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School Choice: How an Abstract Idea Became a Political Reality

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This paper traces the evolution of the choice idea over three generations, from a market model concerned with economic liberty, to a demand for social justice based on equality, to a political movement that translates the idea into policy. Focusing on the last generation, it explains why the market concept has lacked political appeal and how empirical academic research has had a stagnating effect on the movement toward greater choice. While somewhat illuminating, researchers' preoccupation with empirical measures of student performance has overshadowed the more compelling social justice argument for choice; taken on its own terms, the research has failed to account for resource disparities between students in choice programs and their public school peers and has given insufficient attention to the satisfaction registered by parents whose children participate in choice programs. Based on the experience with early charter school laws and with vouchers in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, Colorado, and the District of Columbia, the author argues that, in the final analysis, the future of school choice will be written at the local level of politics, where minority activists and political leaders have broken ranks with their elders of the national Democratic Party to help deliver legislative packages that were ultimately signed by Republican chief executives.

While it has become axiomatic that Democratic candidates for national office—including every contestant in the 2004 primaries and the eventual presidential candidate—have been lukewarm on choice and opposed to vouchers, the position of national party leaders will prove to be politically irrelevant and inconsequential. Even though national party leaders are out of touch with the education preferences of African American and Latino parents, who increasingly support choice generally and vouchers in particular, they can assume that minority voters will continue to vote for the Democratic ticket because of agreement on a wider range of social issues. Nonetheless, school choice will advance, because most education policy is made at the state and local levels. The author anticipates a choice regime that allows all parents to select the schools their children attend and in which all schools that receive public

funding—district, charter, private, and religious—are held to high levels of accountability for student performance.