



Major Media Plays Favorites in Coverage of Education Policy

By Frederick M. Hess, Brendan Bell, and RJ Martin

April 2018

Key Points

- We compare press coverage of 2017–18 Republican education policy proposals with coverage of 2009 Democratic proposals.
- The mainstream media was strikingly more skeptical of Republican education proposals than of Democratic proposals. The education-specific media maintained greater impartiality.
- In 2017–18, mainstream media coverage of Republican-led education proposals displayed a negative lean in 45 percent of stories. In 2009, mainstream media coverage of Democratic proposals leaned negative in less than 5 percent of stories.
- Education-specific media coverage displayed more consistency across years, as 25 percent of 2017–18 articles leaned against Republican proposals, while about 13 percent of 2009 pieces were critical of Democratic proposals.

In an era rife with heated debates about “fake news” and the role that reporters play in safeguarding democracy, it is a propitious time for news coverage to be self-evidently fair-minded. In this analysis, we examine the impartiality of media coverage in the area we know best: education policy.

Both Democrats and Republicans have proposed ambitious reforms to K–12 and higher education in recent years. In late 2017 and early 2018, a Republican president and Congress pursued a tax bill with provisions that had significant implications for education. In that same period, Republicans also issued a series of proposals for reshaping the Higher Education Act (HEA).

In an uncanny bit of parallelism, a little less than a decade ago during the first year of the Obama administration, a Democratic president and Congress put forward major education proposals of their own—most notably the education-related provisions

of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, including the heralded Race to the Top program.

In both cases, a single party held power in both Congress and the White House, and in both instances the party proposed major education-related reforms during its first year in office. These two moments provide a useful scenario to examine the degree to which major media coverage of education is evenhanded.

News Coverage of 2017–18 Republican Education Proposals

First, we examined recent media coverage of Republican education proposals by analyzing news stories that had at least one paragraph dedicated to the tax bill’s education provisions or the HEA. We surveyed the period from Thanksgiving 2017, when the relevant deliberations intensified, through

Table 1. 2017 Mainstream Coverage

Publication	Headlines			Framing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
<i>New York Times</i>	3	0	0	3	0	0
<i>Washington Post</i>	4	2	0	5	1	0
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	2	7	1	1	8	1
<i>USA Today</i>	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total	9	10	1	9	10	1
Total Percentages	45%	50%	5%	45%	50%	5%

Source: Authors’ calculations.

January 2018. We included all relevant news articles—while avoiding opinion pieces—in four major mainstream media outlets (the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*) and in four widely read, education-specific outlets (the 74, Chalkbeat, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Education Week*).¹

In the mainstream media, 20 news stories met our criteria (Table 1). Of those 20 articles, nine featured a headline with an obvious slant against the Republican tax plan or HEA proposal, while just one *Wall Street Journal* story carried an obviously favorable headline. For example, one negative *Washington Post* headline read, “House GOP Higher Ed Bill Moves Ahead, Despite Cries to Slow Down.”² A similarly negative *Wall Street Journal* story was headlined “GOP Tax Plan Could Hit Students Hard.”³

When we examined lead paragraphs and the manner in which stories were framed, once again nine stories were clearly negative, and just one *Wall Street Journal* story was favorable.⁴ For instance, one *New York Times* article’s opening paragraph dismissed Republican proposals on HEA as

“seeking to dismantle landmark Obama administration regulations designed to protect students from predatory for-profit colleges.”⁵ A negative *Washington Post* story likewise warned that “Republicans in the House rattled students, parents and universities with the release of a sweeping tax overhaul proposal.”⁶

Notably, specialized education press coverage was considerably more evenhanded. Of 24 trade press stories on either the education provisions of the tax bill or HEA reauthorization, just seven headlines showed clear evidence of tilt—with six leaning against Republican proposals and one in favor (Table 2). About three-quarters of headlines maintained neutrality, such as an *Education Week* headline that stated, “Tax Plan Poised to Change Deductions, Choice in K–12.”⁷

The lead paragraphs and framing of the trade accounts displayed the same lean as the headlines; of 24 trade press stories, 17 were impartial, while seven exhibited a tilt (with six of those leaning against the Republican proposals). An impartial account from *Education Week* stated that “Congress is making

Table 2. 2017 Trade Press Coverage

Publication	Headlines			Framing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
<i>Education Week</i>	0	7	0	0	7	0
The 74	1	5	0	1	5	0
Chalkbeat	1	0	0	1	0	0
<i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>	4	5	1	4	5	1
Total	6	17	1	6	17	1
Total Percentages	25%	70.80%	4.20%	25%	70.80%	4.20%

Source: Authors’ calculations.

headway on big changes to the federal tax code that could affect a wide range of issues in education.”⁸

Most of the tilt in the trade press is due to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which displayed a noticeable anti-Republican slant in nearly half its stories; the other trade outlets showed a tilt in only about 10–15 percent of their coverage.

