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School Choice and Household Participation in School District Politics

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School Choice and Household Participation in School District Politics[1][2]

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Abstract:

We examine whether policies that enable families to opt out of locally provided public services are associated with reduced political participation. Our study is focused on two types of school choice policy in Michigan: inter-district choice and charter schools. Do parents who send their children to schools of choice or charter schools vote at lower or higher rates than those who use their residentially assigned public school in a school-specific bond election? We conduct our analysis by matching student level data to the Michigan voter file based on addresses, to identify voter households with children enrolled in school by type. We find that household voter turnout in off-cycle school bond elections is significantly lower for households with children who participate in school choice—both charter and inter-district choice. Household turnout is 15 percent lower in households with children in inter-district choice and 12 percent lower in households where children attend charter schools. These numbers are large enough to potentially impact the outcome of very close school bond elections. There are also large differences in turnout rate associated with race/ethnicity and economically disadvantaged households.

[1] This research result used data structured and maintained by the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data is modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information and opinions solely represent the analysis, information and opinions of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, or reflect the views or positions of, grantors, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.

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With more than 90,000 local governments—including over 13,000 locally elected school boards—there are thousands of elections occurring at the local level each year in the United States. Typically, voters receive specific public services from these local entities, and local elections provide one mechanism for political accountability. However, policies enabling privatization and choice in local public services have disassociated some aspects of local service provision from participation and governance for many voters (Warner and Hefetz, 2002; Lerman, 2019; Lay 2022). For example, in education there is a suite of policies, which vary from state to state, that allow families to opt out of local public schools, such as charter schools, public school choice, and private school vouchers. In most cases, these choice schools are not directly governed by the locally elected board where the family resides and not funded by the same local property tax structure.

Although choice and privatization have altered the local education landscape in many communities, voting participation in local school elections has traditionally been one important way for parents and guardians to be involved with their children's education. Parent involvement activities, including parent-teacher contacts, attending school events, and parents supporting learning at home are positively associated with better outcomes for students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). While prior research has not examined parent/guardian voter turnout directly, there is scholarship showing that higher aggregate levels of political participation in local school districts can be good for student outcomes. For example, research has shown that higher levels of voter participation are positively associated with holding elected officials accountable for student achievement (Payson, 2017). Furthermore, an unrepresentative school board electorate is associated with larger racial achievement gaps (Kogan, Lavertu, & Peskowitz, 2021). School bond elections also have consequences for student achievement; Abott et al.

(2020) show that new revenue from passage of school bonds has a positive and significant effect on test scores and graduation rates. These studies suggest that democratic accountability and elections play a role in ensuring that the officials who govern local schools will maintain a focus on improving instruction. Additionally, election outcomes can create conditions for equitable and improved academic outcomes for students through school board representation and school bond passage. Yet local school elections, particularly in off-cycle years, are known for very low levels of turnout and engagement (Kogan, Lavertu, & Peskowitz, 2021; Anzia 2013).

While local elections are a traditional venue for participation in education, the expansion of school choice policies can alter the political relationship between families and local schools. These policies offer market-based choice as an approach to accountability for schools, positioning parents or guardians as clients choosing the best school for their children who can opt out if they are not satisfied (Chubb and Moe 1990; Henig 1994). In contrast, residentially assigned local public schools rely more on democratic accountability for schools, expecting that families will vote in local elections or voice concerns at local public meetings if they are not satisfied with their public schools (Collins 2021). In practice, market-based choice and democratic accountability for schools suffer from implementation challenges and participation challenges. Local school elections often fall short of ideals for democratic accountability, particularly off-cycle elections, which have low turnout rates and officeholders who are not as well aligned with their local constituency (Anzia, 2013; Hartney & Hayes, 2021). Meanwhile, many families lack the broad access to high quality choices envisioned in the market model and face inequalities in access to transportation and information (Jochim et al. 2014).

In between these market-based or democratic ideal types is a reality for families navigating school choice options and opportunities to participate in local school district politics.

What does local political engagement look like when a family has opted out of their local public school district? For households sending their children to a charter school with a different governance board or an out-of-district school, local school board and school bond elections do not have direct representational consequences for the schools their children attend. Drawing on Hirschman (1970), school choice options offer an *exit* from local public schools, while remaining enrolled and participating in local elections is an exercise of *voice* and *loyalty*. However, families that enroll in choice schools still have the option to participate in local elections- they could simultaneously engage in both exit and voice, but exit may have diminished their loyalty to the local district. Our research directly assesses whether the use of exit from a local public service is associated with lower levels of voice through participating in local elections.

Prior research has shown that charter school enrollment in Ohio school districts reduced voter turnout in odd-year local school board elections (Cook et al. 2020). Casalaspi (2019) shows that a one percent increase in school choice participation at the district level in Michigan is associated with a one percent decrease in voter turnout for school bond elections. However, both studies rely on aggregate data at the district level, meaning it is not possible to directly assess voter turnout for adults with children enrolled in choice schools. Our study advances the literature on the consequences of privatization and choice policies for democratic participation by analyzing the participation of adults with school children in local elections at the household level. With household level data, we can better understand whether engagement with school choice policies is associated with parent/guardian participation in local school elections. Our study focuses on Michigan, which has a long history and high level of participation in school choice policies relevant to our analysis. Michigan is also a large state with a broad mix of rural, suburban, and urban school districts.

