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Public Opinion and School Choice Policy Change

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Introduction

Grassroots advocacy campaigns in support of education policy change involve the education of the public about preferred policy solutions and efforts to motivate public action that can influence policymaker decisions. American philanthropic foundations are permitted to fund grassroots advocacy so long as the funded non-profit organizations do not engage in grassroots lobbying. According to IRS code, grassroots lobbying is defined as: “attempts to influence legislation by attempting to affect the opinion of the public with respect to the legislation and encouraging the audience to take action with respect to the legislation” (2015).

In 2012, the top 30 American foundations in education philanthropy, based on the monetary amount of their giving, spent \$479 million on K-12 education grassroots advocacy (Carr et al, 2015). But does the theory that swaying public sentiment can in turn influence policymaker awareness of, commitment to, and support for preferred policy solutions hold? Put differently, what relationship does public opinion have to the quality of education policy, specifically related to educational choice in the form of charter schools?

As context for this question, charter schools are: “public schools that operate on a contract, or charter, which allows them increased operational autonomy in exchange for greater accountability for performance” (Holley, 2008). The first charter laws passed in 1993, and currently forty-three states and the District of Columbia have charter school laws that allow these schools of choice to educate more than 2.9 million students across the nation, as of the 2014-15 school year (NAPCS, 2015). Across these states and the nation’s capital, there is considerable variation in the content of these laws. For example, there is variability in what entities may authorize a charter school, who may teach in them, and how they are funded (Holley, 2008).

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In this study, we use survey data from 16 large urban areas to explore the relationship between public support for charter schools and the quality of charter school policies. Our primary theory is that more public support for more educational options should be positively related to the quality of the charter policy. Our secondary question reverses the direction of causality and is an investigation of whether perceptions of school quality in the district, charter, and private schooling sectors and other variables may be responsible for variation in support for charter schools.

Literature Review

In examining the research literature, there are three primary bodies of scholarship that inform the question: does public opinion impact policy change? A relatively deep body of literature lays various theoretical frameworks for the connection between public opinion and policy change and largely finds a positive connection between public opinion and policy change. However, nearly all articles, while finding a positive connection, do cite study limitations and challenges in making clear connections between public opinion and policy change, acknowledging a host of other factors that may explain the impact.

A second and much smaller body of literature examines the connection between public opinion and policy change on specific issues, such as LGBTQ rights, gun policy, and health policy. Interestingly, there is limited scholarship on the connection between public opinion and education policy change in this particular body of scholarship.

Finally, a third body of literature examines a point related to our research question which is: does the availability of performance information influence public opinion in the service of policy change? In this body of literature, which we do not relate in-depth, there is a fair amount of scholarship on education, particularly related to the connections between efforts to increase

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public awareness of school performance vis-à-vis accountability systems and the impact of this new information on public opinion and in turn policy. In the literature review below, we examine key pieces of scholarship related to each body of scholarship: theoretical, issue specific, and information's impact on public opinion.

Historic Literature/Theoretical Frameworks

In their 2002 article, Manza and Cook provide a thorough treatment of the literature examining the link between public opinion and policy. The authors posit that there are two popular viewpoints – studies that find a strong linkage and those that find a weaker linkage. The authors walk through the scholarship and offer a third view, one they call the “contingent view”. Manza and Cook’s contingent view acknowledges the possibility of a strong link between salient issues and policy but qualifies that historical, institutional, and political contingencies offer more insight about the true impact of opinion on policy. In particular, Manza and Cook cite in their contingent view that politicians and policy entrepreneurs have substantial room to maneuver policy in ways not seen to the public such that the independent causal impact of opinion on policy is diminished by political entrepreneurs.

Importantly, this article recounts many of the cautions and caveats provided by other scholars in this field. These caveats include: 1) the impact of media and special interest groups on the policy process; 2) the fact that policy can in some cases influence public opinion; 3) selection bias of public opinion polls toward the most salient policy issues; 4) the idea that Americans do not have a sophisticated understanding of policy proposals and therefore are unable to exercise specific influence over policies; and 5) the idea that public opinion polling can “manufacture” public opinion where it really does not exist through asking carefully framed questions.

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In his 2003 article, Paul Burstein examines the impact of public opinion on public policy through a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic. Burstein argues that most social scientists agree that public policy influences public opinion, that the more salient the issue is to the public the stronger the relationship is likely to be, and that the relationship is influenced by the power of various interest organizations, political parties, and economic elites. Burstein cites a series of articles to support this conclusion, including Aldrich (1995), Dahl (1989), Mueller (1999), Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995), Page and Shapiro (1983), and Smith (2000). Burstein's article goes further by examining 30 studies to answer a series of research questions including:

- How much impact does public opinion have on public policy?
- How much does the impact of policy increase as the importance of an issue (salience) to the public increases?
- To what extent can interest groups and political elites influence policy even when opposed by public opinion?
- Has government responsiveness to public opinion changed over time?
- How generalizable are findings connecting the impact of public opinion on policy?

Through his analysis of 30 studies that include 52 estimates, Burstein finds that public opinion affects policy 75% of the times it is gauged and that its effect is of substantial policy importance 33% of the time. Burstein's study of studies also supports many of the conclusions reached by Manza and Cook (2002) including: that issue salience affects the impact of public opinion on policy and that there is a need for additional scholarship to examine other possible mitigating factors of the public opinion policy linkage.

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In their 1983 article, Page and Shapiro examine public opinion and policy data from 1935 to 1979 to measure the “congruence” between public opinion and policy change. Congruence is defined as the link between a shift in public opinion and a subsequent policy change within one year. The study also examined noncongruent policy changes. The authors used publicly available data sources to identify 357 instances of significant policy change where both policy and survey data existed to measure a shifts in opinion and subsequent policy action or inaction. Page and Shapiro found that across all 357 cases, 43% resulted in a congruent change in opinion and policy, 22% resulted in a noncongruent change in policy, and 33% resulted in no policy change.

