

## Adult education in the United States of America: A critical examination of national policy (1998-2014)

Marcella Milana\* and Lesley McBain\*\*

\* Aarhus University & University of California-Los Angeles

\*\* University of California-Los Angeles

### ABSTRACT

*Under the Bill Clinton's administration, the U.S. approved the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998; the backbone for public adult education in many states. But since its expiration (2003), and despite multiple attempts, the Act lacked reauthorization until summer 2014, when a Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act was signed into law. In this contribution we examine how broader Republican and Democrat party-values feed into the legal debate around the reauthorization of the 1998 Act, and whether the 'great recession' has had a detectable influence. Our findings pinpoint at a slow but steady across-party alignment in linking adult education to occupational skill training, and English-language instruction to civic learning, while tightening standards and accountability measures for states, thus conditioning curricular content, but also opening to new providers. While this still hides party differences that extend conservative vs. liberal party-sponsored ideologies to the policy debate on adult education, it is such alignment that allowed stricter conservative ideals to gather consensus.*

**Keywords:** *Adult Education Policy - United States of America - Workforce Investment Act - Ideologies*

### ***L'educazione degli adulti negli Stati Uniti d'America: Un'analisi critica delle politiche nazionali (1998-2014)***

*Approvato sotto l'amministrazione Clinton, il Workforce Investment Act del 1998 è tuttora la spina dorsale dell'educazione e formazione degli adulti in molti stati americani. Ma una volta terminata la sua validità giuridica (2003), nonostante vari tentativi, solo nel 2014 è stata approvata una nuova legge in materia. In questo articolo le autrici esaminano i modi in cui i valori repubblicani e democratici siano confluiti nel dibattito sull'educazione e formazione degli adulti attraverso la discussione che ha accompagnato l'iter della legge, e se la 'grande recessione' abbia avuto una qualche influenza in esso. I risultati mostrano un lento ma progressivo allineamento di visioni tra i partiti che tendono a ridurre l'educazione degli adulti alla formazione delle competenze professionali, a connettere l'insegnamento dell'inglese all'educazione civica, e ad accrescere il controllo federale sugli stati, condizionando i contenuti curriculari degli interventi pubblici attraverso l'imposizione di misure di accountability. Malgrado persistano considerevoli differenze fra conservatori e liberali, è proprio in virtù di tale allineamento bipartisan che gli ideali conservativi più estremi hanno finito per raccogliere crescenti consensi.*

**Parole chiave:** *Politiche di educazione degli adulti - Stati Uniti d'America - Workforce Investment Act - Ideologie*

## **Introduction**

During the mid-1990s, the United States of America (US) underwent the ‘Republican Revolution’ (Gold, 1996), redefining the functional roles of federal, state and local governments based on a New Federalism approach to public policy. This approach assumes that state and local governments can be more responsive than the federal government in meeting public needs and results, legislatively, in federal aid and block grants giving states greater flexibility in implementing national policies (Watson & Gold, 1998). The Republican Revolution reformed welfare through a series of public laws (Hayes, 1999), including the *Workforce Investment Act* (WIA) of 1998 (P.L. 105-220), approved under the Bill Clinton administration. WIA legislates a workforce investment system and related activities (Title III), creates links to vocational rehabilitation programs for people with mental and physical disabilities (Title IV), and reconfigures existing funding, coordination, and evaluation of ‘adult education’ programs, i.e., basic literacy and education up to secondary school levels, under the *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act* (hereafter WIA-Title II).

Today, adult education regulatory efforts and budgets vary substantially across states, as do underlying conceptualizations of educating adults through public investment. Nonetheless, aside from Florida, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, and Texas, where state funds exceed federal allocations (Moore, Shulock & Lang, 2004), the backbone of public adult education is still regulated through WIA-Title II. Originally, it authorized appropriations, i.e., the expenditure of a designated amount of public funds, for “a sum as necessary” in support of adult education over a five-year period (1998-2003).<sup>1</sup> The sum, administered as basic grants to states by the US Department of Education, is intended to assist states and lead nationwide activities enhancing adult education and literacy. But from 2003 to July 2014, WIA was not legislatively reauthorized despite multiple attempts by both Republican and Democratic members of Congress. These attempts increased after the latest global financial crisis (2008) prompted the US ‘great recession’. Although the lack of WIA reauthorization did not discontinue basic grants to states, it kept them basically unchanged.

In our view, the long delay in reauthorizing WIA epitomizes an ideological battlefield for the authoritative allocation of values (Easton, 1965) to adult education as a common good worth public spending. This battle hampers its national sustainability. In this vein, this paper examines whether and how broader party values shape the legal debate about adult education and whether the ‘great recession’ has influenced it. In doing so, we tease out ideational continuities and discontinuities between Democrats’ and Republicans’ administrations.<sup>2</sup>

### **On ideologies and US parties’ official positions**

Our study is informed by the morphological approach to ideology (Freeden, 1996; 2006; 2013) and the concept of ‘participant ideology’ (Román-Zozaya, 2008). In a nutshell, it contends that ideologies

---

<sup>1</sup> The process for allotting public funds to federal programs in the US is rather complex, and its reference jargon unique. For the purpose of this paper, an important distinction is between ‘mandatory spending’, for which legislation defines eligibility criteria and the government allocates funds, and ‘discretionary spending’, for which legislation serves as program operational guidelines. In the latter case, legislation includes an authorization of appropriations that either specify a dollar amount (i.e., definite authorizations) or “a sum as necessary” (i.e., indefinite authorizations), permanently or for a limited duration.

<sup>2</sup> With special attention to the latest shifts in administration between Democrats (under Bill Clinton, 1993–2001), Republicans (under George W. Bush, 2001–2009) and again Democrats (under Barack Obama, 2009 to date).

