

# Partisan Governance and Policy Implementation: The Politics of Academy Conversion Amongst English Schools

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates that party-political orientations within governance communities can have strong effects on policy implementation. Empirical evidence is drawn from the Academy conversion scheme for secondary schools in England that was recently pursued by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government. The opt-in nature of the reform makes it possible to discern the impact that nominally apolitical school governors have on the implementation of the policy. Academy conversion is disproportionately found in more Conservative-voting constituencies due to varying school-level propensities to apply to convert, rather than varying propensities for the Department for Education to authorize conversions. Further, applications to convert are significantly more likely from schools in Conservative parliamentary seats that are under the control of Labour local authorities. Thus, nominally apolitical policy participants appear to act in rather political ways, which has implications for our understanding of the involvement of civil society in the provision of public services.

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# 1 Introduction

A transformation in the governance structures of English education has been underway since the coalition government came to power in May 2010. The previous model, in which most schools were administered and controlled by a combination of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), the national Department for Education (DfE), and local school management, is in the process of being swept away under the auspices of a wholesale roll-out of the ‘Academies’ programme. Such a change is clearly of national political consequence, but the core argument made here has more general theoretical importance. The claim is that reform of this sort is mediated through profoundly political factors at a much more local level than is often considered. The empirical evidence below reveals that political factors have been crucial in the roll-out of the policy at the level of individual schools. Further, these school-level effects are large enough that they have created a sharp, national-level, asymmetry between the prevailing models of schooling in Conservative and Labour constituencies. The most local of politics can interact with ideological and political orientations to yield national patterns of policy change.

Empirically focused on English schools, the methodological approach here takes advantage of a rather distinctive feature of the Academy reform process in England to shed light on whether, and with what consequences, unelected layers of governance structures act politically. The opt-in nature of the reform meant that individual schools had discretion over whether to adopt a rather important institutional reform that increased their own managerial autonomy and, by implication, the between-school degree of competition. With school governors commonly unelected and generally thought to be apolitical, one may reasonably question whether we should expect variation in the adoption of this reform that can be explained by political variables. I show below that the decisions of these actors reveal a systematic political nature to school-level administration.

This finding has implications that are broader than simply for English schools. It suggests that reforms that seek to disconnect policy implementation from political matters may face a more difficult task than had been thought. It has natural implications for both contemporary British politics and comparative patterns of public service provision. On

the former, it seems natural to consider these findings in light of the push by the Conservatives to encourage a ‘Big Society’ approach to policy whereby civil society becomes more involved in provision. Put simply: the results here suggest that political dimensions may be relevant to this process, even at the notionally apolitical level of civil society organizations. The policy implementation literature (Matland 1995; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Saetren 2005; Schofield and Sausman 2004), even in its more recent consideration of the possibility of the politicization of implementation (e.g. Kropf, Vercellotti, and Kimball 2013), has been rather quiet in this regard. Its prominent concern has been about the extent to which local managers implement ‘authoritative decisions’ made at the centre, but models employing local-opt-in mean that the issue is not whether the agents defect from the central decision, but whether they embrace it. More comparatively, the theory and results here point to the likelihood that those states that have long embedded civil society organizations into structures of service provision — and the corporatist and Christian Democratic welfare states are held to be prominent in this respect (Esping-Andersen 1989) — will face politically-induced variation in this provision, even though electoral politics operates at more of an arms-length.

The empirical focus of this paper affords it a place within the comparative education policy literature that has studied the decentralizing and marketizing reforms to schooling systems (e.g. West and Ylönen 2010; Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998). It also contributes to a literature that has sought to provide political explanations for patterns of reform adoption in this sphere (e.g. Gingrich 2011; Hicks 2013b; Klitgaard 2008; Zehavi 2012). To these studies of national-level policy choices, this paper adds a more nuanced understanding of the way in which these policies can be mediated through local policy elites. Indeed, outside the USA (e.g. Renzulli and Roscigno 2005; Vergari 2007), there is a dearth of political science work that analyses the within-country political processes that are at work when these reforms are implemented — and this has only very recently begun to be rectified (e.g. Gingrich and Ansell 2013).

The underlying theoretical account of ideological politics at school level relates to wider literatures, as well. For example, there has been work on the politics of administrative

decentralization (e.g. Christensen 2000; Christensen and Pallesen 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002), privatization (e.g. Boix 1997; Hicks 2013a; Zohlnhöfer, Obinger, and Wolf 2008), and out-sourcing (e.g. Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2009; Chandler and Feuille 1991; Elinder and Jordahl 2013; Picazo-Tadeo *et al.* 2012; Sundell and Lapuente 2012), but this has focused on either parliamentary or local government politics without consideration of the politicization of unelected actors. Meanwhile, there is a literature, focused on the USA, that more clearly tackles this aspect by studying the policy effects of a ‘representative bureaucracy’ (e.g. Bradbury and Kellough 2008; Meier and Bohte 2001; Meier and Nigro 1976), but this has tended to focus on demographic rather than explicitly political representation (c.f. Kropf, Vercellotti, and Kimball 2013). More broadly still, the findings presented below extend a general partisanship literature that has repeatedly asked, ‘does politics matter?’. This literature ranges from the classic comparative macroeconomic (e.g. Hibbs 1977), to national education expenditure (Ansell 2010; Busemeyer 2007; Castles 1989; Iversen and Stephens 2008), and down to the level of local government (Boyne *et al.* 2012; Gerber and Hopkins 2011). In one sense, this paper provides an illustration of the connection between national and local politics. Local political factors are clearly seen to be drivers for the embrace or rejection of the Academy policy by individual schools, but they are only really explicable within the context of a national-level understanding of the policy as a whole; be that ideological or electoral.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. I begin by setting out the Academy policy in more detail, before outlining a theoretical framework that draws on this discussion to yield hypotheses about why we should expect some schools to be more likely to convert than others. I then move to the empirical analysis, describing my data, showing visually and statistically that there is a strong correlation between Academy conversion and the party-political climate within a school’s constituency, and that this is driven by applications to convert rather than subsequent bias in authorisations to convert.

## 2 The Academy Programme

The Academy model of school decentralizes control of a whole range of consequential features of educational provision to the school level — including curriculum design, staff employment, capital expenditure, and even, to an extent, pupil admissions policies. In effect, LEAs are being removed from the system of school governance, with a far greater role being taken up by local school management, as well as the DfE. Indeed, the component of the DfE bureaucracy dealing with Academies has quickly expanded to be the largest part of the Department (Morris 2012). Where schools used to be operated in groups determined by local political boundaries under the LEAs, the new model is dominated by single free-standing schools as well as an emerging pattern of chains and federations of operators based on shared approaches to the provision of schooling rather than just geography.

One factor that has clouded consideration of the politics of the Academy programme is that it is composed of two superficially similar but ultimately distinct policies: one created by the Labour government in the early 2000s and a second instituted by the current coalition government in 2010. While the focus of this paper is on the latter, it is helpful to provide a little context on the former. The Labour government introduced the term ‘Academy’ as the label for its approach of replacing under-performing schools (Adonis 2012). These Labour Academies were disproportionately targeted at poorer neighbourhoods where the need for reform was most apparent. They came with large-scale capital investment from central government, greater freedoms for school management in the areas of curriculum, staffing, and enrolment, and the requirement that an outside ‘sponsor’ be enlisted to drive through improvements in the new schools. Sponsors were sought from the private sector, including successful local businesses or even individual businessmen. In addition to capital funding, on-going funding also came directly from central government, leaving these ‘sponsor-led’ Academies almost completely separated from the LEAs that had controlled the schools they replaced. An important consequence of this divorce from LEAs was that Academies no longer had automatic access to the various services that those bodies traditionally provided. Given that, freedom from LEAs came with the requirement to provide, or purchase, services relating to various kinds of educational provision (e.g.

special educational needs) and back office functions (e.g. human resources, finances, and staff training).

