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Policy Cues and Ideology in Attitudes toward Charter Schools

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Charter schools have generated support from politicians in both major American political parties, while stimulating intense debate among interest groups. We investigate whether and how public attitudes come to mirror interest group polarization or politician consensus in order to understand what drives public attitudes as policy debates mature and citizens learn information that drives advocates to opposite sides. Using survey experiments, we assess how views change in response to policy cues. Mirroring debates among advocates, we assess whether the role of private companies and non-union teachers polarize opinion. We find that the public responds to cues linked to unions and polarizes based on liberal and conservative ideology as well as attitudes toward unions. This helps to explain how ideological polarization can grow even in the absence of strong partisan sorting among top political leaders.

Shortly after President Barack Obama was sworn into office, he accompanied First Lady Michelle Obama on their first official visit to a public school: Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. President Obama signaled his support for charter schools in his remarks, proclaiming, “The outstanding work that’s being done here...is an example of how all our schools should be” (Russo 2013). Echoing a similar sentiment, the Republican Governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, signed legislation in 2011 lifting the state’s charter school cap. At the signing ceremony, Governor Snyder stated, “Charter schools play a critical role in providing Michigan students and parents with alternative educational options...This reform gives families who are trapped in failing schools more freedom to take control of their future.”¹ Charter schools may defy partisan divisions, because they potentially advance a wide range of goals in education reform, such as school choice, innovation, and parental involvement (Bulkley 2005, p. 1).

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are exempt from many government regulations. They are typically operated by private entities, including nonprofit organizations or for-profit corporations. Since the first charter school law was adopted by the state of Minnesota in 1991, charter school laws have steadily expanded to other states (Mintrom 2000). By 2013, 42 states had adopted charter school laws. Moreover, in response to federal grant incentives included in the Race to the Top program, several states have recently adopted new legislation to remove caps on the number of charter schools allowed (McGuinn 2012).

Aggregate public opinion data suggests that the expansion of charter school policies has occurred alongside a broadening base of political support. According to the PDK/Gallup poll of

¹ Rick Snyder, Press Release. Available at: <<http://www.michigan.gov/snyder/0,4668,7-277-57577-267802--,00.html>> Accessed 25 July 2013.

the public's attitudes towards the public schools, support for charter schools seems to be on an upward trajectory—from 51 percent in favor of charter schools in 2008 to 70 percent in favor in 2011. According to the 2013 poll, favorable views of charter schools remained high at 68 percent (Bushaw and Lopez 2013).

Yet these trends tell only half of the story. Among interest groups and education activists, charter schools have been a hotly contested policy issue. According to Kirst, “At the national level, charters are part of political competition between two competing advocacy networks and coalitions that want to expand or constrain school choice” (2007, 185). One side views charter schools as a form of privatization that would exacerbate educational inequality; another views them as public school reforms that help ameliorate inequality, increase innovation, and offer parental choice (Zhang and Yang 2008). Teachers' unions, business groups, minority group activists, and philanthropists have divided into opposing coalitions associated with these two sides. There is also striking polarization among academic researchers on charter schools (Henig 2009). The two sides disagree about the evidence regarding the outcomes of charter schools, in addition to basic divisions over the values they advance.

Charter school policy thus presents an opportunity to assess how well public attitudes mirror interest group polarization or politician consensus and to investigate what drives public attitudes as policy debates mature and citizens learn information that drives advocates to opposite sides. Does the public mirror the bipartisan pro-charter consensus of top officials such as President Obama and Governor Snyder? Or is there alignment between polarizing interest group arguments and public opinion on charter schools? How is public opinion affected by information that frames the debate as polarized advocates see it?

We investigate the determinants of public opinion on charter schools in the state of Michigan, a site of recent increases in charter schools and an ongoing debate about their efficacy and purpose. Rather than merely assess citizens' inclinations regarding charter schools, we assess how views change in response to policy cues that guide the considerations used in forming their opinions. We use survey experiments to show that attitudes are ideologically polarized but also amenable to change based on policy cues. Mirroring debates among advocates, we assess whether the role of private companies and non-union teachers polarize opinion. We find that the public responds to cues linked to key interest group coalition actors, particularly teachers' unions. This helps explain how ideological polarization can grow even in the absence of strong partisan sorting among top political leaders.

Polarized Advocacy in the Charter School Debate

Charter schools are not following a customary pattern of partisan sorting through issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Republicans are traditionally identified as the strongest proponents of increasing choice and competition in education through vouchers and charter schools. Meanwhile, key Democratic leaders have viewed charter schools as a compromise approach to reforming public education that avoids the government support for private schools enabled by vouchers. Federal grant support for charter schools started under President Bill Clinton, who received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. President Barack Obama has expanded federal grants for charter schools.

Nonetheless, polarized rhetoric on the issue of charter schools is increasingly prominent. A common justification used by proponents of charter-based education reform highlights how many charter school operators are able to skirt the restrictions of local teachers unions, which

proponents view as obstacles to reform. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles, a Democrat, has called teachers' union leadership in Los Angeles the "one, unwavering roadblock to reform" while citing charter organizations as belonging to a coalition of groups who are "ready with ideas" and "excited for change" (Villaraigosa 2010). Conservative think tanks at both the state and national level have echoed these sentiments. Researchers at the Illinois Policy Institute have labeled the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) "obstructionists", criticizing CTU President Karen Lewis for incendiary race-based rhetoric that ignores "the economics and academic challenges" threatening Chicago Public Schools (Kersey 2013). The Heritage Foundation has accused unions of helping to "perpetuate the failed status quo" in education by opposing school choice-related policies including charter schools (Burke 2010).

