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# All States Close but Red Districts Reopen: The Politics of In-Person Schooling during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:**

The COVID-19 pandemic created enormous challenges for public education. We assess the role of political factors and public health in state and local education decisions, especially the continuation of learning during COVID-19. Using an original dataset of state education policies since the start of the pandemic, we find that governors took the lead on ordering school closures in Spring 2020 but left decisions to districts in the Fall, regardless of partisanship. Partisanship played a much stronger role in local decisions than state decisions. We analyze local district reopening plans and public opinion on reopening in the politically competitive state of Michigan. Partisanship was much more associated with district reopening plans than COVID-19 rates. Republicans in the Michigan public were also far more favorable than were Democrats toward in-person learning. States' decisions to leave reopening plans to their districts opened the way for students' experiences to be shaped by their area's partisanship.

On March 12, 2020, Ohio became the first state to announce the closure of all K-12 school buildings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other states quickly followed suit as COVID-19 infection rates grew across the country. Although many states began with temporary closure periods of a few weeks, these building closures were extended to the end of the school year in nearly every state. At their peak, school building closures impacted 55.1 million students in U.S. public and private schools (*Education Week,* 2020).

Although there was a generally uniform response to school building closures in the spring of 2020, decisions about how to proceed with instruction in the fall of 2020 unfolded differently across and even within states, reflecting the highly decentralized institutional context of U.S. public education. State and local policy decisions about the continuation of learning for K-12 students during the COVID-19 pandemic were and remain controversial, with political actors attempting to satisfy parents and teachers while responding to an unprecedented situation with limited options. School openings and closings have stimulated campaign ads, protests, and labor disputes (Belsha, 2020; Lee, 2020; Strauss, 2020).

We examine the role of public health data, partisan politics, and collective bargaining in school reopening decisions. For our analysis, we compiled original datasets tracking state-level education policy responses to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, as well as data on local district reopening plans and public opinion on school reopening in a politically diverse state: Michigan. Using these data, we examine how state and local policies shaped the continuation of learning during the spring and fall of 2020 and what factors drove these decisions.

We find that states—especially governors—played a large role in the policy response to COVID-19 in spring 2020. Regardless of partisanship, governors responded quickly to a public health crisis in a time of enormous uncertainty. However, states overwhelmingly left decisions about the start of the 2020-21 school year to local districts. As a result, K-12 schooling modalities across the United States in fall 2020 were a patchwork, with some schools open for in-person education, others providing all remote education, and still others offering hybrid plans in which some instruction occurs in-person and the remainder is offered remotely. Our findings from Michigan show that political partisanship is a much larger factor in school district reopening plans than local public health data on COVID-19 risk. Additionally, we find collective bargaining agreement restrictiveness (a measure of teachers' union strength) increases the likelihood that districts will offer all remote schooling. We also show that political partisanship is strongly associated with public opinion about school reopening in Michigan, suggesting that local officials may reflect public opinion in their areas. While the initial response to COVID-19 and schools at the state level was not partisan, we find that partisan political differences loomed large in both school district planning and public opinion by fall 2020.

**COVID-19, Education, and Politics**

In March 2020, as COVID-19 spread throughout the United States, public health experts called on policymakers to "flatten the curve" due to concerns about over-burdening hospitals

with patients sickened by a novel and deadly disease (Bailey, 2020). School closures were one of many mitigation measures adopted at this time to address the extraordinary challenges of a global pandemic.

While school closures were widely recommended in spring 2020, experts anticipated that these closures would also have high social costs. Researchers and educators alike have voiced concerns about how school building closures and the suspension of face-to-face instruction might affect student's academic progress, mental health, and social-emotional well-being (Hamilton et al., 2020; Kemper Patrick & Newsome, 2020; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). These concerns are reflected in student surveys, which find that youth have become more concerned about having their basic needs met and have poorer cognitive, physical, and emotional health since school-building closures (America's Promise Alliance, 2020; Lake, 2020).

During summer 2020, policymakers' attention shifted to the question of school reopening. At the time, there was relatively little evidence concerning schools and the spread of COVID-19. Since then, research has slowly accumulated concerning the risks of COVID-19 spread due to school reopening. These findings suggest that risks are higher when there is "increased community transmission, insufficient physical distancing, poor ventilation, and lack of masking," but school reopening with appropriate mitigation measures and lower levels of community transmission does not seem to be a substantial contributing factor to viral spread (Goldhaber et al., 2020; Harris, et al. 2021; Isphording et al., 2020; Lordan et al., 2020; Oster, 2020; Vlachos et al., 2020).

While research and public health information could play a role in informing state and local decisions about schooling during COVID-19, partisanship has also been an important factor in public opinion and elite responses to COVID-19 in the U.S. (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020; Horowitz, 2020). Political science researchers have shown consistent evidence of partisanship impacting both attitudes and behaviors in response to COVID-19. Overall, Republican voters and politicians have been less concerned about COVID-19 risks and have adjusted their behavior less often in response to the virus than Democrats (Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2020). Partisans with higher levels of animus towards the other party have an even larger gap in their behavioral responses to COVID-19 (Democrats engage in more mitigating behaviors; Republicans resist changing behaviors) and are less responsive to local COVID-19 conditions (Druckman et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study of more than 1 million US adults shows that "partisanship is 27 times more important than the local incidence of COVID-19 in explaining mobility"—with mobility based on daily reported activities (Clinton et al. 2020). Partisanship was also associated with decision-making among public officials. Republican governors were less likely to quickly introduce social distancing policies for COVID-19, such as restricting gatherings and closing non-essential businesses (Adolph et al. 2020).

Public opinion polling on school reopening suggests that partisan divisions also shape school reopening attitudes—Republicans are more supportive of schools reopening in-person and Democrats are more supportive of schools remaining remote (Horowitz, 2020). These

partisan divisions may have been exacerbated by President Trump. On July 7th, he told the nation "What we want to do is we want to get our schools open. We want to get them open quickly, beautifully, in the fall" (Trump, 2020). Later in the summer, he threatened to cut off funds for school districts or states that did not reopen schools for in-person instruction (Baker et al, 2020).

