America’s College Promise:
Examining Congressional Standstill from a Federal and Local Perspective

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Lieke Janssen
s4447395
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Supervisor: Dr. M. Roza
Second reader: Prof. Dr. F. Mehring
Abstract

In 2015, President Obama introduced America’s College Promise (ACP), an initiative to increase accessibility to higher education in the United States. With this federal proposal Obama made an effort to make college as universal as high school, but he could not gather enough supporters in Congress. Why did Congress not support the initiative? In this thesis, I examine the responses from the federal government and local stakeholders to find out what caused the current stagnation. The thesis concludes that while partisanship seems to limit the chances for the ACP to succeed on the federal level, party consensus is present on a local level. Hence, it is not merely a matter of party preference or institutional scope. Rather, the federal discussion and legislation on the ACP came to a stop because of complex dynamics in both the institutional and ideological coordinate system.

Keywords: America’s College Promise, education policy, partisanship, federal government, community college
Glossary of terms

**FAFSA**: Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Form that all U.S. prospective students (citizens) need to fill out which determines their eligibility for financial aid (e.g. Pell Grant).

**Pell Grant**: Federal system of financial aid, where the amount of aid is determined by family income and degree of need for aid. The Pell Grant is only awarded to undergraduate students who have not yet received their first bachelor’s degree or are enrolled in certain specific post-baccalaureate programs.

**Tuition-free college**: According to the America’s College Promise Act, tuition-free college means that a combination of federal and state funds covers the costs of tuition and fees for a two-year program at a community college.

**GPA**: Grade Point Average.

**529 Plans**: Savings plans that offer federal, and sometimes state, tax benefits and minimize impact on financial aid. Savings that are used for educational purposes are not taxed, and 529 plans differ from state to state.
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1. Introduction

As an aspiring graduate student at an American college, I was shocked by the enormous costs that accompany a U.S. degree. Not only have tuition costs escalated to the point where it may discourage many students from attending college, paying for housing and supplies only worsens the situation. How do we justify the difference in earnings between college and non-college graduates, without there being equal chances for students to obtain such a degree? In 2015, President Obama introduced America’s College Promise (hereafter referred to as the ACP) as a solution to this problem. The goal of this bold plan is to make community college free of costs for the first two years for every student.

Many government officials prioritize equality in education and realize that it is a pressing issue. As a follow-up to Obama announcing the plan, a House bill was introduced by Representative Robert C. Scott, Ranking Member of the Education and the Workforce Committee, in July of 2015. In September 2017, another bill was introduced. The bills go by the name America’s College Promise Act of 2015 and 2017 respectively.¹ Since then, senators have also been putting in proposals under the same name that all aim to make the cost of higher education a federal responsibility.²

The ACP Act is not making its way through Congress and the reasons for this have not yet been explored in the academic domain. So far, the initiative’s ‘failure’ has only been assessed in informal ways, e.g. in speculative newspaper articles or blogs. This thesis will consist of a conceptualization of the program and I will collect different arguments (federal vs. local) that may hint at potential causes for congressional standstill. These arguments may reveal patterns or recurring themes, which show the difference between federal and local approaches

¹ The bills were introduced multiple times by different representatives, but embody the same idea and goals, with minor changes to make the proposal more inclusive.
² This paper will use the terms higher education and postsecondary education as synonyms and these include two-year community colleges, four-year institutions and universities that offer graduate degrees, in addition to any institution that offers any associate or bachelor’s degree.
and I will examine whether or not these differences contribute to congressional standstill. Further, an important theme that may be responsible for an unsolved problem is the discrepancy between Republican and Democratic views on education policy.

While the ACP may not be much of a realistic legislative proposal, it may have forced the government to take a critically assess education policy and reform. I will come back to this topic and refer to it as the ACP as a ‘conversation starter’.

Research on the ACP is scarce, mostly because it is a fairly new plan and the legislation is still in Congress, meaning that the proposals have not been approved by the committees that deal with education. The greatest challenge for this study was finding articles and statements on the ACP – which supports the idea that this plan and its congressional standstill is rather mysterious. Even though the number of collected responses may be limited, I take them to be representative of the greater group of stakeholders and decision-makers in both federal and local institutions. Further, while legislative action has not been successful, grassroots organizations and campaigns are taking off to make the idea of the ACP very much a success. The fact that this happens on the local/state level could mean that local governing prevails in this case. Regardless, the federal trail seems to end whereas the decentralized momentum increases thanks to the work of grassroots organizations and campaigns.

The aim of this study is to map the responses from both federal and local actors to uncover the reasons for the standstill in Congress. The results may function as a tool for stakeholders to assess the direction of the policy as it unfolds. How can we situate America’s College Promise in the longstanding tensions between federal ambitions and local needs in higher education?

In the first chapter I will provide background information on the ACP, Obama’s motivation to introduce the plan, and the accompanying ideology. Also, some historical

3 I recognize the study’s limitations due to the topic’s novelty and complexity: see heading 6.2.
background is needed here to situate the ACP in the general discourse of educational policy and federal efforts to get involved in education. The third chapter will further contextualize the ACP by including responses from Congress. Here I will look at what members of Congress have commented about the plan’s feasibility. These responses are pivotal to discovering the reasons for the lack of support, and thus standstill, in Congress. Partisanship in the responses will be analyzed as this could play a major role. Chapter four will outline the local responses to and perspectives on the ACP. I will also purport to illustrate how local needs are (not) represented or understood by the federal government, and what the local communities think about a national approach. The discussion in chapter five will evaluate the responses and correlate them with existing literature on local-federal tensions in the U.S, partisanship and other considerations found in the responses.

For theoretical and conceptual background, I will refer to scholarly articles on either educational policy or more specific research on the ACP. This work will also make use of speeches, interviews, fact sheets and official statements. To assess federal and local views, I will make use of newspaper articles, (videos of) interviews and statements by officials (community college chancellors etc.).

2. Contextualizing America’s College Promise

2.1 Obama’s initiative

The ACP is a federal initiative with the noble goal of “providing greater access to higher education for America’s students” (America’s College Promise Act, 2015-2018). President Obama introduced the general plan in the beginning of 2015, and a House bill followed by the summer. If implemented, the legislation would increase access to over 1,300 community
colleges throughout the United States, by providing free college education to responsible students for the first two years of community college (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Requirements to become eligible to receive funds from the program are that students maintain an average GPA of 2.5 or higher and make considerable progress toward obtaining a degree. A full-time community college student would be saving an average of $3,800 per academic year (usually spent on tuition and fees). If all states were to participate in the program, up to nine million students could benefit and complete a college degree for ‘free’.

Many institutions would benefit from the American College Promise bill through the establishment of partnerships between the federal government and the states. The program would make it possible for states to waive tuition for responsible students, in order to help them complete at least the first two years of a bachelor’s degree and acquire the skills that the workforce demands. This requires dedication from both colleges, which have to improve their programs so as to ensure more graduates, and students, who have to earn good grades and stay on track to obtain a diploma. The idea of the proposal, therefore, is to increase access to college degrees and make higher education as universal as a high school education.

2.2 Obama’s ACP and ideology

President Barack Obama introduced the ACP against the background of a growing skills gap (OECD, 2017) and the need to strengthen the economy (White House, 2015). This proposal would also support his earlier American Graduation Initiative, in which he called for an extra five million college graduates by 2020 (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). With the ACP Obama again stressed the importance of education for American economic prosperity.

