

# Citizenship Development and the Market's Impact: Examining Democratic Learning in Charter Schools in Two Regions

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## Abstract

The marketization of U.S. schools has increasingly complicated and even undermined the democratic aims of education, causing many to argue that democratic and market ideologies are fundamentally opposed. This meta-ethnographic study uses conceptual tools from democratic theory and the research on civic education to investigate how leaders in one market-based organization—charter schools—grapple with tensions between the market and democracy in fostering the democratic orientations of their students and parents. Findings reveal that charter leaders primarily facilitate democratic learning opportunities that advance their organizational interests and promote a narrow and more individualistic conceptualization of democracy at the expense of a communitarian, justice-oriented one. The bounded vision of democracy observed in charter school practices suggests that market pressures may drive charters to focus their democratic engagement on the instrumental aims of ensuring their organizational survival in a competitive educational marketplace, despite espoused commitments to broader democratic aims.

## Keywords

charter schools, market-based reform, democratic engagement

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Since the inception of the common public school system, policy makers, educators, and citizens have emphasized how schools are foundational to American democracy (Dewey, 1916; Engel, 2000). In the late 19th century, reformers such as Horace Mann and Ellwood Cubberley called for common schooling to foster shared civic values across an increasingly diverse population (Labaree, 1997; Tyack, 1974). Similarly, in the early 20th century, John Dewey argued that a democratic society “must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (p. 115). Although the educational visions of these reformers did not extend to people of color, scholars, such as W.E.B. DuBois (1903) and Carter G. Woodson (1933), also theorized how a system of African American schools could nurture African American identity and political empowerment. Today, many scholars have continued this line of argumentation, suggesting that schools remain arenas where generations learn the “democratic way of life” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 7) and are prepared to participate in a system that values equal participation and open public discourse (Engel, 2000).

Because of the widely held belief in the value of education for democracy’s sustainability, schools and districts have long implemented curricula and learning experiences to foster understandings of and facility with engaging in a diverse, democratic society (Gutmann, 1999; Hirsch, 1987). Yet, with ongoing national concern over student academic performance in U.S. public schools, the democratic aims of education have been undermined in favor of reforms that emphasize the market values of competition, choice, efficiency, and individual achievement (Engel, 2000). For example, the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) codified the high-stakes accountability regime, effectively replacing early reformers’ vision of democratic education with a curricular focus on preparing students for standardized tests (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Trujillo, 2013). The marketization of public education, which has increased in recent decades, has also marginalized the communitarian and relational elements of democracy—those that emphasize relationships and deliberative interactions among citizens in service of promoting a liberating and nonrepressive common good (Delanty, 2002; Demaine & Entwistle, 2016; Gutmann, 1993). Instead, students and families are encouraged to engage democratically through individual advancement and actions to express their preferences and individual rights (Duggan, 2003; Engel, 2000).

Against this backdrop, scholarship focused on the impact of market-based education reforms on democracy carries increasing significance. To date, much of this literature focuses on the impact of market reforms on democratic accountability, or how citizens and interest groups are able or unable to participate in a market-oriented public schooling environment (Buras, 2011;

DiMartino & Scott, 2013; Lipman, 2011). Others, too, have documented how the rising influence of nonprofit and for-profit organizations in the education sector shifts the nature of democratic governance to emphasize market rather than communitarian tenets, often at the expense of public transparency (Bulkley et al., 2010; Burch, 2009). However, few scholars have investigated how market-oriented educational organizations generate new avenues for democratic engagement and foster political practices among their stakeholders. These organizations necessarily engage in strategic political behaviors to sustain their organizational presence. They persuade local policy makers of the value of their educational missions and approaches, and in doing so, often tap their key constituents—parents and students—to lend their voices to these efforts (Hernández, 2017).

This study investigates how educators of one such market-based organization—charter schools—promote and foster the democratic, political engagement of these two constituencies. We focus on charter schools given their dramatic growth in a short period of time: Between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of public schools with charter status increased from 7% to 8%; and charter student enrollment grew from 400,000 to 2.8 million (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). This growth suggests that increasing numbers of U.S. students and their families are being exposed to the habits and skills of democratic citizenship in these institutions. Furthermore, our focus on charter schools is apt because this organizational model exemplifies the tension between market and democratic values (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Wilson, 2016). Publicly funded but privately operated, charter schools owe their existence to a market landscape that allows families to select from an array of school options. Yet, the charter school movement was also intended, in theory, to animate local democracy by empowering communities to design schools based on their needs and preferences (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Wells et al., 1999). Although market values have increasingly defined charter schools, scholars argue that the charter model may hold promise for facilitating its original democratic aims (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Wilson, 2016).

Using conceptual tools from democratic theory and the research on civic education, we investigate how independent charter schools and charter schools affiliated with charter management organizations (CMOs) create opportunities for their stakeholders to engage democratically and politically. We draw upon qualitative data sources from charter schools in two charter-dense urban districts to identify these practices and the degree to which they advance individualistic or communitarian visions of democracy. Findings reveal that the charter schools in this study facilitate opportunities for stakeholders to engage politically but do so primarily for the purpose of advancing

charters' organizational interests. In turn, the focal charters limit opportunities for stakeholders to address broader issues related to educational equity and racial, social, and economic justice. These findings demonstrate that this study's focal charter schools promote an individualistic conceptualization of democracy at the expense of a communitarian, justice-oriented one among their stakeholders.

## The Democratic Implications of Market-Based Education Reforms

The democratic purposes of public education have long been in tension with market-oriented purposes. From common schools to the creation of centralized school systems in the early 20th century, reformers and policy makers have advanced simultaneous arguments, noting the centrality of schools in supporting social cohesion among a pluralistic citizenry while preparing a workforce for the U.S. economy (Labaree, 1997; Tyack, 1974). As Labaree (1997) explains, "Schools . . . occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, between political ideals and economic realities" (p. 41). Because of schools' unique position, dual purposes of education have continuously coexisted, with political and policy momentum swaying from one pole to the other.

However, many scholars suggest that market-oriented purposes of education have come to dominate the current educational landscape. Engel (2000) argues, "Current-day discussion about the future of education are conducted almost entirely in the language of the free market: individual achievement, competition choice, economic growth, and national security—with only occasional lip service being given to egalitarian and democratic goals" (p. 3). Arguably, the 1983 publication of the federally commissioned report *A Nation at Risk* signaled a turning point where market values and discourse rose to prominence, prompting policy makers to focus school reforms on raising academic performance and economic competitiveness (Ravitch, 2010). Subsequent publications, such as Chubb and Moe's (1990) *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, only deepened the commitment to market values in education. Bolstered by these arguments, market-based reforms that increase privatization, competition, and incentives have been instituted over the last three decades, often redefining democratic participation as the expression of individual choice (Duggan, 2003; Engel, 2000; Scott, 2011). With their proliferation, researchers have identified and interrogated the effects that marketization has had on democratic education and the governing conditions surrounding schools and districts.

