POLICY BRIEF

Politics in the Pandemic: The Role of Unions in School Reopening Decisions

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Executive Summary

The decision on whether to reopen schools in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a subject of great debate in Wisconsin, and around the country. On such an important topic, one would hope that scientific evidence, rather than political considerations, would be the driving force behind reopening decisions. Is that the case? To answer these questions, WILL examined the factors that contributed to whether a school opened in-person or continued virtual classes this fall in more than 400 Wisconsin school districts.

Union presence predicts a school going virtual. Districts with a teachers union were more likely to go virtual than districts without a teachers union.

Political ideology predicts a school going virtual. Districts with a higher percentage of votes for President Trump in 2016 and 2020 were more likely to open, while those with a higher percentage for Hillary Clinton were more likely to remain shuttered.

COVID-19 cases in an area were unpredictive. The per-capita rate of COVID-19 cases in an area was not significantly predictive of whether a school district would reopen or not.

Districts with more low-income children are more likely to go virtual. As the percentage of students in a district who are low income increases, so does the likelihood that the district will have chosen virtual education for the fall.

Takeaways:
Despite regular admonishments to "follow the science," it appears a number of other factors drove reopening decisions throughout Wisconsin. Teachers unions, though weakened by Act 10,

remain an important force in many areas when it comes to education policy. Moreover, the politicization of the pandemic appears to extend to the classroom as well, with political ideology a driver of decision-making.

The decision of whether or not to reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great consternation and debate in school districts throughout the country. Normatively, many would hope that the science of the pandemic would drive decision-making, but to what extent has that been the case? Some states, like Wisconsin, which is the focus of this paper, afforded local school districts the opportunity to make autonomous decisions on whether to open or not, and in what form.

COVID-19 and Opening Schools

While there are mixed messages from researchers on the viability of reopening schools, the preponderance of the evidence seems to suggest that it is the right policy choice. In June, the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) released a statement in support of safely reopening schools:

> *"Schools are fundamental to child and adolescent development and well-being and provide our children and adolescents with academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, reliable nutrition, physical/speech and mental health therapy, and opportunities for physical activity, among other benefits…*
>
> *With the above principles in mind, the AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school. The importance of in-person learning is well-documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020."*

The AAP document goes on to describe a number of considerations that would allow for schools to reopen safely, and some research suggests that is indeed possible. For example, a recent study was conducted in South Korea on 109 children with COVID-19, and 248 of their family members. They found that when social distancing measures were practiced, the virus spread at a very low rate (Kim et. al. 2020). Another study from Germany has found that while outbreaks of COVID-19 did occur after schools reopened, the number of outbreaks and subsequent cases were lower than the time period before schools closed, indicating that mitigation measures could be effective at reducing spread (Kampe et. al. 2020). A third study examined school closure decisions in 191 countries

around the world. The research found no consistent relationship between reopening decisions and COVID-19 infection rates (Insights for Education 2020). In the United States, a study of nearly 200,000 kids in 47 states has revealed little evidence that schools serve as superspreaders thus far (Oster 2020).

A failure to reopen schools also may come with a long-term economic cost. A recent study by Hanushek and Woessman (2020) estimate that students who miss just 1/3 of a year of schooling would reduce their lifelong earnings potential by 3%. This would in turn result in a loss of GDP in present value of a staggering $14.2 billion. If learning loss continues into the fall, that cost would essentially double to $27.9 billion. These economic costs must be taken into account when policymakers evaluate reopening plans.

Closer to home, Wisconsin has indeed seen rising COVID-19 infection rates since the reopening of schools, but this appears to be more correlated with increases among those in the 18-34 age range than among those in younger cohorts. The table below is reproduced from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services website. It depicts the number of cases in each age group over time.

