Sector Bias and Structural Trade-offs:
A Between-Within-Subjects Experiment on After-School Programs

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Description of the Study:

Do trade-offs among different structural forms of service delivery organizations influence citizens' preferences for public services? Existing literature on sector bias demonstrates that citizens hold subconscious biases regarding service delivery (Hvidman, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2024; Marvel, 2015, 2016; Meier et al., 2022). Despite their negative influence on the public sector and its employees, relatively little is known about the origins of these biases. Behavioral studies attribute them to values linked to service type (Hvidman & Andersen, 2016), prior familiarity with service delivery (Meier et al., 2022), and political-cultural dynamics in citizen–bureaucrat interactions (Szydlowski et al., 2022; Neo et al., 2024).

Existing research has largely overlooked the inherent structural differences among service delivery organizations across sectors. In contrast to public organizations, whose structures are often shaped by procedural constraints and high formalization (Rainey, Fernandez, & Malatesta, 2021), a significant portion of nonprofit organizations operate at a nascent stage and often have yet to develop established procedures (Andersson, 2016; Searing & Lecy, 2022). Procedures that ensure stability and promote public value can also impose compliance burdens, potentially leading to negative perceptions of public organizations (Bozeman, 1993; Kaufman, 1977; van Loon et al., 2016). The link between these trade-offs and citizens' perceptions remains relatively underexplored.

To address this gap in the literature on sector bias, the present study employs a between-within design using a forced-choice experiment to examine parents' relative emphasis on structural attributes of service delivery organizations – (1) stability, (2) red tape, (3) flexibility – varies across sectors. We selected the context of after-school programs offered by public schools and nonprofit community centers, as it offers an ideal setting for comparing sectoral preferences due to shared funding sources, overlapping users, and similar services (Halpern, 1999). This study contributes to research on sectoral bias by highlighting trade-offs among structural factors as a source of differing citizen expectations for public and nonprofit organizations, which may lead to biases in performance appraisals.

Hypotheses:

- ***General preference***

Based on existing studies, the core hypothesis is that respondents—parents in the United States—will make decisions by considering trade-offs between different attributes of organizational structures. The forced-choice design aggregates respondents' preferences in a way that, rather than directly asking about their preferences for each organizational structural attribute, it helps predict citizens' evaluations of the relative importance of each attribute, which will be revealed through their choices. We chose these three attributes—stability, red tape, and flexibility—because existing literature considers them deeply embedded factors contributing to negative public sector stereotypes (Bozeman, 1993; Kaufman, 1977). First, stability is a fundamental aspect of bureaucracy, shaping public organizations' operations while also being a key factor in defining a performance dimension (Boyne, 2002; Rainey, Fernandez, & Malatesta, 2021). While various dimensions of stability exist within an administrative system, this study focuses on personnel stability, as frontline workers play a crucial role in shaping service delivery in the context of after-school programs (O'Toole & Meier, 2003). Second, we chose red tape because, while formalization is an important element in achieving procedural accountability and consistency, it also imposes a compliance burden on citizens, regardless of its legitimacy, potentially leading to negative perceptions of public services (Campbell et al., 2023). We operationalized the red tape incorporating the assumption that citizens perceive it as causing delays in the child registration process due to complex paperwork. Third, public organizations are often criticized for their rigidity and inflexibility, which can create the impression that they are unable to respond to citizens' demands (Neo et al., 2024). Therefore, we conceptualized and measured flexibility in terms of curriculum adaptation over time in the provision of educational services.

Citizens value streamlined service provision and are particularly sensitive to instability in public services (van den Bekerom et al., 2021). To maintain stability, organizations often rely on formalization, which can burden citizens and create negative perceptions (Kaufman, 1977; van Loon et al., 2016). This results in a trade-off relationship between stability and inflexibility or red tape, depending on citizens' priorities. Especially in our context, frequent teacher turnover disrupts the stable relationships that are essential for providing high-quality services, highlighting the importance of stability over flexibility or reducing red tape.

Hypothesis 1: Among the three attributes, respondents will choose stability as the most important attribute when selecting after-school programs.
Hypothesis 2: Respondents will be willing to forgo high flexibility (i.e., accept lower flexibility) in order to gain stability.
Hypothesis 3: Respondents will be willing to forgo low red tape (i.e., accept higher red tape) in order to gain stability.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents will be willing to tradeoff high flexibility and low red tape for high stability (note this is a two for one tradeoff versus the one for one tradeoffs in H2 and H3).

