

**Applying the narrative policy framework to charter schools
within the news media**

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Abstract

Policy debates in the public arena are increasingly dominated by polarizing emotional narratives. The recently developed Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach offers guidelines to systematically study the narrative elements and strategies that policy actors use to influence policy debates. The NPF approach defines a policy narrative as having four core structural elements (setting, characters, plot, and moral) that can be applied across different policy contexts. In this study, this approach is used to examine the news media narratives on charter schools, an understudied policy area within the NPF scholarship. Charter schools are a public-private hybrid within the education landscape in the United States. They are publicly funded independent schools established and managed by either non-profit or for-profit groups under the terms of a contract with a governmental authority. Educators, policy makers, advocates, and skeptics express their disagreement in many areas of the charter school debate by using selective information and particular cases. Since news media still plays a central role in disseminating information to the public, identifying the setting, characters, plots, and morals used in the circulating narratives would clarify the different ways these elements are used and perceived.

In order to provide an in-depth case study of narrative elements in stories on charter schools, we limited the analyses to one particular state, the state of Alabama, where the proposed charter legislation has led to a charged debate in the last few years regarding whether or not to adopt charter school legislation. We will discuss findings of a content analysis of articles published in local newspapers to evaluate how the news media covers different issues associated with charter schools in the recent years prior to adoption of the legislation. Prior research has shown that the composition of pro and counter charter advocacy coalitions reflects the political context of each state and locality in the United States. This case study approach will also enable us to go beyond looking at the general politics behind the educational choice policy movement and examine whether the narratives are shaped by educational alliances in the local context. If narrative frames and stories can shape opinions and beliefs about charter schools, and if public opinion, in turn, shapes policy outcomes, then scholars, policy makers, educators, and parents should pay close attention to the nature and quality of these frames and stories.

Introduction

Policy debates in the public arena are increasingly dominated by polarizing emotional narratives. Education policy is no exception. The education privatization movement has been developing for years and so have the alternate depictions of the American education landscape and its problems. For some, the U.S. education system is characterized as a stolid bureaucracy with unresponsive and uncaring leaders and consequently, the solution is to replace the “broken” system with one built around parent choice, school competition, and school autonomy. For others, the U.S. public education is characterized by a promise of equal opportunity and a common ground to transfer democratic values. Therefore, their solution is to invest resources to eliminate the inequities among schools, while maintaining a system of governance that ensures public accountability. Charter schools arrived in the education landscape in the midst of these discussions and have complicated the arguments even more, due their hybrid private-public nature.

In this study, we examine news media narratives on charter schools relying on the relatively recently developed narrative framework approach. The findings presented in this draft are preliminary, yet we hope that the topic would be interest to NPF scholars, since education policy in general, and charter schools in particular are an understudied policy area within the NPF scholarship. Charter schools are a public-private hybrid in the United States; they are publicly funded independent schools established and managed by non-profit or for-profit groups under the terms of a contract with a local or state level authority. Educators, policy makers, advocates, and skeptics disagree about the purpose and consequences of this policy with regards to effectiveness, efficiency, equity, accountability, and autonomy and

express their disagreement by using selective information and distinct narratives. In the case of charter schools, the policy debate have at times moved into high stakes ideological battles between starkly divided camps (Davis, 1996; Petrilli, 2006; Henig, 2008). In the book *Spin Cycle*, political scientist Jeffrey Henig describes how “the vitriol of charter school debate” (p. 5) is reflected in staunch frames and policy conclusions used by researchers and journalists that reinforce polarized positions. Such polarization makes charter schools an appropriate topic of study for narrative analyses. Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach offers guidelines to systematically study the narrative elements and strategies that policy actors use to influence policy debate. In this paper, we examine whether these elements can be discerned in the media accounts of charter schools, particularly focusing on local newspapers published in the state of Alabama. The paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly describe charter schools and summarize main areas of contention for this policy. Second, we present some information on the local context to introduce policy actors and setting. Next, we discuss the methods we have used to explore our research questions and describe the main tenets of NPF that informed our analyses. After discussing the findings and their implications, the paper concludes by offering practical insights relevant to future research on NPF and charter schools.

The Policy Issue: Charter Schools

Almost 3 million students currently attend charter schools. While this is only 6% of public school students, enrollment in charter schools has increased more than three fold in the last 10 years and expected to increase further in the near future (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Currently close to 7000 charter schools operate across the United States. Forty three

states and the District of Columbia have adopted charter school legislation. The first law allowing the establishment of public charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991. The state of Alabama, the target of our case study was one of the last eight without charter school legislation until the charter bill was finally approved and signed by the governor in March 2015 (Thomsen, 2016).

Charter schools are public-private hybrids. They are considered to be public schools because they receive federal and state funding, they do not charge tuition and are open to all students, and they are approved and overseen by public entities. The private nature refers to autonomy and administration. These schools are managed by nonprofit or for-profit groups or organizations under a legislative contract (called a charter) with the state, district, or other governmental entity. The charter lists the accountability standards the school must meet to avoid closure but it also exempt the school from state or local rules and regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition, charter school teachers and administrators are not public employees and the buildings in which they operate are not typically public property.