Charter schools and inter-district choice (known as school of choice) in Michigan were adopted in 1994. In Michigan, charter schools are predominantly authorized by universities, separating them from governing oversight by local school districts. Michigan statute (as well as the state constitution) does not allow vouchers or tax credit scholarships for private school choice. For charter enrollment and school of choice, Michigan Department of Education data shows where these students attend school as well as their district of residence. Based on data from the 2021-22 school year, 14% of Michigan public school students were using inter-district choice and an additional 11% were enrolled in charter schools– for a total of 25% enrollment in choice programs statewide (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 2022). In some parts of the state, such as the city of Detroit and the city of Flint, the share of families participating in school choice is much higher, comprising over half of the students who live in the district. Do adults who send their children to schools of choice or charter schools vote at lower rates, higher rates, or the same rate as those with children who attend their residentially assigned public school?

By matching student level data to the Michigan voter file with addresses, we compare voter participation for adults in households with children who enroll in school choice programs (including inter-district choice and charters) to households with children who attend school in their local district of residence. We match election timing in the voter file to districts that held local school-bond elections, focusing on off-cycle school bond elections in 2017 and 2019, as well as the November 2018 midterm election. In Michigan, while school bond elections can be held in odd years, school board elections must occur on the date of the November general election in even years. Therefore, we focus on school bond elections for our study. An off-cycle school bond election in Michigan usually has very few other items on the ballot. By comparison, an even-year midterm election has both congressional and statewide offices, in addition to local

offices. Overall, this study adds clarity and precision to our understanding of how privatization and choice program participation could shape voting participation. We find that voter turnout in off-cycle school bond elections is significantly lower for households with children enrolled in charter schools and inter-district choice.

Choice and Participation: Expectations

Enrollment in charter school and school of choice options in Michigan has grown considerably over time. Presently, around 1 in 4 students in Michigan are enrolled in a charter school or a public school outside of their local district (Wilkinson and Lohman, 2023). Research on school choice impacts often focuses on student achievement outcomes, family satisfaction, school segregation, or financial consequences for the impacted local districts. Fewer studies have assessed the implications for democratic participation. Important exceptions include work on aggregate voter turnout in school district elections and rates of school choice (Casalaspi 2019; Cook et al. 2020), research on student charter school attendance and young voter turnout (Cohodes and Feigenbaum, 2024), as well as a study matching voter registration records to students participating in a within-district public school choice lottery (Hastings et al. 2007).

Although empirical research on school choice participation and voting is somewhat limited, there are theoretical contributions to consider. For example, Hirschman (1970) draws on Milton Friedman's model for school vouchers as a way to explore tradeoffs between exit and voice. In Hirschman's formulation, individuals who are dissatisfied with a particular organization (such as their local public schools) can choose to exit—withdrawing from the organization—or alternatively, they can choose voice—by speaking up to change a situation. As Hirschman observes, the greater availability of exit as an option can discourage or reduce the use of voice (1970, p. 51). According to Hirschman, the example of school choice in the form of

vouchers shows the preference among economists (such as Friedman) for exit as opposed to voice, arguing:

> Friedman considers withdrawal or exit as the 'direct' way of expressing one's unfavorable views of an organization...[whereas] the decision to voice one's views and efforts to make them prevail are contemptuously referred to be Friedman as a resort to 'cumbrous political channels'" (1970, p. 17).

Drawing from this perspective, we would expect that school choice participation would reduce families' interest in participating in local school district elections. The availability of the exit—and the family's direct preference expressed through school choice—would reduce their incentive to use voice in local school politics.

Relatedly, we can look to Chubb and Moe's (1990) framework of politics and markets as two alternative institutional arrangements for operating schools to consider how expansion of a market model for schools might interact with political participation. They point out that public schools rely on public authority, which is contested through democratic institutions, while a market setting is "radically decentralized," meaning families "make decisions for themselves, not for the schools" (Chubb and Moe 1990, 30). Interestingly, Chubb and Moe propose a system of public-school choice that shares some features with the school of choice system in Michigan; however, they say little about how these reforms might change the political participation of choice families. Throughout the book, they argue that choice (exiting one school and enrolling in another) is the best pathway for parents to display their preferences in public education. They also point out that the outcomes of democratic participation in typical school elections do not necessarily reflect the perspectives or preferences of parents (Chubb and Moe, 199). Thus, like Hirschman, Chubb and Moe's work also suggests that participation in choice would reduce participation in local school district politics.

