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School Vouchers in the Trump Era: How Political Ideology and Religion Shape Public Opinion

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School Vouchers in the Trump Era: How Political Ideology and Religion Shape Public Opinion

Abstract

Expanding school vouchers is a central component of the Trump Administration's education agenda.¹ However, the extent to which the Administration can fully realize this policy goal may hinge, in part, on the level of public support or opposition for the voucher method of reform and on the particular components of any proposed voucher system. In this policy brief, we report on a randomized survey experiment we conducted to identify how two key dimensions of school voucher systems—source of funding and scope of coverage—affect public opinion across various sectors of the American public.

Keywords

School Voucher, Trump

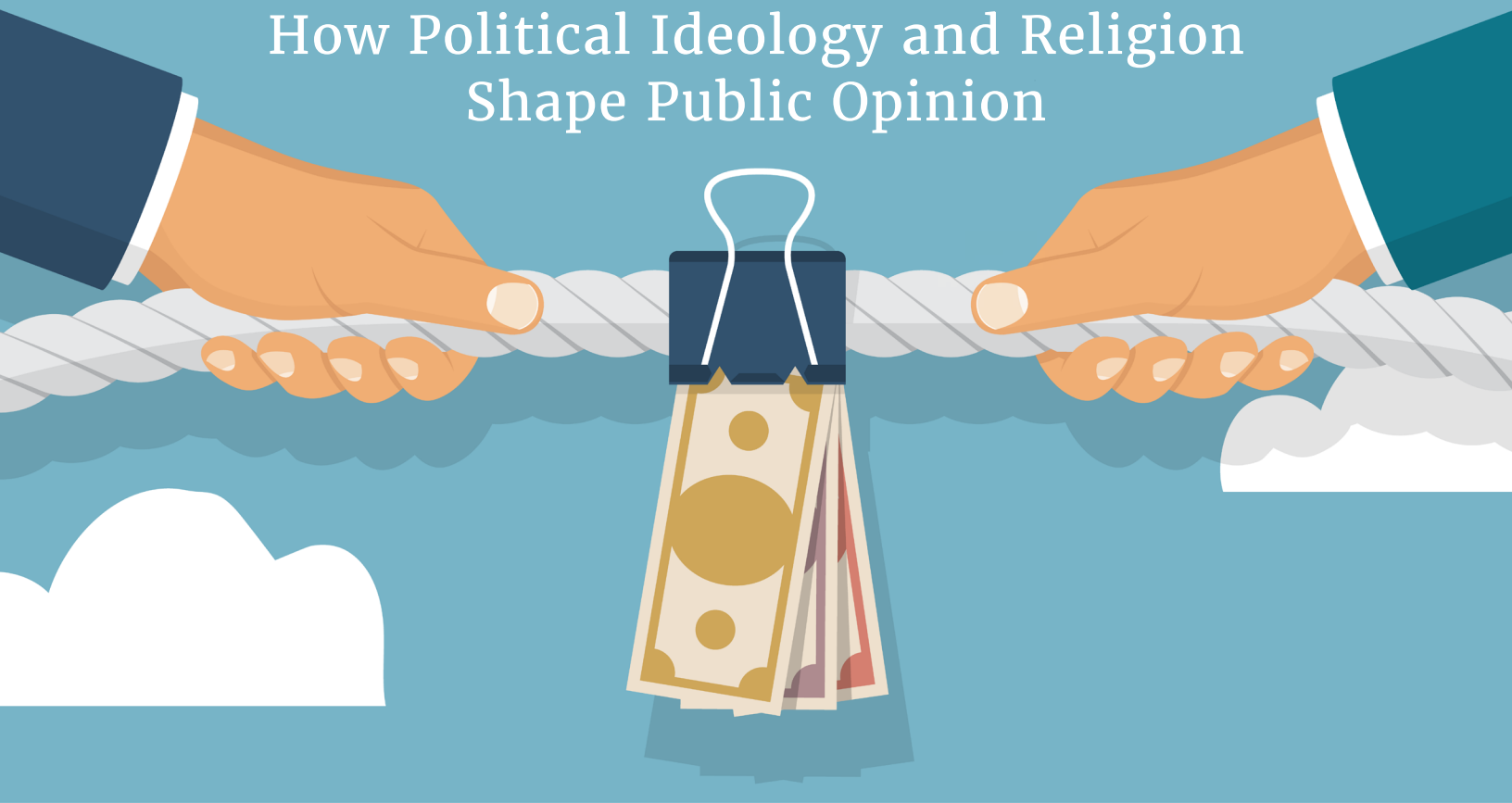
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School Vouchers in the Trump Era: How Political Ideology and Religion Shape Public Opinion

