Private Means, Public Ends (Figure 1)

Even the most rigorous studies with few exceptions, studies consistently find that schools of choice instill civic values to a higher or the same degree as traditional public schools.

Note: The 21 studies included in this review had a total of 59 findings. A study had multiple findings if it reported effect sizes for multiple types of choice school (e.g., secular private, Catholic, charter).

Source: Author’s tabulations
Do assigned public schools have a comparative advantage over public schools of choice and private schools in steeping their charges in the civic values necessary for democratic citizenship? The theoretical argument in favor of such an advantage is both intuitive and popular. As free government schools, open to all on equal terms, public schools make an important statement about equality, a fundamental democratic value. Former education secretary Richard Riley aptly captured this perspective, noting that civic values are “conveyed not only through what is taught in the classroom, but by the very experience of attending [a public] school with a diverse mix of students.”

Many supporters of school choice argue that neighborhood assignment to public schools results not in what public school advocates celebrate but in just the opposite: schools that are less likely to contain a diverse mix of students and that are more internally segregated along racial lines than are schools of choice. In recent years, a number of empirical studies of the effects of school choice on civic values have been published. As the extent of school choice in American education continues to grow—the latest data from the Department of Education show that 26 percent of American students attended a school other than their closest neighborhood public school—it is time to take stock of the evidentiary record on whether assigned public schooling better prepares students for their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

Studying the Effects of Choice on Civic Values
For this review, I examine the results of 21 quantitative studies regarding the effects of school choice on seven civic values that relate to the capacity of individuals to perform as effective citizens in our representative democracy. The values, in order from the most studied to the least studied, are political tolerance,
With one exception, the findings regarding the effect of school choice on political tolerance are confined to the neutral-to-positive range. Eleven findings—five of them from the more-rigorous studies—indicate that school choice increases political tolerance.

As can be seen in Figures 1a and 1b, the 59 findings from existing studies suggest that the effect of private schooling or school choice on civic values is most often neutral or positive. Among the group of more-rigorous studies, 12 findings indicate statistically significant positive effects of school choice or private schooling on civic values and 10 suggest neutral results (see Figure 1). Only one finding from the rigorous evaluations indicates that traditional public schooling arrangements enhance a civic value.

The studies that employ only basic adjustments for likely self-selection paint an even rosier picture of the positive effects of school choice on civic values (see Figure 1). Of the 36 findings, 21 indicated a school choice advantage in promoting preparation for citizenship. Thirteen neutral results appear in this collection of analyses, and two findings show benefits from traditional public schooling. The reader is cautioned not to draw strong conclusions from these studies, however, since they employed only rudimentary methods for addressing the problem of selection bias. We now consider the specific civic values that appear to be affected by school choice arrangements.

Voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills, and patriotism.

The studies are divided into two categories, based on the statistical rigor with which the investigation was conducted. To qualify for inclusion in this review, a study had to be a quantitative analysis that controlled for observed differences in the backgrounds of the students attending different schools. To be classified as rigorous, the study also had to attempt to correct for the tendency of students and families to sort themselves into different schools and school sectors based on unobserved factors, a research challenge commonly referred to as selection bias. Those studies classified as rigorous used experimental data or employed sophisticated statistical techniques that credibly adjust for the possibility of selection bias when analyzing nonexperimental data. These more-rigorous studies should be weighted more heavily in any assessment of school sector impacts.

Most of the studies included in the analysis focus on students in private schools. Only three studies present results for students in charter or magnet schools. Therefore, the results described below primarily map out the effects of private schooling on civic values.

Findings are divided into three categories. A finding is categorized as signaling a traditional public school advantage if the evidence suggests that such a schooling arrangement produced a statistically significant (at the 90 percent confidence level or better) increase in the realization of the particular civic value. A finding is classified as supporting a choice school advantage if attendance at a public or private school of choice generated a statistically significant positive effect on a civic value. Findings of no significant difference between traditional public and choice schools are classified as neutral.