Moving beyond the theoretical literature, we also use existing school choice and school election literature to consider possible feedback loops related to choice policy and its impact on schoolboard elections. On the one hand, there is a potential mobilizing effect that could translate into choice participants voting at higher levels than nonparticipants. On the other hand, families utilizing school choice as an alternative option for traditional public schooling may experience a demobilizing effect caused by being detached from their community school. The former of the two impacts can be studied by examining common characteristics among school election voters and participants of choice programs. Research has found that parents – regardless of race or socio-economic background – couple civic skills with social capital to navigate choice policy (Neild, 2005; Altenhofen et al., 2016). We draw on these findings to theorize that the networks and resources parents use to participate in school choice programs are also needed to participate in education politics (e.g., schoolboard and school bond elections), and the social and civic capital families use to take part in school choice is transferrable and enables them to participate in school elections at higher rates.

In the case of Michigan, school choice policy and local school elections both have layers of complexity for families to navigate. Michigan's school of choice policy permits school districts to opt out of participating in the program, knowing which schools are willing to accept nonresident students is the first information hurdle families must address. Schools may also restrict the number of school choice enrollees by grade level, building, and programs (Arsen et al., 1999). Lastly, school districts –not the state – determine the timeframe for accepting applications for their choice program. Applying outside of the application period automatically disqualifies a family from participating. Scholars have shown that these policies create inequality in access to school of choice for families in Michigan, and that some districts act strategically to

limit access of Black students and economically disadvantaged students (Lenhoff, 2020; Singer and Lenhoff, 2022). The burden of school choice knowledge is not dissimilar to the obstacles voters face when voting for a school bond or a schoolboard candidate. Both school bond and schoolboard elections are traditionally less visible than national campaigns (Valant, 2021). School bond elections can go on a ballot during any year while school board elections in Michigan must occur in even years (on-cycle with state and national elections). The different time frames and the lower visibility of school bond elections could mean voters are less aware of the election. Being informed about election information and casting a vote often requires voters to rely on the networks that distribute school information to make voting decisions. While school choice and school elections differ in their political landscapes, the similarities in engagement requirements may increase the propensity to participate in elections among families participating in choice. Finally, families who choose out-of-district or charter schools may be motivated to participate and vote against local school bonds, since they would face higher tax rates to fund schools that their own children do not attend.

On the other hand, there is empirical research supporting a demobilizing impact of school choice on voting in school elections- especially for school bonds. Research has shown that common characteristics of individuals who vote in school bond elections are older, nonparent citizens who are motivated by the fiscal impact that a tax increase may have on their income (Kogan et al. 2018; Kitchens 2022). Given that Michigan students who participate external district transfers via school choice and charter schools are more likely to be low-income and/or African American, families that utilize choice do not meet the traditional criteria for high propensity school bond election voters (Cowen and Creed 2017). Finally, there is the district-level research showing that higher rates of school choice in a community are associated with

lower voter turnout in school district elections (Casalaspi 2019; Cook et al. 2020). Families who participate in school choice may become detached from their community school and less likely to participate in local education politics.

We have two possible expectations associated with the prior literature on choice behavior and voter turnout. Based on the literature, there are reasons to expect opposing outcomes in the relationship between school choice and voting participation in school bond elections. Therefore, we consider both possibilities. First, we offer the expectation that families who engage in choice (charters or school of choice) vote at higher rates in off-cycle school district elections, because engaging in choice programs involves navigating administrative processes and this behavior is likely to be associated with greater political participation, especially in low turnout elections. Alternatively, it is also reasonable to expect that families who engage in choice (charters or school of choice) vote at lower rates in off-cycle school district elections, because engaging in choice programs involves exiting the local public school system, so these families are likely to feel less politically connected to their local school district.

In addition to these expectations regarding the relationship between school choice and voting participation, we control for other factors that could be associated with voter turnout in school bond elections. Fraga (2018) tracks the persistent Minority-White turnout gap in U.S. elections, showing that turnout among Black and Latino voters is lower compared to white voters, especially in majority white contexts. Focusing on education elections, Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2021) use data on four states to show that racial composition of the electorate in school board elections has a substantially higher proportion of white voters when compared to the student population. Based on this representation gap and noting that we are examining off-cycle school bond elections, we expect that households with a student identifying as Black,

Latino, or Asian will have lower voter turnout rates. Additionally, we expect a lower voter turnout rate for households with a student that MDE has classified as economically disadvantaged, following research showing the strong relationship between income and voter turnout (Leighley and Nagler 2013; Fraga 2018). Finally, we expect that households with more children enrolled in school will have a higher likelihood of turning out to vote, due to stronger connections to the local education system and more pathways for information flow.