The authors go further, explaining that some of the instances of no change in policy can be explained by floor or ceiling effects. For example, if Americans are polled and are against one year of compulsory military service, and no policy exists requiring this, then no policy change can (or needs to occur) in response to that opinion. Therefore, the authors also examined 231 cases where policy change occurred and found higher levels of congruence between opinion and policy – 66% of cases versus 34% where policy and opinion were noncongruent.

Page and Shapiro, much like Manza and Cook and Burstein, raise important considerations for this body of research going forward including: 1) the question of the implementation of policies and ascertaining whether policies passed were as strong as public opinion; 2) the importance of issue salience (Page and Shapiro find that poll questions with a higher proportion of “don’t know” or “no opinion” response produced less policy and opinion congruence, indicating that the more salient an issue the more likely it is for policy and opinion congruence to occur); and 3) whether opinion moves policy or whether policy can move opinion (Page and Shapiro comment that their data shows that more often than not that opinion moves first; however, policy driving opinion cannot be ruled out).

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Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson (1995) examine policy responsiveness and outline a definition of “dynamic representation” – the idea that when public sentiment shifts, political actors sense the shift and subsequently alter their behaviors at the margins to reflect public opinion. Using the framework of public choice theory of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962), Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson rely on the idea that elected politicians are rational actors, and as they are informed about movements in public opinion, they will respond in kind to such movements, most often for the purposes of reelection. This article offers some interesting takeaways about the political actors and their behaviors as they relate to shifts in public opinion.

Taken together, these four articles convey the theoretical frameworks and common research concerns related to the question of whether or not public opinion actually has been shown to influence policy. Overall, the studies conclude that there is a positive relationship between shifts in public opinion and policy change. However, each author is careful to point out limitations including issue salience, the influence of other actors on policy change, and the inherent challenges in determination correlation versus causality between opinion polling and policy change. To get an even better sense of the connection between shifts in public opinion and policy change, we next examine three articles that take a look at the public opinion-policy linkage on specific issues.

Gay Rights, Gun Rights, and Health: Examining Issue-Specific Public Opinion and Policy Change

In their 2009 article, Lax and Phillips examine the effects of policy-specific public opinion on eight topics related to LGBTQ rights on the adoption of policies at the state level. Drawing from national public opinion surveys and other data about the demographic and political make up of states, the authors simulate state-level public opinion on eight issues central

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to LGBTQ rights. These issues include: adoption, hate crimes, health, housing, jobs, marriage, sodomy, and unions. The authors test their hypothesis by examining whether or not policy is responsive to policy-specific opinion and whether policy is congruent with the preferences of opinion majorities.

Lax and Phillips find that generally policy is responsive to opinion even when controlling for factors such as voter ideology, the ideology of elected officials, and interest/issue group environments of particular states. However, Lax and Phillips do find variation in the strength of the public opinion and policy linkage across the eight issues studies. Finally, they find that in some cases policy is not responsive to public opinion, even where there is a supermajority. This study is unique and raises a relevant question for education policy as to whether there are contemporary education policy questions for which policy change is more or less responsive.

In their 1993 article on gun policy, Vernick et al. examine the state of public opinion polling from 1987 to 1992 on the issue. While this article does not examine policies passed as a result of public opinion, the article does take a close look at the number and type of questions being asked on various facets of gun policy and reinforces some of the key limitations to making a connection between public opinion and policy. The study, which analyzed 143 poll questions from four national sources, examined public opinion on issues that span the “lifecycle” of gun ownership from manufacturing to possession, as well as examining general regulation and issues related to the Second Amendment. The authors review the aggregate polling numbers and provide a discussion of the issues surrounding them, finding variation in polling numbers when examining specific dimensions of a particular policy issue. This is instructive for those of us in the field of education policy considering testing the connection of public opinion on specific education issues to policy change.

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In their 2003 study on health policy in California, Greenwald et al. interview individuals involved in the policymaking process at the state level to investigate whether poll results and policy analyses both have an impact on policymaking at the state level and if polls and policy analyses contribute to policymaking in different ways. The authors explored this issue by conducting 90 brief interviews and 24 in-depth interviews with individuals who were well-positioned to comment on the impact of both polling and policy analyses. The authors find from the 90 brief interviews that 91% of respondents cite public opinion polls as having “moderate” or “strong” effects. Despite the methodological limitations, this study offers interesting insights along a couple of lines. First, it contributes to the literature examining the connection between issue-specific public opinion and policy change. But perhaps more importantly, the authors interviewed a number of policymakers and interest group members in their interviews and the data show that these individuals take public opinion polling into consideration. This is important as we think about the individuals beyond the general public who have a role to play in the policymaking process.

These three articles just begin to scratch the surface of a body of research literature that needs further development. Many research studies that examine the linkage between public opinion and policy change do so by looking across a vast array of issues over a long period of time. This is helpful in some regard and establishes a general relationship between public opinion and policy change. However, more research is needed on issue-specific public opinion, particularly in education, and subsequent policy change. Our search did not yield strong articles on this point. Further research here will advance an understanding of whether or not policymakers are responding to public will on education issues – a topic that has undoubtedly

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been in the local, state, and national spotlight over the last 30 years and more acutely over the last 10.