(noun, plural) are essentially inevitable, ubiquitous within politics, and fluctuate over time and space (Freeden, 1996). Departing from a normative view in the Marxist tradition, it acknowledges that ideologies are present in political thinking by different social groups, but with no clear-cut distinctions (Gramsci, 1971), as coherent frameworks of meanings produced in constant interaction between social actors and the socio-historical contexts in which they are embedded (Freeden, 1996; 2013). These frameworks emerge through the selection, among inevitable contested and contestable meanings, and attribution of specific meanings to a given concept, in an attempt to create “a semantic ‘solution’ to the messiness and indeterminacy of perceptions and comprehensions of the political world”; solutions that are “apparently firm and ‘final’ pronouncements on issues such as social justice, liberty, sovereignty, and the like, supplying charts for navigating through what would otherwise be a bewildering social environment” (Freeden, 2013, p. 118). An ideology thus results from the interdependency of concepts that gain relative stable significance and weight thanks to their proximity, permeability to different ideological positions, the relative relevance of their conceptual components, and the priority that core concepts assign to adjacent ones or adjacent concepts assign to peripheral ones (Freeden, 2013, p. 134). Accordingly, as Griffin (2006, p. 83) contends, ideologies may be seen as both products and constitutive elements of the formation of culture, thus not only forming links between ideological hegemony and the coercive replication of culture, but also the creative potentials and different forms of adaptations by both ideologies and culture.

Building on this approach, however, Román-Zozaya (2008) points out that ideologies are not only a social product, but also a group-specific product reflecting the substantive meanings and orientations of a given set of individuals that can be said to ‘hold’ a certain ideology. But different sets of producers, she notes, use diverse manufacturing media, are influenced by distinct socio-political perspectives and are subject to dissimilar logical and socio-historical constraints. Politicians, unlike other producers, i.e., philosophers, public intellectuals, are the solely directly involved in public policy decisions under real-time conditions; thus Román-Zozaya (2008, p. 112) coined the term “participant ideology” to address “the recurring patterns of conceptual terms and associated policies found in the discourse of politicians.”

In this line of reasoning, assemblages of political concepts conventionally labeled as, for instance, conservatism or liberalism, are not fixed frameworks of meanings but rather “families of ideologies” with fluid boundaries (Freeden, 2013). But political parties and ideologies reinforce each other in governmental discourse, even more so in polarized political systems like the US where such discourses overstate party ideological differences. As a consequence Republican and Democrat parties in the US, even while shifting positions under the strong influence of social and economic factors and the necessity to create coalitions of activist groups who disagree on particular policies to win, act as catalysts for ‘official’ ideologies linked to either conservative or liberal ideologies. ‘Official’ Republican ideologies tend to center around *laissez-faire* capitalism, corporate conservatism, and Christian traditionalism; whereas Democratic ideologies tend to focus on governmental intervention and regulation for the common good, the reduction of social inequality via governmental mechanisms, and religious plurality.

Albeit these broad-stroke ideologies undermine the conceptual complexity found within each ideological family or political party, as Miller and Schofield (2008) note, the 1960s watershed moment of polarization between Democrat and Republican parties was reinforced in the 1980s-1990s. Specifically, “the tensions dividing the social liberal and social conservative wings of the Democratic

Party could not survive the sixties, when the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, urban riots, the rulings of a libertarian Supreme Court, and the women's movement all shifted social issues to the forefront" (*Ibid.*, 2008, p. 438). As a result, under the Democrat administration of John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), Democrats shifted to social liberal ideologies emphasizing civil rights.

By contrast, Republicans grew more socially conservative under Kennedy's Democratic successor, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) and under the influence of the Republican Ronald Reagan, who strongly opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Social conservatism grew under Reagan's administration (1981-1989) thanks to a coalition of populists and pro-business "simultaneously serving the economic interests of business while advancing the agenda of the social conservative wing of the party" (*Ibid.*, p. 439). Ideological party polarization increased with Republicans becoming more conservative and Democrats more liberal in response to Reagan's cuts to social welfare programs and military buildup (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998, p. 634), and party lines hardened to such an extent that liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats were heavily pressured to follow their party lines on votes, switch parties, or leave office (*Ibid.*, p. 637).

When Bill Clinton took Presidential office in 1993, he

moved quickly to reward liberal interest groups that had supported his candidacy... [and] further antagonized conservatives with his proposals to raise taxes on middle- and upper-income Americans and dramatically expand the role of the federal government in providing health insurance. (*Ibid.*, p. 637)

Today some claim there is a greater ideological division among conservatives and liberals, with deeper partisan antagonism observed over the last decade (Pew Research Center 2014, 42).

Informed by these views, we understand that participant ideologies produced by Republican and Democrat politicians shape and are shaped by North American culture, a culture that is forged as well as reinvented via political thinking and governmental discourses. But it is also our opinion that Republican and Democrat Congressmen stress party differences, reinforcing polarization of conventional conservative or liberal constellations of concepts when involved, under real-time conditions, in revisiting the national legislative framework for adult education.

### **Methodological considerations**

Our data consists of the original text of WIA-Title II and amendments to it introduced for consideration by Congress, and specifically those sections defining the boundaries of services and programs falling under its ruling and delineating their purpose, agents and addressees. Since 2003, 22 bills regarding WIA have been introduced to Congress, but none has become public law until July 2014 (see Table 1, annexed).<sup>3</sup> Given 17 of 22 bills were introduced between 2007 and 2014,

---

<sup>3</sup> For those unfamiliar with the US legislative process, the Congress is composed of two houses: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The most common form of legislative proposal to Congress is the bill. A bill can be introduced in either of the houses, where it is assigned for hearing to a committee or subcommittee, and then for the full house's approval. Once a bill has been approved by both houses, it is discussed jointly to reconcile differences before it is voted on by each house. If both houses vote in favor, the bill is subject to the President's veto or signature; once signed, the bill becomes public law (Birkland, 2003).

beginning just before the global financial crisis hit the US, we focused on this period of higher legislative activity.