Background: Michigan School Bond Elections

Michigan school bonds are used to raise capital for noninstructional and nonoperational expenditures like building repairs, the construction of new facilities, or debt refinancing. School bonds are funded by raising taxes levied on real property in a school district's jurisdiction. Bond elections allow voters to decide whether to authorize property tax increases through these levies (Naughton and Iamarino, 2022). Elections can take place in even or odd-numbered years. The four regular election dates are the fourth Tuesday in February, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in August, and the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November (Michigan Bureau of Elections, 2019). For our analysis, all the relevant bond elections take place in May, August, or November. Appendix Table 1 provides an overview of school bond elections in Michigan from 1996 to 2023. The number of bond proposals for referendum decreased in the early two-thousands, but it has grown slightly since then. On average, Michigan has about seventy-four bond elections each year. Fifty-five percent of bond proposals pass with total bonds passed exceeding the number of failures most years. The passage rate in off-cycle elections is slightly lower- 53 percent- compared to 57 percent in even year elections.

Research by Anzia (2013) finds that individuals who vote in odd year elections often possess higher levels of political and institutional knowledge than average citizens – making off-cycle election results less representative of local constituencies. Furthermore, Kitchens (2023) finds that communities are more inclined to vote in school elections that impact home and property values. In the case of Michigan, the bond passage rate in off-cycle elections is slightly lower; however, there is little research assessing whether the electorate in off-cycle bond elections in Michigan systematically differs from even years. Based on prior research on other states, we would expect that white voters will be over-represented compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

Data and Methods

For the analysis, we rely on administrative data provided through the Michigan Education Research Institute and Michigan Education Data Center (MERI-MEDC). We match student level data from the 2017-18, 2018-19 and the 2019-20 school years with the Michigan Voter File based on registered voter addresses prior to the 2020 general election. Our analysis focuses on districts that held bond elections during 2017 and 2019 based on data compiled by the State Treasurer[3]—two off-cycle election years—as well as the statewide November 2018 midterm election. We focus on all three election dates with school district bond elections in 2017 and 2019 in Michigan—May, August, and November. For 2018, we only use the November election to offer a major statewide election comparison.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data matching process, MERI provided research student ID's matched to a specially generated household ID based on registered voter addresses (all

[3] https://treas-secure.state.mi.us/apps/findschoolbondelectinfo.asp?countyname=All&SelectYear=2019&electionresult=All&sortorder=ByDistrictName&Submit1=%A0Go%A0

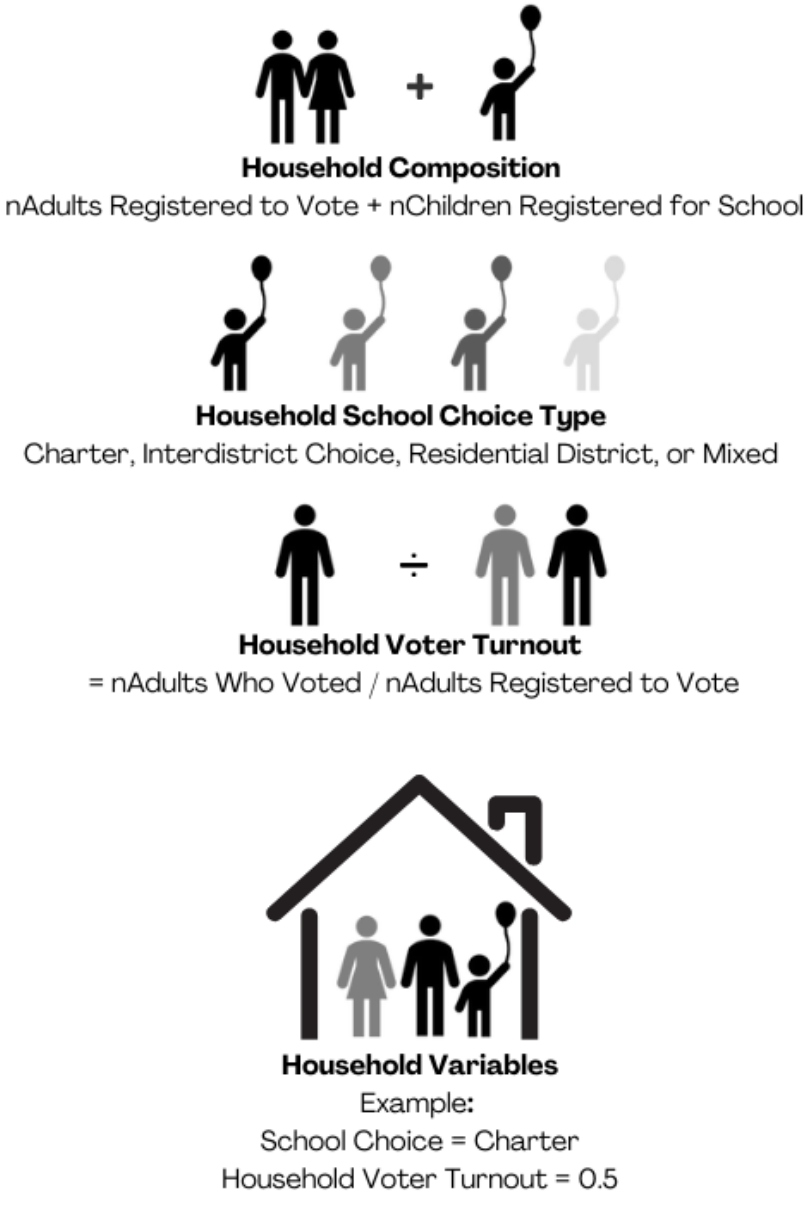
student information was de-identified through newly generated identification numbers for research purposes). The original voter registration numbers were removed from our voter file and replaced with these generated household IDs; in sum, linking voters in the same household to students in the same household. However, due to the size and complexity of the data merge, we collapsed the voter file into household level turnout rates for each election. We then used the MERI provided cross-walk of student and household IDs to link household turnout rates to the students by household in 2017-2018, 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years who resided in districts with a bond election in that time frame. Because the student-voter match is done by 2020 address we rely on the matched students' residential district indicators to determine if a household was in a school district that held a bond election. We removed cases where the residential district determined there was not an eligible election despite the household having a turnout rate greater than 0 for that election, as we were unable to resolve the location of the registered voters nor students in the household.

