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Does Governmental Condition Really Matter in Charter School Adoption?

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Abstract

Charter schools are generally considered to be implemented in order to achieve the educational needs and desires that parents have for their children, according to the school choice model. However, adoption of charter schools can also depend on various government conditions, such as the availability of resources. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine whether charter schools are more commonly adopted under favorable government conditions. Using a panel data set from 45 counties in California between 2001 and 2012, our analysis demonstrates that charter schools are more commonly adopted when the government has many financial slacks.

Keywords: charter schools, policy diffusion, policy adoption

1. Introduction

Contemporary education is facing fundamental issues, not only in the area of how to improve student achievement, but also in how to achieve educational goals based on improvement of school quality in the public educational system. Educational policy has evolved over the years through the efforts policy makers, but one fundamental question remains: What is the best policy instrument to enhance educational outcomes in the public school system? One possible trend is the market-driven approach, first put forth by Milton Friedman, which advocates school choice and increased competition in public education (May, 2006). Recently, charter schools have risen in popularity as one of the educational policy tools in the movement toward school choice. Charter schools are publicly funded schools, but they are operated autonomously rather than being directly controlled like traditional public schools.

Since the earliest charter school law in Minnesota was passed in 1991, the number of charter schools has increased to more than 5,714, and charter schools now serve more than 1.9 million students in the United States as of 2012 (Center for Education Reform, 2012). Compared to growth of schools, the number of charter schools has increased rapidly. Supporters of charter schools expect that rapid increases in the number of charter schools will have positive effects on academic achievement and will create dynamic changes through competition in the public education system (Bulkley & Fusler, 2003).

Table 1. Number of charter schools, private schools and public schools from 2001 to 2012

year	Charter schools	Private schools	Public schools
2000	298	4,184	8,395
2001	349	4,025	8,558
2002	408	3,857	8,724
2003	442	3,692	8,857
2004	500	3,639	9,006
2005	557	3,667	9,184
2006	582	3,454	9,306
2007	678	3,424	9,472
2008	741	3,314	9,525
2009	816	3,246	9,519
2010	906	3,307	9,535
2011	1,003	3,103	9,564

Note. Sources from Department of Education in State of California (http://www.cde.ca.gov/)

As the number of charter schools has increased rapidly in the United States, several studies have been conducted on the adoption of charter school laws and have focused more heavily on political and institutional factors in the adoption of charter schools (Renzulli, 2005; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). There are few studies, however, that examine why some local governments adopt more charter schools than others. Moreover, existing studies have focused primarily on the demand side of charter school adoptions from consumer desires to improve educational performance. This study attempts to explain why charter schools are more likely to be adopted from the service suppliers' perspective in education, such as local governments, to examine conditions of government by using the diffusion theory. As a result, this study can provide evidence as to whether the adoption of innovative school systems is related to the financial condition of local governments or if the decision of adoption is influenced by the internal condition of local governments.

Studying the diffusion of charter schools is meaningful in a number of ways. First of all, it leads to competition with traditional public schools. Traditional public schools will respond as they lose students to the charter schools, which will ultimately lead to the loss of or a reduction in financial support; financial penalties are levied against public schools for losing students (Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000). In the end, these changes in the number of students will affect the budget conditions of the school district, since school funding is allocated based on the number of students. Second, charter school diffusion can alleviate the stress of costs for managing the school systems, and it ultimately leads to reduced spending of public funding. And finally, it is believed that school innovation and flexibility of the school systems lead to improved student achievement (Nathan, 1997).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Charter School Adoption: Demand Side

Charter schools are originated based on individual choices about the school system; these choices reflect customers' diverse preferences in school services. Consumers can choose the service that meets their needs; therefore, service providers have the responsibility of satisfying consumers by "holding publicly funded providers accountable to users through the threat or exercise of an exit option not available in pupil assignments schemes." (Lubienski, 2003, p.398) Advocates of charter schools argue that school choice reforms such as the adoption of charter schools lead to greater competition among schools and bring positive effects to the overall school system (Bohte, 2004; Maranto, Hess, & Milliman, 2001). The competition between traditional public schools and charter schools also produces changes in educational achievements (Booker, Zimmer, & Buddin, 2005). Public schools adjust to the pressure from competition in the education marketplace, and they have better outcomes compared to those without any influences from charter schools (Hoxby, 2004).

Specifically, increased competition in the general educational system can lead to innovations among traditional public school administrators (Bohte, 2004; Bulkly & Fiscler, 2003), and in the end, competition from charter schools can also act as a catalyst for greater satisfaction among parents and teachers, improvements in student performance, and improved educational equity. Some successful programs spawned by increased competition are imitated by schools from other local areas as well, and this results in another form of competition which ultimately leads to better education (Maranto et al., 2001). As a result, charter schools can provide a basis for better educational service overall through competition with traditional public schools (Sass, 2006), and the competition originating from charter schools can create a virtuous circle with traditional public schools by inducing competition and imitation of successful practices.