A Related Question: The Impact of Information on Public Opinion in Education Policy

Though limited research exists on the topic of public opinion on education and policy change, a related literature on the impact of information on public opinion in education does exist. Clinton and Grissom (2015) examine the effect of new information on beliefs and opinion of 1,500 individuals in Tennessee. Chingos, Henderson, and West (2012) examine citizens' ability to evaluate government performance accurately, looking particular at citizen perceptions of public school quality and implications for school accountability. Additional scholarship by Favero and Meier (2013), Henderson, Howell, and Peterson (2014), Jacobsen and Saultz (2012), Lay and Stokes-Brown (2009), Ertas (2015), Reckhow, Grossmann, and Evans (2015), and Jacobsen, Saultz, and Snyder (2013) explore various facets of how public opinion on education issues is shaped. Finding this set of articles is not surprising given accountability and public information based reform on the NCLB era. That said, this body of literature, while interesting, is slightly outside the scope of our study.

Research Questions

We seek to understand what statements can be made about how public perception about school choice and, more specifically, charter schools at the city level shapes the policies governing local school choice. Specifically, we will answer the following questions:

1. Is there a positive relationship between the quality of state charter school laws and the public perception of the desirability of school choice within the selected cities? Does the relationship change when controlling for the quality of local traditional public schools?

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2. Is there a positive relationship between the public perception of school choice and the public perception of the quality of local schools (private, charter, traditional public) within the selected cities? Do these relationships change when controlling for other observable factors?

Data

WFF Polling

On behalf of WFF, Public Opinion Strategies conducted telephone surveys across sixteen different U.S. cities, completing interviews with 8,200 adults and 4,581 parents, 12,781 total. For the adult sample, 4,920 (60%) interviews were conducted via landline, and 3,280 (40%) were conducted via cell phone. And, for the parent sample, 2,762 (60%) interviews were conducted via landline, and 1,819 (40%) were conducted via cell phone. The margin of error for the topline figures as well as the sub-groups is extremely small given the sheer volume of interviews. The surveys were conducted from September 18 through October 5, 2015. Consult Appendix A for information on how many adult and parent respondents came from each city, as well as for when each poll was conducted in its respective city.

In Tables 1 through 7, we share the polling results for these seven questions based on the responses of parents across the eight cities being considered. When numbers do not add up to 100%, it is because some respondents chose “Do Not Know” or “Refuse to Answer.” Consult Appendix B for the full list of questions and answer possibilities.

Table 1. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, 2015: “Rate the Quality of Local Private Schools”

City	Rating A-B	Rating C-F	GPA
<i>Atlanta</i>	73%	10%	3.36
<i>Boston</i>	69%	13%	3.23
<i>Camden</i>	61%	18%	3.09
<i>Denver</i>	56%	12%	3.21
<i>Houston</i>	59%	12%	3.18

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<i>Indianapolis</i>	71%	14%	3.22
<i>Kansas City</i>	64%	12%	3.28
<i>Little Rock</i>	62%	17%	3.13
<i>Los Angeles</i>	67%	9%	3.30
<i>Memphis</i>	68%	12%	3.26
<i>New Orleans</i>	74%	15%	3.20
<i>New York City</i>	64%	13%	3.23
<i>Oakland</i>	62%	11%	3.18
<i>San Antonio</i>	51%	16%	3.07
<i>Tulsa</i>	68%	12%	3.21
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	75%	7%	3.44
WFF Average	65%	13%	3.23
Non-WFF Urban Sample	62%	14%	-

Table 2. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, 2015: “Rate the Quality of Local Charter Schools”

City	Rating A-B	Rating C-F	GPA
<i>Atlanta</i>	58%	18%	3.01
<i>Boston</i>	64%	19%	3.04
<i>Camden</i>	58%	30%	2.85
<i>Denver</i>	39%	29%	2.60
<i>Houston</i>	34%	25%	2.59
<i>Indianapolis</i>	35%	35%	2.41
<i>Kansas City</i>	28%	38%	2.32
<i>Little Rock</i>	50%	29%	2.68
<i>Los Angeles</i>	50%	22%	2.86
<i>Memphis</i>	46%	29%	2.68
<i>New Orleans</i>	52%	41%	2.52
<i>New York City</i>	45%	17%	2.82
<i>Oakland</i>	47%	31%	2.67
<i>San Antonio</i>	32%	29%	2.48
<i>Tulsa</i>	42%	20%	2.71
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	56%	27%	2.76
WFF Average	46%	27%	2.69
Non-WFF Urban Sample	40%	25%	-

Table 3. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, 2015: “Rate the Quality of Local Public Schools”

City	Rating A-B	Rating C-F	GPA
<i>Atlanta</i>	45%	52%	2.31
<i>Boston</i>	43%	55%	2.22
<i>Camden</i>	34%	63%	1.80
<i>Denver</i>	54%	44%	2.48
<i>Houston</i>	54%	44%	2.47
<i>Indianapolis</i>	49%	50%	2.40
<i>Kansas City</i>	50%	48%	2.28
<i>Little Rock</i>	39%	61%	2.06
<i>Los Angeles</i>	40%	57%	2.18
<i>Memphis</i>	34%	63%	2.00
<i>New Orleans</i>	32%	65%	1.95
<i>New York City</i>	47%	48%	2.27
<i>Oakland</i>	37%	61%	2.12
<i>San Antonio</i>	58%	39%	2.64
<i>Tulsa</i>	40%	57%	2.23
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	52%	47%	2.47
WFF Average	44%	53%	2.24
Non-WFF Urban Sample	53%	46%	-
PDK Survey	57%	42%	-
EdNext Survey	55%	45%	-

Table 4. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, Favor/Oppose, 2015: “Providing parents with more choices in where they can send their kids to school”

City	Total Favor	Total Opposed
<i>Atlanta</i>	91%	9%
<i>Boston</i>	91%	7%
<i>Camden</i>	90%	8%
<i>Denver</i>	85%	13%
<i>Houston</i>	87%	12%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	89%	10%
<i>Kansas City</i>	84%	16%
<i>Little Rock</i>	90%	10%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	90%	7%

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<i>Memphis</i>	91%	7%
<i>New Orleans</i>	92%	6%
<i>New York City</i>	91%	8%
<i>Oakland</i>	88%	11%
<i>San Antonio</i>	87%	12%
<i>Tulsa</i>	83%	16%
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	86%	12%
WFF Average	88%	10%
Non-WFF Urban Sample	86%	12%

Table 5. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, Favor/Oppose, 2015: “Do you think that charter schools help improve public education or do you think charter schools harm public education?”

