Feature

Voters Reject Vouchers —Again!

What the defeat of private school choice measures in three states signals for the movement

LAST NOVEMBER'S ELECTIONS produced a trifecta of defeats for supporters of private school choice, which had been on the march in Republican-controlled legislatures in recent years. Surprisingly, two of these losses occurred in solidly red states, Kentucky and Nebraska, that overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump in the same election. Yet voters rejected voucher proposals in both places by margins nearly as decisive. The third loss occurred in Colorado, where public school choice has thrived for three decades.

The defeats come at a time of tremendous flux in education politics. Until recently, education reform had been a bipartisan endeavor. School choice was but one policy lever for improving educational outcomes—one that was arguably less central to the reform movement than high-stakes accountability linked to standardized testing. And reformers focused primarily on public school choice, through open enrollment, magnet programs, and the rapid expansion of public charter schooling. Private school vouchers, to the extent that they featured in the movement's

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JENNY BRUNDIN / CPR NEWS

Superintendent Rob Sanders of Fort Morgan School District in Colorado rallies opponents of Amendment 80, which would have added the right to school choice to the state's constitution. The amendment was defeated by voters last November.

toolbox, were generally limited to programs targeting students in underperforming urban districts and from low-income households—an escape valve for families that couldn't afford access to housing zoned with better schools and were stuck without decent education options.

As education reform of all stripes has fallen out of favor on the political left, Republicans who once signed on to the bipartisan consensus have also begun to have second thoughts. By supporting small, highly targeted voucher programs, "the right wound up largely neutering choice, stripping it of much of its appeal and potential constituency," Rick Hess and Mike McShane have argued. "While choice proposals could generally count on the principled support of conservative lawmakers, [targeted voucher programs] weren't seen as especially relevant by many conservative voters, suburban families, or middle-class parents."

Universal programs and flexible education savings accounts (ESAs), two policy priorities for Republican leaders in recent years, promised to make choice accessible to a broader swath of the electorate, including parents frustrated by pandemic-era school closures, masking mandates, and high-profile curricular and culture wars.

Or so went the thinking. The 2024 election results provide compelling reasons to reevaluate this logic. The defeat of the school choice proposals suggests that support for voucher programs remains surprisingly weak among Republican rank-and-file, and that the theoretical benefits of choice don't hold much appeal for the large number of families satisfied with their neighborhood public schools. These parents worry about the cost of voucher programs and fear they will ultimately come at the expense of spending on traditional public education—especially when the inherent zero-sum nature of budgeting is made salient in an initiative campaign.

As education reformers ponder the best path forward, it may be helpful to understand what went wrong last November.

Batting Zero at the Ballot Box

Last year's defeats are only the latest ballot box wipeouts for school choice, underscoring the political challenge facing advocates who seek to build a durable majority coalition. It is a challenge they have faced for decades, so far unsuccessfully. Beginning in 1978, when seven in 10 Michigan voters opposed a private school voucher plan there, choice proposals have consistently lost in state after state, often by overwhelming margins.

Table 1 lists every statewide ballot question since 1978 that focused on expanding alternatives to traditional public schools. Not a single measure was successful, regardless of whether it focused narrowly on private school vouchers or included other reforms such as public-school open enrollment (e.g., Oregon in 1990). Voters rejected proposals for

Statewide School Choice Referenda Since 1978 *(Table 1)*

For nearly 50 years, every state ballot question about expanding educational choice beyond public schools has been voted down.

State	Year	Measure	Description	% Opposed	Program
Michigan	1978	Proposal H	Establish vouchers	74	Universal
Oregon	1990	Measure 11	Establish tuition tax credits	68	Universal
Colorado	1992	Amendment 7	Establish vouchers	67	Universal
California	1993	Proposition 174	Establish vouchers	70	Universal
Washington	1996	Initiative 173	Establish vouchers	64	Universal
Colorado	1998	Amendment 17	Establish tuition tax credits	60	Universal
California	2000	Proposition 38	Establish vouchers	71	Universal
Michigan	2000	Proposal 00-1	Establish vouchers	69	Targeted
Utah	2007	Referendum 1	Retain school vouchers	62	Targeted
Arizona	2018	Proposition 305	Retain educational savings accounts expansion	65	Universal
Colorado	2024	Amendment 80	Create a "right to school choice"	51	Universal
Kentucky	2024	Amendment 2	Allow public funding of private schools	65	Universal
Nebraska	2024	Referendum 435	Retain private school choice program	57	Targeted

NOTE: Table excludes six charter school proposals in three states: (1) Washington (1996, 2000, 2004, and 2012); (2) Georgia (2012); and Massachusetts (2016). Except for the Georgia measure, all were rejected by voters.

