prevent change. Almost all the time, the vested interests win. Regardless of the merits. And almost all the time, the people who challenge the system in a serious way can expect to get their heads handed to them.

While this is a universal axiom of politics, it is true in spades in this country. We have something extra that magnifies the power of vested interests still further and makes the status quo even more difficult to change. What is this something extra? It is simply the familiar structure of American government. Beginning some two hundred years ago and continuing to the present day, our democratic institutions have been designed via myriad checks and balances to make the passage of new laws very difficult and to make blocking very easy. In the usual policymaking process, advocates for any change in the status quo (such as a voucher program) must successfully make it past *all* the hurdles that stand in their way—subcommittees, full committees, and floor votes in two houses of the legislature, plus executive vetoes, court decisions, and more—while the opponents simply have to win at any *one* of these points to block. Thus, the opponents of change have a huge structural advantage. Even if they command little public or elite support, they can often find a veto point at some stage of the game that will stop the proposed change from going forward. And if the opponents are politically powerful—as the teachers unions and their allies surely are—then it is virtually guaranteed that they can do so.

These are the fundamentals of voucher politics, and they aren't pretty. The movement is doubly disadvantaged. In the first place, raw power is heavily stacked against it. In the second place, the political battle is being fought out within a governmental structure that favors opponents, and that skews the power imbalance even further. Given this context, it follows

that the voucher movement is sure to generate a great many political losses in its quest to change American education, at least in the early years (such as now) when the opponents are at their most powerful. Losses have to be considered normal, and an entirely necessary part of the process of change. Progress must come through small victories, usually won at rare times and places when the political stars happen to line up just right.

Initiative Politics

Voucher advocates are well aware that power is stacked against them, and that the checks and balances of American government make the prospects for change even worse. In the short term, they know they cannot do much about union power. But they have occasionally sought to improve their chances of success—and indeed, to score big, dramatic victories—by circumventing the structural disadvantages that American government places upon them. This they have done by taking their case directly to the people through the initiative process, which in twenty-four states offers an alternative arena in which policies can get adopted.

Theoretically, this is a terrific idea. But in practice it doesn't work. Over the past decade, vouchers (or tuition tax credits) have been put before the voters seven times, and in each case they have been defeated by big margins. The defeats in California and Michigan are just the most recent in a long line of electoral failures.

Losing at the ballot box creates obvious problems for the movement, because it gives opponents ammunition for saying that the American people, when given a choice, simply do not want vouchers. The 2000 election returns were barely counted before Robert Chase, president of the National Education Asso-

ciation, was proclaiming that “The resounding defeat of vouchers in Michigan and California should put an end to the myth that voters want vouchers. . . . This thorough thrashing of vouchers should be the death knell to a bad idea.”

The real reason that vouchers have gone down so badly in these initiative campaigns has little to do, however, with the meaningful expression of public opinion. While it might seem that direct democracy should offer the purest possible measure of the general will, there is a perverse logic that drives the dynamics of these elections. This logic almost guarantees that vouchers cannot win, regardless of how sympathetic people might be toward the idea from the outset. Here is why.

There is a good deal of independent research on initiative campaigns, ranging across all types of policy issues, and it shows pretty clearly that, unless the issue is familiar to voters and fairly simple for them to evaluate—as is the case, for instance, with the death penalty, assisted suicide, gambling, and many others—a strong opponent (if there is one) can almost always defeat it, often by big margins. This happens not because the issue is unpopular. Indeed, the very popularity of the issue as measured by pre-election polls and focus groups is usually what convinces proponents to put the issue on the ballot in the first place. Defeat is in the cards because, with an unfamiliar and rather complicated issue, a well-heeled opponent can unleash a media campaign—filled with extreme claims, half-truths, and even outright lies—that generates doubt and uncertainty among many voters and causes them to fall back on the status quo (even if they don’t like it much). The maxim among voters in these situations is “when in doubt, vote no.” Big spending by the initiative’s advocates cannot stop this hemorrhage of support from occurring. Nor does it much matter if the initiative is well designed. A well-financed opponent is going to win.

The voucher issue is surely in this category. Many polls have shown that the American people are basically open to the idea. A 1999 survey by Public Agenda, for instance, showed that 57 percent expressed support for vouchers, with 36 percent opposed. (The figures for parents were 68 percent in support and 27 percent opposed) This same survey, however, also showed that some two-thirds of the public had little familiarity with the issue. So at least for now, it fails the familiarity test. It also fails the simplicity test. For there are obviously many dimensions to its possible social effects—on school quality, social equity, racial balance, costs, taxes, accountability, the separation of church and state—that make it inherently complicated. Under these conditions, an opponent can have a field day with its media campaign. Vouchers would ruin the public schools. Vouchers would raise taxes. Private schools would discriminate against the poor. Ideologues and religious cults would propagandize children. And so on. These sorts of sensational charges can be carefully and thoroughly rebutted by voucher advocates, but not in the midst of a full-blown media war, where the potential for voter education and considered judgment is near zero. The opponent wins.