## *Market Reforms and Democratic Learning in Schools*

Market-oriented theories of action have come to underpin a range of reforms, including those related to teacher evaluation (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008) and curriculum and instruction (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Trujillo, 2013). In addition, these reforms have had resounding effects on the degree to which schools emphasize democratic education. The onset of high-stakes accountability policies, epitomized in NCLB, led to the narrowing of school curricula, particularly for schools that showed persistently low performance on standardized assessments (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004). Civics courses and other forms of democratic education were frequent casualties in this narrowing, as persistently underperforming schools disproportionately attended to tested subjects such as literacy and math (Berliner, 2011; Hinde, 2008). To date, 40 states require only one to two semesters of U.S. government or civics, and typically mandate these courses only for high school-aged students (Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

Compounding the diminished presence of democratic education is the narrowness of democratic learning experiences in educational settings. For example, researchers argue that civics curricula enacted in U.S. schools infrequently include experiential learning or local problem-solving opportunities (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Scholars also indicate that civics learning typically emphasizes demonstrations of character (e.g., volunteering, charity) or technical knowledge of government operations at the expense of activities that develop critical thinking and challenge systems of power (Westheimer, 2008). Although models of justice-oriented learning experiences have been documented (Kwon, 2013; Morrell, 2015), they are exceptions rather than the norm. Overall, the market-oriented context has marginalized democratic education and limited the form and nature of its expression.

## *Market Reforms and the Democratic Character of Governance and Engagement*

Market reforms have not only affected the nature and depth of democratic learning in schools but also altered the democratic character of school governance by limiting transparency and community responsiveness. For example, many have sought to spur academic improvement and competition by diversifying school governance, often through the adoption of portfolio management models, which include charter schools (Bulkley et al., 2010). These reforms have facilitated the expansion of nonprofit and for-profit organizations into the education sector, which can operate with minimal transparency (Burch, 2009) and in the face of broad community opposition

(Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2011). Similarly, the growing practice of contracting, wherein districts enter agreements with outside organizations that assume responsibility for key school operations, also limits public accountability and input (Burch, 2009; DiMartino & Scott, 2013). Finally, state takeovers and mayoral control—two reforms that draw upon the logic of market efficiency—effectively dissolve the policy-making abilities of elected school boards, either through the mayoral appointment of board members or by tapping leaders with managerial versus educational expertise (Morel, 2018; Wong & Shen, 2003). In turn, these reforms limit the impact of democratically elected representatives.

Other scholars have investigated market reforms' impact on the nature and form of parent engagement and governance. For example, school choice policies are underpinned by the theory that parents behave as rational actors and “vote with their feet” in choosing schools that meet their needs. Yet, research on parental decisions reflects preferences that complicate the image of parents as rational choice actors (Goldhaber, 1999; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Waitoller & Super, 2017). Others have investigated the political mobilization of parents in the midst of educational marketization and shifts in local political economies. For example, scholars have explored the role of parental social networks and neighborhood advocacy efforts in spurring school improvement in both neighborhood schools and choice contexts, and how these efforts work to challenge or protect systemic advantages for privileged groups (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Scott, 2011).

More recently, researchers have delineated the growth and influence of Parent Advocacy Organizations (PAOs), which teach parents about the complex education system and how to actively participate in it. In their analyses, researchers interrogate how these mediating organizations frame and promote particular approaches and reforms to direct parental efforts (Chong, 2018) and often trace the political and financial networks that sustain PAOs to illuminate their ideological agendas (Scott, 2013). Although the visions and policies for which PAOs advocate vary, researchers note the increasing presence of corporate and philanthropy-funded PAOs, such as Parent Revolution, that mobilize and organize parents for the advancement of school choice and charter schools (Scott, 2013). Regarding the influence of PAOs that emphasize market-oriented policies, some scholars suggest that these current expressions of parent advocacy and engagement may be taking an antidemocratic turn, as parents increasingly participate in policy and choice environments that elevate the values of consumerism, individualism, and competition (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2015; Scott, 2013). Overall, these analyses beget questions of authenticity, equity, and

democratic participation surrounding parent engagement and governance in the market-oriented context.

### *Democracy and Civic Learning in Charter Schools*

The research described above suggests that market reforms have had tangible and often negative effects on students' democratic learning experiences and the authentic inclusion of local stakeholders in education governance. Yet, what remains comparatively less understood is how market-oriented organizations such as charter schools are facilitating these democratic shifts in their own practice and interactions with their key constituents—students and families.

A growing number of researchers has sought to develop the knowledge base surrounding civic learning opportunities for students in charter schools. Much of these studies have interrogated the impact of discipline practices on democratic learning in no-excuses charter schools (Ben-Porath, 2013; Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013)—schools, often operated by CMOs, that maintain rigid and compliance-oriented behavioral management systems with the aim of spurring academic achievement. For instance, Ben-Porath (2013) argued that the use of strict behavior management in the pursuit of closing persistent achievement gaps in some CMOs has undermined relational and reflective civic virtues among the low-income students of color who predominate their student populations. Similarly, Goodman (2013) interrogated the civic costs for students in no-excuses charters who are constantly exposed to rigid systems of penalties and reinforcements and adult monitoring that minimize student agency. Findings from this scholarship suggest that the charters who adhere to the no-excuses model, which include some of the largest and most publicly lauded CMOs in the field, may be inhibiting democratic values and civic learning with their keen focus on securing improved academic outcomes.

In addition to civic learning among charter students, a subset of scholars have explored whether and how charters foster democratic practices among parents and families (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; S. Smith, 2001; J. Smith et al., 2011). For example, in examining the decision-making processes in Michigan schools, Mintrom (2003) found that charters more frequently had systems that foster inclusive decision-making when compared with their public school counterparts, suggesting that charters encourage deliberative democracy and provide opportunities “for yoking citizen voice with consumer choice” (p. 52). More recently, Wilson's (2016) case study of one charter school serving a Somali community in Minnesota examined the possibility of democratic deliberation and engagement. She described how the case site fostered a

culturally validating and participatory environment for students and families to consider how other charters and traditional public schools might be able to follow suit. Although this scholarship suggests that charters may facilitate more democratic and inclusive decision-making practices, other studies have complicated these findings, noting how charter schools face significant challenges in engaging families in democratic governance (Becker et al., 1997; Fuller, 2010; Hamlin, 2017).

While elucidating some patterns in the democratic character and practices in charter settings, important questions remain about how civic and democratic practices are fostered among students and parents in a range of charter schools and what kind of democratic citizens are developed in the process. This study extends the research base by investigating how charter school students and families engage politically and the degree to which charter schools foster their stakeholders' democratic practices. In identifying these practices, we also consider the conceptualizations of democracy that are advanced and how they exacerbate tensions between the market and democracy.