News Coverage of 2009 Democratic Education Proposals

One veteran education journalist, in response to the above findings, suggested that the results likely reflected reporters’ natural inclination to treat skeptically the party in power. With Republicans controlling both the executive branch and Congress in 2017, she posited, perhaps reporters simply endeavored to critically assess major policy proposals, and perhaps the media was likewise skeptical of Democratic education proposals under similar circumstances in 2009. We thought it a hypothesis worth testing, especially as it could provide an explanation for the bias we discovered when analyzing 2017–18 media coverage.

Using the same methodology, we examined press coverage of major education policy proposals announced in 2009—the education-related provisions of the stimulus bill and especially Race to the Top. We examined the same news sources as before, except the 74 and Chalkbeat (as neither existed in 2009). We searched from January 20, 2009, to October 1, 2009, a period that spanned from President Obama’s inauguration to about seven months after the passage

of the stimulus and about three months after the official announcement of Race to the Top.

For the period in question, we identified 41 mainstream press stories covering the education-related stimulus provisions or the Race to the Top program (Table 3). Of those, 33 featured neutral headlines, such as the *Wall Street Journal*’s straightforward “Obama to Unveil Guidelines for New Education Fund.”⁹ There were also eight stories with positive headlines, such as the *New York Times*’ “Stimulus Includes \$5 Billion Flexible Fund for Education Innovation.”¹⁰ No story carried a negative headline.

The leads and framing of mainstream news stories showed a similar pattern, with 32 framed impartially, seven positively, and two negatively. For example, a neutral *New York Times* article stated, “The economic stimulus bill that is expected to win passage in the Senate on Tuesday would provide about \$83 billion for child care, public schools and universities.”¹¹ A few stories, however, seemed to visibly cheer on Democratic proposals, such as a *Washington Post* story framing Race to the Top as “helping stave off teacher layoffs, keep class sizes in check and jump-start efforts to revamp aging schools.”¹²

During the same period, the education press published 96 relevant articles, of which 74 had impartial headlines, while 10 displayed a positive headline and 12 had a negative one (Table 4).

For example, one impartial *Education Week* headline read, “Guidelines Sketch Out Use of Aid: Federal Stimulus Allocations to Come Soon, with Strings.”¹³ Similarly, 75 out of the 96 articles featured impartial framing. One impartial *Education Week* story,

Table 3. 2009 Mainstream Coverage

Publication	Headlines			Framing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
<i>New York Times</i>	0	12	2	1	13	0
<i>Washington Post</i>	0	11	6	0	11	6
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	0	4	0	0	3	1
<i>USA Today</i>	0	6	0	1	5	0
Total	0	33	8	2	32	7
Total Percentages	0%	80.50%	19.50%	4.90%	78%	17.10%

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Table 4. 2009 Trade Press Coverage

Publication	Headlines			Framing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
<i>Education Week</i>	4	22	2	3	24	1
<i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>	8	52	8	9	51	8
Total	12	74	10	12	75	9
Total Percentages	12.50%	77.10%	10.40%	12.50%	78.10%	9.40%

Source: Authors' calculations.

for instance, offered two competing perspectives in its lead: “One education advocate calls it ‘a golden opportunity,’ while a think tank official has labeled it ‘the largest education slush fund in history.’ Either way, [Race to the Top] . . . is drawing attention far out of proportion to its size.”⁴

Takeaways

In light of today’s omnipresent claims and counter-claims regarding media bias, this exploration is an attempt to determine where and to what extent education coverage is impartial. On that count, a few key findings deserve particular note.

