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## ABSTRACT: *The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency in November 2016 is expected to usher in a new phase in the country’s economic and domestic governance as well as its foreign policy orientations. Trump’s ascendancy to power has also fuelled debates on the global rise of populism. The populist upsurge had already gained prominence in academic and policy circles thanks to the success of populist parties in Europe, as well as in countries like Turkey, India, Thailand, and Venezuela. More recently, the referendum on Brexit witnessed the victory of a populist party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and its (former) leader, Nigel Farage, in the form of its dominance in shaping the populist debates largely devoid of facts in the period preceding the referendum. Nonetheless, despite their electoral strength or their increasing power in shaping public debates, none of these parties had yet come to power in a long-established Western democracy. In that sense, Trump’s election marks a turning point by making the United States the first long-established Western democracy that is currently ruled by a right-wing populist leader. It also significantly strengthens the claim that populism is no longer a regional but a global phenomenon that needs to be studied through comparative terms in a global context.*

**KEYWORDS**: *Trumpism, GOP, Populism, USA*, *Governance of education.*

**Introduction**

Since the Sixties, U.S. presidents have used their executive, administrative, and political powers to pursue policy goals in elementary and secondary education. Even though states retain primary responsibility for governing K-12 schools, American presidents have ‘galvanized’ the nation’s attention to issues of equity and accountability in public schools. With support from a liberal majority in Congress, Lyndon Johnson proclaimed the Great Society program and signed the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) in front of the one-room school house where he attended as a child. Jimmy Carter elevated the governmental status of the U.S. Office of Education with the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education and appointed the nation’s first secretary of education. Ronald Reagan appointed a national commission that crafted the seminal report, *A Nation at Risk* that connected student performance to global competitiveness. In convening the first national summit on education, George H.W. Bush and the nation’s governors launched *Goals 2000*. Bill Clinton promoted federal expansion in *Head Start, Title I, charter schools, and post-secondary opportunities*, among other initiatives.

George W. Bush and Barack Obama made tremendous efforts to implement the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, with an explicit focus on holding schools accountable for performance among student subgroups (Wong, 2007; McGuinn, 2016). Obama further used *Race to the Top* grants and federal waivers to engage states to adopt systemic initiatives such as the *Common Core State Standards* and direct intervention strategies to turn around «low-performing schools» (McGuinn and Manna-dal-Cielo, 2013). Like his predecessors, Donald Trump has had an opportunity to use his executive, administrative, and political power to shape education policy. This article addresses several questions about the Trump administration’s actions regarding education policy. In particular, what were the K-12 policy strategies pursued during the first three years of the Trump presidency? Additionally, how did the Trump administration use its executive, administrative, and political power to further the president’s policy goals in K-12, particularly regarding implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA)?

In this article, particular emphasis is placed on Trump’s reliance on executive and administrative tools to promote state policy authority, diminish federal direction on civil rights issues, and expand private and public school choice. Following the strong bipartisan passage of ESSA in 2015, Trump did not see many opportunities to score key political wins through passage of congressional statutes regarding K-12 education, thereby leading the administration to focus less on legislative initiatives and more on executive and administrative actions. Trump’s reliance on administrative action may also have been a product of limited congressional support for some of the president’s policy priorities as well as a lack of support for his budgetary request to reduce funding for the U.S. Department of Education and many K-12 programs.

**1. Trump’s Priority: A Reduced Federal Role in K-12 Education Policy**

In contrast with recent presidents whose education policy legacy is connected with adoption of significant congressional legislation, Trump has generally not focused on and has had little success securing congressional enactment of his education policy goals. He has relied instead on executive and administrative action in the education policy area, no less than in other policy areas (Thompson *et al.*, 2020).

In statistical terms, European early school living (ESL) rates are defined as the percentage of 18-24 years old with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. Eurostat, the statistics office for the European Commission, measures this by calculating the percentage of young people aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions: *i*) the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short; *ii*) no education or training has been received in the four weeks.