- ***Heterogeneous Effects of Sectoral Treatment in Public and Nonprofit Programs***

The between-within design offers the advantage of efficiently generating substantial data from relatively small sample sizes. By leveraging random assignment between public and nonprofit treatments, this approach allows for the examination of heterogeneity in citizen expectations regarding structural attributes. While many well-functioning nonprofits operate as goal-oriented, lean organizations or rely heavily on the discretion of strong leaders (Ogliastri et al., 2016), public organizations generally have more stable structures than nonprofit counterparts. This distinction is especially pertinent when parents select after-school programs offered by elementary schools versus nonprofit community centers. Perceived organizational structure influences people's perceptions of organizational processes (Schminke et al., 2000; Ambrose & Schminke, 2003), shaping preconceptions based on each sector's typical organizational attributes. These preconceptions lead them to prioritize attributes that align closely with the specific type of organization while de-emphasizing those that do not. Consequently, parents expect differences in services that stem from the distinct organizational structures of schools and community centers. Parents are more likely to expect greater stability from public-sector organizations, while nonprofit organizations, which often offer more specialized programs and shorter registration periods, tend to be seen as more flexible and less burdened by red tape. Thus, sectoral differences likely influence citizens' expectations of structural attributes, resulting in heterogeneous expectation on trade-off relationships.

Hypothesis 5: Compared to respondents in the public counterpart, respondents in the public program treatment group are more likely to trade off high stability for greater flexibility and lower red tape.

Hypothesis 6-1: Compared to respondents in the nonprofit counterpart, respondents in the public organization group are more likely to trade off greater flexibility for higher stability.

Hypothesis 6-2: Compared to respondents in the nonprofit counterpart, respondents in the public organization group are more likely to trade off lower red tape for higher stability.

Design Plan

Study type

Experiment- A researcher randomly assigns treatments to study subjects, this includes field or lab experiments. This is also known as an intervention experiment and includes randomized controlled trials

Blinding

This study has no control group and includes only public and nonprofit program treatments. Participants are aware of their assigned treatment, making this an open-label study with no blinding.

Is there any additional blinding in this study?

No

***Study design*:**

- The proposed study is based on and adapted from the within subject forced-choice experiment approach proposed in a working paper by Kenneth J. Meier and Grant Mobley.
- The respondents answer a series of choices between two options in this study: after-school program A or B, each with different characteristics.
- The experiment follows a between-within design. Sectoral differences will be compared between subjects through randomization, while structural attributes will be compared within subjects using a series of paired-comparison questions featuring different attributes.
    - Between: sector (public /nonprofit) difference
    - Within: three attributes and two levels (either high and low): 2 X 2 X 2 design
- First, based on random assignment, participants are divided into either a public or a nonprofit group, with 100 participants allocated to each group.
- Second, forced-choice experimental design will be a 2 x 2 x 2 within-subjects design with the respondent providing an evaluation (that is, making a choice between two after-school programs A and B).
    - The full factorial design would require 64 questions (8×8), but this would cause excessive respondent fatigue. To address this, only a subset of combinations is included.
    - Out of 64 possible combinations, 8 are ties where both options have identical values, making tradeoffs unnecessary. Another 38 combinations show one school is Pareto superior to the other, eliminating the need for a tradeoff. This leaves 18 potential tradeoff scenarios; however, half are duplicates where Program A and Program B simply swap attribute levels. This results in 9 unique tradeoff cases.
    - Thus, each respondents answers 9 paired-comparison questions

- Treatment values were determined by examining various sites to determine what an average value might be in a typical state and setting the high and low values about 5%p above and below respectively. (But the information for the new registration processing day is not available, so we instead used 30 days as the standard and divided it into ±5-day intervals. This was based on the typical timeframe for an information disclosure request from the educational office, which we used as a reference.)
- After receiving the experimental treatment, participants will be asked manipulation check questions to ensure they understood and perceived the treatment conditions correctly.
- The following table explains the structure of the experiments which leaves a total 1,800 observations from 200 respondents.