Further, we considered the full text of political platforms of the Democrat and Republican parties. Political platforms are official public documents that state the values and actions of a party when appealing to voters during national elections. While we acknowledge that individual candidates can simply ignore what is stated in a party platform once they have won elections, we think these texts embed somewhat negotiated ideas endorsing official positions for which a party is known and to which Congressmen adhere to some extent when introducing bills to Congress. Specifically, we reviewed 10 political party platforms by Republicans (5) and Democrats (5) published in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012, thus covering the period spanning since enforcement of WIA to date.

*Interpretative policy analysis* (Bevir & Rhodes, 2002; Wagenaar, 2011) helped in running our analysis. Specifically, we assume that the written statements under consideration include both the concepts and meanings selectively assigned to them by Congressmen and negotiated within political parties, which shape different ideologies and party approaches to adult education. Hence, we draw on Yanow's (2000) suggestion that for analytical purposes it is possible to identify collectivities or communities of meanings that are time- and place-specific to the policy in question. These communities include policy-related practice (counting interactions), the artifacts (containing language) used, and the site-specific meaning these artifacts (including language used in certain documents) have for the actors involved (Yanow, 2003, p. 232). In our study, party platforms, bill proposals and the Congressmen sponsoring or co-sponsoring them, debating and finally voting in favor or against re-authorization of WIA represent communities of meanings. However, due to the lack of consensus on a party-sponsored bill to pass approval by both chambers over more than a 10-year period, we also assumed an a priori difference in the framework of meanings assigned by Republicans and Democrats to adult education. Accordingly, first we independently evaluated each party's sponsored proposals and the meanings within, then juxtaposed the results to tease out convergent ideas hiding different meanings and party ideologies. Before presenting the results, we summarize the legal history and context of adult education in the US.

### **A brief legislative history**

National adult education policy in the US dates back to the 1960s, when the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program was first established as Title II-B of the *Economic Opportunity Act* of 1964 (P.L. 88-452), an adult remedial education program. Meant as a redistributive policy, the *Economic Opportunity Act* was designed to tackle 'the roots and consequences of poverty' but left ample implementation discretion to state and local authorities (Ellis, 1984). The Act prompted all states to establish adult education delivery systems and led to the approval of the first *Adult Education Act* (P.L. 89-750), under Title III of the 1966 amendments to the *Elementary and Secondary School Education Act* of 1965.

The *Adult Education Act* of 1966 authorized federal funds for the Adult Education Program under the US Office of Education, now US Department of Education, to provide education for adults below the 9th grade, i.e., up to completion of lower secondary education by European standards, including those with limited English proficiency. It was amended in 1970 (P.L. 91-230) to increase adult educational opportunities to high school level, adding an Adult Secondary Education (ASE) program component (NACAE, 1980), and amended again in 1978 (P.L. 95-561) to incorporate a

competency-based or functional approach to literacy. In doing so, the Act established target group expenditures and prescribed how to reach them; this trend was somewhat reversed in 1984 amendments that restored some discretion to state and local authorities (Ellis, 1984). Further reauthorization of the *Adult Education Act* in 1988 (P.L. 100-297) expanded it to include an English as Second Language (ESL) program component and partnerships between educational agencies and business or labor organizations to assist workers with low basic skills (Workforce Literacy), and substantially increased federal investment (Rose, 1991). By 1991, according to official estimates (OVAE, 1991), overall enrollment rates in Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, English as Second Language and Workforce Literacy had grown from 0.389 to 3.6 million compared to 1967, state and local funds had increased from \$8.3 to \$560 million, and federal funds had expanded from \$26.3 to \$238.8 million, accounting for roughly 30% of total expenditure.

In 1991 basic grants to states under the *Adult Education Act* of 1966 were revised by approval of the *National Literacy Act* (P.L. 102-73), which increased authorization for literacy programs and established literacy programs for imprisoned adults as well as a National Institute for Literacy (Eyre, 2013). In 1998, the *National Literacy Act* was repealed and replaced by WIA-Title II, the object of our analysis, with the

...purpose to create a partnership among the Federal Government, States, and localities to provide, on a voluntary basis, adult education and literacy services, in order to:

- (1) assist adults to become literate and obtain knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency;
- (2) assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and
- (3) assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education. (WIA, Title II, Sec. 202)

Incorporating adult education into an all-encompassing employment and training law reinforced its links with welfare philosophies (Hayes, 1999), which triggered a major break in US policy tradition (Wilson, 2009). Some claim that in the post-WIA era adult education development to support progressive democracy and society at large faded replaced by a narrower focus on individual development benefiting employers and the market (*Ibid.*, 2009). This is no surprise given that the US is also the cradle of human capital theory and its links to educational thinking have informed much of the educational policy debate in North America and Europe over the last decades (Milana, 2013).

This subjected US adult education to stricter national accountability requirements to inform Congress on adult students' progress toward societal and employment goals in terms of obtaining employment, becoming involved in children's education, or earning a high school diploma or equivalent credential. This was part of a larger mindset favoring increased accountability for public benefit recipients. While US politicians' complex attitudes toward who should be 'accountable' for benefits received, and which benefits should be strictly scrutinized, are beyond this paper's scope, one example influencing WIA is that of the Clinton administration's eliminating education and training from welfare benefits (Johnson, 2010).

