# Parents, Homevoters, and Public School Employees

## An Analysis of Voting Patterns in the 2012 Georgia Charter School Amendment Referendum

**L. Brooke Conaway***
**Benjamin Scafidi****
**E. Frank Stephenson*****

**October 2014**

### Abstract

Referenda on whether to allow parents greater choice over where to send their children to elementary and secondary schools had always been soundly rejected by American voters—until 2012. In 2012, with a vote of 58.6 percent in favor, Georgia voters passed an amendment to their state constitution to allow the state to approve charter schools, which provide greater choice to parents among public K-12 schools. This study analyzes the vote to pass the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment. We pay particular attention to the roles of parents, ideology, homevoters, and public school employees in determining voting patterns. Our analysis of county-level voting finds that support for the charter schools amendment was higher among counties with lower achieving public schools, more Democrats, more African-Americans, more school-aged children, more educated adults, more private school attendance, and more homeowners. There was a large and negative effect of public school employment on support for the Georgia Charter Schools Amendment. For every one percentage point increase in the proportion of the county electorate that was employed by the public school system, the vote in favor of the amendment declined by about 4 percentage points.

* Georgia College & State University
** Kennesaw State University
** Berry College

The authors thank Scott Milliman, Alexsandar (Sasha) Tomic, and seminar participants at the 2013 Southern Economics Association Conference for helpful comments.

Disclaimer: Scafidi was the first (unpaid) chair of the Georgia Charter Schools Commission that was declared unconstitutional. That court ruling led to the state constitutional amendment studied here.

> "If we employ (in the public sector) one of our men, we increase our vote count while decreasing theirs. Let's help a man get a job and we will have the effect of four votes for DPS. Putting efforts into active measurements for employment is not an expense but an investment and that should be clear to all."
>
> (Member of the ruling DPS Party in Montenegro, 2013)[1]

## 1. Introduction

Charter schools are public schools of choice that are governed by school-level boards.[2] While they are subject to government-mandated learning standards and testing, charter schools are exempt from most other state and local school board laws and policies governing strategic and day-to-day operations.[3]

Since the first law authorizing charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991, charter schools have grown rapidly in the U.S. K-12 education system. Currently, all but seven states states have legal frameworks that allow the creation of charter schools to varying degrees (NCES 2012).[4] As of the 2011-12 school year approximately 5,200 charter schools serving over 1.9 million children were operating in 39 states and the District of Columbia. This large increase in charter schools—from zero in 1991—has far exceeded the growth of other programs to increase parental choice in education.

Supporters of greater parental choice in education believe that reforms like school vouchers, tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, and charter schools will allow funds spent on education to be used more productively, parents to select schools and programs better tailored to their children's specific needs, more innovation in school operations, and traditional public schools to improve by using their resources more efficiently in order to decrease the number of students who leave to attend schools of choice. In short, they believe

[1] We are indebted to Sasha Tomic of Mercer University for sharing this quote and translating it into English. The quote can be found at http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/audio-snimak-dps-izborna-strategija-jedan-zaposlen-cetiri-glasa-114052 .

[2] A school of choice is a school that parents can chose instead of the school assigned to them based on a geographic attendance zone. Charter schools are typically open to all children in a school district regardless of geographic attendance zone within the school district. Charter schools that are oversubscribed must have a lottery or other random process to select students who may attend. In Georgia, most counties are served by a single school district though a few counties host more than one school district.

[3] Laws and policies that charters must follow typically include federal education laws and policies, civil rights, and safety laws and policies.

[4] At the time this was written, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia did not have laws allowing the creation of charter schools.

that, for a given amount of educational spending, competition and choice will lead to better outcomes for students who attend schools of choice and for students who remain in traditional public schools. On the other hand, opponents suggest that these benefits will not be obtained, students who remain in traditional public schools will receive a worse education, and that greater parental choice will lead to more stratification across schools and in educational outcomes by race and class.

This paper analyzes voting patterns for the first school choice measure to pass via a statewide referendum—the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment, which passed in November 2012 with the support of 58.6% of voters. Passage of the amendment allowed the Georgia General Assembly to form a state-level commission empowered to approve the creation of charter schools—even if the charter schools did not have the support of the local public school board. In 2008, the Georgia General Assembly had, under House Bill (HB) 881, created a state commission with the power to approve charter schools, even if local public schools boards opposed them. However, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled HB 881 unconstitutional in 2011 thereby closing the state's charter school commission. Prompted by the court ruling, the Georgia General Assembly, by a two-thirds majority, passed the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment thereby leading to the referendum passed by Georgia voters in November 2012.

This passage of the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment was the first time in American history that a statewide referendum was passed by voters to enact greater parental choice in education.[5] All prior attempts failed at the ballot box—usually by significant margins (Brunner and Sonstelie, 2003). Thus, it is interesting to investigate the factors associated with passage of the Georgia Amendment.