An illustration on a blue background with white clouds. Two hands, one in a dark blue suit sleeve and one in a teal suit sleeve, are shown from the left and right, respectively, holding a thick, grey rope. A blue paperclip is attached to the center of the rope, and a stack of money, including a yellow bill with a large circle and a red bill, hangs from the paperclip.

Rand Quinn

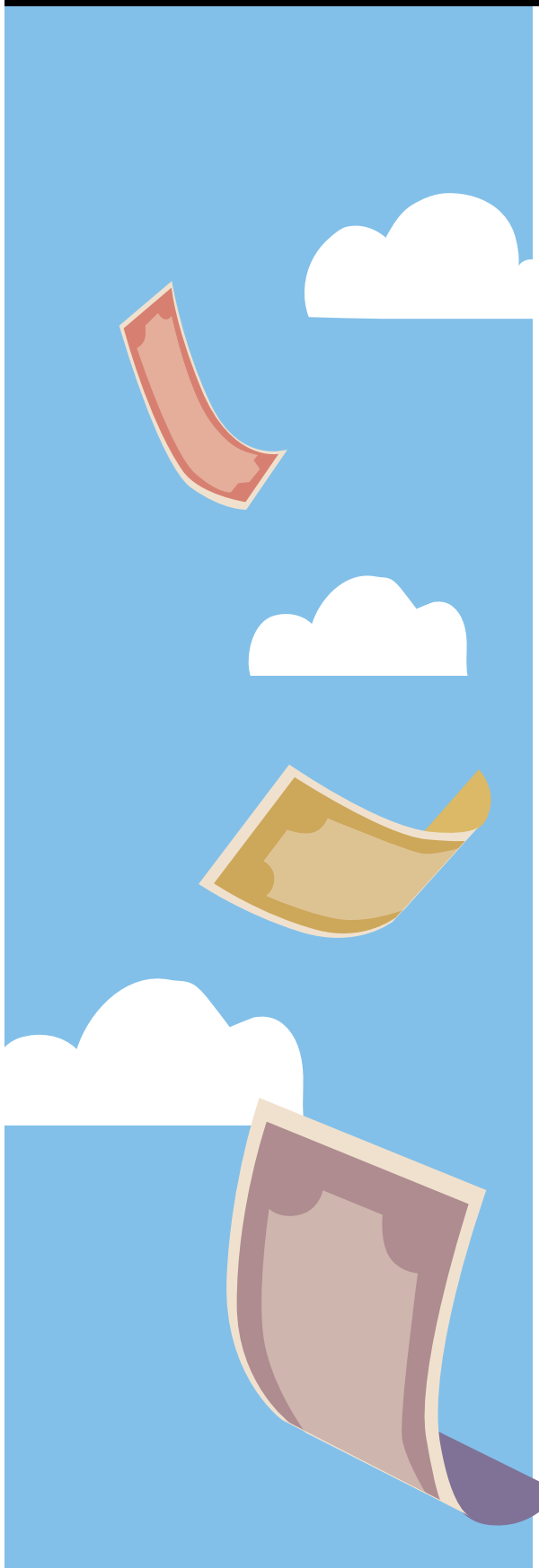
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Overview

Expanding school vouchers is a central component of the Trump Administration's education agenda.¹ However, the extent to which the Administration can fully realize this policy goal may hinge, in part, on the level of public support or opposition for the voucher method of reform and on the particular components of any proposed voucher system. In this policy brief, we report on a randomized survey experiment we conducted to identify how two key dimensions of school voucher systems—source of funding and scope of coverage—affect public opinion across various sectors of the American public.



What are school vouchers and how do they work?