So electoral defeats do not mean that the voucher idea is unpopular. There is, however, an essential feature of public opinion that is surely finding expression in these election results, and that gives opponents something extra to work with in sowing the seeds of doubt and uncertainty. This is an important part of the political equation and needs underlining.

The fact is, despite all the concern among policymakers about improving education, most Americans very much like the public school system. They tend to think their local schools are performing reasonably well. They also believe in the ideals of public education: they see it as a pillar of democracy and the local community, they admire the egalitarian principles on

which it is based, and they think it deserves our commitment and support. They embrace what I call the “public school ideology.”

Although most Americans are not paying attention to the nation’s voucher debate, their basic values put them on both sides of the fence at once. They are open to the idea of vouchers, think private schools are superior to public schools, and believe it makes sense to give new opportunities to children who need them. Yet they also have a genuine attachment to the public school system, and this attachment makes them wary of any reforms that might seem to threaten the schools’ well-being. They are sitting ducks, as a result, for a campaign that makes sensational claims about the frightening risks of vouchers, and this is one reason the opponents find it so easy to win.

Voucher advocates can rightly complain that public opinion is being manipulated in these situations. But the manipulation is also rooted in something very real that cannot help but shape the movement’s strategies and prospects more generally. Americans are not interested in revolution. They want to keep the public system, make it better, and perhaps add vouchers. But only if the risks to the public schools can be kept to a minimum.

Legislative Politics

For the foreseeable future, the voucher movement cannot use initiative campaigns to get around the checks and balances that the American political system places in its way. As most of its leaders now realize, the movement has little choice but to pour its energies and resources into the usual policymaking process, and thus to pursue its aims by getting legislatures to pass new laws, getting executives to sign them, and getting the courts to

uphold them. The process being what it is, and opponents being as strong as they are, progress can only come through incremental, hard-won steps that bring about change over a long period of time. But the key question is: can serious progress really be made at all, or are the barriers to success simply prohibitive?

The outlook is surprisingly positive. The barriers to success are largely beyond the movement's control, but not entirely. There are things the movement can do to improve its prospects considerably, and thus to win small victories more often than it otherwise would. Notably, it can move to the political center—by making moderate, low-risk proposals for change and, on that basis, putting together diverse coalitions that reach across ideological lines. In the short run, moderate proposals and diverse coalitions can win battles here and there. In the long run, they can break down the liberal coalition and leave the teachers unions virtually alone and unable to hold back the tide. These developments are more than abstractions. They are already under way.

For decades after Milton Friedman first introduced the voucher idea, the budding choice movement was essentially a conservative phenomenon, driven by the ideals of people who firmly believed in the power of markets to improve the schools. The connection between choice and conservatism made good sense and was crucial to the movement's emergence as a political force. Nonetheless, conservatism alone was too narrow a political base—not moderate enough, not diverse enough—to overcome the blocking power of the established interests. If the movement wanted to bring about change, it first had to change itself.

The spark came in 1990, through an event that may someday be regarded as one of the most significant developments in the history of American education. Certainly it is the single

most critical event in the struggle for school choice. What happened was that inner-city parents, organized and led by local activists—most notably, Polly Williams—rose up to demand vouchers as a means of escape from their failing public schools. And by entering into a coalition with conservatives—led by Republican Governor Tommy Thompson—the urban poor won a surprising victory over the powerful defenders of the existing system. The result was the nation’s first public voucher program: a small pilot program reserved (at the time) for no more than 1,000 disadvantaged children in inner-city Milwaukee. But the victory did more than put vouchers on the map. It also generated a dramatic change in the guiding ideals and internal makeup of the voucher movement as a whole, and set the “new” movement on a very different and far more promising path.

Since 1990, most of the movement’s efforts have focused on providing vouchers to poor and minority families in the inner cities: families that are concentrated in low-performing schools and trapped by the searing inequities of the current system. The new arguments for vouchers have less to do with free markets than with social equity. And they have less to do with theory than with the commonsense notions that disadvantaged kids should be given immediate opportunities to get out of bad schools, and that experiments, pilot programs, and novel approaches are good ideas in urban systems that are clearly failing, and for which the downside risk is virtually nil.