It is important to note that there was a clear limit placed on the roll-out of this Labour Academy scheme in the sense that it was targeted, and consequently that it had a very redistributive character. The regulatory and management freedoms that came with this new Academy status — including the ability to opt out of nationally-bargained wage and employment agreements — were part of a political device that enabled Labour to avoid the charge that it was simply sinking money into failing institutions. As such, while Labour introduced the concept of Academies, together with their freedom from LEAs and greater school-level management discretion, they were not intended to form the basis of a system-level transformation in the governance and structure of English schooling.

When the coalition government came to power in May 2010, the new (Conservative) Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, quickly set about dramatically expanding the scope of this existing sponsor-led Academy scheme. Amidst some fears of undue haste, the *Academies Act 2010* was passed in June 2010, coming into effect as early as the coming school year starting in September 2010. The express intention of this Act was to facilitate the conversion of as many existing ‘maintained’ (i.e. state-funded) schools to Academy status as was feasible, with or without a sponsor. While Ed Balls, when Labour’s Secretary of State for Education, did approve the conversion of a handful of maintained schools to Academy status in 2009, it is a reasonable short-hand to denote ‘sponsor-led’ Academies as being ‘Labour Academies’ and ‘converter’ Academies as being ‘Conservative Academies’. The short-hand is useful, not least because it reinforces the fact that the sponsor-led Academies that opened after the coalition government came to power were in fact the fruits of the previous government’s efforts. The freedoms enjoyed by Academies under the new government were essentially unchanged. As such, the new policy was a clear attempt to fundamentally change the way in which much, if not all, of the English schooling system operated. In these terms, at least, the policy has been rather an astounding success. By 2012, the proportion of secondary pupils being taught in an Academy school had jumped to almost 40%, of which the nearly decade-old sponsor-led Academy scheme accounted for

less than a quarter.

The conversion process warrants some attention as its features will form an important justification for some of the inferences that I draw from the analysis that follows. The process can reasonably be described as follows:

1. The school governors decide to request conversion to Academy status.
2. The DfE considers the request and decides whether, in principle, to approve conversion.
3. If approval to convert is given, in principle, negotiations occur:
  - (a) between the school and the DfE regarding ongoing funding arrangements;
  - (b) between the school and the LEA regarding the transfer of assets and liabilities from the LEA to the school.
4. With those negotiations successfully concluded, conversion to Academy status occurs.

Note that this process has some important aspects to it. First, the conversion process must be initiated by schools themselves making a request to the DfE. This is important for my broader theoretical purposes as data capturing this opt-in feature makes it possible to observe something akin to policy preferences of nominally apolitical school governors. Second, the DfE maintains veto power over which schools convert. Third, LEAs have a relatively small formal role to play in the conversion process, being involved only in the ‘nuts and bolts’ of asset transfers rather than the actual conversion decision itself. Nonetheless, it remains an empirical question as to whether even this role affords them the opportunity to influence conversion process outcomes. The empirical analysis below engages directly with this question.

One aspect of the DfE’s assessment of a school’s conversion request is clearly based on OFSTED reports for the schools that apply. These reports provide ratings for schools on a 4-point scale from ‘Outstanding’ to ‘Inadequate’, and is applied to the school overall as well as to different sub-categories of assessment, such as academic performance, leadership, teaching effectiveness, etc. In the earliest stages of the conversion policy, it was announced

that those schools with an ‘Outstanding’ OFSTED rating would be effectively pre-approved for conversion. This was later relaxed to those schools with a ‘Good, with Outstanding features’ rating. Interestingly, the DfE actively contacted such highly-rated schools at the outset of the conversion policy to encourage them to convert. Thus, while schools themselves were required to formally start the conversion process, the DfE was clearly not an idle bystander waiting for applications to arrive.

The rapid rate of Academy conversion since 2010 prompts the question that drives the empirical portion of this paper: why do some schools convert and others do not? While I will return to the possible political reasons in the next section, it is helpful to understand the scheme at a more bureaucratic level. Specifically, two prime candidate explanations for why a school would convert are (1) the freedoms afforded to its management, and (2) any associated financial incentives. In fact, the features of the former are effectively set in law and so apply universally to any Academy. That does not mean that each school would necessarily face the same pattern of management freedom incentives to convert, however. Academy status results in the need for individual schools to procure a variety of services that were previously provided by LEAs. Schools that feel they lack sufficient management expertise or resources — perhaps because of their smaller size or greater specialist needs resulting from characteristics of the student body — may be wary of conversion. I return to this empirically below. Meanwhile, the financial side is less clear cut at this stage. Each school converting to Academy status enters into its own separate funding agreement with the DfE and systematic data are not yet available regarding these agreements, at least in a form that is comparable with non-converters.

### 3 Theory

While there are administrative reasons to believe that there will be variation in the propensity of different schools to convert to Academy status, the more theoretically interesting reasons, for my purposes, relate more directly to politics. Even setting aside the simple fact that it has the prospect of fundamentally re-orienting the governance structures of one



of the largest public services, the Academy conversion scheme is clearly of great political importance. This is true in several different senses. First, the coalition government accorded it almost instantaneous legislative time upon assuming office, indicating that this was a policy that had a great deal of backing at the very highest levels of the government. Second, perhaps unsurprisingly given its scope, the policy has proved to be extremely controversial amongst organized interests within the schools sector — most notably teachers' unions. Leaders of several such bodies have been outspoken critics of the policy, and various schools seeking to convert have faced strikes by staff opposed to the change. Third, the policy has become fairly publicly associated with the Conservative Party, and Michael Gove in particular — an association that he seems to embrace. I argue that this politicization frames much of the policy process.

To provide some order to this category of politically-based variation in Academy conversion, it is helpful to split the process into the application side (from schools) and authorization side (from the DfE). This is helpful both in a conceptual way, but also because it maps onto the process, outlined above, through which Academy conversion occurs. The application side is of more relevance for consideration of the political behaviour of unelected local policy elites, but the authorization side also has the potential to shed light on a substantively interesting aspect of the national politics of this particular policy reform.

On the application side, political ideology may be a driver for school governors, and even the senior leadership team of schools. The Academy policy constitutes a reduction in the level of control and regulation imposed on schools from higher levels of government, both in the form of the LEA and central government. As such, it affords schools greater freedom in their operation. This stepping-back of the state fits rather well with common ideological conceptions of left and right, and so seems more likely to be supported by those with other more rightist views (e.g. Boix 1997; Elinder and Jordahl 2013; Pierson 1998; Zehavi 2012). Ideally, there would be survey data available on the ideological views of school governors, which could then be assessed for its correlation with school conversions — an approach that would be analogous to the 'active bureaucratic representation' research that has been focused on the USA (e.g. Bradbury and Kellough 2008; Meier and Bohte 2001).

Unfortunately, such data are not available. The closest data on governors' views comes from James *et al.* (2012), but their large survey of governors does not seem to have asked questions about ideological or political attitudes.