Studies of Political Tolerance

Democratic citizenship requires that we respect the rights of others, even if we profoundly disagree with their opinions. The most commonly used method of measuring such political tolerance first asks respondents to either think of their least-liked political group or select one from a list that includes such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazis, the religious right, and gay activists. It then asks whether respondents would permit members of the disliked group to exercise constitutional rights such as making a public speech, running for political office, and teaching in the public schools. Other studies simply ask respondents whether they would permit various activities from a group with whom they disagree, without first asking them to choose their least-liked group. In either case, responses are aggregated into a tolerance scale.

With one exception, the findings regarding the effect of school choice on political tolerance are confined to the neutral-to-positive range. Eleven findings—five of them from the more-rigorous studies—indicate that school choice increases political tolerance. For example, one experimental voucher study in Washington, D.C., found that nearly one-half of the students who switched to a private school said they would permit a member of their disliked group to live in their neighborhood, compared with just over one-quarter of the students in the public school control group. Three studies that used sophisticated nonexperimental techniques to control for selection bias also found positive effects of choice arrangements on political tolerance. These studies were of 8th-grade students in Dallas–Fort Worth attending private secular and non-evangelical religious private schools, 8th-grade students in private
secular schools in New York City, and Massachusetts students attending secular private schools.

The more-rigorous studies produced eight findings that school choice arrangements neither increase nor decrease political tolerance. For example, three experimental studies found neutral results of school vouchers on the political tolerance of middle-school students, in the Washington program after three years, a Dayton program after two years, and a San Francisco program after two years.

Six of eight findings from the less-rigorous studies of the effects of school choice on political tolerance indicate a school choice advantage. Three studies concluded that secular private schools have a positive effect on political tolerance. One analysis reported that Catholic schooling boosted tolerance. Another study found that religious schools in general increase the political tolerance of their students. A third report concluded that private schooling of any type improves political tolerance among Latinos.

An observational study by Jay Greene and his colleagues reported no effect of school type on the political tolerance of Texas adults, and David Campbell’s analysis of the National Household Education Survey (NHES) found that students in traditional public schools had higher levels of political tolerance than students in non-Catholic religious schools.

Studies of Voluntarism
The ideal citizen not only tolerates dissent but also actively serves the community. With one exception, studies regarding the extent to which private schooling or school choice affects the likelihood that students or parents will volunteer their time in community enterprises range from neutral to positive.

Four voluntarism findings emerged from rigorous studies, with three of them favoring school choice. The study of 8th graders in New York City and Dallas–Fort Worth found that private school students are 21 percent more likely to volunteer—and dedicate more hours to community service—than comparable public school students. A study using just the sample of 8th graders in New York City found that private schooling promotes volunteer activity if the students attend religious private schools. A third rigorous study looked at the effects of school choice on the likelihood of parents volunteering in New York City and the New Jersey suburbs and found that parents in school choice districts are about 6 percent more likely to volunteer than are comparable parents in non-choice districts. Finally, students in private secular schools in New York City are nearly 17 percent less likely to volunteer than comparable public school students, a finding that favors traditional public schooling arrangements.

Studies of voluntarism employing less-rigorous statistical methods produced 10 findings; half favor school choice, whereas the other half report no effects of school type. The findings in support of school choice show higher voluntarism among students in religious schools, parents of students in religious schools, parents who home school, students in any type of private school, and students in public charter schools. Other studies reported that voluntarism rates were similar between the students in secular private, non-Catholic religious, and magnet schools and their peers in traditional public schools. Two studies reported similar rates of volunteering between the parents of students in secular private and traditional public schools.

Studies of Political Knowledge
Presumably, democratic citizens will be more active and effective in public forums to the extent they are knowledgeable about politics and current events. Researchers typically measure political knowledge by administering brief civics quizzes of 3 to 10 items pertaining to central features of the U.S. Constitution as well as contemporary public figures. Five studies produced nine findings regarding the effect of school choice on political knowledge. Only three of these findings are from rigorous studies. R. Kenneth Godwin and Frank Kemerer, in their analysis of students in schools in New York City and Dallas–Fort Worth, found that choice students scored higher than traditional public school students on political knowledge regardless of whether they attended private schools in general or evangelical private schools in particular. The only experimental study of school choice and political knowledge found no significant difference in average political knowledge levels between recipients of vouchers and comparable students in public schools.
Three studies that employed basic statistical methods report six findings regarding the effect of school choice on political knowledge, two showing a choice school advantage. Richard Niemi and his colleagues drew on the NHES data to conclude that private schooling increases political knowledge. David Campbell’s more fine-grained analysis of the same data reported that only Catholic private schools demonstrated a clear political knowledge advantage. Campbell found that students in non-Catholic religious, secular private, and public choice schools all evidenced political knowledge levels that were comparable to students in traditional public schools. In the earliest known empirical study of the effect of school choice on civic values, James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer concluded that students in Catholic and public schools were similar in their average levels of political knowledge.