City	Total Help	Total Harm
<i>Atlanta</i>	74%	13%
<i>Boston</i>	74%	19%
<i>Camden</i>	70%	24%
<i>Denver</i>	57%	26%
<i>Houston</i>	67%	14%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	59%	26%
<i>Kansas City</i>	64%	16%
<i>Little Rock</i>	65%	18%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	74%	13%
<i>Memphis</i>	66%	17%
<i>New Orleans</i>	74%	18%
<i>New York City</i>	58%	19%
<i>Oakland</i>	64%	21%
<i>San Antonio</i>	67%	14%
<i>Tulsa</i>	62%	19%
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	67%	20%
WFF Average	66%	19%
Non-WFF Urban Sample	63%	18%

Table 6. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, 2015: “Did you happen to choose the school your child attends or was it a public school he or she was assigned to?”

City	Choose the School	School Assigned
<i>Atlanta</i>	53%	45%

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<i>Boston</i>	62%	33%
<i>Camden</i>	68%	30%
<i>Denver</i>	68%	30%
<i>Houston</i>	43%	55%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	59%	40%
<i>Kansas City</i>	45%	53%
<i>Little Rock</i>	58%	38%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	62%	34%
<i>Memphis</i>	60%	38%
<i>New Orleans</i>	85%	14%
<i>New York City</i>	58%	38%
<i>Oakland</i>	68%	29%
<i>San Antonio</i>	37%	60%
<i>Tulsa</i>	60%	37%
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	69%	28%
WFF Average	60%	38%
Non-WFF Urban Sample	52%	47%

Table 7. Public Opinion Survey Results of School Choice Issues in Select Urban Areas, 2015, Agree/Disagree: “The school my children are currently attending is realistically my only option.”

City	Total Agree	Total Disagree
<i>Atlanta</i>	55%	43%
<i>Boston</i>	45%	55%
<i>Camden</i>	45%	55%
<i>Denver</i>	40%	58%
<i>Houston</i>	55%	44%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	52%	47%
<i>Kansas City</i>	59%	41%
<i>Little Rock</i>	57%	43%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	54%	46%
<i>Memphis</i>	52%	47%
<i>New Orleans</i>	53%	46%
<i>New York City</i>	56%	44%
<i>Oakland</i>	38%	62%
<i>San Antonio</i>	46%	54%
<i>Tulsa</i>	62%	39%

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<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	37%	62%
<i>WFF Average</i>	50%	49%
<i>Non-WFF Urban Sample</i>	45%	54%

Supplemental Information

In addition to the polling data outlined above, we include other relevant variables in our analyses.

1. NAPCS Charter Law Strength: The National Association of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) puts together an annual rubric and measure of how the charter school laws in each respective state and the District of Columbia compare to each other, with the model legislation of NAPCS serving as the standard. The NAPCS rubric includes twenty components from seat constraints to charter authorizers to renewal processes. This measure is comparable across state lines and across time on a scale from zero to 228. Since each urban center is the population hub of its state or District, it is reasonable to suggest that these urban centers serve as the focus for these laws and have the most to gain or lose by how they are shaped. Table 8 below includes the respective state scores for each city.

Table 8. NAPCS Charter Law Strength for States by City, 2014 and 2015

<i>City</i>	2014	2015
<i>Atlanta</i>	137	147
<i>Boston</i>	147	147
<i>Camden</i>	116	118
<i>Denver</i>	159	159
<i>Houston</i>	137	137
<i>Indianapolis</i>	161	161
<i>Kansas City</i>	132	132
<i>Little Rock</i>	128	132
<i>Los Angeles</i>	152	152

<i>Memphis</i>	116	120
<i>New Orleans</i>	167	167
<i>New York City</i>	157	162
<i>Oakland</i>	152	152
<i>San Antonio</i>	137	137
<i>Tulsa</i>	112	147
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	153	153
WFF Average	141.44	145.19

2. City Level Charter Enrollment Market Share: The NAPCS collects and publishes publicly available data on enrollment in school districts across the country. These numbers allow us to observe the enrollment market share, the percentage of public school enrollment that is in a specific sector, of charter schools for each city.
3. City Charter Enrollment: Part of the above measure of market share is the simple count of the number of charter students enrolled in charter schools in each city. An example of how these two numbers are different is found in Los Angeles, where 23% of students were in charter schools in the 2014-15 school year, fourth in our list by market share. However, this 23% represents 151,311 students, more than the rest of the charter school enrollments in the seven other cities combined (136,221). Both of these measures should be considered in how each relates to public perception of charter schools. Table 9 below outlines these numbers over the past six years.

Table 9. City Charter Enrollment and Market Share, 2014-2015¹

City	2014 Enrollment	2014 Market Share	2015 Enrollment	2015 Market Share
<i>Atlanta</i>	6,564	13%	8,137	16%
<i>Boston</i>	9,658	15%	11,155	17%
<i>Camden</i>	4,251	27%	4,324	28%
<i>Denver</i>	13,653	16%	14,760	17%

¹ City Enrollment totals with asterisks (*) are approximate values based on prior growth trend.