Further, a national accountability system implemented by the US Department of Education started measuring states' performance targets in: 1) basic skills improvement; 2) placement, retention or career advancement in either employment or secondary education; and 3) attainment of a secondary school credential (Hayes, 1999). The political intention to use WIA to create both stronger ties between adult education and workforce development systems and accountability and performance standards has been partially achieved, as cross-state implementation research shows (Pindus et al., 2005). Simultaneously, feminist research has uncovered power and interest issues embedded in WIA-Title II. In this vein, Sparks (2001) contends that it construes the family as a public space, uses adult education to promote 'family values' in line with national goals and priorities, and reinforces gender division. Sparks' work intertwines with larger issues regarding welfare policies' impact on women, including how false stereotypes of women (especially Black women) as 'welfare queens' buying luxuries with public assistance funds affect welfare recipients (Johnson, 2010).

In conclusion, after the expiration of WIA's original authorization (2003), Congress prolonged most of its programs through annual appropriations. According to US Department of Education data, basic grants to states increased steadily from \$ 345.3 million in 1998 to \$ 561.1 million in 2003, with an overall growth of 40%, but have remained substantially unchanged over the last decade (\$ 563.9 million in 2013), with the exception of 2010 (\$ 628.2 million) when Congress made supplemental appropriations in response to the 'great recession' via the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (2009) (P.L. 111–5). Thus US adult education since 2003 has had an essentially flat funding stream, high accountability, and a narrower vision tied into workforce development and employability. However, while official accounts of national legislative development abound, including technical comparisons between the 1998 WIA and bills introduced for its reauthorization (Bradley & Collins, 2012; 2013), we could not find independent research closely examining the ideologies feeding into the legal debate since 2003.

### **Republicans and Democrats views on a national adult education policy**

Over the more than three decades since the first national remedial education program was established, public intervention in the US has reinforced ties between education and welfare measures and increased states' requirements to access basic grants funds for adult education and literacy services; an essentially flat funding stream and political disagreement has characterized the last decade. It is to this period that we turn attention, to disclose whether and how broader party values impinged upon the legal debate around reauthorizing WIA.

### **Republicans' bills and party platforms**

Our analysis starts by documenting changes proposed by Republican congressmen to WIA-Title II and demonstrating how these reflect broader official party values.

#### ***Devolution in adult education***

A core principle for Republicans is limiting federal control over education and welfare. Accordingly, education is framed as "a state and local responsibility – not federal" (RPP of 2007, Local Control, par. 1). Such a position was extremely radical in 1996, under the Bill Clinton administration (D), when Republicans advocated eliminating the US Department of Education and opposed federal control over school curricula or imposed outcome- or performance-based standards on local schools

(RPP of 1996, Improving Education, par. 5). However, in WIA-Title II adult education was still envisioned as a public responsibility based on a “partnership between governmental levels” (P.L. 105-220). By 2007 this concept had been converted into “federal support to states and local communities” (HR 3747 of 2007) and has remained unchanged, while the adult population has changed from adults aged 16-61 (P.L. 105-220, sec. 211) to 16 or over.

### ***Parental choice of children’s school***

Education as a local responsibility is coupled with the view that “education is a parental right” (RPP of 2008, p. 44), in line with conservatives valuing freedom over equality. Accordingly, in the 1996 party platform parents were given the choice among public, private, and religious schools to ensure quality education (RPP of 1996, Improving Education, par. 8); however, education as a parental right acquired even more weight in 2004, under the George W. Bush administration (R) (RPP of 2004, Protecting the Educational Rights..., par.1). WIA-Title II addressed the need for parents to gain “the educational skills necessary to become full partners” in their children’s educational development (P.L. 105-220 of 1998, sec. 202). But parents as primary teachers for children increased in emphasis under the George W. Bush administration (R), as it is from parents that children “learn values and ideals... that get them started on a lifelong path of education” (RPP of 2004, Protecting our families, par.1); but since 2007 onward adult education has been more strongly tied to parents simply making “informed choices” about their children’s schooling (HR 3747 of 2007, sec. 202).

### ***Religious and for-profit institutions as adult education providers***

The above conception connects to Republicans’ concern, since the mid-1990s, for private and religious institutions as recipients of federal financial aid in support of social, welfare, or educational activities (RPP of 1996, Upholding the Rights of All, par.7). Yet it is not until 2007 that “nonprofit” was replaced by “faith-based organizations” in the list of eligible adult education providers together with “private agency... with the ability to provide relevant service and programs” under WIA-Title II. This sanctions conservative tenets in support of Evangelical Christian values, as a quote by George W. Bush illustrates:

The values we try to live by never change. And they are instilled in us by fundamental institutions, such as families and schools and religious congregations. (RPP of 2004, Protecting our families, par.1)

### ***Education of migrants and citizenship learning***

Under the Clinton administration (D), Republicans promoted ethnic diversity as a core value, construed as a national strength, yet combined with linguistic unity binding Americans to one another. So English for newcomers was seen as a “fastest route to the mainstream of American life” (RPP of 1996, From many, one, par. 2). Yet it is under the Obama administration (D) that focus on US civic education and English phonics increased (DPP of 2008, p. 44), as part of a broader bipartisan discourse in favor of legal immigration. Accordingly, English as a Second Language and citizenship education gained prominence in adult education. While WIA-Title II enlisted adults “unable to speak English” as eligible, English as Second Language or citizenship education were not emphasized (P.L. 105-220, sec. 203). But in 2007 English as Second Language for “immigrants” was sanctioned to improve basic skills and gain “an understanding of the American free enterprise system, individual freedom, and the responsibilities of citizenship” (HR 3747 of 2007, sec. 202). In 2009 “immigrants” were replaced by “adults who are not proficient in English” (HR 4271 of 2009, Sec.



202), better acknowledging second- and further generation migrants who had studied in the US at least for a few years and sometimes up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Accordingly, “English learner” was preferred to “migrants” from 2012 onwards (HR 4297 of 2012, sec. 203), while English as Second Language put emphasis on earning a secondary education diploma, transition to postsecondary education and better employment, or professional advance (*Ibid.*, HR 803 of 2013, S 1911 of 2014, sec. 203).