School vouchers are public or private subsidies, typically worth several thousand dollars, given directly to eligible families on behalf of their children to offset tuition at the private school of their choice.

Four types of voucher systems

Source of Funding

Voucher systems can be (1) **publicly-funded** (e.g., through state or federal funds) or (2) **privately-funded** (e.g., through contributions from private foundations or businesses). Dozens of publicly- and privately-funded school voucher programs have operated in states and localities across the nation.

Scope of Coverage

Voucher systems can also be (3) **universally** available to all students within its jurisdiction or (4) **targeted** to a particular subset of the population, such as students from low-income households or students with special needs. Despite several attempts, there are no universal vouchers systems currently operating in the United States.²

The modern version of school vouchers is credited to famed economist Milton Friedman who argued that the public school system inhibits freedom of thought, withholds from parents the freedom to choose among schools, and works to the detriment of low-income families who cannot afford to send their children to private schools. To address these issues, Friedman proposed providing parents vouchers redeemable for “educational services” from a school of their choice.³

Voucher-like programs were established in the South as a means of subverting desegregation under the guise of providing parents school choice. Such systems existed as late as 1969 before they were ruled unconstitutional.⁴ During the Nixon administration, a voucher experiment targeting poor

Figure 1. Debating school vouchers

SUPPORTERS OF SCHOOL VOUCHERS ARGUE:

- The government's role is to empower parents to make the best educational choices for their children.
- Expanding school choice options for families allows schools to "compete" for students. Good schools will thrive; bad schools will close. Schools are forced to innovate or face failure, and the whole system improves as a result.
- Recent evaluations of school voucher systems have found that vouchers can improve graduation rates and increase satisfaction and sense of school safety among parents, albeit with mixed outcomes on students' academic achievement.⁵
- Families should have the freedom and flexibility to choose how their tax dollars are used in educating their own children—be it in public, private, or parochial schools.

OPPONENTS OF SCHOOL VOUCHERS ARGUE:

- The government's role is to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students.
- Vouchers strip funds from public schools, thereby increasing inequities and creating a segregated system.
- There is limited evidence that school vouchers improve student academic outcomes.⁶ In some cases, they produce negative effects.⁷
- Public tax dollars should not be used to fund religious institutions. This violates the principle of separation between church and state.

families was conducted in an elementary school district in San Jose, California. However, due to increasing opposition and a lack of significant achievement gains, the experiment ended in 1977.⁸ By the early 1980s, the voucher method of school reform had little support and was "barely on the political map."⁹

School vouchers reappeared in 1990 with the enactment of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. For the 2016-2017 school year, the publicly-funded program provided school vouchers worth \$7,323 (elementary) and \$7,969 (secondary) to 27,597 low-income students.¹⁰ Publicly-funded voucher systems have launched in Cleveland (1995), Florida (1999), Washington, D.C. (2004), Ohio (2005), Indiana (2011), and elsewhere. Today, publicly-funded school voucher systems operate in 14 states and the District of Columbia.¹¹

In recent years, several states have also established scholarship programs that operate like vouchers. Rather than relying on public funds, private individuals and corporations contribute to nonprofit scholarship-funding organizations, receiving a tax credit in return. Arizona was the first state to establish such a scholarship program, in 1997. Since then, scholarship programs have been enacted in states including Florida (2001),

Pennsylvania (2001; 2012), Iowa (2006), and elsewhere. Today, scholarship programs operate in 17 states.¹² In addition, the privately-funded Children's Scholarship Fund (est. 1998) provides vouchers to students in cities throughout the nation.

Today, the U.S. Department of Education, under the leadership of Betsy DeVos, has re-embraced the notion of school vouchers and scholarships as part of an effort to expand school choice.¹³ She has stated, "Choice in education is good politics because it's good policy. It's good policy because it comes from good parents who want better for their children."¹⁴ However, teachers unions, civil rights organizations, and other education advocacy groups, including the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have objected to or raised concerns about school voucher expansion.

School voucher debates center on issues related to the role of government in education, impact of funding on systems improvement, student outcomes, and use of public tax dollars for private and religious entities (see Figure 1).