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<i>Houston</i>	49,885	21%	51,400	21%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	12,914	30%	13,825	31%
<i>Kansas City</i>	8,877	37%	9,980	41%
<i>Little Rock</i>	3,422	12%	3,540	13%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	139,174	21%	151,311	23%
<i>Memphis</i>	7,707	7%	7,800*	7%*
<i>New Orleans</i>	40,547	91%	42,860	93%
<i>New York City</i>	70,210	7%	84,310	8%
<i>Oakland</i>	10,325	22%	13,137	26%
<i>San Antonio</i>	15,607	26%	17,000	30%
<i>Tulsa</i>	1,500*	4%*	1,600*	4%*
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	36,565	44%	37,684	44%
WFF Total/Average	430,859	24%	472,823	26%

4. City Charter Quality (2012-13 and 2013-14): As a part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and continued in reauthorizations, states must release proficiency rates for students in grades 3rd-8th in public schools, which includes charter schools. Table 10 below shows proficiency rates for charter school 3rd-8th grade students by sector where available.

Table 10. City Charter Academic Proficiency Rates, Avg. Math/Reading, Grades 3-8, 2012-13 and 2013-2014

City	2012-13 Charter	2012-13 TPS	2013-14 Charter	2013-14 TPS
<i>Atlanta</i>	88%	86%	87%	84%
<i>Boston</i>	69%	46%	66%	48%
<i>Camden</i>	52%	28%	50%	29%
<i>Denver</i>	51%	51%	51%	52%
<i>Houston</i>	37%	33%	36%	33%
<i>Indianapolis</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Kansas City</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Little Rock</i>	72%	63%	73%	62%
<i>Los Angeles</i>	66%	52%	88%	78%
<i>Memphis</i>	31%	33%	30%	35%
<i>New Orleans</i>	-	-	-	-

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<i>New York City</i>	30%	29%	36%	34%
<i>Oakland</i>	65%	47%	89%	66%
<i>San Antonio</i>	27%	21%	29%	20%
<i>Tulsa</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	55%	48%	56%	51%
WFF Average	54%	45%	58%	49%

For a full treatment of descriptive statistics concerning these variables, see Appendix C.

Using this combination of fresh polling data and additional data that are publicly available, we want to determine if there is a relationship between the public opinion within a given city and the observables that may or may not impact how schools and schools of choice are viewed in that city. Our next section will explore what methods are needed in order to make steps towards those answers with the data we currently have.

Methodology

In order to understand how public opinion is formed and how the context of each location shapes opinions, we turn our attention to the techniques of measuring how the context of each city is related to the public approval of school choice, and how different public views are related to each other.

The first method we used was an independent correlation analysis. Identifying whether or not any relationship exists would give the first indication about the relevance of the two factors. Our hypothesis is that there is a positive statistically significant relationship between both the quality of state charter laws and the favorability of school when correlated against the public perception of local private and charter school quality, and a negative relationship with the public perception of local traditional public school quality.

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To judge whether or not quality of charter laws or the higher public perception of school choice in each city can be explained by perceptions of quality in the local school markets, we will use simple ordinary least square (OLS) regression methods:

$$\text{Equation 1: } Y_i = \alpha + \beta_i X_i + u_i$$

In this equation, Y_i represents the quality of state charter laws in the first regression and favorability of school choice in the second regression, which we seek to model as dependent on the baseline measure α , the coefficients of the independent variables, β_i , public perception of private, charter, and traditional public schools, and the charter enrollment market share, as well as unobserved other factors, u_i (Stock and Watson, 2007, 193).

Because this analysis is done on polling data of randomly selected individuals, our sample meets the needed assumptions to use these methods: 1) the conditional distribution of the unobserved characteristics, u_i , is zero; 2) our survey data can be treated as independently and identically distributed (i.i.d.); and 3) there are no major outliers in the polling data.

As with any work that takes advantage of OLS regression methods, there are some shortcomings that we are aware of and force us to not make stronger claims about our findings. First and foremost, this analysis is subject to omitted variable bias (OVB): because we do not know the true set of stimuli that cause the responses that we view in the public opinion polling, we can only estimate from the information we do have. It could be that we falsely assign to one variable what is actually caused by another. With that in mind, we respond by saying that we are open to finding additional factors that shape public opinion and would hope to add those observables to future versions of our model.

Results

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To begin, we calculated several independent correlations based on our research questions to ascertain whether an observational relationship existed between the quality of state charter laws and the public opinion about favorability toward more school choice, public perception of sector quality across private, charter, and traditional public sectors, and charter market share in a city. The results can be found in Appendix E.

In our analysis, we find that there are no statistically significant relationships between the quality of the state charter law and any of the other variables. For the public favorability of school choice, there is a statistically significant relationship with the public perception of traditional public schools, which was negative as expected. No other relationships were found to be significant.

We then proceeded to the regression analyses. In the regression with the dependent variable of the quality of the state charter law, seen in Table 11, we did not find any significant relationships. These findings are similar to the results of the correlation outputs and suggest that public perceptions of school choice are not related to the quality of state charter laws. OLS 1-5 are simply bi-variate regressions; OLS 6 includes all the variables in one model.