### ***Transition to postsecondary educational and career progression for sustainable growth***

Sustainable growth entered as a tenet in the Republican belief framework under the George W. Bush administration (R), pointing at education to “unleash the productive potential of individuals in all nations” (RPP of 2004, Building a Better World..., par. 6), to promote, with literacy and learning, democracy and development (*ibid.*, par. 14); and later pointing at “innovation” as the approach to education, health care and energy (RPP of 2008, p. 26). Consequently, a new emphasis in adult education since 2007 is on adults’ ability “to successfully advance in the workforce” (HR 3747, sec. 202), reach “self-sufficiency” (HR 3747 of 2007, sec. 202), and better transfer to post-secondary education or gain “academic education and proficiency” (*Ibid.*, sec. 203) via the acquisition of a General Education Development credential (GED)<sup>4</sup> (*Ibid.*, HR 4271 of 2009, HR 2295 of 2011, sec. 203, S 1911 of 2014). Thus, while federal support was originally limited to educational services “up to” secondary school level, since 2013 it has been extended to “at least” such level (*Ibid.*, 2014); while the linkage of education and work has become stronger with the inclusion since 2012 of “education/workforce training integration” services as eligible for federal grants (HR 4297 of 2012, HR 803 of 2013, S 1911 of 2014, sec. 203).

### ***Standards and accountability linking education and employment***

Also under the George W. Bush administration (R), reforming high schools via improved standards and accountability systems was advocated to guarantee students’ success, based on core conservative values such as freedom and opportunity for all (RPP of 2004, Introduction and preamble, par. 12). For that reason, Republicans revised the accountability system for states to receive federal grants from WIA-Title II. Originally based on three education performance indicators (see page 39), in 2007 it was complemented by three employment performance indicators (HR 3747 of 2007, sec. 212).<sup>5</sup> But a major restructuring of the accountability system was proposed in 2009, disappeared in 2011 (HR 2295 of 2011), yet reappeared, unchanged, from 2013 onward (HR 803 of 2013, S 1911 of 2014). Such an accountability system eliminated a separate accountability system for adult education in favor of a WIA all-encompassing accountability system, based on six indicators<sup>6</sup> of which only two are education-specific (HR 4271 of 2009, sec. 212; Bradley & Collins, 2012).

---

<sup>4</sup> The GED is a national-wide program consisting of a battery of tests administered, upon payment, through a joint venture between the American Council on Education and Pearson VUE, a private global corporation, commercial testing company and education publisher. Passing these tests certifies that a person possesses the equivalent knowledge and skills in reading, writing, science, social studies and math of an average high school graduate, and so it is valued by both educational institutions and employers.

<sup>5</sup> These are: 1) entry into employment, 2) retention in employment, and 3) increase in earnings.

<sup>6</sup> These are: 1) entry into unsubsidized employment, 2) retention in unsubsidized employment, 3) change in earnings, 4) credential and educational attainment, 5) participation in education or training and achievement of a gain in basic skills, and 6) entry into unsubsidized employment in the occupation in which the training was received.

## **Democratic bills and party platforms**

Below, we shift attention to Democratic-sponsored bills and link proposed changes to larger party values and ideologies. Compared with Republican-sponsored bills, these are fewer in number and cluster from 2009 to 2013. However, such period encompassed the ‘great recession’, which in our view explains some of the economic convergences we note with Republican proposals.

### ***Federal control over learning content and targets***

Democrats consistently extol the virtues of a smaller, technologically advanced, and more flexible government (DPP, of 1996-2012), which is a point of commonality with Republicans. Accordingly, proposed amendments to WIA-Title II emphasize partnerships between multiple federal, state, and local government entities in addition to partnerships with employers (S 1468 of 2009, S 2117 of 2012, HR 4227 of 2012, HR 798 of 2013). But such party statements are somewhat contradicted in adult education’s detailed definition of “high quality literacy instruction” (HR 4227 of 2012, HR 798 of 2013), which federally prescribes what to teach students down to types of awareness used to decipher unfamiliar English words (HR 4227 of 2012, p. 238). In line with this centralistic approach, mandated state plans for adult education and workforce training under WIA explicitly states the type of skills adult students must learn, the degrees teachers must have, the stakeholder to be included, the data to be collected to evaluate services provided, and the students to be focused upon (e.g., English language learners and adults with disabilities) (S 1468 of 2009, S 2117 of 2012, HR 4227 of 2012, HR 798 of 2013). This exposes a philosophical tension between larger Democratic tenets and specific views on adult education. So while a smaller, more flexible government is advocated, detailed federal standards for state and local education providers are instead proposed to hold state and local governments accountable for federal funds. Further, performance measurement criteria, likewise proposed by the Republicans, include how many students obtain jobs, receive secondary school diplomas or equivalent, or earn other industry-recognized workforce or postsecondary credentials (S 1468 of 2009, S 2117 of 2012, HR 4227 of 2012, HR 798 of 2013).

### ***Skill-based education for personal, national and global prosperity***

Since the mid-90s, Democrats have consistently characterized education as an investment tied to personal, national, and global economic prospects. As in Republican statements, liberal arts and the social good are never mentioned; instead, education is specifically referred to as skill-based and tied to an evolving global economy and American economic competitiveness. In addition, public/private partnerships and worker training are emphasized to bridge education and employment (DPP of 1996-2012) all the way across both Democratic and Republican administrations. This is reflected in all bills introduced to amend WIA that in Title II put emphasis on adult education as a means to economic self-sufficiency, career path advancement, and skills training (S 1468 of 2009, S 2117 of 2012, HR 4227 of 2012, HR 798 of 2013).

