



How the Engagement of High-Profile Partisan Officials Affects Education Politics, Public Opinion, and Polarization

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Abstract

What happens to public opinion when prominent partisan officials intervene in education policy debates? We analyzed the results of 18 survey experiments conducted between 2009 and 2021 with nationally representative samples of U.S. adults. Each experiment explored the effect of an endorsement of a specific education policy by a high-profile partisan official on the public's attitudes toward that policy. Our results indicated that the engagement of such officials in education policy issues typically did little to move public opinion in the direction of the cue-giver's preferred policies. Instead, the chief consequence was increased polarization among the public along partisan lines. A key exception applied to endorsements of policies that diverged from the traditional position of the cue-giver's own party, which tended to shift aggregate public opinion modestly in favor of those policies. Such cross-party cues also had minor de-polarizing consequences.

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Over the last twenty years, public opinion in the United States on questions of education policy has increasingly split along party lines (Houston, 2024). Although arising somewhat later than analogous trends in other policy domains, this dynamic mirrored the broader alignment between party affiliation and policy views among the American public that accelerated in the 1990's and has since continued unabated (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009). Partisan sorting, to use the term favored by political scientists, is the product of multiple and overlapping causes, including the realignment of Southern politics in the wake of the civil rights movement, the concentration of legislative authority among party leaders in Congress, increasing income inequality, and tectonic shifts in the media environment (McCarty, 2019). The common thread across all of these factors has been the emergence of clearer and more consistent signaling by high-profile partisan officials about the values, ideas, and policies associated with each of the two major parties, which rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans have used to update and adjust their own political belief systems (Levendusky, 2009).

Education policy proved to be an exception to this pattern for many years. Prominent actors in both parties staked out similar positions in the 1990's, 2000's, and 2010's on standardized testing, school choice, and the role of the federal government (McGuinn, 2006; Rhodes, 2012). As the political consensus on these matters broke down and as new, more polarizing issues—such as pandemic-era school closures, classroom instruction about racism, and the rights of gay and transgender students—grew in salience, some observers suggested that the era of bipartisanship among elected officials on education policy had come to an end (e.g., Finn & Hess, 2022; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020). A common theme across many of these accounts was a dose of measured skepticism about the salutary effects of the presence of polarizing political figures in education policy debates. Indeed, the nontrivial influence of high-

profile partisan officials over education policy is of relatively recent historical vintage, a function of long-term shifts in school governance spanning multiple decades. These underlying institutional trends, alongside the changing political context, prompted the question that guided our inquiry: What happens to public opinion when prominent partisan officials intervene in education policy debates?

The Decline of Local, Education-Specific School Governance

Two key institutional features characterized early American public-school governance: localism and separation from general-purpose politics (Henig, 2013; Kaestle, 1983; Neem, 2017; Tyack, 1974). Although Constitutional authority for the operation of public schools rested at the state level, most states delegated almost all decision-making powers to local officials until the second half of the 20th century (Manna, 2006; Timar, 1997). The establishment of two parallel local governments—one for schools and one for essentially everything else—originated in Massachusetts in 1826 (Tyack, 1974). Progressive Era reforms from the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, ostensibly intended to buffer education from the patronage and partisan spoils systems of urban political machines, further refined the basic template for local school governance all across the country: institutionally separate and locally financed jurisdictions in which a nonpartisan school board—often selected in special elections held at separate times from general municipal, state, and federal elections—appointed a professional superintendent to oversee the operation of public elementary and secondary schools (Iannaccone, 1967; Kirst, 2004).

Both of these features of school governance experienced considerable institutional erosion over the last seventy years. The gradual expansion of state and federal authority over K-12 education at the expense of local autonomy has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention by historians, legal scholars, and political scientists. Depending on whether one focused

on the actions of lawmakers, the courts, or educational professionals, the specific contours of this narrative might have varied, but key episodes consistently included *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the National Defense and Education Act of 1958, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the educational equity and adequacy lawsuits that began in the 1970's, the emergence of the standards-based reform movement in the 1980's and 1990's, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Davies, 2007; Manna, 2010; McGuinn, 2006; Reed, 2014; Ryan, 2009; Superfine, 2013).

The latter half of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st also witnessed the growing institutional authority of mayors, governors, and presidents over K-12 education policy (Henig, 2013; Mehta & Teles, 2011). Unlike school board members, superintendents, chief state school officers, and other education-specific officials, these general-purpose officeholders viewed education as one policy domain among many in a larger portfolio of responsibilities. They also, in contrast to most of their education-specific counterparts, typically campaigned and governed under the banner of a formal political party affiliation. Mayors in fifteen cities acquired the power to appoint all or most of the members of the local school board, which, in most cases, selected the district superintendent (Henig, 2013). In a majority of states, governors acquired the power to appoint a controlling proportion of the state board of education, which, analogous to their local counterparts, typically selected the chief state school officer (in a handful of cases, the governor gained the authority to appoint the state's top education executive directly) (Education Commission of the States, 2024; Henig, 2013). During the 2000's and 2010's, the U.S. secretary of education, appointed by the president, wielded expanded powers over K-12 education through the implementation and enforcement of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Race to the Top program (McGuinn, 2016). This era also saw the decline of informal norms that may have

previously deterred high-profile elected Democrats and Republicans from opining publicly on education issues. The details of education policy increasingly became fruitful raw material for the rhetoric wielded by current or aspiring occupants of city halls, state capitols, the White House, and the U.S. Congress (Barnum, 2021; Betrand et al., 2023; Mahnken, 2022).

Two recent episodes captured the convergence of these dynamics—the growth of state and federal authority and the increasing influence of general-purpose public officials—and their consequences for the politics of education: the Common Core State Standards and pandemic-era school closures. When they first entered the mainstream discourse, the Common Core enjoyed the support of two-thirds of Americans, including majorities of both Democrats and Republicans (Henderson & Peterson, 2013). This changed in the wake of the Obama administration’s decision to reward states for adopting the standards as part of the Race to the Top competitive grant program (McGuinn, 2014). Prominent Republicans found a political advantage by linking the standards to Obama and characterizing them as a case of federal overreach (Whitman, 2015). They christened the standards “Obamacore” in a reference to the Affordable Care Act of 2010, often referred to as “Obamacare,” which inspired the ire of conservative voters (Henig et al., 2017). Public support for the standards, especially among Republicans, plunged (Henderson et al., 2014). Opposition to the standards was strongly associated with negative views toward Obama (Polikoff et al., 2016). Many Republican-led states subsequently renamed and lightly revised the standards in order to avoid the politically toxic label (Jochim & McGuinn, 2016).

Similarly, in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision to close schools for in-person instruction was essentially nonpartisan. Governors in both red and blue states swiftly closed schools’ doors in response to the danger and uncertainty posed by the virus. By May of 2020, however, President Trump had endorsed the view that schools should re-open as

quickly as possible (Kogan, in press). The resulting partisan divide was profound. Researchers revealed that school districts in Republican-leaning communities were far more likely to re-open for in-person instruction in Fall 2020 than their counterparts in Democratic-leaning communities (Grossmann et al., 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2022). Unsurprisingly, public opinion on the issue also split along party lines (Henderson et al., 2021). Notably, one of the most important predictors of public support for in-person instruction was the extent to which individuals trusted Trump (Collins, 2023). Even by the end of the 2020-21 academic year, the local results of the recent presidential election remained one of the factors most reliably associated with school re-opening status (Houston & Steinberg, 2023).

Our Study

In our analysis, we focused on one of the key political consequences of the decline of local, education-specific governance: the frequent engagement of high-profile partisan officials in education policy debates. Specifically, we were interested in how the public responded to such engagement. We organized this line of inquiry around three research questions:

1. What were the effects, on average, of information about high-profile partisan officials' positions regarding a series of education policies on the public's attitudes toward those policies?
2. How did these average effects vary by the political party affiliations of the cue-giver and the recipient of the policy cue? In other words, to what extent did such information increase or decrease the partisan divide on these issues among the public?
3. How did these average effects vary by other characteristics of the cue, the cue-giver, and the recipient (e.g., the issue in question, the year in which the cue was given, the extent to which the cue was politically surprising, the popularity of the cue-giver, the intensity of

recipients' attachment to their political party)?