Table 11: Analysis of the Effect of Charter School Observables on Quality of State Charter Law

Variables	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) OLS	(5) OLS	(6) OLS
Perception of Private School Quality	49.352 (39.843)					23.564 (46.607)
Perception of Charter School Quality		-1.561 (19.398)				12.941 (28.069)
Perception of Traditional Public School Quality			20.800 (16.703)			31.061 (20.569)
Charter School Favorability				0.209 (1.395)		0.746 (1.800)
Charter Enrollment Market Share					0.232 (0.174)	0.313 (0.227)
Constant	-13.979 (25.9)	149.382* (52.274)	98.535* (37.636)	126.675 (123.431)	139.097** (5.799)	-109.412 (208.146)
Adjusted R-Squared	0.034	-0.071	.035	-0.070	0.049	0.24

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Observations	16	16	16	16	16	16
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Notes: ***: Significant at the 1% level; **: Significant at the 5% level; *: Significant at the 10% level. Standard errors are given in parentheses under the coefficients.

As seen in Table 12, we then used the polling for charter school favorability as the dependent variable. Like the correlations, the one significant variable was the perceived quality of the local traditional public schools, which is negatively related to charter school favorability: as the perceived quality of traditional public schools goes down, the favorability of more school choices rises.

Table 12: Analysis of the Effect of Charter School Observables on Charter School Favorability

Variables	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) OLS	(5) OLS
Perception of Private School Quality	-1.233 (8.027)				-4.850 (7.668)
Perception of Charter School Quality		6.382 (3.299)			7.902 (4.053)
Perception of Traditional Public School Quality			-6.382* (2.906)		-3.484 (3.281)
Charter Enrollment Market Share				0.018 (0.035)	0.044 (0.036)
Constant	92.413** (25.9)	71.285** (8.891)	102.752** (6.549)	87.974** (1.168)	89.50** (22.073)
Adjusted R-Squared	-0.07	0.16	.203	-0.52	0.253
Observations	16	16	16	16	16

Notes: **: Significant at the 1% level; *: Significant at the 5% level. Standard errors are given in parentheses under the coefficients.

Based on the above results, we were able to observe a negative statistically significant relationship between school choice favorability and the perceived performance of traditional public schools. However, no other statistically significant relationships exist.

Limitations

Obviously, one of the shortcomings of this work is the small sample size. For any relationship to come through as statistically significant, it would have to be quite strong. Our goal is to continue to grow our database of survey results and to continue to understand what variables might impact these results. The second, and perhaps larger, concern is that there is not

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a large degree of variance in some of the variables. For example, the favorability to increased school choice variable – central in our analyses – only ranged from 83% to 92%, with a mean of 88.4% and standard deviation of 2.8%. We consider these analyses as exploratory and largely descriptive in nature. That said, we are interested in learning more about the relationships between public opinion and educational choice policy.

Conclusion

While each respondent to the public opinion survey has a set of preferences that lead to his or her choices, our analysis leads us to believe that the observables in this research do not directly relate to those preferences in a strict correlation relationship. Even though we have not succeeded in determining the factors that lead to these high opinions of school choice, we hope that the polling information that we provide will be beneficial to city officials and advocates in their task of understanding the sentiment of local parents.

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Appendices

Appendix A. 2015 WFF Polling Methodology Information

City	Field Dates	Adult Sample	Parent Sample	City	Field Dates	Adult Sample	Parent Sample
<i>Atlanta</i>	9/24-28	N=500	N=300	<i>Los Angeles</i>	9/20-29	N=800	N=400
<i>Boston</i>	9/18-22	N=400	N=250	<i>Memphis</i>	9/18-22	N=400	N=250
<i>Camden</i>	9/27-10/1	N=400	N=131	<i>New Orleans</i>	9/24-28	N=400	N=250
<i>Denver</i>	9/23-27	N=500	N=300	<i>New York City</i>	9/23-29	N=800	N=400
<i>Houston</i>	9/24-10/5	N=800	N=400	<i>Oakland</i>	9/21-25	N=500	N=300
<i>Indianapolis</i>	9/23-27	N=400	N=250	<i>San Antonio</i>	9/26-10/4	N=600	N=300
<i>Kansas City</i>	9/28-10/1	N=400	N=250	<i>Tulsa</i>	9/28-10/4	N=400	N=250
<i>Little Rock</i>	9/28-10/1	N=400	N=250	<i>Washington DC</i>	9/27-10/1	N=500	N=300