This shift has put the opponents of vouchers in an extremely awkward position. As liberals, they claim to be (and usually are) champions of the poor. But on the voucher issue, they flatly refuse to represent their own constituents—and indeed, find themselves fighting *against* poor families, who are only trying to escape conditions that liberals agree are deplorable. In doing so, moreover, liberals have essentially pushed

the urban poor into an educational alliance with conservatives. And this alliance, whose arguments for equity, practicality, and low risk have a much broader public appeal than the conservative mantra of free markets, is sometimes powerful enough to bring about political victory, even in a context heavily stacked against it.

This is the alliance that won in Milwaukee. It won again in creating the nation's second voucher program in Cleveland (1995), in vastly expanding the Milwaukee program (1995), and in creating the first state-level voucher program in Florida (1999). And it came close—which is saying a lot, under the circumstances—in many state legislatures, as well as in the federal government (where Congress passed a low-income program for Washington, D.C., only to have it vetoed by President Clinton). Spurred on by the recent Supreme Court decision, these attempts will continue. And some of them will surely succeed.

Outside of politics, this same alliance has also been responsible for creating a vast system of privately funded voucher programs: programs that opponents are powerless to block, and have put vouchers in the hands of more than 70,000 disadvantaged children—far more than in the hotly contested public voucher programs. Because of these private programs, especially, vouchers are increasingly becoming part of the everyday lives of poor families and the everyday experiences of urban communities. People are telling their friends and neighbors, policymakers and other elites are watching and listening. The sociology of the issue is changing.

And there is more. The voucher movement has recently hit upon two promising new avenues for extending the reach of choice. The first follows the lead of Florida, which in 2000 adopted a voucher program that makes every child in special education—some 350,000 of them—eligible for a voucher.

Here too, the focus is on a population of needy children who in many cases are not being well served by the public schools. Here too, it is politically awkward and embarrassing for opponents to argue against. And the numbers are huge—already, in just the second year of the program, about 9,000 special education children are expected to use vouchers to attend private schools, and in future years this figure could increase astronomically.

The second strategy involves tax credits. Over the years, this idea has taken various forms, most often that of giving parents tax credits to compensate them for private school tuition (and perhaps books, transportation, and other expenses). A few states, such as Minnesota and Illinois, have adopted such measures. The more recent development, however—a development with spectacular growth potential for the voucher movement—is the idea that business firms should be given tax credits for allocating money toward specially constituted scholarship foundations, which would then distribute vouchers to qualified children on the basis of need. Pennsylvania and Florida have already adopted such programs; and business firms, often preferring to earmark their money for deserving education programs rather than see it dumped into the general fund, have responded by pouring many millions of dollars into their states' scholarship funds. In 2002–2003, thousands of kids in both states will be attending private schools with the help of these vouchers. And this is just the beginning

Looking Ahead

The teachers unions would like to believe that they can stop these developments, and in the short term there is no doubt that they will win most of the battles. All they want to do is

block, and the structure of American politics ensures that they can succeed most of the time. Their prospects over the long haul, however, are another matter—for their political position and ability to block are likely to deteriorate steadily over time. There are three reasons for this.

The first is that the voucher movement benefits from the law of large numbers. There are 15,000 school districts, hundreds of cities, fifty states, and a national government, and all of them are political arenas in which the voucher issue can be fought out. Because the movement itself is fragmented and decentralized, it is guaranteed to generate a great many battles in the years ahead. For a while, almost all these battles will be lost. But with so much action taking place in arenas all over the country, and with the movement taking advantage of windows of opportunity—legislatures controlled by Republicans, districts in crisis, new leaders emerging to represent urban parents—the law of large numbers ensures that it will win some of these battles, even if the probability of victory is small overall. These victories will accumulate over time. And as they do, the unions will suffer losses of members and resources—and become incrementally weaker. Which will increase the probability of voucher victories in future battles. And so it will go.

The second is that, as vouchers are provided to many thousands of kids throughout the country, the social context cannot help but change. I mentioned this earlier with regard to private voucher programs. But it is clearly a consequence as well of all the various public voucher programs, which, while currently small by comparison, are destined to grow tremendously, if only because the programs for special education and the programs financed by business tax credits have the potential to extend vouchers to vast numbers of families. As this happens, vouchers will become a normal part of educational life in America, especially urban America: the home of Dem-

ocratic opponents. No longer will vouchers be regarded as an alien concept. No longer will opponents be able to claim that vouchers destroy the public schools—because people will be able to look around and see that nothing of the sort has happened. Increasingly, vouchers will move from the abstract to the socially concrete. Many people will benefit from them, have a stake in them, know friends and relatives who use and like them, and expect their political representatives to support them.

Third, as these observations about the social context begin to suggest, the liberal coalition at the elite level is destined to break down over time. The key development—which could happen within five years, but could take a decade or more—is that the NAACP and other civil rights groups will come to support vouchers for the disadvantaged. Such a claim may seem fanciful, because these groups have been vociferous in their opposition thus far. Yet this stance has created serious problems for them: for their own constituents are the ones who are trapped in our nation’s worst schools, and these same constituents are the nation’s strongest supporters of vouchers. The leaders are dramatically out of step with their “followers.”