## **Investigating Democratic Practices in Charter Schools: A Framework**

To investigate democratic practices in charter schools, we used a two-pronged conceptual framework. First, we utilized concepts from the literature on democratic education, which provides typologies of the nature and form of democratic experiences, to consider the presence and absence of these civic opportunities in charter schools and their implications. We then considered these findings in light of the scholarship that theorizes and interrogates the evolving tensions between democracy and the market and how it affects school communities. Through this lens, this analysis aimed to consider whether or how the unique interplay of democratic and market forces in charter schools generated possibilities and tensions for its key stakeholders.

### *Democratic Practices and Their Implications*

Democratic learning is often facilitated by asking students to engage with content and a given curriculum, but many schools have also adopted practices that incorporate experiential learning components that can better develop students' sensibility of what it means to be a democratic citizen (Bennett et al., 2009; Butin, 2007; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Although out-of-school learning opportunities are frequent features of civic learning and



citizenship identity development, researchers have demonstrated that these opportunities vary in form and nature, yielding differences in the values and orientations they foster. Specifically, scholars suggest these experiential learning practices range from those that (a) emphasize the actions of responsible community members (Lickona, 1993; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), (b) facilitate participatory democratic practices (Newmann, 1975; Verba et al., 1995), and (c) emphasize systemic change (Ayers et al., 1998; Baldrige et al., 2017; Kwon, 2013). Examples of how each of these approaches is operationalized in democratic learning experiences are detailed in Table 1. In this study, we investigate whether and how charters facilitate and promote student and family engagement in these activities. While we draw upon concepts primarily from literature that investigates student democratic learning experiences, the increasing activism and visibility of parents as actors in market reform and charter schools make their participation in these practices also ripe for investigation.

In addition to identifying the democratic practices that charters promote, this framework provides a lens into understanding what type of democratic citizen is fostered through these activities. First, researchers have considered the advantages and disadvantages of promoting personally responsible citizenship as a primary form of democratic learning and participation. Although scholars note that these practices can lead to constructive improvements in community life, they also suggest that the impact of these actions may be fleeting and often can distract from the structural or systemic forces that perpetuate negative and inequitable conditions (Butin, 2007). Moreover, the individualistic character of this form of democratic participation divorces citizens from the broader collective, emphasizes individual actions, and generates more personalized benefits (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Researchers have also assessed the democratic potential of participatory citizenship learning opportunities, suggesting that they encourage the active and collective pursuit of solutions to public problems and cultivate individuals who deliberate and engage with fellow citizens (Chambers, 2003). Yet, critics point to the need for individuals to subvert or circumvent established systems to bring about transformative change, calling for alternative sites for influence to counteract institutionally unjust processes (Warren, 2011). Others critique this vision of democratic learning and practice by demonstrating how it can be enacted without communitarian overtones in favor of market interests (Piazza, 2017; Purcell, 2007).

Regarding justice-oriented democratic development, scholars highlight the transformative power of this approach and its ability to elevate the voices of nondominant communities in a culturally validating manner (Baldrige et al., 2017; Kwon, 2013; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Yet, despite the

**Table 1.** Democratic Experiential Learning Experiences.

Democratic learning in action	Aim	Learning activities
Responsible community citizen	Acts responsibility and in service to his or her own community to build character and demonstrate personal responsibility	Volunteering Engaging in community service Making charitable contributions
Participatory citizen	Participates in and is knowledgeable of local, state, and national affairs	Training in government Participating in CBOs Engaging in collective decision-making Participating in public campaigns Speaking at public forms Participating in public protests
Justice-oriented citizen	Analyzes and understands sociopolitical forces to advocate for attention and action to mitigate social injustices	Explicit learning of sociopolitical and economic dynamics Engaging in participatory action research Participating in social movements Participating in public protests

Note. Titles and aims for democratic learning in action use the typology presented by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). Learning activities associated with each citizenship conceptualization were synthesized from various sources (Ayers et al., 1998; Kwon, 2013; Verba et al., 1995; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). CBO = community-based organization.

promise of participatory action research and related experiences that collectively engage stakeholders in an analysis of sociopolitical forces to spur social action, scholars suggest that these learning experiences are infrequently present in schools.

### *Understanding Democratic Learning in a Market Context*

In identifying democratic learning practices and their implications, we also consider whether or how these practices contribute to or alleviate the tensions between market ideology and democracy, which are both uniquely embodied by charter schools. Political theorists and researchers have demonstrated how

market ideology undermines democracy and its values related to pluralism and collective engagement (Duggan, 2003; Engel, 2000). In arguing that market ideology and democratic values in education are “mutually exclusive,” Engel (2000) explains,

Democrats cannot be created one at a time, each pursuing his or her own autonomy or self-interest, individually deciding whether or not to bother learning about democratic values. Educational consumers, acting as individuals, will not and cannot choose to organize their schools around common values. (p. 70)

Others, too, suggest that the individualism inherent in choice environments minimizes communitarian goals in favor of those emphasizing individual attainment and empowerment, thus redefining equity and democracy in individualist terms and inhibiting the advancement of policies that redress structural impediments to equitable schooling (Scott, 2013).

The self-interested and alienating behaviors inherent to market-based, choice environments, which stand in contrast to deliberative and relational democracy, form the complicated backdrop against which charter schools foster and encourage the democratic and political engagement of their stakeholders. Although charter schools were originally conceptualized to enhance democracy and community responsiveness (Budde, 1988), the charter school sector has become increasingly defined by and understood through market values (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010), which have muddled the philosophical underpinnings of the movement (Wilson, 2016). Although the diverse coalition of charter advocates maintain and assert varied definitions of liberty, justice, and equity, researchers suggest that a neoliberal or libertarian logic, or one that seeks to minimize government regulation to enable maximum individual choice and expression, has come to undergird the practices and politics of charter schooling (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Indeed, advocates of market reforms exert robust influence in shaping charter school policies and legislation, discursively framing charters as democratic by employing market logic that responds to consumer preferences and facilitates parents’ freedom to choose (Wells et al., 2002). Thus, scholars argue that charters, defined in market terms, have been inconsistently able to develop democratic spaces that are responsive, participatory, and grounded in principles of recognition and redistribution.

Overall, through this lens that acknowledges the tensions between democracy and market ideology, we consider how charter schools foster democratic and political practices among their stakeholders and whether these practices advance individualistic or communitarian aims. By considering

these findings in light of the unique interplay of the market and democracy in charter settings, this study can shed further light on whether tensions between these forces are exacerbated, assuaged, or uniquely manifested in these environments.

## Research Design

This investigation was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Questions 1:** How, if at all, do charter school leaders promote the political engagement of their families and students?

**Research Questions 2:** How, if at all, do charter school leaders teach their stakeholders to engage politically?

**Research Questions 3:** If charter school leaders teach stakeholders to engage politically, do these political engagement practices advance individualistic or communitarian visions of democracy, or both? If so, how?