Our Study

We sought to understand public opinion on school vouchers in the current political context. In particular, we wanted to understand how political ideology and religion, along with various demographic factors, predict support or opposition for school vouchers. Using a randomized survey experiment with a nationally-representative sample of 1,000 U.S. adults, we examined support for school vouchers across two core program dimensions—source of funding and scope of coverage—through various demographics reflective of the electorate.

Our survey was conducted online from April 6 to 13, 2017—soon after Betsy DeVos was confirmed as the new Secretary of Education and details of her support for school choice reforms, including school vouchers, reached the general public.

Survey participants were randomized to respond to one of the following questions:

1. Publicly-funded, universal vouchers:

“The U.S. Congress is considering an education bill that would distribute public funds to provide all families a voucher to offset the tuition of private schools — including religious schools — of their choice. How much do you support or oppose this policy?”

2. Publicly-funded, targeted vouchers:

“The U.S. Congress is considering an education bill that would distribute public funds to provide low-income families a voucher to offset the tuition of private schools—including religious schools— of their choice. How much do you support or oppose this policy?”

3. Privately-funded, universal vouchers:

“A private foundation is considering a program that would distribute private funds to provide all families a voucher to offset the tuition of private schools—including religious schools— of their choice. How much do you support or oppose this policy?”

4. Privately-funded, targeted vouchers:

“A private foundation is considering a program that would distribute private funds to provide low-income families a voucher to offset the tuition of private schools—including religious schools— of their choice. How much do you support or oppose this policy?”

Participants provided their level of support or opposition to their randomly-assigned question through a 7-point

scale (1 - extremely oppose; 2 - moderately oppose; 3 - slightly oppose; 4 -neither support nor oppose; 5 - slightly support; 6 - moderately support; 7- extremely support).

In this policy brief we present the average effects for (1) publicly-funded vouchers (public-universal & public-targeted), (2) privately-funded vouchers (private-universal & private-targeted), (3) universal vouchers (public-universal & private-universal), and (4) targeted vouchers (public-targeted & private-targeted).

Data

Our data come from a survey given to participants in YouGov's online panel from April 6 to 13, 2017. Our study was part of a larger omnibus survey designed by an interdisciplinary group of researchers through the Stanford University Laboratory for the Study of American Values. YouGov used a sampling process that produced a weighted sample that is approximately representative of the U.S. population.

Survey respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on voter registration status and turnout were matched to this frame using the November 2010 Current Population Survey. Data on interest in politics and party identification were then matched to this frame from the 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame. All of our analyses use the weighted sample.

Respondents were randomly and independently assigned to read one of four versions of text on school vouchers (across dimensions of source of funding and scope of coverage). Demographic variables, including religious views and political affiliations, were collected by YouGov.

What have other public opinion polls shown?

- ▶ In AP-NORC's 2017 public opinion poll, 43% of respondents strongly or somewhat favored (and 35% of respondents strongly or somewhat opposed) "giving low income parents tax-funded vouchers they can use to pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools of their choice instead of public schools."¹⁵
- ▶ Education Next's annual poll found that 37% of the general public favored using government funds for targeted vouchers in 2017, up from 31% in 2016. Support for universal vouchers lessened, with support at 27% in 2017, down from 29% in 2016.¹⁶

Findings & Discussion

Our results are presented in a series of figures. First, we show the average level of support for school vouchers across voucher system type. Second, we provide the proportion of respondents across categories of support/opposition.

Our findings suggest that **political ideology and religion help explain variation in voucher support.**

1. Public opinion varies across voucher system type.

Among all adults, support is greater for privately-funded and targeted voucher systems than for publicly-funded and universal systems. Just over 50 percent of adults support publicly-funded school vouchers while nearly 58 percent support privately-funded vouchers. Over half of adults support universal (52 percent) and targeted (55 percent) voucher systems. (Figure 2)

2. Public opinion on school vouchers varies across the political spectrum.

Adults who identify as liberal are more opposed to school vouchers across system type than those who identify as conservatives (Figure 3). We identified a similar pattern in political party affiliation and voters in the 2016 presidential election. Namely, adults who identify as Democrats and as Hillary Clinton voters are more opposed to school vouchers than those who identify as Republican and Donald Trump voters ([Supplemental File, Figures S-1 & S-2](#)). These differences may be partially driven by the prominence of school choice rhetoric in the current administration's education platform, as well as the opposition by national advocacy groups typically aligned with liberals. Our results may also suggest that the public's opinion about school voucher policy is driven by partisan affiliations. In the current political landscape, where a divide is growing among partisans, the role of partisanship may be an increasingly important factor in eliciting support for education policies such as school vouchers.