Unsurprisingly, teachers unions are often the most visible advocates questioning or objecting to charter expansion. In March 2013, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten was arrested in Philadelphia while protesting a district school-closing plan. Weingarten argued that the school closings would take money away from public schools while protecting charter schools, adding, "This was really a plan to eliminate public education" (Resmovits 2013). Recent protests in Wisconsin and the 2012 teachers' strike in Chicago highlighted issues such as collective bargaining and teacher evaluations, attracting national attention to teachers' unions and their response to proposed education policy changes.

Opponents of charter schools, including teachers' unions, emphasize the idea that charter school expansion is akin to the privatization of public education. Citing the dichotomy between those who view public education as an inherently public good and those who view the private sector as a better provider of services, charter school opponents emphasize the idea that for-profit pursuits in education may result in less accountability and transparency (Ravitch 2010,

Boesenberg 2003). Chicago Teachers' Union President Lewis has attacked the "venture capitalists" that she claims "use little black and brown children as stage props" in the fight to expand school choice options (Pearson 2013). Similarly, the National Education Association, the largest labor union in the United States, has stated that "[p]rivatization is a threat to public education, and more broadly, to our democracy itself."²

There is some evidence, especially at the state level, that public opinion on charter schools has become more polarized along ideological lines. A 2002 statewide survey in Michigan found little ideological polarization on the issue.³ The majority of those identifying as conservative or liberal in each category of ideological identification expressed support for charter schools in the state.⁴ In contrast, those in the middle were closely divided between support and opposition. Within three years time, however, public opinion had shifted. While survey responses to an identical question in 2005 showed a healthy majority among all categories of conservatives continuing to show favorable attitudes toward charter schools, liberals were split. An interest in this trend informs our investigation of whether polarization occurs in response to

² "Privatization," National Education Association. Available at: <<http://www.nea.org/home/16355.htm>>. Accessed 1 July 2013.

³ Data from the 2002 and 2005 iterations of the survey referenced here are available at [Redacted]. The question wording on the 2002 survey asked: "Do you favor or oppose charter schools in Michigan?"

⁴ Categories of ideological self-identification cover the following range of responses: "very conservative/liberal", "somewhat conservative/liberal", "lean conservative/liberal", and "middle".

information cues brought about by the privatization and de-unionization concerns voiced by advocates.

Policy Cues and Ideological Polarization in Public Opinion on Charter Schools

Political beliefs and identities become much better indicators of policy preferences as elites become polarized (Garner and Palmer 2010). Elite polarization influences individual attitudes, ideology, and policy preferences (Hetherington 2001; Mullinix 2011). Issue polarization is driven by the framing power held by partisan elites; public attitudes can change in response to frames that reference credible perspectives (Druckman 2001a). Polarization stands to be heightened where elite framing is strong, divided, and consistent (Zaller 1992).

In the charter school debate, partisan elites have not sorted consistently but interest group advocates are at odds. What types of policy cues are thus likely to affect public opinion on charter schools? Nelson and Kinder (1996) argue that public opinion is commonly “group-centric:” policy opinions follow attitudes toward “the social groups perceived as the beneficiaries of policy.” Their survey experiments demonstrate that issues can be framed to enhance or detract from respondents’ tendencies to evaluate policy on the basis of group benefits.

Information also seems to have a major influence on survey respondents. In direct comparisons, attitudes change at least as much in response to learning relevant policy information as from learning which parties support each policy (Bullock 2011). Some respondents may be using partisan cues to infer information about the beneficiaries of policy, rather than simply adopting the positions of their party elites. When citizens learn directly about policy, they may respond less to party cues because framing effects reflect the needs of citizens seeking credible information (Druckman 2001a). This constraint of credibility is also reflected in

citizens' own knowledge; the strength of framing effects is inversely related to the availability of other credible advice (Druckman 2001b).

In the only known previous survey experiment on charter schools, Howell, Peterson, and West (2009) show that respondents are more supportive of charter schools when told either that President Obama supports them or that research evidence indicates that charter schools increase student performance. Charter school support was 11% higher among respondents hearing the Obama endorsement and 14% higher among those hearing the research support. Among Democrats, support jumped 12% in the Obama condition and 18% in the research condition. Howell, Peterson, and West (2009) find less support, however, for the notion that factual information about school quality or student achievement changes opinions. Survey experiments regarding school vouchers also show some effects. Nelson (2004) finds that opinions are more favorable if respondents are reminded that school quality is an important value, rather than freedom of religion. He argues that the frames used by political actors in these debates change the importance of voters' conflicting values, altering their decision calculus.

Citizens may learn information that links the charter school debate to their underlying values and group attitudes. Policies designed to create supportive constituencies can develop and sustain public support over time, even if the messages used in the initial political debate over those policies are less persuasive (Jacobs and Mettler 2011). Meanwhile, policies that fail to reconfigure the interest group sector surrounding the issue or that do not weaken the political power of reform opponents may face a greater threat of opposition and erosion in the long term (Patashnik 2008). Charter schools are now a mature policy issue; the policy has developed for more than two decades, influencing the interest group environment and leading to real differences between charter schools and traditional public schools. Two key differences are

politically important: their operators are independent, leading to concerns over privatization, and their teachers are less unionized, tying charter school expansion to de-unionization.

Our Expectations

Given the evolution of the charter school debate among interest groups, we expect to find that charter school opinion in Michigan is polarized. Yet because leaders from both political parties have endorsed charter schools, we expect to see polarization along ideological, rather than partisan, lines. We now expect conservatives to be substantially more supportive than liberals. We also expect opinions on charter schools to differ based on attitudes toward salient groups of policy beneficiaries and implementers. The prevalence of two key frames in elite discourse, the fear of school privatization among charter school opponents and the gains from de-unionization emphasized by charter school proponents, suggest that attitudes toward unions and for-profit companies should also affect charter school opinions.