To answer these questions, this study draws upon two research projects examining the political practices of charter schools operating in two urban districts, one in Northern California and one in New York.<sup>1</sup> To collectively analyze the data amassed from the studies, we employed meta-ethnographic methodology (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Rather than merely aggregating data, meta-ethnographies combine data from independent studies to generate new analyses and interpretations beyond those of the original studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Like other scholars who have synthesized qualitative studies and reanalyzed combined data through new conceptual frameworks (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; DiMartino & Jessen, 2016; Jabbar & Wilson, 2018), this meta-ethnography enabled us to explore how the marketization within two urban contexts affects the form and nature of democratic and political learning opportunities in charter schools. A meta-ethnographic approach also allowed us to explore patterns across contexts, enhancing theory development and the practical implications of the study's findings (Patton, 2014).

## Study Contexts

Across both studies, we examined the democratic practices fostered in 14 charter schools: 10 in Northern California and four in New York. The regional contexts and the focal charter schools are described in the sections that follow.

*Birchwood.* The California schools were a subset of those affiliated with CMOs<sup>2</sup> operating in Birchwood,<sup>3</sup> a midsized, racially diverse urban area in Northern California. CMOs exclusively operated schools in the city's low-income areas, and in turn, 80% of its students were from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and more than 93% identified as students of color. Because students in these Birchwood communities had historically been underserved by traditional public schools, each of the CMOs espoused a commitment to enacting a quality educational experience that enabled students to persist through college and career. While sharing this mission, the CMOs had approached this effort in different programmatic ways, including through no-excuses school models, deeper learning school designs, or through programs that combined a strict academic environment with growing attention to socioemotional supports.

Birchwood CMOs operated their schools in a city with a storied history of community activism intended to mitigate against economic, political, and social shifts that had been acutely felt along racial lines. Education had been a prominent issue in these political efforts, spurring city residents to advocate for a range of policies to address the needs of its diverse and segregated communities. With local activism and demands for community responsiveness, the local district implemented numerous policies increasing school autonomy. Although small schools were the primary form this took in the early 2000s, charter schools proliferated in the wake of small school closures and consolidations, yielding annual growth in the number of charters operating in the city limits. In 2017–2018, Birchwood had more than 40 charter schools that served approximately 25% of the city's school-aged youth, making Birchwood a charter-rich education market where charter leaders faced fierce competition for stakeholder support and increasing opposition from local groups.

*New York.* The New York charters included one small CMO and three independent schools, all located in a large urban area. The schools each operated in neighborhoods with mixed income levels, where recent patterns of gentrification have brought newly arrived middle-class White residents to areas that have long been home to low-income families of color. The CMO and one independent school in the sample were established prior to the onset of gentrification in their respective neighborhoods. Hence, at each of these schools, more than 80% of students identify as students of color, and more than 75% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Conversely, the other two independent schools in the sample were each established more recently and intentionally sought to locate in gentrifying neighborhoods, hoping that doing so would facilitate a diverse student body. Despite their founding aims to be

“intentionally diverse” (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018), at the time of data collection, each school had yet to meet this goal: One school disproportionately enrolled students of color (70%) and low-income students (60%), whereas at the other school, nearly half of all students were White and only one quarter low income. Despite distinct racial and socioeconomic enrollment patterns, the schools in the New York sample shared a commitment to progressive pedagogy and aimed to foster student learning through hands-on and project-based learning experiences. However, this progressive orientation was often in tension with accountability pressures to improve student achievement as defined by standardized test scores.

The schools in the New York sample were located in a highly segregated city, which had engaged in a short-lived initiative in the late 1960s to politically empower communities of color in school governance. Following a racially charged power struggle, this initiative was dismantled, and, in the following decades, the city further displaced mechanisms for democratic participation in public education. This occurred most intensely during the early 2000s, with the institution of mayoral control, privatization, and charter school expansion. In a 10-year period, from 2000 to 2010, the number of charters grew nearly 9 times, and by 2018, more than 200 charters are in operation. Mayoral control continues to limit opportunities for democratic participation, though charter schools have recently generated much political debate, mobilizing an array of stakeholder groups.

*Case significance.* Although there are political, demographic, and institutional differences between these locales that limit our comparative analysis, several shared characteristics across these urban contexts render them ripe for comparison. First, both contexts have attracted vast political, financial, and ideological support for charter school expansion over the last 20 years. Moreover, both cities have a deep history of grassroots and community-based activism, particularly from low-income communities of color, aimed at improving educational quality, equity, and access. The legacy of these efforts continues to influence education activists who advocate for justice-oriented and communitarian approaches to education reform. These grassroots advocates often criticize market-based approaches, arguing that they primarily serve the interests of wealthy, White, and nonlocal reformers at the expense of community groups. Thus, we consider these two contexts to be ideal sites in which to examine the nature of democratic learning and political engagement against the backdrop of market-based education reform, as they represent information-rich cases that intensely manifest the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2014) and hold the potential to advance theory regarding the tensions between market and democratic values.

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

Across both contexts, data sources included interviews, observations, and documents. We interviewed 47 charter school personnel and their supporting stakeholders, including board members, parents, state- and district-level policy makers, donors, and education reformers, to elicit their perspectives on the nature and form of stakeholder political engagement. We interviewed 27 individuals in Northern California and 20 individuals in New York, and each interview was approximately 60 min. Interview respondents were purposively sampled (Creswell, 2012) to reflect a range of political or community engagement experiences and perspectives at the school, district, and state levels. For our original studies, semi-structured interview protocols (Patton, 2014) broadly focused on charter schools' political, resource mobilization, and community engagement practices. Given the open-ended nature of the interview questions, many respondents also addressed how schools foster stakeholders' political engagement and citizenship development.

We supplemented interview data with approximately 82 hr of observations of public gatherings. Observations included charter school board meetings at all focal schools in each city (34 hr in Northern California and 24 hr in New York). In Northern California, observations also included 19 hr of school district board meetings and charter petition hearings. In New York, we also observed 5 hr of lobbying meetings between charter school stakeholders and elected officials. Together, these events enabled us to observe how charter school personnel and their stakeholders engaged politically and made strategic decisions about political engagement and coalition building. During observations, we took ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al., 1995), attending to what opportunities for democratic learning and engagement were available to students and families and the purposes of these opportunities.

Finally, we collected open-access documents, including news articles about charter school involvement in state and district policy, organizational documents, social media feeds, family newsletters, and charter school informational materials, as additional evidence of charter school stakeholders' political activity (Bowen, 2009). For instance, we examined social media and family newsletters for evidence on whether, and to what extent, charter school leaders solicited stakeholder participation in activities that might foster their citizenship development.