The alternative approach that I adopt is to assume that, on average, school governors are drawn from a pool of people that is reasonably representative of local political dispositions. It is fair to note that the assumption that underpins this is not unproblematic. School governors are hardly a randomly-drawn sample from the local population, being both selected and self-selecting, to varying degrees. Nonetheless, I maintain that the assumption is not so problematic as not to be useful. It seems plausible to believe that the political orientation of the local population from which governors are drawn will be positively correlated, albeit imperfectly, with the political orientation of those governors. Practically, I propose to measure the political orientation of the local population using vote shares for the Westminster constituency that each school is located in. The intention is to capture the political orientation of the population that has an interest in each school. Defining this population at the LEA level implies an average of 17 schools for each LEA locality, but this certainly seems too high to be appropriate. The Westminster constituency implies a more appropriate average of about five schools for each locality, which surely better reflects the selection of schools that will be of interest to the population. Of course, even if one accepts this view, a measure of political orientation based on constituency is not without problems. For example, those who are near the border of the constituency may not necessarily see all of the schools in that unit as their 'local' schools, being drawn instead to those in other constituencies.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the use of parliamentary constituency to measure political orientation has the merit of facilitating any analysis of this issue, at all. While it is certainly imperfect, there is no reason to think that measures derived from this geographical unit will bias the empirical results in favour of the theory. In fact, the opposite is true as the associated measurement error should result in attenuation bias that makes the test of the hypothesis more stringent than it should be. Thus, I maintain the assumption that schools in constituencies voting disproportionately for Conservatives are also more

likely to have ideologically Conservative school governors. In such circumstances, I argue that we should expect a greater tendency to apply for Academy conversion. This proxy for local ideological leanings can be made into a continuous measure by calculating the Conservative-minus-Labour vote share for each constituency at the 2010 general election. On this basis, the ideological argument leads to a prediction of a fairly smooth relationship between Conservative-minus-Labour constituency vote share and the likelihood of a school applying for conversion.

**Hypothesis 1** *The probability of a school applying to convert to Academy status will be an increasing function of the difference between the constituency-level Conservative and Labour vote shares.*

Coupled with the institutional structure within which schools operate, this initial hypothesis points towards a further possibility. Conversion to Academy status is about greater freedoms for schools, but a potentially important aspect of this is from whom these freedoms are gained. In this light, to the extent that ideological views on the appropriate way to operate schools, the political orientation of the LEA is likely to be consequential to the decision to apply for conversion. Schools in localities (i.e constituencies) that share a political orientation with the LEA that controls them are less likely to find the LEA to be burdensome or restrictive. Put more concretely, schools in strongly Conservative seats would seem more likely to clash with a Labour-controlled LEA than a Conservative-controlled LEA. Indeed, this is consistent with the recent finding by Andrews *et al.* (2012) that public service performance is negatively affected by differences in the ‘strategic stances’ of different organizational levels. There are 150 LEAs in my sample and 530 constituencies, so there is ample scope for mismatches of control and political orientation. Given this, I suggest the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2** *The probability of a school applying to convert to Academy status will be an increasing function of the difference between the constituency-level Conservative and Labour vote shares, and this effect will be stronger where there is a mismatch between constituency-level political and LEA political orientation.*

On the authorization side, there is a related set of possible political mechanisms in play. Note, however, that the Academy conversion process means that, in a formal sense, the DfE cannot compel conversion. Thus, its approval of conversion is contingent on the applications that it receives. With that said, the DfE has been working to encourage conversion requests in the first place by sending letters and then representatives out to schools to discuss the possibilities with them. Indeed, these efforts have led to conflict with LEA leaders, one of whom publicly requested that such visits be halted (BBC News 2013).

There is obviously reason to think that the political motives behind the policy at large will lead the DfE to wish to see schools convert to Academy status. The relevant question, however, is what reasons there might be to think that this desire will manifest itself differentially across schools. One possibility is that Academy conversion is deemed by the political leadership of the DfE to be an electoral asset to sitting MPs. In principle, this could be the result of an opportunity to offer favourable financial terms to such converting schools — although as noted above, there is little evidence to suggest that is the case. An alternative is that it is the result of an ideological belief that the Academy model is the more desirable for the provision of public education in terms of student outcomes and satisfaction. Either way, there could be an incentive for authorizations to be skewed towards schools in government-held constituencies. This leads to the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3** *Conditional on having applied to convert to Academy status, the probability of a school being authorized to do so will be higher in government-held than Labour-held constituencies.*

A second possibility is that the political leadership at the DfE will seek to maximize Academy conversion in the most electorally marginal constituencies. The logic is similar to that above, but this time draws on an application of classic pursuit of the ‘median voter’ (Downs 1957), or Director’s Law (Stigler 1970). Assuming that Academy conversion is thought to be inherently beneficial to a school (and its surrounding area), an office-seeking politician will have an incentive to target the Academy conversion policy in marginal constituencies to increase their party’s vote share there. This argument applies fairly equally to

marginal seats held by Conservatives (and Liberal Democrats) or opposition parties to the extent that all such seats exhibit a similar probability of Conservative (or Liberal Democrat) victory in the subsequent election. Certainly in the current climate of macro-economic difficulties, government MPs cannot feel confident of re-election in marginal seats.

**Hypothesis 4** *Conditional on having applied to convert to Academy status, the probability of a school being authorized to do so will be higher in the most electorally marginal constituencies than it is in the more electorally secure constituencies.*

Finally, moving beyond considerations relating to the DfE, the conversion process outlined above indicates that there is a potential point of influence for LEAs. While they do not have a direct role on the application side — except to the extent that they have influence over boards of governors — they are party to negotiations over how assets and liabilities are transferred from the LEA to any converting school. Given this, they may have the opportunity to hold up or expedite conversion, depending on their policy preferences. This suggests a hypothesis that relates the partisan control of an LEA to conversion probability.

**Hypothesis 5** *The conversion process is less likely to be completed where schools must negotiate asset arrangements with Labour-controlled LEAs.*

## 4 The Data

I test the hypotheses developed above using a constructed data set containing information on all secondary schools in England. I concentrate on secondary schools as this has largely been the focus of the Academy conversion policy. Primary schools have started converting, but in much lower numbers and there is generally less experience of the scheme at this level.

The basis of the data set is the DfE spreadsheet released as part of “Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2013” (Department for Education 2013). This contains information on all maintained schools in England, with columns indicating the type of

school (i.e. converter Academy, sponsor-led Academy, Community School, etc), as well as enrollment size and free school meal proportion. The latter is the standard measure for capturing social disadvantage of the student body. Note that the information is based on administrative records, and is correct as at January 2013.

I merge this baseline data set with data on the most recent OFSTED inspection reports (up to 2010) for nearly all schools in the sample — as used by Allen and Burgess (2012). I merge the combined school-level data with the 2010 constituency-level general election results provided by Norris (2010). Finally, I merge these data with local election results up to 2010, as made available by the project coordinated by Rallings and Thrasher (1997). This allowed me to construct variables that capture that partisan control of each LEA in 2010.

Together, this constructed data set yields a sample of 3089 secondary schools in England. I then restrict the sample to those that are not sponsor-led Academies as my interest is in those that were, in principle, able to convert to this status from 2010 onwards. I further discard the 28 schools that cannot be matched to an OFSTED rating. This yields a sample of 2681 schools, 1130 of which had converted by January 2013. Lest there be any doubt about the size of the Academy conversion programme, these figures make clear that it involved around 30% of secondary schools in only its second academic year of operation.

As a final step, I merge in DfE data made available by Rogers (2010) on those schools that had expressed an interest to the DfE in converting to Academy status up to around mid-July 2010. Note that this is not the same as a formal application to convert, but it does capture an important aspect of the application side that would otherwise be rather opaque. While it might appear unfortunate that these data are currently only available for such an early point in the policy process — around one month after the passage of the *Academies Act 2010* — this turns out not to be an important empirical problem. It is not the case that only very few schools had time to express their interest in conversion by this point: 931 had done so. Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that the early-interest list captures the degree of school demand for conversion in a reasonable way. This is important because the use of these data allows me to try to disentangle some of the application and

authorization effects that underlie the hypotheses developed above.