Literature on the Advocacy and Opposition to Charter Schools

Debate on charter schools and charter school research has uncharacteristically been held in the public arena (Carnoy et al., 2005). According to Henig (2008), the public controversy was fueled by the ties of charter school movement to “the high ideas of systemic privatization” (p.35). Ironically even the origin story for the charter school idea has been subject of narrative disagreements. Some credit a 1988 speech by Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as the vision for publicly funded and independently managed

school. Proponents like to remind us of this origin story to make a case for bipartisan support for the policy, while opponents frame it as a story of a distorted and misused idea from teacher unions. Others argue that the story is an “urban myth” and the idea was conceptualized and developed by pro-choice policy entrepreneurs Joe Nathan and Ted Kolderie in Minnesota (Cohen, 2017; Peterson, 2010). Regardless of the origin, it was clear that charter schools were a much more palatable policy option than voucher policies.

In American education system, children are typically assigned to public schools based on where they live and these schools are funded primarily by local property taxes. In addition, there are private schools that operate and are funded privately, by tuition or donations. For a long time, school choice proposals focused on the idea of vouchers. School voucher programs were proposed to provide subsidies to parents for tuition at any school, effectively enabling students to attend at private schools at public expense. The idea was driven by dark portrayals of the current public education system as “sluggish and inefficient” (Finn, 2008, p.36), “a lazy monopoly, motivated by self-interest” (Henig, 2008, p.46), and educators critical of reform as resembling “hard-line Soviet bureaucrats” (Finn, 2008, p. 66). Nevertheless, the idea of vouchers was not embraced by public and school choice debate remained in relative obscurity until the charter school movement. Charter schools offered fewer degrees of privatization than vouchers and presented a less threatening and friendlier face.

Scholarly work that focuses on the advocacy of and opposition to school choice has typically adopted an Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to investigate the degree to which school-choice advocates act conjointly with one another at national, state, and local levels (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, and Scott 2007; Kirst 2007; Vergari 2007). An advocacy coalition is a

group of policy actors who “share a particular belief system” and engage in “coordinated activity [in a policy subsystem] over time” (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014; Sabatier 1988, 139). These coalitions are critical to a narrative study because they develop or present the divergent policy narratives (McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014). With regards to charter schools in particular and school choice in general, main areas of contention include varying views about elements of privatization in education, such as the production and delivery of education, school finance, school governance and regulation, and the overall purpose of education.

Ideologically complex networks of advocacy coalitions operate in school choice, especially around charter school politics (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, and Scott, 2007). Vergari (2007) includes teachers unions, school boards, school administrators_ associations, and their interest group allies, and groups of academics and the federal bureaucracy as the main policy actors in the “traditional educational establishment” (p.21) coalition. Business community, private foundations, think tanks, and education reform interest groups, as well as groups of academics and the federal bureaucracy are policy actors within the “reform coalition” (p.21). Alongside the traditional conservative coalitions, some new civic rights groups as well as the Democratic Party leadership also support expansion of charter schools.

Local context

The local actors in the pro-charter and counter coalitions vary somewhat across states (Kirst, 2007). This study focus on the state of Alabama, one of the few states without any operational charter schools as of June 2017. There have been attempts to garner support for creation of charter schools, but various charter legislation proposals have died in the legislature

over the course of last 10 years .Finally, in March 2015, the governor of Alabama has signed into law a bill allowing charter schools in Alabama (Cason 2015).

The main arguments of the proponents and opponents to charter schools in the state of Alabama can be found in the policy statements of the pro free market and limited government think tank Alabama Policy Institute (API) and the teacher union Alabama Education Association (AEA). The arguments mirror concerns identified in the larger school-choice politics literature. API emphasizes choice, innovation, autonomy, flexibility, and deregulation. AEA is critical of the financial model, privatization, and the associated deregulation and de-professionalization. Many public school administrators and public school systems have sided by AEA in opposition to previous legislation proposals, while pro-charter lobbying efforts have been expanded in the state with the inclusion of the Alabama Federation for Children (AFC), an affiliate of the national advocacy group American Federation for Children, and the Alabama branch of Students First, a political lobbying organization formed by the well-known U.S. public school reform advocate Michelle Rhee.

Level of public support is not clear. One study suggested that a sizable proportion of Alabamians have no knowledge of and opinion about charter schools (Ertas, 2016). Two opinion polls conducted by groups affiliated with the two major advocacy coalitions showed stark differences in support. The one conducted by the Republican polling firm McLaughlin & Associates on behalf of Students First, a California-based interest group supporting charter schools, showed 45% of Alabamians support charter schools. The other one conducted by the Capital Survey Research Center, a division of the opposing teachers' organization

AEA) showed 35% of Alabamians supported charter schools. Both polls argue that either the support or the opposition increased after they provide more information to the respondents alongside the expected narratives adopted by the prevailing advocacy coalitions on this issue.