To answer these questions, we analyzed the results of 18 survey experiments conducted between 2009 and 2021 with nationally representative samples of U.S. adults. Each experiment explored the effect of an endorsement of a specific education policy by the current U.S. president on participants' attitudes toward that policy. Although we were also interested in the behavior of a broader class of general-purpose politicians, the president was the most universally recognizable and applicable figure for a nationally representative sample and a wide range of issues. Moreover, prior research on the effects of policy cues on public opinion, described at greater length in the following section, suggested that recognizability and party affiliation mattered more than the specific office of the individual providing the cue (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Broockman & Butler, 2017; Druckman et al., 2013; Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2012; Satherley et al., 2018). The U.S. president was the most visible and familiar face of a political party for our purpose.

To briefly summarize our findings, information about high-profile partisan officials' positions regarding education policy typically did little to move public opinion in the direction of the cue-giver's preferred policies. Instead, the chief consequence was increased polarization among the public along partisan lines. A key exception applied to endorsements of policies that diverged from the traditional position of the cue-giver's own party—for example, Obama's support for centrist or center-right reforms such as charter schools or evaluating teachers based on students' test score growth—which tended to shift aggregate public opinion modestly in favor of those policies. Such cross-party cues also had minor de-polarizing consequences.

The results of our analysis can inform efforts to understand past engagement of high-profile partisan officials in education policy debates and to anticipate the consequences of future

engagement by those same officials as well as aspiring candidates for high office. For example, we provide clear empirical evidence of the way in which Obama's and Trump's shared support for charter schools helped generate notably different partisan dynamics on that issue during their respective administrations. Moreover, our findings almost certainly generalize to analogous situations, such as the political consequences of Obama's support for the Common Core standards (prompting resistance among Republicans) or Trump's support for rapidly re-opening schools for in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (prompting resistance among Democrats). We also argue that this pattern of results is likely not exclusive to presidential engagement. Our study may shed light on the effects of high-profile governors and gubernatorial candidates focusing on, for example, issues of race and gender in K-12 classrooms. And, although the linkage is more speculative, our results may provide context for the effects of formally non-partisan school board candidates running local campaigns with platforms that emphasize issues that have acquired clear partisan connotations.

Our analysis also has implications for our understanding of the political consequences of the decades-long shift in school governance away from a model organized around localism and separation from general-purpose politics. One of the primary justifications that Progressive Era reformers gave for establishing local, education-specific governing institutions was the need to ensconce public education away from the rough-and-tumble world of partisan politics (Tyack & Hansot, 1981). This objective has attracted a wide range of criticism over the years. Clarence Stone (1998) argued that separating education policymaking from the local political context deprived school reform efforts of the broader constituencies necessary for robust and sustainable implementation. Others scholars argued that the governance model forged at the turn of the 20th century merely managed to empower special interest groups that could dominate a less visible

political arena; to over-represent the interests of older, whiter, and richer members of the electorate who were more likely to vote in low-turnout elections; and, as a result, to shield education officials from political accountability (Hartney & Hayes, 2021; Kogan et al., 2021; Moe, 2011; Payson, 2016). Moreover, local control of public education—regardless of whether education-specific or general-purpose officials carried more influence—has often served as a key mechanism for the creation and maintenance of persistent funding inequalities and segregation along racial, ethnic, and economic lines (Dahill-Brown, 2019; Kelly, 2023; McDermott, 1999).

We do not seek to settle the debate over the advantages and disadvantages of local, education-specific school governance. Rather, we aim to illuminate one of the potential trade-offs of this model's structural decline over the last seventy years. As we consider our finding that high-profile partisan officials generally tend to reinforce and exacerbate partisan divisions in the public when they engage in education issues, the Progressive Era reformers' concerns about the influence of general-purpose politicians in education policy appear newly prescient and credible. We concluded our project with an open-ended discussion about how we might reimagine our school governance structures to reduce the incentives for prominent partisan figures to intervene in education policy debates without undermining the school system's responsiveness to the public via the political process.

Policy Cues, Public Opinion, and Partisan Polarization

There is a rich research literature, dating back at least to Samuel Popkin's 1991 book, *The Reasoning Voter*, suggesting that individual citizens, lacking detailed knowledge of specific public policy options, have regularly relied on cues from leaders of trusted organizations, advocacy groups, and political parties to guide their opinions and voting choices. The following year, John Zaller published *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, which presented the now-

canonical argument that public opinion about matters of public policy, especially among the most educated and politically engaged members of the public, has been profoundly influenced by messaging from political elites. Decades later, Gabriel Lenz (2012) demonstrated that this form of top-down opinion formation had become so pervasive that, when alerted to the fact that a political leader they supported held a view different from their own, individuals were much more likely to switch their views than to shift their support to another politician who was aligned with their original position. Vladimir Kogan (in press) recently documented two instances of this dynamic in the domain of education policy, revealing the influence of signals from high-profile partisan officials on the election results of statewide referenda in California in the 70's and 90's. Optimistic accounts of elite policy cues highlighted their capacity to guide individuals through the complexities of contemporary political debates and allow them to make relatively well-informed choices at the ballot box (Aldrich, 1995; Fiorina, 2005). Less sanguine scholars pointed to both the promises and perils of opinion leadership, in which political leaders actively sought to reshape public opinion—either guiding it toward their own views of optimal public policy, toward positions that were electorally advantageous, or both (Achen & Bartels, 2017).

There is a small but robust body of research specifically on the effects of prominent politicians' policy views on public opinion and partisan polarization. The basic pattern could be aptly summarized by the title of Nicole Satherly and colleagues' (2018) article that examined this issue: "If they say yes, we say no" (see also: Druckman et al., 2013; Goren et al., 2009; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Nicholson, 2012). In short, when someone learned that a politician of their own party supported a policy, they became more likely to support it. Conversely, when someone learned that a politician of an opposing party supported the same policy, they became less likely to support it. As a result, political cues and policy endorsements by high-profile partisan figures

tended to widen the gaps in public opinion among rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans. An exception occurred when a party leader expressed an ideologically surprising view (i.e., a Republican official endorsing a conventionally liberal position or a Democratic official endorsing a conventionally conservative position). Such cues could be even more influential to rank-and-file members of that party than ideologically unsurprising cues, revealing not only the power of partisan signals but also the ways in which such signals could paradoxically serve to reduce partisan polarization on a specific issue among the public (Barber & Pope, 2018).

The participants in these studies were not necessarily responding to policy cues in an unthinking, knee-jerk fashion. Rather, in a political environment characterized by a high degree of intra-party agreement and inter-party disagreement among elected officials (McCarty et al., 2016), it may have been reasonable for someone to receive a policy endorsement from a leader of the opposing party and assume with some confidence that leaders of their own party held the opposite view. Further, in an era in which rank-and-file members of both parties increasingly diverged on a wide range of issues (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Houston, 2024; Levendusky, 2009), a policy endorsement from a prominent partisan politician likely contained relevant information about that policy's alignment with one's own values and interests. However, in an experiment in which participants received both in-party and out-party cues—and in which the ideological directions of both cues varied independently—Anthony Fowler and William Howell (2023) demonstrated that, when the assumption that out-party support implied in-party opposition (and vice-versa) was untenable, individuals were willing to update their beliefs in line with policy cues from both in-party and out-party politicians.

Earlier research also revealed some limits to the influence of partisanship. Using a conjoint survey experiment, Jonathan Mummolo and colleagues (2021) showed that voters'

support for the candidate of their own party began to decline after they learned that the candidate held positions contrary to their own on multiple high-salience issues. Other scholars have shown that Americans were not completely immune to attempts at persuasion that challenged their partisan identities. For example, assembling data from nearly two dozen experiments, Alexander Coppock (2022) demonstrated that the dissemination of arguments and evidence in favor of certain positions caused members of both parties to update their beliefs in the same direction. On the other hand, these informational effects were smaller in magnitude than the disclosure of simple policy endorsements by party leaders unaccompanied by a rationale or justification (Broockman & Butler, 2017; Tappin, Berinsky, & Rand, 2023).