We use county-level Census data, public school district data aggregated to the county level, and county charter school history to analyze the determinants of support for the charter school amendment across Georgia counties. Our results indicate that voter support for the charter school amendment was higher when there were lower public school graduation rates, higher private school enrollment, more Democratic-leaning voters, higher homeownership rates, more African-Americans, more school-aged children, and more educated adults. In contrast, having a higher proportion of public school employees was associated with less support for the

[5] Later that evening, on Election Day 2012, the voters of Washington State passed, by a very slim majority, the second education choice referendum in U.S. history. The Washington State measure is more modest in scope than Georgia's (Rich, 2012).

charter school amendment, and this effect was quantitatively very large. Interestingly, counties that had charter schools that were approved previously by the state of Georgia—and not by their local school boards—were more likely to vote for the charter school amendment, but counties that had charter schools approved by their local school boards prior to passage of the amendment were less likely to support the amendment.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II describes the evolution of charter school policy in Georgia and the November 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment. Section III contains a survey of the literature on the political support for charter schools and school vouchers. In the literature review, we discuss the various hypotheses that have been put forth as determinants of support for greater parental choice in K-12 education. The data and empirical model are described in Section IV, and Section V presents our results. Concluding remarks are given in section VI.

## 2. Charter School Policy in Georgia

In 1998, the Georgia General Assembly passed its first law that permitted the creation of "start-up" charter schools.[6] Start-up charter schools are what education policymakers typically consider a "charter school". Start-up charter schools are new schools of choice that receive flexibility over most state and local laws and regulations, and they are governed by a school-level board separate from the local public school board. In this paper, we use the terms "start-up charter school" and "charter school" synonymously.

Only a handful of charter schools were created under Georgia's 1998 law, as local public school boards had to approve petitions to create charter schools. If a charter was denied by a local school board, then an appeal could be filed to the State Board of Education (BOE), at which point the denial could be overruled. If the State BOE approved a charter upon appeal, the school would not be eligible to receive any funding generated from local tax revenues. The approved school was then labeled a "state special school," and all funding came from the state. Because these schools were not eligible for local funding, they had to operate on about half the

[6] Soon after Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law in 1991, the Georgia General Assembly passed its first charter law in 1993. This Georgia law allowed only for "conversion" charter schools to be created. That is, existing traditional public schools could "convert" to charter status with approval by both their local school board and State Board of Education. These conversion charter schools were not schools of choice, but they did obtain a modest degree of flexibility from state and local laws and regulations.

funding amounts given to traditional public schools in Georgia, as additional state funds were not provided to offset the foregone local funds (Consoletti, 2012; Miller, 2012). As of 2008, there were only three charter schools that were state special schools in the entire state of Georgia.

In 2008, the Georgia General Assembly attempted to make it easier to establish charter schools by passing HB 881which created the Georgia Charter Schools Commission. This state-level commission was appointed by the Governor (three members), the Lt. Governor (two members), and the Speaker of the House (two members). This 7-member commission was given the power to approve the creation of new charter schools, provide these schools with per-student funding equal to approximately 80 percent of the funding given to traditional public schools, and to close charter schools under its purview. This commission was allowed to approve charters that were turned down by local public school boards. In 2007, the year prior to the creation of this commission, a total of 26 charter applications were submitted to local public school boards throughout Georgia, and all 26 were rejected (Roberts, 2011).

This new state commission eliminated the power of local public school boards to unilaterally block competition from incoming charter schools. During its three years of operation, the commission approved charters for 16 schools, many of which had been previously rejected by local school boards. The figures below show the distribution of start-up charters and state-approved charters across Georgia counties in 2010 – after the Georgia Charter Schools Commission began approving charter schools. Figure 1 shows the distribution of locally-approved and state-approved charters by county. Figure 2 shows only state-approved charter schools, one of which was a statewide virtual charter school where students received instruction at home through virtual means. As discussed below, the original Commission was not able to approve schools after this time period.