Methodology

This study uses a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach to examine the news media narratives on charter schools, an understudied policy area within the NPF scholarship. . The NPF approach defines a policy narrative as having four core structural elements (setting, characters, plot, and moral) that can be applied across different policy contexts. In order to provide an in-depth case study of narrative elements in stories on charter schools, we limited the analyses to one particular state, the state of Alabama, where the proposed charter legislation has led to a charged debate in the last few years regarding whether or not to adopt charter school legislation. Specifically, we conducted a content analysis of articles published in local newspapers to evaluate how the news media covers different issues associated with charter schools in the recent years prior to adoption of the legislation. Empirical research on media demonstrated that “media affect what people think about” and sometimes also “what they think” (Entman, 1995). According to Entman (1995, 55) ““Diversity of news perspectives and editorial liberalism show significant relationships to readers' support of interest groups, public policies, and politicians.” In order to allow for more diversity of perspectives, we collected articles from three sources; Montgomery Advertiser, Al.com, and Anniston Star. These represent high circulation news outlets in the state. Montgomery Advertiser is Central Alabama’s leading news source and paper of the state capitol (circulation: 32,847). AL.com is the largest news site in the state of Alabama, owned by Alabama Media Group along with

Alabama's three largest and most prominent newspapers: The Birmingham News (circulation: 103,729), The Huntsville Times (circulation: 44,725) and Mobile's Press-Register (circulation: 82,088). Finally, we also included Anniston Star (circulation: 19,563) as representative outlet for a smaller Alabama town, which is represented in the Alabama senate by the sponsor of the charter bill senator Del Marsh.

We obtained online subscriptions to all three sources and used key search terms of "charter schools" and "school choice" to search articles published in the last 10 years. The search dates spanned from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2016. This initial search generated 28 articles from Montgomery Advertiser, 66 articles from AL.com, and 89 articles from Anniston Star. We read all articles and initially removed those that were not related to charter schools directly. This reduced the pool from 183 to 150 articles. We sorted the remaining articles into 3 categories as descriptive and neutral pieces (n:98), failed attempts at being neutral (n:6), and position pieces (n: 46). This draft focuses on the position pieces. We both coded the documents using a codebook similar to Shanahan et al. (2013) and Gupta et el. (2016) (See appendix). The unit of analysis was the document, as opposed to sentence or paragraph. After coding articles independently, we went over each document and discussed the content with regards to policy solutions, context, characters, and themes. Table 1 provides summary information about the documents.

Research Findings

The NPF approach defines a policy narrative as having four core structural elements (setting, characters, plot, and moral). The moral of the story is typically the policy solution offered in the narrative. It is possible to have policy narratives without a specific solution.

Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan (2014) note that such policy narratives are more likely to exist in contentious policy issues and may be focusing on the uncertainty of evidence or problem definition. The main morals of narratives under investigation in this paper were “approve charter school legislation” and “oppose charter school legislation”. A few pieces contained slight nuances within these larger morals. Some pro-charter pieces suggested certain reservations for approval demanding rigorous charter school legislation that ensure local control or accountability or undue financial burden. Some anti-charter pieces include suggestions about alternate actions in addition to opposing charter schools, for example, funneling federal dollars to poor kids and rural areas.

Initially a dominant theme in the narratives was the loss of federal grant funds through President Obama’s Race to the Top initiative. Adoption of charter schools were portrayed as a prerequisite for Alabama to get federal grants and in extreme cases, the anti-charter positions were portrayed as sabotage. In fact, the state Alabama finished dead last among all states in the 2010 round for Race to the Top federal education grants, scoring 212 points out of 500 points. If the state had adopted charter schools at that time, it would have only gained an additional 40 points, which would have not been enough to make any difference in the results. This focus has shifted as Alabama failed to receive funds. The policy narratives primarily stressed either an appeal to innovation or an appeal to risk. Lesser stories included either a story of conspiracy, a story of helplessness and lack of control, or a story of decline. The following section describes and illustrates the content of each theme with selected quotes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on opinion pieces

	% (n)
<i>Policy Solution (n=46)</i>	
Approve charter schools or legislation	65% (30)
Oppose charter schools	33% (15)
No policy solution	2% (1)
<i>Source</i>	
AL.com	24% (11)
Anniston Star	70% (32)
Montgomery Advertiser	7% (3)
<i>Year</i>	
2009	13% (6)
2010	24% (11)
2011	7% (3)
2012	26% (12)
2013	2% (1)
2014	4% (2)
2015	24% (11)
<i>Stance</i>	
Winning (supports the policy environment and actions discussed in the narrative)	41% (19)
Losing (the group is under attack even if they are partially winning)	44% (20)
No stance	15% (7)
<i>Number of story type</i>	
0	2% (1)
1	61% (28)
2	33% (15)
3	4% (2)
<i>Primary story type</i>	
Appeal to innovation	58% (26)
Appeal to risk	36% (36)
Conspiracy	2% (1)
Helplessness and control	2% (1)
Story of decline	2% (1)
<i>Primary Causal Mechanism</i>	
No causal mechanism	41% (19)
Bureaucratic/systemic	30% (14)
Incompetence/apathy	9% (4)
Inequitable socioeconomic circumstances	13% (6)
societal/cultural factors	7% (3)