### ***Religious plurality and the separation of church and state***

Although faith-based groups are singled out by Democrats as having roles to play in addressing US societal challenges (DPP of 2004, 2008, and 2012), contrary to the Republicans, Democrats never specify faith-based (nor for-profit) groups as eligible providers of adult education services, in line with

the official party line of First Amendment protections.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, religious plurality is often emphasized in party platforms, most notably under George W. Bush's administration (R) (DPP of 2008, p. 39), together with the separation of church and state and reassurances that public funds will not be used to "proselytize or discriminate" (DPP of 2004, p. 39; DPP of 2008, p. 48).

### *Adult learners and parents as school partners*

Like Republicans, Democrats consistently address the parental role in education by referencing the "sacred responsibility" for parents to guide and support children's education (DPP of 1996, p. 16; DPP of 2008, p. 49), including the parental duty to be actively involved in their children's education. However, distancing themselves from Republicans, Democrats perceive parents as partners with schools rather than the sole source of authority over children's education and school choice. So, while specific family values are not spelled out, federal funds are designed by Democrats to assist adults so they can obtain jobs and support their families, including better educating their children (S 1468 of 2009; S 2117 of 2012; HR 4227 of 2012; HR 798 of 2013).

### *Opening language and civic education to adults with limited English proficiency*

The Democratic Party platforms studied oscillate between acknowledging America's history as a nation of immigrants, welcoming legal immigrants into American society, and advocating immigration reform and control over illegal immigration (DPP of 1996-2012). Thus English language education and civic education for immigrants are tied together, though more strongly integrated as one concept from George W. Bush's administration (R) into Obama's administration (D) (DPP of 2004-2012). This is reflected in the Democratic bills introduced after Obama took power, where integrated English literacy and civic education are openly tied to teaching immigrants American citizenship responsibilities, but also opened to "other limited English proficient adults" (HR 4227 of 2012, p. 241), regardless of whether they already have secondary diplomas or the equivalent, in order to bring them into mainstream American society (S 1468 of 2009; S 2117 of 2012; HR 4227 of 2012; HR 798 of 2013).

Finally, it shall be noted that in summer 2014, after months of negotiation across parties and Houses of Congress, by combining elements of HR 803 of 2013 (Republican) and S 1356 of 2013 (Democrat), a joint resolution (HR 803 Enrolled Bill) passed Congress and was signed into law by President Obama as the Workforce and Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA repeals the WIA of 1998 and eliminates a total of 15 programs, including the National Institute for Literacy under WIA-Title II. Other Title II changes include an emphasis on states and local providers teaching basic skills, adult education, literacy activities, and English language instruction either concurrently with or as part of occupational skill training in order to accelerate recipients' earning secondary school diplomas and postsecondary credentials (Murray, 2014a, 2014b, n.p.). Further, WIOA creates an interlocking content standard between adult education and school curricula up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, as set forth in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Also, it authorizes Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education program. Funds for this endeavor are to be distributed among states

---

<sup>7</sup> The First Amendment of the US Constitution (1791) guarantees freedoms of speech, press, religion, petition and assembly; hence it forbids the US government from promoting one religion over others and protects the individual's rights to practice (or not practice) any religion.

based on their need and immigrant resident population growth (but not accounting for undocumented immigrants). In addition, provisions are made for national-level research and evaluation of adult education activities (U.S. Congress, 2014, pp. 7-8). Finally, both community-based and faith-based organizations are specified as potentially eligible providers of adult education.

## **Conclusion**

Since the Republican administration of George W. Bush (2001-2009) party-sponsored proposals to amend WIA-Title II have essentially converged toward providing English-language instruction to those not proficient in English so to participate fully in US society. Citizenship education for immigrants, however, is conceptualized by Republicans as explaining American individual freedoms and the free enterprise system; Democrats generally emphasize teaching an understanding of the US government and citizenship obligations. Both parties also share an emphasis on workforce development and credentials designed to help undereducated adults in the transition to employment and/or postsecondary education, and require accountability standards and data collection as part of a larger US educational accountability movement. The 'great recession' that hit the US in 2008 influenced subsequent proposals, as both parties increased attention on an aspect of economic sustainability by enabling adults to achieve concrete workforce credentials meant to sustain them (and their families) financially.

Party-specific views on adult education, however, also diverge on more subtle yet important matters that partly explains the long-term Congressional inability to reach bipartisan consensus, like the share of responsibilities between central and local governments, parents' positioning in relation to children's school choice, migrant access to adult education provisions, and the contribution to adult education by faith-based and for-profit organizations.

Normative dichotomization between liberal and conservative ideologies, as already mentioned, do not fully account for the constellation of meanings found within each ideological family (see also Maddox & Lilie, 1984); but as official party positions by Republican and Democratic tend toward polarization and led to the US government shutdown in 2013, such division among ideological families still proves useful when understanding different meanings and interpretations found in party platforms and proposed amendments to WIA-Title II.

Conservatives are inclined to support a specific worldview influenced, since the 1980s, by the rise of religious (specifically evangelical Protestant) traditionalism, with an emphasis on laissez-faire capitalism and corporate conservatism (Himmelstein, 1990; Swedlow, 2008). Republicans, in line with the rise of the religious right faction within their party over the presidential administrations we examined, are the only party to make explicit reference to faith-based and for-profit providers in bills proposed to amend WIA-Title II.

Liberals tend to support governmental economic interventions, governmental regulation of private businesses for the common good, a governmental role in reducing societal inequality (often framed in terms of race and gender), and a governmental role in caring for the needy. Religion also plays a role in liberal philosophy, though encompassing multiple faiths (Swedlow, 2008). It shall be noted, however, that Democratic Party platforms studied focus on private-sector job creation and trimming the federal government, belying the image of government bloat some associate with liberals (DPP 1996-2012).