Many of Obama’s speeches focus on his political priority to reform the education system, while emphasizing its relevance to the American workforce and economic growth. In
a speech during his first term in the White House, he explains the role that education has played in establishing a prosperous middle class:

In fact, throughout our history, whenever we've faced economic challenges, we've responded by seeking new ways to harness the talents of our people. And that's one of the primary reasons that we have prospered. In the 19th century, we built public schools and land-grant colleges, transforming not just education, but our entire economy. In the 20th century, we passed the GI bill and invested in math and science, helping to unleash a wave of innovation that helped to forge the great American middle class.

But in recent years, we've failed to live up to this legacy, especially in higher education. In just a decade, we've fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees. That not only represents a huge waste of potential; in the global marketplace it represents a threat to our position as the world's leading economy (Obama, 2010, par. 11-12).

This example shows Obama’s dedication to educational reform as a way to boost the economy. He outlines historical examples of education policy that had lasting impact on the life of many Americans, such as the GI bill. He supports his argument with a comparison between successful education policies in the past and America’s failure to keep up in the 21st century. In the same speech he mentions his ambitious goal that sets the year 2020 as the time for the United States to be a world leader again in producing college graduates. However, in order to reach that incredibly challenging goal, a lot of changes would need to be made. Not only would college have to become more affordable, it would also need quality assurance and access equalizers. Although it is a given that something needs to happen, legislators are divided on how to address these problems.
From the beginning of his presidency, President Obama has invested in community colleges. He looks at community colleges as hidden pearls in society; highly underappreciated schools with enormous potential. Oftentimes, this is exactly the reason why people call Barack Obama the ‘Community College President’. Community colleges, as Obama said in a speech at Hudson Valley Community College in 2009, are a place “where people of all ages and backgrounds, even in the face of obstacles; even in the face of very difficult personal challenges, can take a chance on a brighter future for themselves and for their family” (Obama, 2009, p. 6). This definition of a community college has close connections to the image of the United States as a nation of diversity, immigration, prosperity (through hard work) and most of all opportunity. Senior fellow at The Century Foundation, Richard D. Kahlenberg, mentions in his article about higher education funding that community colleges are pivotal in American society; they are crucial to the country’s economic competitiveness and Americans’ efforts to revive their American Dream (2015). These colleges are essential in battling the growing skills gap in a globalizing economy. And a rapidly changing world calls for skills and knowledge upgrades for people to thrive in a 21st century economy. Thus, Obama chose to focus on community colleges in his plan to recognize their potential on a national scale.

Community colleges are believed to have the power to jumpstart one’s social mobility and economic prosperity, but growing inequality in America suggests that the system is flawed. Romano and Eddy (2017) argue that community colleges are still considered to facilitate social upward mobility, but strong intervention and a strong economy are needed to realize its potential in an increasingly stratified higher education system. Besides a lack of funding and rising economic inequality, there may be other reasons for the low graduation rates (drop-out rates in community colleges are as high as 50%) that community colleges have been struggling with. Moreover, community colleges are expected to educate the people that are most in need but are offered the lowest funds to do so (Kahlenberg, 2015). As a consequence of low budgets
and high expectations the inequality grows not only in those schools, but throughout American society. Because colleges cannot keep tuition costs low, high school graduates from lower-income families are less likely to attend college. These problems were some of the main reasons for President Obama to go forward with the ACP in 2015.

Close to the end of his second term, President Obama drew people’s attention to the skills deficit that left many Americans unprepared for 21st century jobs. Skills ‘upgrades’ had been done before, he mentions in the State of the Union speech of 2015, when the government passed bills to make high school free for everyone and legislation that allowed returning military go to college to be retrained for a timely and suitable profession. It is nothing new: times change and there needs to be some guidance for people to develop the right skills and knowledge for a new era. Still, Obama argues, more needs to be done to advance this process.

By the end of this decade, two in three job openings will require some higher education—two in three. And yet we still live in a country where too many bright, striving Americans are priced out of the education they need. It's not fair to them, and it's sure not smart for our future. And that's why I'm sending this Congress a bold new plan to lower the cost of community college to zero (Obama, 2015, p. 32).

With these words, Obama introduced his plan to make community college free; the plan that later became known as America’s College Promise, modeled and named after the Tennessee Promise program.⁴ In the same speech he also points at the nonpartisan character of the initiative by mentioning statewide and citywide programs that inspired him and others: Tennessee and the city of Chicago, with Republican and Democratic leadership respectively, have developed free-tuition programs. This suggests that Obama’s program should be able to find support on both sides of the isle. Theoretically, that is, because even if the goal of

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⁴ Last-dollar scholarship program in Tennessee that results in free community college for the first two years. President Obama looked at the Tennessee Promise for inspiration. See more in paragraph 3.5.
affordable education might be something both Democrats and Republicans want to pursue, complete bipartisan support would prove impossible. Nonetheless, the ACP was Obama’s attempt at solving the problem, and it has sparked a nation-wide discussion.

2.3 ACP as a conversation starter

Obama’s State of the Union speech ignited a discussion about higher education. As a response to Obama’s plan, legislators drafted the America’s College Promise Act of 2015, and local actors were inspired to create their own tuition-free community college programs. Others disagreed on the idea and resumed working on other plans, such as simplifying the FAFSA. However, the ACP aims for a unified approach to higher education and encourages all states to invest in their colleges. The plan and its supporting legislation prescribes for states to not only help students pay for school but also improve the quality of the programs (Executive Office of the President, 2015). That is, access to college would be meaningless without improving the quality of degrees or offering the necessary services for students to successfully enter the workforce upon graduation. Therefore, the ACP would provide states with one format and guidelines to make college tuition-free and create a consolidated higher education system. Some critics of the initiative argue that it is more important to improve the quality of programs than to give students the opportunity to go to college for free. Students would be rewarded with a valuable degree and would have a better chance at a well-paying job. The ACP would focus more on the tuition-free aspect of college (and would thus make higher education more accessible), while others have identified a slightly different priority: uphold and uplift the quality of such associate degrees (degree after two years of community college). Regardless, there is much debate about what the right approach should be, and the ACP— one could argue— was the conversation starter.
The ACP would give states the opportunity to participate, voluntarily, in a federal-state partnership. This partnership would increase accountability for colleges to ensure that students obtain their degrees, and the federal government would chip in to pay 75% of the costs. Still, it is likely that most state governments would be unable to pay the other 25% of the total tuition costs. And even though the plan would take a voluntary approach, this type of federal intervention is a big issue for many legislators – especially for conservatives. The plan’s idealistic goals and centralized form are some one of the largest obstacles in achieving legislative success in Congress, and the responses in chapter three confirm this.

Then, under the wings of Obama’s initiative, the College Promise Campaign took off as a nonpartisan, national movement. The campaign’s goal is to bring affordable community college to all districts, and while it is a national movement originally, local communities and state governments are leading the way to create and promote free community college (College Promise Campaign, 2016). Although a major advancement, the College Promise Campaign does not take one unified approach; it simply spreads the ideals and guidelines on how to promote and establish tuition-free community college. This movement may potentially contribute to the plan’s popularity and – if proven successful – make its way to the federal government. The movement may be promoting the ACP, but – because of its decentralized character – would not easily generate reform across-the-board. In other words, to achieve the goals Obama put forward, a federal, bold plan like the ACP would be the most effective way to do so.