THEMES

There were five story types that we discuss by way of our analysis; Appeal to innovation, appeal to risk, conspiracy, helplessness and control, and story of decline. Table 2 summarizes primary story type by policy solution. Appeal to innovation was exclusively used by pro-charter narratives. The pro-charter narratives were also more likely than anti-charter narratives to use themes of helplessness and control and story of decline as primary story types. Anti-charter narratives typically used appeals to risk.

Table 2. Primary story type by policy solution

	Approve charter schools or legislation % (n)	Oppose charter schools % (n)	<i>Total</i>
Appeal to innovation	86% (25)	-	57% (25)
Appeal to risk	7% (2)	93% (14)	37% (16)
Conspiracy	-	7% (1)	2% (1)
Helplessness and control	3.5% (1)	-	2% (1)
Story of decline	3.5% (1)	-	2% (1)
<i>Total</i>	100% (29)	100% (15)	100% (44)

Themes related to Appeal to Innovation

The first and dominant story type among the articles were appeals to innovation, i.e., claims that charter schools would be successful via innovations in school infrastructure, school culture, and curriculum and instruction. These ranged from more nuanced descriptions of some of the innovations charters were capable of, and what kinds of students would likely most

benefit the most from them, to full throated declarations of their superiority. Many of the articles began with a description of the former. As example one stated,

charter schools are publicly funded schools that are operated in non-traditional methods. Their independence from the typical school-district formula allows them the opportunity to build a better mousetrap, to reach the goal of highly educated Alabamians through alternative means. . . . The trick is creating a system of charter schools that are accountable to basic standards while unrestrained enough to think outside the box. There are countless examples of themes and methods used by charter schools, including a focus on the classics of Western civilization, entrepreneurship, foreign languages, project-based learning or no theme at all save for teaching the basics. (29)

The likely beneficiaries generally fell within in the categories of “students with unique needs or abilities. . . . [and] children most at risk: minorities, low-income students, and those who do not speak English” (11).

In line with the latter point about unambiguous endorsement one opinion writer was more strident in his claims. He stated,

charter schools make parents and teachers happier, provide a home for kids floundering in regular public schools, increase leaning (slightly), are safer, cost less and prod traditional public schools to improve. (9)

Themes related to Appeal to Risk

The second most common story type tended to emphasize themes like charter schools tendency to waste resources and/or take money from public schools, and that they would be autonomous to the point of being unaccountable. The former points were usually coupled with a discussion of how Alabama’s schools are under-resourced to begin with. Pursuant the then head of the state’s teacher’s union stated the following: “We know what works to improve

Alabama education. We simply lack the funding. We know that charters are unproven, but are guaranteed to take needed resources away from already underfunded schools” (8).

Others echoed “concerns about unwarranted usurpation of local control of schools” (13) by incoming charter schools, and the lack of accountability aforementioned illustrated in the following: “charter schools unlike ‘real’ public schools have ‘autonomy over decisions including . . . matters concerning finance, personnel, scheduling, curriculum and instruction’. Autonomy means not accountable to voters” (23).

Themes related to Story of Decline

Although less frequent than the first two story types discussed many of the articles included elements describing how the education situation was getting steadily worse in Alabama. This was primarily a position taken by those who supported charter school legislation. One author even went so far as to state that Alabama’s system of public schools has been bad from the start:

Alabama’s students deserve better than that. Public education in our state has been under-funded and under-developed since its inception. It hasn’t mattered which party has controlled Montgomery. The result is a state with nearly 200 years of educational woes and a populace that isn’t getting what it needs, school-wise. (42)

There were also references pinpointing teacher quality as the source of Alabama’s education woes. A former public school teacher who went on to found a private school stated, “we just haven’t moved forward like the rest of the world has moved. I could go back to the school I taught at in 1970 and teach the same way. Nothing has changed.” (6)

Another took this sentiment farther by linking teacher mediocrity to the state teacher’s union being a hindrance to change. She stated,

I know there are some great teachers. My mother taught early elementary all of her teaching life. I remember some teachers who changed my life for the better; oh, that was before the union.¹(28)

Themes related to Helplessness and Control

The idea that educational reform was hindered by influences beyond the control of political actors and those who voted for them was particularly popular with those who supported charter schools early on in the legislative process. Again, it named the state's teacher's union as the source of much of this stagnation. One author stated,

AEA Executive Secretary Paul Hubbert used the economy as an excuse to oppose charter schools, but he has given no indication that he would support them even in a booming economy. We would expect nothing different. Job One with Hubbert is protecting the jobs of teachers. . . . If Alabama is ever to get charter schools, the state's legislators will have to shrug off the yoke of the AEA and pass the law. (24)