Figure 1. Weekly Cases by Age Group (Wisconsin Department of Health Services)
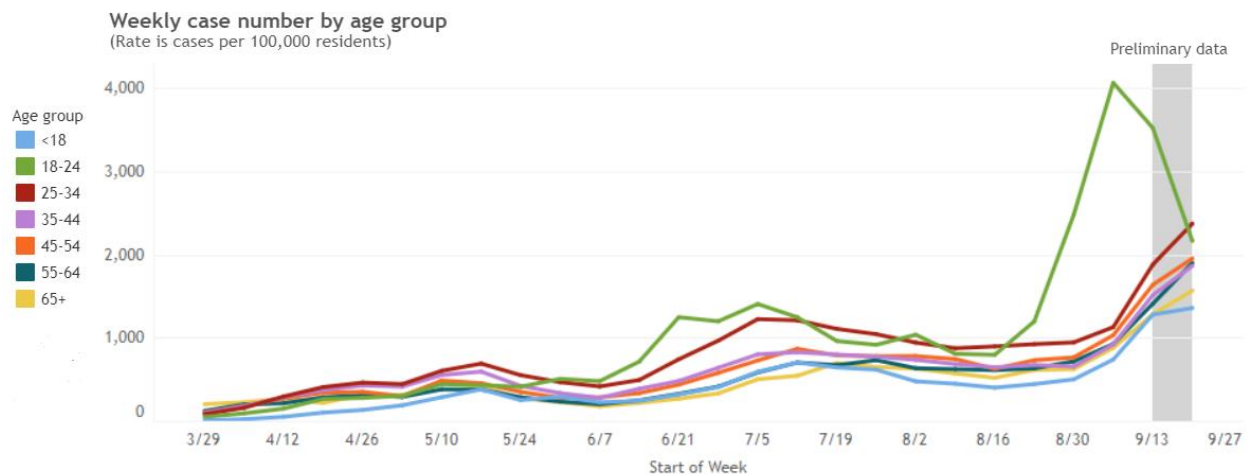
As can be seen clearly here, the 18-24 age range (green line) is the main source of the recent spike in cases. The next highest group is the 25-34 age range (red line). Those under age 18 (blue line) remain the lowest group in terms of the total number of cases despite covering a far wider age range than any other bracket besides those 65 and older.

There is much we still don't know about COVID-19, but at our current state of knowledge, it appears that keeping kids out of school may be a worse decision than reopening. So who is fighting to keep schools closed?

Power in School Governance and COVID-19

School governance has been described as a "tangled web" among a number of actors with various incentives (Epstein 2004). Among those with "skin in the game" are parents, taxpayers, and teachers unions. Teachers unions are arguably among the most powerful of these interested parties, routinely ranked by state legislators as one of the most powerful lobbying groups that they must deal with (Hrebenar and Thomas 2004). Even as union strength has waned across the country in recent decades, states with strong teachers unions are still able to exert their power when it comes to important issues like state education spending (Swain and Redding 2019). Additional power may be exerted through campaign contributions on issues such as public-school choice, evaluation methods, and teacher salary (Hartney and Flavin 2011).

Many teachers unions have been loud opponents of reopening schools. Teacher protests have included vivid images against reopening including putting out grave stones ostensibly for students and teachers (Haines 2020). The National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers union in the country, has made the case that many state and local reopening plans are insufficient, and that additional guidance and work is needed for safe reopenings to occur (Alvarez 2020). If unions continue to hold sway, one would expect that reopenings in areas of union strength might be slower and more measured. At least two recent studies at the national level have found that union power is more predictive of reopening decisions than the status of the pandemic (DeAngelis and Makridis 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a number of unique factors that also must be considered. Beyond traditional models of school governance, response to the COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly cleaved along partisan lines. Polls show that conservatives tend to be more supportive of reopening various aspects of life with fewer restrictions than what more liberal individuals would prefer. A nationwide poll in July found that 60% of Republican respondents support reopening sooner, compared with only 10% of Democratic respondents (Hamel et. al. 2020). Any model of governance decisions must take into account the partisanship of those in the school district. Additionally, the strength of the virus itself in a particular area also must be taken into account. The AAP recommendations for reopening are dependent on an environment where the spread of COVID-19 is under control. Where that is not the case, school closures might rationally result.

