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# Particularism and Entrepreneurial Governance in United States Education Reform: Policy Continuities and Transformations Across the Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations

**Amira Berkane**

Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University ,12. P. O. Box. 23000 Annaba, Algeria

Email: amira.berkane@univ-annaba.dz

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## Abstract

Education is among the most localized areas of American governance and, at the same time, one of the most frequent targets of presidential ambition. This article explores how two forces, particularism and policy entrepreneurship, jointly shape federal education reform. Using a qualitative, comparative design, it analyzes federal policy instruments, such as grant conditions, waiver authorities, and regulatory guidance, and the record of state responses to them, interpreted through Kingdon's multiple-streams framework. Since 2009, federal education policy has shifted from formula-based allocation toward discretionary, competitive, and negotiated processes that concentrate power in the executive branch. At the same time, policy entrepreneurs advanced their ideological commitments through mechanisms that bypass legislative channels where consensus is absent. The comparison traces how the Obama administration consolidated accountability through competitive grants, how the Trump administration turned to deregulation and school choice, and how the Biden administration emphasized equity through partnerships with labor. The comparison suggests that reforms built on executive discretion depend on the coalitions that produce them rather than on statute, which leaves federal education governance in a recurring cycle of reversal. The evidence is strongest for the Obama case, and the smaller number of cases limits how far the findings can be generalized. This article concludes that more durable reform requires a legislative foundation and bipartisan consensus building, and it identifies state level responses to federal pressure as a direction for future research.

**Keywords:** particularism, policy entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial governance, federal education policy, executive discretion, multiple-streams framework

## Introduction

Education occupies a peculiar place among policy domains in the United States: it is among the most thoroughly local domains of governance, yet it is also a frequent target of presidential ambition. The tension motivates the present study, which examines the convergence of two forces that have come to define contemporary federal education reform. Given the complexity of the American education system, the president cannot legislate education policy directly, and Congress rarely reaches lasting agreement on it. The executive branch has therefore relied repeatedly on particularistic tools, such as competitive grants, conditional waivers, sub regulatory guidance, and administrative rulemaking designed for specific states,

institutions or constituencies, instead of a universal standard. Alongside these instruments sits policy entrepreneurship: the strategic work of individuals, such as cabinet secretaries and White House staff, who couple problems, solutions, and political opportunities to open and exploit policy windows.

The inquiry matters for what it shows about how modern school reform is built. In particular, executive strategies have turned the federal role in kindergarten12 schooling into a series of regulatory experiments that tend to draw sustained political resistance (McGuinn, 2016). Presidents who use competitive grants and waivers to work around partisan gridlock tend to put their short-term political goals ahead of the system's long-term stability, and this deepens the instability that follows each administration (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). The use of executive direction may indicate an intensifying trend toward policy entrepreneurship, in which administrative action codifies ideological commitments wherever robust legislative consensus is absent (Galey, 2015). Comparing administrations is worthwhile because it shows how presidents circumvent legislative barriers to reshape the national educational framework, often at the cost of policy durability, and because it documents a broader move away from bipartisan agreement toward a more fractured administrative state.

The study addresses three linked questions, the first asks how particularism and policy entrepreneurship jointly structure federal education reform. Answering it requires moving beyond accounts that treat each policy period in isolation, toward a more systemic view of executive governance. The second asks whether these interventions: reflect the capacity of policy entrepreneurs to reshape policy outcomes strategically or reflect a particularistic strategy aimed at winning electoral support in politically decisive states. The third asks what happens to the relations between federal and state governments when reform is pursued through administrative rather than legislative means. The shift from collaborative incentives to unilateral directives may mark a broader transformation in executive governance, in which waivers and grant conditions increasingly bypass the legislative process to advance ideological outcomes (Saultz et al., 2016).

Additionally, this study examines the administrations of Barack Obama (2009–2017), Donald Trump's first term (2017–2021), and Joseph Biden (2021–2025). Three considerations guided this selection. First, together the three cover the period since 2009, in which, as discussed below, discretionary and competitive forms of particularism came to displace a formula-based allocation. The cases therefore share a common institutional setting: a Congress that rarely reaches lasting agreement on education and a federal government that must act through the states. Second, the administrations advanced markedly different paradigms: consolidated accountability under Obama, deregulation and school choice under Trump, and equity focused partnerships with labor under Biden. This makes them a useful set for tracing how similar kinds of instruments serve different ends. Third, each administration followed its predecessor directly and inherited its regulatory legacy, which allows the study to examine reversal and continuity as well as difference. The small number of cases limits how far the findings can be generalized; a point taken up in the discussion of limitations below.