## 5 The Political Distribution of Converter Academies

I begin the analysis with a graphical exploration of the patterns of interest in and conversion to Academy status, which I then supplement with a more systematic multivariate analysis. The prediction from hypothesis 1 is that schools will be more likely to apply for conversion when they are located in more strongly Conservative constituencies. To assess whether this is the case, figure 1 shows the proportion of schools that expressed an interest in converting against the difference between the Conservative and Labour vote shares for the relevant constituencies in 2010. The overlaid histogram shows the number of schools that fall within each ‘bin’ in order to make clear which parts of the scatter plot are drawn from smaller amounts of data. The figure lends rather strong support to the hypothesis as, notwithstanding some noise to the relationship, conversion interest is clearly increasing in Conservative vote share.

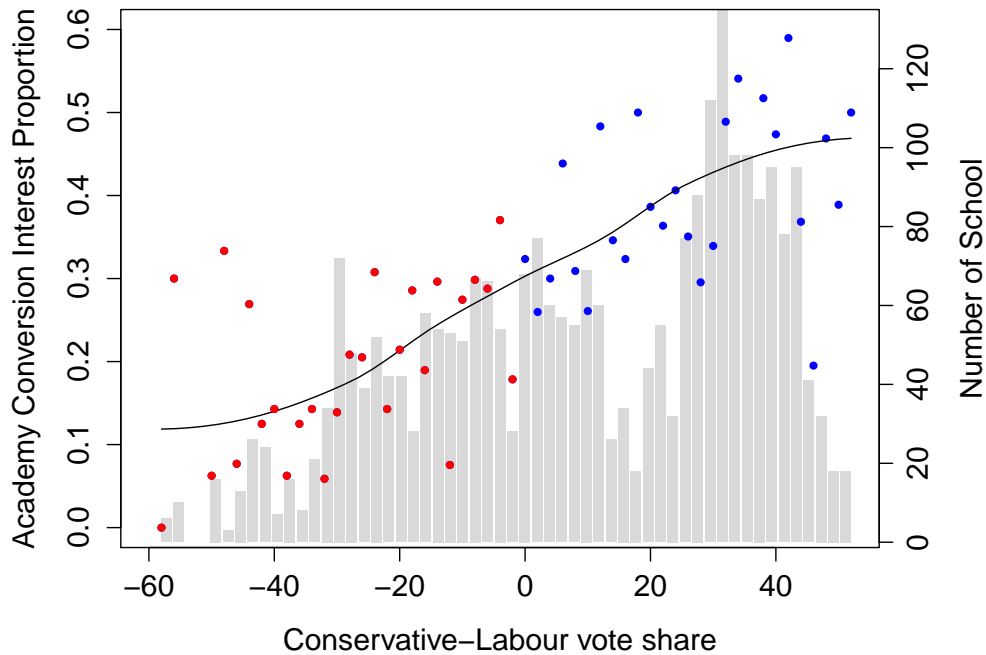


FIGURE 1 *Proportion of schools expressing an interesting in converting to academy status (July 2010), by relative Conservative constituency-level electoral strength in 2010.*

Hypothesis 3, regarding the likelihood of authorisation to convert, can be assessed in a similar way. Figure 2 plots the proportion of schools that had converted by January 2013, conditional on having expressed an interest in July 2010, against the Conservative–Labour vote share. There is no evidence in this figure that conversions in Labour seats have occurred at a lower rate than in Conservative seats. Rather, the vast majority of schools expressing an interest in 2010 have subsequently converted, no matter what the partisan complexion of their locality. Indeed, the underlying data indicate that of the 918 schools in the sample that expressed an interest, 860 had converted by January 2013.

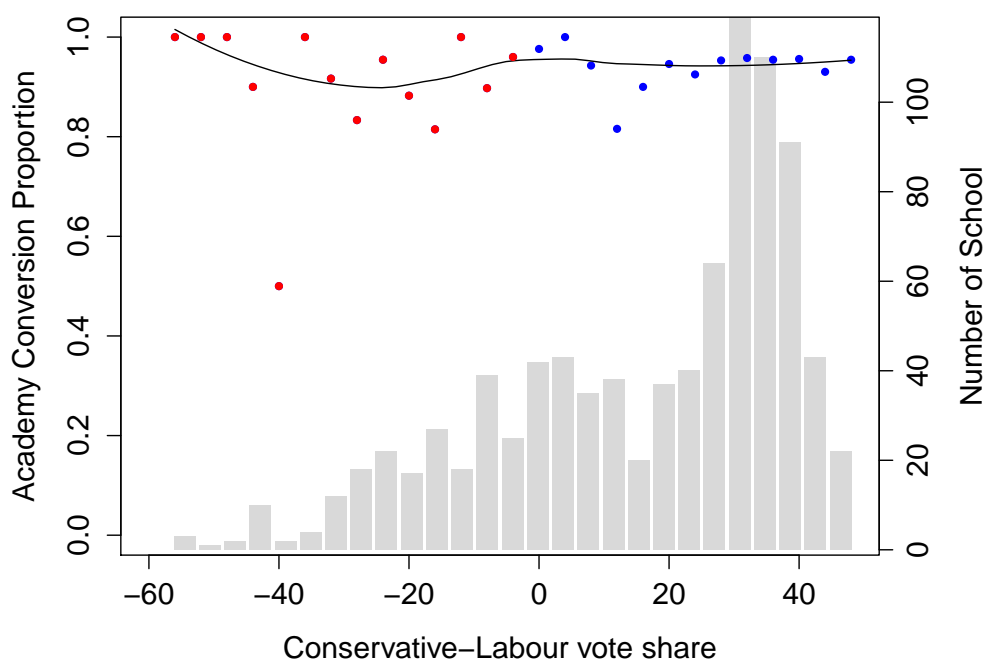


FIGURE 2 *Proportion of schools expressing an interest in Academy conversion (July 2010) that subsequently converted (January 2013), by relative Conservative constituency-level electoral strength in 2010.*

Figure 3 shows the equivalent data for all conversions, regardless of whether the school expressed an interest in July 2010 or not. It confirms patterns suggested by the previous two figures of more conversions in more Conservative constituencies. From these data, a basic pattern is clearly visible: Academy conversion has occurred disproportionately in Conservative seats.

This pattern of greater conversion rates in Conservative constituencies may seem un-



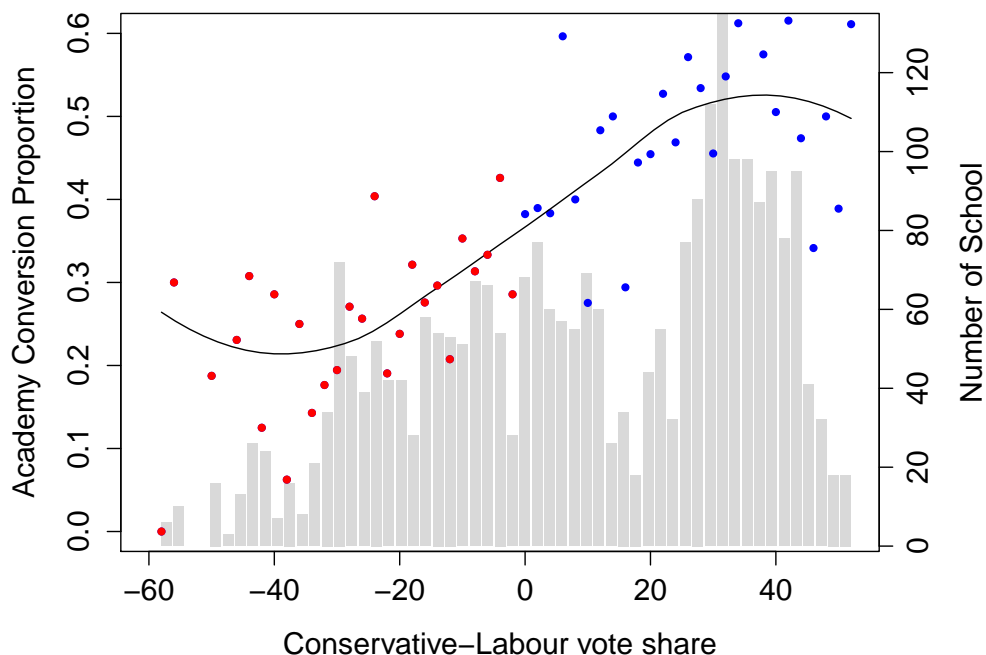


FIGURE 3 *Proportion of schools converting to academy status (January 2013), by relative Conservative constituency-level electoral strength in 2010.*

surprising given that the rules governing conversion were written such that more successful schools — in terms of OFSTED inspection reports — were more likely to be approved for the transition. That is, if more successful schools are more prevalent in wealthier areas and those areas disproportionately vote Conservative, then this could explain the pattern. However, data from OFSTED inspections do not lend support for this view. Figure 4 plots average OFSTED ‘overall’ inspection results (on a scale where ‘Outstanding’ corresponds to 4 and ‘Inadequate’ corresponds to 1) against the Conservative–Labour vote share, and reveals that there are not systematically higher results in Conservative constituencies. As such, there is little reason to think that the disproportionate conversion in more strongly Conservative areas is driven by school quality.