First, in the two periods examined, journalistic skepticism was infrequent—primarily appearing in coverage of Republican-led reform efforts. Coverage of Democratic proposals back in 2009, when Democrats enjoyed unified control of the federal government, was qualitatively different than the critical coverage devoted to recent Republican proposals in similar circumstances (Figures 1 and 2). In 2017, mainstream media coverage of Republican proposals was 45 percent negative; in 2009, coverage of Democratic proposals was less than 5 percent negative.

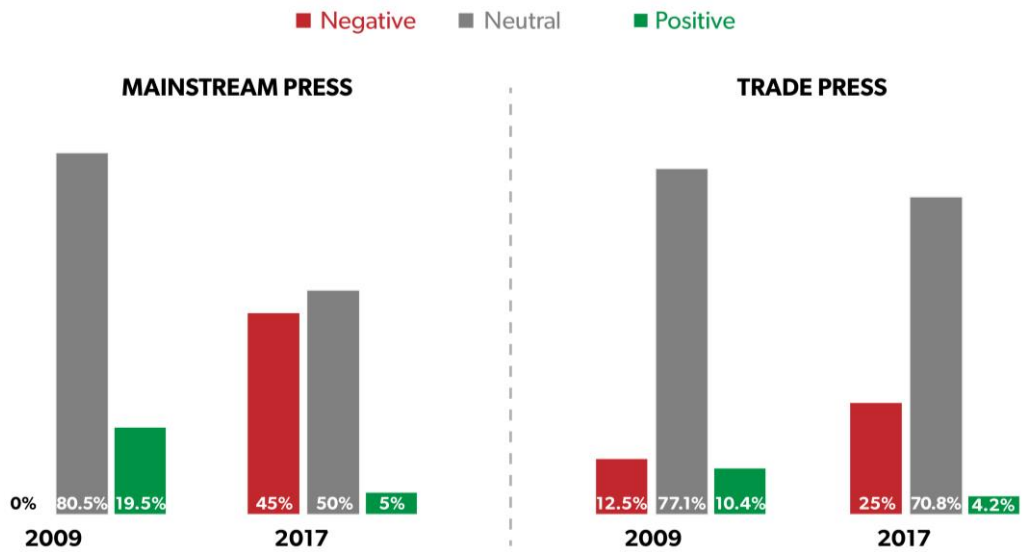
Second, it is striking that such imbalance was evident in education policy, which has historically tended to be less partisan. The current analysis did not touch media coverage of more politically charged topics, such as Russia, guns, or immigration. We would not be surprised to see a tilt on those polarizing topics, but education policy would seem

to be one of the places where journalists could more easily distinguish fact from opinion. Yet our analysis revealed that even in the realm of education policy—focusing on provisions in a tax bill and revisions to the nation’s primary higher education law—the mainstream media struggled to temper its skepticism toward Republican ideas.

Third, while the mainstream press was disproportionately critical of Republican initiatives, the education trade press proved to be far more impartial. Regardless of the party in power, education-specific media offered coverage that featured impartial headlines and framing at least 70 percent of the time (Figures 1 and 2). While still showing a proclivity to be more critical of Republican than Democratic proposals, the education trade press maintained a level of evenhandedness that far exceeded that of the mainstream media.