Methodologically, this study uses a qualitative, comparative design. Its central analytical move is to compare two administrative tools, competitive grant programs and discretionary waivers, on two questions: how differently each shapes a state-level implementation, and what each leaves behind in the long run relationship between Washington and the states (Dahal, 2024; Howell, 2015; Wrabel et al., 2016). In addition, Kingdon's (1995) multiple-streams framework guides the interpretation and makes it possible to analyze how strategic actors time their moves to exploit a policy window (Fowler, 2018). In this way, they can turn accountability into a vehicle for ideological rather than a purely technocratic revision (Lewis & Young, 2013).

This corpus comprises a systematic selection of sources on how the U.S. executive branch shapes state education policy through administrative tools rather than legislation. It draws on federal policy instruments and their official documents, records of state responses, and scholarship on executive federalism and intergovernmental relations (Thompson, 2012). Sources were included if they were peer reviewed scholarship, academic books, or official government document that addressed federal education instruments, state responses to them, or the actors who shaped them, and if they covered the period since 2009, or supplied the theoretical and historical background for it. For the Trump and Biden cases, where scholarly studies of award patterns remain scarce, the corpus draws on the few available scholarly studies of ESSA plan review and waivers and is supplemented with policy reports and reputable trade press, which are treated as partial evidence and identical as such.

It contrasts the Obama administration's broad, grant and waiver are focused on interventions (Wong, 2015) with the more disruptive, ideologically driven shifts under the Trump and Biden administrations. This analysis argues that grant conditions and the selective use of waiver authority are the main channels through which federal influence reaches individual states, because these same instruments allow policy entrepreneurs to reshape federal accountability frameworks and embed competing ideological narratives in state systems (Heys, 2023). The analysis highlights "disciplined devolution" as a mean of modifying state accountability structures. Finally, it explores the policy paradoxes that emerge when executive directives clash with differing local interpretations of educational equity (Herrick et al., 2026).

The article roadmap proceeds in three stages for this analysis. The first establishes the conceptual and historical foundation. It delineates the shift from the formula-based allocation to competitive and negotiated mechanisms that concentrate discretion in executive hands. It then places that change within a broader movement away from uniform standards and toward decentralized, pluralistic institutional frameworks, which is the setting for the rise of particularism. It also pairs entrepreneurial governance, understood as reliance on competition, private capital and performance metrics, with the figure of the policy entrepreneur. The two reinforce each other: particularistic tools can be authorized without a durable legislative majority, and entrepreneurial brokerage allows those instruments to be presented as answers to national problems. The second stage compares the Obama administration's effort to consolidate accountability as a dominant policy paradigm, the Trump administration's turn toward deferential deregulation, and the Biden administration's emphasis on restorative equity. The final stage considers what this comparison implies for the durability and fragility of federal education reform. Such reform depends on the coalitions that produce it rather than statute. The conclusion returns to the three questions, sets out the study's limitations, and considers directions for future research. A short limitations section precedes the conclusion, which returns to three questions and considers directions for future research.

## 1.Theoretical Framework: Particularism and Entrepreneurialism in American Education Policy

This section develops the two concepts on which the analysis rests, beginning with particularism and then turning to entrepreneurial governance. It closes with the multiple-streams framework, which links the two concepts to the timing of reforms.

### 1.1 Particularism in U.S. Education Governance

American political science has long classified policies by how broadly their costs and benefits are distributed across society. The classic statement is Lowi's (1964) typology. It distinguishes distributive policies, which confer benefits on discrete, identifiable recipients without requiring direct tradeoffs among competing claimants at the point of enactment, from regulatory and redistributive policies, which apply broad, categorical rules uniformly to all similarly situated actors. Distributive policies are, in this sense, particularistic as opposed to universalistic. Put differently, particularism channels public resources and

benefits to dedicated constituencies, states, or other politically favored groups (Rocco & Haeder, 2018). In this respect, it stands opposed to universalism, the traditional strategy in which legislative coalitions spread benefits across all districts in order to secure a broad majority.

Research on presidential distributive politics extends this logic to the executive branch. Earlier works examined how presidents shape the geographic distribution of federal spending (Berry et al., 2010), and Kriner and Reeves (2015) found that "presidents are not universalistic, but particularistic—that is, they reliably direct dollars to specific constituents to further their political goals" (p. 155). This analysis at the county level shows that presidents reward both counties in swing states and core counties in states that strongly supported them in recent elections. In addition, the targeting of swing states is especially pronounced in reelection years. On this view, executive offices may treat financial resources in sectors such as education as instruments of patronage rather than as equitable means of national advancement (Rhodes, 2012).

