

Move School Board Elections On-Cycle to Restore Local Control

By Max Eden

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Key Points

- Off-cycle school board elections deeply depress voter turnout and minimize genuine “local control” in public education.
- When school board elections are held on-cycle, school board members become more likely to hold the political and policy beliefs of their constituents.
- Allowing school board candidates to display partisan affiliation would equip voters to make an informed choice in an era of increasingly diverging values and priorities for schools.

Conservatives insist that education is an issue best governed through local control. But we’ve paid too little attention to whether communities truly have such control. Unfortunately, the fact that school board members are by and large elected in off-cycle, nonpartisan elections renders local control largely chimerical.

If we want a public education system that caters to the cultural, policy, and pedagogical preferences of communities, then we should ensure that more citizens participate in local school board elections—and that they have a clear idea about what the candidates stand for. To boost election turnout, school board elections should be moved on-cycle (i.e., held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of an even year). And to boost the signal as to what candidates stand for, school board ballots should allow partisan affiliation to appear next to candidates’ names.

The Conservative Case for On-Cycle Elections

The conservative case for on-cycle elections could not be more compelling: If we value local control, then it should matter whether citizens engage in the democratic process and whether their elected officials represent their values. Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be the case, as voter turnout in off-cycle school board elections frequently hovers between 10 and 15 percent,¹ compared to 66 percent of eligible voters who turned out for the 2020 national election.²

Only 13 states effectively mandate that school board elections be held on-cycle, eight states hold their school board elections in November of an odd year, 16 provide localities discretion in election timing, and 12 mandate off-cycle, non-November elections. Data from when elections were held in states that afford local flexibility were prohibitively difficult to collect to the point where a full analysis could be run. Nevertheless, based on my

review, on-cycle elections in those states appear to be the exception rather than the rule. There is, then, a massive deficit of local democratic participation—one could even call it legally mandated voter suppression—in public education that state legislators could remedy.

Political participation may be a virtue that conservatives support in and of itself, but political scientists have also demonstrated the significant political consequences of holding school board elections on-cycle rather than off-cycle.

In a 2021 paper, Michael T. Hartney and Sam D. Hayes examined whether election timing (on- or off-cycle) in California affected the ideological match on fiscal issues between the local electorate and school board members.³ They found that school board members who were elected on-cycle were more likely to reflect their communities' values on fiscal matters than those who were elected off-cycle. In districts where elections were held on-cycle, a 10 percentage point Republican advantage in voter registration corresponded to an increase of half a standard deviation in school board member fiscal conservatism. By contrast, in off-cycle districts, that difference in the electorate corresponded to only “a quarter of a standard deviation more conservative board”—that is, half the effect as in on-cycle districts.⁴

Conservatives were also more likely to hold school board majorities in Republican districts when elections were held on-cycle. A 10-point Republican advantage corresponded to a 27 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a majority fiscally conservative board in on-cycle districts, compared to only a 10 percentage point increase in off-cycle districts.

Hartney and Hayes also documented that school board members elected on-cycle were more likely to reflect their communities' views on education reform. Hartney and Hayes compared local vote share between two Democratic candidates for state superintendent, whose election was widely billed as a referendum between support for and opposition to charter schools, with a survey measure of school board member opinion on charter schools. They found that “board members elected in on-cycle elections were far more likely to share their constituents' views on charter schooling than

candidates who had been elected in off-cycle races.”⁵

Based on this research, the conservative case for on-cycle elections is straightforward and powerful: Greater local democratic participation will empower local control by yielding school board members whose values more closely reflect their constituents and who will make policy and fiscal decisions that more closely reflect parents' preferences.

The Liberal Case for On-Cycle Elections

None of those reasons, of course, should exclusively appeal to conservatives. Indeed, liberals should also strongly support moving school board elections on-cycle.

One of the main Democratic political talking points of the past few years has been the need to fight voter suppression and expand democratic participation. Congressional Democrats have proposed a raft of measures intended to increase voter turnout in the For the People Act, such as instituting automatic voter registration, requiring vote by mail, mandating 15 days of early voting, and prohibiting voter ID. If their goal truly is to increase turnout and improve representation, then Hartney has shown in his recent Manhattan Institute report that moving elections on-cycle would provide a greater boost than all those measures combined.⁶

This boost in voter turnout would also provide a clear boon to another cause that liberals prioritize: racial equity (defined in this case by minority political participation). Researchers have found that the share of minority voters increases in higher-turnout presidential races compared to off-cycle elections.⁷ It should, then, be unsurprising that studies have demonstrated that minority-heavy municipalities elect a greater share of minority candidates when municipal elections are held on-cycle rather than off-cycle. In addition to the progressive conviction that greater minority political representation is an inherent good, some studies have linked more diverse school boards to improved outcomes for minority students.⁸

The Political Reality of Education

Even though moving school board elections should, in principle, have broad bipartisan appeal, in practice

any such effort likely must be a conservative-led partisan effort for one simple reason: It would threaten the power of teachers unions. So long as school board elections are low-turnout affairs, teachers unions' get-out-the-vote apparatus will have an outsize influence. Hartney found that teachers unions' candidates were 8 percentage points more likely to win in off-cycle elections than on-cycle ones.⁹

Conservatives should, by all means, attempt to appeal in good faith to their liberal counterparts based on shared and particular values. The public would likely be better served if both sides came together to expand democratic participation in school board elections. But conservative policymakers should not shy away from pursuing this reform on a partisan basis, given that liberal opposition would be more truly rooted in interest-group pressure than principle.

