

SCHOOL BOARDS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROMISE

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In the United States there are over 13,000 independent school districts governed by school boards consisting of three to nine elected representatives from their community. They decide on curriculum, school construction and closures, staff compensation and for spending hundreds of billions of dollars annually. This dissertation seeks to explore the degree of democratic control communities exercise over school boards through elections. The perception is that voters and candidates do not participate in school board elections. This perception runs counter to the democratic promise of school boards as local offices. School board membership, often by design, is among the easiest office for a potential candidate to secure in terms of votes needed to win, campaign costs, and lack of political party gatekeepers.

I look at four aspects of school board elections to assess whether or not school boards do fulfill their promise of democratic control over local schools. First, what community conditions are related to the emergence of school board candidates? Next, what factors determine changes in the level of voter turnout for school board elections? Third, do voters and candidates change their behavior in response to exogenous political forces? Fourth, does incumbent defeat lead to measurable changes in school district outcomes?

To examine this I construct a new dataset around a panel of election records from over 300 Wisconsin school districts spanning the 2002-2012 elections. I combine these election results with administrative records on the demographics, finances, community partisanship, policy decisions,

and academic performance of school districts to explore the relationship between these conditions and election behavior through multilevel modeling. Wisconsin is selected because of the introduction of a reform that gave boards unanticipated freedom in setting employee compensation and work rules, which provides an exogenous shock to the information available to board members, voters, and potential candidates about the preferences of their community for public education and the role of school boards.

Despite the greater accessibility of school board office, on average, participation by both candidates and voters in board elections remains low and responded only weakly to a large external policy shock.