2.4 Historical background

In an interview with C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, an American television network that broadcasts U.S. federal government proceedings and other public affairs programming) Representative Virginia Foxx, Education and the Workforce Committee Chair,
mentions that education policy should be left to the states and not the federal government (2018). History shows us, she says, that the states and localities know best how to provide their residents with good education and her experience tells her that federal decision-making only frustrates the processes on a local scale. Furthermore, the Constitution does not mention education as a responsibility of the federal government, rather, it became solely states’ business under the tenth amendment (US Const. Amend. X). Interestingly, however, when the Fourteenth Amendment, also called the ‘equal protection clause’, was signed into law and ratified by the states in 1868, this required that all Americans (all persons born and naturalized in the United States; US Const. Amend. XIV, sec. 1) be treated equally by the law. Supreme Court interpretations of the Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment led to one of the most famous cases, Brown v. Education, in which separate educational facilities were deemed unequal and thus unlawful (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). However, these cases were state-based and did not concern any federal input in education policy. To this day, educational policy is determined by state governments, but there is a role for the federal government: the public tends to look at Washington D.C. to lead the way.

The government’s recognition of its obligation to provide education for its citizens dates back to America’s first years as a republic. In the Northwest Ordinance, the Continental Congress noted that “...knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Northwest Ordinance, 1787). This set a precedent for continuous federal support for education going forward. The first time there was any federal action with regards to higher education, was with the Morrill Acts of the 19th century (1862, 1890). The first act was signed into law in 1862 and allowed federal land to be donated to the states (or territories) in order to create land-grant colleges, which incorporated the idea that education should be available to all social classes. The first Morrill Act also fits into a series of acts signed by President Abraham Lincoln that
largely defined post-Civil War America. The bills included expansion of railways and the encouragement of western settlement. The Morrill Acts also shifted the focus of higher education from the classic studies to more practical programs like agriculture, mechanical arts and home economics (Stein, 2017).

By the turn of the century, higher education became an essential resource for technological advancement, especially in the wake of two World Wars (Palmadessa, 2017). The government focused on colleges to develop and improve weaponry, and the men and women who served their country during the war were rewarded and encouraged by the federal government to retrain and reacclimatize into American society. The government turned to higher education to make this possible, and passed the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. This was one of the major phases in which higher education saw massive growth and it extended college access to more groups of people in American society (Glacieux, 1995).

In 1946 President Truman formed a special commission on higher education, which aimed to examine “the functions of higher education in our democracy” (Truman, 1946, par. 3). With the establishment of the Truman Commission the federal government considered the first two years of college most crucial to one’s education, hence it focused largely on community colleges. One of the most famous statements made by the Commission was that around half of the American population was capable of completing two years of college, which made clear that there needed to be more access to higher education, and specifically to community college. The Truman Commission was in particular convincing in its efforts to bring together democratic values and access to higher education (Hutcheson, 2007). During the war, race, gender, and economic status were rather insignificant as all Americans fought the war in the name of democracy. The Truman Report used shared experiences from the war to frame unambiguous recommendations, saying that one should acknowledge the inequalities
and continue to strive for democratic ideals (Sullivan, 2017). Access to higher education, the report argues, was deemed crucial to sustaining a democratic society and everyone should have access to at least those first two years of college.

By the end of the 1950s, the American federal government responded to another national issue with an education bill: The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. Although President Eisenhower did not want to interfere in educational policy, the successful launch of Sputnik in the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) caused so much unrest and chaos that the NDEA was seen as crucial to solve the ‘crisis’. In this situation the federal government turned to higher education, so it could develop technology that would be more advanced than that of the Russians (Palmadessa, 2017). If this worked, it would ultimately benefit the entire nation, so it made sense to fund these developments with federal money.

It was not until the 1960s that presidential candidates used higher education as a topic for debate during an election campaign (Graham, 2011). Closely connected to this phenomenon was the Civil Rights Movement, which had equal access to education as one of its main goals and had been campaigning for this since the mid-1950s. Moreover, President Kennedy laid the foundations for President Johnson’s education agenda, which aimed to use education to build a better society – the idea was further supported halfway through the decade when Johnson introduced his Great Society Program. This program also included educational reform as an important pillar of the society he wanted to build and in 1965 Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Higher education was not left out of the equation when the Higher Education Act (HEA) was signed in 1965 (Evaluating the success of the Great Society, 2017), which created grants, loans and other educational resources to support postsecondary education. The HEA of 1965 is considered by some to be the greatest act in federal education legislation and it has been renewed eight times since.
The HEA was not only signed to make college more accessible in terms of providing money to students, it was also an embodiment of American idealism (Glater, 2016). Shortly before the HEA was enacted, the House of Representatives explained that the legislation was a means to “proceed toward molding the myth of higher education for all into vivid, democratic reality.” This explanation hints at the ideology of expanding democratic values through education, which was part of the Higher Education Act, and the Truman Commission Report. Likewise, President Lyndon B. Johnson mentioned in a message to Congress that education was no longer a luxury, but a necessity (Johnson, 1965). The HEA, he said, was going to spread reform and change throughout the nation.

2.5 Development of the HEA

We can see similarities between the HEA and the ACP, such as the democratic values as set out above, but we can also see differences. The goal of the HEA and its reauthorizations was to increase access for all to higher education, just like that of the ACP. However, the HEA did not intend to make higher education a federal responsibility; rather, it should remain a state matter. Even though states were responsible for things like quality assurance, teacher programs and student assistance, the federal government could intervene in matters to protect equality, appropriate funds for research and development, and match loans for postsecondary students (Capt, 2013). A new reauthorization should reflect the needs of higher education and its students, but the ACP gives the federal government a much bigger role than the HEA ever would.

The HEA has not been reauthorized since 2008, and while the reauthorization should have taken place in 2013, the House Education Committee introduced the PROSPER

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5 111th CONG. REC. 21,880 (1965) (statement of Rep. Powell)
(Promoting Real Opportunity, Success and Prosperity through Education Reform) Act in 2017 as a start to reauthorize the HEA. However, this act does not include any sweeping changes when it comes to more funding. Rather, this reform focuses on removing federal involvement in higher education, which is the opposite of what the ACP would have done. Clearly, we can see that Congress is coming back from implementing any federal regulations and it is returning to the original limits of federal authority in higher education.

But it is not that simple. The PROSPER Act does require colleges to report to the federal government and keep up progress towards their missions in order to receive federal aid, something that would happen under the ACP as well. Further, federal aid applications would be simplified, which would result in more eligible students applying for aid. Simplifying these applications is something Obama was working on as well. Still, Congress is hesitant to even discuss matters where the federal government would regulate or finance higher education itself (as opposed to awarding need-based grants to students). The development around the Higher Education Act and its new proposal under the name PROSPER shows that the Education Committee is reluctant to give the federal government full control, but instead is trying to scale back any regulations. A Republican-led Congress leans more towards decreasing federal involvement, while Democrats develop plans like the ACP. But is it really just a matter of party preference?

2.6 Taking responsibility for universal education

Higher education can be seen as merely a tool for an individual to gain skills and get a job, but it can also represent a public good. Education can be treated as a public good to increase universal prosperity, because schools ensure that students acquire the necessary skills to join the workforce, and as a result these graduates will benefit the local economy. That is, the

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collective benefits of education can be achieved through universality and effectivity of learning programs (Labaree, 1997). While education is a way to prepare people for the workforce, higher education institutions should also prepare young adults to pursue advantages later in life, instead of only making competition in school a goal in itself. Moreover, what students pursue are grades or credentials that are compared to those of peers, creating competition from the start. In fact, not only the school system, but also the market of educational providers has become so individualistic that one can only gain some educational distinction at the expense of someone else (Labaree, 1997). This market is driven by the pursuit of preferences and makes education a capitalist market. Thus, whether one’s education is a public or private good, remains highly debated. This ties into a relevant question for this research, namely whether education ought to be a public or private responsibility.

