

Who Is Opposed to Common Core and Why?

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Rising opposition to the Common Core Standards (CCS) has undermined implementation throughout the country. Yet there has been no scholarly analysis of the predictors of CCS opposition in the populace. This analysis uses poll data from a statewide poll of California voters to explore the demographic and policy predictors of CCS opposition. We find opposition strongly associated with views about President Obama, several education policy issues (especially testing), and two mis/negative conceptions about the standards. We advocate future work using poll data to understand public opinion on education issues.

Keywords: assessment; correlational analysis; educational policy; politics; regression analyses; survey research; testing

California is 1 of more than 40 states implementing the Common Core Standards (CCS) or a close variant. The nearly nationwide adoption of these standards represents a remarkable accomplishment in the history of standards-based reform. However, in many states, political opposition has slowed or derailed implementation efforts.

While public opinion polls suggest rising opposition to CCS (for instance increasing from 13% to 35% between 2013 and 2015 in the Education Next national poll; Henderson & Peterson, 2014; Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2015), no empirical analysis has parsed these data to understand what is driving opposition. Such an analysis could help educators currently facing opposition while trying to effectively implement the standards.

This study uses data from the 2015 Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)/USC Rossier School of Education poll of registered California voters to understand the sources of opposition to the CCS. The work addresses three questions:

Research Question 1: Who is opposed to the CCS?

Research Question 2: What other education policy positions are related to CCS opposition?

Research Question 3: To what extent is CCS opposition explained by voters' knowledge of the standards?

Methods

We use item-level data from the 2015 PACE/Rossier poll, fielded online from August 3 to 23, 2015 (for detail on methods and

variables, see online appendix). This was the fourth PACE/Rossier poll, and it used two standing online panels—one based on emails (primarily for older voters) and one based on an app (primarily for younger voters).¹ The state representative poll surveyed 2,350 California voters about a range of education issues, including CCS, standardized testing, and the state's new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

Our dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator for opposition to the standards, where the reference category is support or neutral/no opinion. We randomized respondents to one of four CCS approval questions to test the effect of question wording on responses. More detail, including the question wordings, is found in the appendix available on the journal website. All models include indicators for which question respondents were asked. On average, 29% of the sample expressed opposition to the standards, and another 30% were neutral or unsure.

We use logistic regression to answer our research questions. For the first question, we regress CCS opposition on demographic variables: age, gender, race/ethnicity, parental status, and party affiliation. We also add an indicator for approval of President Obama's performance to test whether this explains support above and beyond partisanship.

For the second question, we add indicators or scales for several policy beliefs or positions, as described in the results and appendix (available on the journal website).

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Table 1
Logistic Regression Models

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		
	Mean	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Ethnicity											
Latino/Hispanic	0.23	0.86	(0.13)	0.88	(0.14)	0.97	(0.15)	1.01	(0.16)	0.92	(0.16)
Black	0.07	0.60*	(0.14)	0.65	(0.15)	0.74	(0.17)	0.78	(0.19)	0.76	(0.18)
Asian/Pac Islander	0.06	0.87	(0.17)	0.90	(0.18)	0.94	(0.19)	0.95	(0.2)	0.99	(0.21)
Male	0.45	0.92	(0.09)	0.90	(0.09)	0.93	(0.09)	0.90	(0.09)	0.93	(0.10)
Age											
18–24	0.09	1.01	(0.22)	1.15	(0.25)	1.00	(0.23)	0.88	(0.2)	0.71	(0.17)
25–34	0.13	0.92	(0.17)	0.99	(0.18)	0.89	(0.17)	0.82	(0.16)	0.77	(0.15)
35–44	0.14	0.96	(0.17)	1.01	(0.18)	0.94	(0.18)	0.90	(0.16)	0.85	(0.16)
45–54	0.13	1.08	(0.17)	1.14	(0.18)	1.12	(0.18)	1.05	(0.17)	0.97	(0.16)
Party affiliation											
Republican	0.29	1.90***	(0.21)	1.29*	(0.17)	1.32*	(0.18)	1.28	(0.17)	1.29	(0.18)
Independent	0.22	1.28*	(0.15)	1.05	(0.13)	1.04	(0.14)	1.04	(0.14)	1.03	(0.14)
Parent											
Parent with a child not in K12	0.39	0.96	(0.11)	0.92	(0.11)	0.90	(0.11)	0.83	(0.1)	0.82	(0.10)
Parent with a child in K12	0.25	1.06	(0.14)	1.04	(0.14)	1.04	(0.14)	0.89	(0.13)	0.85	(0.12)
Obama approval											
Neither	0.02			0.38	(0.21)	0.35	(0.19)	0.37	(0.21)	0.37	(0.21)
Disapprove	0.41			1.92***	(0.22)	1.86***	(0.22)	1.88***	(0.23)	1.66***	(0.21)
Sufficient funding	0.26					1.52***	(0.17)	1.42**	(0.16)	1.40**	(0.17)
Amount of testing	2.15					1.16**	(0.06)	1.11	(0.06)	1.08	(0.06)
Oppose testing	2.86					1.55***	(0.11)	1.52***	(0.1)	1.34***	(0.10)
LCFF	2.53					1.09*	(0.04)	1.09*	(0.04)	1.10*	(0.05)
CCS knowledge											
A little	0.28							1.72***	(0.23)	1.38*	(0.20)
Some	0.32							1.93***	(0.25)	1.48*	(0.21)
A lot	0.10							2.50***	(0.44)	1.90**	(0.37)
Misconceptions											
Only apply to ELA and math	0.32									0.81	(0.09)
Requires more testing	0.37									1.02	(0.11)
Adoption federal requirement	0.28									0.89	(0.11)
Developed by Obama administration	0.18									0.94	(0.13)
State not allowed to add content	0.19									1.64***	(0.21)
Negative conceptions											
Designed to make students fail	0.11									1.26	(0.20)
Limits teacher creativity	0.38									2.50***	(0.28)
Constant		0.37***	(0.05)	0.33***	(0.05)	0.05***	(0.01)	0.04***	(0.01)	0.05***	(0.02)
N		2,350		2,350		2,350		2,350		2,350	