Indeed, initial research on school district reopening plans suggests that schools in majority Democratic areas are considerably more likely to choose all-remote learning (Valant, 2020; Hartney & Finger, 2020). In addition to partisan politics, research also suggests that teachers' unions and collective bargaining could be a factor in these decisions (Hartney & Finger, 2020). Teachers' unions are especially prominent and influential in local education politics (Moe, 2011), and union leaders voiced many concerns about the risks of school reopening for the health and safety of teachers (Wanneh, 2020).

We are the first to simultaneously address the role of partisanship in state- and local-level decisions on school opening relative to other factors such as teachers' union strength and COVID-19 prevalence in the surrounding communities. State governments, especially governors elected on partisan ballots and serving as their state party's lead official, might be expected to be more influenced by partisanship than local school districts, who are normally governed by nonpartisan boards and superintendents. But state officials also might fear implementing unpopular statewide mandates, thus incentivizing them to allow for local variation. Governors, as the key actors making difficult COVID-19 decisions, may see local decision-making as the path to avoiding blame.

In what follows, we first outline our data and methods used to address questions about the role of state and local political partisanship in school reopening decisions in the spring and fall of 2020. We then outline our findings regarding state responses, local district responses, and public opinion about reopening. Last, we discuss our results through the lens of the immense political polarization that has overtaken the school reopening debate in the US.

**Data and Methods**

We use three novel datasets to assess state actions nationwide in spring and fall 2020, local actions in Michigan in early fall 2020 as districts were making initial decisions about how to open schools, and Michigan public opinion in fall 2020. In each case, our goal is to assess policy decisions and their responsiveness to partisanship, special interest groups, and public health data.

Our approach recognizes that state policy responses impact the decision-making options available to local school districts. Centralized decision-making typically ensures greater policy consistency, while more decentralized decision-making or "local control" can produce more divergent policy outcomes (McGuinn & Manna 2013). Since states have authority over local districts, they have the power to shape the conditions of local decision-making (Manna, 2012). If states take a centralized and partisan approach—for instance, if Republican Governors

required all schools to open—it would prevent local districts in those states from incorporating local COVID-19 conditions and/or local partisan preferences or special interest group pressures into their decisions. Alternatively, if states refrain from issuing specific guidelines or requirements, these policy choices could be shaped more extensively by local COVID-19 conditions and/or local partisanship or special interest groups. Our analysis begins with state policy responses and then moves to an analysis of local district policy responses and public opinion within a competitive state.

***State-level data***

We use an original state-level K-12 education COVID-19-response dataset that tracks state-level school closure decisions, recommendations or requirements for remote learning, and plans or decisions concerning instructional hours, equity, funding, and assessment in both the spring of the 2019-20 and fall of the 2020-21 school years. We built this dataset by combing each state's Department of Education website, focusing on their COVID-19 page where memos, frequently asked questions, and other guiding documents are posted and updated regularly. We augmented this information with other state websites including, but not limited to, executive orders and press releases from Governors' offices as well as guidance found on the states' Department of Health websites.

We coded these webpages in five waves, gathering data to capture the status of state policy responses from April 2nd through September 1st.[1] In our most recent state dataset, we include 82 items, mostly as binary yes or no indicators unless otherwise specified. In this paper, we focus on four state policies that were key to the school closing decision in spring 2020 and to the reopening decision in fall 2020. These indicate whether or not states: 1) required districts to write distance learning plans to guide local districts' instruction in spring 2020; 2) allowed local districts to decide whether or not reopen for in-person instruction in fall 2020; 3) required districts to move up the start date for the 2020-21 school year; and 4) provided guidance to direct districts phased resumption of in-person instruction in fall 2020, usually based on the prevalence of COVID-19 infections in surrounding communities. We also capture the partisanship of the state's governor and legislature as well as with the number of COVID-19 cases on April 2nd and September 1st to match state guidance updates. To understand the state-level status of teachers' unions' collective bargaining, we used data from the Education Commission of the States to capture whether states permitted or prohibited teachers to collectively bargain. Appendix Table 1 provides the value for each measure by state. Appendix Table 2 provides summary statistics of state measures by governor partisanship.

***Michigan District-level data***

To understand local policy decisions, we compiled a dataset of district-level reopening plans for all districts in the state of Michigan, tracking school building reopening plans and

[1] The full dataset can be found online at: https://ippsr.msu.edu/state-policies-address-covid-19-school-closure

guidance leading up to the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. We collected and coded Return to School plans submitted by 823 (99%) Michigan traditional and charter school districts by August 19th, 2020. Coding focused on what mode(s) of instruction districts were planning to provide upon school reopening for the 2020-21 school year.[2]

We paired these data with local health information tracking COVID-19 infection rates and election information from the 2016 election cycle to gain insight into how either of these influenced school's reopening plans.[3] To assess the factors associated with local district fall reopening decisions, we pair these data with county-level measures of partisanship (2016 Democratic presidential vote share, taken from the MIT Election Lab) and COVID-19 cases per 1,000 (using daily confirmed COVID-19 total cases through August 17, 2020 by county downloaded from Harvard Dataverse[4]), and district-level measures of union strength (collective bargaining agreement restrictiveness, based on analysis of every collective bargaining agreement in Michigan school districts for the 2014-15 school year)[5], as well as district and county-level demographic variables (race/ethnicity and population density, taken from MISchoolData.org and the U.S. Census).[6] Appendix Table 3 provides summary statistics for these measures.