The broad take-away from the existing literature—that policy cues by partisan figures generally tended to have polarizing effects on the public’s views—concealed considerable variation in the conditions under which this pattern was more or less pronounced. For example, prior research suggested that the effects of partisan cues not only varied by recipients’ party affiliations but that these differential effects themselves also varied by the intensity of recipients’ attachment to their political party (Goren et al., 2009; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Satherley et al., 2018). In addition, the degree of polarization among the public induced by a given policy endorsement varied by the extent to which political leaders were divided over the same issue along party lines (Druckman et al., 2013) and the extent to which the endorsement was politically surprising (Barber & Pope, 2018; Houston, 2021), such as when a high-profile elected official adopted a position traditionally associated with the opposing party. A key source of variation that mattered only modestly if at all was the specific political office held by the cue-giver. Many of the studies cited here considered the effects of party cues from different officeholders—presidents, prime ministers, legislators, governors, and even just generic

members of a given political party—and observed similar patterns (although Stephen Nicholson, 2012, found that cues from specific politicians were somewhat more polarizing than cues attributed to a party as a whole).

Data and Methods

To conduct our analysis, we relied on data from the 2009, 2010, 2017, 2020, and 2021 iterations of the *Education Next* (EN) poll. Each year's EN poll sampled respondents from the KnowledgePanel®, an ongoing, nationally representative, online panel recruited via address-based sampling. In all years, respondents could elect to complete the survey in either English or Spanish. The number of respondents varied by year, ranging from a low of 1,410 in 2021 to a high of 4,291 in 2020. The surveys administered during the five years listed above contained a total of 18 presidential policy endorsement experiments. In each experiment, the poll randomly assigned some respondents to receive the current U.S. president's position on a policy before asking all respondents to indicate their support or opposition to that policy. Various permutations gauged the effects of policy cues from Obama, Trump, and Biden on issues ranging from merit-based pay for teachers to universal pre-kindergarten (please see Appendix B for a complete list of all question wordings for the survey items we used in our analysis).

A common critique of survey experiments is that the artificiality of the context—answering questions in an online survey—limits their generalizability to more realistic settings (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). We argue that this line of criticism is less applicable to our particular study because the conventional method for measuring and analyzing public opinion is precisely in the context of a nationally representative online survey. On the other hand, there is a related threat to external validity that applies squarely to our analysis. In our battery of experiments, the various combinations of presidents and issues that we considered did not constitute an exhaustive

set of partisan cue-givers and relevant education policy debates. The range of generalizability for our analysis, therefore, may be more accurately described as exceptionally high-profile partisan cue-givers and relatively high-salience debates.

To evaluate the effectiveness of random assignment in each survey experiment, we checked for balance in demographic covariates between the treatment group (participants received a policy cue) and the control group (participants did not receive a policy cue) using the following ordinary least squares (OLS) regression equation:

$$Cue_i = \alpha + \beta X_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

in which Cue was participant i 's assignment to treatment, X was a vector of demographic characteristics (age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, educational attainment, political ideology, partisan affiliation, home-owner status, marital status, presence of a child age 0-18 in the home, K-12 teacher status, residence in a metropolitan statistical area, and U.S. Census region), and ϵ was the error term. To summarize the results of these covariate balance tests parsimoniously, we reported the F -statistic of joint significance for the full set of demographic variables in X .

To estimate the average treatment effect for each experiment, we used the following equation:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta Cue_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

in which Y was participant i 's level of support for or opposition to a given policy (measured on a 5-point scale from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support”), Cue was assignment to treatment, and ϵ was the error term. When the presidential cue indicated opposition to a policy, we reverse-coded participants' policy preferences so that positive values of β indicated movement in the cue-giver's direction.

We also estimated the average effects of both in-party and out-party cues for each

experiment:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta In-party_i + \gamma Out-party_i + \delta PartyID_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (3)$$

in which *In-party* indicated that participant *i* received a cue that aligned with *i*'s party affiliation, *Out-party* indicated that *i* received a cue that did not align with *i*'s party affiliation, and *PartyID* was a dichotomous indicator for party affiliation. We omitted self-reported political independents from these analyses. Participants who indicated that they “lean[ed]” toward one party were included in that party (Magleby et al., 2011).

To explore the extent to which the average effects, in-party effects, and out-party effects varied by other relevant factors—the education issue in question, the year in which the experiment took place, the identity of the cue-giver, the level of participants' self-reported attachment to their party (measured on a 4-point scale from unaffiliated to strong partisan), whether or not the cue contrasted with the conventional position of the cue-giver's party (referred to hereafter as “cross-party” cues and operationalized as cues in which the cue-giver's position had greater support from the opposing party in the control group), the cue-giver's approval rating (as measured by the Gallup Presidential Job Approval Survey), and the difference in the cue-giver's approval rating between Democrats and Republicans—we aggregated all 18 experiments together and subsetted the data by each relevant factor. We then re-employed equations (2) and (3) with these aggregated data. In these models, we included experiment-year fixed effects and clustered standard errors at the participant level.

Lastly, we examined the extent to which the depolarizing consequences of cross-party cues varied by two key attributes of the cue-giver: their approval rating among all U.S. adults and the difference in their approval rating between members of the two parties. To conduct these analyses, we introduced a series of multiplicative interaction terms representing these potential

Table 1. Covariate balance for each experiment

	Charter schools (Obama supports) 2009	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2017	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2020	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2009	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2010
<i>F</i> -statistic	1.21	0.78	0.56	1.16	0.74
<i>N</i>	1,958	4,030	4,090	1,483	1,757
	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2009	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2010	Merit pay (Trump supports) 2017	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2020	Merit pay (Trump supports) 2020
<i>F</i> -statistic	0.90	1.15	0.90	0.89	0.89
<i>N</i>	2,126	2,753	4,196	4,253	4,253
	Merit pay (O and T support) 2020	Annual testing (Obama supports) 2010	Toughen standards and tests (Obama supports) 2010	Common core (Trump opposes) 2017	Common core (Trump opposes) 2020
<i>F</i> -statistic	0.96	1.04	1.02	0.68	0.89
<i>N</i>	4,253	2,665	2,658	2,684	2,763
	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2017	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2020	In-state tuition for undoc. immigrants (Trump opposes) 2020	Universal public pre-K (Biden supports) 2021	Universal public community college (Biden supports) 2021
<i>F</i> -statistic	1.35	1.01	1.18	1.23	1.10
<i>N</i>	4,037	4,092	4,096	1,349	1,349

Notes. *F*-statistics drawn from an OLS regression of assignment to treatment on a series of demographic predictors: age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, educational attainment, political ideology, partisan affiliation, home-owner status, marital status, presence of a child (0-18) in the home, K-12 teacher status, residence in a metropolitan statistical area, and U.S. Census region. The 2020 merit pay experiment is separated into three analyses: one for each treatment. * $p < 0.05$.