Studies of Political Participation, Social Capital, Civic Skills, and Patriotism
Beyond being tolerant, community minded, and well informed, we also expect well-trained citizens to be politically active possessors of social capital with civic skills who are loyal to their country. Unfortunately, relatively few studies have queried the extent to which school choice arrangements foster such attributes. One rigorous study, by Thomas Dee, concluded that Catholic schooling increases voter turnout as adults. Jay Greene and his colleagues conducted less-sophisticated studies that found that Latinos who received all of their K–12 education in private schools were 16 percent more likely to say they voted in the last presidential election than comparable Latinos who were educated exclusively in public schools. They also reported that Texas adults who were educated at least partly in private schools were 9 percent more likely to have voted recently, all else being equal. An observational study by Christian Smith and David Sikkink found that parents who enroll their children in private religious schools or who home school them are more politically active than are otherwise comparable parents who enroll their children in public schools. Parents of students in private secular schools do not differ significantly from public school parents in political participation.

Two rigorous studies reported findings regarding the effects of school choice on social capital, typically defined as a close connection with one’s community via social networks, group norms, and cooperation for mutual benefit. Mark Schneider and his colleagues concluded that the responsibility to choose their child’s school increases the social capital of parents. Paul Peterson and David Campbell reported no difference in the levels of social capital between voucher users and control group members in their experimental analysis of the Children’s Scholarship Fund.

In the first study of education and social capital, Coleman and Hoffer employed basic statistical methods and found that Catholic schooling was associated with higher levels of social capital. Greene and his colleagues replicated those results on a national sample of Latino adults.

No experimental studies have been conducted on the effects of school choice on civic skills or patriotism. Two studies that applied basic statistical methods to the 1996 NHES data generated diverse findings regarding the effect of school choice on civic skills. The survey asked students, During this school year, have you done any of the following things in any class at your school: Written a letter to someone you did not know? Given a speech or an oral report? Taken part in a debate or discussion in which you had to persuade others about your point of view? Students in private high schools were more likely to have engaged in these three activities than comparable students in public high schools, according to one study. The second study found that students in Catholic schools scored slightly higher than comparable students in assigned public schools. No significant differences in civic skills were uncovered between students in assigned public schools and comparable students in non-Catholic religious or secular private schools.

An observational study of patriotism employed an index that includes five questions about students’ visceral attachment...
The Catholic Schooling Effect

Several prominent scholars have claimed that Catholic schooling may be largely responsible for the generally positive school choice effects on civic values. Would the likely effects of choice on political tolerance, voluntarism, and other democratic values disappear or turn negative with Catholic schools out of the picture? Figure 2 excludes all results based on comparisons between public and Catholic school populations or that focus exclusively on the experiences of Latinos (who, if privately schooled, predominantly attend Catholic schools). Study groups identified simply as “private religious” are considered Catholic and excluded for purposes of this analysis, since most religious private schools in the U.S. are Catholic. Twenty-two results showing a school choice advantage remain, suggesting that secular private schooling enhances political tolerance, that charter schooling increases voluntarism, and that education at an evangelical private school increases political knowledge. Twenty findings indicate that school choice has no clear effect, positive or negative, when schools other than Catholic schools are chosen.

Three findings showing a traditional public school advantage remain, suggesting that evangelical Protestant schools reduce political tolerance, that secular private schools decrease voluntarism, and that private schooling of any sort may diminish a particularly passionate form of patriotism. As all the negative effects shown in Figures 1 also appear here, it seems non-Catholic schools of choice are responsible for the few negative effects of choice arrangements on civic values observed here. However, non-Catholic schools of choice also appear to generate many positive outcomes regarding democratic values. These results suggest that the expansion of school choice is more likely to enhance than diminish the civic values of our next generation of citizens, even if none of the new choosers end up in communitarian-infused Catholic schools.