Our survey experiments seek to directly manipulate the role of these considerations in charter school opinions. We expect that framing the charter school debate alongside teacher unionization should increase ideological polarization along both traditional liberal-conservative lines and based on attitudes toward unions. Framing the charter school debate with reference to for-profit corporate providers should also increase polarization based on ideology and attitudes toward business. We assess charter school opinion without framing the issue in our control condition and use a non-ideological cue by framing the issue with reference to universities that authorize charter schools. We expect less ideological polarization in these conditions.

If the union, privatization, or university considerations constitute a useful political message for the proponents of charter schools, our experiment should show that the policy cues

increase support for charter schools. Likewise, a useful message for opponents would show that the policy cues decrease support for charters. We expect our non-ideological cue emphasizing university authorizers to be the most likely to increase support, but we have no prior expectation about the overall success of cues highlighting considerations of de-unionization or privatization.

Attitudes toward charter schools may also differ based on whether respondents are considering replacements for their own schools or for the worst schools they can imagine. Public opinion polls consistently show that Americans view their own local public schools more positively than public schools nationally (Hochschild and Scott 1998; Loveless 1997; Henderson, Howell, and Peterson 2014). Thus, satisfaction with local public schools might detract from support for new local charter schools. We expect differences based on the schools referenced; attitudes toward increasing the number of charter schools in the worst performing districts should be more favorable than attitudes towards charter schools in the respondents' communities.

Because some respondents will already be aware of the information that we present, they may have internalized considerations associated with union, corporate, and university involvement in charter schools. We may only be able to observe changes in charter school support among those who had not previously been exposed to the information. Natural experiments of the effect of policy information on opinions that attempt to replicate survey experiments find that opinion change is often only observable among the least engaged subset of respondents (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Lau and Schlesinger (2005) find effects on policy preferences for most frames but show that effects sometimes differ based on whether respondents lack political sophistication or pay less attention to government. We thus expect the effects of our survey experiment to be concentrated among the least engaged portion of the population, who would not have otherwise been exposed to similar information.

Data and Methods

We conducted an experiment as part of the Michigan State University's State of the State Survey. The quarterly survey uses a stratified random sample with both landline telephones and cell phones. The survey included interviews with 1,015 Michigan residents from June 12 – August 13, 2012. Survey data, instruments, and documentation are available online at <http://ippsr.msu.edu/soss/>.

Although our data draw on public opinion in a single state, we view Michigan as an excellent case for assessing the interaction between interest group polarization and public opinion on charter schools. Michigan was an early adopter of charter schools; charter-authorizing legislation was passed in 1993. By the 2010-2011 school year, Michigan had 300 charter schools, the 6th highest number in the country.⁵ Michigan's largest school district, Detroit, has a substantial proportion of students enrolled in charter schools. In 2012, 41 percent of public school students in Detroit attended charter schools, ranking second to New Orleans for the highest share of charter enrollment nationally.⁶ Moreover, Michigan's charter sector is heavily skewed in ways that either privilege or disadvantage key interest group actors. For example, Michigan has a very low rate of teacher unionization in charter schools. In 2011, only 6 of Michigan's 240 charter schools had collective bargaining agreements (Price 2011). Meanwhile, 80 percent of charter schools in Michigan are operated by for-profit education management

⁵ This data is available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁶ This data is from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Available at: http://www.publiccharters.org/data/files/Publication_docs/NAPCS%202012%20Market%20Share%20Report_20121113T125312.pdf. Accessed 25 July 2013.

organizations (EMOs). These characteristics of Michigan’s charter sector heighten the stakes for teachers’ unions (as opponents of charter schools) as well as business and education management stakeholders (as supporters of charter schools). This makes Michigan a particularly useful case for observing the relationship between polarizing informational cues and public opinion on charter schools. Meanwhile, one characteristic of Michigan’s charter sector could shield charter school policy from polarizing public debates: universities authorize the vast majority of Michigan charter schools.

In our experiment, all respondents were told that “Michigan has charter schools that receive public money but are governed independently of its local school districts” and asked two questions: (1) “How much do you favor or oppose increasing the number of charter schools in your community?” and (2) “How much do you favor or oppose increasing the number of charter schools in the state’s worst performing districts?” This enables a comparison of the factors that predict support for a policy that might directly affect the respondent’s local schools with a more targeted policy that may not affect them. For each question, the response choices were “strongly favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, and strongly oppose.” Respondents could also volunteer that they “don’t know” or refuse to answer the question, although only 20 respondents out of 1,015 selected these options.

Before answering these questions, a random number determined which additional piece of information respondents received. The *control* condition gave no other information. Previous studies recommend using this condition as a baseline to compare the effects of all other conditions (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). In the *for-profit* condition, respondents were told: “More than 80% of Michigan charter schools are operated by for-profit companies.” In the *universities* condition, respondents were told: “More than 80% of Michigan charter schools are

authorized by universities or colleges.” In the *union* condition, respondents were told: “More than 80% of Michigan charter schools rely on teachers that are not represented by labor unions.”

All of these statements are close representations of Michigan charter school conditions. Notice that these three different aspects of the policy allowed us to use the same statement structure, directing attention to the same supermajority of schools but connecting it alternatively to for-profit companies, universities, and labor unions. Each condition thus highlights a different element of the policy’s implementation and a potential beneficiary: the school operators, the authorizers of those operations, and the teachers at the school. Each condition also connects the issue of increasing charter schools to a wider concern of some portions of the public as well as elites: privatization of public services, alignment of K-12 and higher education, and unionization of public employees. All three of these issues were raised in recent state legislative debate and media coverage over increasing the number of charter schools. Previous framing studies recommend searching for the popular arguments used in elite discourse to see if citizens change opinions after they learn about the claims made in policy debates (Nelson and Kinder 1996).