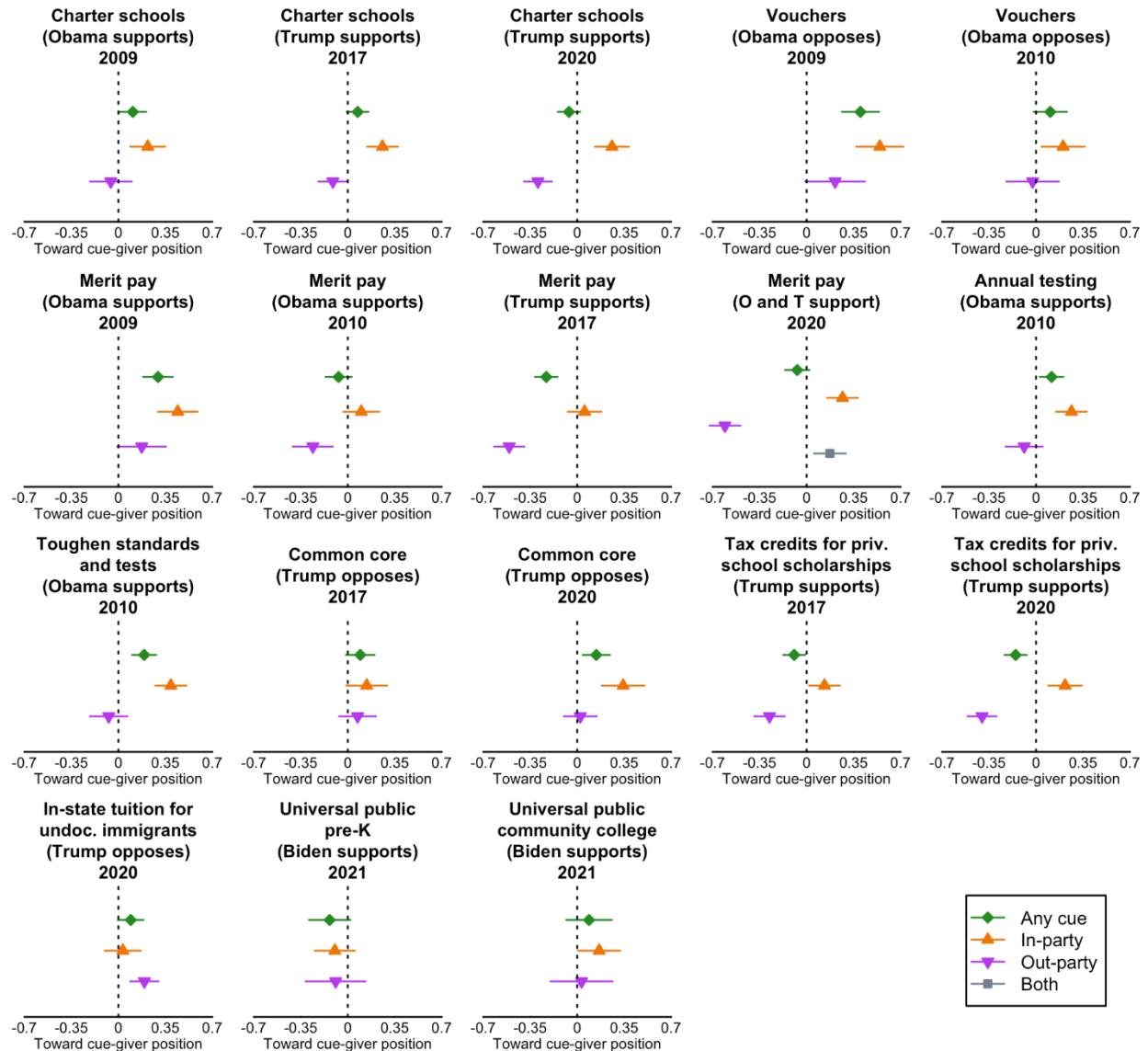
sources of heterogeneity. In these models, we included year fixed effects (some experiment-year fixed effects were perfectly collinear with a subset of the interaction terms) and clustered standard errors at the participant level.

Findings

Table 1 displays the results of the covariate balance tests for each experiment. We found that random assignment worked as intended. Participants' demographic characteristics were not jointly predictive of assignment to treatment in any of the 18 experiments used in our analysis.

The standard deviation of participants' responses in each experiment ranged from 1.14 to 1.59 points and averaged 1.35 points on a 5-point scale, with most values hewing closely to the mean. When reporting our estimates of the average treatment effects we primarily relied on the original scale. To contextualize the magnitude of those effects, we also divided the estimates by

Figure 1. Average effects of presidential cues on policy preferences for each experiment



Notes. Points represent estimates of average treatment effects. Solid lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Policy preferences measured on 1-5 scale. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver's position).

1.35 points for a near approximation in standard deviation units.

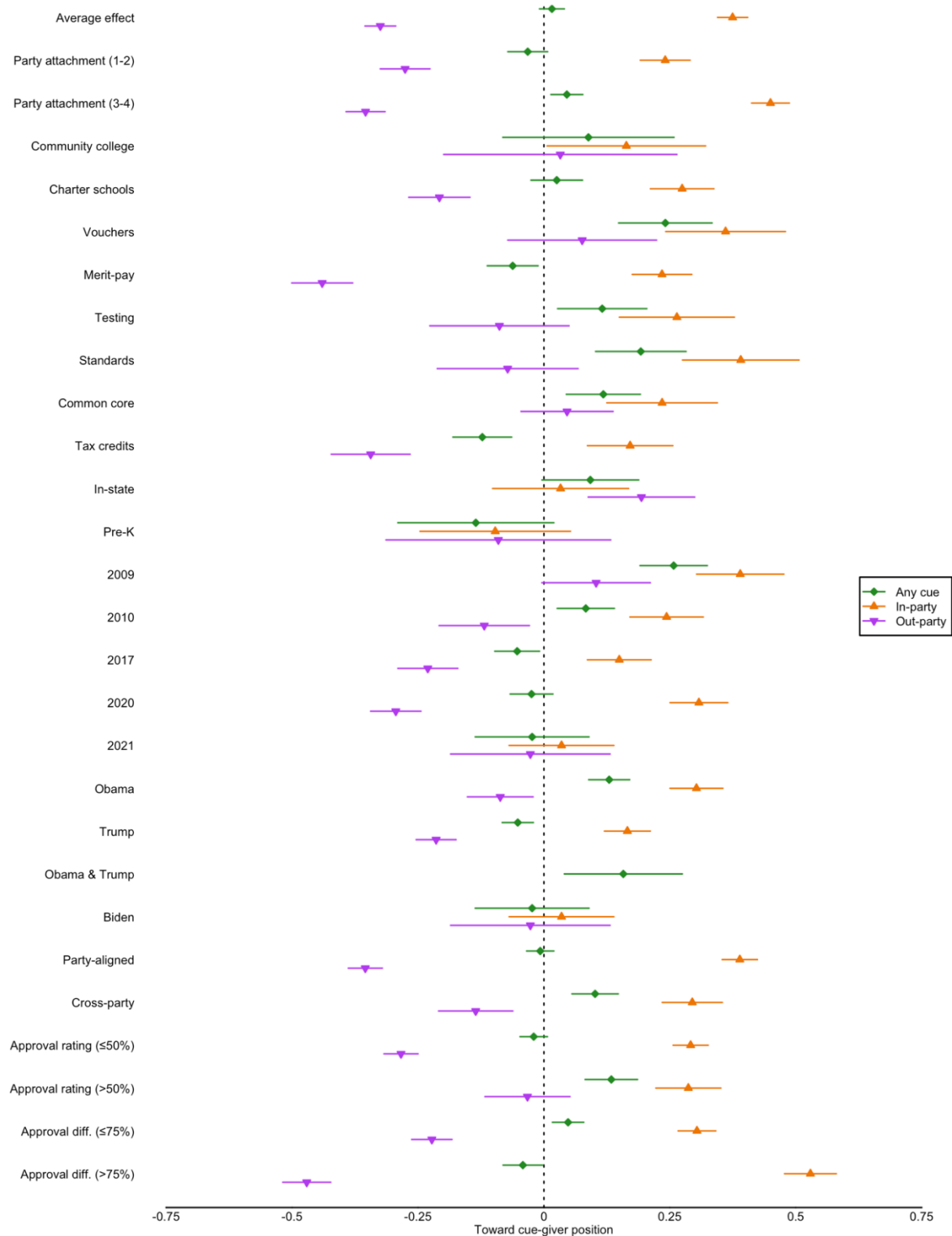
To answer our first and second research questions, Figure 1 displays our estimates of the average treatment effects of A) receiving any cue, B) receiving an in-party cue, C) receiving an out-party cue, and—in the case of one experiment conducted in 2020 in which some participants received information about both Obama's and Trump's positions on merit-based teacher pay—D)

receiving both an in-party and out-party cue (see also Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix A). While the precise magnitudes of the estimates varied from experiment to experiment, the general pattern was quite consistent. The average effect of receiving any cue was typically modest in size and non-significant, with an unweighted average of 0.05 points (0.04 SD) in the direction of the cue-giver's position across all experiments. In-party cues tended to guide participants in the direction of the cue-giver's position, with an unweighted average of 0.22 points (0.16 SD). Meanwhile, out-party cues tended to guide participants away from the cue-giver's position, with an unweighted average of -0.12 points (-0.09 SD).