Appendix B. WFF Polling Questions and Allowed Answers

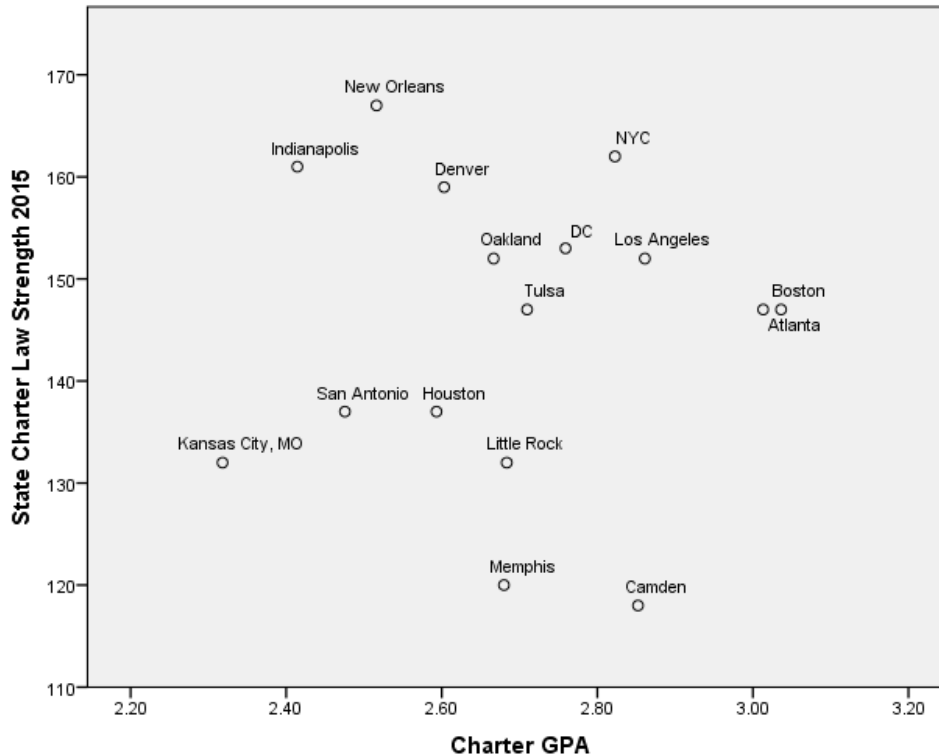
Question	Year	Question language
Q1	2015	Next, I'd like you to rate the quality of the following types of schools in your area. We will use an A to F scale with F being poor and A being excellent. (A-F)
Q2	2015	Next, I'd like you to rate the quality of the following types of schools in your area. We will use an A to F scale with F being poor and A being excellent. (A-F)
Q3	2015	Next, I'd like you to rate the quality of the following types of schools in your area. We will use an A to F scale with F being poor and A being excellent. (A-F)
Q4	2015	Next, I'm going to read you a few different education policies or proposals, and please tell me whether you favor or oppose each one. Providing parents with more choices in where they can send their kids to school. (strong favor, smwt favor, smwt oppose, strong oppose, dk, refused)
Q5	2015	And, generally speaking, do you think that charter schools help improve public education or do you think charter schools harm public education? (help, harm, dk/refused)
Q6	2015	Earlier you indicated you are a parent or guardian. From what you remember, did you happen to choose the school your child attends or was it a public school he or she was assigned to? (chose, assigned, dk, refused)
Q7	2015	Next, I am going to read you a series of statements, and please tell me whether you AGREE or DISAGREE with each of the following statements. The school my children are currently attending is realistically my only option. (strong favor, smwt favor, smwt oppose, strong oppose, dk, refused)

Appendix C. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variables	N	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	Standard Deviation
Private School Perception GPA	16	3.23	3.44	3.07	0.09
Charter School Perception GPA	16	2.69	3.04	2.32	0.20
Public (TPS) School Perception GPA	16	2.24	2.64	1.80	0.22
Favor Parents Having More School Choices	16	88.44%	92%	83%	2.80%
Charter Schools Help Improve Public Education	16	66.38%	74%	57%	5.73%
Parent Chose Child’s School, Not Assigned	16	59.69%	85%	37%	11.56%
Current School Only Realistic Option	16	50.38%	62%	37%	7.61%
State Charter Law Strength	16	145.19	167	118	14.65
Age of State Charter Law	16	19.19	23	13	3.02
Public (TPS) Academic Proficiency Rate	12	49.35%	84.2%	20.3%	20.13%
Charter Academic Proficiency Rate	12	57.51%	88.6%	28.9%	22.67%

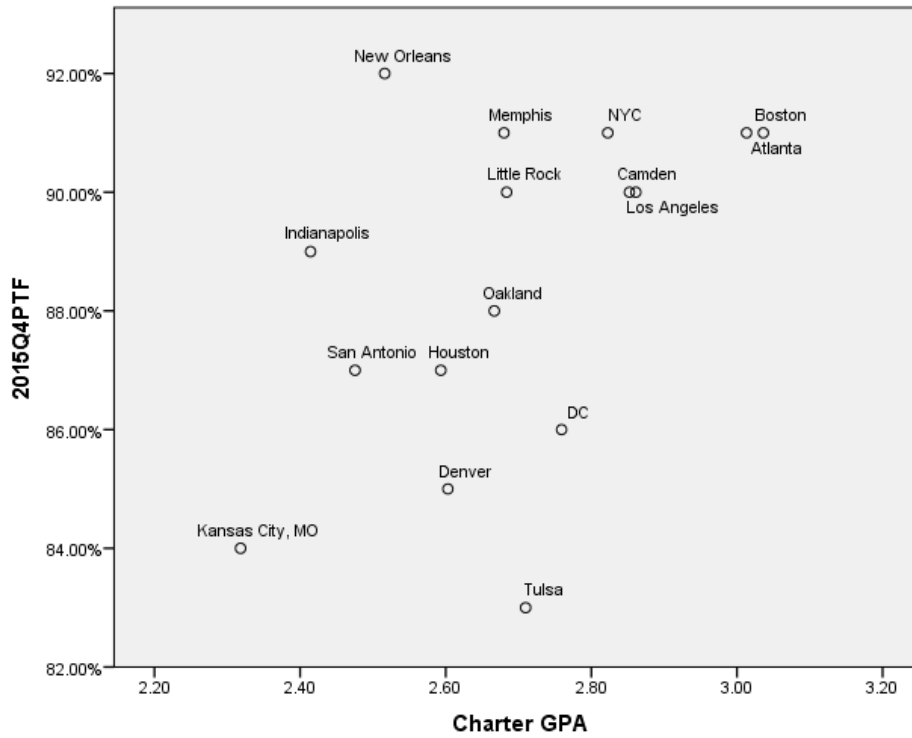
Appendix D. Scatterplots of Charter School Variables

D1. Public Perception of Charter Schools (GPA) and Respective State Charter Law Strength