3. Public opinion on school vouchers varies by religiosity and religion.

Adults who claim that religion is important to their life are much more supportive of school vouchers across system type than those who do not (Figure 4). In addition, Protestants and Catholics support privately-funded and targeted vouchers by over 1 point (on our 7-point scale) over respondents who are atheist, agnostic, or describe their religion as "nothing in particular" (Supplemental File, Figure S-3). We identify similar disparities across all voucher system types between those who identify as "born-again" or evangelical Christians and those who do not (Supplemental File, Figure S-4). This dynamic may result from the fact that vouchers can be applied to religious schools (although they also can be applied to non-religious private schools).

4. Digging deeper, public opinion on school vouchers varies across several demographic factors.

In a supplementary document, we provide figures showing public opinion on vouchers across gender, race, education level, and family income demographic subgroups. Black and Hispanic adults favor school vouchers slightly more than white adults—particularly publicly-funded and targeted vouchers. This finding is consistent with other recent surveys. Differences across race and ethnicity groups may be due to several factors.

Black and Hispanic adults may have higher levels of dissatisfaction with the quality of public schools, both in their neighborhood and generally. School vouchers—particularly vouchers targeted to low-income families—may be perceived as a direct opportunity to access higher quality schools. In addition, Black and Hispanic adults may be more motivated than white adult to support a policy perceived to be broadly beneficial to their racial and ethnic community.¹⁷

We also find that adults with at least a 4-year college degree are more opposed to vouchers than adults without one, and that adults with family incomes between \$30,000 and \$100,000 are less supportive of vouchers than both adults with less family income and adults with more family income (Supplemental File, Figures S-5 to S-8).

Implications for the field

Education is a values-driven institution that has become increasingly politicized in the current environment. Our study sought to tap into the pulse of public opinion on school vouchers by drawing on a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults.

Our findings indicate that levels of support and opposition for school vouchers vary across a myriad of factors. Beyond standard factors such as race and ethnicity, educational level, and income, our study shows that religion and political ideology factors influence opinion on this contentious method of reform.