A further dynamic concerns how particularistic grants become a means of embedding executive preferences while managing a Congress too polarized to legislate. Federal agencies matter as essential but non neutral intermediaries, because they hold discretion over how federal resources are allocated, and can either advance or blunt the president's objectives (Napolio, 2021). These distributive patterns suggest that presidential policy priorities can take precedence over conventional partisan explanations, pointing to administrations that sometimes use discretion at the agency level to keep core supporters loyal to the president's agenda (Fu, 2022).

The particularist logic of federal education policy dates to its earliest enabling statutes, as authority over schooling was left to the individual states. Consequently, American presidents have mostly influenced the education system indirectly, through agenda setting, executive budgets, and symbolic leadership, rather than through direct control of schools. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 illustrates the point since its Title I tied federal dollars to districts and schools serving concentrations of low-income students, using a formula as opposed to a universal per-child grant (Dilger & Cecire, 2019).

For much of the period that followed, this formula-based logic prevailed until 2009. Since then, more discretionary, case by case forms of particularism have come to dominate education policymaking. Instead of distributing funds by formula, these newer forms channel them through an application and scoring process, or through terms bargained bilaterally with individual states, with executive officials controlling both. The Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTT) remains the clearest illustration (McGuinn, 2014, p. 61).

### 1.2 Entrepreneurialism and the Marketization of Education

Particularism concerns who benefits from policy; entrepreneurial governance concerns how government pursues its goals. The label entered the American administrative language mainly through the "reinventing government" movement of the early 1990s. Its central claim was that public agencies should borrow tools from the market in place of bureaucratic culture: competition among service providers, an organization run around a mission instead of rules, measurable performance targets, and the treatment of citizens as customers (Osborne, 1993, pp. 350–351).

Presidents and cabinet secretaries, in this context, act as policy entrepreneurs. On this spot, policy entrepreneurship means the strategic advocacy by which executive actors steer preferred reforms through the policy process and exploit administrative windows of opportunity (Ness, 2010; Petridou & Mintrom, 2020). Furthermore, these entrepreneurs shape the policy environment, drawing on skills such as social acuity and proactive problem definition to align federal mandates with their ideological priorities. When context and institutional complementarities supported them, their strategic allocation of resources allows them to convert administrative authority into durable ideological instruments (Bakır & Jarvis, 2017).

In American education, policy entrepreneurship operates through several interlocking mechanisms. First, charter schools expand outside traditional district bureaucracies, and access to them is competitive rather than based on formula. Second, grant programs reward states and districts for adopting favored reforms. Third, "venture philanthropy" has risen, in which foundations apply on investment style metrics and expectations of measurable return to their giving (Scott, 2009). Finally, for-profit and nonprofit private organizations are increasingly involved in functions once performed by public school systems (Reckhow, 2013). Mehta's (2013) historical analysis places this entrepreneurial turn within a longer American pattern of seeking external, rationalized order for schooling. In its most recent iteration, this pattern expresses itself through markets and competition in place of the bureaucratic or scientific management models of earlier periods.

### 1.3 The Multiple-streams Framework

The analysis is interpreted through Kingdon's (1995) multiple- streams framework, which treats policy change as the product of three largely independent streams: problems that attract attention, policy solutions that circulate among specialists, and the political conditions that make action possible. Change becomes likely when a policy window opens and an entrepreneur manages to couple the three streams (Kingdon, 1995). Later work has extended the framework from agenda setting to the stage of implementation (Fowler, 2018) and has given the figure of the policy entrepreneur a more systematic research agenda (Petridou & Mintrom, 2020).

For the present study, the framework does two things. It explains why executive actors act when they do: post-recession conditions, a change of administration, or stalled Congress each create an opening for entrepreneurs to attach favored solutions to pressing problems. It also explains why the resulting reforms are fragile. When coupling is achieved through executive discretion rather than statute, the political stream that supports it can shift with the next election, and the same instruments can then be redirected toward different ends.

## 2. The Obama Administration

### 2.1 Instruments and Particularistic Mechanisms

The Obama administration's approach to education policy was marked by paradoxical continuity, it kept the bush era accountability structure, while it used competitive grant programs such as Race to the Top to extend federal interventions (Tilhou, 2021). This particularistic use of executive power pushed states toward specific reforms, such as alternative certification programs and rigorous teacher assessment models, and in turn empowered policy entrepreneurs who argued for a market-based efficiency (Hodge et al., 2020). These actors framed student outcomes as a question of national competitiveness, and the administration used that framing to rewrite school performance metrics without having to debate the case in Congress. This move illustrates how a flexible reading of federal mandates allows an executive office to turn broad legislative objectives into narrow, often ideologically loaded, policy memos (Sellers, 2021). In addition, this administration was able to link the issue of low achievement to a policy solution, data-driven teacher evaluation, while the post-recession climate offered a political window to institutionalize it (Diem et al., 2018).