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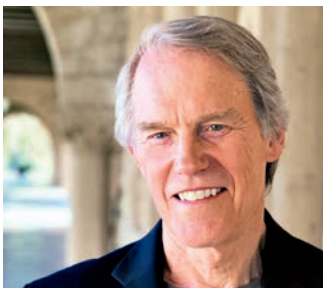
policy change brought forward using the initiative process but also repealed laws that had already been passed by conservative state legislatures (e.g., Utah in 2017 and Arizona in 2018). They said no to universal programs open to all students and rejected narrower offerings targeting specific populations. The table doesn't include six other measures to expand charter schooling during this period, of which all but one also failed.

Such an overwhelming record of failure spanning more than four decades may seem surprising in light of polling indicating substantially higher levels of popular support for school choice in the abstract, including years of data from *Education Next* surveys. Nearly every survey fielded since 2017 has found a narrow majority in favor of universal private school vouchers. The story is similar for targeted choice programs, described as "a proposal to give low-income families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition." Support for targeted programs peaked at lower levels than universal ones, but more survey respondents nevertheless expressed favorable opinions than opposed them.

Other polling commissioned by the school choice advocacy group EdChoice, focusing on parents of school-aged children, found even more enthusiasm alongside rising support for school choice since the pandemic. In 2024, for example, the group's surveys showed that eight out of 10 parents favored both universal ESAs and school vouchers. "In short, parents like both their child's public school and school choice," Hess and McShane argued in their book *Getting Education Right.* "They don't see a tension."

The apparent disconnect between such polling and actual election results is nothing new. Both in Oregon (1990) and Colorado (1998), private tax credit initiatives appeared well ahead in pre-election polls before ultimately being rejected by voters.

Research sheds some light on why abstract support expressed in low-stakes surveys rarely translates into electoral success. Backing for private school voucher programs in particular appears to be shallow and highly dependent on question wording. As political scientist Terry Moe showed more than two decades ago, language noting that taxpayers would foot the bill for vouchers—perhaps at the expense neighborhood public schools, given real-world budget constraints—dramatically reduces support. It is not surprising such messaging played a central role in campaigns that produced the November 2024 defeats. It will surely continue to feature heavily in future campaigns.



WIKIMEDIA

Stanford's Terry Moe noted the effect of survey-question wording on results two decades ago.

What Happened in 2024?

Kentucky

The biggest loss last fall came in Kentucky, where a proposed constitutional amendment to allow the state to enact and fund a private school choice program was rejected by more than 60 percent statewide and lost in every single county. The Republican supermajority in the state legislature placed the amendment on the ballot last spring following earlier defeats in court. The resulting campaign became a test of political influence between the state's top elected Democrats, Governor Andy Beshear and Lieutenant Governor Jacqueline Coleman, who both actively opposed the amendment in partnership with the National Education Association (NEA), and the state's Republican establishment, including U.S. Senator Rand Paul.

The amendment would have empowered the state legislature to "provide support for the education of students outside the system of common schools," overturning state court precedent that had previously interpreted the Kentucky constitution as prohibiting voucher programs.

The dueling campaigns raised nearly $16 million, marking a new record for political spending in Kentucky that more than doubled the previous record set in 2022 in connection with a constitutional amendment to protect abortion rights.

In their advertising, opponents of the voucher amendment targeted Republican voters, emphasizing the fiscal costs of similar programs in other states and arguing that this spending would come at the expense of public investment in local schools in rural communities. One ad featured a young girl explaining to her parents the risks involved: "In Arizona, [vouchers] blew a massive hole in the budget. . . . In Georgia, rural Republicans are in revolt over vouchers."