Discussion

All of the studies reviewed draw on data either about the various school sectors as they existed in the 1980s and 1990s or from modestly sized school choice experiments. The demographic composition of the various school sectors and the independent effects of private schooling and school choice on the civic values reviewed here would likely change somewhat under a complete or even larger-scale school choice regime. One should therefore be cautious in drawing strong conclusions from the empirical record to date on school choice and civic values.
The most intriguing explanation for the apparent school choice advantage in promoting civic values is a generally higher level of order and discipline in schools of choice.

The empirical picture regarding the effects of school choice on civic values raises some concerns. The lone study on fostering patriotism indicates that public schools may hold an advantage over schools of choice. In one study of voluntarism, attending private secular schools apparently reduced the likelihood of volunteering. Attending an evangelical Protestant school was found to decrease political tolerance in one study and increase political knowledge in another, causing scholars such as Stephen Macedo to worry that such schools may produce young adults who are strongly equipped to act politically on their intolerance. The Madrassa schools of radical Islam remind us that private schools of choice can serve to undermine democratic values. It would seem reasonable to require some minimal oversight and regulatory constraints on private schools that accept public monies, such as prohibitions against teaching hate. As important as these concerns are, the record to date suggests that civic values tend to be enhanced, or at least not harmed, by the exercise of school choice.

What aspects of choice schools generate these modestly positive civic values outcomes? No direct evidence yet exists regarding the specific conditions or practices of choice schools relative to traditional public schools that would explain this pattern of results. One theory is that schools of choice foster strong education communities typified by regular parental involvement and a concern for the welfare of all members. Yet several other plausible explanations also deserve attention. Teachers in private schools may be freer to infuse instruction with moral values and discuss controversial issues than public school teachers. Students who regularly encounter value-based claims and perspectives may become more tolerant of people with value-based positions that differ from their own. They also may feel more motivated to volunteer for activities that seek to bring about social and political change.

The most intriguing explanation, in my opinion, for the apparent school choice advantage in promoting civic values is a generally higher level of order and discipline in schools of choice. Public charter schools and private schools tend to be more well-ordered education institutions than neighborhood public schools, especially in urban environments. A well-ordered and nonthreatening education environment likely contributes to students’ feelings of security and confidence. Such feelings might be a necessary precondition for young people to develop a willingness to tolerate potentially disruptive political ideas and political groups and to venture out into the community to promote social causes, an idea suggested by Alan Peshkin in his case study of a Christian fundamentalist school. There is a clear theoretical justification for linking a well-ordered education environment with stronger civic values, and I hope that future studies will explore this possibility.

Other aspects of schooling might also promote higher levels of civic values among students, be they in assigned public schools or schools of choice. Effective instruction itself likely promotes civic values, as better-educated citizens tend to be more knowledgeable about politics, more tolerant, and more active in their communities. Some preliminary studies suggest that students are more likely to embrace civic values as adults if they had the opportunity to participate in student governance or voluntary activities as students, or at least witnessed adults who modeled proper civic behaviors in their schools. There is less empirical support for curricular interventions aimed at boosting civic values. Civics classes appear to increase civic values such as tolerance only modestly, and only if they are customized to focus explicitly on that particular value. There is no evidence that taking a required civics course in junior high or senior high school, in and of itself, enhances civic values.

In summary, the empirical studies to date counter the claims of school choice opponents that private schooling inherently and inevitably undermines the fostering of civic values. The statistical record suggests that private schooling and school choice often enhance the realization of the civic values that are central to a well-functioning democracy. This seems to be the case particularly among ethnic minorities (such as Latinos) in places with great ethnic diversity (such as New York City and Texas), and when Catholic schools are the schools of choice. Choice programs targeted to such constituencies seem to hold the greatest promise of enhancing the civic values of the next generation of American citizens.

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A complete list of the studies is provided in the appendix to the unabridged version of this essay at www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/.