Additionally, the administration turned fiscal necessity into strong leverage over the reform agenda states would adopt, using competitive mechanisms like Race to the Top. These competitive grants offered political support for state reformers to pursue contentious reforms, such as charter school expansion, that often aligned with the national conversation but were highly unpopular on the ground (McGuinn, 2011). However, analyses indicate that this competitive funding stream may have been shaped by political pressures, as critics argued that the administration awarded grants to states that were crucial in the 2012 presidential electoral map (Hoalst, 2017).

The use of federal resources as a tool for political strategy illustrates how the administration's market-oriented reform agenda was facilitated by specific interests, arising from the alignment of federal incentives with civil rights rhetoric (Hernandez, 2016). As a result, business entrepreneurs were able to advance their agendas by employing a standards-based approach, which has proved problematic in other conventional contexts (Rhodes, 2011, 2012).

### 2.2 Policy Entrepreneurs and Framing

This approach allowed a coalition of technocratic policy entrepreneurs to entrench themselves in the regulatory structure of the Department of Education, making local adoption of performance metrics become a prerequisite for essential federal funding. In practice, these policy entrepreneurs leveraged the Race To the Top criteria, which not only imposed nineteen selection criteria worth 500 points, including teacher evaluations linked to student performance, but also pushed state legislatures to align state laws with federal reform priorities (Vinovskis, 2022).

By requiring states to integrate student assessment results into teacher evaluation frameworks, the administration effectively forced a nationwide standardization of pedagogical measurement that prioritized value-added models over local, qualitative assessments (Good, 2023). This psychometric accountability system centralized teacher evaluation at the state level and gave local systems a financial incentive to prioritize student growth metrics as the primary indicator of educator effectiveness (Frasier, 2021). Furthermore, this structural imposition based on performance criteria functionally required states to rework their data infrastructure, so that pedagogical successes were quantified through mechanisms designed to facilitate oversight and comparative assessment (Malin & Lubienski, 2022; Maranto & McShane, 2012).

These competitive procedures also served as a form of political shield that allowed advocates to enact rigorous standards, such as those linked to Common Core Standards, under the pretext of objective, data-driven improvement (Koyama & Kania, 2016). Additionally, by reframing the nature of federal involvement to focus on more performance-driven outcomes instead of legislative maneuvers, the administration successfully bypassed traditional legislative processes and secured widespread adoption of these accountability metrics (Gagnon et al., 2016).

However, the heavy reliance on competitive incentives also generated a significant backlash, as the design flaws and capacity challenges inherent in such rapid implementation exposed the limitations of federal overreach in a decentralized system (Aldeman, 2017). This top-down implementation approach misjudged the local norms and institutional capacities necessary for legitimate reform, ultimately failing to connect federal interests with the experiences of educators on the ground (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). These systematic shortcomings were intensified by the administration's reliance on poorly designed implementation plans that largely ignored the contextual realities of marginalized school communities (Gitomer & Marshall, 2023). The fatigue and sense of professional devaluation that followed point to a broader risk: when policy entrepreneurs push for rapid, universal adoption, they can crowd out the slower incremental growth that lasting institutional change actually requires (McGuinn & Supovitz, 2016).

## 3. The Trump Administration

### 3.1 Particularistic Influences

In contrast, the Trump administration redirected policy entrepreneurship toward school choice and reduced federal regulatory oversight, recasting accountability as a matter of local control and parental choice instead of centralized metrics. Its emphasis on deregulation empowered a different set of entrepreneurs, who used executive directives to diminish federal enforcement of civil rights protections in school discipline and admissions. This pivot toward decentralization reflected a strategy to dismantle the standards-based accountability infrastructure established during previous decade and to hand that authority back to

the states (Schneider & Saultz, 2020).

Although the shift away from a centralized, regulatory model aimed at devolving power to state and district leaders, it often left gaps in equity protections that had previously been enforced through federal mandate (Robinson & Bell, 2023). During this period, the administration worked to revive the particularistic influences by directing them toward private school choice. This allowed executives to employ little used executive powers, achieving two objectives: advancing federal interests for voucher supporters and freeing institutions from compliance regulations (Chu, 2019). The administration extended the bipartisan charter school support into a more aggressive form of privatization, one that routinely evaded civil rights scrutiny on behalf of for-profit providers and private vouchers (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023). This change represented an effort to prioritize the preferences of right leaning constituents who viewed federal regulation as a hindrance to competition and choice in education (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). These ideological alignments highlighted a stark contrast with Obama era efforts to encourage federal performance standards, as they moved toward a view of reforms defined by how far individual liberty is advanced through school choice (Galey-Horn & Ferrare, 2020).