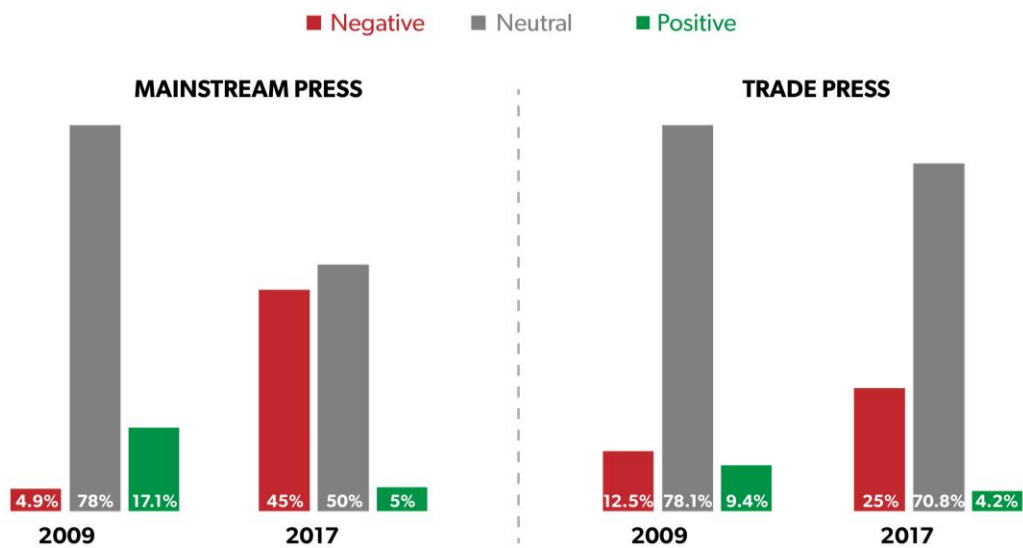
If one thinks, à la Paul Krugman, that “facts have a well-known liberal bias” and presumes it a foregone conclusion that conservative proposals are frequently indefensible, then one might conclude that the media’s tilt represents responsible news coverage.¹⁵ If, on the other hand, one believes the issues in question are thorny and feature legitimate arguments on both sides, then this kind of reporting is a recipe for undermining reasoned discourse. Indeed, it is a tall order to ask that conservatives regard media coverage as responsible and fair-minded when journalistic skepticism appears to operate only sporadically—and seemingly only when Republicans are in power.

Figure 1. Media Coverage Headlines



Source: Authors' calculations.

Figure 2. Media Coverage Framing



Source: Authors' calculations.

Appendix: Examples of Coding Methodology

The following tables present examples of how the headlines and leads of news articles were coded for bias. Note that in rare cases the headline had a different lean than the framing of the piece.

■ Negative
 ■ Neutral
 ■ Positive

Table A1. Examples of Mainstream Press Coverage of Tax Bill’s Effects on Education, November 23, 2017–January 31, 2018

Article Headline (Along with Author, Publisher, Date, and URL)	Lead and Framing
Laura Sanders, “529 College-Savings Plans Are Even Hotter After Tax Overhaul,” <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , January 5, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/education-savings-plans-are-even-hotter-after-tax-overhaul-1515160800?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=2 .	“So-called 529 education-savings accounts, and Americans who can benefit from using them, are big winners in the recent tax overhaul. New curbs on state and local tax deductions will make these tax-sheltered accounts more attractive. Many people will also benefit from a change that now allows assets in these plans to be used to pay elementary and high school tuition.”
Douglas Belkin, Josh Mitchell, and Melissa Korn, “House GOP to Propose Sweeping Changes to Higher Education,” <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , November 29, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/house-gop-to-propose-sweeping-changes-to-higher-education-1511956800?mod=searchresults&page=2&pos=6 .	“The Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives this week will propose sweeping legislation that aims to change where Americans go to college, how they pay for it, what they study and how their success—or failure—affects the institutions they attend. The most dramatic element of the plan is a radical revamp of the \$1.34 trillion federal student-loan program. It would put caps on borrowing by parents and students and eliminate some loan-forgiveness programs for students.”
Erica L. Green, “Graduate Students Escaped Tax Increases, but They Still Feel a Target on Their Backs,” <i>New York Times</i> , December 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/us/politics/graduate-students-education-tax-bill.html .	“Samantha Hernandez was finishing up an argument for her dissertation about Latinos and affirmative action on Thursday when the emails started pouring in with the subject line ‘Congratulations.’ President Trump had finished a celebratory news conference to announce the completion of a sweeping overhaul of the nation’s tax code, and graduate students were breathing a deep sigh of relief. House Republicans had targeted them for a hefty tax increase, one that many of them could not hope to pay, but they had escaped unscathed. The question now is this: Once lawmakers put a target on your back, are you ever really in the clear?”

Source: Authors.

