



# Do Missourians Support School Choice?

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*Between June 23 and July 1, 2020, we worked with YouGov to interview 900 likely voters from the state of Missouri. In addition to questions regarding state and national political candidates, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and school satisfaction, we explored public opinion on school choice policies in the form of charter schools, open enrollment, and tax-funded scholarships for private schools. We learned Missourians are most supportive of school choice policies that allow students to enroll in public charter schools or other traditional public schools. Half of Missourians support charter school formation in the state, but six in ten voters incorrectly identify public charter schools as private. Missourians consistently support student enrollment in public schools outside their assigned district. Finally, voters are evenly divided on whether the state should allow tax-funded scholarships to fund student enrollment in private schools. Nonwhite voters overwhelmingly support school choice policies in Missouri and are particularly supportive of initiatives to allow enrollment in private and private religious schools.*

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## Introduction

During the 2019 Missouri legislative session, proposals related to school choice in the form of charter school expansion and tax-funded scholarships for private schools nearly led to a government shutdown.<sup>1</sup> Few education issues draw more controversy and heated debate than school choice initiatives, especially given the recent prioritization of these initiatives from the Republican Party and President Trump.<sup>2</sup>

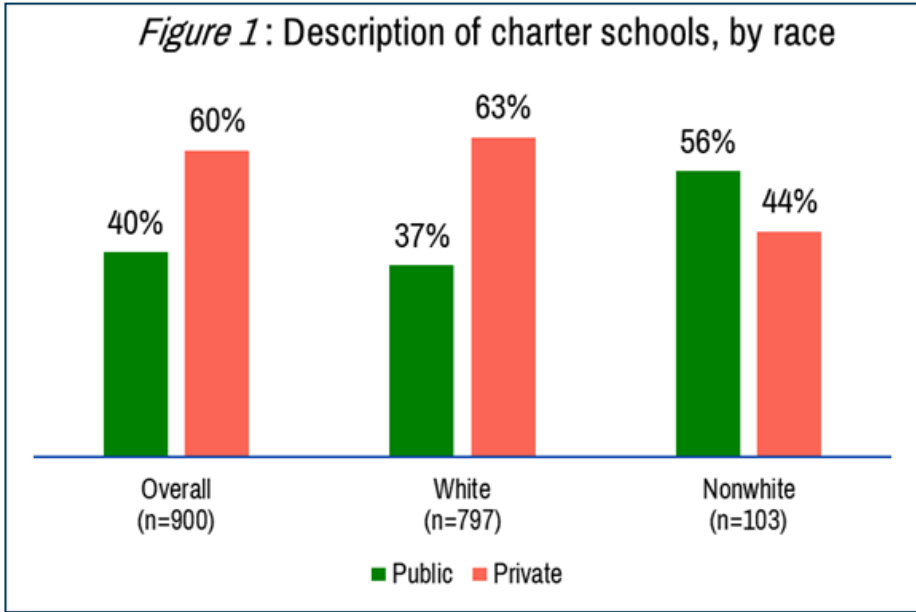
Currently, Missouri charter schools only operate within the boundaries of St. Louis Public Schools and Kansas City Public Schools and there is no tax-funded private school scholarship program in the state. Due to these limitations, efforts in the state legislature to expand charter schools and create a private school choice program have spurred contentious debate.<sup>3</sup> This policy brief reports on opinion among Missouri voters on these contentious school choice policies.

## Charter Schools

Nationally, the charter school sector has grown gradually since the first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992.<sup>4</sup> Missouri's first charter school opened in 1999 and, statewide, the sector now includes over 75 individual charter schools enrolling nearly 24,000 students as of Fall 2020.<sup>5</sup> Charter schools can operate anywhere in the state of Missouri, including in the Kansas City and St. Louis Public School Districts, unaccredited districts, districts that have been provisionally accredited for three consecutive years, or in an accredited district if sponsored by the local school board.<sup>6</sup> Currently, these public schools of choice only operate in the City of St. Louis and in Kansas City.<sup>7</sup> Due to their present geography, it is possible many Missouri voters in other regions across the state are unfamiliar with charter schools.

## Special points of interest:

- ◆ 37% of white voters correctly identify charter schools as public schools, compared to 56% of nonwhite voters.
- ◆ 41% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans support charter schools forming in Missouri.
- ◆ Fewer than half of voters support using tax-funded scholarship for children to attend private schools, including religiously-affiliated schools.
- ◆ Nonwhite voters are particularly supportive of public and private school choice initiatives, especially those programs allowing children to attend religious schools.