Peer reviewed work on the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act 2015 offers firmer evidence on how this discretion was exercised. Wong (2020) finds that the administration relied heavily on executive and administrative tools to promote state flexibility, diminish federal direction on civil rights, and expand school choice, and that it took a highly deferential approach when reviewing that Every Student Succeeds Act plans. Duff and Wohlstetter (2019) reach a consistent conclusion for the sixteen states that submitted plans under the early deadline: federal feedback centered on accountability and school improvement, but states that ignored or defied it were successful because of the limits Every Student Succeeds Act place on the Department’s authority and the administration’s reliance on negotiation over sanction, and all plans were approved. Taken together, these studies suggest that particularism under this administration took the form of deference to states rather than competitive grant making, with school choice programs such as the Charter Schools Program as the main exception.

Evidence on how these preferences translated into awards is thinner than for the Obama period, but the Charter Schools Program offers a partial test. An analysis by the Network for Public Education estimated that as much as $1 billion in program grants went to charter schools that never opened or closed soon after opening, and the problems it describes span both the Obama and Trump administrations (Burris & Bryant, 2019; Prothero, 2019). The report comes from an advocacy group opposed to charter expansion, and charter supporters disputed its methods, so it is treated here as partial rather than conclusive evidence. It is nonetheless relevant that the administration’s budget proposal sought to raise the program’s funding from $440 million to $500 million when the report appeared (Prothero, 2019), which suggests that discretionary grant making for school continued alongside deregulation.

### 3.2 The Role of Policy Entrepreneurs

Market-based think tanks and pro-voucher advocacy groups frequently supported these efforts, promoting charter schools and downplaying evidence of lackluster results in established programs (DeMatthews et al., 2025). In this respect, the administration's policy path reflected wider ideological and institutional networks committed to shrinking government via educational privatization as a conduit for market-driven reform (Malin & Lubienski, 2022). Entrepreneurial philanthropic bodies and advocacy organizations kept these priorities alive, leveraging the shift in ways that, critics argue, eroded formal democratic accountability and replaced it with decentralized market competition (Ellison et al., 2019).

## 4. The Biden Administration

### 4.1 Particularistic influences

Breaking with this market-centered paradigm, the Biden administration reoriented federal priorities away from private education expansion and toward renewed institutional support for public schools, and recast civil rights enforcement as a core function of the Department of Education. This shift emphasized equity-based programs over privatization, continuing a larger attempt to revitalize the influence of federal governance after decades of selective deregulation (Fried, 2017). This reorientation indicates that political ideology can steer how is made, with interest groups standing between federal agendas and realities of local implementation (Dellegue et al., 2025).

Across all three presidencies, the way an issue is defined, and the values attached to it, shape what role government is asked to play in public schools, and entrepreneurs gain ground by aligning themselves with whichever coalition is ascendant (Wolbrecht & Hartney, 2014). Governing ideology also acts as a gatekeeper for which policy ideas, foreign or domestic, are taken up, and so helps to decide whether a presidency leans toward liberal market tools or toward democratic equality led by the state (Verger, 2014). The result is a cycle in which each administration’s agenda is exposed to changing ideas, while the tension between federal mandates and local implementation remains a lasting feature of American schooling

(Cibulka, 2001).

Each change of administration also alters who is invited into policy networks, and with them the perceived legitimacy of federal action in kindergarten 12 education. As these outside actors come and go, the policy environment grows fragmented: swings between privatization and equity-centered frameworks leave little room for stable, long term institutional capacity. Ideological shifts of this kind, in turn, color how federal directives are carried out in local schools (McDonnell, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Scholarly evidence on the Biden years is thinner but points in a similar direction. A systematic review of early unilateral action by the Trump and Biden administrations finds that both used executive and administrative action to shape pre-kindergarten 12 policy, although they pursued divergent priorities, and that the multilevel structure of American governance moderates presidential influence because state actors can maintain or challenge presidential priorities (Flanagan & Wong, 2025). Federal responses to waiver requests illustrate this dynamic. In a study of requests from twelve states 2020-2021 for relief from federal testing requirements, eight were denied, three were considered not needed, and one was granted, and federal and state leaders each invoked civil rights and moral frames to defend opposing positions (Herrick et al., 2026).