Another ad featured a teacher from an area of Kentucky devastated by major floods in 2022. "When the floods hit Eastern Kentucky, we lost everything," the narrator explains in a distinctive drawl. "Public school saved us. It's where everyone could find food and shelter." The voucher amendment, the ad warned, would hurt rural Kentuckians by using "our tax dollars on private schools" and

"forcing many public schools in rural communities to close."

A series of commercials featuring the state's Democratic governor warned that the proposed amendment "subtracts taxpayer money from public schools and gives it to unaccountable private schools" and predicted that, if it passed, "you will see dollars move from rural Kentucky school systems into unaccountable *urban* private schools."

Voucher proponents emphasized that the measure would bring about "educational freedom"—predicting it would improve student achievement, increase teacher salaries, and give parents more control over their children's education. With financial support from billionaire Jeffrey Yass, they managed to outspend opponents by more than $1 million—only to lose the vote by 30 percentage points.

Nebraska

Nebraska's campaign followed largely similar lines, although the path to the ballot proved more circuitous. In 2023, the legislature voted to create a tax credit program to subsidize private school vouchers. Democrats and labor allies mobilized almost immediately to put the new program to a popular vote. Anticipating a tough campaign, the legislature repealed the original law and adopted a smaller, directly funded voucher program prioritizing low-income and special education students, pairing it with $1 billion in new funding for public schools.

The effort to head off a referendum didn't work. Opponents collected nearly twice the number of signatures necessary to force a vote to repeal the voucher section of the legislative package.

The campaign united Democrats, energized organized labor, befuddled business groups, and divided Republicans. With nearly $6 million in financial support from the NEA and its state affiliate, repeal proponents heavily outspent voucher backers. They ran an intentionally nonpartisan campaign aimed at convincing the state's overwhelmingly Republican electorate that school choice would undermine public education.

Tim Royers, president of the Nebraska State Education Association, called vouchers an "existential threat to our capacity to fund our schools in the future" and "a fundamental attack on the integrity of public education within the state." Campaign ads warned that "state legislators are playing games with our children's education," predicting that vouchers would cost as much $100 million over 10 years and cause "larger class sizes, less resources, lower teacher pay, and higher property taxes." As in Kentucky, voucher opponents argued that the program would transfer resources from rural public schools to urban private ones.

On Election Day, Nebraska voters repealed the voucher plan by nearly 15 percentage points.

Colorado

The closest advocates of private school choice came to success last November was in Colorado, a state that has long been a leader in public school choice even as it has shifted from red to purple to blue. An amendment to the state constitution to explicitly grant "each K–12 child the right to school choice" defined to include "neighborhood, charter, private and home schools, open enrollment options and future innovations in education" fell six points short of the 55 percent supermajority required for passage.

Abstract support for school choice expressed in low-stakes surveys rarely translates into electoral success.

The amendment would not have created a program of any kind or required an appropriation, but it was seen by critics as the first step to opening the door to public funding to private schools. (As shown in Table 1, two earlier voucher proposals were defeated by Colorado voters: in 1992 and again in 1998.)

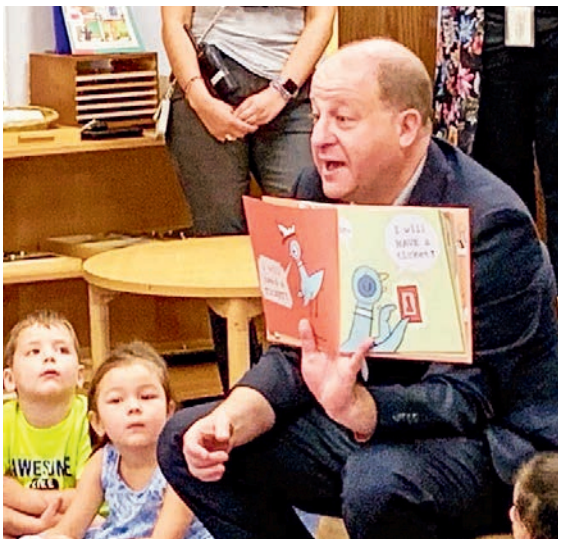
In contrast to Kentucky and Nebraska, where school choice of all kinds remains controversial, Colorado has provided for considerable public school choice for decades. The state was the third in the nation to pass a charter school law in 1993 and one of the first to require mandatory inter- and intradistrict choice among public schools. Support for public school choice in Colorado has long been firmly bipartisan. Today, an estimated 40 percent of Colorado students participate in open enrollment or charter schools.