In 2012 the ESL rate in the EU as a whole was 12,8%. The UK recorded a slightly higher rate (13,5%). This figure may well be higher for the UK since GCSE’s (GCSE’s are the main qualification undertaken by young people at 16 in the UK) grade A - C have been assigned an ICSED code of 3c long. Thus, young people who drop-out of education after completing only lower secondary education who gained the qualifications of GCSE’s grade A - C are not included in the UK figure on early school leavers, which complicates international comparisons.

**TAB. 1.** *Early school leaver rates in European countries*



Source: European Commission (2013: 32)

**FIG. 1.** *Development of ESL rate by country*

Source: European Commission (2013: 10)

**2. Rolling Back the Federal Role in Equity**

Historically, equity has been a key justification for federal involvement in K-12 education. Since the civil rights movement and the Great Society program of the Sixties, federal education programs have played an instrumental role in promoting equal educational opportunities for all students. Title I of the 1965 ESEA was a key part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty. More recently, in implementing NCLB, Presidents Bush and Obama focused on the achievement gap experienced by low-income and racial and ethnic student groups.

Throughout his two terms, President Obama used administrative actions to elevate the nation’s attention to racial/ethnic, income, gender, and sexual orientation inequity in K-12 schools. Among other actions taken during the Obama years, the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education conducted extensive monitoring of civil rights violations related to gender discrimination (Title IX), the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) students, as well as students with disabilities and other needs.

Led by Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in the Obama administration, an interagency task force leveraged federal resources and political will to address complex challenges that African American children and youth faced, including violence, an achievement gap, chronic absenteeism, and teacher quality. A prominent example of Obama’s commitment to educational equity was his effort to improve schools for Native Americans on reservations. Obama highlighted education as a key pillar in revitalizing Native American communities. As Secretary Duncan explained:

The President and I believe the future of Indian Country rests on ensuring that [Native American] children receive a high-quality education. Improving academic outcomes for Native American children has never been more important. Unfortunately, too many Native American children are not receiving an education that prepares them for college and career success, too few of them are going to college, and far too many of them drop out of high school. We need to do better! (Duncan’s speech at the Annual Meeting of the American Teachers Association, quoted in Lakesworthy, 2016, 7).

Seen over the longer term, the proportion of NEETs among 16-18 year olds has fluctuated between 8 and 10% from the mid-1990s. From 2008, nevertheless there has been a decline, which, again, may be partly explained by the raising of the age of compulsory education (Department for Education, 2014b). Table 3 below shows trends in the proportion of NEETs among 19-24 year olds from the third quarter of 2009 to the third quarter of 2014. Although there are notable fluctuations, a clear curvilinear trend can be detected: the proportion of NEETs first rises to 22% in the third quarter of 2011 and then declines (with ups and downs) to 17,6% in the third quarter of 2014. Thus, the number of NEETs has gone down both among adolescents and young adults. Moreover, they have sunk below pre-crisis levels, given that the proportion of NEETS among 19-24 year olds stood at 18% in the third quarter of 2008 (Department for Education, 2013). Thus, the economic crisis appears not to have produced a lost generation as was feared by many. On the other hand, people who were 19 and older in 2009 are 25+ in 2015, meaning that they no longer fall in the 16-24 NEETs category and have thus dropped out of sight for policy makers. It could well be that the crisis has had lasting effects on this generation.

Orienting more of mathematics teaching toward understanding probabilities and statistical claims, and ensuring that students have practice in applying the knowledge and skills they develop to claims about policy, is probably an essential part of developing the relevant statistical literacy. Just as most citizens, most of the time, are not going to carefully scrutinize news media reports in detail, they are not likely to investigate statistical claims that lie behind claims about policy: to expect otherwise is to demand too much of the polity. But a well-functioning democracy requires that there is a substantial pool of ability to engage well in the critical consumption of statistical evidence and to scrutinize news media critically, and that this pool is well-distributed across the population: that is, that the pool should not mainly be concentrated at one end of the political spectrum, or in one part of the country, or in one social class.