The Charter Schools Program also supplies the clearest instrument level evidence for the Biden administration. The final rules published in 2022 required applicants to show community input and need, and to demonstrate that they were not managed by a for-profit company, which tightened the conditions attached to the grant (Stanford, 2022). The Department justified the change by reporting that about 930 funded schools, or 14.5 precent, either never opened or closed before the end of their grant period, at a cost of more than $174 million. The rules were also softened after charter advocates objected: the proposed community impact analysis was replaced by a less-demanding needs analysis (Modan, 2022). The episode illustrates both the use of grant conditions to advance equity-oriented priorities and the degree to which such conditions are renegotiated through the comment process. The waiver evidence is limited to testing requirements and to a short window, so it cannot show how waivers were distributed across states over the whole administration.

### 4.2 The Role of Policy Entrepreneurs

Particularistic pressures during this time were directed to interest groups such as labor unions and professional organizations seeking to establish collective bargaining protections as well as equity-oriented performance indicators within federal supervision (Sunderman, 2010). These policy entrepreneurs expanded

educators' roles in local decision making and turned the attention from standardized outputs toward school climate and resource equity. In turn, this positioned teacher unions in the role of intermediaries that used their advocacy coalitions to connect national equity mandates with instructional practices on site (La Londe et al., 2015).

As a result, the administration advanced these changes by centering professional organizations, and replacing the market liberal coalitions of earlier decades with a governance model based on institutional stability and sectoral expertise. This strategic shift points to an optimal balance in governance, in which professional competence is incorporated into formal policy design so that practitioners can support system change through improved implementation. However, these changes also reveal the potential limits of an institutionalized, expert-led reform model as an alternative to the market-oriented framework in which policy agendas were driven by brokers after 2000. These initiatives highlight the important role that such intermediaries play in addressing challenges to state-level implementation, acting as a broker between federal directives and regional educational governance (Natow et al., 2023). However, this attachment to labor interests may also risk generating new political frictions, particularly where localities seek to develop their own solutions or retain regional administrative authority (Geng, 2023). The viability of this model therefore depends on whether the administration can balance federal equity mandates with bottom up demands for local control.

Policy entrepreneurs within the administration have also relied more heavily on distributive politics, directing targeted investment toward less developed districts in ways that embed specific stakeholder interests directly in the administrative machinery. These earmarks reinforce the influence of particular interest groups by tying grants to the policy priorities of coalition partners. By weaving these associations into its regulatory apparatus, the administration anchors priority themes beyond the immediate financial cycle and gives them more durable ideological influence. But embedding these preferences in the federal infrastructure can turn legislative victories into entrenched administration standards that outlive any given executive, because later changes are difficult, if not impossible, to work through. Therefore, the establishment of these distributive routes institutionalizes a form of administrative independence that later administrations will find harder to reverse. Ultimately, this means that political and administrative control tend to become intertwined: new bureaucracies cannot effectively respond to interest groups without meeting continuing normative demands that extend beyond individual programs. This alignment makes the administrative state a means of partisan durability, using spending power to tie allocations and protect policy regimes from swift change across succeeding executives.

Such dynamics reaffirm the reality that political contention among policy entrepreneurs, including both market reformers and civil rights advocates, continues to be shaped more by electoral politics than by evidence-based stability. In turn, this creates an education governance system that is characterized by continual reaction instead of durable institutional design (Shipps, 2011). Much of the "legacy agenda" has involved separating higher education and K–12 into independent silos, making system-level reform increasingly difficult (Workman et al., 2021).

## 5. Comparative Synthesis

The three administrations demonstrate that particularism in education policy is not a static phenomenon but a shifting alignment of federal power with specific stakeholder interests, from data driven technocracy under Obama to a market-oriented deregulation under Trump and labor centric equity mandates under Biden. Where Obama used federal grant programs to induce institutional conformity, the Trump administration turned executive authority in the opposite direction, unwinding those federal mandates in favor of school choice and administrative deregulation (Jacobs et al., 2019). By contrast, the Biden administration has worked to rebuild

federal influence by institutionalizing partnerships with labor, using distributive policy entrepreneurship to embed equity-focused reform within the bureaucracy (Brasfield, 2022; Jacobs & Milkis, 2022). This evolution underscores a fundamental tension between the pursuit of universal federal standards and the entrenched reliance on particularism and policy entrepreneurship driven by interest groups. Table 1 sets the three cases side by side on the same dimensions.