The adoption of charter schools is explained from the perspective of the demand side of educational service, called 'parental decision-making models' (Zhang & Yang, 2008). That is, charter schools have been adopted in order to address problems related to education and increase educational performance (Renzulli, 2005). However, the demand side models can't explain the government perspective of an educational service supplier. This is because educational service is delivered by the government, and the level and type of service delivery may depend on government conditions such as resources, political mood, and other institutional factors. Thus, this study will attempt to focus on both the demand and the supply side of educational service.

2.2 Charter School Adoption: Supply Side

Diffusion theory can provide the guidance to explain local governments' internal perspective of charter school adoption (supply side). There are two principal explanations for adopting new programs by a government: internal determinants and regional diffusion models (Berry & Berry, 1990). Internal determinant models include political, economic or social characteristics, and these are affected only by characteristics that are internal to the state. Regional diffusion models, on the other hand, are intergovernmental and policy adoptions that are a product of emulations from previous adoptions by neighboring states. Thus, regional diffusion models take place in those states who share a common border (neighbor models) (Berry & Berry, 1990; Mintrom, 1997; Balla,

2001). Following the models, our research examines both internal determinants and regional influences in policy adoption. However, this research is different from previous models for the following reasons: 1) previous diffusion research has focused primarily on the state level (Berry & Berry, 1992; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998), while this study addresses local government as a unit of analysis; 2) previous diffusion studies are primarily interested in political and institutional factors (Zhang &Yang, 2008; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005), while this research focuses more heavily on financial resources and also addresses various factors in local government other than political and institutional factors.

3. Hypotheses

3.1 Supply Side (Local Governments)

Policy adoption requires organizational capacity to innovate, since new programs require resources for initiation. Larger organizations with higher levels of "slack resources" are more likely to be innovative than smaller and less resource-rich organizations (Cyert & March, 1963; Rogers, 2010). Walker (1969) also concludes that larger, wealthier, and more economically developed organizations are more innovative because they are more adaptive to and tolerant of change. Thus, some studies hypothesize that the fiscal health of a state government is likely to have a positive effect on the propensity to adopt new policy (Allard, 2004; Lowry, 2005).

However, from another perspective, launching a charter school is a resource-dependent process (Preffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizations rely on resources, and they initiate new policy based on the potential level of capable resources. Furthermore, charter schools are vulnerable to financial problems due to their high start-up costs (Anderson, Adelman, & Finnigan, 2000), and it takes time to receive federal grants. Thus, they must rely on local, formulaic funding, and districts with greater financial resources more easily approve charter schools (Zhang & Yang, 2008).

Hypothesis 1: Counties with greater financial resources are more likely to have a higher degree of charter school adoption.

Fiscal policies may reflect decision makers' political preferences (Alt & Lowry, 1994, 2000), and elected officials use grants in order to advance their preferred programs or planning (Volden, 1999). The political ideology of policy makers affects the probability of policy adoption, because "party dominance reflects a more general understanding of liberal/conservative ideals and values that are present in the legislature and state as whole." (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005) For example, Democrats and Republicans have different preferences for policies about charter schools (Pipho, 1991; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Charter schools are expected to benefit the poor and visible minority student groups (Roy & Mishel, 2005; Zhang & Yang, 2008). Thus, Democrats may support charter schools more than Republicans, and in fact, there are more charters schools in school districts where Democrats play a role as decision makers. In addition, Renzulli and Roscigno (2005) empirically demonstrate that Republican governors tend to have fewer operating charter schools. Because decision makers usually behave rationally toward reelection, their decisions normally reflect the voters' demands in the jurisdiction.

Hypothesis 2: Counties with more Democratic decision makers are more likely to have a higher degree of charter school adoption.

In terms of regional diffusion, most of the models assume that each level of government is influenced entirely by those governments with which they share a border (neighbor models) (Walker, 1969; Light, 1978; Mooney & Lee, 1995). These models hypothesize that the likelihood that each level of government will adopt a policy is positively related to the number of governments bordering it that have already adopted the policy in question (Mintrom, 1997; Balla, 2001). Specifically, the models emphasize emulation of neighboring governments; if policy adoptions are the result of attempts to compete with other governments rather than pervasive influence, and if they are geographically close to each other, then diffusion seems the most effective (Berry & Berry, 2007).

Hypothesis 3: A county's charter school adoption is positively related to the degree of charter school adoption by its neighboring districts.