Regarding Alabama's Race to the Top application another author stated, "Alabama blew this opportunity to compete for some federal dough. Perhaps the second try will prove different. More likely, Alabama will once more be left behind." (11)

And another made a more personal plea echoing a common sentiment that many students are trapped in low performing schools:

If your child was in a threatening position of being in the 47 percent of the children who won't graduate from high school on time, wouldn't you want the freedom of having an educational option that could change the academic trajectory of your child? As a father of a 5-year-old son, I know I would. (44)

Themes related to Conspiracy

The last of the dominant story types was exclusively expressed by those who opposed the establishment of charter schools. These commenters generally expressed two main

¹ It is worth noting that the state teacher's union finds its origins before the Civil War. She also claimed the high school dropout rate is 65% when actually it was less than half that at time of publication.

concerns. The first being that charter schools were vehicles for enriching the companies that would be managing them and generally bankrupting the system. One author was particularly vivid:

Many vendors target school districts with high percentages of at-risk pupils to sell their supposedly proven, successful programs. Some of these school districts are vulnerable to “quick-fix” solutions. It takes an average of three years to measure valid results of newly implemented concepts. Some educational salesmen will consume school funds like vultures eating at a decaying carcass. They will linger around until schools’ coffers are bare-boned. The public has become alarmed and demands greater financial accountability. (27)

Another picked what seemed like a hybrid image of carrion birds and state sanctioned pirates: “the circular flight pattern of the charter school privateers indicate that gobs of money are going to be up for grabs at the expense of our public school children” (5).

And yet another described the establishment of charter school as a kind of slippery slope with elements of helplessness.

National studies [no citation given] show that once a charter gets up and running, it becomes almost impossible to shut it down, even when it does much worse than schools it was set up to replace. When a private charter gets public money, vested interests apply pressure to make sure funds keep coming, regardless of outcomes. (8)

The second concern was that charter schools actually represented the advent for the privatization of public education, writ large—that charter schools served as a kind of Trojan horse for market driven solutions that would end in the disestablishment of public schools. One author stated an absolute position regarding public monies going to charters:

An attempt to divert money from public schools is an act of “sabotage” toward public education. The majority of school-aged children in Alabama attend public schools; therefore, there remains a public for public education in this great state. (27)

Another hinted at the crux of the feared end result: “All of a sudden we have the money for charter schools, which will take money away from the public schools. . . . You gut something long enough and it will fail, or maybe that is the point.” (38)

CAUSAL MECHANISM

We noted whether a narrative offered a causal mechanism or not. About 40% of narratives offered no causal mechanism. Some policy narratives clearly promoted a policy solution and identified characters, but did not specify causal mechanisms. Overall, the pro-charter narratives were more likely than anti-charter narratives to lack a causal mechanism. If the narrative had a direct or implied causal theory, we coded the kind of causal mechanism as bureaucratic/systemic, incompetence/apathy, inequitable socioeconomic circumstances, societal/cultural factors or a combination of either. Table 3 shows primary causal mechanism by policy solution.

Table 3. Primary causal mechanism by policy solution

	Approve charter schools or legislation % (n)	Oppose charter schools % (n)	<i>Total</i>
No causal mechanism	53% (16)	13% (2)	40% (18)
Bureaucratic/systemic	30% (9)	34% (5)	31% (14)
Incompetence/apathy	13% (4)	-	9% (4)
Inequitable socioeconomic circumstances	-	40% (6)	13% (6)
societal/cultural factors	4% (1)	13% (2)	7% (3)
<i>Total</i>	100% (30)	100% (15)	100% (45)

Bureaucratic/systemic

This causal category generally spoke to school aged students and their parents lacking agency about not having access to what they would deem to be high quality educational offerings. There is a sense here that the system itself conspires to keep some students in substandard schools due to our state's vast collection of independent school districts and geography. One author summed up this sentiment as follows: "I don't want to see our students in any part of Alabama get stuck in a failing school because they don't have another choice because of where they live" (14).

Incompetence/apathy

This causal mechanism, related to the previous, elicited a sense of institutional exacerbation that there are controlling actors who do not seem to care or know how to care sufficiently to challenge the current way public schools operate. Early on in the legislative process the lawmakers were dealt a setback when a bill they advanced was defeated. In reference to this one author expressed his frustration:

It's unfortunate that Alabama's Race to the Top application was hijacked by those who didn't want charter schools for legitimate reasons or those who fought them with a campaign of misinformation. Charter schools are no panacea, but when operated properly and with stringent and consistent oversight, they can enhance a state's educational offerings. . . . Alabama blew this opportunity to compete for some federal dough. Perhaps the second try will prove different. More likely, Alabama will once more be left behind. (26)

Another was more neutral in describing the rationale behind the push for charter schools: "In recent years, charter schools have become the darlings of conservative critics of

public education, which they see as dominated by teacher unions and out-of-touch bureaucrats.” (15)

Inequitable socioeconomic circumstances

Others located the cause for charter school with the inequitable way Alabama supports its public school. This particular mechanism was mostly deployed by anti-charter factions. One author described a conversation he had with an administrator at a school in one of the poorer counties in the state.