***Michigan Public Opinion Data***

We also make use of survey data on the opinions of Michigan adults in October 2020 from the State of the State Survey (a program of Michigan State University) and fielded by YouGov.[7] The 1,000-person online survey is recruited and weighted to be representative of the state population. It has been compared against a random digit dialling telephone sample to confirm similar prior results. The survey included a question about respondents' support for in-person schooling. We examine support for in-person schooling based on responses to other items on the

[2] More detail about these data can be found in EPIC (2020): https://epicedpolicy.org/return-to-learn-how-michigan-school-districts-plan-to-reopen-in-fall-2020/

[3] Our source for county level election returns was the MIT Election Data and Science Lab: MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2018, "County Presidential Election Returns 2000-2016", https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VOQCHQ, Harvard Dataverse, V6, UNF:6:ZZe1xuZ5H2l4NUiSRcRf8Q== [fileUNF]; We also estimated our models using preliminary 2020 county-level presidential election returns downloaded from Politico: https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/michigan/

[4] We examined COVID-19 cases for different time periods in our analysis, including focusing exclusively on July case levels (because district plans were submitted in August) and examining the aggregate total cases. We found that the aggregate total cases, rather than focusing on the more proximate July case count had more explanatory power in in our models. Data Source: China Data Lab, 2020, "US COVID-19 Daily Cases with Basemap", https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HIDLTK, Harvard Dataverse, V46, UNF:6:l+QTrceV0xEn3GGLAskwEQ== [fileUNF]

[5] The measure of CBA strength is based on the Partial Independence Item Response Model approach developed by Strunk and Reardon (2010) and shown to be a valid proxy for union strength by Strunk and Grissom (2010). More details about its development and use can be found in Strunk and Reardon (2010) and Strunk (2011).

[6] We include population density as a covariate in our multivariate models to account for the fact that more populous areas are more likely to have high rates of COVID-19, and are also more likely to be urban centers.

[7] Michigan State University Institute for Public Policy and Social Research. (2020). State of the State Survey 79 [Data file and code book]. Retrieved from http://ippsr.msu.edu/soss/

survey, including political partisanship, approval of President Trump, having children at home, and race/ethnicity. Appendix Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for these data.

### *Methods*

Using the data described above, we assess how partisanship and COVID-19 infection levels are related to school building reopening decisions for fall 2020 and to public attitudes on schools during COVID-19. Most relevant orders and policies on school building closures and other requirements for school districts came from governors' offices, therefore, we focus on gubernatorial partisanship in our discussion. However, examining legislative partisanship shows similar results. We first look at state decisions on school closures, summarizing the data across states and descriptively comparing states with Republican governors to states with Democratic governors.

To assess the relationship between districts' school reopening plans and partisanship, COVID-19 levels, and other factors including collective bargaining agreement strength, we estimate logistic regression models using robust standard errors clustered at the county level. To examine the factors associated with public opinion on in-person school reopening, we estimate OLS regressions and ordered logit models to assess how partisan identification, support for President Trump, race/ethnicity, and status as a parent are associated with support for an in-person school option.

## Results

### *State Responses*

#### Truncated 2019-20 School Year and Distance Learning in Spring 2020

In the spring of 2020, schools in forty-nine states completely suspended in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year. Montana initially ceased face-to-face instruction but allowed for reopening on May 7th for the remainder of the academic year. Given that nearly every state acted similarly, there was no relationship between policy decisions and COVID-19 cases or partisanship.

While there was consistency across states in the decision to close school buildings, states took somewhat different approaches in requiring districts to provide instructional plans for spring 2020. Table 1 outlines states that did and did not require districts to provide continuity of learning or distance learning plans addressing how they would continue to educate students in the absence of face-to-face instruction. Such plans might be important to help districts to think clearly about how they would ensure continued learning even as school buildings shut down and to provide transparency and accountability to the public about what actions districts would take to do so. These policies also provide information about whether states were attempting a more prescriptive and centralized approach, or whether they largely enabled local control and discretion in planning for instructional delivery.

Thirty-three states required districts to provide distance learning plans so that students could continue instruction in the absence of face-to-face learning. While the decision to require distance learning plans was not as widespread as the decision to require school building closures, roughly two-thirds of states maintained a relatively prescriptive role in directing school districts to maintain instruction. An additional 17 states encouraged but did not require the adoption of distance learning plans. Table 1 also breaks down the political affiliation of governors who did and did not require distance learning plans. Although states with Democratic governors were a bit more likely to require distance learning plans, the decisions were not strongly related to partisanship. Similarly, differences do not seem related to union strength: both lists contain states with permitted and not permitted collective bargaining (Education Commission of the States, 2020).

**Table 1: Partisanship of Governors in States That Required School District Plans for Remote Learning in Spring 2020**

| | **Distance Plans Required** | **Distance Plans Recommended/Not Required** |
|---|---|---|
| **Republican Governors** | 16 states<br>(AL, AK, AZ, FL, GA, ID, IN, MS, NE, NH, ND, OK, SC, VT, WV, WY) | 8 states<br>(AR, IA, MA, MO, OH, SD, TN, TX) |
| **Democratic Governors** | 15 states<br>(CA, DE, IL, KS, MD, MI, MN, NV, NJ, NM, NY, OR, PA, RI, WA) | 2 states<br>(LA, VA, WI) |
| **Collective Bargaining Permitted** | 28 states<br>(AL, AK, CA, DE, FL, ID, IL, IN, KS, MD, MI, MN, MS, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, ND, OK, OR, PA, RI, VT, WA, WV, WY) | 9 states<br>(AR, IA, LA, MA, MO, OH, SD, TN, WI) |
| **Collective Bargaining Not Permitted** | 3 states<br>(AZ, GA, SC) | 2 states<br>(TX, VA) |
| **No Guidance:** 8 states (CO, CT, HI, KY, ME, MT, NC, UT) | | |

**Reopening in Fall 2020**

State reopening guidance for fall 2020, much like the decision to shutter school buildings in the spring, was largely consistent across state and party lines. However, states departed from the more prescriptive and centralized approach that we observed in the spring—rather than making state-level decisions or issuing strong guidance, the vast majority of states adopted a "local control" approach to reopening. In 25 states with Republican governors and 23 states with Democratic governors, decisions about instructional modalities for fall 2020 were

left to local school districts. Only two states—with governors of different parties—set forth the instructional modality for the state leading into the 2020-21 school year. In Arkansas, state guidance set hybrid as the instructional modality and New Jersey state guidance called for in-person instruction.