3.2 Demand Side (Parents and Students)

Households of different ethnicity and economic status have different school preferences (Weiher & Tedin, 2002) and especially parents with minority or lower incomes are more concerned about test scores or proper discipline of their children. Thus, charter schools can easily be created in those districts with a large population and lower income and minority students (Nathan, 1997). As a new and innovative policy in education, charter schools are

one of the alternatives for students, because minorities sometimes perceive themselves to be poorly treated in traditional public school systems (Good & Braden, 2000). This is the very reason why charter schools have become more popular among African-American families over the last 15 years (Fusarelli, 2003). A remarkable increase of minorities in politics can facilitate higher social spending and greater distributive equity among students from minority families whose educational needs may not have been previously considered in public schools (Wong, 1999). Therefore, minor groups may be more willing to consider charter schools in their districts because they have been treated inadequately by the traditional public system.

Hypothesis 4: Counties with more minority students are associated with a higher degree of charter school adoption.
Hypothesis 5: Counties with more low-income students are associated with a higher degree of charter school adoption.

Previous performance in terms of student achievement can result in changes in preference for school services. Educational needs are critical factors in determining whether a charter school is adopted. School districts with lower performance in academic achievement are more willing to create charter schools than those districts with higher performance. This is because school systems can survive with some changes in competition (Zhang &Yang, 2008). Thus, previous educational performance may influence the adoption of charter schools in a county.

Hypothesis 6: Counties with lower academic performance are associated with a higher degree of charter school adoption.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Sample

This study uses 45 California counties as the sample unit. The data set is paneled and comprises a total of 405 observations from 2001 to 2012, collected from the California Department of Education Data System. Since the California charter school law was passed in 1992, California has had more charter schools form than any other state in the United States, with more than 1,063 schools serving over 490,000 students as of 2013. In 2013, 1,130 charter schools operated in the state, representing 7 percent of public schools. The number of charter schools has grown rapidly across California school districts as well, with 363 charter schools in operation in 2001 and 1,130 charter schools currently being managed in 2013 (http://www.calcharters.org).

Table 2. Variable Specification: Variables, Measures, and Descriptions

Variable	Measurement	Description
Dependent Variable		
Degree of charter school diffusion	Number of charter schools in each county	Number of charter schools in each county in each year
Independent Variables		
Financial resources	Revenue per student	Total general revenue and local sources divided by the number of students
Political ideology	Democrat voters	Percentage of registered Democrats
Regional influence	Number of charter schools in neighboring counties	The number of charter schools in boundary/ neighboring counties
Socioeconomic factors	African-American/ Hispanic students	Percentage of the number of African-American students compared to the number of Hispanic students in the county
	Low-income students	Percentage of the number of students who are eligible for free or reduced-fee lunches
Control Variables		
Previous performance	Test score (California Standardized Testing)	Math and English test scores of fourth grade students in each county
Land size	Geographical size	Land size of each county measured in hundred square miles
Private schools	Number of private schools	Number of private schools in each county

4.2 Variables

This study is interested in how charter schools are expanded. One of the important independent variables on the supply side of the educational service is financial capacity, and this study uses revenue per students, which was the total general revenue from the local government's own sources and grants divided by the total number of students in the county in each year. In terms of institutional factors, the regional influence of each county is measured by counting the total number of existing charter schools in bordering counties in a given year, following other policy diffusion studies (Berry & Berry, 1990, 1992; Renzulli, 2005; Zhang & Yang, 2008). Regarding political ideology in counties or school districts, some studies (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; Zhang & Yang, 2008) suggest that citizens' ideologies can reflect political characteristics of the decision makers in the district, and these studies have used the percentage of Democratic voters instead of the dominance party. Thus, this study measures the political ideology as the percentage of registered Democrat voters in a county in a given year by calculating the number of voters who registered as Democrats divided by the total number of registered voters.

To measure socioeconomic factors on the demand side of educational service, the number of minority students and low-income students in a county year is used. This is measured by the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students per each county one year prior to (t-1) charter school adoption (t) to capture parents' backgrounds before the charter school is adopted. This is because both African-American and Hispanic students make up a substantial proportion of the students enrolled in charter schools in California. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-fee lunches per each county one year prior to (t-1) charter school adoption (t) is used as a measurement of the low-income student population.

Previous performance is included to determine the impact of educational needs through educational achievement on the number of charter schools. It is also used to solve the simultaneity problem, because charter schools themselves can improve school performance. Previous student performance is measured one year prior to (t-1) charter school adoption (t). In terms of measurement, school performance is difficult to measure, as any indicator is sometimes criticized (Zhang & Yang, 2008). Standardized test scores are considered as a relatively reliable performance indicator. This study uses California standardized test scores, particularly those of fourth-grade students in Math and English.