This context may explain why the choice measure received support from nearly half of the electorate—but also shows that goodwill built through public programs may not extend to private school vouchers. Amendment supporters denied that it was "a backdoor to vouchers"—although an early draft of the proposal would have explicitly authorized a voucher program—and claimed their motivation was to protect charter schools, which have attracted growing skepticism from Colorado's Democratic majority in recent years. The state's moderate Democratic Governor Jared Polis—a former charter school founder and a vocal advocate of public school choice—remained neutral on the amendment. The state's charter advocates did not actively support it either.

The campaign for the amendment ended up spending nearly $1 million, raised from prominent Colorado Republicans and conservative education groups. Controversially, the campaign's website and other communications featured a deceptive video of the state's top teachers union leader edited to intimate (falsely) that he supported the amendment.

As in Nebraska, however, supporters were heavily outspent by opponents, led by national and state teachers unions, which raised $5 million to defeat the amendment. Whereas in Kentucky

and Nebraska both sides framed school choice in the broadest terms, opponents of the Colorado amendment explicitly invoked support for open enrollment and charter schools and sought to distinguish these public choice programs from private school vouchers. Perhaps surprisingly, several prominent homeschool advocacy groups also opposed the amendment, warning that it would open the door to increased regulation and government oversight.



GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

Colorado Governor Jared Polis, once a charter school founder, neither backed nor opposed Amendment 80.

Fault Lines in Voter Support

While the differences in the magnitude of the defeats across the three states highlight the importance of state context, campaign messaging, and the details of individual proposals, variation in voter support *within* each state helps reveal the most salient fault lines in public opinion on school choice.

We have assembled detailed precinct-level results from all three states—covering nearly all precincts in Kentucky, a dozen large counties in Colorado that account for a large majority of statewide votes cast in the election, and precincts from several large counties in Nebraska (making up over half of the statewide vote). We then mapped each precinct, linking election results to demographic information from the U.S. Census and the associated school district. In addition to the precinct breakdowns, we were able to obtain redacted cast vote records from six large Colorado counties. These anonymized files track individual ballots and show how a given person voted across different contests on the same ballot.

Given the sharp divisions on school choice between Democratic and Republican elites in these states, it should not be surprising that each measure did better among Republican voters. What is perhaps more unexpected is the *relative* weakness in this relationship. In Colorado, for example, three in 10 Harris voters voted in favor of the school choice amendment, while a quarter of Trump voters opposed it (see Table 2). The partisan gap on a second state constitutional amendment appearing on the same ballot—to add language protective of abortion rights—was nearly twice as large.

In Nebraska, where voters narrowly passed a constitutional amendment banning most abortions after the first trimester, precinct-level presidential voting was much more predictive of support for the abortion measure than for the voucher plan. Similarly, in Kentucky, presidential partisanship was more important in explaining variation in support for a measure to require proof of citizenship for voting as for the voucher amendment (see Figure 1). Underscoring the important differences between states, the Kentucky voucher plan received only modestly more support in the state's most Republican precincts than the Colorado school choice amendment won in that state's most Democratic areas.

One overarching lesson from these results is that school choice remains far less polarized along partisan lines than some of today's most salient culture war issues. Many regular voters have not internalized the sharp partisan divisions that have emerged on the topic among state and national elites. What's more, partisanship is only one factor that explained voter support for school choice this November.