	United States Parents (n = 200)
Public (n = 100)	(N=100) * (Q = 9)
Non Profit (n = 100)	(N=100) * (Q = 9)

Randomization

Participants will be randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions: **public program or nonprofit program**. Randomization will be implemented using the Qualtrics Randomizer to ensure an even distribution of participants across the two groups. The randomization process will be automated within the Survey Flow of Qualtrics, maintaining equal probability of assignment to each condition.

Sampling Plan

Existing Data

No existing data will be used in this study.

Explanation of existing data

N.A.

Data collection procedures

Participants will include citizens of the United States who are parents or legal guardians of a child or children. Recruitment will be outsourced to a data collection company (Prolific), which will sample respondents meeting the study criteria through online channels. Participants will first complete a consent form and answer questions covering basic socio-demographic information (outlined in the variable section). Then, they will answer a series of **pairwise choice questions**

comparing different programs. They will be recruited using convenience sampling methods. Participants will be reimbursed for their participation, with payment provided by the survey panel company upon survey completion.

Sample size

The total targeted sample size for this study is 200 participants. However, if needed, we may add 100~300 participants to ensure sufficient power.

Sample size rationale

A total of 200 observations will be collected. The sample size is determined based on a power analysis using the cjpowR package in R (Freitag & Schuessler, 2020). To detect an average marginal component effect (AMCE) in a pairwise conjoint design with 2 levels (high, low) on 3 attributes across 9 tasks (80% power, $\alpha = .05$), the minimum required sample is 174 for an AMCE of .05 and 57 for an AMCE of .087. Since the median AMCE in published conjoint studies is around .05, and 75% fall below .087 (Schuessler & Freitag, 2020), 200 observations per group (public and nonprofit) are considered acceptable.

- Freitag, M., & Schuessler, J. (2020). *cjpowR: A priori power analyses for conjoint experiments* [R package].
- Schuessler, J., & Freitag, M. (2020). *Power analysis for conjoint experiments*. SocArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/9yuhp

Stopping rule

We plan to collect samples until the designated number of subjects is reached.

Variables

Manipulated variables

We have manipulated three attributes in the pairwise choice question: the percentage of newly developed programs (5% or 15%), the annual teacher turnover rate (15% or 25%), and the estimated processing time for newly enrolled children (25 or 35 days). To estimate heterogeneity, we manipulated the public elementary school and nonprofit community center after-school program treatment.

Measured variables

Respondents will be presented with sequential hypothetical choice tasks where they choose between two research findings that best fit the criteria or opt out of choosing either. The set of choices will ask them which program they are willing to enroll their children. Sample vignettes

and the question are attached below. Demographic variables, including political identification, were collected to assess the balance between treatment groups.

Indices

N.A.

Sample Vignettes with Questions:

(1) Nonprofit After-School Program Treatment

- **Survey Introduction**

The American Community Children's Center, a nonprofit community center, has recently started offering two after-school programs. Previously in this district, after-school programs were only offered through nearby elementary schools. However, because these schools could not accommodate all of the demand, the programs have now started being offered through the community center in response to requests from local parents. Approximately 100 elementary school students in grades 1 through 6 are eligible to enroll in each program. They offer childcare services from the end of regular school hours (around 3 pm) until parents finish work (around 7 pm). In collaboration with the Association of Nonprofit Children's Centers, the center offers a well-structured after-school curriculum, utilizing diverse educational resources both within and beyond the center. As these programs are government-funded, parents do not have to pay any additional costs.

- The following outlines two different **nonprofit after-school programs** for comparison. **Which program would you prefer for your children to enroll in?**

(2) Public After-School Program Treatment Vignette:

- **Survey Introduction:**

The American Elementary School, a public elementary school, has recently started offering two after-school programs. Previously in this district, after-school programs were only offered through the nearby community centers. However, because it could not accommodate all demand, the programs have now started being offered through elementary schools in response to requests from local parents. Approximately 100 elementary school students in grades 1 through 6 are eligible to enroll in each program. They offer childcare services from the end of regular school hours (around 3 pm) until parents finish work (around 7 pm). With support from the after-school program department in the School District, the school offers a well-structured after-school curriculum, utilizing diverse educational resources both within and beyond the center. As these programs are government-funded, parents do not have to pay any additional costs.