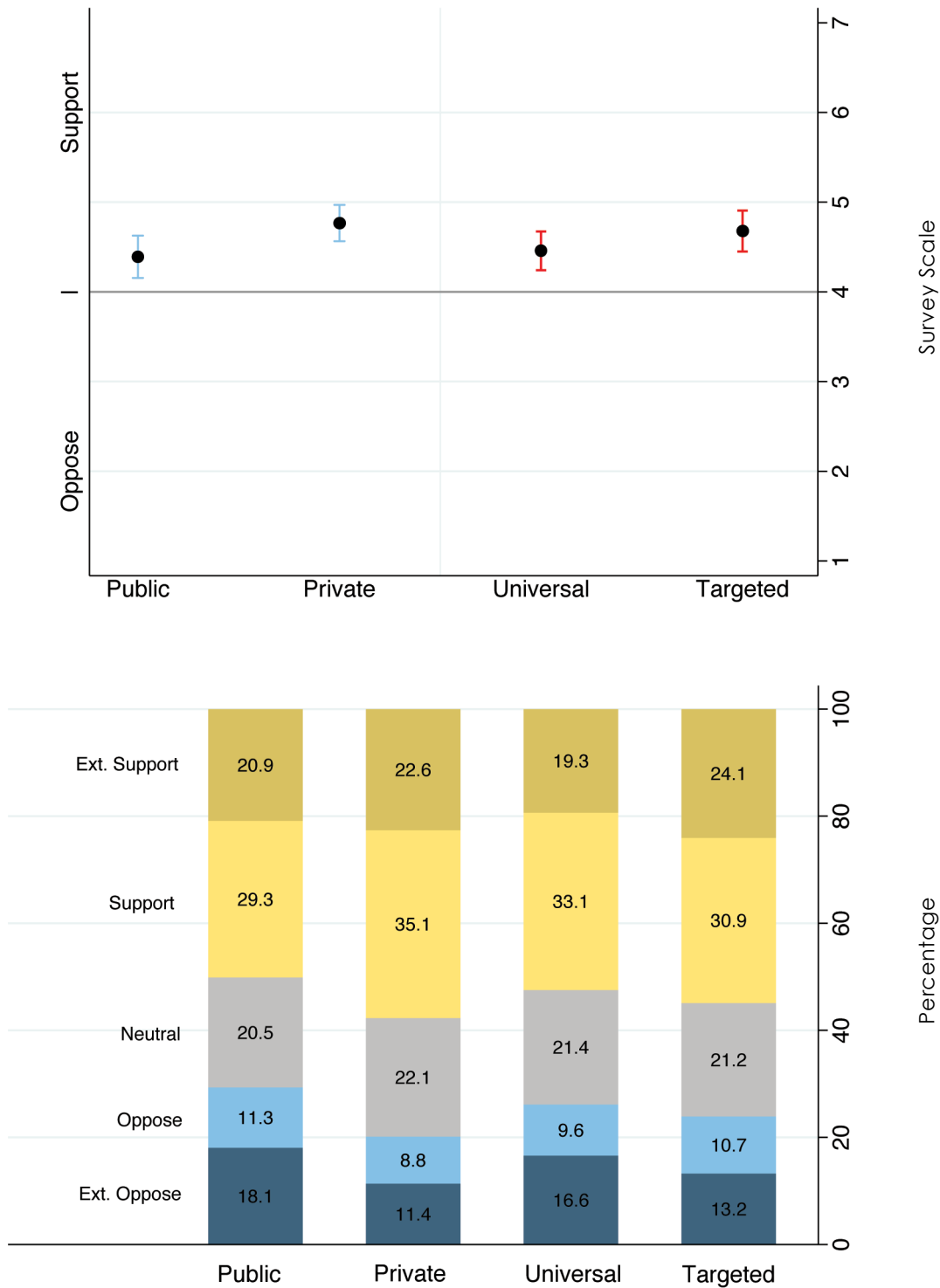
Note: Respondents were randomly and independently assigned to read one of four versions of text on school vouchers: public-universal (n=248), public-targeted (n=253), private-universal (n=261), private-targeted (n=238).

We present the average effects for (1) publicly-funded vouchers (public-universal & public-targeted), (2) privately-funded vouchers (private-universal & private-targeted), (3) universal vouchers (public-universal & private-universal), and (4) targeted vouchers (public-targeted & private-targeted).

The high/low bars represent 95% confidence intervals. For the bottom figure, responses were collapsed into five categories: (1) Extremely Oppose; (2) Moderately/Slightly Oppose; (3) Neutral; (4) Moderately/Slightly Support; (5) Extremely Support.