So far they have shown little sign of shifting course. Most of these leaders have been around since the early years of the civil rights movement, and they have emerged with a firm set of convictions—that government is the key to social progress, that markets don’t work for the poor, that choice is simply an excuse for whites to engage in segregation. Younger blacks, however, have had very different formative experiences, and they are much more inclined to see choice as a means of empowering minorities and promoting equity and opportunity. These leaders-in-waiting are causing trouble in the lower ranks of the civil rights groups. And if the current generation of leaders doesn’t come around to vouchers on its own, the

shift will take place when the new generation comes to power. In the meantime, new groups are emerging—notably the Black Alliance for Educational Options, led by Milwaukee’s Howard Fuller—dedicated to the empowerment of black families through educational choice. Their claim: that the civil rights groups are out of step with black constituents. This is another reason for the civil rights groups to open up to vouchers. Competitors are moving in to represent the unrepresented.

Civil rights groups will not be the only ones to abandon the teachers unions. The most visible sign of things to come is that certain high-profile liberals have begun to peel off and announce their support for targeted voucher plans. In recent years, the converts include: the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, former secretary of labor Robert Reich (when he’s not running for governor), civil rights activist Andrew Young, and former secretary of health, education, and welfare Joseph Califano. Their support for vouchers arises out of liberal principles and concerns. They don’t rave about free markets. They see vouchers as an experimental but sensible means of providing much-needed assistance to disadvantaged kids, and of trying to shake up a status quo that, in many urban areas, is demonstrably inequitable and resistant to change.

There is evidence, then, that the opponents of vouchers are beginning to lose the intellectual and moral arguments within their own coalition. Important as this is, however, it will take more than the force of ideas to convince most Democratic officeholders to turn against the teachers unions too. The unions have always been able to rely on the Democrats to keep voucher plans from passing into law, and there is little mystery why. Sheer power keeps them in line. Still, this era of lockstep Democratic compliance cannot last. Many Democrats, like the civil rights groups, find their opposition acutely uncomfortable: they have constituents who are disadvantaged, in bad

schools, and strongly interested in vouchers. At the mass level, in fact, vouchers could very easily be a Democratic issue—but Democratic politicians have not been able to treat it that way. Were it not for the unions, many Democrats, especially those representing inner-city areas, would simply line up with their own constituents.

Eventually, this is what will happen. The shift to vouchers by prominent liberals will help pave the way, making it easier for some Democrats to justify their defection. But the union grip will really start to loosen when the civil rights groups begin to make the switch themselves. This will change the balance of raw political power, and with it the incentives of Democratic politicians to vote their constituencies. Increasingly, the unions will be left alone, out on the extreme.

These changes may take decades to be realized. The new system that evolves, moreover, will fall well short of what some of the purists in the choice movement might want. Free markets will not reign, the public system will not be privatized, and vouchers may never be extended to all kids on a universal basis. Given the checks and balances inherent in American government, the changes that actually come about will tend to be those that the new and future recruits to vouchers—urban activists, civil rights groups, prominent liberals, urban Democrats—are willing to go along with. They are the ones who hold the balance of power, and they will be using that power to aid the disadvantaged, promote social equity, and ensure that government continues to play an important role in education.

Vouchers are not the only choice-based reforms that we can expect. For similar reasons, there will also be thousands of new charter schools offering choice and competition within the public system. And there will be lots of innovative contracting arrangements, in which private firms (such as Edison) are

engaged to run schools. The new system will be a blend of all these (and more), and is best thought of as a mixed system of government and markets—a system that involves far more choice, competition, and privatization than the current system does, but maintains a key role for government in helping ensure that these market forces work as desired and that key social values—especially equity for the disadvantaged—are protected and promoted.

Had the Supreme Court prohibited vouchers for religious schools, these developments would have been slowed but not stopped. The socioeconomic fundamentals driving the politics of reform would have stayed the same, after all. And it is likely that advocates would have found other means of extending vouchers to kids in religious schools—for example, appropriately designed tax credits and scholarship foundations—that would have circumvented the Court’s decisions, and indeed have gained explicit Court approval.

As it is, a favorable Supreme Court decision has removed a key legal obstacle to change, and the socioeconomic and political forces I’ve described can work their influence more quickly and effectively. Even so, real change will hardly come overnight. It will take a long time—twenty years, thirty years, perhaps more—for the system to be thoroughly transformed. In the meantime, vouchers will continue to have their ups and downs, and we simply have to see them for what they are: short-term fluctuations in a long-term process of change.