Compared to previous tests of policy frames, our experiment has an important benefit. The cues we develop all provide information on a key aspect of the policy but also frame the issue so that respondents think of a particular set of actors who would benefit from the proposal and likely favor it: unions, for-profit companies, and universities. Without discussing the partisan or ideological orientation of these actors, we can assess whether people react to information about policy in a group-centric manner. We compare the key public policy proponents and opponents on each side with a control group of no information and a cue highlighting the role of a non-ideological actor (universities).

There were 209 respondents in the *control* condition, 270 in the *for-profit* condition, 293 in the *universities* condition, and 242 in the *union* condition. Due to random assignment, the respondents in each experimental condition are representative of the Michigan population and do not differ substantially in their demographics or political attitudes. We nevertheless rely on data regarding the social background and status of respondents as well as their political orientations to assess the factors leading to support for charter schools in each condition.

Our education scale measures whether respondents have not finished high school, finished high school, completed some college, or graduated from college, with these four responses spaced equidistantly. Our measures of partisan identification and political ideology place respondents on seven-category equidistant scales from strong Republican to strong Democrat and from very conservative to very liberal. Respondents were also asked whether they like or dislike labor unions and whether they like or dislike for-profit companies; we created five-category equidistant scales from “like a lot” to “dislike a lot.” We are thus able to assess the role of political ideology and partisanship along with attitudes concerning the specific groups that we highlight in our policy information cues.

We also assess whether the impact of frames on political opinions is dependent on political sophistication. Some people pay a lot of attention to politics and the news media and may already have been exposed to some of our informational cues. We measured sophistication directly through a two-question quiz asking respondents to correctly identify the Vice President of the United States (72% could) and the party in control of the state senate (62% could). We construct a 3-point scale based on the number of correct responses.

Charter School Attitudes

We examined respondents' support for charter schools on a five-category equidistant scale from 0 to 1. Respondents were asked about increasing the number of charter schools in two different contexts: in your community and in the worst performing districts. In the *control* condition, average support was .45 for charter schools in your community and .53 for charter schools in the state's worst performing districts. In their own community, this corresponds to 15% of respondents strongly favoring charter schools, 23% somewhat favoring, 17% neither favoring nor opposing, 18% somewhat opposing, and 27% strongly opposing. For the worst performing districts, no respondents moved from support to opposition but 19% of respondents moved from opposition to support. This is consistent with the greater satisfaction that Americans have towards their own local public schools than toward schools generally.

Figure 1 reports the level of charter school support in both places by ideology (based on a seven-category scale). Our results show considerable ideological polarization on charter schools in both contexts. Conservatives are much more supportive of charter schools than liberals. Across the two levels of opposition, 82% of liberals oppose charter schools in their communities, compared to only 33% of conservatives. In the worst performing districts, 50% of liberals but only 25% of conservatives oppose charter schools. There is greater support for increasing the number of charter schools in the worst district across the ideological spectrum.

[Insert Figure 1]

The Effects of Informational Cues

Our experiment allows us to investigate the effects of informational cues. Support for charter schools in respondents' communities averaged .4 in the *for-profit* condition, .54 in the *universities* condition, and .5 in the *union* condition, compared to .45 in the *control* condition. In

the worst performing districts, support was again highest in the *universities* condition (.58), second highest in the *union* condition (.55), and lowest in the *for-profit* condition (.51) compared to .53 in the *control* condition. For respondents' own communities, the means were significantly higher from those in the control condition when respondents were informed that universities authorize charters or that non-union instructors teach in them. In t-tests for differences of means, other differences did not reach statistical significance.

The experiment also produced differences in relative support for charter schools between liberals and conservatives. For schools in respondents' communities, charter school support among very conservative respondents rose from .54 in the *control* condition to .83 in the *union* condition and .68 in the *universities* condition. Conservatives thus become much more supportive of charter schools when they learn that they often employ non-union teachers. Liberals are not very supportive of charter schools in most conditions, but they are more supportive when informed about university authorizers. Ideological polarization is the strongest for respondents who received the information about non-union teachers. Across all three levels of conservative and liberal ideology in the *union* condition, only 28% of liberals supported charter schools compared to 56% of conservatives.

Moving to a multivariate framework, Table 1 examines the impact of each treatment and other covariates on attitudes towards charter schools, comparing the results for responses about charter schools "in your community" to charter schools in the "worst performing districts." Each treatment is compared against respondents in the control group. Since respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of the four conditions, we are confident in the causal relationship between receiving a treatment and support for charter schools. The results confirm that two of the treatments significantly increased support for charter schools in the respondents'

community but no treatment resulted in a significant change in support for charters in the worst performing districts. Learning that charter schools are university authorized led to the largest increase in support. Learning that they involve non-union teachers also increased support.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Higher education level increases support for charter schools in respondents' communities. Liberal ideology leads to lower levels of support, but party identification is not significant. The sizes of each relationship are reduced because we include additional predictive variables: general support for labor unions and corporations. Supporters of labor unions are significantly less supportive of charter schools, whether they are located in their community or the state's worst performing districts. Supporters of corporations are more supportive of charter schools but the relationship is significant only in the worst performing districts.⁷

⁷ Political ideology, party identification, support for labor unions, and support for corporations are all correlated. Ideology and party identification are correlated at .55; party identification and union favorability are correlated at .54. Further tests indicate that collinearity is not a major issue for model specification. Tests for collinearity, as well as joint significance tests on both corresponding coefficients, did not raise concerns. Running a pair of alternative models, omitting variables for support of labor unions and corporations, suggests that the correlation between party identification and support for unions may result in the latter explaining the bulk of the former's effect when both are included in regression. Party identification may have an indirect effect on charter school support through union favorability. Nevertheless, the results support our expectation that charter school attitudes are polarized mainly along ideological lines.