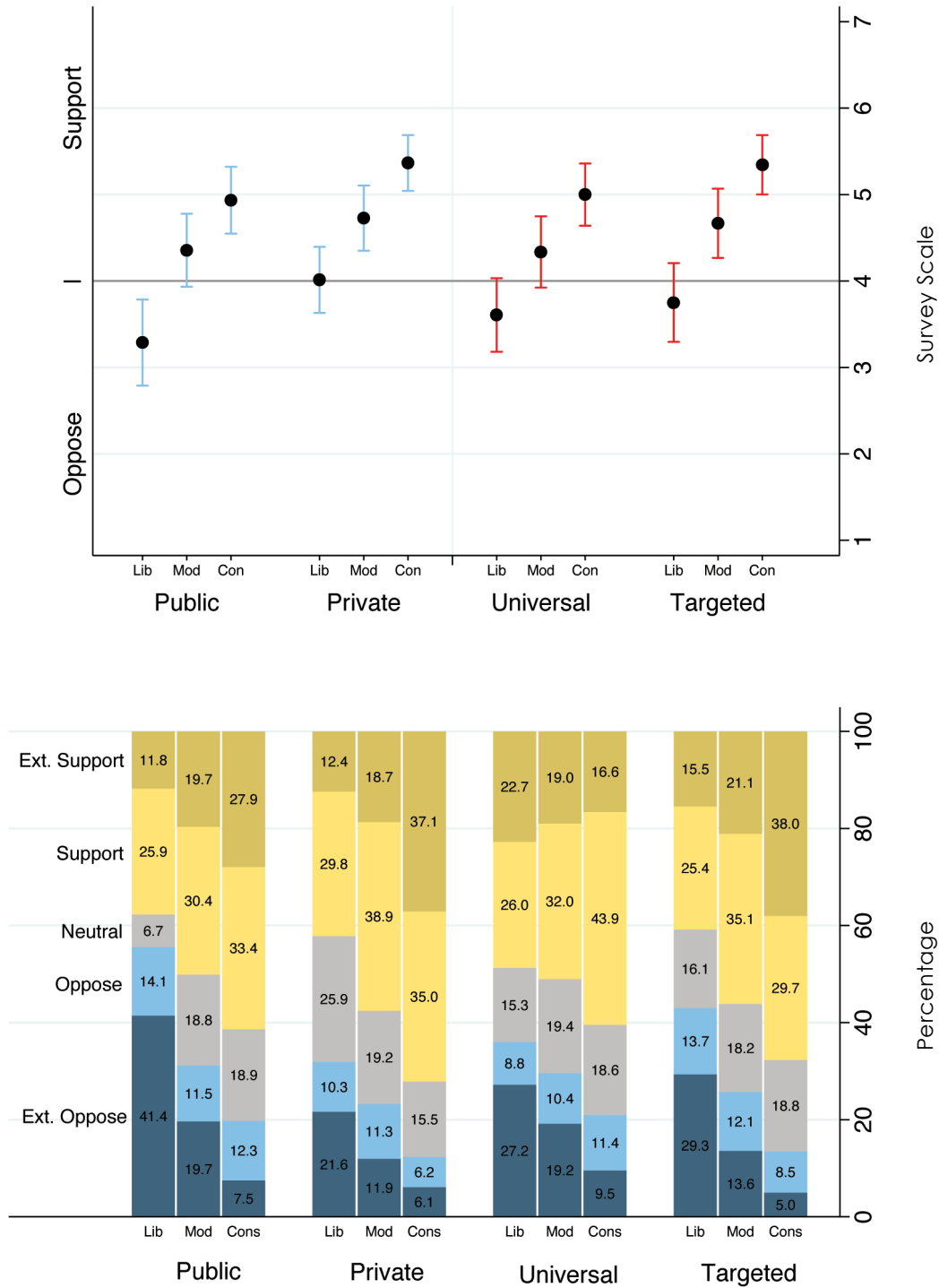
We report the results from our weighted sample which is approximately representative of the U.S. population.

Figure 2. Public Opinion on School Vouchers (overall)