**3. The Evolution of State Education Agencies**

*3.1. History*

The historical evolution of SEAs provides important context for understanding the ways in which their role has shifted over the past two decades and is likely to shift further in coming years. Until recently, SEAs were not deeply involved in K-12 education policymaking or school district oversight, and school districts and local school boards were the dominant decision makers for elementary and secondary schools. Beginning with the federal *National Defense Education Act* (NDEA) of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, however, national policymakers used the grant-in-aid system to push states to pursue federal goals in public education. In order to claim their share of a growing pot of federal education funds, states had to agree to comply with a wide array of federal policy mandates, and over time the relationship between state education agencies and local school districts began to change[[1]](#footnote-1).

*3.2. What lies behind cartoons?*

Within geopolitics and related disciplines such as international relations and critical security studies, there is growing recognition that visual cultures need to be better understood, precisely because of ongoing mass-mediated violence and terror (Power and Crampton, 2005). In the words of Mitchell (1994, 2-3) «what we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses».

The analysis illustrates the different motivations and the complexity of the journeys that led to leaving school early. Behind the truncated educational journeys of ESL there were a range of personal factors which intersect with other social conditions. Amongst the personal factors, lack of motivation and not knowing what to do were prominent causes of dropping out. Michael, now 22 years old, left school at 16. He then started a music technology course at college but gave up without gaining any qualification. Since then, he had a couple of jobs and he has been claiming unemployment benefits on and off. He is currently out of work as he was made redundant from the last job:

Researcher: «And did you have any particular hopes when you left school?»

Michael: «Sighs heavily. At the time I wasn’t one of those who thought about the future much, just sort of, not bothered about the future so I didn’t really plan ahead for anything. […] It’s just me. I was disinterested which is why I didn’t really follow up a lot of stuff… But to be honest it’s getting the motivation to do it all which, I don’t know, I just don’t really have. […] I was thinking about joining the Forces or something but I just don’t have the temperament to take orders, you know, so that was kind of… I mean now, I wouldn’t mind like, just for the money really, an electrician or some at but I didn’t get any of the qualifications when I was younger so… I’d have to save up loads of money and go back and pay loads and get in college again or something. So that’s pretty much nothing really apart from that».

These images ask hard-hitting questions about the nature and purpose not only of the Bush administration but also of the kinds of visual claims associated with ‘America’ in the aftermath of 9/11, especially by framing a particular issue or event through the depiction of implicated individuals. His cartoon published on 15 October 2002, in the aftermath of the devastating attack on local people and holidaymakers on the Indonesian island of Bali, highlights how Bell felt that the Bush administration’s long-term decision to pursue Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq meant that the USA’s ‘War on Terror’ was simply not making the world safer from the threat posed by Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda terror network.

*3.3. Consequences* *for the individual*

Leaving school prematurely is first a tragedy for the individuals concerned. Reviewing the literature on the effects of ESL, we arrive at the following list of consequences:

* Lowered inhibitions, leading to poor social judgment.
* Trouble concentrating.
* Loss of coordination.
* Loss of critical judgement.
* Dulled perception, especially vision.
* Mood swings.
* Reduced core body temperature.
* Raised blood pressure.
* Passing out.
* Puking.

To this list we may add low self-esteem (Prause and Dooley, 1997). In this way, Butler’s notion of performativity in the construction of gender is likely to be centred on the idea of repetitiveness of these acts, which are continuously forming gender identity that could not exist prior to these gendered acts, but rather while are being performed. Moreover, this performativity conception puts forth or implies that gender is not fixed, but fluid, or as Groening (1999) describes «free-floating», so changeable since it is a social fabrication that varies amongst cultures and through time. The similarities in the music are also matched with coincidences in the story line.