Although the results of most of the experiments roughly aligned with these averages, there were a few noteworthy exceptions that warranted discussion. For example, in a pair of experiments from May 2009, information about Obama's opposition to private school vouchers or Obama's support for merit-based teacher pay nudged members of both parties toward his positions on these issues. This was likely a product of Obama's relative popularity, even among Republicans, in the months immediately following the beginning of his first term. We discuss this pattern in greater detail below. The same explanation is less persuasive with respect to a 2020 experiment in which participants were informed of Trump's opposition to in-state college tuition rates for undocumented immigrants. In this case, we observed no average effect among Republicans and a small, positive effect among Democrats. It is possible that these findings were idiosyncratic to this particular issue or perhaps a statistical artifact, generated in the course of replicating the same basic experimental design many times.

Figure 2 displays the results of our analysis after we aggregated all 18 experiments together (see also Table A3 in Appendix A). Our estimate of the average effect of receiving a policy cue was a non-significant 0.02 points (0.01 SD) with a standard error of 0.01—in other

Figure 2. Heterogeneous effects of presidential cues on policy preferences across all experiments



Notes. Points represent estimates of average treatment effects. Solid lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Policy preferences measured on 1-5 scale. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver's position).

words, a precisely estimated zero. In-party cues, on average, shifted participants' responses 0.37 points (0.27 SD) in the direction of the cue-giver's position. Out-party cues, on average, shifted participants' responses 0.32 points (0.24 SD) in the opposite direction of the cue-giver's position. In short, across a wide range of issues, years, and cue-givers, policy cues from high-profile partisan officials did not move public opinion on average, but they did polarize public opinion along party lines.

To answer our third research question, we considered the conditions under which these effects varied by other relevant factors. The inferences that we drew from this analysis—the results of which are also displayed in Figure 2—were necessarily more tentative and cautious. Our battery of experiments did not contain every possible combination of issue, year, and cue-giver. Therefore, it was difficult to disentangle the variance attributable to these different sources of heterogeneity. For example, the magnitude of the effect appeared to vary by the education issue in question. The largest effect of receiving any cue pertained to vouchers (0.24 points/0.18 SD), the largest effect of receiving an in-party cue pertained to toughening academic standards and tests (0.39 points/0.29 SD), and the largest effect of receiving an out-party cue pertained to merit-based teacher pay (-0.44 points/-0.33 SD). However, to offer an example of the methodological challenge at play here, the large average effect of the voucher cues could have primarily been a function of the identity of the cue-giver. Both voucher experiments featured Obama's views on the issue, and he was particularly influential (nudging participants 0.13 points/0.10 SD in the direction of his position on average). Or the large average effect may have been a function of the timing. The voucher experiments appeared in the 2009 and 2010 EN polls, and the largest yearly average effect of any cue occurred in 2009 (0.26 points/0.19 SD).

We ameliorated—although not eliminated—this issue when we considered sources of

heterogeneity that still allowed us to aggregate across multiple issues, years, and/or cue-givers. For example, with respect to participants' party attachment, we observed larger in-party effects (0.45 points/0.33 SD) and out-party effects (-0.35 points/-0.26 SD) when participants identified as a somewhat or very strong Democrat/Republican rather than indicating that they merely leaned toward one party or the other (in-party: 0.24 points/0.18 SD, out-party: -0.28 points/-0.21 SD). Similarly, cues from Obama (any cue: 0.13 points/0.10 SD, in-party: 0.30 points/0.22 SD, out-party: -0.09 points/-0.07 SD) and Trump (any cue: -0.05 points/-0.04 SD, in-party: 0.17 points/0.13 SD, out-party: -0.21 points/-0.16 SD) tended to generate larger average effects than cues from Biden (any cue: -0.02 points/-0.01 SD, in-party: 0.03 points/0.02 SD, out-party: -0.03 points/-0.02 SD). However, the experiments that featured Biden as the cue-giver focused on different educational issues, limiting us to indirect comparisons.

We next considered the effects of cross-party and party-aligned cues. The set of experiments that examined cross-party cues—which randomly assigned information about Obama's support for charter schools, merit-based pay for teachers, and tougher academic standards and tests—only featured one cue-giver (Obama). However, they spanned multiple years (2009, 2010, and 2020), during which the cue-giver's popularity and propensity for polarization varied meaningfully. When participants received information indicating that the cue giver supported a policy conventionally associated with the opposing party, we observed a 0.11-point (0.08 SD) average effect in the direction of the cue-giver's position. Among members of the same party, the average effect was 0.28 points (0.21 SD) in the direction of the cue-giver's position. Among members of the opposing party, the average effect was 0.14 points (0.10 SD) in the opposite direction. Given the partisan distribution of public opinion in the control group, these cross-party cues had the unusual effect of de-polarizing public opinion along party lines.

Table 2. Presidential approval ratings

Year	EN poll survey dates	President	Approval (all adults)	Approval (Democrats)	Approval (Republicans)	Approval (difference)
2009	May 4 th – 10 th	Obama	66%	91%	31%	60%
2010	May 3 rd – 9 th	Obama	50%	82%	14%	68%
2017	May 1 st – 30 th	Trump	40%	10%	84%	74%
2017 ¹	Jan. 16 th – 19 th	Obama	59%	95%	14%	81%
2020	May 1 st – 13 th	Trump	49%	8%	92%	84%
2021	May 3 rd – 18 th	Biden	54%	92%	8%	84%

Notes. Approval ratings drawn from the week following the start of the EN poll in each year. ¹ Final presidential approval rating for Obama (for use in analysis of 2020 merit-pay experiment). *Source.* Gallup Presidential Job Approval Survey

Conversely, party-aligned cues had substantively large polarizing effects, shifting members of the same party 0.39 points (0.29 SD) further in the direction of the cue-giver's position and shifting members of the opposing party 0.35 points (0.26 SD) in the opposite direction on average.

We also examined the ways in which the average effect intersected with cue-giver popularity. When cue-givers had an approval rating above 50%, their policy endorsements tended to steer aggregate public opinion in the direction of their positions (0.13 points/0.10 SD, compared to -0.02 points/-0.01 SD for those with approval ratings below 50%; see Table 2 for a complete list of EN poll survey dates and contemporaneous presidential job approval ratings). Alternatively, when cue-givers were more polarizing (i.e., there was at least a 75 percentage-point difference in their approval rating between Democrats and Republicans), their policy endorsements actually served to steer aggregate public opinion modestly away from their positions (-0.04 points/-0.03 SD, compared to 0.05 points/0.04 SD for those with less than a 75 percentage-point difference in their approval rating by party). Unsurprisingly, more polarizing cue-givers also tended to generate larger in-party effects (0.53 points/0.39 SD) and out-party effects (-0.47 points/-0.35 SD) compared to their less polarizing counterparts (in-party: 0.30 points/0.22 SD, out-party: -0.22 points/-0.16 SD).

Table 3. Variation in the effects of cross-party cues by presidential approval rating and approval difference

	Policy preferences (1-5)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cue	-0.013 (0.014)	-0.486* (0.108)	0.757* (0.158)			
In-party				0.388* (0.018)	-0.792* (0.135)	-0.496* (0.194)
Out-party				-0.355* (0.018)	-0.072 (0.143)	1.135* (0.202)
Cross-party	-0.305* (0.021)	-0.754* (0.198)	0.626 (0.435)	-0.241* (0.026)	-0.119 (0.242)	0.475 (0.463)
Approval (%)		0.014* (0.004)			0.013* (0.004)	
Approval difference (%)			-0.144* (0.032)			-0.110* (0.033)
Cue × cross-party	0.119* (0.026)	0.043 (0.219)	0.066 (0.267)			
Cue × approval		0.010* (0.002)				
Cue × difference			-0.010* (0.002)			
Cue × cross × approval		-0.001 (0.004)				
Cue × cross × difference			-0.001 (0.004)			
In-party × cross-party				-0.099* (0.035)	0.733* (0.281)	0.731* (0.344)
In-party × approval					0.024* (0.003)	
In-party × difference						0.012* (0.003)
In-party × cross × app.					-0.018* (0.005)	
In-party × cross × diff.						-0.011* (0.005)
Out-party × cross-party				0.218* (0.041)	-0.858* (0.334)	0.548 (0.411)
Out-party × approval					-0.005 (0.003)	
Out-party × difference						-0.019* (0.003)
Out-party × cross × app.					0.019* (0.006)	
Out-party × cross × diff.						-0.008 (0.006)
Cross × approval		0.008* (0.004)			-0.003 (0.004)	
Cross × difference			-0.015* (0.007)			-0.012 (0.007)
<i>N</i> observations	52,352	52,352	52,352	51,777	51,777	51,777
<i>N</i> participants	15,506	15,506	15,506	14,965	14,965	14,965

Notes. Values are OLS coefficients (robust standards errors clustered at the participant level). All models include year fixed effects. Models estimating in-party and out-party effects omit Independents from analysis, include a dichotomous party ID variable, and include the full suite of party ID interactions. All models omit the 2020 merit-pay experiment with both cues. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver's position). * $p < 0.05$.