Table A2. Examples of Trade Press Coverage of Tax Bill’s Effects on Education, November 23, 2017–January 31, 2018

Article Headline (Along with Author, Publisher, Date, and URL)	Lead and Framing
Adam Harris, “Is It Finally Time to Simplify the Fafsa? Signs Point to Yes.,” <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i> , November 28, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Is-It-Finally-Time-to-Simplify/241907 .	“Elaine G. Williams earned her bachelor’s degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in May. But the road to graduation was anything but easy. She first experienced homelessness in middle school, and the burden of maintaining a healthy living environment weighed on her. But she made it to high school, where she graduated, only to hit another obstacle: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa. Filling out the application is a rite of passage for college-bound students and their families, and for homeless applicants the bureaucratic requirements can seem insurmountable. Among those who have struggled through the Fafsa, there is near unanimity that the application needs to be simplified. On Tuesday, that sentiment was on the minds of some of the nation’s top education policy-setters.”
Andrew Ujifusa, “Tax Overhaul’s Impact on K–12,” <i>Education Week</i> , January 16, 2018, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/01/17/tax-overhauls-impact-on-k-12.html .	“The federal tax overhaul—signed into law by President Donald Trump late last month—contains some big implications for K–12, including shake-ups to how state and local taxes are treated, changes to college-savings plans that let them be used for private school, and more.”
Adam Harris, Eric Kelderman, and Andy Thomason, “Passage of Senate Tax-Reform Bill Leaves Colleges Scrambling,” <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i> , December 1, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Passage-of-Senate-Tax-Reform/241962 .	“College leaders are bracing for major changes in the nation’s tax code that could weaken their financial footing by undermining charitable giving and placing new tax burdens on institutions with valuable endowments. College leaders spoke out in near uniformity against the Republican lawmakers’ plans, which received a major boost over the weekend. ‘At a time when our economy is demanding more education for more of our citizens, we cannot erect new barriers for the millions of Americans who need affordable higher education,’ wrote Margaret Spellings, president of the University of North Carolina system and a former education secretary, under President George W. Bush.”

Source: Authors.

Table A3. Examples of Mainstream Press Coverage of Education-Related Stimulus and Race to the Top, January 20, 2009–October 1, 2009

Article Headline (Along with Author, Publisher, Date, and URL)	Lead and Framing
<p>Maria Glod, "Stimulus Includes \$5 Billion Flexible Fund for Education Innovation," <i>Washington Post</i>, February 14, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/13/AR2009021303346.html.</p>	<p>"Education Secretary Arne Duncan would have \$5 billion under the stimulus bill to back new approaches to improve schools, a fund that could prod states to raise standards and reward top teachers as the Obama administration presides over a massive infusion of federal education aid. The Race to the Top Fund, as Duncan calls it, is part of about \$100 billion the bill would channel to public schools, universities and early childhood education programs nationwide, helping stave off teacher layoffs, keep class sizes in check and jump-start efforts to revamp aging schools."</p>
<p>Sam Dillon, "For Education Chief, Stimulus Means Power, Money, and Risk," <i>New York Times</i>, February 16, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/education/17educ.html.</p>	<p>"The \$100 billion in emergency aid for public schools and colleges in the economic stimulus bill could transform Arne Duncan into an exceptional figure in the history of federal education policy: a secretary of education loaded with money and the power to spend large chunks of it as he sees fit. But the money also poses challenges and risks for Mr. Duncan, the 44-year-old former Chicago schools chief who now heads the Department of Education. Mr. Duncan must develop procedures on the fly for disbursing a budget that has, overnight, more than doubled, and communicate the rules quickly to all 50 states and the nation's 14,000 school districts. And he faces thousands of tricky decisions about how much money to give to whom and for what."</p>
<p>Sam Dillon, "Dangling Money, Obama Pushes Education Shift," <i>New York Times</i>, August 16, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/17/education/17educ.html?pagewanted=all.</p>	<p>"Holding out billions of dollars as a potential windfall, the Obama administration is persuading state after state to rewrite education laws to open the door to more charter schools and expand the use of student test scores for judging teachers. That aggressive use of economic stimulus money by Education Secretary Arne Duncan is provoking heated debates over the uses of standardized testing and the proper federal role in education, issues that flared frequently during President George W. Bush's enforcement of his signature education law, called No Child Left Behind."</p>

Source: Authors.