**Figure 1. The Distribution of Charter Schools by County**

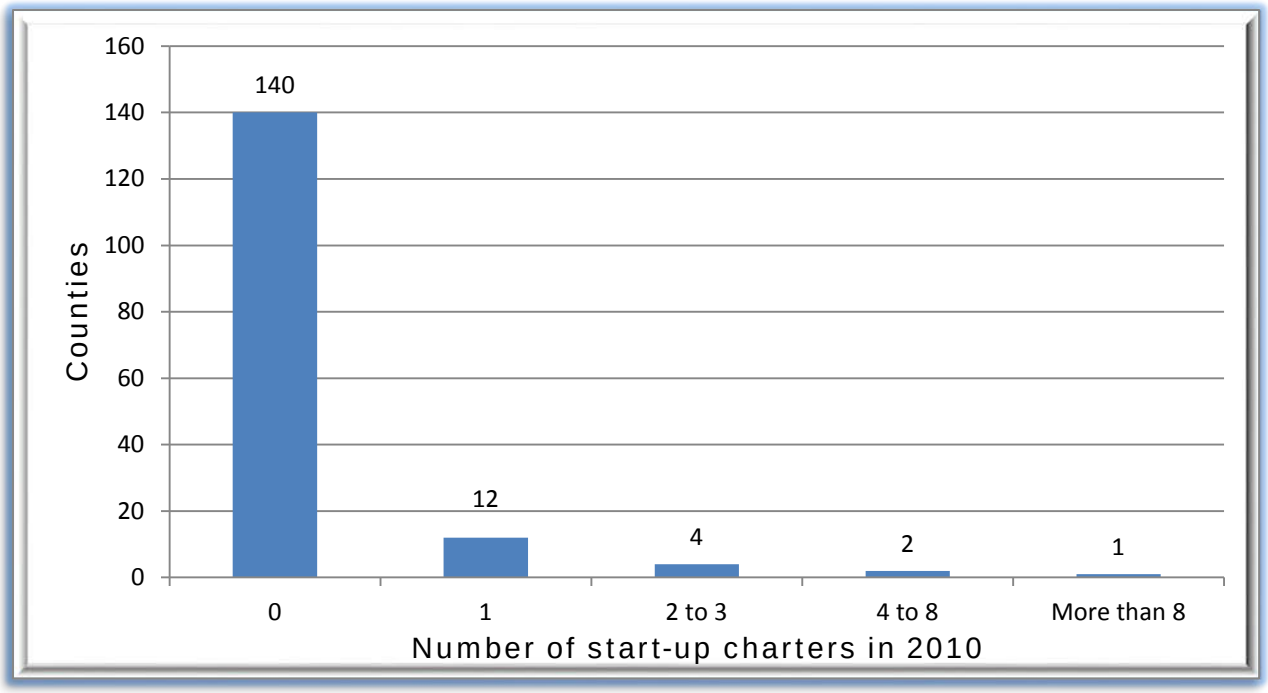
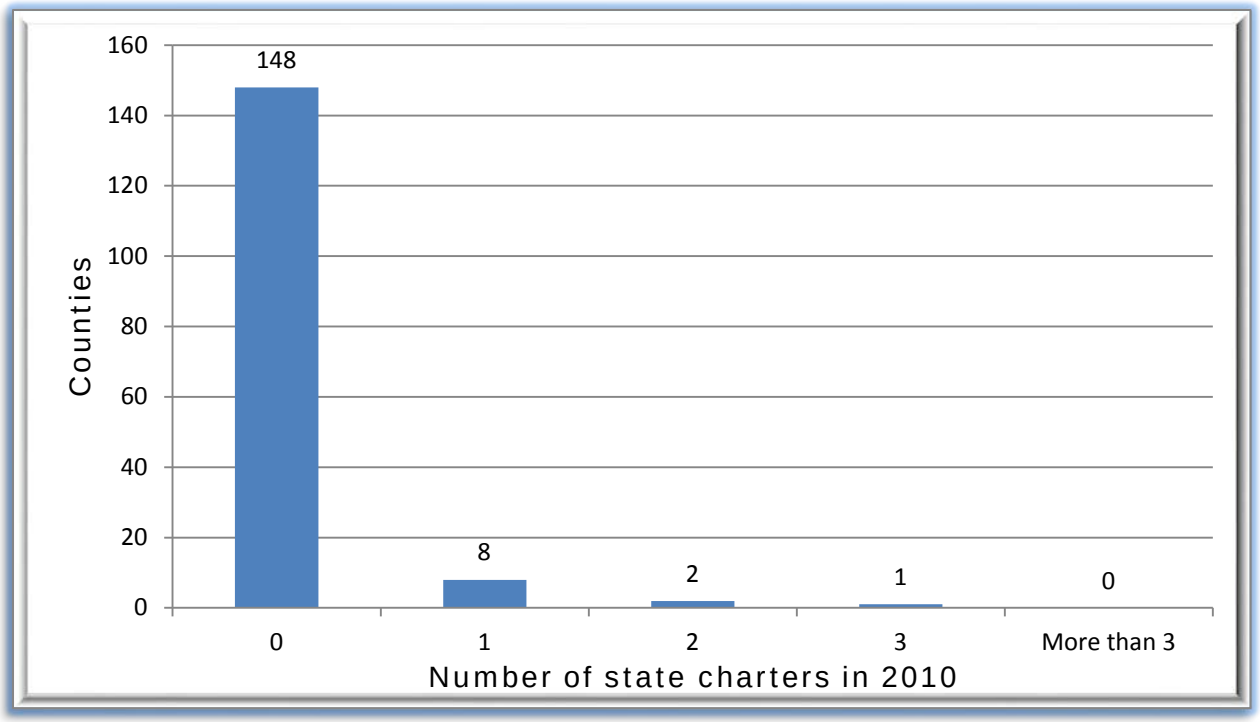



**Figure 2. The Distribution of State-Approved Charter Schools by County**



After the state commission approved its first two charter schools in late 2009, the state's largest public school district—Gwinnett County Public Schools—sued the commission on state constitutional grounds. After losing at the trial court level, Gwinnett County Public Schools won a 4-3 Georgia State Supreme Court decision in 2011. The decision declared the Georgia Charter Schools Commission unconstitutional on the grounds that the state constitution did not give the Georgia General Assembly the power to create public schools that were not "special" in some manner that was radically different from traditional public schools. According to the state constitution only local school boards had the power to create public schools that were not "special" (Downey, 2011).

Because state laws vary, The Center for Education Reform (CER) —a proponent of charter schools and greater parental choice in education—ranks states charter laws based on four major factors: the existence of multiple autonomous charter authorizers, operational and fiscal autonomy, the number of charters allowed and state caps, and equitable funding. As of 2012, the District of Columbia ranked highest, with the most supportive framework for charters, and Mississippi ranked lowest among those states with charter laws. Georgia had the 15$^{th}$ most friendly environment for charter schools according to CER in 2011, but fell to 20$^{th}$ in 2012, which tied Georgia with New Jersey for the largest drop in ranking over that period. This large drop in ranking was due to the Georgia Supreme Court decision that closed the Georgia Charter Schools Commission, thereby restoring the power of local public school boards to veto the creation of new charter schools (Consoletti, 2012).