Lastly, given the interesting pattern of results generated by cross-party cues, we explored how these effects further varied by a cue-giver's approval rating and the difference in their approval rating between members of the two parties. This investigation was more exploratory and speculative in nature, given the accumulation of multiplicative interaction terms and the increasing likelihood of observing statistically significant findings by chance alone. Table 3 displays the results. The average effect of a cross-party cue did not vary by approval rating or the partisan difference in approval rating. However, as the cue-giver's popularity rose, the depolarizing consequences of cross-party cues also grew (i.e., in-party effects were modestly less positive; out-party effects were modestly more positive). On the other hand, as presidential polarization increased, the efficacy of cross-party cues declined (i.e., both in-party and out-party effects were modestly less positive—although the difference in the latter fell short of the conventional threshold for statistical significance).

Discussion

When high-profile partisan figures weigh in on education policy debates, they tend to have no effect, on average, on public opinion. There are some minor deviations from this pattern that are worth noting. Broadly popular cue-givers do seem to be able to move the needle slightly in the direction of their position, more polarizing cue-givers tend to nudge participants marginally in the opposite direction, and policy cues that endorse a position traditionally associated with the opposing party have a small positive effect in the cue-giver's direction. More significantly, the null average effect conceals considerable heterogeneity by participants' party affiliation. While high-profile partisans may be largely unable to persuade the public as a whole, they are often wildly effective at polarizing public opinion along party lines. An exception occurs with cross-party cues, in which the expected in-party and out-party effects serve to reduce

polarization. Yet this is merely a case of the exception proving the rule: When prominent partisan officials opine on education issues, they tend to bring along members of their own party and turn away members of the opposing party.

Although our analysis draws on experiments that feature multiple cue-givers, educational issues, and time periods, there are important limits to the generalizability of our specific findings. Most notably, the majority of the experiments focused on the effects of cues from two exceptionally outsized political personalities: Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Both men generated—and continue to generate—an unusual degree of backlash from members of the opposing party. However, even a study organized primarily around Obama and Trump offers a surprising amount of variance to analyze, given the U.S. public’s changing perceptions of these politicians over the course of their presidencies. Moreover, while the polarizing consequences that we observe may be particularly acute for the subset of political actors who engender strong emotional reactions from their friends and foes, the contemporary American political landscape contains no shortage of high-profile partisan figures who reliably rankle their opposition.

We also readily acknowledge that our findings are unique to our current political context, in which rank-and-file members of both parties have increasingly sorted along ideological, educational, racial, ethnic, economic, and geographic lines (Abramowitz, 2018; Mason, 2018). If we were to envision an analogous experiment conducted in the 1960’s or 1970’s featuring Kennedy’s, Johnson’s, or Nixon’s views on crosstown busing for school desegregation, we do not expect that we would observe similar in-party and out-party effects—if only because the demographic and ideological compositions of the two parties have changed so dramatically since the mid-20th century. On the other hand, our research questions would have been less relevant and applicable to that period. Indeed, when asked by a reporter about his views on busing for

desegregation in 1963, Kennedy replied, “In the final analysis [this] must be decided by the local school board. This is a local question. If you’re asking me my opinion...I would not agree with it” (Delmont, 2016, p. 94). Although Kennedy did not hide his opposition, he prefaced his statement by emphasizing that education policy was primarily a local rather than federal affair. That such a delimiting statement seems less plausible today reflects the decline of local, education-specific governance and the rising influence of high-profile general-purpose public officials that prompted our inquiry.

Why, then, do contemporary politicians continue to engage in these attempts at opinion leadership despite their generally poor track record? It depends, of course, on how one defines success. If a candidate’s or elected official’s objective is to consolidate support among members of their own party during a primary campaign, to appeal to the policy preferences of major donors, or simply to express their deeply held beliefs about optimal education policies, then the advantages of engagement may easily outweigh the expected resistance among members of the other party. This may not necessarily be a bad thing. Advocates of greater authority over K-12 education for mayors, governors, and presidents often cite the higher visibility of these general-purpose elected officials—and therefore their heightened exposure to political accountability through the ballot box—as a means for administering a dose of transparency in a policy domain historically governed by relatively unknown actors selected in low-turnout elections (Anzia, 2014; Moe, 2011; Wong et al., 2007). Some observers may see an important upside to this development: greater clarity regarding elected officials’ education policy platforms, ideally leading to greater responsiveness between the preferences of the voting public and the policies in place in K-12 schools.

The downsides may also be quite compelling. While contemporary critics of the rise of

partisanship in the politics of education are less concerned than their Progressive Era counterparts about the specter of big-city party bosses handing out school jobs as political spoils, they warn of other dangers afoot: rank-and-file partisans lining up rapidly in familiar coalitions rather than taking the time to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the party line, the reduction of complex debates to simplistic battles between opposing sides, the reframing of political conflict from debates over “better or worse” to debates over “good versus evil,” and the heightened personal animosity between members of the two major parties (Abramowitz, 2018; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). The social pathologies of the increasing centrality of political party affiliation in American public life are well documented. The desire to buffer education policy from these dynamics—to whatever limited extent possible—may continue to resonate for many policymakers, educators, and families.

Even a cursory glance at recent education news headlines would provide the interested reader with a rogue’s gallery of today’s high-profile partisan actors whose efforts to influence education policy have generated the predictable polarizing effects that we document in our analysis. However, rather than focus on specific issues and political personages, a more systematic response ought to emphasize the kinds of governance reforms that might reduce the incentives for partisan officials to engage in the first place. One particularly stark example is the provision in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 that explicitly prohibits the U.S. secretary of education from promoting the adoption of national academic standards (Barone, 2017). Regardless of one’s perspective on the merits of national standards or the utility of having the secretary of education serve as a spokesperson for them, such moratoria undoubtedly curtail a class of partisan actors (in this case, members of a presidential administration) from intervening in a specific area of education policy.

Less draconian and issue-specific measures may also serve similar ends. Although our battery of experiments focused on the effects of presidential engagement on public opinion, we contend that our results likely generalize to other high-profile partisan officials such as governors. There is considerable variation across states in the relative influence of governors over the administration of public K-12 education. For example, the state board of education may be appointed by the governor with confirmation by the state legislature (e.g., Florida) or elected by the public (e.g., Kansas). Similarly, the chief state school officer may be appointed directly by the governor (e.g., New Jersey), appointed by a state board of education chosen by the governor (e.g., Missouri), appointed by a state board of education independent from the governor (e.g., Alabama), or elected by the public (e.g., Washington) (Education Commission of the States, 2024). To be clear, there is not a mechanistic relationship between appointment power and a governor's propensity to engage in education policy debates (Burns, 1994). Certainly there have been governors vested with considerable institutional power over K-12 education who have seen fit to delegate their authority with broad discretion as well as governors with limited formal influence over schools who have made extensive use of the bully pulpit to shape their state's education policy agenda. However, there are arguably fewer political advantages for governors to wade into policy arenas over which they have limited control. Advocates for the reduction of gubernatorial influence over state education policy may find value in reexamining these formal elements of school governance. Moreover, an emphasis on state-level institutions may provide an opportunity to imagine a less partisan politics of education without necessarily reverting to a tradition of localism that has helped create and reinforce many of the inequities by race, ethnicity, and class that continue to plague American public education (Dahill-Brown, 2019; Kelly, 2023; McDermott, 1999).