## 6 Explaining Interest in Academy Conversion

I now turn to a series of logit models to test hypotheses 1 and 3 more systematically. From the administrative records, I use data on pupil numbers and the FSM proportion of

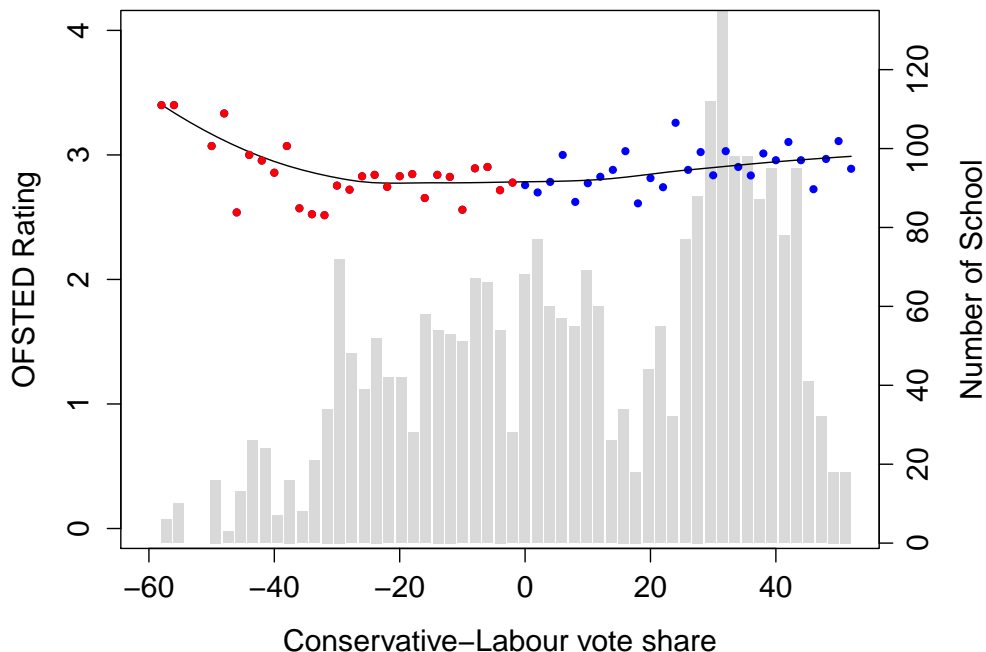


FIGURE 4 *Average OFSTED ‘overall’ inspection rating, by relative Conservative electoral strength at the constituency level in 2010.*

enrolled pupils. As OFSTED school inspection reports were used to (partially) indicate which schools would be allowed to convert, I use these data, as well. Finally, to test the two hypotheses directly, I use data on the Conservative vote share margin over Labour in the constituency of each school (for hypothesis 1), as well as dummy variables for the party of the sitting MP after 2010 (for hypothesis 3). I divide Con–Lab vote share variable by 100 and the Pupils variable by 1000 so that the respective estimated coefficients require few decimal places for presentation.

Table 1 presents the results of estimating models that focus on a test of hypothesis 1. Model 1 shows the estimates of a standard logit model where expression of interest in Academy conversion is the dependent variable. Model 2 re-estimates the same specification, but this time including random effects at the LEA level. The logic for doing this is that individual LEAs may have an impact on whether schools express an interest, either through the presence of their representatives on boards of governors, or through persuasion or coercion of a less formal kind. Estimating LEA-level random effects allows for

	1	2	3	4	5
(Intercept)	-2.48*** (0.42)	-2.85*** (0.47)	-2.63*** (0.45)	-2.62*** (0.45)	-1.77*** (0.59)
Pupils	0.72*** (0.13)	0.84*** (0.15)	0.74*** (0.13)	0.74*** (0.13)	0.85*** (0.15)
FSM	-2.64*** (0.59)	-2.74*** (0.70)	-2.49*** (0.60)	-2.54*** (0.61)	-2.84*** (0.71)
OFSTED: Satisfactory	0.51 (0.39)	0.50 (0.42)	0.55 (0.42)	0.55 (0.42)	0.50 (0.42)
OFSTED: Good	1.28*** (0.39)	1.44*** (0.42)	1.33*** (0.41)	1.34*** (0.41)	1.45*** (0.41)
OFSTED: Outstanding	2.25*** (0.39)	2.47*** (0.43)	2.31*** (0.42)	2.32*** (0.42)	2.50*** (0.42)
Con-Lab	1.34*** (0.21)	1.32*** (0.32)	1.23*** (0.27)	1.01*** (0.29)	2.05*** (0.41)
LEA: Lab			-0.03 (0.17)	0.26 (0.21)	
LEA: Con			0.07 (0.14)	0.12 (0.14)	
LEA: LD			0.15 (0.33)	0.18 (0.33)	
(Con-Lab) × (LEA: Lab)				1.74** (0.79)	
Managerial Population					-4.54*** (1.60)
AIC	2883.35	2687.12	2798.48	2795.51	2681.06
BIC	2924.33	2733.97	2856.75	2859.60	2733.76
Log Likelihood	-1434.67	-1335.56	-1389.24	-1386.75	-1331.53
Deviance	2869.35	2671.12	2778.48	2773.51	2663.06
N: obs	2579	2579	2506	2506	2579
N: LEA		150			150
Variance: LEA		1.19			1.14
Variance: Residual		1.00			1.00

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

TABLE 1 *Estimated effects, based on logit models, on the probability of a school expressing an interest in Academy conversion.*

these unobserved factors to be controlled for across the 150 LEAs in the sample. The estimates and inferences from both of these models are very much in line, however, suggesting that LEA-level factors are not of great importance in explaining school conversion interest. This inference is reinforced by the results from model 3, which includes dummy variables indicating whether the LEA is controlled by Conservative, Labour, or Liberal Democrat councillors — using ‘No overall control’ is the base category.

Regarding the more administrative variables, larger schools are more likely to have been interested, as are schools with lower FSM proportions. These results are intuitive. Larger schools are more likely to have the capacity to take on administrative functions that were previously provided by LEAs. Similarly, lower FSM proportions are likely to be strongly correlated with lower use of special educational services that LEAs typically provide; thus making separation from those bodies less costly and disruptive. Looking at the OFSTED report results, there are, again, few surprises. ‘Outstanding’ schools are more likely to have expressed an interest in conversion; fitting with the publicized position of the DfE regarding their eligibility. Naturally enough, the likelihood of expressing interest is estimated to decline monotonically with the OFSTED rating.