All data sources were analyzed via qualitative coding (Miles et al., 2014). We deductively generated codes related to democratic teaching and learning and, during the coding process, refined code definition and defined boundaries through a constant comparative method (Kolb, 2012). We engaged in two rounds of coding. First, we coded for general evidence of stakeholders'

democratic or political engagement and schools' solicitation of stakeholders' participation in such activities. Second, we coded for evidence of responsible community citizenship, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship. We refined our coding and analysis through monthly meetings held during the winter 2018, during which we discussed and distilled emergent themes in the data. In examining emerging patterns, we initially sought to compare whether findings between the two regions diverged, particularly in light of their demographic and institutional differences. Yet, in our analysis, we found that patterns converged. Thus, we have presented the study's findings to reflect a holistic assessment of the democratic practices fostered across the two sites.

### *Researchers' Orientation*

As former charter school teachers, our personal experiences in and firsthand knowledge of charter schools influence our understandings of charters' political and stakeholder engagement practices. To minimize the influence of our own perceptions on the research process, we strove to conduct a rigorous meta-ethnography through systematic data collection and analysis, which enabled greater descriptive validity (Johnson, 1997). For instance, our semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions allowed informants to speak on their own terms. Furthermore, during observations, we took ethnographic field notes with low levels of inference. Finally, we anchored our analysis closely to our conceptual framework, engaged in data triangulation, and received feedback from research colleagues to refine our analyses and interpretations.

### *Limitations*

Although this research approach supported the execution of a rigorous qualitative study, the study's design has several limitations. First, despite its topical and conceptual contributions, its meta-ethnographic approach prevents the generalizability of our findings to other charter schools. Shared sociopolitical contextual features between New York and Birchwood enabled our comparison of charter schools across these two regions. However, not all geographic regions where charters operate share these sociopolitical dynamics. Hence, our analytic conclusions do not generalize to charter schools writ large. Second, although this meta-ethnography drew upon multiple sources and analytic processes to support data interpretation, the data we collected limited our analysis. For example, classroom observations, which can generate important evidence of civic learning and curricula in charter schools,



were outside the scope of data collection efforts. In turn, the study's findings do not reflect a comprehensive assessment of the focal charters' democratic practices at the classroom level, but rather, advance empirical evidence of charters' democratic practices at the organizational level. Third, the study's data sources did not enable an in-depth investigation into parents' and students' motives for engaging in charter-promoted democratic practices, or into their understandings of, and reactions to, those experiences. Thus, our discussion of the findings describes the democratic learning opportunities that surfaced in the study's data and considers them in light of the scholarship that theorizes how citizenship and justice are embodied in these activities.

## Findings

The charter schools in the study's sample engaged students and families in varied democratic learning opportunities, enabling their constituents to participate in experiences that foster responsible community citizenship, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship. In the sections that follow, we provide descriptions of these activities, and discuss how charter schools encouraged and fostered these democratic practices.

### *Fostering the Responsible Community Citizen: Community Service, Community Events, and Fundraising*

*Community service.* Across contexts, charters provided opportunities for parents and students to participate in activities intended to improve community conditions. In several instances, this took the form of community service. For example, schools affiliated with seven of the 10 Birchwood CMOs mentioned community service learning in their charter petitions, with three schools requiring a designated number of hours per year or before graduation. Birchwood CMOs also used social media outlets to announce and document community service activities. In one illustrative example, a CMO-operated school circulated the following Facebook post about an upcoming local park clean up: "Come join the students and staff as we strive to make the park clean, safe, and beautiful once more. We will provide all the necessary cleanup materials. The only thing we need is you!" The school then photographed the event and used social media to showcase student and community participation. In New York, one charter similarly oriented its mission toward community service, requiring students to participate in activities such as volunteering at local food pantries or raising money for charitable organizations. Three charters also provided community service opportunities as extracurricular activities, with one

school providing students and parents with the means to give back to their community by hosting a “Winter Gift Drive” and maintaining a “Community Closet” to support the school’s neediest families.

*Community events.* Charter-promoted efforts to improve community conditions also took the form of hosting local events, wherein students and families could build positive relationships within their schools and with their surrounding neighborhoods. For instance, the principal of one New York school explained,

We work with so many organizations, so many cultural and community-based. We always house the Hispanic Book Fair over here. That brings a lot of people who are really active in the Latino community. We host community forums. We open our building. We definitely have the philosophy that schools are places of learning for everybody, and they should be open.

Schools affiliated with only two of the 10 CMOs in Northern California sponsored community events. In one case, two schools affiliated with a small CMO partnered with a local nonprofit to hold weekend fairs where local businesses, nonprofits, and service agencies operated booths to connect families to resources. Students and families at another Birchwood CMO hosted occasional festivities at their affiliated sites to gather the community together in celebration. A Facebook post advertising one such event read as follows:

Tonight Enlighten Academy is hosting a “National Night Out.” Like most National Night Outs, there will be fun activities planned, great food, and special guests. This is a great opportunity to bring our community together. Hope to see you there!

Although charters in both locales sponsored community events, these events were not without their challenges. In New York, some charters struggled with how to foster inclusivity at such events, particularly among families. For instance, at a racially diverse independent charter elementary school, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) organized a series of panel discussions about how to talk about race, class, and gender with children. Yet, the overwhelmingly White and wealthy audience that these panels attracted generated mixed emotions for some of the event’s organizers. According to one of the organizers, “Several of us . . . felt uncomfortable about the fact that [the events] did not seem to be engaging our diverse community . . . We struggled with what’s an appropriate way to have those sorts of conversations.” In Birchwood, interviewees questioned the nature and authenticity of many of

these CMO-promoted events. One local parent questioned whether the events that CMO-affiliated schools asked their stakeholders to organize and facilitate truly ingratiated themselves to local communities: “The real question is how do you become part of the community which you are serving? How do you do that in a way that’s thoughtful and authentic? To do that, you actually need to be part of the community.” Through his comments, the interviewee suggests that although CMO-operated schools may be engaging the community, their approach may be in need of improvement to build community cohesion and true partnership. Overall, these challenges demonstrate how issues of inclusion and authenticity complicated efforts of the charters in this study to nurture community relationships and foster responsible community citizenship.

*Fundraising.* In addition to providing opportunities for families and students to participate in community service or community events, this study’s focal charter schools encouraged families to act as responsible community citizens by donating funds directly to the school or by participating in fundraising activities to support school projects, such as field trips and curricular programs. In New York, interviewees across the four schools remarked on the need to fundraise given insufficient charter funding from the state. At three schools, each weekly, biweekly, or monthly family e-newsletter sent throughout the school year included links to the school’s donation websites or encouraged families to shop at websites, such as Amazon.com, that would donate a portion of proceeds to the school. Some school leaders solicited additional contributions: At one school, leaders encouraged parents to make a monthly financial contribution of US\$30, and another school held two fundraising campaigns, one of which contained language emphasizing individual actions and responsibilities to the school community: “Show you CARE! . . . We hope you take a moment to make a gift . . . so that we can continue to create a CARING COMMUNITY!”