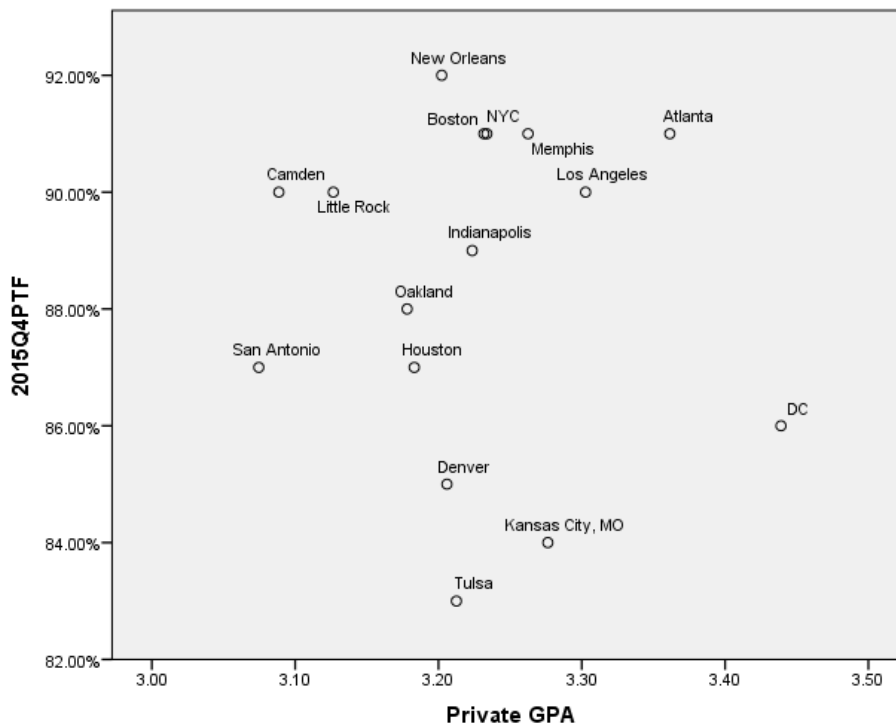


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D2. Public Perception of Charter Schools (GPA) and Public Perception of Favorability towards Increased School Choice for Parents

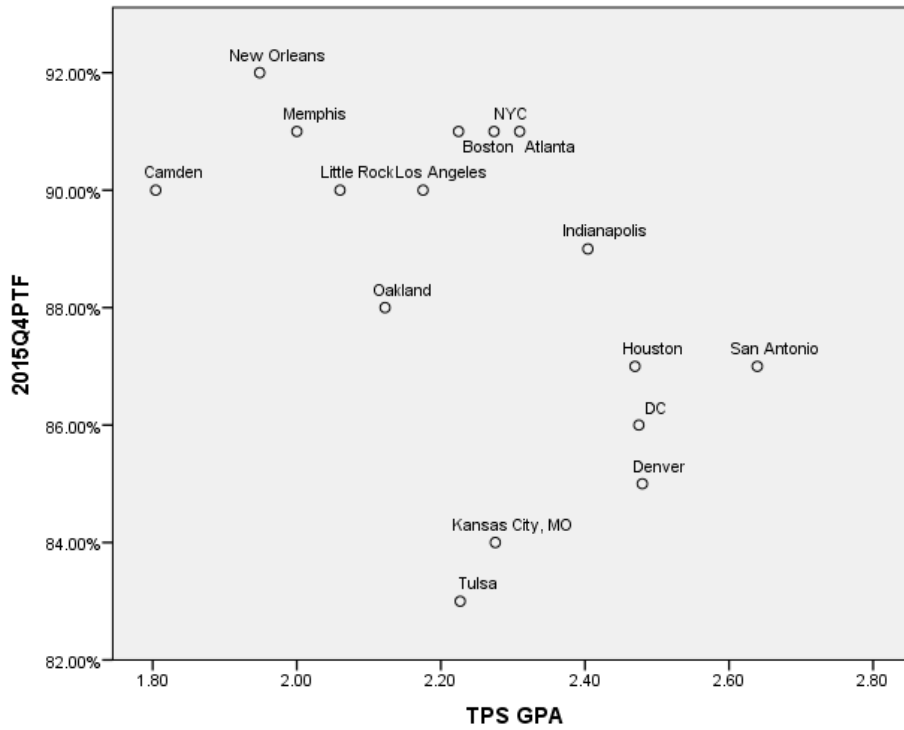


D3. Public Perception of Private Schools (GPA) and Public Perception of Favorability towards Increased School Choice for Parents



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D4. Public Perception of Traditional Public Schools (GPA) and Public Perception of Favorability towards Increased School Choice for Parents



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Appendix E. Correlation Table of State Charter Law Strength, Public Perception of School Choice, Public Perception of Private School Quality, Public Perception of Charter School Quality, Public Perception of Traditional Public School Quality, and Charter School Market Share

		Correlations					
		State Charter Law Strength 2015	Public Perception of School Choice	Private GPA	Charter GPA	TPS GPA	City Charter Enrollment Market Share 2015
State Charter Law Strength 2015	Pearson Correlation	1	.040	.314	-.021	.316	.336
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.883	.236	.937	.233	.204
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Public Perception of School Choice	Pearson Correlation	.040	1	-.041	.459	-.506*	.134
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.883		.880	.074	.045	.622
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Private GPA	Pearson Correlation	.314	-.041	1	.276	.201	.057
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.236	.880		.301	.454	.833
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Charter GPA	Pearson Correlation	-.021	.459	.276	1	-.259	-.409
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.937	.074	.301		.332	.116
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
TPS GPA	Pearson Correlation	.316	-.506*	.201	-.259	1	-.150
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.233	.045	.454	.332		.580
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
City Charter Enrollment Market Share 2015	Pearson Correlation	.336	.134	.057	-.409	-.150	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.204	.622	.833	.116	.580	
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).