With the ACP, Obama laid out his vision for free community college, in which there would be a shared responsibility for states, schools, educators, students, and families (Abramson, 2016). To achieve shared responsibility, this means that states have to contribute financially, colleges are required to provide quality programs, and students are expected to keep their grades up. Being a shared responsibility, the ACP can be characterized as a public good. This would justify the need for tax money to cover the costs of such a public good. Going back to some fundamental concepts America was built upon (the Constitution mentions that the power is in the hands of the people), and considering how much Americans value these concepts, it might be impossible to convince people that federal control has any merit. In the case of education policy, however, there is evidence that some central control is beneficial in the process of increasing accessibility and universality. Shared responsibility for higher education is an aspect of the ACP that could justify federal involvement.

The ACP was not a surprising step, considering the actions by Obama’s predecessors Clinton and Bush Jr. That is to say, they had proven earlier that federal monitoring and
informing the public about a specific goal, in this case college attainment, is useful (Nettles, 2017). They set targets for the future and used national evaluations and analyses to track the country’s progress towards the goal. Obama’s policy on education is in line with this trend of national goals for education, monitored by the federal government.

3. Congress and its responses

3.1 The irony of federal education policy

During the 1980s, a paradigm shift started to take place in the United States with the result that the federal government took responsibility for education (Mehta, 2013). Mehta (2013) concludes that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the culmination of that two-decade long shift. Whereas the United States is traditionally known for its cultural pluralism, this shift suggests a rather contrasting philosophy: the government chose one dominant view to pursue (Mehta, 2013), instead of sustaining coexistence of different convictions or interests. Top-down reform became a priority for both Democrats and Republicans, and “long-standing traditions of local control gave way to unprecedented state and then federal involvement” (Mehta, 2013, p. 314). This shows a shift away from the ‘regular’ or the ‘traditional’ American view that represented education as a more individual responsibility than a shared one. As Pinder (2010) notes, the role of the federal government with regards to education shifted from extreme deference to one of a prescriptive nature. This shift was clearly represented through Bush Jr.’s NCLB.

This paradigm shift reveals that America’s education policy is deeply ironic. For instance, during Bush Jr’s presidency, education policy expanded federal intervention in schools (No Child Left Behind further emphasized annual testing, report cards and teacher qualifications, among other things), while his Republican party had always been in favor of
limiting the role of the federal government when it comes to education. Kosar (2005) argues that efforts in education policy have always been stymied by ideological differences between anti-statists and liberals. 7 Whereas America’s political history is infamous for its harsh partisanship, Congress seemed to have found common ground on education matters when NCLB, for example, was signed into law. Still, these ideological differences between conservatives or anti-statists and liberals persist to this day, and with the introduction of the ACP, these differences became painfully exposed. Likewise, the results from the present response mapping (chapter three and four) lay bare the complex divisions on education policy. While party preferences seem to explain these divisions, there are more intricate dynamics to this issue. The following questions about higher education should be answered to understand this complexity: whose responsibility is it, who will pay for it, which institution should monitor it, and is higher education a budget priority? Answers to these (and other relevant) questions compose innumerable point of views – each dictating behavior and making the scene ever more complex.

Federal intervention in education has been controversial because of its ‘paternalistic’ character. In which cases are ‘paternalistic’ actions from the federal government justifiable? This question represents a controversial dilemma. Some argue that paternalistic acts may infringe on the freedom of choice by responsible actors (Friedman, 1955). Friedman also highlights the important distinction between what the government can finance and what it may administer (1955). It is generally accepted that government pays for citizens’ general education, but administrating it may be too paternalistic. Still, high school graduates should be free to choose what college to attend. Any governmental interaction may impede these choices by either subsidizing certain schools – which lowers tuition – or (like the ACP) providing

7 Anti-statists are characterized by or expressing opposition to statism (i.e. concentration of economic controls and planning in the hands of a highly centralized government; Merriam Webster Dictionary)
community colleges with extra funds, which would probably result in many students choosing a two-year institution over a four-year institution merely because of financial reasons. Nonetheless, these effects of government intervention make paternalism a deal-breaker for many conservative Americans.

3.2 Initial responses to the ACP

Most criticism from Congress came from Republicans, and the discrepancy between Democrats and Republicans may have been the biggest issue that slowed down any progress for the ACP. Figure 1 shows the party membership of senators and a clear Republican majority (in red). In fact, at the time when the ACP and its supporting legislative proposals were introduced, the Senate had a 54 to 44 Republican majority (see Table 1, taken partly from Glassman & Eckman, 2015).

**Distribution of Seats (114th Congress – Senate)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Majority (R)</th>
<th>Minority (D)</th>
<th>Independent (I)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Senators</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Committee Seats</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Committees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committees</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Majority (R)</th>
<th>Minority (D)</th>
<th>Independent (I)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Senate Committee Party Ratios: 114th Congress (2015-2017)

Considering that the 2015 House bill was introduced by Democratic Representative Bobby Scott (VA), with 111 Democratic cosponsors, the initiative may not be as nonpartisan as Obama made it seem in his introduction of the program (see paragraph 2.2). The 114th Congress (2015-2016) consisted of 187 Democratic representatives
and 248 Republicans (see figure 2), which means that more than half of all Democratic representatives rallied behind America’s College Promise Act when it was proposed in 2015, while not a single Republican did. The Senate bill that bears the same name, introduced by Tammy Baldwin in 2015, was cosponsored by 16 Democratic senators. The fact that both bills were not supported by any Republicans in Congress shows how divided the parties are on this front. With a Republican majority in both the Senate and the House, it proved more than challenging for Democrats to push such a big federal plan. The responses from Congress indeed show a clear division between Republicans and Democrats. However, we see that not all Democrats sponsored the bill and there are few accounts from Democrats that present positive, or any, thoughts on the ACP. Republicans responded more to the ACP, and they were predominantly skeptical. It was more difficult to find any Democratic reactions to the plan, even from those who cosponsored the legislation. From the responses follows, however, that neither Democrats nor Republicans are single-minded on the topic, but that the Democratic supporters base for the ACP is larger than the Republican one.

3.3 Someone has to pay for ‘free’ college

Some Republicans in Congress have accused President Obama of wanting to spend money that the government does not have. For example, John Kline, chairman of the House Education Committee at the time, said in a statement that the president should not make promises that the country cannot afford. He said it would be yet another multi-billion federal program that would have to compete for limited tax-payer dollars (Adams, 2015). Much discussion arose when Obama indeed released the 2016 budget, in which $60 billion was set aside for the ACP. As expected, and as North Carolina Representative Carl Ford states it: “There is no such thing as free” (Groh, 2015, par. 23). Similarly, Representative Virginia Foxx argues that Obama has a way of coming up with ideas without “identifying a way to pay for them” (Groh, 2015, par.
Obama’s plan is often called one of the boldest, most ambitious and most expensive ideas during his presidency. However, using federal money, which might not even be readily available, for his idealist initiatives did not go down well with a large part of Congress.