A further subject of this study is what the reaction of parents will be to decisions to reopen or not. Evidence from polling and surveys suggests that parents may be seeking alternative options. A Gallup Poll in August found a 10% drop in parental satisfaction with their child's

education from 2019 to 2020 (Brenan 2020). A poll by RealClear Opinion in May found that 40% of parents said they were more likely to homeschool than before the pandemic (Schulz 2020).

Methods

Table one displays the summary statistics for the key variables in our analysis. We explore the governance structure of reopening decisions through the prism of Wisconsin. Wisconsin is a relatively unique state when it comes to the presence of unions in a particular district due to the passage of Act 10 in 2011. This legislation limited the collective bargaining power of teachers unions, and required annual recertification votes for the union to continue to represent employees (Wisconsin Legislative Council 2011). It is this annual recertification that led to the variation in union presence that we take advantage of in this study. Annually, union members in each state must vote on whether or not to continue to be represented by a union. Currently, about 51% of districts in the state continue to have a teachers union, while 48% no longer have one. While these percentages can change on an annual basis, the remaining unions generally see high levels of support (Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission 2020) and thus there is relative stability.

Our variable of interest is whether schools decided to utilize virtual education during the fall semester or return to classes. Using online search engines, we visited the website for all 422 school districts in the state of Wisconsin. In the majority of cases, the website allowed us to determine their decision on reopening. In a few other cases, we utilized secondary sources, such as local newspapers, to make the determination. This search yielded information for 405 districts in the state, leaving 18 for which we were unable to make a determination. We only consider schools as having implemented a virtual model if they are fully online—districts that have implemented a hybrid model of in-person and home-learning or that have allowed parents to opt-in to virtual learning are not considered here.

As a proxy for the political position of the district, we utilize the vote share for President Trump in the county in which the district is located from the 2016 election.[1] Note that the average vote share for the president greatly exceeds what he achieved statewide due to his dominance in the more rural, less populous counties where the majority of school districts are located.   Because this paper is releasing after the 2020 election, we also utilized the preliminary results of that

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[1] In Wisconsin, a few districts cross county lines. We utilize the city where the district office is located as the "home" county for the district.

election. These results, found in Appendix Table A2, did not substantively change out key findings.

An important control variable in this analysis is the rate of COVID infection in the area at the time that decisions were made. Schools opened in Wisconsin following Labor Day weekend, on September 7. Most districts met well before then to make their initial opening decision. Consequently, we use the average daily increase in cases per 100,000 residents in each district's home county for the period from August 13 to September 2.[2]

Other control variables include the population of the county in 100,000s, the percentage of African American students in the school district, and the percentage of low-income students in the school.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Virtual	415	0.0819	0.2745
Union	420	0.4833	0.5003
Conservative Vote	421	0.5324	0.1066
Cases per 100,000	420	10.948	5.6943
Population (100,000s)	420	1.4318	2.0981
Low Income	421	0.3748	0.1624
Enrollment Change-2020	421	-0.003	0.0339
Enrollment Change-2019	421	-0.027	0.0589

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[2] While we are most interested in the time period of decision-making right before schools opened, we recognize that some districts made their reopening decisions earlier and stuck with them. Consequently, we include in Appendix Table A1 an alternative model using an earlier time frame of COVID-19 per capita case counts (July 14th- Aug 3rd). The use of this measure does not significantly impact the results.

We utilize a logistic regression with a dependent variable that equals "1" if a district decides to go with fully virtual classes to start the year, and a "0" if the district makes any other choice.

Formally, for each district:

$$Virtual\ Education = \alpha + \beta_1\ (Union)\beta_2(Liberalism) + \beta_3(COVID\ Rates) + \beta_4(Controls)$$

Results: Reopening Decisions

Table 2 on the following page shows the relationship between our key variables and reopening decisions for each polar reopening choice—full reopening and full virtual. The significance of the economic status variable is intriguing.