In addition to soliciting donations, some school leaders encouraged family participation in and contributions to school fundraising events. At one New York school, for instance, the administration requested that parents donate auction and raffle items to the annual fundraising gala. Yet, at this school, parent leaders struggled with how to make fundraising events inclusive of the racially and socioeconomically diverse parent body. As one parent explained,

In the process of raising money, you have the potential to alienate people who maybe can’t participate in those things or you create events that people don’t feel comfortable at. So, you might create events [where] people are like, “Well, I can’t spend \$50 to go out.”

In an effort to foster inclusivity, parent organizers lowered the ticket price to the gala, but still struggled with “[figuring] out ways that we can create kinds of events that . . . don’t feel too distant and rarefied.”

Like New York charters, schools affiliated with Birchwood CMOs also had students and families participate in fundraising activities, including giving campaigns, ticketed social functions, and walk-a-thons, to generate additional funds to support school improvements, school projects, and field trips. Yet, in addition to these fundraising efforts, some CMOs solicited student and parent participation at formal network fundraisers, such as galas and luncheons, which were high-priced events that gathered benefactors to garner funds for the organization as a whole. Of the 10 CMOs, four hosted such events, and in each instance, parents and students were included in the formal program of speakers to share their experience with attendees. At a board meeting, one of these CMOs also indicated that they had partnered with a public speaking firm to train students in sharing their “testimonials of persistence.”

The examples above suggest that the focal charters engaged students and families in fundraising activities that supported school and organizational financial sustainability. Yet, in a few cases, some charter leaders encouraged fundraising for communities other than their own. For example, one CMO-operated school in Birchwood described how its teachers had “organized their students to participate in a global fundraiser, raising thousands for ‘Water for South Sudan’” on social media. In this instance, students engaged in a fundraising campaign focused on broader societal issues in their efforts. Similarly, one charter in New York collected supplies for a hurricane relief drive, to be donated to families in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. However, fundraising activities such as these were few in the sample, with the focal charter more frequently encouraging students and families to contribute funds or their efforts to financially support their school communities rather than external causes.

Despite its keen focus on the school community, charter families viewed fundraising as key to the operational survival of their schools, as it ensured ongoing access to technology, after school programming, and teacher professional development. As one parent of a middle schooler in New York noted, “I want the school to be there in the long run because if my daughter decides to stay through high school, I want to make sure that she has all the tools she needs . . . to be successful.” Moreover, some New York stakeholders noted that fundraising was especially critical in light of poor state investment in charter schools relative to traditional public schools. Thus, engaging in fundraising efforts served as a primary way for parents to participate as responsible citizens in their charter school communities and ensure their schools’ longevity.

## *Developing Participatory Citizens: Site-Based Governance and Charter Advocacy*

*Site-based governance.* Charters in the study's sample had structures in place to solicit input and participation from families in site-based decision-making, suggesting that they fostered deliberative and collective governance for this stakeholder group in their schools. For example, each of the charters in New York had some version of a PTA, which were primary spaces wherein parents volunteered their time to engage in such collective efforts. To this end, at three of these schools, weekly, biweekly, or monthly family newsletters regularly solicited parent participation in PTA meetings or on the PTA executive board. Some parent leaders felt compelled to volunteer with their school's PTA as a way to engage in dialogue with others and, in turn, build a more cohesive school community. As one New York parent leader explained, "The most satisfying thing is just being and working with other families, particularly from a diverse background."

Beyond parent associations, charters had decision-making structures that solicited parent perspectives to inform school-based policies. In Birchwood, each CMO-operated school had a school site council—a policy requirement of all traditional public schools and charter schools operating within the district boundaries—that included parent representatives. Although this structure was required, CMO leaders expressed a deep commitment to the space and acknowledged its democratic potential. One CMO school principal explained,

I do believe in running a school system by constantly getting input from your stakeholders as you start to craft initiatives to make sure that everybody's bought in and this is the right direction. To me that's kind of the way you can do democracy in a school system.

Alternatively, in two New York schools, parent representatives served on their school's board of trustees, serving as an avenue for them to influence school policy. One parent explained that he was compelled to join his school's board because he "felt that it was a good opportunity for the school to learn about what parents are going through and to set some sort of a dialogue." Overall, although variable in its institutionalization, several charters in our sample had systematic opportunities for parents to engage in deliberative decision-making around school policies at the site level.

At the same time, data suggest that parents infrequently participated in decision-making that informed policy beyond the school site. In CMO-affiliated schools in both geographic regions, there was little evidence of

parent participation in charter board meetings—forums where charter boards made strategic decisions about a number of schools operating in a particular region. Unlike site-based councils, few charter boards included parent representatives, and in our observations of board meetings, we found that parents rarely attended. Furthermore, temporal and spatial constraints were often not conducive to broad parental participation, as many board meetings were held during daytime work hours and evening board meetings did not provide child care. Moreover, many meetings were held in classrooms or conference rooms that only accommodated between five and 10 members of the public.

Overall, although the charters in this study provided avenues and opportunities for parents to actively participate in site-base governance, data suggest that parental participation in broader governance and decision-making was limited beyond its utility at school sites. It is also notable to add that systems for incorporating student perspectives in site or charter board decision-making were not present in the present data set.

*Advocating for charter schools.* Beyond site-based decision-making, findings demonstrate that the focal charters fostered the democratic learning of students and families by encouraging and preparing them to participate in the political arena to advocate on behalf of various legal and policy issues related to charter schools. For example, schools affiliated with Birchwood CMOs circulated information about public forums and rallies to solicit student and family presence through social media, e-newsletters, and web-based announcements. These calls most frequently solicited parent and student participation in hearings related to charter petitions or renewals. For instance, one CMO-operated school advertised the upcoming event with the following post:

Dear Parents, Students, and extended CMO family, as many of you already know, our charter must be renewed this year in order for us to continue operating as a public school in the state of California. We need to win, or we must close. We need your support!

In fewer instances, CMO schools rallied students and families to attend city council meetings, particularly around issues related to facilities and access to public bond funds. A post from another CMO-affiliated school in the region documented one such event on social media:

The gathering took place on August 10th at the school board meeting. Parents and the CCSA, California Charter Schools Association, lobbied the board for inclusion in Measure “A” funds. Passed in 2008, Measure A is supposed to

provide \$20 million for public schools. Charter schools have so far been left out of the equation. We're hoping for a bigger showing at the next school board meeting on September 14th.

This example also elevated another theme in our findings—the role of external agencies in political mobilization efforts. Here, the CMO noted their partnership with California Charter Schools Association (CCSA), California's primary charter advocacy organization, suggesting their presence as a mobilizing force.