Conservatives should, furthermore, strongly consider going a step further to allow partisan affiliation to appear next to candidates' names on the ballots. This may strike some who are used to the tradition of "nonpartisan" elections as unseemly. But policymakers should reflect on the principle behind this tradition and the political reality it has engendered.

The political decision to make school board elections "nonpartisan" is rooted in the same progressive principle that placed these elections off-cycle: that education should be less subject to the whims of citizens and more the province of "experts." Just as moving school board elections on-cycle would expand democratic participation, allowing partisan affiliation to appear on the ballot would provide a clear signal to voters about where school board candidates are likely to stand on various issues.

Even in an on-cycle system, school board elections would still be subject to outsize influence, in terms of financial and organizational power, from teachers unions. And it's important to realize that teachers

union leaders are not necessarily committed to "apolitical" education. For example, the president of Los Angeles' teachers union recently stated: "Education is political. People don't want to say that, but it is." She went on to articulate her political philosophy of education: "It's OK that our babies may not have learned all their times tables. . . . They know the words *insurrection* and *coup*."¹⁰

Our facially nonpartisan system of education governance also conceals the political reality that much of public education's expert class holds firm ideological commitments substantially out of step with the broader public. Take, for example, the most controversial education issue of the year: critical race theory. A recent Manhattan Institute poll of 20 metropolitan areas, which skewed two-to-one Democrat-to-Republican, found that two-thirds of parents want critical race theory lessons and concepts such as "white privilege" and "systemic racism" purged from school curricula.¹¹ However, in September 2021, much of the public education establishment—most notably the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association—publicly joined forces with teachers unions to defend critical race theory in education against efforts by citizens, through their elected officials, to curtail it.¹²

From fiscal to pedagogical to policy to cultural considerations, our self-consciously "nonpartisan" system of education governance effectively conceals the reality that much of public education's "expert" class conforms to an ideological monoculture. In the long run, alternative professional associations should be built to support school board members representing communities that hold other values. In the short run, enabling more citizens to vote for school board members, providing those citizens with a clearer choice, and raising the political consciousness of school board candidates by enabling partisan affiliation would potentially be the most significant actions conservatives could take to restore meaningful local control.

Appendix

Table A1. Timing of States' School Board Elections

State	November, Even	November, Odd	Varies by Locality	Mandated Non-November
Alabama ¹³			X	
Alaska ¹⁴			X	
Arizona ¹⁵	X			
Arkansas ¹⁶			X	
California ¹⁷	X			
Colorado ¹⁸		X		
Connecticut ¹⁹			X	
Delaware ²⁰				X
Florida ²¹	X			
Georgia ²²			X	
Idaho ²³		X		
Illinois ²⁴				X
Indiana ²⁵	X			
Iowa ²⁶		X		
Kansas ²⁷		X		
Kentucky ²⁸	X			
Louisiana ²⁹	X			
Maine ³⁰			X	
Maryland ³¹	X			
Massachusetts ³²			X	
Michigan ³³	X			
Minnesota ³⁴			X	
Mississippi ³⁵			X	
Missouri ³⁶				X
Montana ³⁷				X
Nebraska ³⁸	X			
Nevada ³⁹	X			
New Hampshire ⁴⁰				X
New Jersey ⁴¹			X	
New Mexico ⁴²		X		
New York ⁴³				X
North Carolina ⁴⁴			X	
North Dakota ⁴⁵			X	
Ohio ⁴⁶		X		
Oklahoma ⁴⁷				X
Oregon ⁴⁸				X
Pennsylvania ⁴⁹		X		
Rhode Island ⁵⁰	X			
South Carolina ⁵¹			X	
South Dakota ⁵²				X
Tennessee ⁵³			X	
Texas ⁵⁴			X	
Utah ⁵⁵	X			
Vermont ⁵⁶				X
Virginia ⁵⁷			X	
Washington ⁵⁸		X		
West Virginia ⁵⁹				X
Wisconsin ⁶⁰				X
Wyoming ⁶¹	X			

Note: Hawaii not included as the school board members of the state's single school district are appointed.
Source: Author's compilation based on the cited material.

About the Author

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Notes

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