With slightly more than the constitutionally required two-thirds vote in each house, the Georgia General Assembly passed House Resolution 1162 in early 2012. This resolution called for amending the Georgia constitution in a manner that would permit the creation of a new State Charter Schools Commission, and this new commission would be allowed to approve charter schools without local school board approval. The new commission would not be allowed to redirect local funds to the schools it approved, but the state would instead appropriate additional state funds to compensate for a lack of local funding. Like the original Georgia Charter Schools Commission, this new commission would give charter petitioners the option of going directly to the new state commission to ask for a new charter school, rather than having to first garner approval by a local school board. However, as a constitutional amendment, implementation of this new commission also required approval by voters in a statewide referendum.

The Georgia Charter Schools Amendment appeared on the November 2012 ballot with the following wording: "Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities?" Under this amendment, charter schools would only be created through the state commission if community members filled out a lengthy application—called a petition—requesting a charter school be approved in their area. If approved, that school would still not receive the same per pupil funding given to the average traditional Georgia public school – instead, the school would receive only 82.4 percent of that average.[7] Any virtual charter school approved by the state would receive 52.3 percent of the average spent per pupil in traditional public schools. The amendment stipulates that none of the funding for state approved charter schools may come from local property taxes (House Resolution 1162).

Radio ads, Facebook campaigns, and public debates leading up to the election marked the hot dispute between those on either side of the charter school referendum. All organizations that represent public school employees and leaders opposed the amendment publicly, and public school districts were accused of using taxpayer funds to oppose the amendment. Amendment supporters had over $1.5 million to spend to convince voters to pass the amendment (Rich, 2012). Lead sponsor of the amendment House Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones and Georgia Governor Nathan Deal were vocal supporters of the amendment, while elected State School Superintendent John Barge was a vocal opponent. All three are members of the Republican Party, and Dr. Barge announced that he would run against Governor Deal in the Republican Primary for Governor in 2014.

As stated previously, Georgia voters passed the amendment with 58.6 percent voting "yes", and this was the first time in American history that a statewide referendum was passed by voters to enact greater parental choice in education. All prior attempts failed at the ballot box—usually by significant margins.

[7] This percentage is equal to what is spent per pupil in the bottom four lowest spending traditional public schools in Georgia.

## 3. Literature Review

*Charter Schools*

There is an extensive empirical literature on whether charter public schools lead to better outcomes for students than traditional public schools. For example, using a quasi-experimental approach, Raymond et al. (2013) analyze the performance of charter schools and traditional public schools in 25 states plus Washington, D.C. and New York City. Their conclusion is: "On average, students attending charter schools have eight additional days of learning in reading and the same days of learning in math per year compared to their peers in traditional public schools (Raymond et al., p. 3)." Another example of this literature comes from Hoxby et al. (2009) who took an experimental approach by comparing students who won a lottery to be admitted to New York City charter schools to students who lost a lottery and were not admitted. They conclude, "On average, a student who attended a charter school for all of grades kindergarten through eight would close about 86 percent of the 'Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap' in math and 66 percent of the achievement gap in English. A student who attended fewer grades would improve by a commensurately smaller amount (Hoxby et al., p. IV-1)."

Betts and Tang (2011) perform a meta-analysis of the literature on charter performance and find that charter high schools do not tend to perform as well as charters at lower grade levels, and that charters tend to have larger effects when in urban areas. While some studies find modest benefits of nearby charter schools on the academic performance of students in traditional public schools, other studies like Zimmer et al. (2003) find no benefits—and no harm—to academic achievement for students who remain in traditional public schools. To our knowledge, no empirical study has found that nearby charter schools lead to declines in academic achievement for students who remain in traditional public schools even though they tend to have a significantly lower taxpayer cost per student.

*Legislative Passage of Charter School Laws*

Three studies analyze the relative strength of state charter school laws in terms of their favorability to creating and operating charter schools, Hassel (1999), Alvarez (2003), and Wong and Shen (2004). Each of these three studies found that urbanization and Republican legislative control and population are associated with the passage of strong charter school laws. Hassel (1999) found little correlation between student achievement in public schools and more

permissive charter creation laws, while Alvarez (2003) did not find teacher-student ratios in public schools to be associated with the legal ease or difficulty of creating charter schools. Alvarez (2003) found that teacher unions made it less likely that a state passed a charter school law. Neither Hassel (1999) nor Alvarez (2003) found the presence of teachers' unions to be associated with charter school law strength.

Using state level data, Stoddard and Corcoran (2007) analyze which states had passed charter school laws by 1999 and by 2004 and the strength of state charter school laws by 2004.[8] Stoddard and Corcoran found that charter schools law passage is more likely with more population heterogeneity, more income inequality, more educational attainment among adults, more students enrolled in private schools, and lower student performance on SATs. Higher unionization rates among instructional employees of public schools made charter school law passage less likely by 1999.

There are three main differences between the present study and Stoddard and Corcoran (2007). Our study analyzes the support for charter schools expressed by voters in a referendum, while Stoddard and Corcoran estimate the relationship between state-level demographic and school characteristics on whether state legislatures had passed charter school laws. Second, Stoddard and Corcoran analyze whether state legislatures passed charter school laws prior to 2004. Given the rapid increase in charter school enrollment nationally since that time, it is possible that voters are more aware about charter schools in more recent years. Thus, nearly a decade after the period studied by Stoddard and Corcoran (2007), it is again worth examining voters' preferences for charter schools. To that end, the present study analyzes who voted in favor of the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment. Third, as discussed in later sections, the present study uses a different array of control variables relative to Stoddard and Corcoran.