These calls for stakeholder presence at public forums not only resulted in the attendance of large numbers of students and families at these events but also in their participation in public comment during these respective hearings. During each of the observed forums in Birchwood, students and parents provided 1- to 2-min statements in support of their schools. Through their statements, students and families often repeated similar, motivational tropes in their comments to compel policy makers to action, suggesting that they were trained on how to engage in these democratic forums in advance of the event. In one illustrative example, each student and parent who spoke in support of a charter renewal for a Birchwood CMO-operated school concluded each of their testimonies with the phrase, "If not now, when? If not us, who?"

Evidence of engagement in political and public forums was also evident among our focal charters in New York. For example, two New York-based charter school advocacy organizations, supporting both CMOs and independent charters, organized an annual "Advocacy Day," providing free transportation and meals for charter schools so that they could send staff, students, and parents to the state capitol to meet with legislators. These organizations also provided numerous resources for participating stakeholders, including online videos and printed materials describing "talking points" and tips for successful meetings. In addition to organizing Advocacy Day, one of these organizations provided ongoing support, trainings, and resources to charters, including a parent engagement handbook containing sample letters, call scripts, and public testimonies, and a "Legislative Toolkit" for school leaders. Although only two New York schools in the sample participated in Advocacy Day, interviewees from all four schools remarked on their ongoing reliance on these advocacy organizations' resources and political support. Thus, consistent with the literature documenting how an array of "intermediary organizations" work alongside charters to advance charter school policy (DeBray et al., 2014), findings reveal that various charter advocacy organizations teach stakeholders how to participate in the political arena to garner political support for their schools.

## *Encouraging Justice-Oriented Citizens: Public Demonstrations and Raising Awareness*

*Public demonstrations.* Charters in Birchwood and New York provided multiple avenues for students and families to engage in democratic learning opportunities that fostered both their responsible community and participatory citizenship. On fewer occasions, charter school students and families participated in experiences that fostered justice-oriented citizenship—those that would allow them to interrogate societal injustices and demand necessary action. Most of these democratic learning opportunities took the form of participation in public demonstrations. Compelled by various national political events, some charter school stakeholders participated in public protests, marches, and rallies, such as the Women’s March, Black Lives Matter, and the National School Walkout against gun violence. To varying degrees, school leaders encouraged such activities. Three charter schools in New York, for instance, posted photos on their social media accounts and websites documenting students’ preparation for these demonstrations (i.e., making signs, learning protest songs) and participation at the events. One school leader in New York not only encouraged students to participate in the National School Walkout but also invited their U.S. Representative to meet with them. This school leader, and two others, explained to families, via e-newsletters, that the walkout aligned with their mission to engage students in social action to improve society. However, not all school leaders were equally supportive of students’ political activism. At one charter middle school in New York, school leaders and board trustees debated how best to support students’ civic engagement and political participation without alienating members of the school community who may not support the politics undergirding such activities. The school leadership team has since written a schoolwide policy noting that only student groups and their faculty leaders, rather than the school as a whole, could sponsor students’ political activities.

*Raising awareness on injustices.* Three New York charters also enhanced students and families’ justice orientation by disseminating resources, news articles, and podcasts related to discussing sensitive political topics (e.g., gun violence, systemic racism) with children. To illustrate, one New York school’s newsletter typically included articles by parents of color regarding their experiences to inform parenting decisions. Another New York school sent information about local community forums on race, identity, and equity hosted by outside organizations, including a town hall on school diversity. Moreover, these three schools shared updates on student examinations of



political issues and justice in their e-newsletters, highlighting the learning that occurred at school events, including one school's "Social Justice Day" presentations on topics ranging from the Israel–Palestine conflict to youth incarceration.

Political activities such as these were rare across CMO-affiliated schools in Northern California. Although the CMO operated their schools in a city with strong political activism, there were few instances in which broader social movements or sociopolitical causes were cited in CMO school communication about student or parent activities. In fact, only one school affiliated with the 10 CMOs described this form of activity. In this divergent example, the CMO-affiliated school shared a social media post about an upcoming event where students put on a theatrical performance to engage the community, law enforcement, and CMO stakeholders in a discussion of police brutality. It read as follows:

Intersections 2016, your favorite youth verbatim theater project, based on interviews with police, incarcerated community members, organizers, public defenders, and more . . . IS HERE! Thursday will be a li'l more intense and have more stories based on police interaction. Friday may have more skilled acting and astounding special effects.

Through this event, students creatively engaged the community in a public dialogue around the ongoing police brutality that disproportionately affects men and women of color. In doing so, they advocated for attention and action to mitigate injustice through their political and democratic activities, but these activities remained the exception rather than the norm.

## **Assessing the Competing Visions of Democracy in Charter Schools**

The evidence from this study demonstrates that charters, regardless of geographic region, school mission, or charter type (e.g., CMO, independent charter), provide various opportunities for students and families to engage in democratic activities that embody notions of the responsible community citizen, the participatory citizen, and to a far lesser degree, the justice-oriented citizen. Given this array of democratic learning opportunities, what vision of democracy are the charter schools in the study's sample advancing? To what degree do they promote individualistic or communitarian democratic behaviors among their students and families? Do charter schools exacerbate the alienating democratic vision that scholars theorize or do the democratic behaviors they foster further other purposes?

### *Limited Communitarianism*

Evidence demonstrates that the charter schools in this study promote forms of democracy that, on the surface, further communitarian aims. By doing community service, fundraising, and hosting community events, students and families contributed to constructive improvements in school life and, on fewer occasions, built relationships with their surrounding neighborhoods. Charter leaders also sought to elevate community voice by incorporating or institutionalizing forums and decision-making processes that allowed parents to inform site-based governance—though opportunities for students to participate in these forums were not present in the data set.

Although these efforts had communitarian undertones, their implementation resulted in a limited form and expression of democracy. First, these democratic learning opportunities were rarely inclusive of all community and school stakeholders. Interviewees noted the lack of diverse participation in site-based decision-making and the limited impact that parents had in making broader network decisions, particularly in the case of CMOs. Second, democratic practices that developed responsible community citizens (e.g., community service, fundraising, community events) typically focused on improving the conditions for the immediate school community rather than the community writ large. In doing so, charter schools narrowly defined community to mean their own affiliates and maintained insular orientations to community responsibility that centered on securing benefits for their constituents and educational operations.

### *Democratic Action to Advance Organizational Interests*

Charter school students and families were frequently encouraged to participate in political activities that secured resources critical to charter survival and ensured the existence of choice marketplaces, providing additional evidence of how these democratic practices served organizational interests. Much of this democratic action related to public advocacy for favorable choice policies (e.g., access to public bond funding, minimization of charter caps, facilities access) or for charter authorization and renewal. Furthermore, the evidence reveals that charter leaders allocated resources and entered partnerships that would prepare their constituents to advocate on behalf of their schools in public forums. This demonstrates that charter leaders, with their partner advocacy organizations, actively shaped the nature of stakeholder participation. Thus, although students and families gained important political experience in participatory citizenship, findings illustrate that the focal charter schools created “neo-democratic” spaces, setting the parameters for what

democratic engagement entails to advance policies that ensure their organizational sustainability (Piazza, 2017).