Table 2. Relationship between Key Variables & Virtual Learning Choice

VARIABLES	Virtual Education
Union Presence	0.902*
	(0.508)
Liberalism	10.43***
	(2.685)
Cases per 100,000	0.0443
	(0.0483)
Population (100,000s)	0.112
	(0.111)
Economic Status	2.819**
	(1.334)
Constant	0.183
	(1.342)
Observations	415

Standard errors in parentheses
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Districts with more economically disadvantaged students were *more* likely to go fully virtual, despite the difficulty in technological access that such a move may entail.

The significance of *Liberalism* suggests that the politics of the area played a key role in reopening decisions. Recall that this variable is coded so that higher numbers are indicative of more conservatism. Moving from a hypothetical district with no conservatives to a district that is 100% conservative decreases the log odds of going fully virtual by about 10.43.

Among our other variables of interest is *Union Presence*. Moving from a district without a union to one with a union increases the log odds of going fully virtual by about 0.902. While the magnitude of this coefficient is smaller than the partisanship variable, it still represents a substantively significant impact on the decision to reopen schools. Moreover, we observe schools with (1) and without unions (0) while partisanship is generally in a much narrower observed band (e.g. we don't actually have districts that are 0% or 100% conservative). The marginal effects of political ideology and union are depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Perhaps the most disconcerting result comes from our findings regarding *per capita cases*. The number of COVID-19 cases in a particular community bore no relationship to the decision to go with virtual education. Indeed, the variable came nowhere near traditional standards of statistical significance.