In each of the three states, the trio of choice proposals did best (after adjusting for local partisanship) in central urban

Support for 2024 Colorado Constitutional Amendments, by Presidential Candidate Preference *(Table 2)*

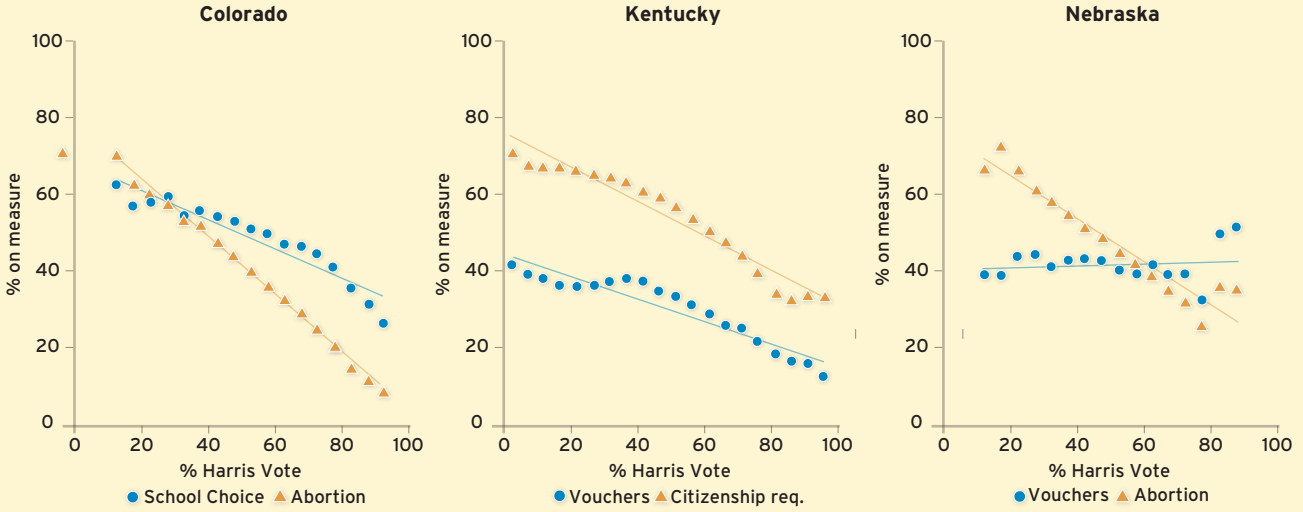
Compared to abortion, school choice had a narrower partisan divide in the Centennial State last year. A greater proportion of Democrats supported the state's school choice amendment than the share of Republicans who opposed it.

	School choice (Amendment 80)			Abortion rights (Amendment 79)		
Presidential vote	% Yes	% No	% Abstain	% Yes	% No	% Abstain
Harris	30	64	6	88	8	4
Trump	68	26	6	24	71	6

NOTE: Calculated using individual-level information from 1.6 million Colorado voters in the redacted cast vote records provided by Adams, Broomfield, Denver, El Paso, Jefferson, and Larimer counties.

Precinct Level Referendum Results vs. Presidential Vote *(Figure 1)*

Traditionally partisan issues like abortion and immigration followed predictable patters among Democratic voters, where affirming protections rose in proportion to support for Kamala Harris. Opposition to school choice, on the other hand, was less pronounced at the precinct level among Democrats, and in Nebraska support for it even rose slightly with support for Harris.



NOTE: Colorado's abortion amendment sought to protect abortion rights, while Nebraska's sought to ban abortions after the first trimester. For Colorado, we plot percent of "no" votes for the abortion amendment rather than the "yes" percentage, so that larger numbers correspond to more conservative policy preferences, to aid comparison across the states.

areas. The primary contrast, however, was between urban centers and everywhere else. There was not much difference between suburbs located within metropolitan areas, small towns, and rural areas far away from the major cities in Kentucky and Colorado. (In Nebraska, unlike the other two states, vouchers did especially poorly in the most rural areas of the state.) The urban-vs.-everywhere-else divide was particularly large in Kentucky, corresponding to an increase in support for vouchers of about 6 percentage points, or the equivalent of increasing Trump's vote share in a precinct by nearly 20 percentage points.

One reason why choice fared so well in urban areas appears to be larger minority populations, a factor which predicted greater support at the precinct level in all three states holding other demographic variables constant. In Kentucky and Nebraska, support was also higher in neighborhoods with higher existing private school enrollment, which may reflect either self-interested considerations on the part of parents who stand to benefit from private voucher programs or dissatisfaction with available public school options. Consistent with the second explanation, support for school choice was also highest in the lowest-rated school districts in each state—but with few meaningful differences based on academic performance in school systems above the very lowest tier.