**Table 1**

**Comparison of the Three Administrations**

| Administration | Main Tools | Particularistic mechanisms | Entrepreneurial Actors and Framing | State Response and Durability |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Obama | Race to the Top competitive grants; requirements on teacher evaluation, standards, and data | Application-and scoring process controlled by executive officials; points for favored policies, states with incompatible infrastructure effectively excluded (Howell & Magazinnik, 2019) | Technocratic reformers in the Department of Education; business and civil rights reformers; framing around national competitiveness (Hodge et al., 2020 ; Rhodes, 2012) | Adoption of favored reforms, then backlash and capacity strain (Aldeman, 2017; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016); reform fatigue (McGuinn & Supovitz, 2016) |
| Trump | Executive guidance and deregulation; reduced enforcement of civil rights protections; alignment with voucher advocacy | Selective relaxation of compliance standards benefiting private and for-profit providers (Chu, 2019 ; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023) | Think tanks, pro-voucher groups, philanthropic and advocacy networks; framing around local control and parental choice (DeMatthews et al., 2025; Ellison et al., 2019) | Devolution to states and districts; gaps in equity protections (Robinson & Bell, 2023); dismantling of standards-based accountability (Schneider & Saultz, 2020) |
| Biden | Equity-based initiatives and civil rights oversight | Federal guidance incorporating collective bargaining protections and equity metrics (Sunderman, 2010); targeted investment in less developed districts | Labor-aligned advocacy groups, teacher unions, and professional organizations as intermediaries; framing around equity (La Londe et al., 2015) | Possible friction with localities seeking autonomy (Geng, 2023); durability not yet established |

*Note*. Entries summarize the claims developed in the case sections. The Biden row is provisional pending instrument-level evidence

Three distinct patterns emerge through this research. First, all three administrations primarily advanced their policies via executive tools rather than legislation, though the nature of these instruments differ: competitive grants under Obama, guidance and deregulation under Trump, and equity-oriented initiatives under Biden. Second, each administration is linked to a unique coalition of reformers: technocratic, business, and civil rights advocates; think tanks and pro-voucher groups; and organizations aligned with labor and professionals. Third, the state's reaction in each scenario reveals tension, manifesting as capacity challenges and backlash, deficiencies in equity protections, or competing demands for local control. The evidence varies in strength that the Obama case provides the clearest insight into whether the entrepreneurial agenda setting or the electoral targeting better accounts for the pattern, as award patterns have been examined (Hoalst, 2017). However, the evidence for the Trump and Biden cases is only partial, drawn from studies of ESSA plan review and waivers as well as from the administration of the Charter Schools Program, making its conclusions less definitive.

Taken together, the cases suggest that ideology is the strongest influence on how policy develops, with interest groups carrying federal aims into local practice (Dellegue et al., 2025). Because ideology differs from one administration to the next, so do the coalitions in play and the reforms they promote, as discussed above (Wolbrecht & Hartney, 2014; Verger, 2014). What stays constant is the friction between national mandates and local implementation, which marks American education whichever agenda prevails (Cibulka, 2001; McDonnell, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Such rhythms of institutional friction reflect a broader historical pattern in which education policy swings between periods of federal consolidation and decentralized autonomy, often tracking the ideological orientation of the sitting administration (Bieber & Martens, 2011). The cycles reveal a recurring effort to readjust federal oversight and also expose how unstable any given program's lifespan really is, since each new administration tends to redirect categorical funding while dismantling its predecessor's legacy (Cibulka,

1994). This current instability suggests that the U.S. Department of Education works less like a stable regulatory power and more like a battleground where power relations are perpetually up for renegotiation, potentially threatening long term pedagogical stability and institutional equity (Badawi, 2024).

Moreover, the evolution of networked governance designs suggests that current and future reform efforts need to move beyond partisan influences and establish cross- sectoral liability frameworks, that value sustained outcomes over reflexive ideological pivoting (Özkan & Şahin, 2025). To achieve such resilience, policy design has to move away from particularistic distributive negotiations and toward stable and institutionalized processes that decouple core educational standards from shifting mandates of executive leadership. Furthermore, this necessitates a transition from reliance on executive-led policy entrepreneurship toward legislative and bipartisan consensus, which would reduce the volatility of the current system of bureaucratic bargaining. By grounding reform in durable institutional foundations, the federal government could diminish the influence of particularistic capture. In that case, the pedagogical equity would rest on consistent standards rather than the ideological preferences of successive administrations (McDonnell, 2017; Ydesen & Dorn, 2022).

As a consequence, this move toward legislative permanence would replace a short lived and an executive-directed particularism with a framework built to survive political transitions. By detaching education policy from the fluctuations of partisan cycles, this approach would limit the ability of future executives to use federal fiscal levers as instruments of narrow patronage. The future of federal education oversight, then, hinges on the capacity to reform the internal administrative architecture so that it shifts control away from transitory political agendas and toward enduring pedagogical principles.