These control variables all perform rather well, but the more theoretically interesting results are for the remaining variables. For the Conservative–Labour vote share variable, the estimated coefficient across all models is positive, fairly precisely estimated, and stable. As such, there is strong evidence in support of hypothesis 1. Model 3 provides no evidence that partisan control of LEAs had a direct influence on expressions of interest in Academy conversion. However, model 4 introduces an interaction variable that is used to test hypothesis 2 — relating to the idea that schools in a more Conservative constituency but under the control of a Labour LEA will be more likely to wish to convert. This hypothesis does indeed find support as the coefficient on the Conservative–Labour vote share difference is estimated to be almost three times as large for schools operating under Labour LEAs. Note that this also implies that schools in more strongly Labour-voting seats are much less likely to seek to convert when controlled by a Labour LEA.

As a final robustness test, model 5 re-estimates the model 2 specification, but with an

additional control variable included. One reasonable concern is that it may not be the ideological orientation of a school’s surrounding constituency that is driving its propensity to seek to convert, but rather the socio-economic standing and therefore capabilities of the parents and governors. That is to say, conversion to Academy status may be seen to imply greater managerial responsibilities for school governors, and those with less experience in this realm may prefer to retain the support afforded by LEA control. This issue may confound the inferences regarding Conservative–Labour vote share if parent and governor capabilities are correlated with patterns of voting — which seems all too plausible as the Conservatives are typically thought to represent the higher-income sections of society. In order to assess whether this socio-economic capabilities mechanism is operating instead of the more directly political, model 5 includes a variable that measures the fraction of the constituency population that falls into any of the following three National Statistics Socio-Economic classifications (as provided by Norris (2010)): ‘Higher managerial and professional occupations’; ‘Lower managerial and professional occupations’, and; ‘Small employers and own account workers’. This yields a variable that I denote as ‘Managerial Population’, and which has a sample mean and standard deviation of 0.25 and 0.06, respectively. Thus, it captures a meaningfully large proportion of the population that plausibly has the experience to take on extra managerial responsibilities in schools. The results show that the inference on the Conservative–Labour vote share variable is robust to the inclusion of this managerial population variable. Indeed, the magnitude of the vote share coefficient actually doubles with its inclusion and the managerial coefficient is actually negative. Unreported specifications confirm that this negative sign is true in a partial-correlation sense as excluding Con–Lab switches its sign, albeit without achieving statistical significance. Moreover, the inference regarding hypothesis 2 is also robust to the inclusion of Managerial Population.

While inferences from the coefficient estimates are valuable, they can become clearer when translated into something more substantive (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). To that end, I use figure 5 to show how, on the basis of the results from model 1, the predicted probability of Academy-interest varies with the Conservative–Labour vote share

variable. The figure is probabilities and confidence intervals are depicted separately for each of the OFSTED rating categories, with the other predictors are held at their sample-mean values for this purpose. It illustrates how, in the most Conservative constituencies, Academy-interest probability is around twice as high as it is in the least Conservative constituencies. Given an OFSTED rating of ‘Outstanding’, a school in the strongest Labour constituency had around a 1-in-3 chance of expressing interest, while such a school in the strongest Conservative seat had around a 2-in-3 chance. Furthermore, the precision of these estimated probabilities allows the model to distinguish between the effects of vote share differences of much smaller magnitudes than the entire sample range. In sum, the estimated effects both support hypothesis 1, and do so in a way that demonstrates a large substantive effect from this political variable. Interest in Academy conversion amongst schools is strongly correlated with local Conservative electoral strength.

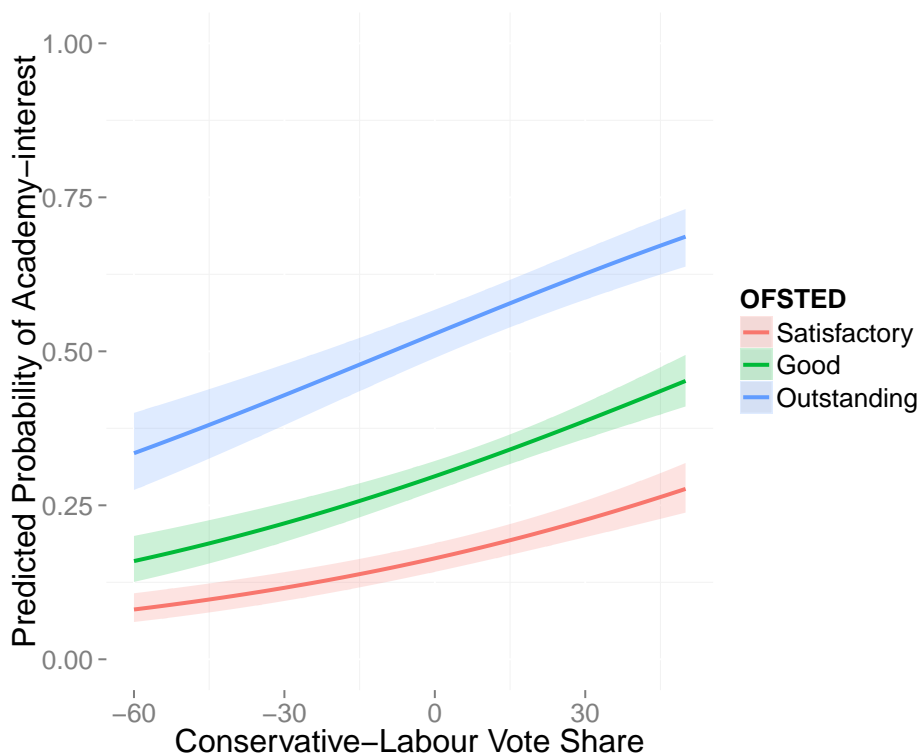


FIGURE 5 *Predicted probability of schools expressing interest in Academy conversion as a function of the Conservative-Labour vote share, for each of ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’, and ‘Satisfactory’ OFSTED ratings. 90% confidence intervals shown in transparent colours. Other predictors held at their sample means.*

This inference is reinforced by figure 6, which is analogous to figure 5, but depicts

the results from model 4 and so how the constituency political orientation interacts with LEA political control. As before, again pupil numbers and the FSM proportion are set at their sample mean, and now the OFSTED rating is set to ‘Good’. The figure shows that there is generally a positive relationship between Conservative–Labour vote share and conversion interest, but that this relationship is much stronger for schools controlled by Labour LEAs. In the most Labour-voting constituencies, Labour LEA control reduces conversion interest as compared to other LEA partisanship, but in the most Conservative-voting constituencies, it markedly increases it. As such, hypothesis 2 receives good support.