Our use of a categorical dependent variable in Table 1 (and subsequent results) warrants further methodological investigation. In order to confirm that our OLS estimates are consistent with effects across the span of respondent categories, we used maximum likelihood estimation and ran ordinal logit models with specifications identical to each linear probability model. We then compared the marginal effects on the ordinal model regressors to the coefficients produced using OLS. These results show effects consistent with the estimates obtained using OLS. Positive coefficients on ideology for the “oppose” categories, and correspondingly negative coefficients on ideology for the “favor” categories, confirm that support for charter schools decreases as one’s ideological position becomes more liberal. In fact, none of the marginal effects from ordinal logit differ substantially from the OLS partial coefficients.

Table 2 reports the results of separate models for charter school support in respondents’ communities across the four conditions.⁸ It reveals some differences in the predictors of charter school support across the four experimental treatments. Liberalism leads to less support for charter schools in every condition, but the effects are strongest when respondents hear that they employ non-union teachers. In contrast, the effects of liberalism are not strong enough to reach standard statistical significance in the *for-profit* or *universities* conditions. In the *union* condition, the effects of political ideology and feelings toward unions both increase in importance.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Charter schools are less polarizing along ideological lines when respondents learn that for-profit companies or universities are involved. Overall, opinions also become less predictable

⁸ The models provide equivalent results to a regression on the entire sample that interacts treatment effects with every covariate. A model of charter school support on the entire population that interacts only ideology with each treatment reveals similar results.

with political covariates; the total variation explained by the models is substantially higher in the *union* condition than in the *for-profit* or *universities* conditions. The results are consistent with our expectation that policy cues highlighting considerations related to unions would polarize opinion, but they are not as consistent with our expectation that priming consideration of the role of for-profit companies would have the same effect.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3 presents the same models predicting support for charter schools in the state's worst performing districts. As Figure 1 illustrates, support for charter schools increases in this condition across all ideological categories. The results of multivariate models are similar. Support for unions tends to reduce support for charter schools, even in these districts. The models associated with the *for-profit* and *universities* conditions explain substantially less variation in opinion than the *union* and *control* conditions. The effect of ideology increases substantially and only reaches statistical significance in the *union* condition. A model on the full sample with treatment-ideology interaction effects shows the same statistically significant difference in the effect of ideology across treatments.

We examined each individual treatment included in Tables 2 and 3 using ordinal logit in order to check for deviations across categories. We find consistency between the marginal effects obtained after ordinal logit and the OLS regression coefficients. As one moves toward a more liberal ideology, the likelihood of opposing charter schools increases, with a magnitude consistent with OLS estimation.

Both union favorability and liberal ideology reduce support for charter schools, but do so cumulatively rather than only in interaction. Tests for interaction effects revealed that the effects of each variable are independent. Figure 2 reports the predicted values for charter school support

based on different levels of union favorability and ideology. They show a steep decline in support as respondents become more liberal and more favorable towards unions. Moreover, the slope is largest for the *union* condition. Both survey questions show that the combination of liberal ideology and favorability towards unions decreases support for charter schools. The predicted support for charter schools in your community drops from .83 among very conservative respondents that dislike unions to .18 among very liberal respondent that like unions.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

These results provide strong support for our expectation that ideological polarization would grow in response to the cue concerning the large share of non-union teachers in Michigan's charter schools. The significance of the variable measuring favorability towards unions suggests that the union lens is prominent in the minds of many of our respondents—those who like unions tend to dislike charters. Meanwhile, the lack of a polarizing effect due to for-profit charter management companies, compared to the baseline, was surprising. Although liberals who received the for-profit treatment were not particularly favorable toward charter schools, conservatives' attitudes towards charter did not grow more favorable either. Conservatives respond much more favorably to the non-unionized teacher frame than they do to the for-profit frame.

Recall that respondent knowledge of the information that our cues provide may dampen the effect of our survey experiment. If so, we would expect opinion differences to be concentrated among those with the least knowledge. We assessed this hypothesis by adding the effects of our political information index to the models of charter school support in Table 2. Figure 3 reports the predicted values of charter school support in the four experimental

conditions for three levels of political information (those who could not identify either the Vice President or the party in control of the state senate, those who could identify only one of the two, and those who could identify both). The results show that political information significantly increases support for charter schools in respondents' communities in the control condition. In all three other conditions, however, there is no clear effect.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

This suggests that the information that our cues provided may help equalize political knowledge and give reasons to support charter schools to those disengaged citizens. The differences are particularly striking among low-information conservatives. Highly informed conservatives are no more likely to support charter schools in the *union* condition than in the *control* condition; even in the *control* condition, 66% already support charter schools. Support for charter schools among conservatives at the lowest information level, however, rises from 26% in the *control* condition to 53% in the *union* condition. Our policy cues thus provided information that was likely already a consideration among highly informed conservatives.

Discussion and Implications

Our study demonstrates strong relationships between political ideology, union favorability, and opinions on charter schools. We show that the charter school issue is polarized along ideological lines even without partisan sorting among top elected leaders. This suggests that issue evolution based on the changing views of party elites and the accompanying movement of public partisans may not be the only route to polarization in new issue areas (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Citizens may also divide into opposing camps based on their attitudes toward policy beneficiaries and on their general ideological perspectives.

Among the cues we tested for their impact on charter school opinions, unions stand out as the most polarizing frame. This is consistent with the strong effect of union favorability in the baseline model. We also found more pronounced effects among those respondents least likely to have previously encountered the relevant information. In light of recent teacher strikes and growing tension between union leaders and school officials in many states and school districts, this polarizing frame for charter school policy is likely to remain in the spotlight. In Michigan, which adopted “right-to-work” legislation in December 2012, unions are increasingly on the defensive across a variety of issues but retain a strong membership base and political clout.