The prevalence of these political actions among this study's charter school students and families also has implications for the vision of democracy that charter schools encourage and advance. In advocating for their charter schools or for legislation that would secure choice-friendly policies, stakeholders focused their democratic engagement almost exclusively on a policy mechanism undergirded by the market values of choice, deregulation, and competition. Thus, while charter students and families may have engaged in democratic practices to secure or maintain learning opportunities in the face of systemic inequities, their efforts nonetheless reinforced market-oriented policies that fracture and warp relational democracy by codifying systems of competition and individualism, which ultimately require students and families to vie for finite resources and opportunities (Engel, 2000). In this process, democratic and justice-oriented goals—to acknowledge and mitigate against the systemic forces that foster inequitable schooling conditions—are often superseded. Given that this study reveals less evidence of justice-oriented democratic opportunities that would allow stakeholders to mobilize around these communitarian aims, charters in the sample appear to advance a narrow vision of democracy undergirded by a limited definition of community and the common good.

### *The Constraining Force of the Market on Democratic Citizenship*

Findings from this study beget questions of how the institutionalization of market values drives charter school behaviors. Although all charters in the study's sample espoused a commitment to democracy and equity, the nature of stakeholders' engagement as democratic citizens demonstrate that charter leaders fostered a limited definition of democracy, one oriented around activities aimed at advancing schools' organizational interests in a competitive market environment where resources are scarce. Across all schools, we observed far fewer instances where school leaders provided opportunities for stakeholders to engage in broader civic and political life. This pattern suggests that the market-oriented context within which all types of charter schools operate drives schools to focus their democratic engagement efforts on the instrumental aims of ensuring their organizational survival in a competitive educational marketplace. In turn, charter schools necessarily behave in a protectionist fashion, focusing stakeholders' efforts on the schools' individual organizational needs, and less on broader issues related to equity and

justice. As a result, charter stakeholders develop their skills primarily as responsible community and participatory citizens, but have little opportunity to develop as justice-oriented citizens.

## **Conclusion: Challenges to Democratic Engagement in a Market Context**

Charter school leaders attend to a variety of priorities in sustaining their organizations. They manage day-to-day operations, aim to foster productive teaching and learning environments, and nurture the civic orientations and mind-sets of their students and families. They must do so amid dwindling resources and an increasingly competitive, market-oriented environment. Given all these priorities, organizational survival is among the most pressing, and understandably so: Only when assured of their charter school's continued existence can school leaders attend to other matters. Thus, even when they subscribe to democratic values and aim to foster varied opportunities for democratic engagement for students and families, charter school leaders may often focus on mobilizing their stakeholders around organizational interests rather than justice issues. Hence, although charter school stakeholders have numerous opportunities to learn the habits and skills of democratic citizens, these opportunities are limited in the vision of democracy they advance due to the demands created by market pressures.

Findings from this study contribute to the empirical and conceptual scholarship exploring the relationship between market and democratic values vis-à-vis public schooling. Although scholars have interrogated the market's impact on the character of democracy in practice and governance, few have investigated how market-oriented organizations, such as charter schools, foster the democratic learning and behaviors of their constituents, or assessed how these practices intersect with the democratic aims of schooling. Hence, this study advances conceptual understandings of market dynamics in public education by providing much needed insights into the democratic learning practices of charter stakeholders and their implications. Methodologically, this study also provides unique contributions in its research design. Because researchers often face obstacles to gaining access to charter schools, our use of documents and observations, coupled with targeted interviews, serves to systematically and creatively investigate democratic learning in schools that receive public dollars but often limit public access.

Future research can investigate to what extent these patterns of democratic engagement hold true for charter schools in other geographic and political contexts. Because this investigation focused on charter schools operating in

two urban districts, its findings are not generalizable to the broader charter sector or other contexts. Moreover, the study's data sources inhibited an investigation of how democratic learning is enacted in charter classrooms or to what extent such learning is a curricular focus. Future studies that include greater access into the day-to-day teaching and learning in charter settings can elicit additional insights regarding the range of democratic learning opportunities charters provide, charters' reasoning behind providing such opportunities, and the degree to which external agencies mediate these learning experiences. Finally, given the prevalence of marketization, future studies can also investigate the extent to which non-charter schools promote and foster similar political practices and bounded democratic visions among students and parents. Traditional public schools increasingly face pressures to compete for resources to sustain their organizations in educational marketplaces; thus, examining their democratic behaviors and their civic implications can shed additional light on the tension between democracy and the market in U.S. schools.

Findings from this study also have implications for policy. This study suggests that the proliferation of market values in public education can negatively affect the character and form of democracy in schools. Furthermore, our findings suggest that opportunities for democratic learning are especially limited for poor communities and communities of color, who are disproportionately affected by market-based educational reforms (Scott & Holme, 2016). In turn, we extend the research demonstrating how market-based reforms constrain equitable educational opportunity for historically underserved populations. In doing so, this study contributes "policy knowledge" that provides relevant "information and ideas useful in framing, deepening our understanding of, and/or enriching our conceptualization of policy problems" (Dumas & Anderson, 2014, p. 8). As policy makers consider future market-based reforms, they should remain vigilant and wary of how markets and competition can constrain democracy in schools and districts.

Finally, our findings carry important implications for practice. For practitioners in traditional public or charter schools, this study suggests areas for reflection and assessment that can improve democracy and equity in daily practice. Our findings shed light on the need for practitioners to assess the range and form of democratic learning opportunities to ensure that they foster a broad range of democratic expression. Extending the literature on community organizing and activism for educational equity (Scott & Fruchter, 2009; Warren & Goodman, 2018), this study highlights how the market affects the nature of democratic engagement among public school stakeholders. By carefully considering the possibilities and limitations of citizenship development in a market context, practitioners can ensure that opportunities for

democratic learning allow for authentic and inclusive expression of student and family voice and promote democratic action in service of equitable public education.

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### Notes

1. Data collection in Northern California occurred from spring 2016 to winter 2017. Data collection in New York occurred from summer 2017 to winter 2018.
2. In this study, we define charter management organizations (CMOs) as nonprofits that operate two or more charter schools under the organization's common brand and philosophy. Eight of the 10 CMOs in Birchwood were small or medium-sized networks (Miron & Gulosino, 2013), operating between three and nine schools in the city or beyond. The remaining two CMOs maintained a national presence and operated numerous schools in multiple states or across the various regions of California.
3. We used pseudonyms for the city and the CMOs operating within its boundaries to maintain the confidentiality of the study's participants.

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