Note. All coefficients are odds ratios. LCFF = Local Control Funding Formula; CCS = Common Core Standards; ELA = English language arts.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For the third question, we add a measure of self-reported CCS knowledge and indicators for seven specific misconceptions or negative conceptions about the standards.

Results

The results of our models are presented sequentially in Table 1, the first column of which contains descriptive statistics for the independent variables. The first two models in Table 1 answer our first research question. In Model 1, we find no effect of age, parental status, or which question respondents were asked. We find Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander voters all less likely to oppose CCS than White voters, but only the Black coefficient is significant (odds ratio [OR] = 0.60, $p < .05$).² The strongest association is for party affiliation—Republicans are 90% more likely to oppose CCS than Democrats ($p < .001$).³ However, in Model 2, we see that Republican opposition is largely explained by disapproval of President Obama's performance—those who disapprove are 92% more likely to oppose CCS ($p < .001$), and the odds ratio for Republican decreases to 1.29 ($p < .05$).

Model 3 shows that each of the other education policy positions is significantly associated with CCS opposition. Belief that California school funding is adequate is associated with a 52% increase in the odds of CCS opposition ($p < .001$). Each one-point increase in belief that there is too much testing is associated with a 16% increase in the odds of CCS opposition ($p < .01$). Each one-point increase on the opposition to testing scale is associated with a 55% increase in the odds of CCS opposition ($p < .001$). And support for LCFF is associated with a 9% increase in the odds of CCS opposition ($p < .05$).

Finally, Model 4 adds a measure of self-reported CCS knowledge, finding that increases in knowledge are associated with increasing opposition to the standards—in particular, those reporting “a lot” of CCS knowledge are 150% more likely to oppose the standards than those reporting no knowledge ($p < .001$). However, when we add indicators for specific negative views or misconceptions in Model 5, the coefficients on knowledge substantially decrease in magnitude, suggesting that some of the knowledge-opposition association is driven by these mis/negative conceptions. In particular, the misconception that states were not allowed to add content to the CCS is associated with a 64% increase in the odds of opposition ($p < .001$), and the negative conception that the CCS limit teachers' ability to be creative in the classroom is associated with a 150% increase in the odds of opposition ($p < .001$). In this final model, we also see that previously significant variables no longer are; however, these changes in statistical significance are mainly due to small increases in standard errors rather than being evidence of redundancy between the knowledge variables and the demographic predictors.

Discussion

This brief explored predictors of CCS opposition in a state representative sample of voters. The work suggests that demographic predictors do not explain variation in CCS opposition after controlling for specific beliefs and policy positions. In particular, opposition to

President Obama, opposition to testing, support for current funding levels and local funding control, and two specific mis/negative conceptions about the standards are associated with negative views.

The work suggests targets for improving CCS support and addressing voters' concerns. For instance, research shows 70% to 80% of teachers report developing some CCS curriculum materials themselves, suggesting claims of reduced teacher creativity may not reflect on-the-ground changes (Kane, Owens, Marinell, Thal, & Staiger, 2016); policymakers and advocates could challenge these claims if they had more systematic evidence. Also, state policymakers might emphasize the additions they've made to the standards to rebut the claim that states could not add to the standards. Finally, given that disapproval of President Obama appears to be a stronger factor than party affiliation in predicting opposition, the results of the upcoming presidential election may decrease opposition somewhat.

With those suggestions in mind, it is of course not clear that merely correcting misconceptions would improve public support for the policy. Indeed, Hochschild and Einstein (2015) argue, as we find here, that political activity and group membership (e.g., political party affiliation) can reinforce misinformed beliefs. Furthermore, voters also tend to resist change even when faced with facts (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000; Nylan & Reifler, 2010). Finally, Hochschild and Einstein argue that politicians are incentivized to focus on politically active voters, even if they have misconceptions. This may help explain intense opposition to the standards among Republican presidential primary contenders whose base voters—those identifying as Republicans and who disapprove of the president's record—are much more likely to be opposed to the standards.

Given the limits of our study, future studies might expand to other states that have seen more opposition to CCS and include other policy positions in analyses. For instance, a New York poll found that voters by a two-to-one margin thought Common Core had worsened education there (Siena Research Institute, 2015); these more negative attitudes might affect the relationships observed here. We hope research on CCS and other policy issues continues to attend to public opinion, its drivers, and its impact on education policy.

NOTES

¹The pollster could not provide a response rate for this specific poll because those data were no longer maintained, but they confirmed response rates for the app-based panel are typically 40% to 45% and for the email-based panel are typically 10% to 15%.

²The odds ratios are slightly more extreme (e.g., .50 for African American, rather than .60), but the results are substantively the same if we run this model excluding the party affiliation variable.

³This odds ratio is 1.98 ($p < .01$) if race/ethnicity is excluded from the model.

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