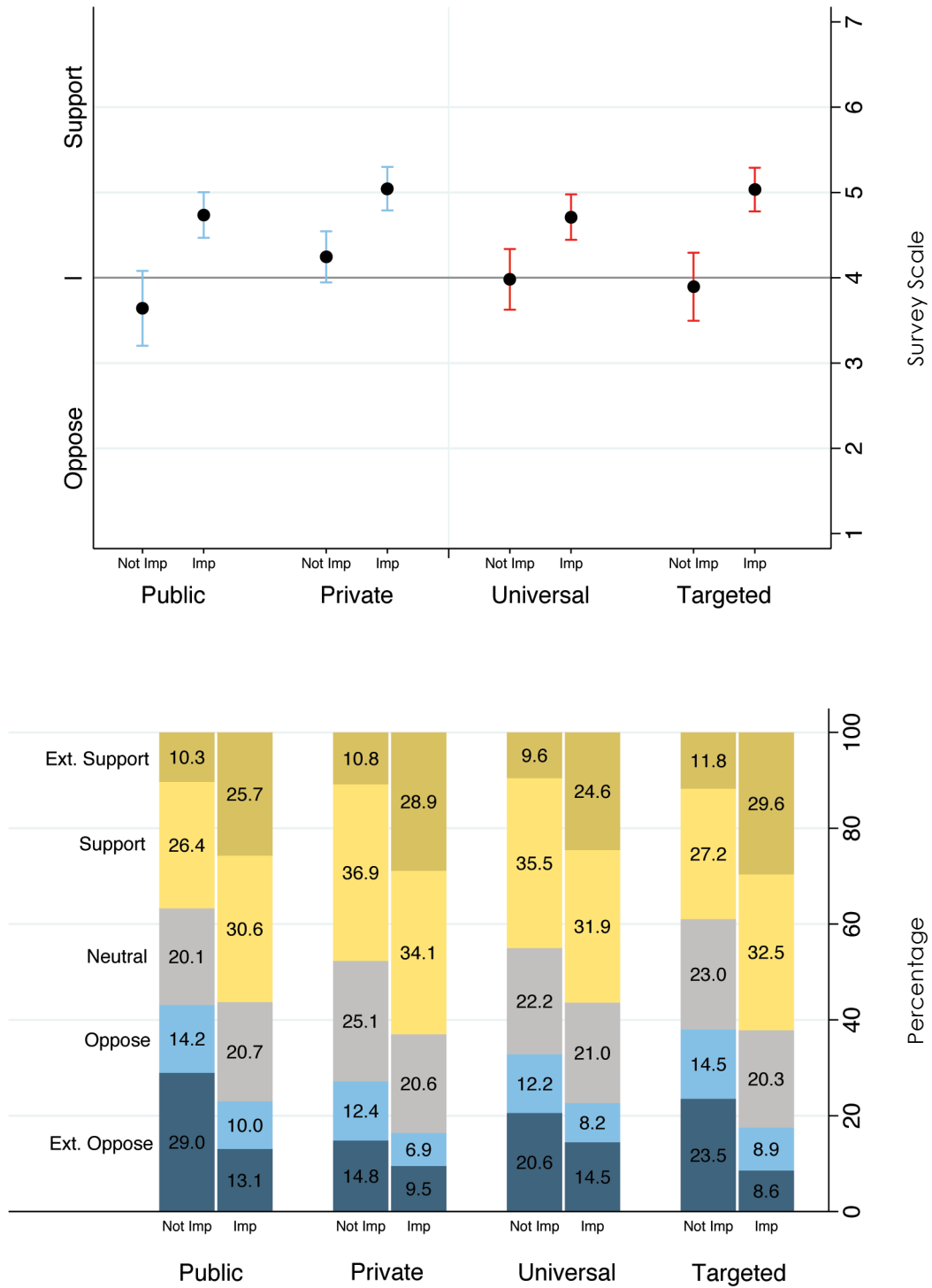
Source: Stanford University Laboratory for the Study of American Values. Survey administered to participants in YouGov's online panel from April 6 to 13, 2017.

Figure 3. Public Opinion on School Vouchers (by political ideology)



Source: Stanford University Laboratory for the Study of American Values. Survey administered to participants in YouGov's online panel from April 6 to 13, 2017.

Figure 4. Public Opinion on School Vouchers (by importance of religion)



Source: Stanford University Laboratory for the Study of American Values. Survey administered to participants in YouGov's online panel from April 6 to 13, 2017.

End Notes

1. The Administration's Fiscal Year 2018 request included \$250 million to support school voucher expansion. This is part of what the President has described as a down payment on his annual goal of \$20 billion for school choice. Source: FY 2018 Education Budget Summary and Background Information. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget18/summary/18summary.pdf>
2. Examples of unsuccessful attempts to implement a publicly-funded universal voucher system in the United States include Nevada's Education Savings Account program (2015), Utah's "Parent Choice in Education Act (H.B.148, 2007), and California's Proposition 38 (2000). In April 2017, Arizona approved an expansion to its Empowerment Scholarship Account; the expansion makes all students in the state eligible for a limited number of school vouchers. However, in August 2017, opponents of the program successfully petitioned to suspend the expansion and to place the issue on the November 2018 ballot.
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Supplemental files to this policy brief can be accessed at:

https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_conferences/7/

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