As in most of rural Alabama, times are not easy in Winston County. Two-thirds of Hiller’s 274 students receive free-reduced lunches. It is not easy running a school on an ever-shrinking budget. I asked Hiller what she would do if she had money for her school. “I would run the air-conditioning and heat when they need to be run,” she said. “But we don’t because we’re trying to save on our utility bill. And I would buy English textbooks.” New books are a rarity in many schools these days because the state education budget only allows \$15 per student for books that cost at least \$65 each. (37)

As previously alluded to in this paper many anti-charter critics see the former as potentially making the funding situation worse. One such critic stated, “Private corporations making profits through the ‘management’ of charter schools means one thing: less money to run our already underfunded schools” (5).

Another critic saw Alabama’s racist past and present as providing additional context for why an initial version of legislation would only allow for charter schools to be created in predominantly low socioeconomic areas of the state:

Based on the criteria in the current draft of the charter school bill, one could simply substitute ‘black’ for ‘poor performing.’ Of the 63 schools that meet the current draft definition of ‘poor performing’ only one small rural school has a majority white population. The other 62 are black school districts.(7)

Societal/cultural factors

This causal mechanism differs from the others that speak to the dynamic of the system itself, whether political or educational, and to the socioeconomic situation of the state. We reserved this category to catch statements that were more universal and theoretical in nature. For instance one author wrote felt compelled to separate the mechanics of education from the ethical arguments for doing so. He stated, “but, public education as a value — a philosophy — differs from the delivery system of public education. How we impart knowledge to children should not be confused with why we do so.” (39)

Another spoke to the troubles a specific part of Alabama’s population has in receiving an adequate public education in the state: “there is an educational crisis in this country. Nowhere is that crisis more profound than with our black children in Alabama.” (44)

CHARACTERS

We coded direct or implied heroes, villains, and victims in the narrative. Table 4 summarizes the number of documents that refer to a certain type of character and total number of certain characters by policy solution. Overall, anti-charter stories are less likely than pro-charter stories to use characters, but when they do, they are more likely to refer to multiple characters. Most popular characters for both pro and anti-charter stories are victims and the least common characters are heroes.

Table 4. Number of narrative characters by policy solution

	Approve charter schools or legislation		Oppose charter schools		<i>Total</i>	
	# of narratives	# of characters	# of narratives	# of characters		
Heroes	25	37	9	10	34	47
Villains	23	29	15	23	38	52
Victims	27	42	15	32	42	74
<i>Total</i>	75	108	39	65	114	173

HEROES

In short, heroes are hard to find in most of these narrative as the tendency was to explain why the other side had it wrong. While initially some may hold up a hero—themselves or other actors—the majority of their rhetoric was negative. Thus a majority of the positions discussed in the paper fall within the villain category. Republican policymakers positioned themselves as an early hero in the cause to create charter schools. In 2010 Republicans won a majority in the state senate and house for the first time since 1874; they were the party with the most amount of interest in charter schools.

(http://blog.al.com/live/2010/11/republicans_historic_alabama_majority.html). The then chairman of the Alabama Republican Party stated,

When Republicans took majority control in both chambers of the Alabama Legislature, we promised there would be positive changes in many areas, including education. Republicans have kept that promise and are working hard to provide parents and teachers with options that will allow students forced into consistently underperforming schools to have access to educational alternatives with the introduction of the Education Options Act. (35)

There was also a tendency of charter proponents to tout the broad bipartisan support for charter schools at the national level. One author proffered the following while also making sure to include a villain at the end.

Charter schools have received bipartisan support from diverse political figures including Newt Gingrich, Al Sharpton, Jeb Bush and President Obama. Public charter schools also are supported by the group Democrats for Education Reform, which calls them ‘an important alternative to traditional public schools.’ Unfortunately, but entirely predictable, the Alabama Education Association [AEA] remains steadfast in its opposition. (16)

VILLAINS

The primary villains in the articles were teachers and more specifically their state union, the Alabama Education Association. Concerning the former, one author implied that charter schools are a direct response to poor teacher accountability in the state:

Regardless if a student can read or add, the teachers' union is paid to fight for teachers — good or bad. That's what tenure is all about. How about teachers scrutinizing each other? That could reduce the need for charter schools. . . . I'm not against unions, but with power comes arrogance. (28)

Others were less unequivocal in their opinions about the AEA and its opposition to charter schools:

Unfortunately, there are many mistruths about this legislation and the public charter schools they would establish. These mistruths are perpetuated by unions like the Alabama Education Association, which seem determined to oppose any education reform proposal in favor of a struggling status quo. It seems that paid staffers of the AEA in Montgomery would rather do what we have always done rather than give parents and teachers the tools they need to assist students in underperforming school systems. (35)

Another seemed to take the side of the AEA if only to tacitly recognize their power as an inevitable distraction toward providing a better education for Alabama’s public school students:

“an agenda concentrated on charter schools . . . is not much about improving education as it is about drawing a line in the sand for another battle with the Alabama Education Association this will only waste resources and energy and will once again make schoolkids the rope in a political tug of war” (4).