## 6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it compares only three administrations, which limits how far the findings can be generalized. Second, the evidence is uneven: the Obama cases rests on direct analysis of award patterns, whereas the Trump and Biden cases rest on partial evidence drawn from studies of ESSA plan review and waivers and from the administration of the Charter School Program, and the Biden row of Table 1is provisional pending instrument-level evidence. Third, the qualitative, comparative design identifies patterns and plausible mechanisms but cannot establish causal effects. Fourth, the analysis centers on federal instruments and treats state responses only briefly, which is why state-level responses are proposed as the main direction for future research.

## Conclusion

A comparison of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations indicates that U.S. education remains caught in a recurring pattern of executive-driven volatility. This pattern arises from the interaction between institutional interests and initiatives of policy entrepreneurs who advance their own agendas through administrative means. Federal education governance therefore does not follow a linear trajectory of cumulative progress; it oscillates between competing ideological mandates, each of which reshapes the terrain inherited from its predecessor.

The analysis offers the following tentative answers to the three research questions. The first asked how particularism and policy entrepreneurship jointly structure federal education reform. The comparison indicates that the two operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Particularistic tools can be authorized through executive or agency action without a durable legislative majority, which lowers the threshold for a well-positioned entrepreneur to turn a favored solution into binding policy. Entrepreneurial brokerage, in turn, allows those instruments to be presented as answers to national problems. Under each administration, this combination tended to move the center of reform from statute toward executive discretion and to displace the formula-based allocation of earlier decades.

The second question asked whether these interventions reflect the strategic capacity of policy entrepreneurs or particularistic strategy aimed at winning electoral support in decisive states, the evidence only partly resolved it. The Obama case offers the clearest test, since award patterns have been examined directly (Hoalst, 2017), and critics have argued that grants went to states that were crucial in the 2012 electoral map. Yet the same period also shows entrepreneurs framing reform around national competitiveness and using the post-recession window to institutionalize data-driven teacher evaluation (Diem et al., 2018; Hodge et al., 2020). The two explanations are therefore better read as complementary than as rivals: entrepreneurial agenda-setting supplied the content of reform, while particularistic allocation supplied a means of delivering it. For the Trump and Biden cases, this study has only partial evidence from ESSA plan review, waivers and the Charter School Program rather than an equivalent analysis of allocation patterns, thus no firm answer is possible for them.

The third question asked what happens to federal and state relations when reform is pursued through administrative rather than legislative means. Across the three cases, states were pushed toward favored reforms under Obama, which produced capacity strain and backlash (Aldeman, 2017; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016); they were handed authority back under Trump, which left gaps in equity protections (Robinson & Bell, 2023); and they may face friction under Biden where localities seek their own solutions (Geng, 2023). In each case, the relationship was renegotiated rather than settled, because arrangements that rest on executive discretion can be revised by the next administration.

The study further demonstrates that durable educational reform requires moving beyond a mode of governance in which priorities can be altered at the discretion of a single administration. What is needed instead is a framework anchored in legislation rather than in the preferences of individual leaders (Mehta, 2017). Such an arrangement would limit the capacity of partisan interests to capture policy and ensure that pedagogical decisions rest on evidence rather than on the immediate priorities of an incumbent. Where government builds durable institutional structures, it can attenuate the instability produced by successive executive pivots and sustain a system that serves students over time. Anchoring reform in statutory stability thus emerges as a promising means of reconciling the divergent and contradictory regulatory legacies that currently define American education.

Building on this analysis, future scholarly research should examine how states adjust their own rules in response to pressure from the federal level. Investigation of this type would clarify how institutional resilience operates within a decentralized system: by tracing state-level responses, scholars can determine whether localized innovations mitigate the disruptive effects of federal particularism or, conversely, fragment the national educational agenda still further. In short, decision makers should reform governance in order to balance between legislative authority and executive discretion, which is essential to break the cycle of instability. A governance system grounded in coherent, durable regulations, instead of political alignments, offers a promising path toward a more stable and equitable setting for students.

The immediate challenge for federal decision makers is to construct a collaborative governance style that protects state autonomy while maintaining certain common national standards. Achieving this balance is complex: it requires a consensus building strategy that institutionalizes stakeholder engagement, transforming volatile partisan cycles into a stable and enduring framework. Such a shift would require Congress to build a capable bipartisan foundation that protects the institutional continuity from the encroachment of shifting executive interests. The trajectory of future reforms therefore depends on reconciling ideological entrenchment with legislative safeguards that place pedagogical integrity above political convenience.

The broader significance of this approach lies in how it helps understand U.S. education policymaking. Where responsiveness to executive discretion is limited, education policy shifts from being a sequence of

intermittent, entrepreneurs-driven and becomes something more sustained. This evidence-based model fits federal mandates to the varied operational realities on the ground in different states. At the end, this reorientation rests on a simple recognition that lasting educational improvement cannot be built on policy cycles as ephemeral character as the executive who drove them.

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