As mentioned above, Obama’s plan started a widespread discussion about how to tackle the increasing costs of higher education, and a Senate committee hearing brought forward some thoughts about how to allocate money for higher education. Senator Alexander (TN) argued that the federal government should stop requiring states to spend dollars on Medicaid. He explained that he has experienced that the costs for Medicaid increased so much, that the state of Tennessee had to take money from higher education to pay for it. The important and relevant point here is that the costs per state on Medicaid is defined by the federal government, which means that states can only just pick up from there and figure out how to get the money on the table. Although the direct correlation between Medicaid and tuition-costs may not be relevant here, the general pattern is what drives conservative ideologies. In other words, many states have experienced a redistribution of funds because of federal mandates, and this has led to negative results in some cases. A 1994 report by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations highlights that much of the increased Medicaid costs have come at the expense of higher education. The federally induced costs displace state and local priorities, which leads to state and local officials’ inability to deliver on their campaign promises. Sen. Alexander says, in his closing remarks, that states should have more flexibility and fewer mandates, so they can “put the money where the priorities are” (Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015, p. 74). This example may give an idea about the reasons why higher education has been so underfunded. Still, Dr. Scott-Clayton, in a statement, argues, public funding – whether it comes from states or the federal government – should not
be reduced. More importantly, she says, we have to make sure that every dollar is worth spending, not only for the sake of tax-payers, but also for students who are making a great investment (Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015).

3.4 Power to the people

Many responses from Congress (primarily Republicans) point at the need to deregulate higher education. Making community college free through a federal program would not be the way to do that, according to for example Lamar Alexander. In most hearings on education, he expresses this quite adamantly, while emphasizing that his experience taught him that education policy and budget allocations should be left to the states. Majority leader Kevin McCarthy mentions that Washington has been trying to regulate higher education, but that it has only led to sad results. He specifies that centralization, bureaucracy and “tax-and-spend gimmicks” (2015, par. 7) were a bad attempt at increasing accessibility of higher education. Rather, he supports efforts by the House of Representatives to limit federal control and improve college savings accounts. So, instead of helping people pay for college by subsidizing and other governmental interventions, McCarthy and many fellow Republicans are in favor of incentivizing American families to save for college.

Congressional Republicans are generally more concerned about the survival of private institutions if public ones were to become free. Tennessee Representative Duncan Jr. mentions that most of community colleges are already paid for by state and federal taxes, so if the federal government would subsidize them even more, small, private institutions might experience a major decrease in student enrollment and therefore would not survive (Huotari, 2015). On the

other end of the spectrum, Democrats in Congress are more likely to encourage moving away from private schools entirely.

The ACP goes against Republican principles of decentralization and free market capitalism. Republicans argue that the ACP would not be a good idea because it would grant too much central power to legislators in Washington, DC. The responses from many Republican senators and representatives revolved around the idea that higher education should have less bureaucracy and that it should not be the federal government monitoring and financing programs.

3.5 Alternatives and other educational priorities

In response to the ACP, many federal actors highlight alternative methods to reach similar goals. Senators in the HELP (Health, Education, Labor and Pensions) Committee, for instance, prioritize simplification of the FAFSA, keeping student debt low and deregulation of higher education. Moreover, the focus for this committee is on restoring accountability to states and schools, not the federal government. The House Committee on education has been working on the PROSPER Act, which demonstrates the same ideals. The PROSPER Act strongly represents a Republican ideology, in which the federal role is limited. At the same time, PROSPER includes recommendations for the simplification of existing programs to limit bureaucracy and make the processes more user-friendly. Providing transparent information about institutions and loans is also highlighted in PROSPER. This way, students can make a choice about where to apply and how to invest their dollars. When the PROSPER Act was introduced, it was clear that Congress was not up for a far-reaching program like the ACP, but some of its features are presented in the PROSPER Act. Nonetheless, Congress commits to alternatives that do not involve much federal authority – perhaps to faster come to an agreement.
Many critics (see figure 3 – argument 3 and 4; bibliography in appendix) argue that the $60 billion could be better spent, for example by expanding existing Pell Grants, but leaving the rest to the states. The maximum Pell Grant could – in theory – cover tuition for the first two years of community college, which is why some are reluctant to starting a new program without using the Pell Grant system in place. Senators from Tennessee, Missouri and Nebraska clearly express this in an opinion piece. The federal government, they argue, should help by paying for extra Pell Grants (Alexander et al, 2015) that can pay for programs that states may or may not put in place.

![Initial responses to Obama's plan](image)

*Figure 3: Responses from 7 senators and 16 representatives, especially those who are concerned with (higher) education matters*

Although Obama’s end goal is desirable (more accessible higher education), many government officials say his approach is unsuitable. Republican senators from Tennessee, Missouri and Nebraska state in an opinion piece about the ACP that President Obama was “in the right church but the wrong pew,” (Alexander et al, 2015, par. 1) when he tried to turn one state’s good example (Tennessee Promise) into a federal program. Alexander, Blunt and Sasse argue that the ACP misses the mark because existing Pell Grants cover most costs for a large
part of American low-income students. Consequently, the ACP would cover tuition for those who are not eligible for a Pell Grant or for whom the Pell Grant does not cover all the costs.

Data published in 2016 shows that the opposite is true: the Pell Grants only cover 52% of the total costs of attendance for a public two-year institution. This used to be nearly 100% in 1980, but ever since, tuition went up way faster than inflation did. The data include costs like books, housing and transportation, which means that only half of those total costs would be covered by a Pell Grant. Indeed, a maximum Pell Grant is $5,645, but community college students only receive $3,227 on average. This means that the average student is not able to pay for tuition and additional costs without working part-time. Moreover, about 40 percent of community college students make use of a Pell Grant, which also poses a problem. In order to get more students to make use of Pell Grants, the application process (which is extremely lengthy and is problematic especially for first generation college students) should be simplified. Essentially, Pell Grants would have to be expanded and made more accessible in order to increase the percentage of students that can cover the actual (real total) costs of attending college.

Senator Alexander mentions the Tennessee Promise (in effect since 2014) as an example of an alternative method to make higher education more affordable (Adams, 2015), and states should use the Tennessee program as a template for new programs. The Tennessee Promise uses federal funds, but it functions independently. The right way to expand this success is for other states do to the same, says Alexander. The Tennessee Promise provides students with a free college education by covering the tuition costs and fees not covered by other scholarships, among which the Pell Grant (Tennessee Promise). This means that federal grants (i.e. Pell Grants) cover most of the costs, and the state of Tennessee makes sure to pay for the

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rest. It is a so-called last-dollar scholarship, which covers “the gap between a student's financial aid package and tuition” (Smith, 2015). On the other hand, the ACP would be a first-dollar scholarship, which means that the scholarship is *not* determined by the amount of other funding available for that student (Myrland). The Tennessee program also includes mentoring and mandatory community service to keep students involved. In other words, the Tennessee Promise program is an alternative that builds on existing federal grant systems (Pell Grants), which is by some considered a better option than creating a new program like the ACP.