In sum, we have a dataset of more than 100,000 households with registered voters matched to students in the same households for the 2017 and 2019 bond elections in 150 school districts, and a larger matched dataset of nearly 500,000 households for the 2018 midterm election, which was statewide. Analyses are conducted at the household level, so student level characteristics are also measured at the household level, as shown in our summary of variables (Table 2). Descriptive statistics of all variables are available in Appendix Table 2.

Household level voter turnout—our dependent variable—is the proportion of adults in the household who voted in a given election. In other words, in a household with 2 adults in which 1 adult votes, the household voter turnout for that election would be 0.5. It is important to note that the household level data and restrictions related to using student-level data create some

limitations for our analysis. For example, our voter file has been de-identified, so we do not have information about individual characteristics of voters other than their turnout by election cycle. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of our merged household level voter turnout data and student level data.

Figure 1: Merged Household Level Data for Analysis



Our data includes household level indicators for student demographics, for example, if all students in the household are Black, Latino, Asian, or Multi-racial and whether any student in the household is identified as economically disadvantaged. The Michigan Department of Education uses a flag to identify students as economically disadvantaged when any of these conditions are present: students who have been determined to be eligible for free or reduced-price meals via locally gathered and approved family applications under the National School Lunch program, are in households receiving food (SNAP) or cash (TANF) assistance, are homeless, are migrant, or are in foster care. When any of these conditions are present, a student is considered economically disadvantaged. In the 2019-20 school year, 51% of Michigan public school students were classified as economically disadvantaged by MDE. Roughly 45% of households in our sample have a student classified as economically disadvantaged in the 2019-20 school year (Appendix Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of Variables

Variable	Description	Source
Dependent Variables		
Household level voter turnout rate by election	Variable measured 0-1 as a proportion of adults registered to vote in the household who voted in a given election	Michigan Voter File
Independent Variables		
Inter-district Choice	All students in the household participate in inter-district choice (attends a public school outside their district of residence)	MERI-MEDC
Charter School Enrollment	All students in the household are enrolled in a charter school	MERI-MEDC

Mix Choice	The students in a household attend a combination of schools of choice	MERI-MEDC
Economically Disadvantaged (by household)	At least one student in the household is classified as such by MDE	MERI-MEDC
Race/ethnicity (by household)	All students in the household are the indicated race.	MERI-MEDC
Students in household	Total number of students in the household	MERI-MEDC

One challenge for our study is the representativeness of our sample of districts with bond elections. As shown in Table 3, the districts that held school bond elections in 2017 and 2019 do not fully represent the statewide demographics of the charter school population (as measured by our dataset at the household level). Table 3 uses our household level data to show the percentage of households based on race/ethnicity and economically disadvantaged status of students, and the percentage within each group in either charter schools or inter-district choice in the 2018-19 school year. As shown, 27% of households with Black school-aged children were in charter schools statewide (shaded in gray). By comparison, examining the data from districts that held bond elections in 2017 or 2019, only 11% of households with Black school-aged children in this sample had their children in charter school (also shaded in gray). The districts with bond elections are similarly unrepresentative for Latino household enrollment in charter schools, as well as economically disadvantaged students. Since Detroit is not included in our bond sample data (the district did not have an off-cycle bond election during the years of our analysis), this plays a big role in the unrepresentativeness of our charter sample. In the 2018-19 school year, 33 percent of all Michigan households with school-age children in charter schools were residents in the Detroit school district—meaning Detroit residents compose a very large share of the state's

charter school population. However, the school bond election sample is quite representative for families using inter-district choice—the bond election districts have similar levels of households by race/ethnicity and economically disadvantaged status as observed in the statewide data. We will address possible limitations for our results due to the under-representation of charter school families in our discussion of the bond election turnout analysis.