*When Do Voters Support School Vouchers?*

More work has been done on explaining voter support for school vouchers, where taxpayer-funded school vouchers can be used by parents to offset tuition payments at private K-12 schools. Much of the literature explaining support for school vouchers describes the groups that expect net gains or net losses from school vouchers.

[8] Stoddard and Corcoran (2007) and Glomm et al. (2005) also analyze the penetration of charter schools in school districts and states. Both studies find that population heterogeneity and lower quality public schools are associated with more charter schools in school districts and states.

As considered by Brunner et al. (2001), Fischel (2001), Nechyba (2000), and Brunner and Sonstelie (2003), property values for homeowners may be affected by the adoption of school vouchers. Each of these studies found that homeowners vote for school choice bills based on how their property values will be affected. Fischel (2001) called this group "homevoters" – those who vote based on how a proposal will affect their home values. Because vouchers lower the price of a substitute for good public schools, families with school age children will no longer be willing to pay the premium for a home in a good public school district. Hence, vouchers lower home values in district with good public schools, which affects all homeowners, but particularly the ones without kids (Nechyba 2000). Thus, homeowners with children in good public school districts would experience a benefit from vouchers due to the increased educational opportunities offered, but a cost due to the negative impact on the values of their homes. For homeowners with kids in lower quality public school districts, the effects of the voucher on educational opportunities and home values would both be positive as both educational opportunities and housing values would rise with the introduction of vouchers. For renters, their support for school vouchers should be more directly and inversely related to public school quality than homeowners.

The results in Brunner et al. (2001) support the "homevoter" hypothesis. Using data on votes for California's universal voucher Proposition 174, the authors found a negative relationship between the housing price premiums homeowners in California were paying in order to price themselves into good public school districts and the percent in the county that voted "yes" on the voucher proposition. They found that the percent of "yes" votes for the voucher program was lower in districts with high public school home premiums compared to districts with low premiums (i.e., poorly performing public school districts). They explain that if vouchers only go to pay private tuition, then homeowners in good public school districts will not support the voucher program since home buyers would no longer need to buy homes in that district just to be able to attend the better public schools. And, homeowners in poor public school districts supported voucher programs since they would have more educational opportunities and the values of their homes would increase as home buyers will take advantage of their low housing prices and increased schooling opportunities.

Brunner et al. (2001) also estimated the relationship between the percent of precinct voters who were "16 years or older and employed in education services" at voting in favor of the

universal voucher proposition. They used this measure as a proxy for percent of the electorate who worked for the public school system. While some employed in education services could have been employees in higher education or in private K-12 schools, they found a large and negative relationship between their proxy for public school employment and support for universal vouchers. They suggest that public school employees may fear vouchers because they believe that their wages or working conditions may not be as favorable if they had to change their employment to private schools, as students moved from public to private schools via vouchers.

Brunner and Sonstelie (2003) later used a similar model to explain the support for California's universal voucher Proposition 38 in 2000. In this analysis, they had data that allowed them to directly observe how homeowners intended to vote, what their thoughts were on local public schools and if they had school-age children. They found similar results to Brunner et al. (2001); the direction of their votes again depended on the quality of public schools in their district. In districts with higher quality public schools, 39 percent of homeowners were likely to vote for the voucher bill if they had no school-age children. However, 56 percent of homeowners with no school-age children living in districts with poor public schools were likely to vote for the vouchers. These results are consistent with the view that universal vouchers change the values of homes such that home values fall in districts with high quality public schools and home values rise in districts with low quality public schools.

Brunner and Imazeki (2008) noted that changes in peer group composition and changes in housing values can have opposing effects on universal voucher support. Using data from California's universal voucher Proposition 38, they found that the degree of Tiebout (1956) choice available in a market will impact which groups support the voucher bill. If it is relatively easy to move across districts, then high income voters are likely to vote against the voucher bill and low income voters are likely to vote for it. If it is more difficult to move across districts, then the voucher bill will have a much smaller effect on housing values.

Zahirovic-Herbert and Turnbull (2008) also noted that the liquidity of housing would be affected with additional school choice options, making it easier or more difficult to sell your home as people move across districts. Though vouchers and charter schools may not have the same effects on homeowners, both are likely to affect housing values. When voting on charter

school bills, homeowners will likely support more charter schools in their districts because it will increase home values by attracting more home buyers into the areas with the best charter schools.

Kenny (2005) provides an excellent and detailed description of the literature existing at that time regarding legislative and voter support for school choice proposals. According to his summary of the literature, states were more likely to pass vouchers that went to larger school districts as the literature shows that larger school districts are more likely to have lower performing public schools due to little inter-district competition. Smaller, more closely situated school districts have more competition among the public schools across districts, so they tend to have better performing public schools.

Kenny (2005) also analyzed 18 efforts to pass school vouchers in state legislatures. He found that a Republican controlled state legislature and governorship were necessary, but not sufficient condition for voucher approval. Based on the time period he looked at, all successful voucher programs were signed into law by a Republican governor, and most of the voucher activity occurred in those states where Republicans controlled both chambers of state legislatures. His findings suggested that more private school enrollment was associated with more voucher support; however, he only had access to 18 observations. He noted that this result varies across the literature since it may be uncertain how a voucher bill would affect the tax burden of the state.

