The Common Core Standards originated from an initiative written by former Arizona Governor and former chair of the National Governors Association Janet Napolitano. Napolitano, as director of the NGA’s Educational Policy Division, wrote an initiative that emphasized the need to better the workforce through improved math and science education. From this initiative, Napolitano set up a task force which issued a report in 2008 with “international benchmarking” to “help states take the next steps towards ensuring that American students receive a world-class education that positions them to compete and innovate in the 21st century.” In order to do so, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), comprised of state school chiefs, governors and state commissioners from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia, aimed to create standards which would “ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.” With major funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, other foundations, as well as from state membership dues from the CCSSO and the NGA, education consultants Jason Zimba and David Coleman began writing a series of “fewer, clearer, higher” standards based on a plan from the nonprofit, Achieve, and testing groups like the College Board and the ACT. Furthermore, several organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), organized teachers to provide advice for the standards. States that adopted the standards would test on uniform standards in math and English.

Overall, the Obama administration has claimed that it played no role in creating or requiring Common Core curriculum. In fact, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has contended that ”Not a word, not a single semi-colon of curriculum will be created, encouraged, or prescribed by the federal government. We haven’t done so--and we won’t be doing so,” Furthermore, it did not require that states adopt the Common Core Standards upon their creation in 2009.

However, critics have argued that the process that brought Common Core about was less consistent with federalism than first appears, and was actually dominated by quasi-official groups like NGA and CCSSO and Gates Foundation money rather than robust debate at the state level by elected state officials. Moreover, after creation of the standards in June 2009, the Education Department strongly encouraged adoption through tangible incentives. Three months later, in September, 51 states and territories expressed their support for the standards, with only Virginia, Texas, Nebraska, and Alaska never adopting the standards. Each of the states that did not adopt the standards has implemented its own comprehensive state standards. In July 2009, the Education Department designed the competition, ”Race to the Top,” which promoted $3.4 billion in grants for educational success within that year. States that implemented the Common Core standards increased their eligibility for the award, incentivizing Common Core adoption, and the deadline of the race catalyzed faster movement towards Common Core curricula and also Common Core-aligned testing. After the conclusion of this ”Race to the Top” in September 2010, the federal government awarded further grants ”to two state consortiuims in a separate Race to the Top Assessment competition to develop new and better assessments aligned to the Common Core standards. Obama went on to advocate support for this ”Race to the Top,” which further entangled the federal government in the Common Core standards.

Along with the Race, the federal government began to provide No Child Left Behind waivers, relieving states from some NCLB requirements, in exchange for positive action on Common Core.” Kentucky’s state education commissioner complained that ”the rush to implement the
This federal entanglement spurred great criticism, especially from conservatives. The 2012 and 2013 Republican National Committee Platform, emphasizing the need to repeal the numerous federal regulations which interfere with State and local control of public schools. Furthermore, these documents denounced the Common Core as "an inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children." Following these statements as well as further backlash, many Republican-majority states considered repealing the Common Core State Standards in Oklahoma, South Carolina actually did pull out of the standards. After repealing these standards, Indiana Governor Mike Pence stated, "I believe when we reach the end of this process there are going to be many other states around the country that will take a hard look at the way Indiana has taken a step back, designed our own standards and done it in a way where we drew on educators, we drew on citizens, we drew on parents and developed standards that meet the needs of our people," demonstrating Indiana’s support for more localized, state standards. Similarly, Oklahoma Republican Jason Nelson co-authored the original Common Core repeal bill, explaining that Oklahoma citizens universally, "don’t like the idea of having to go to somebody outside the state to do what we think is the best interest of their children in our school system." In South Carolina, members of the state Board of Education were unhappy with the ‘federal takeover’ of Common Core and have moved to a system where ‘the teachers, the administators, the school districts...make the decision about the curriculum,’ she has “always needed to have some basis on which to determine whether we’re making progress, vis-à-vis other countries who all have standards.” As a New York senator, Clinton has spoken in favor of a “common core” that each community can determine the best way to reach. She explained in an interview with Newsday in April that despite problems with Common Core’s implementation in schools around the country, she has “always needed to have some basis on which to determine whether we’re making progress, vis-à-vis other countries who all have standards.” As a New York senator, Clinton voted for No Child Left Behind, and she advocates for “a core of learning that we want all students across the country, no matter what kind of school district they were in, no matter how poor their family was.” She has also denounced the politicization of Common Core as “very painful” and “really unfortunate.” In this year’s Democratic Party Platform, Democrats do not explicitly make reference to Common Core standards, although they explain, “We are also deeply committed to ensuring that we strike a better balance on testing so that it informs, but does not drive, instruction.” The platform also highlights that “Democrats know the federal government must play a critical role in making sure every child has access to a world-class education” and states, “We will hold schools, districts, communities, and states accountable for raising achievement levels for all students.”

Altogether, the Democratic Party argues for the importance of federal oversight in education, but it also calls for improving our national testing system.

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