Table 3: School Choice Status by Demographic Groups: All Households in 2018-19 School Year

	All Households 2018-19 School Year (statewide)		All Households in Districts with 2017 or 2019 Bond Elections	
Population group (by students in household)	**Inter-district Choice**	**Charter School**	**Inter-district Choice**	**Charter School**
White Students	13%	4%	12%	3%
Black Students	13%	27%	15%	11%
Latino Students	14%	10%	12%	4%
Asian Students	7%	8%	10%	4%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	14%	13%	12%	4%

Descriptive Results

Our data offer a rich opportunity to analyze household level voter turnout based on student characteristics. We begin with a descriptive summary of the data to show some of the substantial differences in voter turnout for off-cycle school bond elections based on school choice, race/ethnicity, and household economic status. The mean household turnout rate for the 2017 and 2019 school bond elections is 22 percent. In contrast, the mean household voter turnout rate for the 2018 midterm election among the families in our dataset is 52 percent.

Table 4 provides an overview of average household voter turnout rates based on any household located in a district with a bond election in 2017 or 2019 that has a reported household turnout rate (meaning we had a successful match of student level data to adult voter file data for at least one registered adult in the household). The first row shows the average household voter turnout based on whether the students in the household attend school in their district of residence, inter-district choice, or a charter school. While turnout is low regardless of school choice status for these off-cycle elections, there is a substantial gap between turnout rates for families with children in their district of residence schools (24%) and those who participate in choice (8% for inter-district choice and for charter). The rest of the table shows that these turnout gaps persist across student demographic groups, and that household turnout rates are lower still for households with Black, Latino, Asian, and economically disadvantaged students. Across all demographic categories, household turnout rates for families who participate in choice are lower than for families with students attending their district of residence school.

We also report the average household voter turnout rates for different types of households for the November 2018 statewide midterm election (Table 5). This election had state and federal offices on the ballot, so it serves as a comparison to the hyper-local elections that occur in the off-cycle years. Interestingly, school choice households do have lower average household turnout rates compared to those with children who attend their district of residence schools. However, the gaps are not as large as the gaps we observe in the off-cycle school bond elections.

Table 4: Household Voter Turnout Rates in 2017 and 2019 School Bond Elections by Group

Population group (by students in household)	District of Residence Enrollment	Inter-district Choice	Charter School
All Students	24%	8%	8%
White Students	26%	9%	9%
Black Students	11%	4%	4%
Latino Students	13%	5%	7%
Asian Students	17%	8%	6%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	13%	6%	6%

Table 5: Household Voter Turnout Rates in Nov 2018 Elections by Group

Population group (by students in household)	District of Residence Enrollment	Inter-district Choice	Charter School
All Students	53%	50%	43%
White Students	57%	52%	50%
Black Students	43%	47%	39%
Latino Students	41%	42%	33%
Asian Students	50%	54%	46%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	39%	40%	36%

Results

We begin by presenting our main results using multivariate regression to predict household turnout in the off-cycle bond elections. We provide three models for these results to compare our results for the variables of interest—school choice status—with different model

Table 6: Regression Models Estimating Household Voter Turnout - 2017 and 2019

	Base Model	With 2018 Midterm Turnout	With District Fixed Effects
Inter-district Choice Enrollment	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.00)
Charter School Enrollment	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.12** (0.01)	-0.11** (0.01)
Mixed Enrollment	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)
Economically Disadvantaged Student in Household	-0.17** (0.01)	-0.10** (0.01)	-0.12** (0.01)
Black Students in Household	-0.07** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.07** (0.01)
Latino Students in Household	-0.07** (0.01)	-0.05** (0.01)	-0.05** (0.01)
Asian Students in Household	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.07** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.01)
Multiracial Students in Household	-0.05** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.00)
Number of Students in Household	0.04** (0.00)	0.04** (0.00)	0.04** (0.00)
2018 Midterm Household Turnout	--	0.29** (0.01)	0.29** (0.00)
N	97,395	97,395	97,395
R-squared	0.09	0.19	Within: 0.19 Between: 0.36 Overall: 0.19

Notes: Clustered standard errors (school district) in brackets. * $p < .05$; ** $p<.01$

Specifications (Table 6). Next, we compare the results for the 2018 midterm election (Table 7). Finally, we provide the results for our robustness checks, using data for households that changed into or out of school choice schools between bond elections (Table 8).

Table 6 shows our results estimating household-level voter turnout for the 2017 and 2019 bond elections. Model 1 includes the school choice variables and student-level demographic variables; in Model 2, we included household-level 2018 midterm voter turnout as an independent variable; and Model 3 shows the results with school district-level fixed effects. The school choice variables are dummy variables, which makes the substantive interpretation of the results relatively straightforward. The models show that having children in the household enrolled in inter-district choice is predicted to reduce adult voter household voter turnout by about 15% and charter school enrollment reduces adult voter turnout rates by about 12%. Households with mixed enrollment (having one child in the local public schools and another in choice) are predicted to have household voter turnout that is 8% lower than households where all students attend their residential public schools. Households with economically disadvantaged students, Black students, Asian students, and Latino students are also expected to have lower voter turnout rates in school bond elections. It is noteworthy that the coefficients for our school choice variables change very little across the model specifications. Controlling for the household's voter turnout in 2018 and including district fixed effects show nearly the same results for the households in school of choice and charter schools, suggesting that these results are very robust.