- The following outlines two different **public after-school programs** for comparison. **Which program would you prefer for your children to enroll in?**

- **9 Comparisons**

Comparison 1: A(+ - +) v. B(+ + -)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **35 days.**	• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **25 days.**

Comparison 2: A(- + +) v. B(+ + -)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **35 days.**	• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **25 days.**

Comparison 3: A(- - +) v. B(+ + -)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **35 days.**	• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **25 days.**

Comparison 4: A(- + +) v. B(+ - +)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **35 days.**	• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **35 days.**

Comparison 5: A(- + -) v. B(+ - +)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **25 days.**	• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **35 days.**

Comparison 6: A(+ - -) v. B(- + +)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **25 days.**	• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **35 days.**

Comparison 7: A(+ + -) v. B (- + +)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **25 days.**	• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **35 days.**

Comparison 8: A(+ - -) v. B(- + -)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **15%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **25 days.**	• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **25 days.**

Comparison 9: A(- + -) v. B(- - +)

Program A	Program B
• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **25%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children is approximately **25 days.**	• Approximately **5%** of the programs will be newly developed annually, specifically tailored to meet the needs of children in the local community. • The annual teacher turnover rate for the program is **15%.** • The estimated processing time for newly enrolled children takes approximately **35 days.**

Additional Likert Questions and Demographic Questions:

Demographic Questions	
Citizenship	Yes No (exclude people without citizenship)
Are you a parent or legal guardian of a child or children?	Yes No
Age	Open-Ended
Gender	Male Female Nonbinary or Other
Education (Currently enrolled or Graduated)	Doctoral degree Master's degree Bachelor's degree High school or Below
Ideological Identification Where would you place yourself on this scale?	On a 7-Point Likert Scale 1. Extremely liberal 2. Liberal 3. Slightly liberal 4. Moderate 5. Slightly conservative 6. Conservative 7. Extremely conservative
Race/Ethnicity	White Black or African American Latino American Indian or Alaska Native Asian-American Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Other
Income	Less than $20,000 $20,000 to less than $35,000 $35,000 to less than $50,000 $50,000 to less than $75,000 $75,000 to less than $100,000 Over $100,000
Would you describe where you live as an urban, rural or suburban area?	Urban Rural Suburban

Attitude on Public Sector	
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	(adapted from Hvidman, 2019; Meier, Dhillon, & Xu, 2022)
1. It is still possible to cut public spending significantly and streamline the public sector without compromising services to citizens 2. We should, for the most part, contract out government services (such as child care, elderly care, and hospital treatments). 3. Many public-sector service delivery could be performed better if left to private organizations.	[on a 5-point likert scale, from 1 (“Completely agree”), to (“Completely disagree”)]
Manipulation Check (at the end of the survey)	
Which organization's After-School Program did you evaluate?	*American Elementary School* *American Community Children’s Center*

Analysis Plan

Statistical models

Analyses will be conducted with R 4.4.2 and STATA 18.5. We will conduct fixed-effect or mixed-effect regression analysis to account for the idiosyncratic variation of each respondent. The dummy variable indicating which program has been chosen is regressed on the attributes of hypothetical public and nonprofit afterschool programs. By including person fixed effects, we aim to examine how each attribute influences respondents' choices at the individual level (within-person analysis). We include interaction terms between structural variables to examine respondents' aggregate responses to trade-offs. Additionally, heterogeneity between treatment groups will be analyzed through interaction terms.

Transformations

To perform regression analysis on data collected through an online data collection company (prolific), we plan to transform binary dummy variables into separate columns using the 'tidyverse', 'fastDummies', and 'caret' package in R.

Inference criteria

Treatment effects will be assessed using regression models. Hypothesis testing will be conducted using significance levels based on the APA 7th Edition's criteria. Significance levels will be denoted as + $p<.01$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, and *$p < .001$, and results will be presented according to APA notation or the citation style required by the journal.

Data exclusion

Observations with mid-survey attrition will be excluded, and only complete responses (in which all choices were made) will be included in the analysis. Only those who are U.S. citizens and parents or legal guardians of a child will be included in the sample. Individuals who do not meet this criterion will be excluded.

Missing data

Responses to all questions are mandatory for participants in order to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, we do not expect missing data to be found in the dataset.

Exploratory analysis

We expect that respondents' demographic characteristics (age, gender, education), attitude toward public sector, and political identification may be associated with their preferences for after-school programs. We will explore treatment effect heterogeneity through subgroup analyses or by adding interaction terms to assess whether these characteristics influence preferences.

Citation:

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