Table A4. Examples of Trade Press Coverage of Education-Related Stimulus and Race to the Top, January 20, 2009–October 1, 2009

Article Headline (Along with Author, Publisher, Date, and URL)	Lead and Framing
<p>Sara Hebel, "Colleges and Students Cheer Congress's Economic-Stimulus Deal," <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>, February 13, 2009, https://www.chronicle.com/article/CollegesStudents-Cheer/1528.</p>	<p>"The compromise, a \$789-billion economic-stimulus bill that Congress is planning to try to deliver to President Obama by Monday contains large sums of money for student aid and biomedical research, and would give states billions of dollars to ease budget cuts to colleges and schools."</p>
<p>Alyson Klein, "\$5 Billion Pot of Money Draws Plenty of Interest, Raises Some Eyebrows," <i>Education Week</i>, February 23, 2009, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/02/25/22stimreform.h28.html.</p>	<p>"One education advocate calls it 'a golden opportunity,' while a think tank official has labeled it 'the largest education slush fund in history.' Either way, the \$5 billion pot of federal money put at the disposal of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to help state and local projects under the \$787 billion economic-stimulus package is drawing attention far out of proportion to its size."</p>
<p>Kelly Field, "Skeptics Say Billions for Education Won't Stimulate Economy," <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>, February 13, 2009, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Skeptics-Say-Billions-for/15343.</p>	<p>"A stimulus bill working its way through Congress would help thousands of students pay for college and could give colleges money to fix crumbling buildings. But would spending billions of dollars on education really kick-start the economy? That's the question many legislators and policy experts in Washington were asking last week as the U.S. Senate debated the roughly \$900-billion measure."</p>

Source: Authors.

About the Authors

Frederick M. Hess is the director of education policy studies and a resident scholar at AEI. **Brendan Bell** and **RJ Martin** are research assistants in education policy studies at AEI.

Notes

1. For all time periods studied, we used LexisNexis as our primary search engine. LexisNexis is a database of news articles from local and national news outlets and public documents such as transcripts, civil filings, and bill overviews. More than 32,000 individual sources are represented in the database, which dates back several decades. Searches can be restricted by date and source type. In addition, when identifying media coverage from online-only organizations such as Chalkbeat and the 74, we supplemented our searches by collecting all relevant articles in website archives.
2. Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, “House GOP Higher Ed Bill Moves Ahead, Despite Cries to Slow Down,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/12/12/house-gop-higher-ed-bill-moves-ahead-despite-cries-to-slow-down/>.
3. Michelle Hackman, “GOP Tax Plan Could Hit Students Hard,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gop-tax-plan-could-hit-students-hard-1512068655>.
4. There were a few cases in which the headline had a different lean than the framing of the piece, but in the vast majority of pieces, the headline and framing received the same assessment.
5. Erica L. Green, “New Higher Education Bill Rolls Back Obama-Era Safeguards,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/us/politics/house-republican-higher-education-bill-obama.html>.
6. Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, “The Biggest Higher-Ed Economics Stories of 2017,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/12/29/the-biggest-higher-ed-economics-stories-of-2017/>. In all instances, we tracked and assessed the entire opening paragraph of the article. In instances where the first two or three paragraphs were a continuation of a singular idea and the break in paragraphs was stylistic, we coded according to the overall tone in those paragraphs.
7. Andrew Ujifusa, “Tax Plan Poised to Change Deductions, Choice in K–12,” *Education Week*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/12/13/tax-plan-poised-to-change-deductions-choice.html>.
8. Andrew Ujifusa, “Motion in Congress on Tax Plans with Effects on K–12,” *Education Week*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/11/29/motion-in-congress-on-tax-plans-with.html>.
9. Robert Tomsho, “Obama to Unveil Guidelines for New Education Fund,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124838467837976975>.
10. Maria Glod, “Stimulus Includes \$5 Billion Flexible Fund for Education Innovation,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/13/AR2009021303346.html>.
11. Sam Dillon, “Trimmed Bill Still Offers Vast Sums for Education,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/education/10educ.html>.
12. Maria Glod, “Stimulus Includes \$5 Billion Flexible Fund for Education Innovation,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/13/AR2009021303346.html>.
13. Alyson Klein, “Guidelines Sketch Out Use of Aid: Federal Stimulus Allocations to Come Soon, with Strings,” *Education Week*, March 10, 2009, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/03/10/25guidance-2_cp.h28.html.
14. Alyson Klein, “\$5 Billion Pot of Money Draws Plenty of Interest, Raises Some Eyebrows,” *Education Week*, February 23, 2009, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/02/25/22stimreform.h28.html>.
15. Paul Krugman, “Facts Have a Well-Known Liberal Bias,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/opinion/facts-have-a-well-known-liberal-bias.html>.

© 2018 by the American Enterprise Institute. All rights reserved.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed here are those of the author(s).