4. Local perspectives

4.1 Assessing initial responses

In this thesis I distinguish two types of local actors: community colleges and stakeholders. Their responses were recorded and represented in figure 4. Responses from community colleges were grouped together, just as those from stakeholders. Figure 4 is based on a total of 21 responses from community colleges and 6 from stakeholders. I take these responses as representative for the rest of the community colleges and stakeholders.

a) Community colleges

Most community colleges responded enthusiastically and were hopeful about Obama’s announcement (Naugatuck Valley Community College, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Padrón, 2015; Logan, 2015; Colter, 2015; Hackensmith, 2015; The College of Davidson and Davie Counties, 2015; Buffer, 2015; Huotari, 2015). Still, some institutions were worried about capacity problems if Obama’s plan were to become reality. Four-year institutions were worried about a potential decrease in applicants if community college (i.e. two-year institutions) were to become free for everyone (Frieman, 2015; Clark, 2015).
The initial responses from colleges and stakeholders are represented in Figure 4. Most responses date back to the first period after Obama’s plan was announced, so little was known about the specifics of the initiative and before the budget proposals of 2016. Therefore, the graph can be seen as an overview of responses based on merely the idea that the federal government would provide funds to make community college tuition-free. So, the graph represents thoughts about whether community colleges or stakeholders would like to see increased funding by the federal government in the form of the plan as initially proposed by Obama.

![Bar Graph](Image)

The majority of community college presidents or leaders acknowledge that Obama’s proposal is a conversation starter about the state of higher education. Higher education should be discussed on a higher level, and it should be a top priority. Federal actors would agree with this, and it is also mentioned a lot in Senate and House discussions. Republicans and Democrats alike, whether locally or in the federal government, are aware that higher education has become
very expensive (the costs of higher education have increased with 250% since 1979)\(^\text{10}\), and comprehensive reform is needed to improve the situation. However, whereas legislators in Washington D.C. continue to discuss whether or not to push federal reforms, communities are suffering from the unemployment from those who fail to graduate, student debt from those who finish, and the low market-value of some of those degrees. Community college students in particular should graduate well prepared for the workforce and extra funds from the federal government could give the processes of preparation a boost. Moreover, most community college graduates stay active in the local economy and will contribute to this economy immediately. Colleges use this argument to advocate for more public funding and putting higher education on the top of the agenda. Further, in politics it is certain that money goes where the mind is.

\textit{b) Stakeholders}

Stakeholders include research organizations, educational facilities such as four-year institutions, networks of colleges, and other education policy stakeholders. Some arguments made by stakeholders indicate that federal priorities differ from local or state priorities (Baum & Hansen, 2017). Cities, for instance, can have an economic interest in making people relocate to certain areas with the incentive of free college, instead of merely the ‘ideological’ goal of educational attainment. For the federal government, these specific goals make less sense. Moreover, Baum and Hansen argue, it is highly unlikely that the federal government will be able to micromanage programs in so many local community colleges. In their paper, Baum and Hansen conclude that the whole group of policy advisors that worked on the report (see bibliography: Baum & Hansen, 2017) agrees that the “federal government should not develop

incentives for any of the specific ‘free college’ efforts now under way” (Baum & Hansen, 2017, p. 31). Rather, the federal government could supplement by providing financial aid and improving the programs that are already in place. With these arguments, a group of specialists agree that the federal government should not take explicit action on matters of free community college, and this may impede any development for the ACP in Congress.

4.2 Hopeful but realistic: community colleges

Responses by community colleges are generally positive, but contain constructive criticism. For example, community college president Dennis Gallon (Palm Beach Community College, FL) mentions that although he applauds Obama’s position and he welcomes the ACP, there are more problems like college preparation and completion. These aspects are crucial to obtaining a degree, and it is not only the lack of money that is setting students up for failure in college (Editorial, 2015). He argues that Pell Grants could be expanded, promoted and used for the monetary aspect of increasing access and then college completion should be a focus point for further policy developments. Student persistence is connected to stable support systems and counseling – money alone cannot solve the problems that community colleges face. Janet Gullickson, president of Spokane Falls Community College, argues that there is not one medicine to help a student who is not prepared, poor, ill, in an abusive situation or restricted in any other way. However, she says, Obama’s plan would challenge colleges to step up their game and help students graduate (Logan, 2015).

Concerns have risen about the prediction that students would choose community college over four-year institutions if community college were free (Strauss, 2015). If the goal of the ACP is equal opportunity for higher education, the program should include those four-year schools, as well as increase funding opportunities for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), stakeholders argue (Strauss, 2015). The stakeholders in this opinion
piece consist of an education consultant and four professors at different universities. Supporting one segment of higher education at the expense of another is not the way to go, they argue. This argument comes back in more responses (Frieman, 2015; Clark, 2015). The stakeholders in Strauss (2015) also suggest that a better use of public money should be to expand Pell Grants.

Community colleges are aware of the problems that could arise with the funding of the program. Even though many argue that spending money on education will pay off in the long run, there is some hesitation about the cost-sharing part for states, as well as the federal government’s ability to assign $60 billion to tuition-free college. Just like some mentioned in Congress, states have decreased higher education spending over the past decades. Not all states have fully recovered from the 2008 recession, says Don Hossler, professor of higher education at Indiana University. This is why they “may be reluctant to any cost-sharing proposals that President Obama has put forth” (Frieman, 2015, p. 10). What is more, he argues, community colleges are already underfunded and are forced to rely on adjunct faculty due to insufficient funds. This makes it unlikely that states are suddenly able to or willing to spend the large amount of money that the ACP demands. However, as states decrease their investments in community colleges, tuition will continue to rise.

Community colleges express much gratitude for Obama’s focus on community college specifically because these schools are crucial to America’s local and regional economic success (Satullo, 2015). As president of Northampton Community College, Mark Erickson mentions that community colleges are “the point of access for so many students” and that they “put people back to work” (Satullo, 2015). However, the Republican that represents the district of Northampton Community College, Charlie Dent, says that this is not the way to proceed and that Pell Grants should be used to support students in need, whereas the ACP would provide every student with a full ride (Satullo, 2015). He points out that tax payers should not be
burdened by the cost of higher education, and he worries that money would have to be taken out of other funds such as the National Institute of Health (NIH), Pell Grants or special education. This shows a clear distinction between the responses by community colleges and federal actors. In other words, the ACP acknowledges the value and importance of community colleges, and it is that recognition that spurs a timely discussion. However, for community colleges – as is clear from their responses – this discussion is not an end in itself: action is required.

4.3 State, city and county-wide programs as a response to the ACP

States and regions have stepped in to develop their own tuition-free programs as a reaction to Obama’s initiative and the later launch of the College Promise Campaign in September of 2015. According to Millett (2017), a total of 161 College Promise programs have been put in place. However, not all programs include all students, like Delaware’s SEED program, that only serves recent high school graduates. Most programs are last-dollar scholarships, and this seems to be the most popular form of providing tuition-free college. This way, students will still use all available federal grants before the state picks up what is left to pay. Examples of such programs are the Oregon Promise, Lone Star Community College Promise in Houston, Texas, Boston Tuition-Free Community College Plan, and VanGuarantee Scholarship Program in North Carolina – all launched after 2015 (College Promise Campaign, 2015). Many states are in the midst of free-tuition discussions, which range from the initial stages of people introducing plans to the final steps in the development of such initiatives. In West Virginia, senators have passed a bill for free community college, but the House is still considering the plan. In New Jersey, Governor Murphy introduced his grant-based program for free community college. Tennessee now included adult learners with its program Tennessee Reconnect (which complements the existing Tennessee Promise program).
On a state level, Republicans show less apprehension to accepting a free college program than in the federal government. The responses from senators in West Virginia are examples of this phenomenon. The Senate consists of 34 seats, of which 22 Republican, and still the free community college bill was approved unanimously. This is surprising because we have seen that in the federal government, it is the GOP blocking the proposal from proceeding. So rather than strictly partisan, the opinions differ in various contexts. This does show that while there is resistance in Congress, local governments are able to pass and implement programs that make community college more accessible.