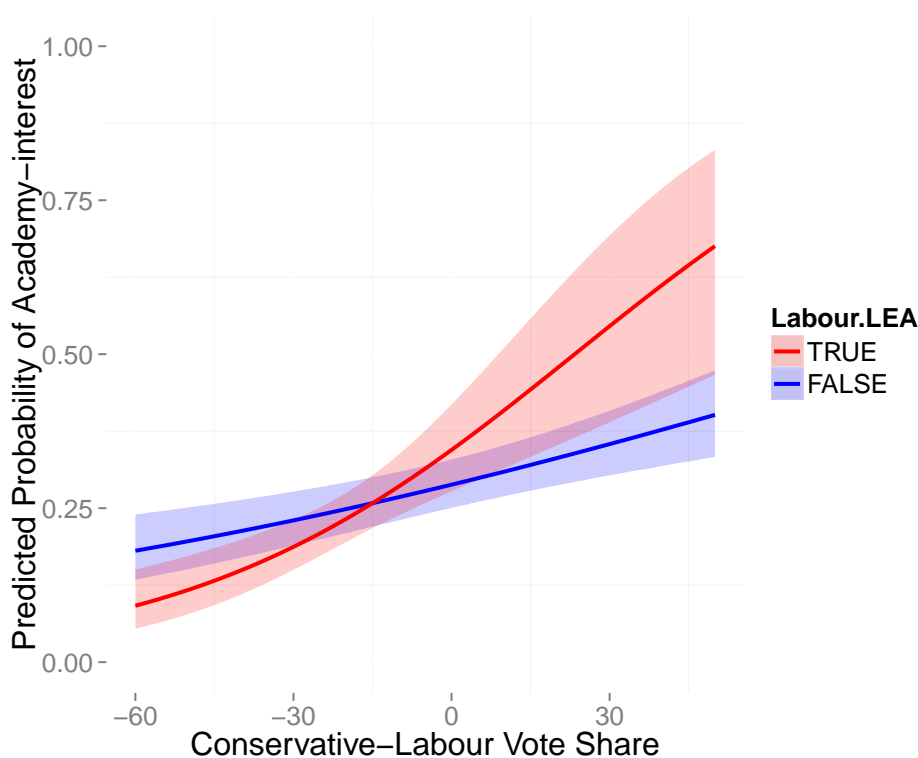


FIGURE 6 Predicted probability (based on ) of schools (rated ‘Good’ by OFSTED) expressing interest in Academy conversion as a function of the Conservative–Labour vote share, conditional on being in a Labour-controlled LEA or not. 90% confidence intervals shown in transparent colours. Other predictors held at their sample means.

## 7 Explaining Academy Conversion

If politics explains school-level interest in converting, does it also explain conversion itself? I answer this question in two steps. First, I analyse the subsample of schools that expressed

an interest in conversion back in July 2010 in order to isolate the DfE authorization side of conversion from the schools' application side. However, as the conversion process has developed since 2010, there are many schools that are now Academies but did not initially express an interest in converting. Given that, I conduct a second analysis of Academy conversion amongst the full sample of schools in order to draw out the correlates of conversion overall.

## 7.1 Conversion Amongst the 'Interested'

Table 2 presents results from estimating models used to test hypothesis 3 regarding the probability of conversion authorisation being higher, on average, in Conservative-held seats than Labour-held seats, and hypothesis 4 regarding higher authorisation rates in marginal constituencies. The dependent variable for these models is a dummy variable indicating whether a school had converted by January 2013. As discussed above, the sample is limited to those schools that had previously expressed interest. In principle, it may be desirable to estimate Heckman selection models here as a way of accounting for the two-stage process of schools applying (i.e. selecting-in) and the DfE authorising. However, this approach is only appropriate when the estimated models in the two stages can be assumed to have a least one different predictor from each other — or if the analyst is willing to make rather strong assumptions about functional form. That is neither possible nor appropriate here, unfortunately.

Model 6 is used to test hypothesis 3 by employing dummy variables for whether each school is in a constituency held by a Conservative or Liberal Democrat MP. The OFSTED dummies are reduced by one category as the inclusion of the eight 'Unsatisfactory' schools in the sample leads to estimation problems for the remaining OFSTED coefficients. In contrast to the hypothesis, there is no evidence that conversion occurred at a higher rate amongst schools in such constituencies *conditional on them having expressed an interest in converting*. Model 7 is used to test hypothesis 4. The 'Marginal Constituency' variable is defined as a dummy variable equal to 1 if the Conservatives and Labour were the two largest parties and their vote shares were within  $\pm 3$  percentage points. Again, I find



	6	7	8	9
(Intercept)	0.97 (0.66)	1.36*** (0.51)	0.54 (0.60)	0.15 (0.70)
Pupils	1.05** (0.43)	1.02** (0.42)	1.07** (0.42)	1.02** (0.42)
FSM	-2.26 (1.41)	-3.08** (1.21)	-2.59* (1.35)	-2.23 (1.43)
OFSTED: Good	0.71** (0.35)	0.70** (0.35)	0.76** (0.35)	0.84** (0.35)
OFSTED: Outstanding	0.81** (0.39)	0.80** (0.38)	0.90** (0.38)	1.02*** (0.39)
MP: Con	0.52 (0.36)			0.44 (0.43)
MP: LD	-0.07 (0.48)			0.17 (0.51)
Marginal Constituency		1.16 (1.03)		1.50 (1.06)
LEA: Lab			0.86* (0.49)	1.08** (0.51)
LEA: Con			0.87*** (0.33)	0.78** (0.37)
LEA: LD			0.16 (0.80)	0.29 (0.84)
AIC	414.66	413.92	405.20	406.94
BIC	453.11	447.56	443.30	459.33
Log Likelihood	-199.33	-199.96	-194.60	-192.47
Deviance	398.66	399.92	389.20	384.94
N: obs	903	903	865	865
N: LEA	132	132		
Variance: LEA	0.05	0.00		
Variance: Residual	1.00	1.00		

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

TABLE 2 *Estimated effects, based on logit models, on the probability of Academy conversion authorisation being granted, conditional on an expression of conversion interest being received.*

no evidence to support the hypothesis regarding marginal constituencies, and unreported results confirm that this inference is unchanged for a marginal band defined in the ranges  $\pm 2$  up to  $\pm 4.5$ . While the coefficient has the correct sign and is larger than its standard error, it does not meet conventional statistical significance levels.

Model 8 provides an assessment of hypothesis 5, regarding the importance of LEAs in the conversion process. As described above, prospective converters must negotiate their transition to independence with the LEA and it is possible for LEAs to exert some influence on the process in this way. As before, dummies for LEA control are used, with ‘no overall control’ (NOC) as the base category. The results do not show support for hypothesis 5. Specifically, they indicate that schools under Conservative LEAs were more likely to convert *than those under NOC LEAs*. Surprisingly, schools under Labour LEAs were also more likely to convert than those under NOC LEAs. It is important to note that the results do not indicate a different propensity to convert between Conservative and Labour LEAs, for which the estimated coefficients are not statistically significantly different from each other. Of course, all of these results are conditional on schools having expressed an interest in converting in the first place. The Labour finding is intriguing, but without further data it is difficult to discern what is causing it. One speculative possibility is that the DfE is more likely to authorize conversion amongst schools operating under Labour LEAs as a way of reducing influence of the Labour politicians on schools.

Finally, model 9 shows that the main inferences are robust to the estimation of a model that tests all hypotheses simultaneously. It makes clear that the parameter estimates for all variables are very stable across all specifications. In sum, looking at the controls, table 2 indicates that larger schools were more likely to convert and schools with a greater FSM proportion were less likely to convert. Meanwhile, regarding the more political theories, there is no evidence that the DfE favoured schools in government-held constituencies or that it favoured schools in more marginal constituencies. There is, however, evidence that it may have favoured schools operating under Conservative *and* Labour LEAs.

## 7.2 Conversion Amongst All Schools

Table 3 presents results from estimating a series of models used to identify the predictors of Academy conversion amongst all secondary schools in England. Model 10 is estimated using the school-level administrative data, as well as the Conservative–Labour vote share variable. This model replicates the Academy-interest findings in the sense that the vote share difference is estimated as a strong predictor of Academy conversion. In model 11, the LEA-control dummy variables are included. Once again, both Conservative *and* Labour control of the LEA are estimated as statistically significant predictors of Academy conversion compared to NOC-LEAs, but not different from each other. There appears to be an interesting feature of NOC councils that leads to a lower level of Academy conversion, however the data used here do not provide a way of probing the mechanism that leads to this outcome. Once the LEA dummies are included (in model 11), the estimated magnitude of the vote share coefficient drops by about 35%, but does remain statistically significant. This suggests that some of the effect of the vote share variable comes from its correlation with LEA control, but clearly not all of it.

As with the conversion-interest results, it is helpful to illustrate the results of the statistical models. In figure 7, I plot the predicted probability of a school converting against the Conservative–Labour vote share, and do so separately for the top three OFSTED ratings. Comparing this figure with figure 5, the results are rather similar. Note, however, that for any given level of the vote share variable, the predicted probability of conversion is around 5 percentage points higher than the predicted probability of a school simply expressing an interest in conversion in 2010. This reflects the greater penetration of the policy as the DfE has had more time to implement it in the following three years.