Legislatures and policymakers were also named by some as villains. One such example portended that some legislators may try to use charter school legislation as a way to reward themselves:

Lest we forget, consider also the fact that there is great need to be concerned about judges who may tend to become overly active outside their arena. We must also be aware and not ignore these same overreaching activities by lawmakers who often present deceptively to gain personal control. (This act is commonplace.) (36)

While others questioned the motivations for supporting the legislation as being less than pure: “some legislators now want to take even more funds away from public schools. Does that sound like they have the best interests of Alabama children — all Alabama children — in their hearts?” (41)

Private EMOs, corporate entities, and lobbyists made up the remaining villains. Concerning the first two of these it was widely believed that, as stated before, charter schools represented a Trojan horse designed to funnel money from our public system to private providers. Pursuant, one author stated,

Charter schools are expensive. Here is the scenario. “Mr. Brown” applies for a license to create a charter school in your neighborhood. Tax dollars that would have gone to the public school will be awarded to Brown so he can pay himself and staff; acquire and furnish a property; pay for maintenance and utilities; buy curriculum materials and technology; and launch a public relations campaign to solicit enrollment. Wouldn’t it be better to invest in our neighborhood schools than to create an alternative school system with your tax dollars? . . . Daddy was right. It is important to be able to pay your bills before you go to the toy store and wish for something you can’t afford. (41)

Lobbyists were also seen as having an undue influence on the legislative process and having unclear motives. Another article specifically a key figure in the charter school vanguard:

But being less than forthright seems to be standard procedure for Rhee's organization, as it will not reveal where it gets its funding. I attended a meeting conducted by one of the StudentsFirst lobbyists in Montgomery. The crowd of about 20 was told that the governor and state Legislature invited them to Alabama — yet, one of Gov. Robert Bentley's staff members told me he did not invite them. We were also told that the organization has 17,000 Alabama members, which seems odd considering few, if any, showed up for the meeting. (37)

VICTIMS

There were three main victims discussed in many of the narratives. In order of emphasis these were students, teachers, and tax payers. Concerning the former, we have already devoted sufficient text to the victimhood of the children. Suffice it to say that the remaining quotes in this area fell in line with statements like "either way, the state and the children it must educate are the ultimate losers." (26)

Teachers were positioned as existing in sometimes untenable situations caused by a lack of support. As example one commentator stated,

Teachers have screamed for years for smaller class sizes, only to be told it wasn't necessary. Teachers have screamed for years for art and music classes, because these subjects develop higher-level thinking, but were told there was no money to provide them. All of a sudden we have the money for charter schools, which will take money away from the public schools." (38)

In another, more charter-sympathetic, passage an author indicated that extant schools can hinder teachers in reaching their full potential:

In schools across Alabama (even those with strong reputations) there are still students with immense potential who are struggling to hit their stride academically. Likewise, there are still teachers who yearn for an environment where they truly can be treated as professionals. (39)

On the subject of taxpayers one opinion writer made his thoughts more than clear about educational funding in Alabama: “I am not satisfied with how Alabama politicians spend my taxes on ‘real’ public schools, and I see no evidence that they will do a better job with ‘private’ schools masquerading as charter schools funded with my money” (22)

Table 5 provides a summary list of mostly commonly listed characters.

Table 5. Most commonly listed character types

	n
<i>Heroes (n=48)</i>	
Political actors (Governor, senators, presidents, legislatures)	24
Public education sector	8
Teacher’s Union (AEA)	2
Advocacy or lobbying groups	2
EMOs	2
<i>Villains(n=53)</i>	
Political actors (Governor, senators, presidents, legislatures)	20
Teacher’s Union (AEA)	15
Advocacy or lobbying groups	4
Private EMOs	4
Public education sector	3
<i>Victims (n=75)</i>	
Students	29
Public Schools	14
State of Alabama	11
Teachers	8
Taxpayers	4
LEAs	2

Conclusion

The analyses and conclusions presented in this draft are preliminary, yet, our research provides some contributions to NPF scholarship. Primarily, charter school politics provides an interesting policy avenue to examine narrative elements since the national advocacy coalitions feature a diverse group of actors and ideologies. We were able to identify clear narrative elements in the form of policy solutions, story types, causal mechanisms, and characters in the newspaper articles about charter schools. Furthermore, the use of these narrative strategies differed by the endorsed policy solution in the document and whether or not the narrative took a winning or a losing stance. The pro-charter and anti-charter articles used different story types, causal mechanisms, and characters. For example, pro-charter stories typically featured themes of innovation, while anti-charter stories typically featured themes of risk. The former was more likely to feature heroes and less likely to offer a causal mechanism than the latter. However all stories shared certain characteristics. Most lacked a clear causal mechanism, the majority of their rhetoric was negative, and the most common element in the stories was the victim(s).

