



# Local charter school service delivery: The explanatory power of interest groups



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## ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this study is to examine whether educational interest groups' roles explain local charter school service delivery in Colorado. Many scholars have found that interest groups affect educational policy outcomes and performance at national, state, and local levels. However, it is not clear whether interest groups' roles are still important in local charter school service delivery. This article seeks to address this lack of knowledge by analyzing the variation of charter school service delivery in Colorado school districts. The present study tests seven hypotheses, using multiple ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis. The final statistical results demonstrate that a school district with more pro-school choice movement interest groups, minority students, and residents who earn a bachelor's degree or above is more likely to deliver charter school services to its residents.

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## 1. Introduction

In charter school research, scholars have usually focused on studying the state level more than the local level. Research analyzing the state level typically addresses the question of why states formulate their own charter school policy, and scholars have found several drivers. However, such analyses do not consider variation at the level of school districts. The present research seeks to address this lack of knowledge by examining the variation of charter school service delivery among school districts, specifically in Colorado.

Scholars have recognized charter schools as one of the most widespread and the fastest growing institutions changing the public education system (Glomm, Harris, & Lo, 2005; Maranto, Kayes, & Maranto, 2006; Miron & Nelson, 2002). By creating and using their own curricula to

target and foster students' unique talents, these charters schools are freer from government control as compared to regular public schools, yet they still receive financial support from governments (Kirst, 2007). This strength has helped charter schools spread across the US since Minnesota became the first state to pass charter school legislation in 1991 (Stulberg, 2004; Vergari, 2007; Walberg, 2007; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). The Center for Education Reform (2012) notes that as of the 2011–2012 school year, about 6,000 charter schools serving nearly 2 million students operate across the US, a dramatic rise from the sole charter school operating in the 1992–1993 school year. This growing popularity might mean that US charter schools play a role as a stimulator in improving the American public education system through a competitive approach embedded in charter schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

The Colorado legislature passed charter school legislation in 1993 (Griffin, 2013). Since then, the number of charter schools in Colorado has risen steadily. However, despite all charter schools operating under the same law, each school district varies in terms of the services offered to

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residents. From a basic policy cycle perspective, this variation makes sense given that federal or state governments create broad education policies whereas local governments are usually the primary implementers. However, questions remain regarding why some Colorado school districts more actively provide residents with charter school services whereas others do not. Further, scholars have not explored the mechanisms of local charter school delivery, which likely include influence from interest groups and unique school district characteristics. The present research seeks to resolve this lack of knowledge by investigating the reasons behind the variation of charter school service delivery among Colorado school districts. Seven hypotheses organized around an empirical model that considers interest group drivers and school district characteristics are tested.

## 2. Reinventing government and charter schools

In the early 1990s, the reinventing government (REGO) movement, a term first introduced by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) and popularized by former Vice President Al Gore, sought to reform and change command-controlled, centralized, and top-down governance styles (Finn, Mano, & Vanourek, 2001; Stillman, 1996). REGO proponents argue that centralized and top-down government structures do not fit well into a contemporary world that experiences diverse demands of highly educated citizens, global market competition, rapid technological evolution, and unhealthy fiscal situations (Osborne & Plastrik, 1997; Zajac, 1997). Thus, they emphasize that in the delivery of public services, governments need to have market-based, community-based, and decentralized governance structures in which public servants are catalytic actors who steer rather than bureaucratic actors that row (Frederickson, 1996; Lenkowsky & Perry, 2000; Vito & Kunselman, 2000). Further, to satisfy self-interested and rational citizens, governments must become market- and results-oriented as well as customer- and mission-driven (deLeon & Denhardt, 2000; Ruhil, Schneider, Teske, & Ji, 1999).

In many ways, REGO's goals, strategies, and suggestions parallel those of the charter school movement, both of which began simultaneously in the early 1990s. For instance, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) note that the American traditional public school (TPS) system is a typical instance of a centralized, rule-driven, command controlled, and bureaucratic model because regular public schools in the TPS system only operate themselves based on government guidelines, and teach students without their unique curricula. In the American TPS system, educational customers – parents, guardians, and students – often do not have rights to choose schools, so students enroll in public schools located in their residential districts. However, like those in REGO, school choice proponents argue for reform of the TPS system, particularly by exposing it to more market-based and competitive circumstances, which hopefully would result in improvements of educational service quality (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Vaughn & Witko, 2013).

Buckley and Schneider (2007) state that a charter school embraces this competitive spirit. Charter schools lead

schools in the American TPS system to be more competitive by creating a supply and demand dynamic between providers – schools, charter management organizations (CMOs), or education management organizations (EMOs) – and educational customers. Providers need students to survive in competitive circumstances. To recruit students, they will try to develop clear missions that help educational customers know what the school stands for, create curricula reflecting their missions, and provide their customers with better facilities. Based on educational service quality that suppliers provide for educational customers, parents will choose where to enroll their children and can choose a school that fits them well or can avoid a school that does not (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). In this way, the charter school movement can be regarded as a movement to reinvent the TPS system. The next section introduces Colorado's charter school movement as an actual example conducting some REGO principles.

## 3. Status quo of Colorado's charter schools

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Colorado policymakers recognized that K-12 educational reform was a critical policy issue (Hirsch, 2002). Colorado legislators who wanted to reform Colorado K-12 public system first considered adopting multiple educational innovations—homeschooling, open enrollment, vouchers, and a tax increase. Among them, the two former educational innovations were enacted in 1988 while the two later educational innovations were rejected in November, 1992 (Lee & Kim, 2010; Ziebarth, 2005). This rejection for the two latter educational innovations helped to make Colorado educational leaders – Republican Senator Bill Owens, Democratic Representative Peggy Kerns, and Governor Roy Romer – more enthusiastic about finding innovative strategies to reform Colorado's K-12 system (Griffin, 2013; Medler, 2004). These Coloradoan educational leaders were interested in seeking another educational innovation that offers students and their parents more rights in choosing a public school. They agreed that a charter school could play a role that made the Colorado K-12 TPS system more dynamic and competitive (Benigno & Morin, 2013; Lee & Jeong, 2012).

In 1992, charter schools emerged as the preferred educational innovation. Senator Owens and Representative Kerns worked with Barbara O'Brien, former Lt. Governor, to construct a draft for the charter school law, and they met and persuaded other Senators and Representatives against the charter school service in the Colorado General Assembly. Their efforts led 41 House Representatives to agree with Senate Bill 183 on May 11, 1993 (23 House Representatives were against SB 183). One hour later, the Colorado Charter School Legislation was passed with 23 Senator pros and 11 Senator cons (Benigno & Morin, 2013). In the absence of many opponents to prevent passage, the Colorado assembly passed the charter school law. Governor Roy Romer signed it on June 3, 1993 (Hirsch, 2002; Ziebarth, 2005). Benigno and Morin (2013) report that the Colorado Charter School law had initially been grown as a strong charter school law due to Governor Romer's support

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