To gauge voter familiarity, our poll asked respondents: “Would you describe charter schools as public schools or private schools?” While the correct answer is that charter schools are, in fact, public schools, 63% of Missourians incorrectly identify them as private. This result was similar across most voter demographics with the exception of voter race. Fifty-six percent of nonwhite voters correctly identified charters as public schools while only 37% of white voters identified the correct response.

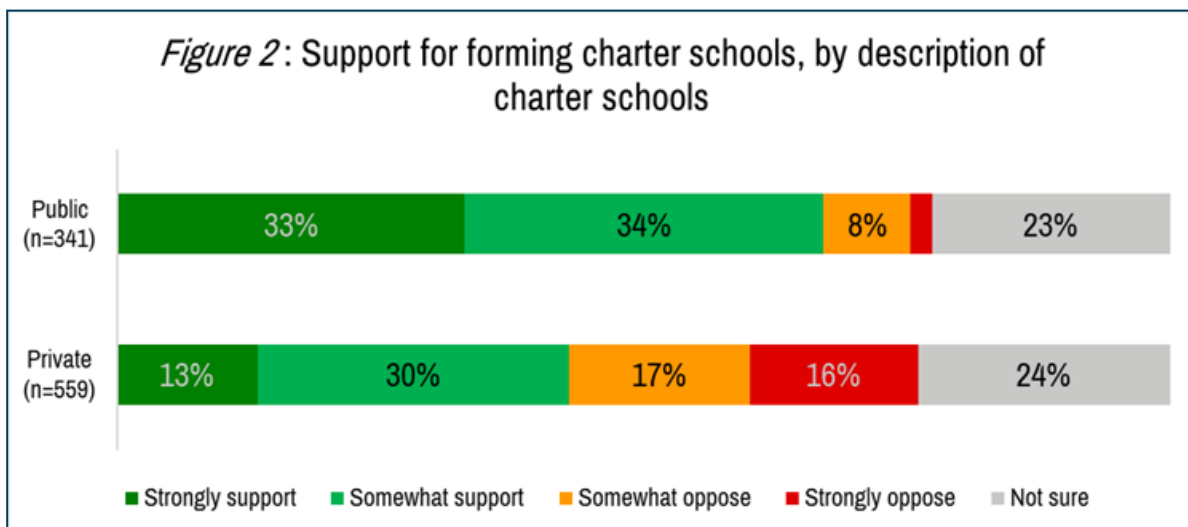
While just over half of voters said they support charter schools opening, their support depended highly on whether they identified charter schools as public or private.

For those who correctly identified charter schools as public schools, two-thirds (67%) support charter schools forming. Conversely, only 43% of those who indicated charter schools are private support these schools forming (Figure 2).

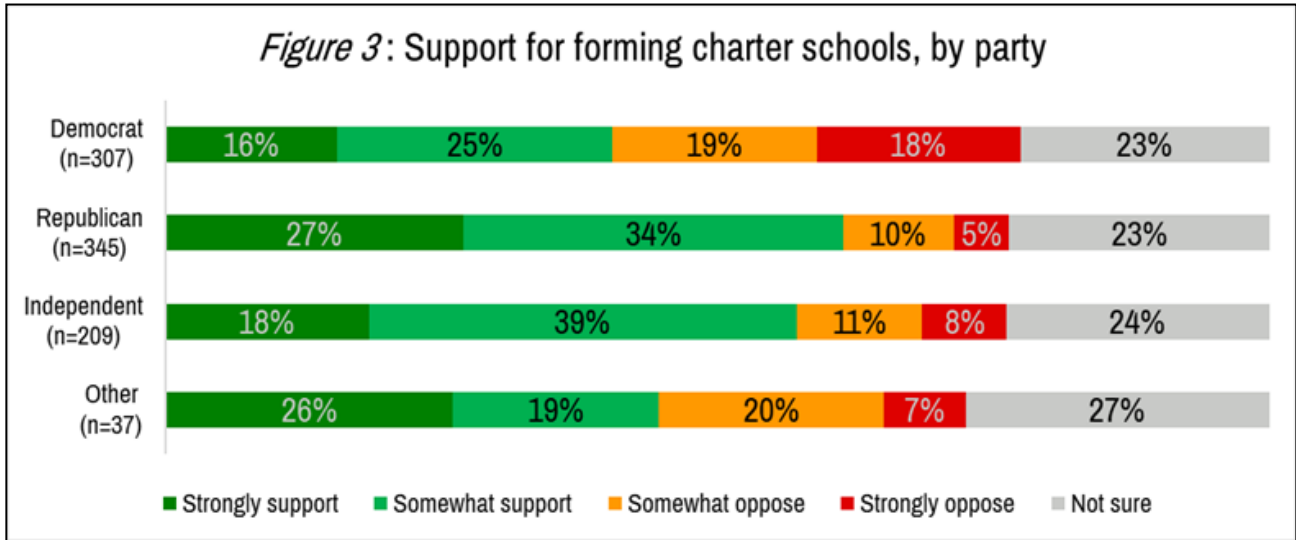
Support for charter school formation also was divided on party lines. Sixty-one percent of Republicans support charter schools forming and 57% of Independents expressed support. Conversely, only 41% of Democrats support charter schools forming (see Figure 3).