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of the broader shift from education-specific to general-purpose institutional authority over K-12 education has been the emergence of mayoral control in many of the country's large cities. However, the implications of our analysis may be less relevant in these contexts where the mayor often shares the same party identification as the overwhelming majority of residents, muting the polarizing dynamics that we document. On the other hand, the infusion of partisanship into local education politics is by no means restricted to this small subset of school districts (Barnum, 2021; Peetz, 2023; Wall, 2022). Although most school board races are formally non-partisan, many school board candidates in recent years have embraced policies around COVID-19 mitigation strategies, the form and content of classroom instruction regarding race and racism, the rights of gay and transgender students, and other issues that have clear partisan connotations (Sinha et al., 2023). While these candidates do not have a "D" or "R" next to their names on the ballot, the unambiguous partisan valence of their political rhetoric may have similar polarizing consequences in their local communities. Such dynamics are likely to intensify in the event of a shift toward formally partisan school board races—a recent change proposed by bills introduced in six state legislatures in 2023 (Blad, 2023).

Our argument is not that attempts at opinion leadership by prominent partisan politicians in the sphere of education policy are always ill-advised or counterproductive. Indeed, there may be circumstances in which only such actors possess the necessary visibility and influence to constructively reframe an education policy debate or, by taking a politically unexpected position, re-orient the partisan dynamics around an issue. Moreover, that same visibility and influence can fruitfully serve to clarify the range of policy alternatives at stake in a given political contest, an important component to a well-functioning representative democracy.

We are also emphatically not arguing that we should somehow strive to keep schools

“above politics” (Tyack & Hansot, 1981). Public education is, by definition, *political* (Stone, 1998). It depends on collective decision-making about—to borrow a phrase from the late political scientist Harold Lasswell (1936)—who gets what, when, and how. Our schools must be accountable to the public in whose name and service they operate, and, in a large and diverse country, that public will naturally disagree about how those schools ought to be run.

But it is not inevitable that the politics of education must be *partisan*. The tone and tenor of the specific brand of partisan conflict that has come to dominate contemporary politics has left many Americans feeling disenchanted, disengaged, and pessimistic about the likelihood of addressing significant problems—inside and outside of schools—through the policymaking process (Doherty et al., 2023). Our findings suggest that partisan interventions in education policy debates generally tend to exacerbate the partisan divides among the public on those same issues. These results, in this context, lead us to wonder how we might reimagine our systems of school governance so that they might more effectively channel the political currents of today.

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Appendix A: Additional Tables

Table A1. Average effects of presidential cues on policy preferences for each experiment

	Charter schools (Obama supports) 2009	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2017	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2020	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2009	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2010
Cue	0.11* (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	0.40* (0.07)	0.11 (0.06)
<i>N</i>	1,958	4,030	4,090	1,483	1,757
	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2009	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2010	Merit pay (Trump supports) 2017	Merit pay (O and T support) 2020	Annual testing (Obama supports) 2010
Cue	0.30* (0.06)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.23* (0.04)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)
<i>N</i>	2,126	2,753	4,196	4,253	2,665
	Toughen standards and tests (Obama supports) 2010	Common core (Trump opposes) 2017	Common core (Trump opposes) 2020	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2017	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2020
Cue	0.19* (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	0.14* (0.05)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.15* (0.04)
<i>N</i>	2,658	2,684	2,763	4,037	4,092
	In-state tuition for undoc. immigrants (Trump opposes) 2020	Universal public pre-K (Biden supports) 2021	Universal public community college (Biden supports) 2021		
Cue	0.09 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.08)	0.09 (0.09)		
<i>N</i>	4,096	1,349	1,349		

Notes. Values are OLS coefficients (robust standard errors in parentheses). Policy preferences measured on 1-5 scale. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver's position). * $p < 0.05$.

Table A2. Average effects of in-party and out-party cues on policy preferences for each experiment

	Charter schools (Obama supports) 2009	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2017	Charter schools (Trump supports) 2020	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2009	Vouchers (Obama opposes) 2010
In-party	0.22* (0.07)	0.26* (0.06)	0.26* (0.06)	0.55* (0.09)	0.20* (0.08)
Out-party	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.29* (0.05)	0.21 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.10)
<i>N</i>	1,958	4,030	4,090	1,483	1,757
	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2009	Merit pay (Obama supports) 2010	Merit pay (Trump supports) 2017	Merit pay (O and T support) 2020	Annual testing (Obama supports) 2010
In-party	0.44* (0.08)	0.10 (0.07)	0.05 (0.06)	0.27* (0.06)	0.26* (0.06)
Out-party	0.17 (0.09)	-0.26* (0.08)	-0.51* (0.06)	-0.61* (0.06)	-0.09 (0.07)
Both				0.17* (0.06)	
<i>N</i>	1,943	2,662	4,039	4,099	2,665
	Toughen standards and tests (Obama supports) 2010	Common core (Trump opposes) 2017	Common core (Trump opposes) 2020	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2017	Tax credits for priv. school scholarships (Trump supports) 2020
In-party	0.39* (0.06)	0.14 (0.08)	0.34* (0.08)	0.13* (0.06)	0.22* (0.06)
Out-party	-0.07 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.28* (0.06)	-0.40* (0.06)
<i>N</i>	2,660	2,684	2,763	4,037	4,092
	In-state tuition for undoc. immigrants (Trump opposes) 2020	Universal public pre-K (Biden supports) 2021	Universal public community college (Biden supports) 2021		
In-party	0.03 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.08)	0.16* (0.08)		
Out-party	0.19* (0.05)	-0.09 (0.11)	0.03 (0.12)		
<i>N</i>	4,096	1,349	1,349		

Notes. Values are OLS coefficients (robust standard errors in parentheses). Independents omitted from analysis. All models include a dichotomous party ID variable. Participants who indicate that they “lean” toward one party are included in that party. Policy preferences measured on 1-5 scale. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver’s position). In-party indicates that participant *i* receives cue that aligns with *i*’s party affiliation. Out-party indicates that *i* receives cue that does not align with *i*’s party affiliation. Both indicates that *i* receives both cues. * $p < 0.05$.

Table A3. Heterogeneous effects of presidential cues on policy preferences across all experiments

Sample	Any cue	In-party	Out-party	N obs.	N par.
Full sample	0.02 (0.01)			54,447	15,550
Full sample		0.37 (0.02)*	-0.32 (0.02)*	51,777	14,965
Party attachment: 1-2	-0.03 (0.02)			20,468	6,142
Party attachment: 1-2		0.24 (0.03)*	-0.28 (0.03)*	19,082	5,557
Party attachment: 3-4	0.05 (0.02)*			33,979	9,408
Party attachment: 3-4		0.45 (0.02)*	-0.35 (0.02)*	32,695	9,408
Issue: community college	0.09 (0.09)			1,349	1,349
Issue: community college		0.16 (0.08)*	0.03 (0.12)	1,349	1,349
Issue: charter schools	0.03 (0.03)			10,078	10,078
Issue: charter schools		0.27 (0.03)*	-0.21 (0.03)*	10,078	10,078
Issue: vouchers	0.24 (0.05)*			3,240	3,240
Issue: vouchers		0.36 (0.06)*	0.08 (0.08)	3,240	3,240
Issue: merit-pay	-0.06 (0.03)*			15,434	15,434
Issue: merit-pay		0.23 (0.03)*	-0.44 (0.03)*	12,764	12,764
Issue: testing	0.12 (0.05)*			2,665	2,665
Issue: testing		0.26 (0.06)*	-0.09 (0.07)	2,665	2,665
Issue: standards	0.19 (0.05)*			2,660	2,660
Issue: standards		0.39 (0.06)*	-0.07 (0.07)	2,660	2,660
Issue: common core	0.12 (0.04)*			5,447	5,447
Issue: common core		0.23 (0.06)*	0.05 (0.05)	5,447	5,447
Issue: tax credits	-0.12 (0.03)*			8,129	8,129
Issue: tax credits		0.17 (0.04)*	-0.34 (0.04)*	8,129	8,129
Issue: in-state	0.09 (0.05)			4,096	4,096
Issue: in-state		0.03 (0.07)	0.19 (0.05)*	4,096	4,096
Issue: pre-k	-0.14 (0.08)			1,349	1,349
Issue: pre-k		-0.10 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.11)	1,349	1,349
Year: 2009	0.26 (0.03)*			5,567	2,960
Year: 2009		0.39 (0.04)*	0.10 (0.05)	5,384	2,777
Year: 2010	0.08 (0.03)*			9,835	2,765
Year: 2010		0.24 (0.04)*	-0.12 (0.05)*	9,744	2,674
Year: 2017	-0.05 (0.02)*			14,947	4,209
Year: 2017		0.15 (0.03)*	-0.23 (0.03)*	14,790	4,052
Year: 2020	-0.02 (0.02)			21,400	4,263
Year: 2020		0.31 (0.03)*	-0.29 (0.03)*	19,161	4,109
Year: 2021	-0.02 (0.06)			2,698	1,353
Year: 2021		0.03 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.08)	2,698	1,353
Cue-giver: Obama	0.13 (0.02)*			17,508	7,831
Cue-giver: Obama		0.30 (0.03)*	-0.09 (0.03)*	17,161	7,484
Cue-giver: Trump	-0.05 (0.02)*			32,146	8,389
Cue-giver: Trump		0.17 (0.02)*	-0.21 (0.02)*	31,918	8,161
Cue-giver: Obama & Trump	0.16 (0.06)*			2,095	2,095
Cue-giver: Biden	-0.02 (0.06)			2,698	1,353
Cue-giver: Biden		0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.08)	2,698	1,353
Cue: party-aligned	-0.01 (0.01)			40,179	13,026
Cue: party-aligned		0.39 (0.02)*	-0.35 (0.02)*	37,856	12,754
Cue: cross-party	0.10 (0.02)*			14,268	7,650
Cue: cross-party		0.29 (0.03)*	-0.14 (0.04)*	13,921	7,303
Approval rating: $\leq 50\%$	-0.02 (0.01)			41,981	11,154