In contrast, we found few effects for informing respondents that charter schools are mostly run by for-profit corporations. Despite the emphasis placed on privatization by charter school opponents, this information does not seem to reduce support for charter schools or increase polarization between liberals and conservatives or between those who generally favor or oppose corporations. This may help explain how charter schools have become more popular even as they also become polarizing. As citizens learn about the considerations that activists on each side use to justify their opinions, the majority may not accept a consideration used by one side as particularly important. In our case, those opposed to charter schools did not seem to need information about for-profit providers to reach their opinion whereas information about non-union teachers and university authorizers increased support.

Although our study focuses on a single state, we would expect to find similar results in other states with long-standing charter authorization policies. Nonetheless, the relationship between union politics and charter school attitudes may vary, depending on the state-level context. In Wisconsin, 83 percent of charter schools have collective bargaining agreements with

teachers.⁹ This is the exception nationally (only 12 percent of charter schools nationally have collective bargaining agreements), but suggests that the relationship between unions and charter school attitudes in a state like Wisconsin could differ from Michigan. Charter schools may not be as appealing to conservatives under these conditions, because they do little to diminish the size of the unionized workforce in education.

There are also some limitations with survey experiments that should influence the interpretation of our results. Methodologists have raised regular questions about whether the effects found in survey experiments apply to real-world political situations. The effects of hearing a short snippet of information may be transitory and unlikely to last (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). For respondents to learn these policy details in the course of political debate they would have to pay attention, remember, and reassess their views; this may be asking a great deal. Natural experiments that attempt to replicate the findings of contemporaneous survey experiments do not show the same effects on policy opinions (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Only a subset of respondents may change their beliefs about policy in response to learning the information provided in a survey experiment through media coverage in the real world; among that subset, changes in beliefs may not lead to changes in policy opinions (Barabas and Jerit 2010). This makes it important that the largest changes in charter school support based on the cues were seen among the lowest information population; these are the people least likely to hear these frames in their daily lives.

⁹ This data is from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Available at: http://www.publiccharters.org/data/files/Publication_docs/NAPCS%20Unionized%20Charter%20Schools%20Dashboard%20Details_20111103T104815.pdf >. Accessed 25 July 2013.

The results must be viewed in the context of the ongoing political debates over charter schools. Survey experiments likely cue messages that respondents have already encountered and serve to highlight which considerations are already apparent in respondents' thinking about an issue (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). The strong effects for the union cue are unsurprising, given that teachers' unions are often featured in education policy debates and media coverage.

When survey experiments indicate that respondents in one treatment do not differ significantly from those in the control condition, it may indicate that the consideration primed by that treatment is already included in most respondents' views on the issue (Jerit 2009). In our experiment, the for-profit condition did not seem to change opinion: respondents may have already incorporated any concerns about privatization into their opinions. Opinions about corporations affected views of charter schools in low-performing school districts, even if they were not primed to think about the role of for-profit companies in charter school provision. In contrast, some respondents appear to learn and modify their opinions in response to learning about the extent of non-union teachers and university authorizers in charter schools.

Our study helps specify how public opinion responds to policy debates as citizens learn more of the information that advocates use to frame and evaluate policy outcomes. Studies of the policy process often view public opinion as an important input to policymaking, but there has been limited work on the public's role in evaluating evidence from competing interest group coalitions. The archetypal public response to elite debate, dividing into opposing coalitions based on partisan leanings, is hardly universal. Neither the patterns of elite rhetoric nor the responses of citizens may match this process. We have shown that polarization can be an outcome of policy information cues tied to opposing advocacy positions, but only if they fit with the primary considerations that citizens use to evaluate policies.

The charter school issue shows how policy debates can become polarized as they mature, even if partisan elites do not divide cleanly into two opposing camps. Citizens learn more about policies and their effects, sometimes using their own values and attitudes toward policy beneficiaries to reach opposing conclusions. Information that ties policies to the advocates on each side can guide citizens to their respective ideological sides (Lupia 1994). By directly manipulating the information at respondents' disposal, our survey experiment demonstrates that policy cues can produce polarized attitudes without reference to parties or other supporters or opponents of policies. There is more than one path to polarized opinion on policy debates.