*Setting*

The Simpsons takes place in the fictional American town of Springfield in an unknown and impossible-to-determine U.S. state. The show is intentionally evasive in regard to Springfield’s location. Springfield’s geography, and that of its surroundings, contains coastlines, deserts, vast farmland, tall mountains, or whatever the story or joke requires. Groening (1999) has said that Springfield has much in common with Portland, Oregon, the city where he grew up. The name Springfield is a common one in America and appears in at least 29 states. Groening has also stated that he named it after Springfield, Oregon, and the fictitious Springfield which was the setting of the series *Father Knows Best*.

*3.4. Consequences for society*

Charles Montgomery Burns is the owner of the Springfield nuclear power plant and this is also symbolical of the fact that capitalism has no respect for any living creature, not even for nature itself. Whenever, the nuclear power plant appears in the series, pollution also appears as the plant lacks every single safety measure a decent plant need. As a matter of fact, the plant’s name is synonymous for radioactive pollution. Thus, the plant pollutes Springfield’s air, rivers and of course its very own residents. Mr. Burns’ poor health is largely due to his lifelong exposure to radiation. His body has absorbed radiation so much that he sometimes glows green in the dark.

Burns’ legal destruction of nature and all its living beings stands symbolical for the harm that capitalism poses on our society. In season 2, episode 4 (*Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish*) Bart catches a three-eyed fish from the river and this causes the nuclear plant to get inspection. ùFailing to bribe the inspectors, Burns eventually decides to run for governor. He abuses Darwin’s theory of evolution and claims that the three eyed fish is a super fish and that it is tastier than regular fish (King and Auriffeille, 2013). Upon inviting him for dinner with the Simpson family, he is served the super fish but immediately spits it out, causing an immediate end to his campaign. Later, the name Blinky was given to the three-eyed fish.

Taking social background and other influences into account, Hoskins and Janmaat (2014), for instance, found that young people in England with Level 1 and 2 qualifications (i.e., those with qualifications from lower secondary) had a significantly lower chance of voting in the 2010 elections than youngsters with higher qualifications (see Figure 2). This unequal electoral participation makes democratic politics less responsive to the needs and interests of the disengaged, which may ultimately undermine the public legitimacy of democracy.

**4. UK Government Policies Dismissing Community Schools.**

Policy-makers worldwide keep creating new kinds of schools that are similar to every other kind (i.e., there is no dismantling or radical re-engineering of the concept of schools), claiming success for electoral or other reasons and then not allowing these schools to be evaluated properly. Several studies based in the US have reported evidence that attainment can be affected by the type of school attended, such as the Promise Academy charter middle school (Dolbie and Surround, 2009), Knowledge is Power Programme middle schools (Tuttle *et al*., 2010) and more general charter schools. A recent example in England is the Academies programme, started by one government in 2000, continued by the next government from 2010 and now extended to include ‘Free’ schools.

It called for a number of measures aimed at keeping young people in education, training or work (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The proposed measures included:

* making sure that young people have clear goals to aim for by the age of 19;
* introducing a variety of pathways in education and training, which address the needs of all young people;
* providing financial support to encourage all groups of young people to participate in education and training;
* the creation of a multi-skills support service for young people targeting those who are most at risk of underachievement and disaffection.

In response, the Labour government launched the Connexions Service, which offers advice and guidance to 13-19 year olds by means of Personal Advisors to help them get their lives on track. It also instituted the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2004. The EMA offered young people from low income families financial support and incentives to boost retention, participation and achievement rates in upper secondary education (Maguire and Rennison, 2005). Research looking into the effectiveness of the EMA found that since its introduction participation in Year 12 full time education (16-17 year olds) had gone up by 5.9% while the number of NEETs had diminished by 2,4% (Ashworth *et al.*, 2002). Thus, a small but noticeable positive effect of EMA was found. Other measures to incentivise NEETs to re-enter education or take up paid employment included the introduction of a variety of vocational and professional Diplomas available at different levels of qualification and the introduction of a national minimum wage for 16 and 17 year olds (Maguire and Thompson, 2007).

