

How political partisanship governed in-person schooling during pandemic

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A key predictor of whether a school offered only remote instruction was the proportion of the county that voted Democratic in the 2016 presidential election, the research found. Credit: Creative commons via Pexels

One of the most controversial topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person schooling, wasn't necessarily determined by the severity of the virus. New research from Michigan State University reveals how political partisanship influenced schools' reopening plans amid the global pandemic.

The study, published in the journal *Educational Researcher*, showed that partisan politics played a large role in local decisions about whether students would attend [school](#) in person in the fall of 2020—a more prominent role than COVID severity, in fact.

"A key predictor of whether a school offered only remote instruction was the proportion of the county that voted Democratic in the 2016 [presidential election](#)," said Sarah Reckhow, associate professor of political science. "Based on [public opinion](#) polling in Michigan, partisanship and support for Trump were also strong predictors of the public's support for offering in-person school."

In counties that voted heavily Democratic, Reckhow said that the data showed school districts were almost three times as likely to open fully remote in fall 2020. In heavily Republican counties, [school districts](#) were nearly 1.8 times more likely to offer in-person instruction. School districts in political battleground counties were in the middle.

The study also found that [partisan politics](#) did not play a major role in state-level decisions—governors ordered school closures in spring 2020 and left decisions to districts in the fall of 2020, regardless of partisanship.

The study was co-authored by Matthew Grossmann, director of MSU's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research and professor of political science; Katharine Strunk, professor of education policy and the Clifford E. Erickson Distinguished Chair in Education; and Meg Turner, project manager for MSU's Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. The researchers collected and analyzed data on COVID-19 rates, educator unionization, presidential voting records, district demographics, state education policies since the start of the pandemic, local district reopening plans and public opinion on reopening in the politically competitive state of Michigan.

Surprisingly, the study showed that it took quite a bit of time for the policy response on education during the pandemic to become polarized.

In spring of 2020, the response from states was consistent, regardless of the party of their governors. "It wasn't until fall 2020 that we saw partisan polarization become a key factor in both local [district decision](#) making and public opinion," Reckhow said.

While relying on local constituencies to implement challenging choices may be a simpler option for the federal system, the researchers hope their findings serve as a warning: Partisanship and polarization matter in local decisions, even when the boards making those decisions are officially "nonpartisan" elected officers.

"COVID-19 continues to divide communities and leaving decisions up to local control doesn't mean that local public health conditions will guide decision making," Reckhow said. "If state leaders want local officials to be more responsive to local context and conditions than partisan attitudes, then more guidance and direction from the state likely would be required."

More information: Matt Grossmann et al, All States Close but Red Districts Reopen: The Politics of In-Person Schooling During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Educational Researcher* (2021). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X211048840](#)

Provided by Michigan State University

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