4.3 Model Specification

In our analysis, two control variables are included: county size and private schools. County land size and market share of private schools are also measured in the analysis. The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model offered for our analysis measures the impact of factors from both the supply and demand side on the number of charter schools. In this model, the number of charter schools is estimated as shown in equation below:

$$CS_{i,t} = \alpha + RE_{i,t} + DE_{i,t} + NE_{i,t} + AH_{i,t-1} + FL_{i,t-1} + TS_{i,t-1} + PS_{i,t} + LS_{i} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

Where CS represents the number of charter schools, and among those factors from the supply side, RE, DE, and NE, respectively, stand for per student general revenue, the proportion of Democratic voters, and the number of charter schools in neighboring counties. Among factors from the demand side of educational service, AH, FL, and TS represent the ratio between African-American and Hispanic students, students eligible for free lunches, and the results of test scores. PS and LS are control variables and stand for the number of private schools and land size, respectively.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Variables (n=540)

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Charter school number	13.48	25.49	0.00	284.00
Per student general revenue (natural log value)	7.00	0.58	4.88	10.84
Democrat voters (%)	40.52	7.85	4.33	57.78
Charter school number in neighboring counties	48.33	57.36	2.00	438.00
African-American/ Hispanic students (%)	17.52	18.57	0.65	102.96
Students eligible for free-lunch (%)	46.31	14.16	13.60	75.60
Test scores(Math, 4th grade)	364.91	20.47	319.90	423.00
Test scores(English, 4th grade)	355.77	15.77	320.70	407.80
Private school number	79.47	168.95	0.00	1,303.00
Land size (100 sq. mi.)	28.34	32.10	0.47	200.53

5. Results

The empirical results demonstrate that the fiscal capacity of each county is positively associated with charter school diffusion. Better financial conditions create more charter schools, holding other factors constant, and this is consistent with previous findings that greater levels of "slack resources" are assumed to result in more innovation when compared with counties with fewer resources (Cyert & March, 1963; Rogers 2010). The results also support the hypothesis regarding the political factor. Democratic voter percentages are positively associated with the number of charter schools in a given county. This supports the result that Democratic decision makers in government are more interested in the adoption of charter schools than Republican decision makers. This finding is consistent with the observation that the percentage of Democratic voters is positively related to the number of charter schools (Zhang & Yang, 2008). For the emulating effect, charter school adoptions of neighborhoods are not associated with the number of charter schools. This implies that local governments do not care about the policy adoption of neighboring governments.

However, the results do not support the hypothesis related to the demand side of educational service. Counties with a higher percentage of minority students and students eligible for free lunches don't demonstrate any relationship with the number of charter schools in the county. Moreover, previous performance in student achievement (Math and English test scores) is not related to charter school adoption. The result demonstrates that the needs and desires of consumers, such as parents or students, in educational service are not reflected to a significant degree in charter school diffusion.

Because charter schools can be an alternative to private schools, a negative relationship between charter schools and private schools is expected. However, this study finds a positive relationship, indicating that more private schools lead to the adoption of more charter schools in a county. Additionally, county size doesn't play an important role in charter school creation. The result is not consistent with a previous study (Zhang & Yang, 2008) arguing that larger districts create more charter schools.

Table 4. Regression Model Results

Variables	Coefficient		Standard Error
Per student general revenue	13.726	***	1.932
Democrat voters	0.442	**	0.194
Charter school number in neighboring counties	0.023		0.022
Ratio between African-American and Hispanic students	0.087		0.109
Students eligible for free-lunch	0.055		0.134
Test scores (Math, 4^{th} grade)	0.045		0.138
Test scores (English, 4^{th} grade)	0.236		0.203
Private school number	0.070	***	0.016
Land size	0.096		0.086

Note: ***, **, and * indicate significance at the level of 1, 5, and 10 percent respectively

6. Conclusion

This study examines those factors that drive charter school adoption by a government by considering both the demand side and the supply side of educational service. Factors from supply the side, such as the level of financial resources as well as political factors, influence charter school diffusion. Financial resources of a government are an important factor in the adoption of charter schools, which is consistent with the 'resource dependence theory.' The results demonstrate the impact of political factors on policy diffusion. However, they also demonstrate that neighboring policy decisions are not a significant trigger in charter school creation. However, factors on the demand side, including socioeconomic factors, are relatively less important than supply side factors with regard to policy diffusion in local government. Further, educational needs based on previous educational performance do not demonstrate great importance in the adoption of charter schools. This indicates that charter schools may be initiated depending on government condition of resources and political factors rather than consumer needs or educational performance. The results imply that adoption of new policy is highly dependent on the capacity and willingness of the supplier of the new policy rather than the consumer of the new policy.

This study has some limitations. First of all, it is based on California counties; thus, it is difficult to generalize the findings, because each state has different charter school laws, funding rules, and political and institutional factors. Second, some significant variables are not included in the model, such as policy entrepreneurs and administrative leadership. For future studies, additional variables should be incorporated to improve the model, and the study should be replicated with other states to improve external validity.

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