Originally, the Academies were set up both to stop the spiral of decline and to improve pupil results. The schools selected at the outset were among the most disadvantaged and so where they changed their intake because of Academisation, this was no threat to local levels of socio-economic segregation between schools. For example, where new Academies ended up taking a smaller share of local free school meal (FSM) eligible pupils, this meant that neighbouring schools had to take more and so the local clustering of poorer children into specific schools would reduce.

However, the Academies programme more recently has only been driven by the purported school improvement agenda, and the social justice element is now largely ignored, meaning that almost any school is eligible to convert. Private fee-paying schools, ex-grammar schools, Foundation schools and many others (including primary) have become Academies. And the even newer Free schools have been set up as Academies from fresh. All of these are clearly nothing like the most disadvantaged schools in their area and were not in anything like a spiral of decline beforehand.

**Conclusion**

To say that struggling Academies are doing no better than their non-Academy peers or predecessors is not to denigrate them. They are doing no worse than their peers either, with equivalent pupils. Nor does it mean that good work has not been done in and by Academies. But it does demonstrate that the programme is a waste of time and energy at least in terms of this rather narrow measure of outcomes. There is no success specific to Academies that might not also have come from straightforward increased investment in ‘failing’ schools. Of course, one can argue that the schools have been a success in maintaining numbers and reducing the proportion of disadvantaged students. And this is certainly true for two of the first three Academies, which were selected as among the most deprived schools in England.

But the programme now includes Academies that had been private or selective schools, and which had been among the least deprived in their areas. So, this is no longer a sensible way of assessing success for the programme. There are also opportunity costs. The money involved since 2002 could have been used differently – spent on refurbishing the most deprived schools or used to follow the most deprived students to whichever school they attend. The same is true for all recent new school schemes in England, such as the Specialist Schools, and will almost certainly be true for yet untested schemes like Free Schools, and their equivalents worldwide.

In addition to redefining the content of science, it is imperative to restructure and redefine the institutional *loci* in which scientific labour takes place – universities, government labs, and corporations – and reframe the reward system that pushes scientists to become, often against their own better instincts, the hired guns of capitalists and the military.

But all this is only a first step: the fundamental goal of any emancipatory movement must be to demystify and democratize the production of scientific knowledge, to break down the artificial barriers that separate ‘scientists’ from ‘the public’. Realistically, this task must start with the younger generation, through a profound reform of the educational system. The teaching of science and mathematics must be purged of its authoritarian and elitist characteristics, and the content of these subjects enriched by incorporating the insights of the feminist, queer, multiculturalist and ecological critiques.

Finally, the content of any science is profoundly constrained by the language within which its discourses are formulated; and mainstream Western physical science has, since Galileo, been formulated in the language of mathematics. Thus, a liberatory science cannot be complete without a profound revision of the canon of mathematics. As yet no such emancipatory mathematics exists, and we can only speculate upon its eventual content. We can see hints of it in the multidimensional and nonlinear logic of fuzzy systems theory; but this approach is still heavily marked by its origins in the crisis of late-capitalist production relations. Catastrophe theory, with its dialectical emphases on smoothness/discontinuity and metamorphosis/unfolding, will indubitably play a major role in the future mathematics; but much theoretical work remains to be done before this approach can become a concrete tool of progressive political praxis. Finally, chaos theory – which provides our deepest insights into the ubiquitous yet mysterious phenomenon of nonlinearity – will be central to all future mathematics. And yet, these images of the future mathematics must remain but the haziest glimmer: for, alongside these three young branches in the tree of science, there will arise new trunks and branches – entire new theoretical frameworks – of which we, with our present ideological blinders, cannot yet even conceive.

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1. The creation of federal categorical programs in the NDEA and ESEA necessitated the creation of new federal and state administrative capacities to oversee the administration of the programs and ensure compliance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)