What is perhaps most notable about these patterns is their consistency with research on the public's attitudes toward private school vouchers going back decades. Indeed, polling on the original 1978 Michigan referendum revealed many of the same demographic and geographic divides that appeared to persist in 2024.

Equally informative is what factors *didn't* appear to influence voter support for school choice. Our analysis found little evidence that vouchers are more popular in neighborhoods with more private school options, measured as the density of such schools within five miles, after accounting for other demographics. We did sometimes find less support in precincts without a single private school nearby, but these differences were surprisingly modest.

Despite popular narratives that support for choice increased in response to frustration with public education during the pandemic, we also found little connection between school closures and voter support for private school choice. Voters living in school districts that remained in virtual learning the longest were

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no more likely to support the choice referenda than voters whose schools reopened for in-person learning right away.

Now What?

These results, in our view, have important implications for education reformers as they contemplate policy choices and political strategy.

First, the relatively low level of partisan polarization on school choice suggests many Democratic voters remain up for grabs in building a new reform coalition. This is an important consideration as legislative advocacy efforts shift from red to blue states. Minority voters and others living in low-performing urban districts are particularly willing to support private school choice. Yet this support needs to be won, which may require compromise and a willingness to consider quality and cost controls that have increasingly fallen out of favor among choice advocates.

On the other hand, explicitly partisan efforts—such as a federal voucher plan publicly associated with the Trump administration—are likely to backfire politically, alienating persuadable blue voters and hardening public opinion along ideological lines. President Trump's efforts to reopen schools during the pandemic seemed to have exactly this counterproductive effect, as did President Obama's embrace of Common Core standards.

MARTHA STEWART

Advocates of universal school choice like EdChoice CEO Robert Enlow vow to keep pushing for state legislation.

The narrow partisan divide also means voter skepticism of vouchers crosses party lines. This explains why most modern voucher and ESA programs have come out of legislatures. Selling Republican lawmakers on the benefits of choice seems to be easier than winning over Republican voters. In Texas and Tennessee, where voucher bills were initially blocked by rural Republican legislators, primaries have proven effective at overcoming legislative roadblocks. No similar mechanism exists for overcoming opposition among the mass public, and a legislature-only strategy is unlikely to be effective in states where Democrats are in control or where court decisions make it necessary to amend a state constitution.

Overall, the large majority of parents who like their current public schools, along with voters without school-aged children, are likely to evaluate choice proposals primarily through their expected (or feared) impact on their local public schools. "Across much of America, schools serve as community anchors, places where children make lifelong friends and parents forge bonds," Hess and McShane noted in their book. "These families hear calls to 'end zip-code education' not as a promise but as a threat." Empirical research bears this out.

And these voters understand universal voucher programs are expensive—especially when they absorb families who currently pay out of pocket to access private schools—and worry about the budgetary tradeoffs required to pay for them. For voters living outside of urban areas, even universal programs may not appear to benefit their families or communities. This does not mean targeted vouchers are likely to fare better—the history of rejection of such proposals suggests otherwise—but there is little reason to think universal programs have an inherent political advantage or broader appeal.

Finally, anger and energy surrounding education culture wars is unlikely to sustain a broader education agenda focused on academic opportunity. Chanting protestors with colorful signs may make a local school board meeting video go viral but are unlikely to provide the organizing base around which to build the necessary statewide electoral majority.

Following the defeats last November, advocates for universal school choice have already vowed to continue fighting state by state. "Once we finish with the low-hanging fruit, Texas and a few other red states, this movement will go to a blue state strategy," promised Robert Enlow, CEO of EdChoice.

"Strategically the advantage is clear," University of Arkansas professor and school choice scholar Patrick Wolf has argued. "Universal eligibility creates a bigger tent of beneficiaries. That's good for the programs and everyone in them."

The benefits of universal choice both as a strategy and a policy may indeed be clear to these advocates. Evidence from 50 years at the ballot box, however, indicates voters will need much more convincing.

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