5. Discussion

It comes as no surprise that for this policy issue the devil is in the details. All members of Congress, college employees, students and stakeholders agree that the American system of higher education is in dire need of reform and innovation. However, whether the ACP or any comparable program is the solution to the problem, remains questionable.

5.1 Partisanship

The plan’s failure in Congress is due to partisan differences and growing political polarization. In Congress, people are concerned with representing their constituents and gain their trust to influence vote choice (Hetherington, 1999). Political trust, Scholz & Libell argue, also increases the likelihood of tax compliance and other governmental demands (1998). So, if representatives and senators wish to uphold or increase trust from their voters, it makes sense to listen to what voters want. And for Republicans, that means little federal involvement, tax cuts and free markets. However, as Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez (2016) demonstrate, the GOP (abbreviation for Grand Old Party, which is the Republican Party) not only caters to its
voters, but even more so to elite-driven actors (i.e. lobbyists and big corporate political donors). Moreover, they introduce the so-called ‘Koch network’\textsuperscript{11} that may be the explanation for the Republican swing to the right. The influence of this network on Congressional Republicans may contribute to the stagnation of the ACP. Nevertheless, this tendency sure feeds into the ever-so-polarized political arena.

A study from 2005 concludes that even though there is much ideological difference between Republicans and Democrats, this can be bridged by an increase of political trust (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). More specifically, the effect of an increase in trust among conservatives is high enough to overcome ideological reluctance to government spending. This theory suggests that it would be a matter of increasing political trust for voters to agree to federal expenses on education, for example. In other words, public support for government spending depends on the level of political trust.

The theory set out by Rudolph and Evans could explain why President Obama failed to draw support with the ACP. Political trust among conservatives grows when there is a Republican president, and trust wanes when a Democrat occupies the White House. Where Democrats have a natural inclination to increase governmental intervention, Republicans would rather see a limited role for the federal government. This ideological gap further widens as conservatives lose political trust in the case of a Democratic-led government. From that follows the problem that Obama faced. Conservatives experienced a decrease of political trust and, as a result, may have opposed interventionist ideas more adamantly. With more political trust they would have been more inclined to accept and even support government spending on education, health care and so forth. Conversely, when we look at the current situation, in which both Congress and the President identify as Republican, the ACP is not supported by any more

\textsuperscript{11} Political group of business actors with a far-right ideology.
Republican actors than it was during Obama’s presidency. Hence, we can argue that more factors influence the (dis)approval of the ACP.

Congressional Republicans show a pattern of immediate disapproval of the ACP, which suggests that ideology for Republicans determines their actions. The federal government has not passed any ACP Act so far, and the responses demonstrate that this is particularly due to partisan ideology. Whether or not there is a Democratic president, Republican support for the ACP remains absent. Although Republicans are to an extent led by their ideology, that is not the only reason this controversial plan has not gotten anywhere in Congress. Democrats introduced the plan and were hopeful to work together on a bipartisan solution. Republicans in Congress clearly oppose any broad education plan because of the underlying party ideology. In other words, it is not Obama’s goal but his approach that collides with the Republican idea of a limited government. Overall, Republicans in Congress consider a federal plan like the ACP the wrong approach to solving the problem of educational attainment. The instantaneous disapproval of the initiative suggests a conflict of ideology.

At the same time, local responses demonstrate fewer partisan differences, which can be attributed to the level of pragmatism that is demonstrated by community colleges. Communities welcome any input to help students pay for college and obtain a degree. Whether this input (i.e. money) comes from local, state or federal organizations can be seen as a side note. Stakeholders on a local level (including community colleges) note that more has to be done to improve degree completion – access alone will not result in Obama’s goal of an additional five million graduates by 2020 (Kotamraju, 2011). Whether the federal or state government, or even colleges themselves, will take up the task of creating support systems or reforming curricula, is not specified in any of the responses. In short, pragmatism dominates the discussion at colleges as opposed to ideology in Congress.
The ACP does not embody an all-encompassing federal ambition, rather, it represents the view of Congressional Democrats. The data show that legislation is supported only by Democrats and Republicans show little interest and want to focus on other paths to help students. Federal plans to improve equality in education are not expected to be as far-reaching as the ACP, while colleges would welcome such sweeping reform, for the benefit of their students and communities. For now, communities have picked up where the federal government has neglected the task of making community college free. But even though the ACP seems to be a problem of incompatible federal and local wishes, it turns out to be yet another magnifier of partisanship and it accentuates the irony of America’s education policy.

5.2 Other considerations

Limitation of federal intervention is so deeply rooted in American society and political behavior that it can be seen as the most problematic obstacle in realizing education reform. Federal authority should be limited to areas specifically designated as federal terrain (national affairs such as trade, infrastructure and defense). Other services (including education) that are supposed to be states’ responsibility are dealt with on the state or local level, and this idea is not necessarily restricted to Republicans.

States may be better off if they develop and manage their own programs. They would then be able to determine their own eligibility criteria. If an external actor, in this case the federal government, mandates that all students who, for example, maintain a 2.0 GPA should be able to make use of the program, that would mean that a state has little to no influence on how much they have to spend on free community college. Although the goal is to have all community college students participate, the funds may not be available at state level to pay for the amount of people that would be eligible under any pre-specified criteria. In other words, if states can determine who they allow in the program, they can be more certain that there is
enough money to pay for it. For example, in Oregon, demand rose more than expected after the first year of the Oregon Promise (House, 2018). In order to sustain the program, Oregon had to increase funding substantially, and even though it did, it was not enough to meet the funds needed. Moreover, whether states can sustain their programs depends on the stability of other state aid programs and Pell Grants, which have not been keeping up with rising tuition costs (Perna et al., 2018). And if states decide that free tuition is the right approach, and they want to make the programs last, this will require coordination with tuition-setting policies at postsecondary institutions (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016). If college promise programs continue to develop on a state or local level, this will prove beneficial for states’ ability to budget a sustainable program.

Congress prioritizes other methods (saving accounts, tax cuts and simplifying the FAFSA) to make higher education more accessible. These are bipartisan plans that have high priority in both House and Senate committees that deal with education. The fact that Congress prioritizes other initiatives instead of considering the ACP is closely connected to the fact that Republicans have a majority in Congress. Both chair(wo)men of the education committees (House and Senate) are Republicans, so they set the agenda for committee meetings. This results in a low chance of the ACP getting a lot of attention. Congressional records confirm that the chambers have barely discussed the ACP, rather, they show an emphasis on the need to improve existing initiatives such as the 529 savings accounts and loan forgiveness programs. However, it is proven that when students take out loans, it compromises the chance that they persist or complete the degree (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney & Burridge, 2015; Robb, Moody, & Abdel-Ghany, 2012). Focusing on student loans may therefore not produce the desired outcome, as students may continue to drop out of college. Targeted education programs could alleviate some of these persistence issues, but the current discussions in Congress show that the federal government will stick to its existing initiatives.
Rapidly changing demographics change educational context and may also be posing a barrier for the ACP. Research by Nettles (2017) shows that it would be not before the year of 2048 that 60% of American adults would have attained a postsecondary degree, but the white population is expected to reach this goal by 2034. Hispanics would only reach that goal by 2060 and Asian Americans have already achieved it. There is great inequality between racial/ethnic groups, and Nettles’ research points at the importance of defining what group(s) would be served by initiatives like the ACP before such an ambitious goal can have a chance of success. There is a strong need for tailored policies to address the needs of specific groups. The question remains whether a program as broad as the ACP could solve such nuanced inequalities.