In addition to party-line differences, support for forming charter schools was similarly divided on racial lines. Among nonwhite voters, 64% support charter schools forming with 25% saying they were not sure. Just over half (51%) of white voters support charter schools forming and 25% oppose. This difference is important to note given that over three-quarters (83%) of students enrolled in Missouri’s charter schools are students of color.

Interestingly, support for the formation of charter schools shrinks substantially based on how voters rate Missouri’s schools. Voters who rated their local schools as excellent were most supportive of charter schools being able to form, with 59% of these voters indicating support. Only 42% of voters who rate Missouri’s schools as poor support charter schools forming compared to 49% who rate Missouri’s schools as fair. Sixty-three percent of Missourians who rate the state’s schools as good support charter schools forming.



*Figure 3: Support for forming charter schools, by party*



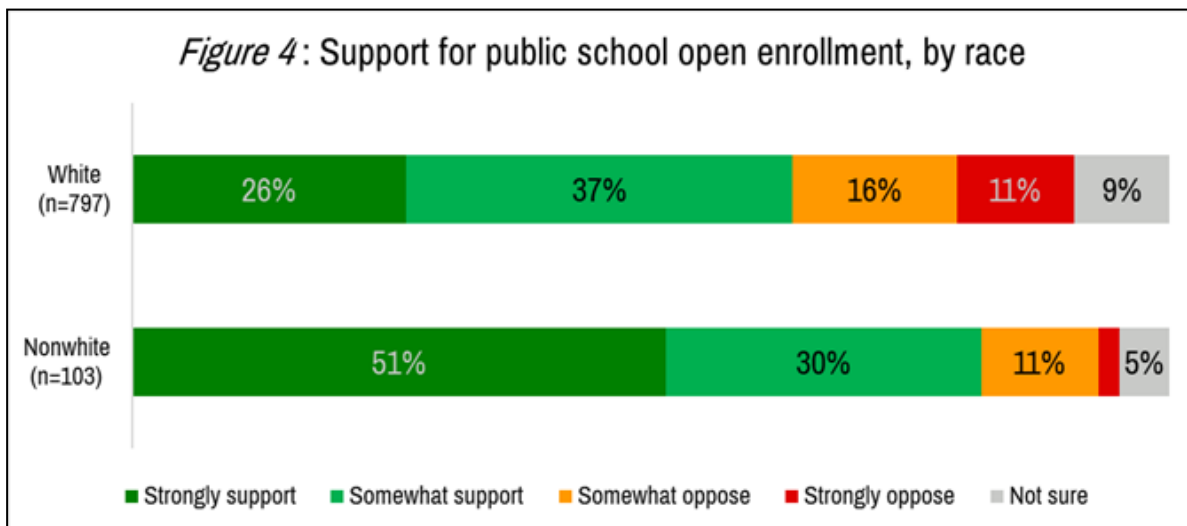
## Open Enrollment

Open enrollment policies allow students to transfer to a public school of their choosing. The policies include interdistrict choice (transfer to a school outside of the residentially assigned district) and intradistrict choice (transfer to a school within the residentially assigned district).<sup>8</sup> Currently, unaccredited districts in Missouri are required by law to allow students to transfer outside of their assigned public school district and fund transportation to at least one other district.<sup>9</sup> Students enrolling in unaccredited districts can transfer to a different school—including charter schools—at the expense of their home district. This occurred in the Riverview Gardens School District and Normandy Schools Collaborative when the districts were unaccredited in recent school years.<sup>10</sup> At the time of publication, there are no unaccredited districts in the state of Missouri.