To summarize, the existing literature indicates that voter support for school choice measures depends on political affiliation, homeownership status, expectations about charter schools, local educational quality and population demographics.

Given the various schools of thought regarding how charter schools will impact student students who attend charter schools and how charters affect students who remain in public schools, the average voter may simply use the doctrine of his or her political party to estimate the effect that more charter schools will have on students. Kenny (2005) finds that conservatives tend to support and expect positive results from charter schools relative to liberals, who tend to prefer more traditional public school spending and reforms. Although there are no studies showing that more charter schools harm other public school students academically, liberals tend to expect harmful effects on traditional public schools and many vote based on those expectations.

## 4. Empirical Model and Data

As noted above, the dependent variable for our analysis is the percentage of voters in each county who voted yes on the 2012 Georgia Charter School Amendment. The definitions of all variables are summarized in Table 1, and Table 2 contains descriptive statistics and data sources. There are 158 observations, one for each of Georgia's 159 counties except Clay County, which is missing data for one of the explanatory variables—Clay's County population is less than 4,000 residents.[9]

The explanatory variables include the number of locally-approved and state-approved charter schools in the county prior to the 2011 Georgia Supreme Court ruling. The number of locally-approved startup charters may be negatively related to voter support if voters in these counties think local approval of charters is working reasonably well. Conversely, the number of state-approved charters is expected to be positively related to the percentage of voters supporting the referendum because voters in these counties may favor a means of state charter approval as an alternative to a local board of education that in the past was unwilling to approve charter schools. Voters in counties with state chartered schools may also have favored the referendum because the elimination of state approved and funded charter schools could result in a local tax hike if students in those schools returned to the locally funded public schools. This "homevoter" rationale is one reason why the homeownership percentage is also included in the model; homeownership should also be positively related to support for the referendum if homeowners think that expanding charter school availability would increase local home values by improving local education options.

While homeowners might anticipate benefitting from increased charter availability, current public school employees might view them as a threat—as students leave traditional public schools for charter schools, state funding leaves as well. Hence the model also includes the share of the local population that is employed by public schools. If school employees expect that increased charter opportunities might reduce their employment prospects then there would be a negative relationship between public school employment and support for the charter school amendment.

[9] Georgia has 159 county school districts and 21 city school districts. Since our voting data was at the county level, for the counties that had a city school district within their county limits, we created a weighted average public high school graduation rate for the county. Thus, the county graduation rate was a population-weighted average of the county and any city school district graduation rates.

The model also includes the percentage of a the local population that is school aged (between 5 and 17 years of age), the graduation rate of a county's public schools, and the share of local students attending private schools or being home-schooled. A larger number of school aged children should increase the salience of education as an issue among voters and lead to an increase in support for the charter amendment. The county's public school graduation rate is included in the model as a measure of public school quality. It is anticipated that the graduation rate is will be negatively related to the share of voters favoring the amendment because a higher graduation rate may indicate more satisfaction with local schools and less possibility that charter schools will represent an improvement over the available educational options. The share of local children attending private schools or being homeschooled should be positively related to support for the charter amendment; in choosing to homeschool or send their children to private school parents of these children have revealed that they think local public schools are somehow inadequate for their children's needs. Moreover, parents who currently send their children to private schools could benefit from local charter schools by avoiding tuition payments.

To control for any ideological preferences for or against charter schools, the model includes each county's support for President Obama in the 2012 presidential election (held on the same date as the charter referendum).[10] In an alternate specification, the Obama vote share is omitted and the percentages of the population that are black, Asian, or other race (with the white population share as the omitted category) are included to assess for patterns of support across different racial groups. The ideology measure and racial group percentages are not included in the same specification because Georgia's large black population and its strong tendency (greater than 90 percent) to vote for Democrats lead to severe multicollinearity.

Lastly, the model also includes the county's population and the percentage of the population that have bachelor's degrees in the event that these population characteristics are correlated with support of or opposition to the charter school amendment. Fischel (2006) suggests that smaller communities are less likely to support parental choice in education because it reduces local cultural capital that is formed by parental bonds forged at their children's local public schools—Fischel shows that this hypothesis is supported by prior research. If holding a bachelor's degree indicates a greater concern about educational opportunities, then the

[10] Georgia does not require party affiliation when registering to vote, so a party registration measure of ideology was not available.

percentage of the population holding bachelor's degrees might be positively related to support for the charter school amendment.

**Table 1**
*Variable Descriptions*

| Variable | Description |
|---|---|
| Percent yes votes | Percent of county voters that voted "yes" on the 2012 Georgia Charter Amendment (PCTYES) |
| Public school employees | Percent of county population that works either full-time or part-time in public education |
| Graduation rate | High school graduation rate for county's public schools |
| Percent ages 5-17 | Percent of county population between the ages of 5 and 17 |
| Percent homeowners | Percent of homes in county that are owner occupied |
| Percent bachelor's or higher | Percent of county population with a bachelor's degree or higher |
| Percent white | Percent of county population that is white |
| Percent black | Percent of county population that is black |
| Percent Asian | Percent of county population that is Asian |
| Percent other race | Percent of county population of another race |
| Percent private | Percent of students that are in private school/home school |
| Local charters | Number of charter schools in the county that were approved by local school boards |
| State charters | Number of charter schools in the county that were approved by the state |
| Obama votes | Percentage of votes in the 2012 presidential election for Obama |
| Population | County population |