5.3 Differences between federal and local approaches

The federal government has different interests than colleges, and interests are driven by ideology. The federal government demonstrates that they will not over-regulate education and will put effort into simplifying existing programs to facilitate use of federal funds. However, it seems detrimental to the federal government to increase funds for education or expand their responsibility. Again, if the federal government would benefit more from prioritizing education, the funds would automatically be allocated to this very field. Colleges represent their districts or regions, and therefore are specifically interested in making education more accessible as this has a direct and positive effect on local economies. As explained by Baum and Hansen (2017), cities or regions’ economies may benefit from an influx of students with their families as a result of free college policies. Congressmen and women, on the other hand, are more concerned with representing their constituents on topics that are explicitly federal tasks. Aligning these interest, which is needed to establish the state-federal partnership that Obama proposes, might be impossible because of these diverging interests. However,
considering the importance of international competitiveness, America may have to find a way to improve college completion nationwide, so no single area or district falls behind.

Although the shift since the 1980s did show there was an increase in responsibility for education, the federal government does not seem to take that responsibility in 2018. Governments around the world often feel responsible for the quality of its citizens’ education and use quality assurance models as policy tools. ‘Ensuring quality,’ then, is a justifiable cause to monitor education (Jarvis, 2014). Congress, however, shifts all education matters to the state level. Considering some Americans’ strong aversion to centralization – especially in a Republican-led Congress, quality assurance tools on a national scale are unlikely to be supported. This is because these policy models are often part of a larger neo-liberal education agenda, which is something the United States have not committed to. The official pamphlet of the US Network for Education Information states that “unlike many other countries, the U.S. federal government and the U.S. Department of Education do not have the legal power to recognize institutions or programs, to inspect for quality assurance, or to determine educational standards” (USNEI, 2007). This once again emphasizes that the federal government lacks authority on matters of education, and this strictly limits any operation in education any more than financial support and the improvement of institutions, thus excluding substantive programs and monitoring plans. The ACP could – especially for supporters of limited government – represent exactly the constraints imposed by the Constitution of the United States and the HEA. So again, the ACP shows that the trend that started in the 1980s (Mehta, 2013) may have been reversed, and the federal government is on its way to less bureaucracy, freer markets and a more limited role for the federal government. Especially since Donald Trump was elected President in 2016, a conservative attitude has characterized the White House. With this in mind, it seems almost impossible for a neoliberal program like the ACP to succeed in Congress.
Because local governments (state, regional or city governments) are closer to their colleges, they could be more competent in creating educational frameworks that make community college more accessible. As shown in chapter four, states and regions have been able to successfully implement free tuition programs. This also connects to successes by different free college campaigns that are promoting such programs throughout the nation. This decentralized approach (led by campaigns) has been the response to Obama’s federal initiative, but it does not result in sweeping reform nationally. Nonetheless, these separate programs are the current (preliminary) answer to the problem of educational attainment, and they suggest that a local path to equality in education may be the only way forward.

6. Concluding remarks

6.1 Conclusion

The topic shows complex dynamics in two different coordinate systems: ideological and institutional. The issues raised in the discourse after Obama introduced the ACP are situated in both systems and are also determined by this context. For example, ideology ranges from conservative to liberal (including many nuanced middle positions) and institutional positions range from local community college professors to Senators. The responses noted in this study show patterns in both coordinate systems, so for example that federal Republicans show apprehension towards the ACP. From the federal responses we can conclude that this apprehension is guided by a conservative ideal of a limited government. On a local level, however, motivations to (dis)approve a College Promise program are not directly linked to political preference. This also ties into the question of responsibility: higher education is not (yet) a federal undertaking, as governed by the law. However, the intricacy of the ideological and institutional systems as well as the infinite number of potential combinations makes it
difficult to pinpoint one sole obstacle to the realization of the ACP. The initial assumption for this study was that local actors, most importantly community colleges, would be opposed to a program like the ACP because it would impede their ability to govern regional or state education. In contrast to my expectations, it was exactly those community colleges that are welcoming the program, as opposed to the federal government. The complexity of education policy in the U.S. and the different opinions about the federal role in it – combined with strict limits by the law – make the discussion about America’s College Promise one that is unlikely to reach consensus soon.

6.2 Limitations and future research

It is important to note that the responses are taken from online sources, such as newspapers and websites from U.S. officials. Therefore, I do not claim ownership of the data used in this thesis. The cited sources are used to provide an overview that includes both the federal government and local actors/stakeholders. Most of these opinions or responses are published on a smaller scale and include interviews with college presidents, professors or for example research institutes. Federal responses were either found in official online statements, videos or interviews.

I am fully aware that the College Promise movement has been successful throughout the United States, largely thanks to the efforts of the College Promise Campaign and other local initiatives. Whether or not such campaigns interfere with federal action is a question that should be addressed by future research. The fact that communities are taking over the baton and pursuing local programs for tuition-free college, may be an indication in favor of local governing. However, the scope of this thesis does not allow me to further investigate this phenomenon.
As mentioned before, race and ethnicity play an important role in college admission. Although I do realize that not only college access, but also college completion is affected by this, the scope of this research is too limited to address racial or ethnic issues. Moreover, one single federal program would probably not be able to tackle all of America’s educational inequalities by aiming at the lowest income groups measured nationally. Each region or state has a different demographic composition and therefore requires a tailored approach in the strive for ethnic or racial equality. Similarly, College Promise models show different effects on different populations (Elliott & Levere, 2017). The interaction between College Promise programs and race or ethnicity is a topic that warrants further study in the future.

Bibliography


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Appendix

The following pages outline the sources for the data used to compose the graphs.

Figure 3

Initial responses to Obama's plan

1) McCarthy, 2015; Congressional Record 161(88), 2015; Adams, 2015; Huotari, 2015; Congressional Record 161(12), 2015
2) Adams, 2015; Huotari, 2015
3) Satullo, 2015; Davis & Lewin, 2015; Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2015; Huotari, 2015
4) McCarthy, 2015; Adams, 2015; Congressional Record 161(4), 2015; Congressional Record 161(31), 2015
5) Adams, 2015; Boyle, 2015; Tim Kaine…, 2015
6) Nancy Pelosi Democratic Leader, 2015; Wilson, 2015
Figure 4

1) Success depends on more than money to get in the door
2) Start at the local level
3) Expenses are problematic
4) We already have similar programs in place
5) Program could affect free choice of school
6) Mentality has to be brought to the national scale
7) Economic benefits will outweigh the costs in the long run
8) ACP is a conversation starter
9) College is the gateway to the American Dream
10) Include four-year institutions

Initial responses from community colleges
Initial responses from stakeholders

1) Editorial, 2015; Logan, 2015; Adams, 2015; Chinoy, 2015
2) Naugatuck Valley Community College, 2015; Padrón, 2015
3) Frieman, 2015; Crumbie, 2015; Clark, 2015; Adams, 2015
4) Crumbie, 2015
5) Clark, 2015
6) Padrón, 2015
7) Naugatuck Valley Community College, 2015; Colter, 2015; Buffer, 2015; Satullo, 2015
9) The College of Davidson and Davie Counties, 2015