In conclusion, underlying differences in meanings behind a cross-party convergence on core ideas about adult education resembles Lakoff's (2001, p. xii) differentiation between American conservatives and liberals' positions as "ultimately a division between *strictness* and *nurturance* as ideals at all levels". We find that such differentiation is covertly reproduced in Republican- and Democratic-sponsored proposed changes to WIA-Title II; however, we also note a slow but steady alignment, especially in the post-great recession era, on linking adult education to occupational skill training, and English-language instruction to civic learning, while tightening standards and accountability measures for states to benefit from federal funds. This conditions curricular content but also allows new providers. It is thanks to such convergence that both parties were able to compromise on the latest Republican-sponsored bill (HR 803 of 2013) to gain (upon amendments), bipartisan approval, yet emphasizing US national economic growth potential that extends 'strictness' ideals into federal adult education policy.

### Acknowledgements

This article draws on research Marcella Milana carried out with the support of the European Union's *Marie Curie* funding scheme (Grant Agreement PIOF-GA-2011-297727); however the views herein presented does not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.

### References

- Abramowitz, A. & Saunders, K. L. (1998). Ideological realignment in the American electorate. *Journal of Politics*, 60(3), 634-652.
- Bevir, M., & Rhodes, R. A. W. (2002). Interpretative theory. In D. Marsh & G. Stoker (Eds), *Theory and methods in political science* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 131-152). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Birkland, T. A. (2003). *An introduction to the policy process: Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making* (2nd ed.). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Bradley, D. H., & Collins, B. (2013). *Workforce Investment Act (WIA) reauthorization proposals in the 113th Congress: Comparison of major features of current law and S. 1356*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service (CRS).
- Bradley, D. H., & Collins, B. (2012). *Workforce Investment Act (WIA) reauthorization Proposals in the 112th Congress: Comparison of major features of current law and H.R. 4297*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

- Congress of the United States. (May 21, 2014). *Statement of the managers to accompany the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*. Retrieved from [http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/ee9c8cfd-cb3f-4dd5-8574-92d9337f02c9/signed-wioa-managers-statement.pdf](http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/ee9c8cfd-cb3f-4dd5-8574-92d9337f02c9/signed-wioa-managers-statement.pdf).
- Easton, D. (1965). *A system analysis of political life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Ellis, J. (1984). *A history and analysis of the Adult Education Act, 1964-1984*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 252 658).
- Eyre, G. A. (2013). *An American heritage: A federal adult education legislative history 1964-2013*. Bethesda, MD: NOVA Research Company. Retrieved on March 3, 2014 from: [http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/Adult\\_Ed\\_History\\_Report.pdf](http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/Adult_Ed_History_Report.pdf)
- Freeden, M. (2013). The morphological analysis of ideology. In Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent & Marc Stears (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political ideologies* (pp. 115-137). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeden, M. (2006). Ideology and political theory. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(1), 3-22.
- Freeden, M. (1996). *Ideologies and political theory: A conceptual approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gold, S. (1998). Issues raised by the New Federalism. *National Tax Journal*, 49(2), 273-287.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York, International Publishers.
- Griffin, R. (2006). Ideology and culture. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(1), 77-99.
- Johnson, V. (2010). Impact of race and welfare reform on African American single mothers' access to higher education. *Journal of Black Studies* 40(6), 1041-1051.
- Hayes, E. (1999). Policy issues that drive the transformation of adult literacy. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 83, 3-14.
- Himmelstein, J. (1990). *To the right: The transformation of American conservatism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. (2nd ed). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

- Maddox, W. S., & Lilie, S. A. (1984). *Beyond liberal and conservative: Reassessing the political spectrum*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.
- Milana M (2013). Incentives and Disincentives to Invest in Human Resources. In G. K. Zarifis & M. Gravani, (eds.), *Challenging the 'European Area of Lifelong Learning': a critical response* (pp. 61-73). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Miller, G. & Schofield, N. (2008). The transformation of the Republican and Democratic party coalitions in the U.S. *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(3), 433-450.
- Moore, C., Shulock, N., & Lang, D. M. (2004). *Funding adult education: Does California put the money where the needs are?* Center for California Studies, California State University, Sacramento.
- Murray, P. (2014a, May). News release: Bipartisan, bicameral group announces deal to improve American workforce development system. Retrieved from [http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/newsreleases?ContentRecord\\_id=f4cbb33a-49c6-4f5d-9e4f-e022cc1fcb32](http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/newsreleases?ContentRecord_id=f4cbb33a-49c6-4f5d-9e4f-e022cc1fcb32).
- Murray, P. (2014b, May). WIOA one-page summary. Retrieved from [http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/1864afcb-c7e5-48a5-85e4-9e4904688e42/wioa-onepager.pdf](http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/1864afcb-c7e5-48a5-85e4-9e4904688e42/wioa-onepager.pdf).
- National Advisory Council on Adult Education [NACAE] (1980). *A history of the Adult Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) (1991). *Education Act: 1966-1991*. Washington, DC: Division of Adult Education and Literacy. Retrieved on March 3, 2014 from: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/anniv40/ae-act.pdf>
- Pew Research Center (2014, June). *Political Polarization in the American Public*. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/06/6-12-2014-Political-Polarization-Release.pdf>
- Pindus, N., Aron, L., Cowan, J., Hatry, H., Hernandez S., Winkler, M., Koralek, R., & Tutko, J. (2005). Volume I: Final synthesis report study to assess funding, accountability and one-stop delivery systems in adult education. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Retrieved on February 19, 2014 from: [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411291\\_Adult\\_Ed\\_Vol\\_I.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411291_Adult_Ed_Vol_I.pdf).