Table 7 shows a model estimating household voter turnout in the November 2018 elections. Since this election is statewide, the N is much larger than it is for our bond election model—all districts statewide are included in this analysis (not just those with bond elections).

Table 7: Regression Model Estimating Household Turnout in Nov 2018 Elections

Inter-district Choice Enrollment	-0.02** (0.00)
Charter School Enrollment	-0.02* (0.01)
Mixed Enrollment	-0.02** (0.00)
Economically Disadvantaged Student in Household	-0.24** (0.00)
Black Students in Household	-0.03 (0.02)
Latino Students in Household	-0.08** (0.01)
Asian Students in Household	-0.07** (0.01)
Multiracial Students in Household	-0.02** (0.00)
Number of Students in Household	0.02** (0.00)
N	491,280
R-squared	0.09

Notes:
Clustered standard errors (school district) in brackets.
* $p < .05$; ** $p<.01$

We still find that the school choice variables—including inter-district choice enrollment, charter, and mixed enrollment—are negative and statistically significant, but the coefficients are much smaller than they were in the bond election models. For each category of school choice, the household voter turnout rate is predicted to be 2 percent lower. Households with children

classified as economically disadvantaged as well as households with Latino students, Asian students, and Multiracial students are predicted to vote at a lower rate. But the relationship between the number of students in the household and household voter turnout is positive and statistically significant.

We conducted an additional analysis as a robustness check by identifying eight school districts in Michigan that had more than one bond election during the 2017 and 2019 election cycles. Within these districts, we identified households with children who either switched into a choice school (and out of the residential public school district), switched into their residential district (and out of choice), or stayed in a choice school (charter or inter-district choice). With this analysis we hope to identify whether a change in choice status of the students might be associated with a change in voter turnout for the adults in the household. One challenge with this analysis is that districts with more than one bond election in close succession are often responding to a failed bond by holding another election. In these cases, it is likely that community members will be more aware of the second bond election, due to efforts by the school district to campaign more effectively for the bond. This is reflected in the higher average voter turnout across the district for their second bond election; average household voter turnout in the first bond election is 21 percent, and it is 25 percent in the second.

Nonetheless, we took the opportunity to examine whether families who switch to choice or remain in choice between bond elections vote at a lower rate than those who remain in their residential public school district. The voter turnout for households that switched into any form of choice from their local public schools is 17 percent in the second bond election—much lower than the average turnout overall; using a T-test, the difference in means statistically significant. Yet it is important to point out that only 145 households had students who switched into choice

between these elections, leaving us with a very small sample. Meanwhile, there are 915 families who stayed in choice schools between the two elections. The mean voter turnout in this group in the second bond election is even lower—only 14 percent. This provides suggestive evidence that families who stay in choice schools (or start out in choice schools) may become more disengaged from local school district politics over time. We also examined these elections with a multivariate regression, predicting the change in voter turnout rate at the household level between the first and second bond elections. These results are reported in Table 8. The excluded group are households that remain in the residential public school district. The coefficients are negative, and the result for families who stayed in choice has weak statistical significance. These results are merely suggestive, and are limited by the relatively small N. Furthermore, districts holding more than one bond election close together are an unusual sample, and the second bond election typically has higher visibility, which raises overall voter turnout.

Table 8: Change in Turnout for District with 2 Bond Elections in 2017-2019

Switch from Choice to Local District	-0.01
	(0.04)
Switch from Local District to Choice	-0.02
	(0.03)
Stayed in Choice	-0.02^
	(0.01)
N	5,430
R-squared	0.00

Notes:
Clustered standard errors (school district) in brackets.
^$p < 0.1$; *$p < .05$; ** $p<.01$

Discussion

These findings show that households with children who participate in school choice programs do have systematic differences in their electoral participation compared to households with students who attend their residential local public schools. Turnout in school bond elections is significantly lower for households with children enrolled in charter schools as well as inter-district choice during off-cycle school bond elections. While our findings are robust to different model specifications, there are limitations to our findings due to the under-representation of households with children in charter schools in our data. Unlike inter-district choice, which is widely used across Michigan in rural, suburban, and urban districts, charter schools are more concentrated in a smaller number of urban districts. Detroit alone has about one-third of the families statewide who enroll their children in charter schools. Therefore, our analysis does not fully capture the voting behavior we could observe among families in high charter enrollment communities. We hope to explore urban districts with high charter enrollment in future analysis.

Our results have implications for choice households, school districts, and the politics of school choice. At the household level, these findings are aligned with theoretical literature suggesting that school choice creates a pathway for families to make decisions about the children's education without engaging in a political process—such as voting. There is prior research indicating that parents with children in charter schools are more satisfied with their schools than those with children in traditional district schools (Buckley & Schneider 2006; Oberfield 2020). The story is less clear with respect to inter-district choice in Michigan; for example, research by Cowen et al. (2015) shows that average participation in school of choice in Michigan was less than 3 years from 2005-2013. In other words, many students shifted out of inter-district choice in a relatively short amount of time, which raises questions about satisfaction

levels. Overall, it is possible that the opportunity to directly select a school is more satisfying and offers a more impactful engagement option for some families, rather than engaging in democratic processes such as voting or speaking at meetings.