**Table 2**
*Summary Statistics and Sources*

| Variable (Obs = 158*) | Mean | Std. Dev. | Min | Max | Data Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percent yes votes | 50.57 | 8.82 | 25.75 | 71.45 | Georgia Secretary of State – Election Results (2012) |
| Public school employees | 2.77 | 0.43 | 1.70 | 4.35 | Certified Personnel Index – provided by the Georgia Dept. of Education |
| Graduation rate | 70.48 | 9.51 | 40 | 91.57 | Governor's Office of Student Achievement |
| Percent ages 5-17 | 17.88 | 2.26 | 11.16 | 23.65 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percent homeowners | 70.18 | 7.97 | 33.66 | 85.82 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent bachelor's or higher | 10.06 | 5.16 | 3.02 | 29.95 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent white | 66.22 | 17.27 | 18.87 | 97.72 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent black | 27.87 | 17.48 | 0.35 | 74.06 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent Asian | 1.05 | 1.32 | 0.03 | 10.59 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent other race | 4.85 | 3.70 | 0.68 | 24 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Percent private | 6.75 | 3.42 | 0.93 | 16.40 | Georgia County Guide |
| Local charters | 0.36 | 1.93 | 0 | 22 | Provided by the Georgia Dept. of Education Charter Schools Division |
| State charters | 0.09 | 0.39 | 0 | 3 | Provided by the Georgia Dept. of Education Charter Schools Division |
| Population (in 100,000s) | 6.09 | 12.71 | 0.17 | 92.06 | U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census |
| Obama votes (2012) | 37.18 | 15.33 | 12.12 | 84.82 | Georgia Secretary of State – Election Results (2012) |

**There are 159 Georgia counties, but the graduation rate for Clay County is missing. All data are county level for the year 2010, except the amendment results and the Obama vote results, which are both for 2012. All data are unweighted.*

## 5. Results

Table 3 contains OLS estimation results with White-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Due to the high correlation between race and political affiliation, two sets of results are reported. The results for most variables are similar in magnitude and statistical significance in both specifications.

**Table 3** *Estimation Results*
Dependent Variable: Percent Yes Votes

| Explanatory Variable | Estimated Effect | Estimated Effect |
|---|---|---|
| Public employees | -4.26** | -4.08** |
| | (1.60) | (1.66) |
| Graduation rate | -0.15** | -0.18** |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Percent ages 5-17 | 1.19** | 1.01** |
| | (0.33) | (0.36) |
| Percent homeownership | 0.22** | 0.14 |
| | (0.09) | (0.10) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Percent bachelor's or higher | 0.60**<br>(0.18) | 0.51**<br>(0.20) |
| Percent black | | 0.08*<br>(0.05) |
| Percent Asian | | 1.11<br>(0.90) |
| Percent other race | | -0.17<br>(0.15) |
| Percent private | 0.42**<br>(0.19) | 0.44**<br>(0.20) |
| County population | 0.10<br>(0.08) | 0.07<br>(0.11) |
| Local charters | -0.91**<br>(0.40) | -0.89**<br>(0.39) |
| State charters | 2.14<br>(1.75) | 2.58<br>(1.76) |
| Percent Obama votes | 0.18**<br>(0.05) | |
| Constant | 20.41*<br>(10.64) | 35.54**<br>(10.64) |
| $R^2$ | 0.46 | 0.44 |
| F-stat | 16.72 | 13.09 |

N=158. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
*** significant at 5%; * significant at 10%*

As expected, a county's prior experience with charter schools is related to voting on the charter amendment. Counties with one state approved charter have an increase of over 2 percentage points in voter support for the charter school referendum relative to a county with no state-approved charters. This result suggests that counties with prior difficulty getting local approval for charters have more support for the amendment, but the effect is not statistically significant. By contrast, the presence of a locally approved charter reduces support by about one percentage point; apparently voters in these counties feel less need for a state approval option since they have been able to get charters approved at the local level.

Likewise, the homeownership percentage has a positive effect, though it is imprecisely estimated in the model with racial population shares. The positive relationship here may arise from the fact that state funding of state-approved charters could reduce local property taxes, as the state was funding new charter schools, or the view that local charter schools would be of relatively high quality and increase property values.

As expected, an increase in public school employees is associated with less support for the amendment. The results indicate that a 1 percentage point increase in public school employees in a county corresponds to more than a 4 percentage point decrease in support for the amendment. The large negative effect is consistent with the view that public school employees feel threatened by an alternative path for approving charter schools since charter school flexibility includes the ability to hire teachers who are not state certified and to eliminate fair dismissal protections for teachers, which some call teacher tenure. The magnitude of this result is also consistent with the view expressed at the quote at the top of this paper that giving one person a government job may lead to three additional votes.

A county's public school graduation rate is negatively related to support for the charter school amendment. As with previous research on vouchers, this result suggests that there is less support for educational options in areas where existing public schools are perceived to be functioning fairly well.

There is a large positive effect associated with the share of the population between ages 5 and 17. This finding suggests that parents with school-age children strongly support the amendment and its provision for state approved charter schools. Likewise, the percentage of the population having bachelor's degrees is associated with increased support for the amendment. More private and homeschool enrollment is also associated with more support for the amendment.