## 8 Conclusion

Analyzing a recent large-scale policy decision within the English schools system, I have documented several consequential features of the ‘Academization’ of English schools being undertaken by the current coalition government. Most fundamentally, I have shown that

	10	11
(Intercept)	-1.82*** (0.40)	-1.88*** (0.36)
Pupils	0.98*** (0.15)	0.85*** (0.13)
FSM	-3.77*** (0.68)	-3.49*** (0.57)
OFSTED: Satisfactory	0.10 (0.33)	0.14 (0.32)
OFSTED: Good	0.85*** (0.33)	0.72** (0.31)
OFSTED: Outstanding	1.71*** (0.34)	1.57*** (0.32)
Con-Lab	1.27*** (0.31)	0.83*** (0.26)
LEA: Lab		0.35** (0.16)
LEA: Con		0.49*** (0.13)
LEA: LD		0.52 (0.32)
AIC	2840.41	2980.10
BIC	2887.25	3038.37
Log Likelihood	-1412.20	-1480.05
Deviance	2824.41	2960.10
N: obs	2579	2506
N: LEA	150	
Variance: LEA	1.19	
Variance: Residual	1.00	

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

TABLE 3 *Estimated effects, based on logit models, on the probability of Academy conversion authorisation being granted, conditional on an expression of conversion interest being received.*

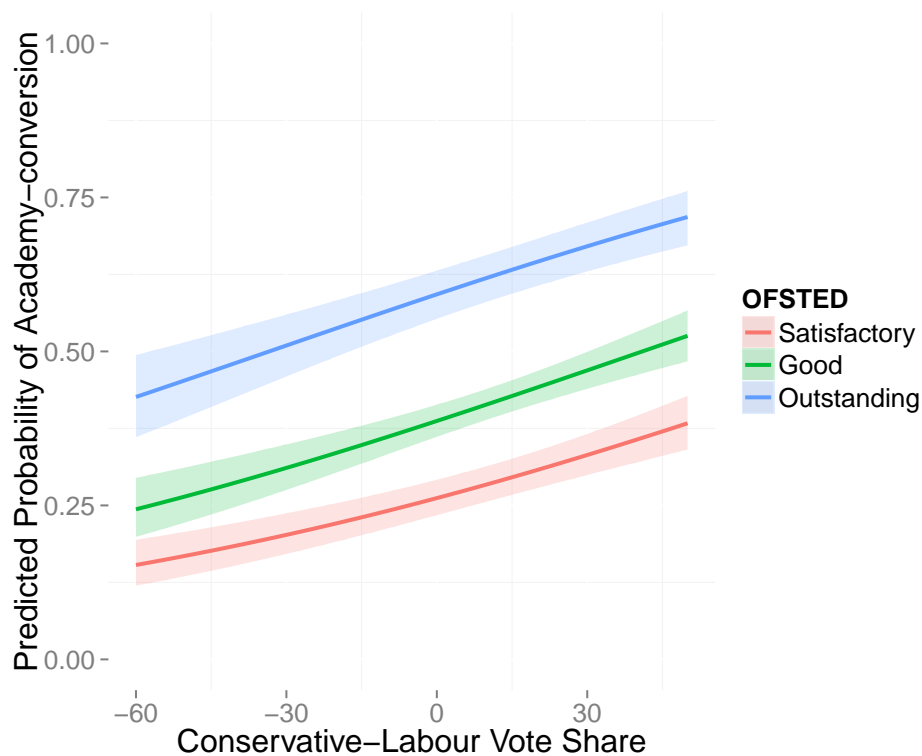


FIGURE 7 *Predicted probability of schools converting to Academy status as a function of the Conservative-Labour vote share, for each of ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’, and ‘Satisfactory’ OFSTED ratings. 90% confidence intervals shown in transparent colours. Figure drawn based on a school under Conservative-controlled LEA and other predictors held at their sample means.*

there is a very marked political distribution of Academy conversion within the country, such that schools in more strongly Conservative constituencies are around twice as likely to convert than schools in more strongly Labour constituencies. This remains true even after controlling for school quality and the social deprivation of pupils. As such, the Academy conversion policy is one that has disproportionately influenced traditional Conservative voters.

A second core finding is that this political distribution of Academy conversion is most likely driven by the application side from schools, rather than the authorization side from the DfE. That is to say, there is little evidence that the skew that makes schools in Conservative constituencies so much more likely to convert is the result of the DfE being more likely to authorize conversion of ‘Conservative schools’, *conditional on a school having applied to convert*. One notable aspect of the application side is that schools in local areas that are a political mismatch for their controlling LEA are even more likely to wish to

convert to Academy status. There appears to be an important element of freeing some schools from local political constraints in this policy. Thus, one inferentially valuable aspect of this finding is that it allows some degree of distinction between the importance of simple ideological beliefs about the likely effectiveness of the Academy as an institution for providing education, as compared to the more organizational-politics version of policy clashes between school and LEA. While the former certainly cannot be ruled out generally, it seems unlikely that it can be used to explain the political-mismatch finding. Whether the DfE — or its political leadership — foresaw the differential demand across schools for conversion, and so its ultimate political distribution, is not possible to discern from these data. However, it is possible to be fairly confident that the device of effectively pre-approving conversion by ‘Outstanding’ schools did not come with its own in-built political bias as the distribution of OFSTED ratings is fairly uniform across constituencies, politically.

On the authorization side of the Academy conversion process, the evidence suggests that the primary determinants of receiving authorization from the DfE are administrative in nature. School size, social need, and OFSTED ratings are the strongest predictors of authorization for those schools that, themselves, expressed an interest in converting. I find no evidence that schools in Conservative or Liberal Democrat constituencies were favoured for conversion, nor schools in marginal constituencies. Political control of LEAs appears to play a role, but it is not possible to discern whether this is the result of choices by the DfE or actions by the LEAs. Further research would be of value, here.

A core contribution of this paper is to highlight political features of the policy reform process that reach far down the hierarchy of the education system. While previous work has studied political aspects of education policy by focusing on the distinctive features of national education policies (e.g. Exley and Ball 2011; Pierson 1998), the more disaggregated approach taken here bears considerable fruit. On the theoretical side, it provides evidence for the politicization of those not often considered to be political: unelected local elites. As civil society becomes more involved in the provision of services, this finding would seem to have important implications. On the direct empirical side, it reveals an emerging bifurcation between the prevailing schooling model in Labour as opposed to Conservative (and Liberal

Democrat) constituencies. In the former, around 25% of schools have converted to Academy status while in the latter, it is around 50%.

While the English schooling system has long seen important local differences — such as the variable adoption of the comprehensive model across LEAs — this discrepancy is potentially rather important. There seems every possibility that it could lead to politically-based variation across schools in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and various other aspects of the educational experience. Troublingly, a range of previous studies have found evidence that increased school autonomy yields improved student outcomes (Clark 2009; Fuchs and Wößmann 2007; Gibbons, Machin, and Silva 2008; Hanushek, Link, and Wößmann 2011; Wößmann 2003), and early evidence suggests that Academization *may* follow this pattern (Machin and Veroit 2012). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from interviewed head teachers suggests that the financial benefits to schools of conversion were large at the outset of the scheme, but have since declined markedly. If that is true, then the way the policy has developed, by design or otherwise, will have led to a financial rebalancing in favour of schools in Conservative (and Liberal Democrat) constituencies. Data are not yet available to assess this possibility, but it constitutes an important avenue for further research. Thus, regarding the distribution of both student outcomes and school-level funding, there appear to be important avenues for further research.

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