Furthermore, relatively few states offered specific requirements to guide reopening decisions, including the provision of phased reopening guidelines (which we defined as a series of guidance based on COVID-19 infection rates in a community and the corresponding educational activities that can occur). Such guidance can be important to help local decisionmakers weigh the risks and benefits of school reopening decisions and to foster consistent and evidence-based decision making (Bowie & Cohn, 2020). When it came to the logistics of reopening school buildings in fall 2020, only seven states moved the start date for the 2020-21 school year to mid- or late-August—Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, and North Carolina. Seventeen states provided guidance outlining how a phased reopening that links in-person instruction with COVID-19 infection rates in the surrounding community should proceed. Partisanship may have played some role in the level of prescriptiveness of state guidance for phased reopening. Democratic-governed states were more likely to promote phased reopening, largely based on COVID-19 levels in different regions of the state. But as illustrated in Table 2, there was variation within each party. Reopening plans were also not strongly related to legislative party control or state party presidential vote (not shown but highly associated with governor partisanship). Union collective bargaining rules (not shown) also were not strongly related to reopening guidance.

**Table 2: Partisanship of Governors and COVID-19 Infection Rates in in States that Issued Phased Reopening Guidance by September 1**

| | **Phased Reopening** | **No Phased Reopening** | **Reopening Guidance Not Provided** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Republican Governors** | 6 states<br>(AK, AZ, ID, IN, ND, SC) | 19 states<br>(AL, AR, FL, GA, IA, MA, MD, MO, MS, NH, OH, OK, SD, TN, TX, UT, VT, WV, WY) | 1 state<br>(NE) |
| **Democratic Governors** | 10 states<br>(CT, DE, IL, LA, MI, NC, OR, PA, RI, VA) | 13 states<br>(CA, CO, HI, KS, KY, ME, MN, MT, NJ, NM, NV, NY, WI) | 1 state<br>(WA) |

Since nearly all states decided to leave reopening decisions to districts, there were no major differences in that decision by state partisanship. But that does not mean reopening decisions were made without reference to partisanship. Indeed, devolving reopening decision-making responsibility to the local level may have allowed for local partisanship to have an outsize influence in whether or not to return students to in-person instruction. And these decisions could have substantial impacts on student outcomes—both related to academic progress and student physical and mental health (America's Promise Alliance, 2020; Lake, 2020; Malkus, 2020).

Michigan provided phased reopening guidance to local school districts, tying reopening decisions to regional COVID-19 infection rates. As such, we might expect districts to avoid local partisan decisions and instead follow state guidance linking school reopening to local COVID-19 levels. However, as shown in our analysis below, that does not seem to be how it played out.

***Local Reopening Decisions in Michigan***

In most states, local school districts had the power to decide whether to reopen schools in-person in fall 2020. To examine how local decisions may or may not be associated with local partisanship, special interest group (teachers' union) sway, and local health patterns, we turn to Michigan, a politically diverse state with more than 500 traditional public school districts. Despite state guidance on phased reopening, Michigan local school districts still had broad discretion over determining the mode of instruction for the 2020-21 school year. As of August 2020, 59% of districts planned to provide at least the option of fully in-person education and 12% were fully remote only (others pursued hybrid strategies).

First, we examine bivariate relationships between COVID-19 case levels and reopening decisions in Figure 1 (Panel A). Districts with higher-than-average county case counts were 1.6 times more likely to go remote than those with below average counts (14.7% to 9.3%); those with below-average case counts were 1.4 times more likely to offer a fully in-person option (66.8% to 47.6%).

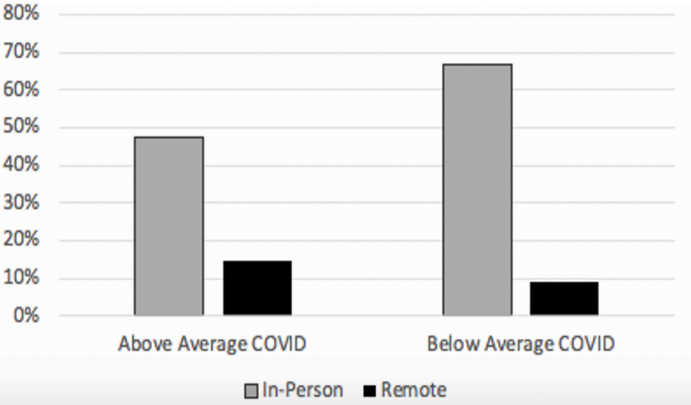
Next, we examine the relationship between partisan politics and reopening decisions. As can be seen in Figure 1 (Panel B), this relationship is quite strong. Among districts in counties where Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton received less than 40% of the vote (known as Republican landslide counties), only 5% are all remote and 71% have in-person instruction. Where Clinton received more than 60% of the vote (Democratic landslide counties), 21% are all remote and 41% are offering school in-person. In other words, in heavily Democratic voting counties, school districts are more than four times as likely to open fully remote this fall. In heavily Republican counties, school districts are 1.7 times as likely to offer in-person instruction. School districts in political battleground counties are in the middle.

Third, we look at the relationship between collective bargaining agreement restrictiveness—an indicator of local teacher union strength—and reopening decisions in Figure

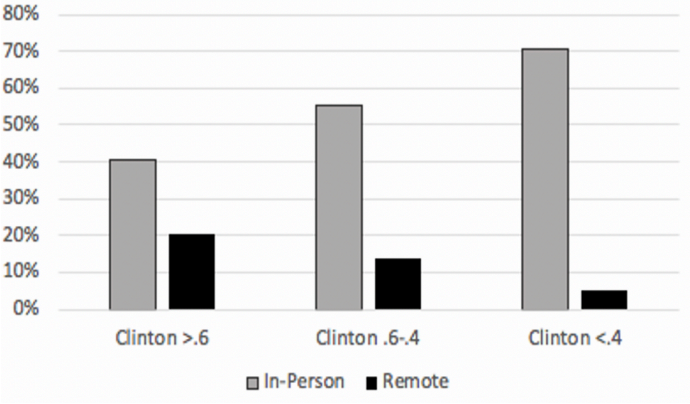
1 (Panel C). Districts with below average CBA restrictiveness have a higher rate of planning for in-person learning compared to districts with above average CBA restrictiveness.