Approval rating: $\leq 50\%$		0.29 (0.02)*	-0.28 (0.02)*	41,662	10,835
Approval rating: $> 50\%$	0.13 (0.03)*			10,371	6,419
Approval rating: $> 50\%$		0.29 (0.03)*	-0.03 (0.04)	10,115	6,163
Approval difference: $\leq 75\%$	0.05 (0.02)*			30,349	9,934
Approval difference: $\leq 75\%$		0.30 (0.02)*	-0.22 (0.02)*	29,918	9,503
Approval difference: $> 75\%$	-0.04 (0.02)*			22,003	5,572
Approval difference: $> 75\%$		0.53 (0.03)*	-0.47 (0.02)*	21,859	5,462

Notes. Values are OLS coefficients (robust standard errors clustered at the participant level). Each row reports the results of a separate regression model. All models include experiment-year fixed effects. Policy preferences measured on 1-5 scale. When cue indicates opposition to a policy, preferences are reverse-coded (positive value in the coefficient represents movement in direction of cue-giver's position). In-party indicates that participant i receives cue that aligns with i 's party affiliation. Out-party indicates that participant i receives cue that does not align with i 's party affiliation. Participants who indicate that they "lean" toward one party are included in that party. Models estimating in-party and out-party effects omit Independents from analysis, include a dichotomous party ID variable, and omit the 2020 merit-pay experiment with both cues. Models estimating the average effect of any cue, conditional on the approval rating of the cue-giver, also omit the 2020 merit-pay experiment with both cues.

* $p < 0.05$.

Appendix B: Survey Experiment Question Wordings

2009

Charter Schools (n = 1,958)

- Original Question: Many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?
- Obama Supports: Many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. President Barack Obama has expressed support for charter schools. What do you think? Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?

Vouchers (n = 1,483)

- Original Question: A proposal has been made that would use government funds to help pay the tuition of low-income students whose families would like them to attend private schools. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?
- Obama Opposes: A proposal has been made that would use government funds to help pay the tuition of low-income students whose families would like them to attend private schools. President Barack Obama has expressed opposition to such a proposal. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Merit Pay (n = 2,126)

- Original Question: Do you favor or oppose basing a teacher's salary, in part, on his or her students' academic progress on state tests?
- Obama Supports: President Barack Obama has expressed support for the policy of basing teachers' salaries, in part, on their students' academic progress on tests? What do you think of this policy?

2010

Vouchers (n = 1,757)

- Original Question: A proposal has been made that would use government funds to help pay the tuition of low-income students whose families would like them to attend private schools. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?
- Obama Opposes: A proposal has been made that would use government funds to help pay the tuition of low-income students whose families would like them to attend private schools. President Barack Obama has expressed opposition to such a proposal. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Merit Pay (n = 2,753)

- Original Question: Do you favor or oppose basing a teacher's salary, in part, on his or her students' academic progress on state tests?
- Obama Supports: President Barack Obama has expressed support for the policy of basing

teachers' salaries, in part, on their students' academic progress on tests? What do you think of this policy?

Annual Testing (n = 2,665)

- Original Question: As you may know, this year Congress is expected to take action on the federal school accountability law. Some people have proposed to maintain the current requirement that all students be tested in math and reading each year in grades 3-8 and once in high school. Do you support or oppose this proposal?
- Obama Supports: As you may know, this year Congress is expected to take action on the federal school accountability law. President Barack Obama has proposed to maintain the current requirement that all students be tested in math and reading each year in grades 3-8 and once in high school. Do you support or oppose this proposal?

Standards and Tests (n = 2,658)

- Original Question: Some people have proposed that states be required to toughen the standards and tests used to evaluate student performance. Do you support or oppose this proposal?
- Obama Supports: President Obama has proposed that states be required to toughen the standards and tests used to evaluate student performance. Do you support or oppose this proposal?

2017

Charter Schools (n = 4,030)

- Original Question: As you may know, many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?
- Trump Supports: As you may know, many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. President Donald Trump has expressed support for charter schools. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?

Merit Pay (n = 4,196)

- Original Question: Do you support or oppose basing part of the salaries of teachers on how much their students learn?
- Trump Supports: President Donald Trump has expressed support for the policy of basing teachers' salaries on how much their students learn. Do you support or oppose this policy?

Common Core (n = 2,684)

- Original Question: As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core standards in your state?

- Trump Opposes: As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. President Donald Trump has expressed opposition to the Common Core. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core standards in your state?

Tax Credits (n = 4,037)

- Original Question: A proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. Would you favor or oppose such a proposal?
- Trump Supports: A proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. President Donald Trump has expressed support for this idea. Would you support or oppose such a proposal?

2020

Charter Schools (n = 4,090)

- Original Question: As you may know, many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?
- Trump Supports: As you may know, many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. President Donald Trump has expressed support for charter schools. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?

Merit Pay (n = 4,253)

- Original Question: Do you support or oppose basing part of the salaries of teachers on how much their students learn?
- Obama Supports: President Donald Trump has expressed support for the policy of basing teachers' salaries on how much their students learn. Do you support or oppose this policy?
- Trump Supports: Former President Barack Obama has expressed support for the policy of basing teachers' salaries on how much their students learn. Do you support or oppose this policy?
- Obama and Trump Support: Both President Donald Trump and former President Barack Obama have expressed support for the policy of basing teachers' salaries on how much their students learn. Do you support or oppose this policy?

Common Core (n = 2,763)

- Original Question: As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common

Core standards in your state?

- Trump Opposes: As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. President Donald Trump has expressed opposition to the Common Core. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core standards in your state?

Tax Credits (n = 4,092)

- Original Question: A proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. Would you support or oppose such a proposal?
- Trump Supports: A proposal has been made to offer a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools. President Donald Trump has expressed support for this idea. Would you support or oppose such a proposal?

In-State Tuition for Undocumented Immigrants (n = 4,096)

- Original Question: Do you support or oppose allowing undocumented immigrants to be eligible for the in-state college tuition rate if they graduate from a high school in your state?
- Trump Opposes: President Donald Trump opposes the idea of allowing undocumented immigrants to be eligible for the in-state college tuition. Do you support or oppose allowing undocumented immigrants to be eligible for the in-state

2021

Universal Public Pre-K (n = 1,349)

- Original Question: Would you support or oppose the government paying for all 4-year-old children to attend a preschool program?
- Biden Supports: As it turns out, President Joe Biden has expressed support for the government paying for all 4-year-old children to attend a preschool program. Would you support or oppose this policy?

Universal Public Community College (n = 1,349)

- Original Question: Do you support or oppose making all public two-year colleges in the United States free to attend?
- Biden Supports: As it turns out, President Joe Biden has expressed support for making all public two-year colleges in the United States free to attend. Do you support or oppose this policy?