- Román-Zozaya, C. (2008). Participant ideology: A new perspective on politicians and ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(2), 111-132.
- Rose, A. D. (1991). Ends or means: An overview of the history of the Adult Education Act. Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (Information Series No. 346)
- Sparks, B. (2001). The gendered construction of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 91, 47-54.
- Swedlow, B. (2008). Beyond liberal and conservative: Two-dimensional conceptions of ideology and the structure of political attitudes and values. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13(2), 157-180.
- Watson, K., and Gold, S. (1998). *The other side of devolution: Shifting relationships between state and local governments*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Wagenaar, H. (2011). *Meaning in action: Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis*. New York: M.E.Sharpe.
- Wilson, A.L. (2009). Adult education in the United States as a subject of policy and politics. *Bildung und Erziehung*, 62(4), 451- 461.
- Yanow, D. (2003). Accessing local knowledge. In Maarten Hajer & Hendrik Wagenaar (Eds.), *Deliberative Policy Analysis* (pp. 228-246). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yanow, D. (2000). *Conducting interpretative policy analysis*. Thousand Oaks / London / New Delhi: Sage Publications.

**Marcella Milana** is Associate Professor at Aarhus University (Denmark), and Marie Curie Fellow at the University of California, Los Angeles (United States) at the time of writing this contribution. This paper draws on research she carried out with the support of the European Union (grant agreement PEOF-GA-2011-297727).

Contacts: [mami@edu.au.dk](mailto:mami@edu.au.dk)



**Lesley McBain** is a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Organizational Change (HEOC) Division of the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include higher education policy and governance, adult education, and veterans education.

Contacts: [lmcbain@ucla.edu](mailto:lmcbain@ucla.edu)

Table 1 – Bills introduced to Congress to re-authorize the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (2003-2014)

Year (Congressional Session)	US House of Congress	Bill Number	Date	Sponsor/State (No. of cosponsors)	Party	Result
2003-2004 (108th)	House of Representatives	HR 1261	March 13, 2003	McKeon, CA (+7)	Republican	Passed by House, referred for conference
	Senate	S 1627	September 17, 2003	Enzi, WY (+3)	Republican	Incorporated into HR 1261 November 14, 2003
2005-2006 (109th)	House of Representatives	HR 27	January 4, 2005	McKeon, CA (+15)	Republican	Message on Senate action sent to House July 10, 2006 but no passage
	Senate	S 9	January 24, 2005	Enzi, WY (+3)	Republican	Referred to committee January 24, 2005
	Senate	S 1021	May 21, 2005	Enzi, WY (+1)	Republican	Returned to Senate calendar June 29, 2006
2007-2008 (110th)	House of Representatives	HR 3747	October 4, 2007	McKeon, CA (+7)	Republican	Reintroduced as HR 4271 (2009), then as HR 2295 (2012)
2009-2010 (111th)	Senate	S 1468	July 16, 2009	Webb, VA (+1)	Democrat	Reintroduced as HR 2226 (2011), then as S 2117 (2012)
	House of Representatives	HR 3238	July 16, 2009	Kennedy, RI (+30)	Democrat	Referred to committees July 16, 2009 and October 22, 2009
	House of Representatives	HR 4271	December 16, 2009	Guthrie, KY (+8)	Republican	Referred to committee, then reintroduced as HR 2295 (2011)
2011-2012 (112th)	Senate	--	June 9, 2011	Discussion only	Bipartisan	Never introduced
	House of Representatives	HR 2295	June 22, 2011	McKeon, CA (+7)	Republican	Referred to committees July 22, 2011 and September 8, 2011
	House of Representatives	HR 2226	June 16, 2011	Hinojosa, TX (+22)	Democrat	Referred to committees June 16, 2011 and September 9, 2011
	House of Representatives	HR 3610	December 8, 2011	Foxx, NC (+8)	Republican	Subcommittee hearings held March 8, 2012
	House of Representatives	HR 3611	December 8, 2011	Heck, NV (+7)	Republican	Referred to committee December 8, 2011
	Senate	S 2117	February 16, 2012	Webb, VA (+2)	Democrat	Referred to committee February 16, 2012
	House of Representatives	HR 4227	March 20, 2012	Tierney, MA (+55)	Democrat	Referred to committees March 20, 2012 and September 26, 2012, then reintroduced as HR 798 (2013)
	House of Representatives	HR 4297	March 29, 2012	Foxx, NC (+6)	Republican	Placed on Union Calendar, No 513, December 14, 2012

**Table 1 (continued) – Bills introduced to Congress to re-authorize the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (2003-2014)**

Year (Congressional Session)	US House of Congress	Bill Number	Date	Sponsor/State (No. of cosponsors)	Party	Result
2013-2014 (113th)	House of Representatives	HR 798	February 15, 2013	Tierney, MA (+51)	Democrat	Referred to committees February 15, 2013 and April 23, 2013
	House of Representatives	HR 803	February 25, 2013	Foxx, NC (+23)	Republican	Passed by House March 15, 2013, and referred to Senate Engrossed amendment passed by Senate June 25, 2014
	Senate	S 1356	July 24, 2013	Murray, WA (+3)	Democrat	Referred to committee July 31, 2013
	Senate	S 1400	July 30, 2013	Reed, RI (+1)	Democrat	Referred to committee July 30, 2013
	Senate	S 1911	January 9, 2014	Scott, SC (+3)	Republican	Referred to committee January 9, 2014
	House of Representatives & Senate	HR 803 Enrolled Bill*	--	--	--	Bipartisan

\* An Enrolled Bill is a joint resolution that has passed both US Houses of Congress in identical form; HR 803 Enrolled Bill integrates the HR 803 of 2013 with S 1356 of 2013, and renames the Workforce and Investment Act of 1998 into the Workforce and Innovation Opportunity Act.