When political affiliation is included, the results indicate that a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of voters who voted for President Obama in the 2012 presidential election corresponds to an increase of almost two percentage points of support for the charter amendment. This contrasts the idea that Democrats tend to oppose school choice measures relative to Republicans. While the prior literature finds this partisan difference with regards to elected officials—with Republicans much more likely to support school choice relative to Democrats, there seems to be a difference when it comes to voters with Democratic voters more

likely to support charter schools relative to Republicans. When race is included the results indicate that, relative to whites, increases in the black and Asian populations are associated with increases in the percentage of voters favoring the amendment. The estimated coefficient on the black population share is relatively small; a 10 percentage point increase in the black population share corresponds to an increase of less than one percentage point in support for the referendum. The coefficient on the Asian population share is much larger - a one percentage point increase in Asians as a share of the population is associated with a one percentage point increase in support—but it is imprecisely estimated. The other race category has a negative effect relative to whites, but the estimated effect is small and is not statistically significant.

There is no effect associated with overall county population suggesting that there was no difference in support for the charter school amendment across counties of different sizes, other variables held constant.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Given the large increases in charter schools nationwide, the 2012 Georgia Charter Schools Amendment provides an interesting study for explaining the variation in support for charter schools and increased parental choice in education. The passage of this amendment by Georgia voters was the first time in American history that voters passed a referendum supporting a school choice program. Our analysis of voting patterns finds that homeowners, more educated adults, black and Asian voters, parents of private and homeschool students were more likely to support the charter school amendment. The presence of state-created charter schools increased voter support for the measure as well. Counties with high graduation rates and high numbers of public school employees opposed it—this latter effect was very large. Our results are consistent with the prior literature on political support for school choice and suggest that the details of school choice proposals have a direct impact on voter support.

**References**


Betts, J. and Tang, Y. (2011). *The effect of charter schools on student achievement: A meta-analysis of the literature*. Seattle: National Charter School Research Project.

Brunner, E.J., Sonstelie, J. and Thayer, M. (2001). Capitalization and the voucher: An analysis of precinct returns from California's proposition 174. *Journal of Urban Economics*. 50, 517-536.

Brunner, E.J. and Sonstelie, J. (2003). Homeowners, property values and the political economy of the school voucher. *Journal of Urban Economics*. 54 (2), 239-257.

Brunner, E.J. and Imazeki, J. (2008). Tiebout choice and universal school vouchers. *Journal of Urban Economics*. 63 (1), 253-279.

Consoletti, A. (Ed.), (2102). *Charter school laws across the states 2012* (13th ed.). Bethesda: Center for Education Reform.

Downey, M. (2011). Georgia supreme court strikes down charter schools commission in 4-3 vote. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. AJC Get Schooled Blog - Online at: http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2011/05/16/breaking-news-supreme-court-strikes-down-charter-schools-commission-in-4-3-vote/ (accessed 9/25/2012).

Downey, M. (2012). Governor signs charter school enabling bill today and endorses November amendment. Atlanta Journal and Constitution. AJC Get Schooled Blog – at: http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2012/05/03/governor-signs-charter-school-enabling-bill-today-and-endorses-november-amendment/ (accessed 9/25/2012).

Fischel, W. A. (2001). *The homevoter hypothesis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Fischel, W. A. (2006). Why voters veto vouchers: public schools and community-specific social capital. *Economics of Governance* 7(2), 109-132.

House Resolution 1162, Georgia General Assembly. http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/20112012/125399.pdf (Accessed 10/25/14)

Hoxby, C.M., Murarka, S. and Kang, J. (2009). *How New York City's charter schools affect achievement, August 2009 report*. Second report in series. Cambridge: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project.

Kenny, Lawrence (2005). The public choice of educational choice. *Public Choice*. 124, 205-222.

Miller, M. At: http://votemikemiller.org/index.php/mike-miller-supports-ga-charter-schools-amendment/ (accessed 9/25/2012).

Nechyba T. J. (2000). Mobility, targeting, and private school vouchers. *American Economic Review*. 90, 130-146.

Raymond, M., Cremata, E., Davis, D., Dickey, K., Lawyer, K., Negassi, Y., and Woodworth, J. (2013). *National Charter School Study*. Stanford: Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

Rich, M. (2012). Charter schools win support in Georgia vote. *New York Times* November 7.

Stoddard, C. and Corcoran, S.P. (2007). The political economy of school choice: Support for charter schools across states and school districts. *Journal of Urban Economics*. 62(1), 27-54.

Tiebout, C. (1956). A pure theory of local expenditures. *Journal of Political Economy*. 64(5), 416-424.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES 2012–045), Indicator 4.

Zahirovic-Herbert, V. and Turnbull, G.K. (2008). School quality, house prices and liquidity. *Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics*. 37, 113-130.

Zimmer, R., et al. (2003). *Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Appendix: Data sources

Demographic data are from the Census Bureau 2010
at: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?refresh=t

Data on the Charter Amendment results are from Georgia Secretary of State – 2012 Election Results at: http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/GA/40378/94809/en/md.html?cid=94120

Data on public school employees are from the Certified Personnel Index – provided by the Georgia Dept. of Education

Data on high school graduation rates are from the Governor's Office of School Accountability at: www.gaosa.org

Number of charter schools for 2010-11 school year from: Georgia Dept. of Education Charter Schools Division

Data on 2012 Obama votes from Georgia Secretary of State – 2012 Election Results
at: http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/GA/42277/113204/en/md_data.html?cid=5000&

Data on private, home school and public enrollment are from the Georgia County Guide at:
http://georgiastats.uga.edu/