**Figure 1: Districts Reopening Mode Based on COVID, Partisanship, and Unions**

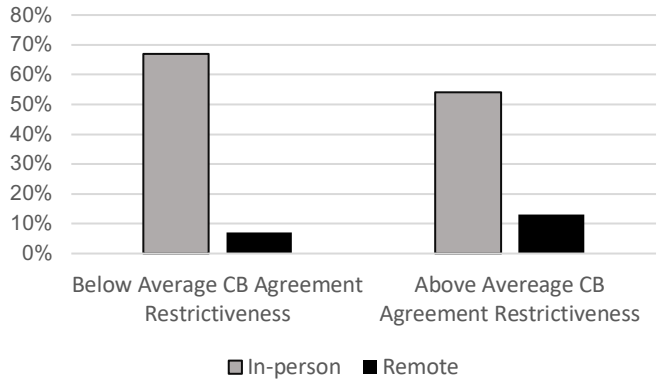
Panel A: COVID-19 Case Levels and District Reopening




Panel B: 2016 Presidential Vote and District Reopening




Panel C: Collective Bargaining Agreement Restrictiveness and District Reopening



We next examine these factors in a multivariate model in order to better understand how individual factors predict initial reopening status when controlling for other factors. Table 3 presents logistic regression models separately predicting district plans to open completely remote and fully in-person or with the option of in-person instruction. Models 1, 2, 3, and 4 include traditional public school districts in Michigan; Models 5 and 6 includes charter schools in Michigan (n=281). The coefficients in Table 3 represent log-odds. We estimate separate models for each because collective bargaining restrictiveness is largely not applicable to Michigan charter schools, as the vast majority do not have a unionized teacher workforce. Additionally, very few charter schools in Michigan are authorized by elected school boards, so we expect weaker political effects on reopening decisions for these schools (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 2020). We also run all models using only traditional public school districts with and without a control for collective bargaining agreement strength to allow for more direct comparisons to the charter sample.

We find that COVID-19 rates at the county level are significantly associated with traditional public school district in-person reopening plans (shown in Models 2 and 4). The finding is in the expected direction; school districts are significantly less likely to have plans for in-person school in counties with higher rates of COVID-19. We do not find a significant relationship between COVID-19 rates in the surrounding communities and school reopening plans for charter schools, nor do we find a relationship between COVID-19 rates and districts' choice to begin the school year entirely remote in traditional public school districts.

We find a significant relationship between the Democratic Presidential vote share in 2016 and traditional public school district reopening plans.[8] Districts in counties with higher Democratic vote share are significantly less likely to have in-person reopening plans and significantly more likely to have plans for all-remote schooling. Furthermore, school districts with more restrictive collective bargaining agreements are also more likely to have plans for only remote schooling—building on previous work that suggests that districts with stronger teachers' unions that are able to negotiate more restrictive CBAs may shape district policy (Strunk & Grissom, 2010), this time by swaying districts to offer remote learning. Interestingly, we also find a relationship between county-level Presidential vote and in-person school plans for charter schools, even though most charter schools are not authorized by elected school boards. Charter schools in more Democratic voting counties are less likely to offer in-person school.[9] This finding suggests that the consequences of partisan polarization on school reopening decisions may extend beyond traditional districts that are designed to be responsive

[8] We also estimated the model with 2020 county-level Presidential vote and found consistent results.

[9]Although charter schools in Michigan are disproportionately located in Democratic landslide counties (45% of charter schools), there are 48 charter schools (16%) located in Republican landslide counties. The overwhelming majority of charters in Republican landslide counties had in-person reopening plans, while the reverse is true for charters in Democratic landslide counties.

to the public through a traditionally elected board. The overall political effects on charter schools, however, seem weaker.

**Table 3: Predicting District-Level Reopening Plans in Michigan**

| | Model 1 All Remote TPS | Model 2 Fully In-person or option TPS | Model 3 All Remote TPS (without CB variable) | Model 4 Fully In-person or option TPS (without CB variable) | Model 5 All Remote Charter Schools | Model 6 In-person (full or option) Charter Schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| COVID-19 per thousand | 0.038 (0.075) | -0.093** (0.031) | 0.041 (0.063) | -0.086** (0.026) | -0.132 (0.096) | -0.038 (0.041) |
| 2016 Democratic Presidential vote | 7.716** (2.278) | -4.307** (1.422) | 5.948** (1.835) | -3.432** (0.825) | 1.985 (1.847) | -2.666** (1.004) |
| CB agreement strength | 0.352* (0.162) | -0.174 (0.092) | — | — | — | — |
| Population density (county) | -0.001 (0.000) | 0.001* (0.000) | -0.001 (0.000) | 0.001** (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| % Black students | 1.577 (0.884) | -2.438** (0.603) | -0.128 (0.336) | -0.417* (0.184) | -0.008 (0.433) | -0.221 (0.298) |
| % Hispanic students | 1.664 (1.263) | 1.344 (0.971) | -0.100 (0.877) | 0.794* (0.347) | -1.294 (1.231) | 0.491 (0.617) |
| Constant | -5.842** (0.944) | 2.759** 0.517 | -4.831** (0.728) | 2.362** (0.355) | -2.012* (1.024) | 1.825** (0.575) |
| N | 515 | 515 | 818 | 818 | 281 | 281 |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.155 | 0.089 | 0.050 | 0.053 | 0.019 | 0.033 |

Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. **p<0.01; * p<0.05

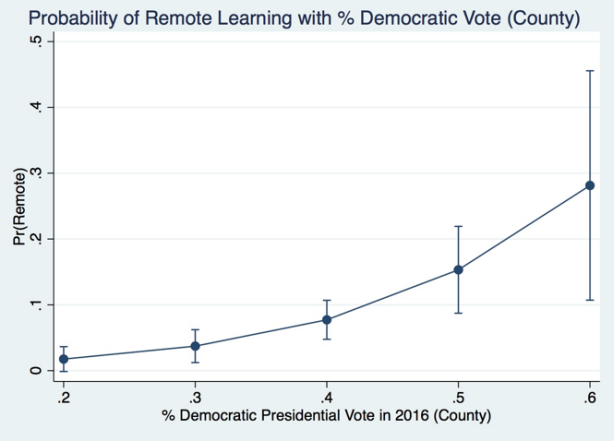
We also find that traditional public school districts in Michigan with a higher proportion of Black students are significantly less likely to have plans to begin the school year in-person. This finding confirms media reports that districts serving students of color were more likely to open fully remote in the fall (Belsha et al. 2020). However, we do not find a significant

relationship for Black or Hispanic student enrollment and charter school reopening plans.[10] When we divide our sample to focus on districts and charter schools in Michigan with majority Black student enrollment, we find a difference between traditional public schools and charter schools. Charter schools in Michigan that enroll majority Black students are significantly more likely to have a plan for in-person schooling (see Appendix Table 2 for results). Furthermore, the county-level Democratic vote share is significantly and negatively associated with in-person reopening for schools with majority Black student enrollment. Overall, the strong relationship between partisanship and school reopening plans is quite robust across our models and different types of schools.