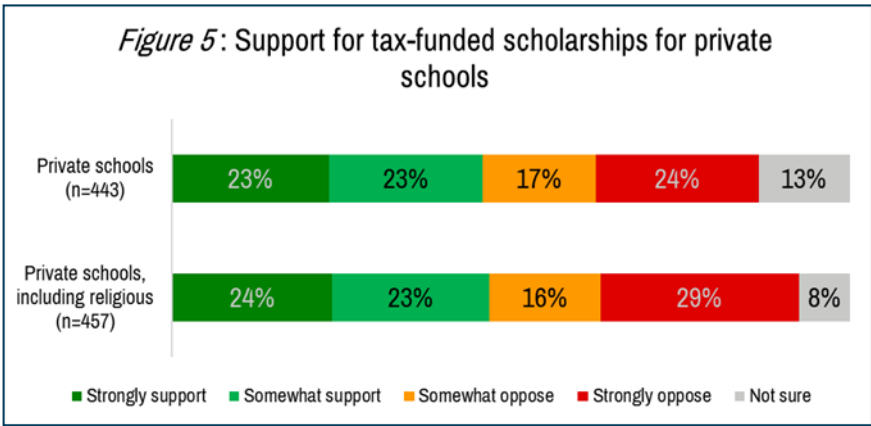
Two-thirds of likely voters said they either strongly or somewhat support allowing students to enroll in public schools outside of their assigned district. This response varied by voter age, as 81% of voters aged 19 to 29 support open enrollment and 58% of voters 65 and over support these policies.

Support for open enrollment among nonwhite voters was similarly strong, as an overwhelming majority (81%) expressed support. White voters were somewhat less supportive (63%), although a clear majority indicated support (see Figure 4). Support was consistent among voters of different political parties, with 63% of Democrats, 66% of Republicans, and 67% of Independents all indicating they support these policies.

*Figure 4: Support for public school open enrollment, by race*



## Tax-Funded Scholarships for Private Schools



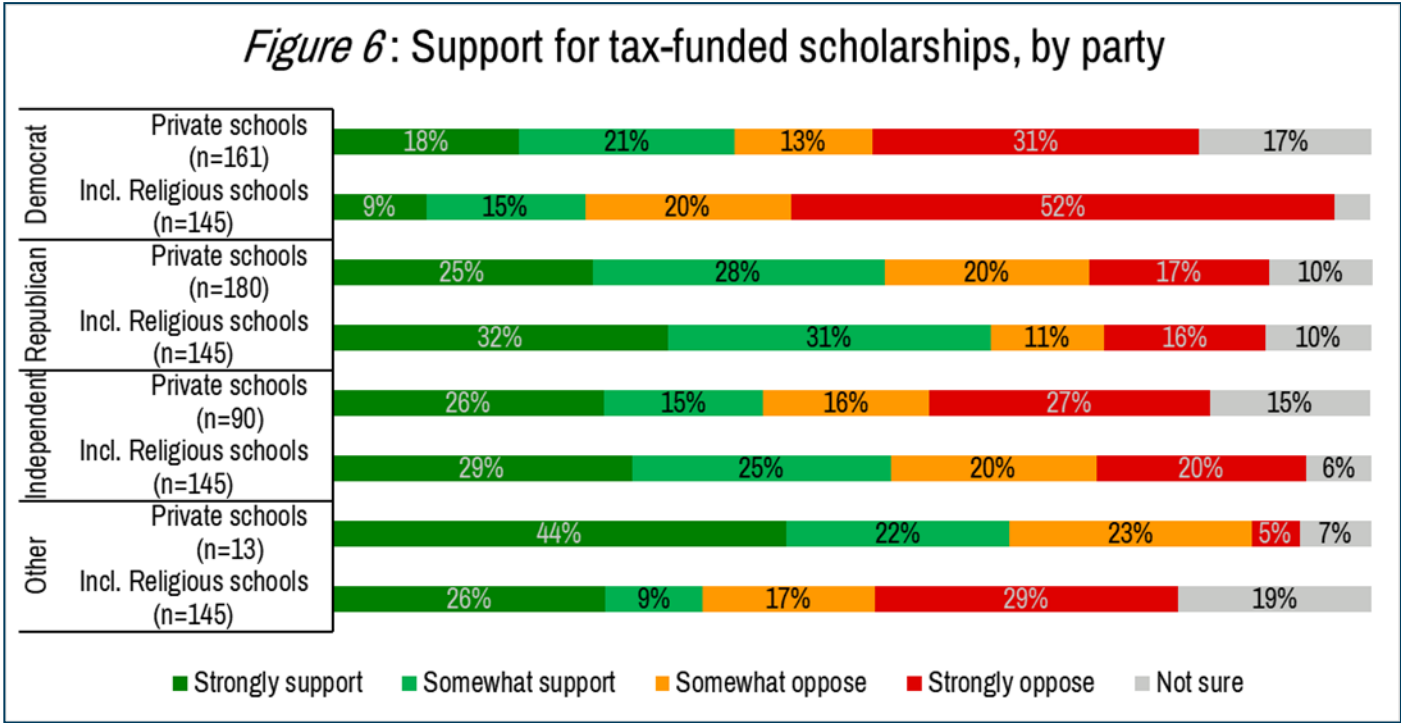
Perhaps the most contentious school choice issue lies in the question of using public dollars to fund scholarships to support private school enrollment. We asked Missouri voters to weigh in on this issue using a split sample approach, where respondents were randomly assigned to two similar but slightly altered questions about tax-funded scholarships for private schools. To half of the respondents we