Prior research has shown that the composition of pro and counter charter advocacy coalitions reflects the political context of each state and locality in the United States. The case study approach also enabled us to go beyond looking at the general politics behind the educational choice policy movement and examine whether the narratives are shaped by educational alliances in the local context. The news media coverage of charter schools in the recent years prior to adoption of the legislation mostly referred to the state's teachers union and, mostly Republican, policymakers as policy actors. While private foundations and education

reform interest groups play a significant role in the national charter school politics (Lubienski, Brewer, & La Londe, 2016), one would not be able to discern their influence based on these newspaper articles. One of the leading fears about market oriented choice systems is that they might lead to re-segregation by race and/or class (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011). The local newspaper stories rarely referred to threat of re-segregation and social fragmentation. Loss of potential federal grants or potential loss of public school funding to charter schools was the main threats in these stories.

Mass media still plays a central role in disseminating information to the public. It is also an intermediary between research literature and citizens. As such, identifying the setting, characters, plots, and morals used in the circulating narratives would clarify the different ways these elements are used and perceived. If narrative frames and stories can shape opinions and beliefs about charter schools, and if public opinion, in turn, can shape policy outcomes, then scholars, policy makers, educators, and parents should pay close attention to the nature and quality of these frames and stories. We found both the straight reporting and the opinion pieces mostly superficial and generally lacking in depth. If evidence was cited to support arguments in the articles we examined, it was usually flimsy and not discussed in sufficient detail. There was also a lack of policing truth claims made by non-journalistic editorial writers. In short we were quite disappointed by the quality of journalism in Alabama concerning their reporting about charter schools. Narrative stories can be used to improve communication of research evidence. Individuals respond well to vivid and emotion-laden information presented by means of stories. When stories present selective anecdotes in place of empirical evidence or

misrepresent existing research and information, they can also turn into tools for manipulation and misinformation.

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APPENDIX (MEDIA NARRATIVES CODING INSTRUMENTⁱ)

Identify newspaper article:

1. This article is a/an

____ 1a. Position piece

____ 1b. Attempt at being neutral (SKIP TO QUESTION *)

2. HERO/ALLY. Who are the direct or implied heroes/allies in the narrative? List specific names /organizations /people you identify.

2a. Charter advocates are hero:

____ public educational sector is hero:

____ political actors are hero:

____ other hero(es) not in above categories:

2b. Charter opponents are hero:

____ public educational sector is hero:

____ political actors are hero:

____ other hero(es) not in above categories:

3. VILLAIN. Who are the direct or implied villains in the narrative? List specific names /organizations /people you identify.

2a. Charter advocates are villain:

____ public educational sector is villain:

____ political actors are villain:

____ other villain(s) not in above categories:

2b. Charter opponents are villain:

____ public educational sector is villain:

____ political actors are villain:

____ other villain(s) not in above categories:

4. VICTIM. Who are the direct or implied victims in the narrative? List specific names /organizations /people you identify.

____ 4a. students are victim:

____ 4b. teachers are the victim:

____ 4c. public schools are victim:

____ 4d. LEAs are victim

____ 4e. economic sector is victim:

____ 4f. taxpayers are victim

____ 4g. other entities are victim:

5. STORY TYPE. Does the narrative have a story type(s)?

____ Yes

____ No

If yes, what kind?

- a. Appeal to innovation
- b. Appeal to risk
- c. Story of decline
- d. Helplessness and control
- e. Conspiracy (e.g. the hidden goal is to take public out of public education)

6. CAUSAL MECHANISM. Does the narrative have a direct or implied causal theory?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what kind?

- a. bureaucratic/systemic
- b. incompetence/apathy
- c. inequitable socioeconomic circumstances
- d. societal/cultural factors

7. SOLUTION. Does the narrative offer a policy solution?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what is the solution? ___

8. CONSEQUENCES. Does the narrative discuss the consequences of the policy solution?

- a. The narrative does not discuss consequences
- b. Policy solution provides negative consequences
- c. Policy solution provides positive consequences

If (b) or (c), who/what entities bear the consequences? _____

9. EVIDENCE. Are data/evidence cited in the narrative?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what data are being used? _____

Is data used to a. support their argument b. refute an argument c. as a matter-of-fact

10. STANCE. What is the stance of the narrative towards the policy being discussed?

- a. Winning (supports the policy environment and actions discussed in the narrative)
- b. Losing (the group is under attack even if they are partially winning)
- c. No stance

ⁱ*This instrument is a modified version of the instruments in the following papers:

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Lane, R. R. (2013). An angel on the wind: How heroic policy narratives shape policy realities. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(3), 453-483.

Gupta, K., Ripberger, J., & Wehde, W. (2016). Advocacy Group Messaging on Social Media: Using the Narrative Policy Framework to Study Twitter Messages about Nuclear Energy Policy in the United States. *Policy Studies Journal*.