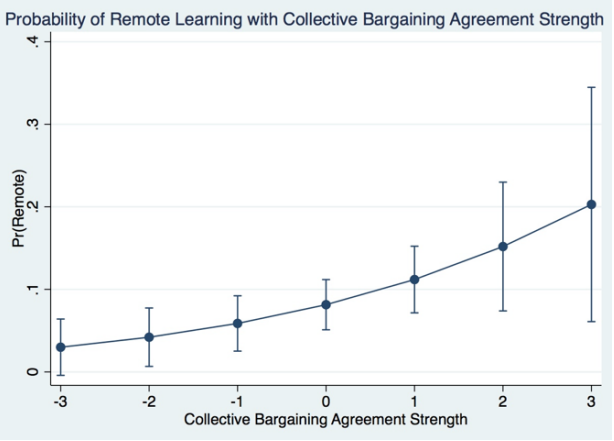
Figure 2 graphically depicts the relationship between Democratic vote share and the probability of districts opting for remote only instruction (Panel A) and between CBA strength and the probability of remote instruction (Panel B), generated based on Model 1 from Table 3. Panel A shows that at the mean rate of Democratic vote in 2016 (45%), there was only an 11% chance for remote instruction. When Democratic vote share was one standard deviation greater (58%), this shifted to an over 25% chance for remote instruction. By contrast, Panel B shows that mean districts with average collective bargaining strength (0), there was just less than a 10% probability that districts would operate remotely. However, districts with contracts that were one standard deviation stronger only experienced a small—approximately 3%—increase in the probability of remote operation in fall 2020. This shows the relative importance of partisanship over teachers' union strength in school reopening decisions.

**Figure 2: Relationship between % Democratic Vote, Collective Bargaining Agreement Strength, and the Likelihood of Districts Offering Remote Instruction Only in the Fall of 2020**

Panel A




Panel B




[10] The majority of Michigan charter schools planned for in-person learning (52%) while only 12% planned for an all remote start. Black students are a disproportionate share of Michigan's charter school student enrollment (45%); however, there is variation in Michigan charter school enrollment. For example, 36% of Michigan charter schools have enrollment that is 60% or more white students.

**Public Opinion on School Reopening in Michigan**

We further examine the relationship between partisanship and school reopening with public opinion survey data from Michigan. These results confirm that partisan divides over school reopening are large. The Michigan State of the State Survey included the following statement about school reopening plans, with which respondents were asked to agree or disagree: "All Michigan school districts should be offering at least optional in-person education in fall 2020, even if COVID-19 cases are still present in the local community." Responses were coded on a 5-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Overall, a larger share of respondents answered that they strongly or somewhat agree with an in-person option for education—45% compared to 35% who said that they strongly or somewhat disagree. Twenty percent neither agreed nor disagreed. However, there is a huge partisan divide in these results. Among Democrats, only 25% agreed with an in-person option for education, while 78% of Republicans agreed.

We also predicted responses to this survey question, with results shown in Table 4. Model 1 provides results from an OLS regression, and Models 2 and 3 show results from ordered logit models. For the OLS model we use the 5-point scaled responses on support for in-person school option as the dependent variable. For the ordered logit models, we collapse the "strongly" and "somewhat" categories for agree and disagree to produce a 3-point ordered scale for the dependent variable. For the partisanship independent variable in the first two models, we use a 7-point scale for party identification, ranging from "Strong Republican" (3) to "Strong Democrat" (-3). In the third model, we collapse these categories into Republican and Democrat identifier dummy variables using the endpoints of the scale (3 and 2 = Republican; -3 and –2 = Democrat). Trump-approval is a dummy variable showing respondents who rated President Trump job approval as "excellent" or "good." We included three additional demographic variables that are associated with attitudes on school reopening based on national survey reporting—respondents who identify as Black or Hispanic and respondents with children under-18 in the home (Horowitz, 2020).

The results are consistent across our different model specifications, showing that partisanship and Trump-approval are both significant and positive—aligning with the partisan division we saw in school reopening plans. Republicans are significantly more supportive of an in-person option, while Trump approval also has a significant and positive relationship with in-person support. Furthermore, families with children at home were more supportive of an in-person option. Importantly, while prior survey reports have shown that Black and Hispanic respondents are less supportive of in-person school, we find no relationship in a model after controlling for party in Models 2 and 3; however, in Model 1 we do find a positive and significant relationship for Black respondents and support for an in-person option. The results for Black and Hispanic respondents persist even if we limit the model to only respondents who identify as Democrats. In other words, the observed difference in attitudes on school reopening between whites, Blacks, and Hispanics may be primarily attributable to partisan differences in

school reopening attitudes. Thus, the developing perspective that minority families are less interested in in-person schooling may be closely tied to partisanship.