At the school district level, these findings could have implications for school bond elections. Statewide, the passage rate for school bonds in Michigan has been going down, and more than half of bonds fail in Republican leaning school districts (Lohman, Wilkinson, and Guiney, 2024). While most school bond elections are not close, a sizable minority are decided by a small margin. For the 2017 and 2019 bond elections in our data, 38 elections (33 percent) were decided by a margin of less than 5 percent. Eight bond elections (7 percent) were decided by a margin of less than 1 percent. In five of these very close elections, the difference between passage and failure of the bond was 10 votes or fewer, and some of these districts have high rates of school choice participation among resident families. While it is impossible to know whether these families would support or oppose bonds (if they voted), reduced voter turnout resulting from school choice could be impactful in these very close elections. As noted earlier in the paper, the passage or failure of school bonds can impact educational quality and outcomes in schools (Abott el al. 2020). In other words, the stakes are high for school districts seeking to pass bonds. If electoral margins are small and passage rates declining—districts may be increasingly concerned about mobilizing all potential voters (especially those with school-aged children).

Finally, these findings are relevant to larger currents in the political movement for school choice. Momentum has grown in recent years for more school choice options, with state level adoption of voucher programs and growing numbers of families opting for homeschooling (Watson 2024). These choice movements often rely on mobilizing participating families for political engagement to support choice-friendly policies (Brown 2021). Yet our research raises questions about

whether longer term opting out of residential public schools could be linked to some forms of political disengagement over time. Years of research on voting and political participation have shown that voting behavior is a habit developed over time (Coppock and Green 2015). If the habit of voting is undermined—especially in school-related elections—for a growing share of the population with school aged-children who engage in school choice, this could raise questions for the parent mobilization strategies and engagement in school choice campaigns as well as educational politics more broadly.

Conclusion

Our study shows that households with children participating in school choice—including inter-district choice and charter schools— participate at lower levels in local school bond elections. These results could have implications for districts that have high levels of students enrolled in charters or inter-district choice. Lower engagement among parents of school-aged children in off-cycle bond elections, which already have low voter turnout, could create hurdles for passing school bonds in close elections. Future research on local electoral participation should consider how choice programs and privatization may shape citizen engagement in the democratic process.

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Appendix

Table 1

Michigan School Bonds 1996 - 2023				
Year	**Total Bond Elections**	**Total Passed**	**Total Failed**	**Pass Rate**
1996	165	83	82	0.50
1997	151	66	85	0.44
1998	107	44	63	0.41
1999	117	56	61	0.48
2000	117	57	60	0.49
2001	108	68	40	0.63
2002	83	49	34	0.59
2003	70	26	44	0.37
2004	73	45	28	0.62
2005	58	23	35	0.40
2006	59	26	33	0.44
2007	68	32	36	0.47
2008	44	25	19	0.57
2009	50	35	15	0.70
2010	50	33	17	0.66
2011	50	23	27	0.46
2012	49	25	24	0.51
2013	43	32	11	0.74
2014	62	44	18	0.71
2015	60	33	27	0.55
2016	54	37	17	0.69
2017	57	32	25	0.56
2018	51	36	15	0.71
2019	60	42	18	0.70
2020	61	48	13	0.79
2021	63	41	22	0.65
2022	56	31	25	0.55
2023	82	45	37	0.55

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Variables Included in Models

Dependent Variables: Household Turnout Rate by Election Cycle	*Mean*	*Min*	*Max*	*N*
May 2017	0.22	0	1	15,448
Aug 2017	0.24	0	1	1,911
Nov 2017	0.25	0	1	20,271
Nov 2018	0.52	0	1	491,280
May 2019	0.20	0	1	29,471
Aug 2019	0.29	0	1	646
Nov 2019	0.22	0	1	35,100
Independent Variables 2017 & 2019 elections	*Mean*	*Min*	*Max*	*N*
Interdistrict Choice Enrollment	0.12	0	1	102,847
Charter Enrollment	0.03	0	1	102,847
Economically Disadvantaged Student	0.42	0	1	102,847
Black Student in Household	0.04	0	1	102,847
Latinx Student in Household	0.05	0	1	102,847
Asian Student in Household	0.02	0	1	102,847
Number of students in Household	1.59	1	11	102,847
Independent Variables Nov 2018 election	*Mean*	*Min*	*Max*	*N*
Interdistrict Choice Enrollment	0.13	0	1	491,280
Charter Enrollment	0.09	0	1	491,280
Economically Disadvantaged Student	0.49	0	1	491,280
Black Student in Household	0.16	0	1	491,280
Latinx Student in Household	0.06	0	1	491,280
Asian Student in Household	0.03	0	1	491,280
Number of students in Household	1.55	1	11	491,280