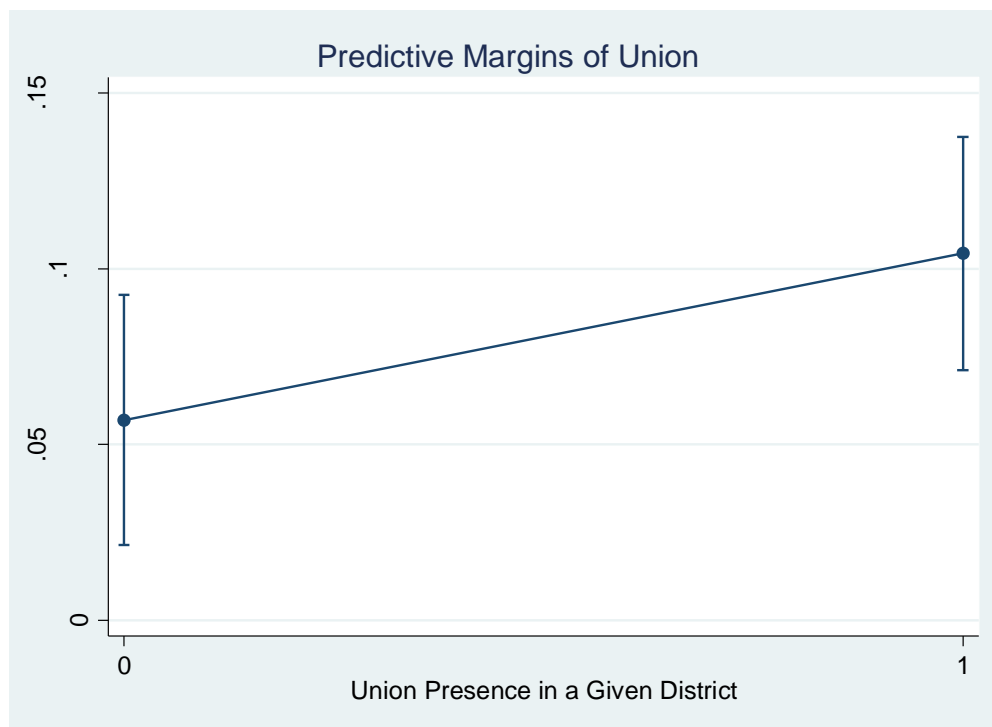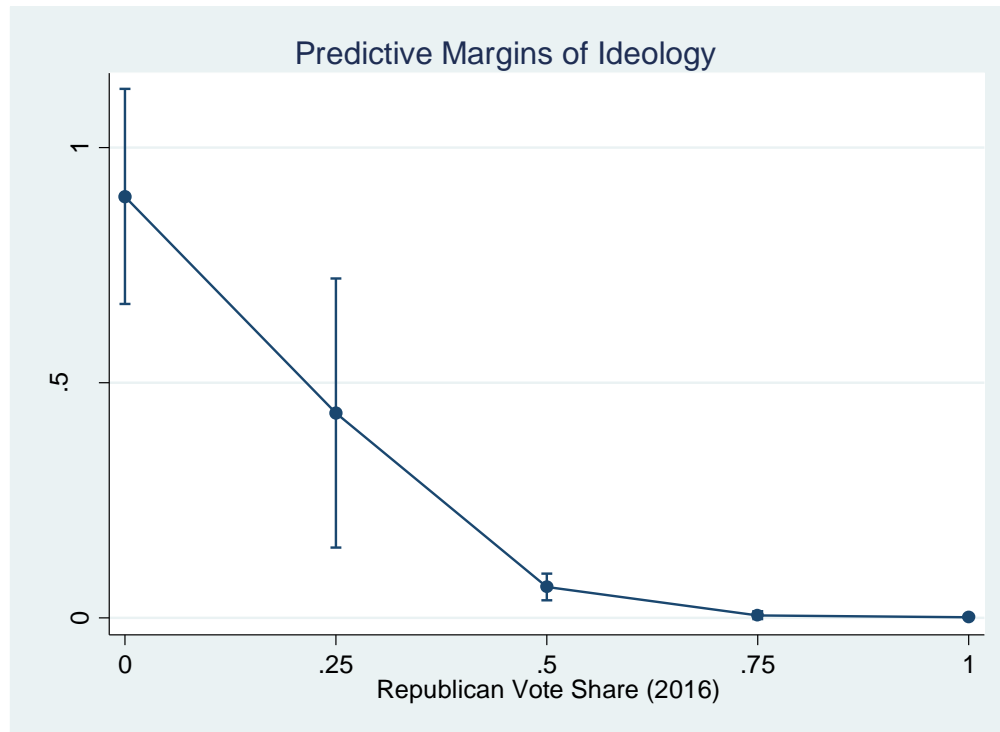**Figure 2. Predictive Margins of Unions**

Figure 3. Predictive Margins of Political Ideology

Conclusion

Consistent with evidence from other school related policies, union presence does play a role in the policymaking process when it comes to COVID-19. But the virus brings some additional factors to bear as well. The fact that infection rates do not play a significant role in determining whether or not to reopen a school is the most striking result of this analysis. Instead, it is partisanship and union presence that are the main drivers of the decision to reopen or not. While this result is perhaps not surprising given the manner in which opinions about the virus overall have become polarized (e.g. Funk and Tyson 2020), it is nonetheless another of the ways in which the pandemic has been part of the pattern of American politics rather than an exception.

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Appendix

Table A1. Results with an Earlier Time Frame of COVID-19 Cases

	(1)
VARIABLES	virtual
Union Presence	1.076**
	(0.539)
Economic Status	3.068**
	(1.414)
Liberalism	7.585***
	(2.904)
Population	0.365*
	(0.196)
Per Capita Cases	-0.0698
	(0.0542)
Constant	-0.735
	(1.537)
Observations	415

Standard errors in parentheses *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A2. Results Using 2020 General Election Preliminary Data

VARIABLES	(1) virtual
Union Presences	0.948*
	(0.515)
Liberalism 2020	10.08***
	(2.452)
Per Capita Cases	0.0425
	(0.0469)
Population	0.104
	(0.108)
Economic Status	2.867**
	(1.336)
Constant	0.120
	(1.283)
Observations	415

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1