**Table 4: Predicting Support for In-Person School Option**

| | Model 1<br>OLS | Model 2<br>Ordered Logit | Model 3<br>Ordered Logit | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partisanship | 0.11**<br>(0.03) | 0.21**<br>(0.04) | ___ | |
| Democrat | ___ | ___ | -0.41*<br>(0.20) | |
| Republican | ___ | ___ | 0.59*<br>(0.29) | |
| Trump approval | 1.37**<br>(0.12) | 1.94**<br>(0.20) | 2.04**<br>(0.24) | |
| Kids in home | 0.24**<br>(0.09) | 0.46**<br>(0.16) | 0.65**<br>(0.22) | |
| Black | 0.26*<br>(0.13) | 0.41<br>(0.21) | 0.29<br>(0.32) | |
| Hispanic | -0.03<br>(0.16) | -0.22<br>(0.27) | -0.36<br>(0.39) | |
| Constant | -0.29<br>(0.07) | ___ | ___ | |
| Constant Cut 1 | | -0.23<br>(0.12) | -0.29<br>(0.14) | -0.15<br>(0.16) |
| Constant Cut 2 | | 0.90<br>(0.12) | 0.79<br>(0.14) | 0.92<br>(0.16) |
| N | 992 | 992 | 992 | |
| R-squared | 0.32 | __ | __ | |

Unstandardized coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. **p<0.01; * p<0.05

Both of our analyses from Michigan show that political partisanship is the most consistent explanatory factor to understanding differences in local district reopening plans and differences in attitudes towards school reopening. Unfortunately, we cannot fully assess whether polarization in public opinion on school reopening caused the polarized response in school district planning. We do not know whether local school officials were reflecting opinion in their districts or helping lead opinion or whether both citizens and officials were influenced by similar factors. However, our findings clearly demonstrate the overwhelming importance of partisan divisions on the issue of school reopening, even when controlling for COVID-19 severity and demographics.

**Unpolarized States and Polarized Districts**

In the wake of COVID-19, momentous education policy decisions are being made quickly by state governments and local districts. Although we would hope that these decisions reflect local public health threats and resources available for remote and in-person instruction, today's polarized partisan context means that decisions may instead reflect partisan incentives and polarized views.

At the state level, decisions were surprisingly non-partisan, with a large consensus to close schools in the spring and leave reopening decisions to districts in the fall. But that consensus could also be seen as "passing the buck," as districts were left to deal with the challenges associated with remote instruction, children with special needs, and staffing and training without comprehensive assistance. Limited and voluntary state guidance in the fall also meant that political conflict moved to the district level.

At the district level in Michigan, most districts offered the option of in-person learning. But decisions were more tied to local politics and union strength than to COVID-19 severity. Even where states sought to guide their districts about when to reopen, local districts made their own decisions, partly based on local political context. These findings match an emerging national literature. Although we might hope that local decision-making was more responsive to local health threat, it was instead more responsive to citizen and interest group views. The effects were not as apparent in charter schools, suggesting that political responsiveness to local opinion and interest groups may be more influential for elected school boards. Public opinion on school reopening, as we saw, was mostly a partisan affair; assumptions that it reflected racial divides or local COVID-19 conditions drew less support. Local officials and their constituents seemed to divide on partisan lines instead.

In a time of rising polarization, governors largely resisted pressure to follow their party's national leaders by either staying open in the spring or opening or closing schools statewide in the fall. That contrasts with an emerging literature finding large partisan differences in policy across states due to national polarization (Grumbach 2018; Caughey & Warshaw 2016). In this case, the hot button issue led Democratic and Republican states to the same decision: pass the buck. The official partisanship of state electoral institutions compared to local school boards might seem to make governors more vulnerable to politicized decision-making, but here they seemed largely to seek blame avoidance, closing statewide when all other states were doing the same and then enabling local decision-making on the controversial issue of reopening.

State non-partisanship in this case left local districts with most of the difficult decisions. They appear to have been less able to resist partisan-aligned positions on school reopening. In Republican-voting counties, school districts were more likely to open with full in-person learning or in-person options. In Democratic-voting counties, school districts were more likely to offer remote instruction only. If we view these policy decisions alongside polarization in mitigation behavior (such as mask wearing and social distancing), this also suggests that schools

were more likely to offer in-person schooling in communities where residents were less likely to adopt behavioral changes to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Clinton et al., 2020; Druckman et al., 2020). Leaving decisions to localities is a popular method for satisfying constituents while appearing to be more responsive to local needs. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been governors and state education departments who have tended to make decisions out of the glare of partisanship while local districts and citizens may have been more guided by their partisan predispositions.

A new administration may change the partisan politics. President Joe Biden and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona have both tried to promote in-person school reopening without upsetting teachers' unions and reluctant Democratic voters, mostly by emphasizing vaccine availability and prioritization for teachers and school staff. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (and several other governors) have followed the new president's lead, coaxing recalcitrant districts toward plans for reopening in-person education (Livengood, 2021). Perhaps Democratic leaders realize that their constituents and allies need encouragement to overcome the large-scale local and public polarization that had developed by the fall of 2020.

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## Appendix

### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for State-level Policy Responses