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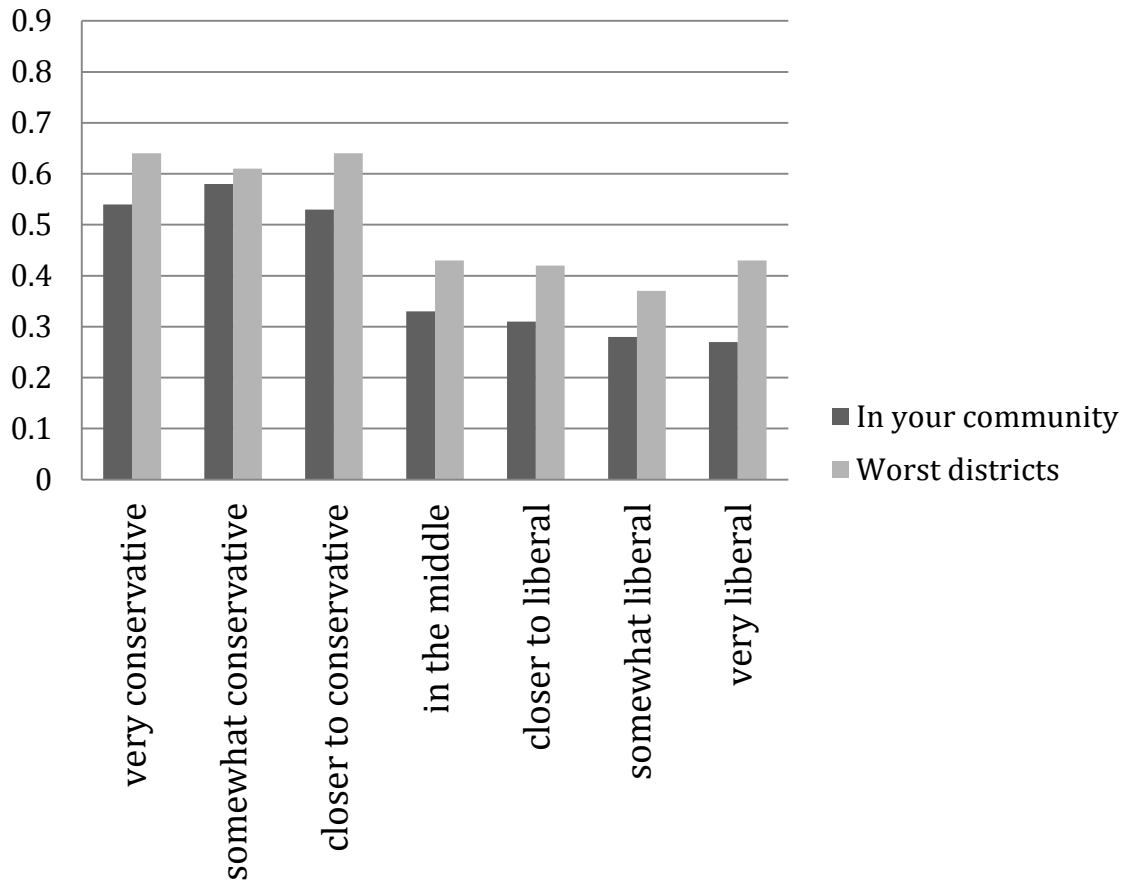
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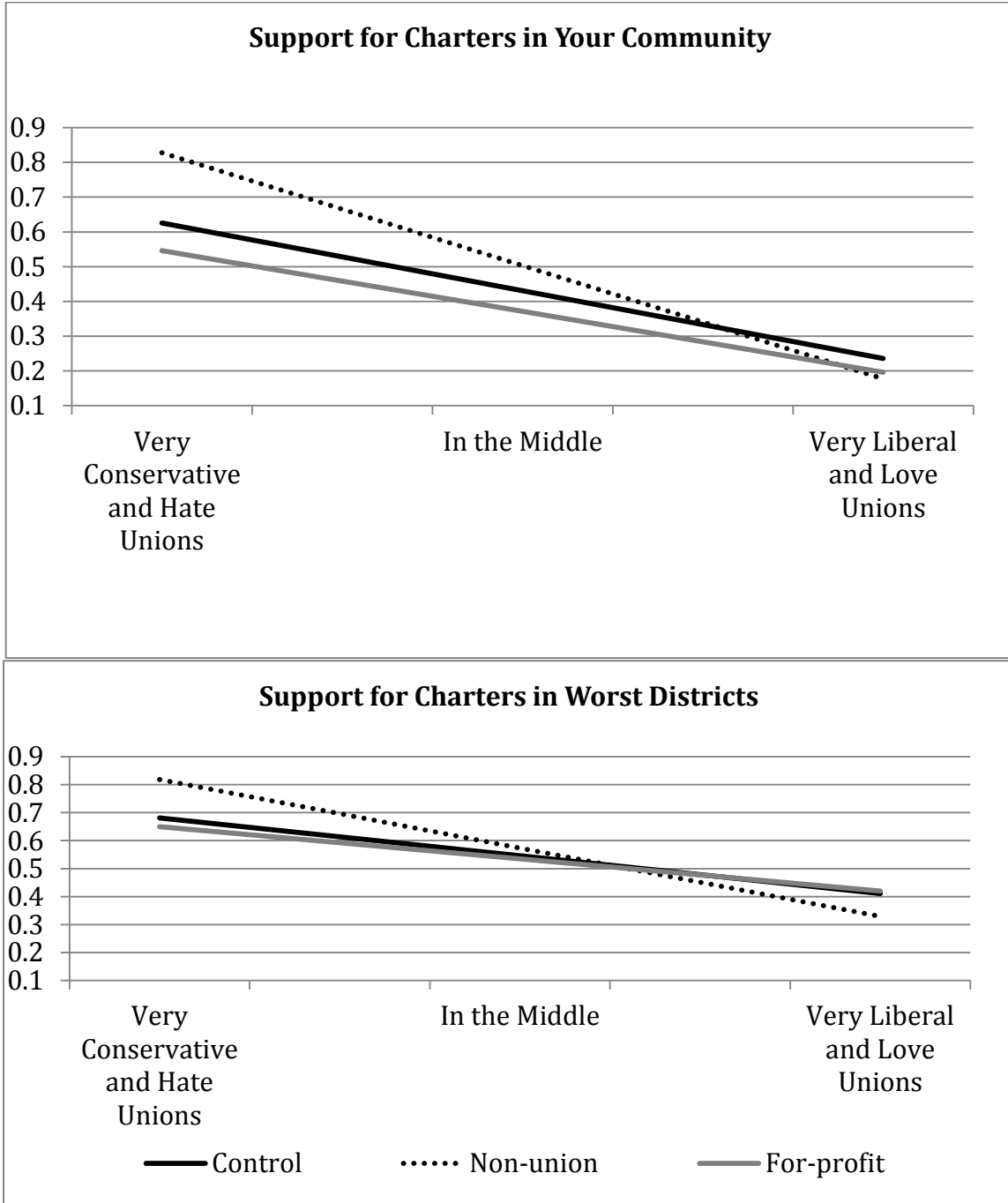
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Figure 1: Support for Charter Schools by Community Context