posed, “Do you support or oppose allowing students to use tax-funded scholarships to attend private schools?” The remaining half of respondents were asked, “Do you support or oppose allowing students to use tax-funded scholarships to attend private schools, including religious schools?”

Fewer than half of respondents supported allowing students to use tax-funded scholarship for private schools, while the inclusion of religious schools left fewer respondents undecided. Forty-six percent of voters said they support tax-funded scholarships for private schools, 41% percent oppose, and 13% were not sure. For respondents posed the question including religious schools, 47% said they support tax-funded scholarships for private schools, 45% said they oppose, and 8 percent said they were not sure (see Figure 5).

While the overall differences in responses to the two questions indicate little variation in voter opinion, we do observe differences when comparing voters of different backgrounds. Both versions of the question elicited stronger support from Republicans and Independents compared to Democrats, and Republicans and Independents expressed stronger support when presented the question including religious schools (see Figure 6).

Perhaps the most interesting finding emerged when we disaggregated responses by voter race. Forty-four percent of white voters support tax-funded scholarships for private school enrollment, regardless of whether we include religious schools. Conversely, nonwhite voters were more likely to support scholarships



for private schools than their white peers; support among nonwhite voters grows from 53% to 74% when we add religious schools to the question. An important caveat, the sample size of nonwhite voters shrinks substantially in this split sample approach.

## Conclusions

In our poll, Missouri voters indicated support for different types of school choice. A large contingent of voters support allowing students to choose a public school outside of their local school district, with younger voters and nonwhite voters each expressing strong support. Missourians who correctly describe charter schools as public schools are the most supportive of charter school formation. This finding suggests further scrutiny, as these public schools of choice in Missouri currently operate only in Kansas City and St. Louis. A lack of local familiarity may lead voters to incorrectly believe charter schools are not public schools. Alternatively, voters simply may not believe charter schools are public schools. Evidence on support for tax-funded scholarships for private schools is less definitive; fewer than half of respondents support this policy irrespective of the inclusion of religious schools as private school options. However, we found clear support for this policy among nonwhite voters, an opinion that grew stronger when religious private schools were explicitly identified as a possibility.

Perhaps the most noteworthy results in voter responses concerning school choice are differences between white and nonwhite voters. Among likely Missouri voters, nonwhite respondents are especially supportive of school choice policies, including options that allow families to use tax-funded scholarships to enroll in private religious schools. Historically, nonwhite families have been the most likely to exercise choice in Missouri through charter school enrollment and enrollment in public schools outside of an assigned district. Additionally, our prior findings show that nonwhite Missourians are less satisfied with both their local schools and schools across the state.<sup>11</sup> Nonwhite families in Missouri may seek policies and programs that offer more educational options due to dissatisfaction with their geographically assigned schools.

## About the SLU/YouGov Poll

YouGov interviewed 900 Missouri likely voters between June 23, 2020 and July 1, 2020. The YouGov panel, a proprietary opt-in survey panel, is comprised of 1.2 million U.S. residents who have agreed to participate in YouGov Web surveys and regularly used by *CBS News* and *The Economist*. Using their gender, age, race, and education, YouGov weighted the set of survey respondents to known characteristics of registered voters of Missouri voters from the 2018 Current Population survey. The margin of error for the weighted data is 3.95%.

The SLU/YouGov Poll is directed by Steven Rogers, Ph.D. Associate Directors are Kenneth Warren, Ph.D. and Evan Rhinesmith, Ph.D.

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