| State | Governor Partisanship | Legislature Partisanship | COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 (April 2) | Distance Learning Plans Required | COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 (Sept. 1) | Decision to reopen left up to local districts | Moved the official 2020-21 school year start date | Phased Reopening | Collective Bargaining |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alabama | 0 | 0 | 22.6 | 1 | 2389.3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Alaska | 0 | 0 | 19.5 | 1 | 719.4 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Arizona | 0 | 0 | 22.0 | 1 | 2772.9 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Arkansas | 0 | 0 | 20.7 | 0 | 2028.8 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| California | 1 | 1 | 20.6 | 1 | 1781.9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Colorado | 1 | 1 | 58.0 | 0 | 997.2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Connecticut | 1 | 1 | -- | 0 | 1483.2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Delaware | 1 | 1 | 37.8 | 1 | 1789.9 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Florida | 0 | 0 | 36.2 | 1 | 2902.9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Georgia | 0 | 0 | 44.7 | 1 | 2547.4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Hawaii | 1 | 1 | 18.2 | 0 | 598.4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Idaho | 0 | 0 | 37.4 | 1 | 1795.6 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Illinois | 1 | 1 | 55.1 | 1 | 1854.7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Indiana | 0 | 0 | 38.1 | 1 | 1399.2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Iowa | 0 | 0 | 17.4 | 0 | 2068.4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Kansas | 1 | 0 | -- | 1 | 1462.7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Kentucky | 1 | 0 | 15.2 | 0 | 1083.2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Louisiana | 1 | 0 | 138.2 | 0 | 3187.8 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Maine | 1 | 1 | 25.6 | 0 | 336.7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Maryland | 0 | 1 | 32.8 | 1 | 1790.5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Massachusetts | 0 | 1 | 112.3 | 0 | 1723.4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Michigan | 1 | 0 | 93.5 | 1 | 1131.7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Minnesota | 1 | 2 | 12.2 | 1 | 1345.2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Mississippi | 0 | 0 | 36.1 | 1 | 2787.2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Missouri | 0 | 0 | 25.8 | 0 | 1380.0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Montana | 1 | 0 | 20.3 | 0 | 694.3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Nebraska | 0 | 2 | 11.1 | 1 | 1772.5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Nevada | 1 | 1 | 41.5 | 1 | 2247.5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| New Hampshire | 0 | 1 | 30.5 | 1 | 535.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| New Jersey | 1 | 1 | 250.6 | 1 | 2161.2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| New Mexico | 1 | 1 | 17.3 | 1 | 1209.1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| New York | 1 | 1 | 430.3 | 1 | 2234.9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| North Carolina | 1 | 0 | 15.1 | 0 | 1595.3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| North Dakota | 0 | 0 | 19.3 | 1 | 1550.5 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Ohio | 0 | 0 | 21.8 | 0 | 998.1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Oklahoma | 0 | 0 | 18.1 | 1 | 1484.3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Oregon | 1 | 1 | 17.5 | 1 | 633.3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Pennsylvania | 1 | 0 | 45.3 | 1 | 1017.1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Rhode Island | 1 | 1 | 53.4 | 1 | 2029.0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| South Carolina | 0 | 0 | 25.1 | 1 | 2278.9 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| South Dakota | 0 | 0 | 14.6 | 0 | 1527.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Tennessee | 0 | 0 | 39.3 | 0 | 2268.7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Texas | 0 | 0 | 13.8 | 0 | 2114.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Utah | 0 | 0 | -- | 0 | 1625.3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Vermont | 0 | 1 | -- | 1 | 262.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Virginia | 1 | 1 | 17.4 | 0 | 1412.8 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Washington | 1 | 1 | 78.6 | 1 | 980.1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| West Virginia | 0 | 0 | 10.7 | 1 | 571.9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Wisconsin | 1 | 0 | 26.6 | 0 | 1298.5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Wyoming | 0 | 0 | 23.7 | 1 | 564.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Binary variable defined as 1=Democrat governor and 0=Republican governor | Variable defined as 2=split or non-partisan legislature, 1=Democrat majority legislature, and 0=Republican majority legislature as defined by the National Conference | Infection rates from April 2 pulled from the COVID-19 Tracking Project divided by the population from the Census Bureau | Binary variable defined as 1=distance learning plans are required per state guidance and 0=distance learning plans are recommended nor required | Infection rates from Sept. 1 pulled from the COVID-19 Tracking Project divided by the population from the Census Bureau | Binary variable defined as 1=decision regarding reopening modality left up to local districts and 0=the state tried to determine reopening modality | Binary variable defined as 1=the start date for the 2020-21 school year was moved according to state guidance and 0=the start date was not moved | Binary variable defined as 1=phased reopening outlined in guidance (specifically linking instruction with COVID-19 infection rates) and 0=no phased reopening or no guidance | Binary variable defined as 1=state policy allows for collective bargaining and 0=state policy does not allow for collective bargaining, pulled from Education Commission of the States |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | of State Legislatures | | | | | according to state guidance | | |

**Table 2: State Policy Responses and COVID-19 Rates by Party of Governor**

| | Republican Governor | Democratic Governor |
|---|---|---|
| **Governors** | 26 | 24 |
| **Average COVID-19 rate on April 2** | 30.6 | 90.5 |
| **Distance Learning Plans Required** | 16 | 15 |
| **Average COVID-19 rate on September 1** | 2149.4 | 1602.7 |
| **Decision to reopen left up to local districts** | 25 | 23 |
| **Moved the official 2020-21 school year start date** | 4 | 3 |
| **Phased Reopening** | 6 | 10 |
| **Collective Bargaining** | 22 | 22 |

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Michigan School Reopening Plan Analysis**

| | Geographic unit | Mean | Standard Dev | Min | Max | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dependent Variables** | | | | | | |
| In-person instruction | School district | 0.59 | 0.49 | 0 | 1 | Data compiled by authors |
| Remote instruction | School district | 0.12 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | Data compiled by authors |
| **Independent Variables** | | | | | | |
| Democratic Presidential vote share, 2016 | County | 0.45 | 0.13 | 0.21 | 0.68 | MIT Election Lab |
| COVID cases per 1,000 from Jan to Aug 2020 | County | 1.76 | 4.91 | 0 | 6.55 | Harvard Dataverse |
| Collective bargaining agreement restrictiveness | School district | -0.00 | 1.00 | -3.60 | 3.30 | Strunk and Grissom |
| Population density | County | 727.02 | 943.26 | 0.40 | 2661.1 | U.S. Census |
| % Black student enrollment | School district | 0.21 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | MIschooldata.org |
| % Hispanic student enrollment | School district | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0 | 0.93 | MIschooldata.org |

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Michigan Public Opinion Analysis**

| | Mean | Standard Dev | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dependent Variable** | | | | |
| In-person school support | 0.21 | 1.45 | -2 | 2 |
| **Independent Variables** | | | | |
| Partisanship | -0.52 | 2.16 | -3 | 3 |
| Republican | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0 | 1 |
| Democrat | 0.40 | 0.49 | 0 | 1 |
| Trump approval | 0.34 | 0.47 | 0 | 1 |
| Kids in home | 0.24 | 0.42 | 0 | 1 |
| Black | 0.10 | 0.30 | 0 | 1 |
| Hispanic | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0 | 1 |

**Table 5: Model Predicting In-Person Reopening Plans for Districts and Charter Schools with Majority Black Student Enrollment**

| | In-Person |
|---|---|
| COVID per thousand | -0.085<br>(0.133) |
| 2016 Democratic Presidential vote | -6.852**<br>(1.306) |
| Charter School | 1.512**<br>(0.515) |
| Population density (county) | 0.001<br>(0.000) |
| % Black students | -1.836<br>(1.727) |
| % Hispanic students | -0.417<br>(2.998) |
| Constant | 3.953**<br>(1.445) |
| N | 153 |
| R-squared | 0.064 |