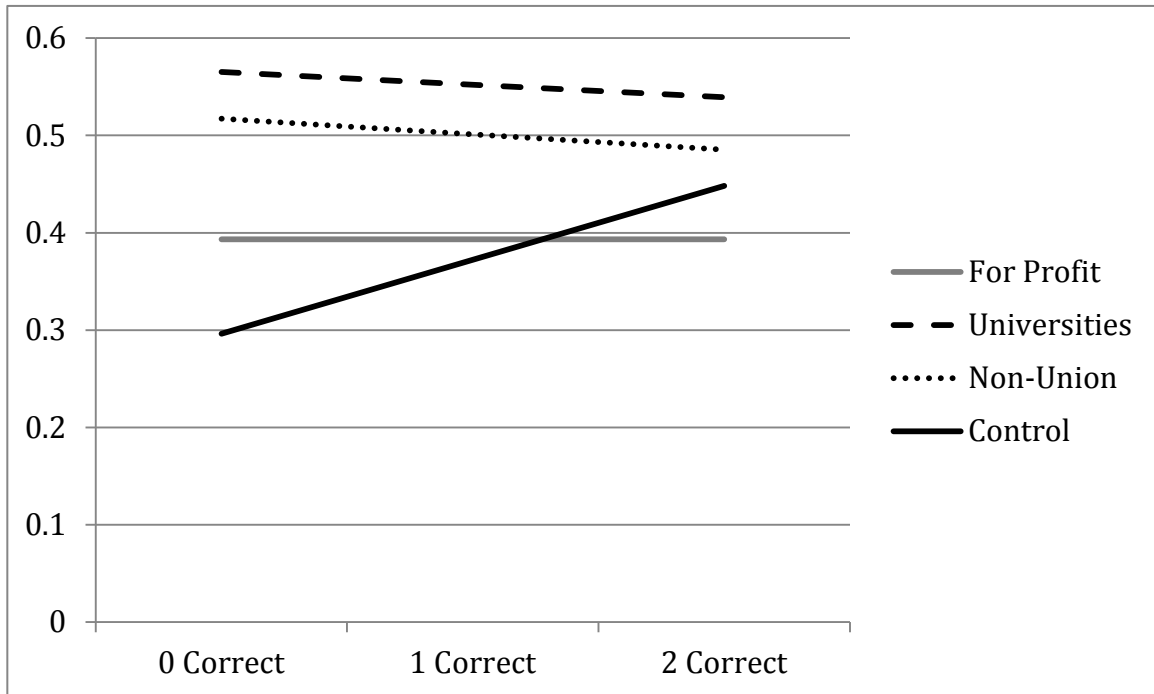
The variables are coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1.

Figure 2: Predicted Values of Charter Support by Ideology and Union Favorability



Charter school support is coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1. Union likability is coded on a five-category equidistant scale from “Dislike a Lot” to “Like a lot.” Ideology is coded on a seven-category equidistant scale from “Very Conservative” to “Very Liberal.” All other variables from the models in Tables 3 and 4 are held at their mean.

Figure 3: Predicted Values of Charter School Support by Political Information Level



Charter school support in your community is coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1. Political information level is ascertained with two factual identification questions asking respondents to name the U.S. Vice President and the partisan majority in the Michigan state senate. All other variables from the model in Table 2 are held at their mean.

Table 1: Models of Support for Charter Schools by Community Context, 2012

	In Your Community	In Worst Performing Districts
Treatment: For-Profit Company Run	-.01 (.03)	-.04 (.03)
Treatment: University Authorized	.15*** (.03)	.04 (.03)
Treatment: Non-Union Teachers	.09** (.03)	.01 (.03)
Ideology (Liberalism +)	-.04*** (.01)	-.03*** (.01)
Party Identification (Democratic +)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Education	.03* (.01)	.03 (.01)
Like Unions	-.17*** (.04)	-.17*** (.04)
Like Corporations	.06 (.04)	.12** (.04)
Constant	.55	.62
Adjusted R²	.16	.10
N	884	853

*The table reports ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1. *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001*

Table 2: Models of Support for Charter Schools in Your Community by Treatment

	No Information	For-Profit Run	University Authorized	Non-Union Teachers
Ideology (Liberalism +)	-.04** (.02)	-.03 [#] (.02)	-.02 (.01)	-.07*** (.01)
Party Identification (Democratic +)	-.03 [#] (.01)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Education	.03 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.01 (.03)
Like Unions	-.15 [#] (.08)	-.17* (.08)	-.17* (.07)	-.23** (.07)
Like Corporations	.03 (.08)	.05 (.07)	.16 [#] (.08)	.08 (.08)
Constant	.69	.53	.53	.78
Adjusted R²	.15	.07	.09	.23
N	203	215	217	226

*The table reports ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable from is coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1. The first model is the control group and each of the final three models refers to a different experimental treatment. [#]<.10 *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001*

Table 3: Models of Support for Charter Schools in Worst Performing Districts

	No Information	For-Profit Run	University Authorized	Non-Union Teachers
Ideology (Liberalism +)	-.02 (.01)	-.00 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	-.06*** (.02)
Party Identification (Democratic +)	-.03 [#] (.01)	-.01 (.02)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.02)
Education	.02 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.01 (.03)
Like Unions	-.15* (.08)	-.23** (.09)	-.21** (.08)	-.13 [#] (.08)
Like Corporations	.13 [#] (.08)	.11 (.08)	.15 [#] (.09)	.10 (.09)
Constant	.70	.54	.52	.75
Adjusted R²	.14	.06	.07	.13
N	199	214	217	221

*The table reports ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable from is coded as a five-category strongly disagree to strongly agree scale with equidistant positions between 0 and 1. The first model is the control group and each of the final three models refers to a different experimental treatment. [#]<.10 *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001*