

School Boards and the Democratic Promise

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The Democratic Promise



When among the happiest people in the world, bands of peasants are seen regulating affairs of State under an oak, and always acting wisely, can we help scorning the ingenious methods of other nations, which make themselves illustrious and wrteched with so much art and mastery? ~ Rosseau





In the first place, God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards. ~ Mark Twain



- Most often, a locally elected body of 3-9 community members who make decisions about public schools
- Serve an administrative unit that is often not coterminous with other units
- Power to set property taxes, decide on curricula, hire and fire district leadership
- Powers available vary from state to state, WI school boards nominally have high power
- Together they represent tens of thousands of elected officials jointly responsible for spending hundreds of billions in local, state, and federal tax dollars

Why are they interesting for political science?



- One of most common elected offices in the U.S.
- Elected officials in special jurisdictions
- Much greater variety in jurisdiction type than other elected offices
- Specialized focus on a major public policy area
- Increasingly targets of centralizing and decentralizing reforms



... rife with conclusions and recommendations based on personal experience, observations, and opinions. School board experts frequently rely on anecdotal evidence, rather than data from carefully designed research studies, to support their conclusions (Land, 2002, p.265)

- Not much political science and little democratic theory
- Lack of focus on voter and candidate behavior
- Most studies refuted by saying, “yes, but if we study for a longer period of time, conflict will emerge”



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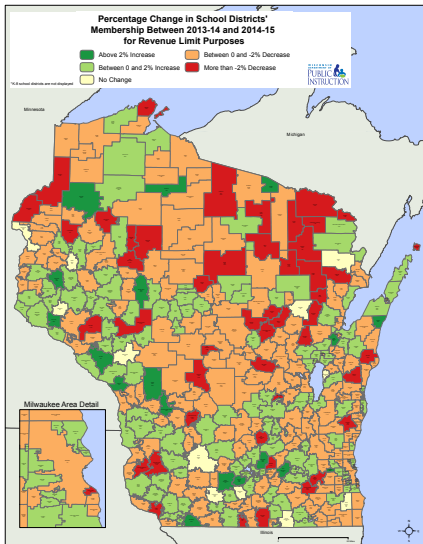


- Consider school districts within a state a *system*
- Observe school board elections *over time*, across the system
- Look for variation in participation, voter turnout, and board member defeat
- Look for attributes that explain, or, are predicted by school board election activity
- *More data, more contexts, more elections, over a longer period of time than previous studies*



- Lots of studies have focused on urban school districts, but the majority of elected officials who serve as school board members serve in small communities
- For every Madison, there are 40-50 school boards serving smaller communities

Lots of Districts





- Advantage of data collection
- Boards retain power in Wisconsin
- Lots of variety (from Milwaukee to Norway J7)
- Possibility of some causal leverage due to statewide political upheaval



- When are board elections contested?
- What drives voter turnout?
- Did statewide political unrest alter school board election participation?
- Do school board election results matter?



- School boards have high democratic potential; cheap, few votes needed to win, easy requirements to get on ballot, no partisan gatekeepers
- School boards also have low actualized democratic behavior; lack of interest, off-cycle, low information available
- With certain pressure, school boards should see great democratic potential met



- Records are solely maintained by school districts
- Retention required for 10 years, but compliance is spotty
- Record keeping practices vary in comprehensiveness and format
- Nothing is digitized



To answer these questions, I collect data from a number of sources. Most importantly – school district election results.

- 310 school districts (out of 424); 7-10 election cycles
- 4,000 election race records
- 13,177 unique candidate-election records
- 6,100 unique candidates
- Most districts have 10 years of records



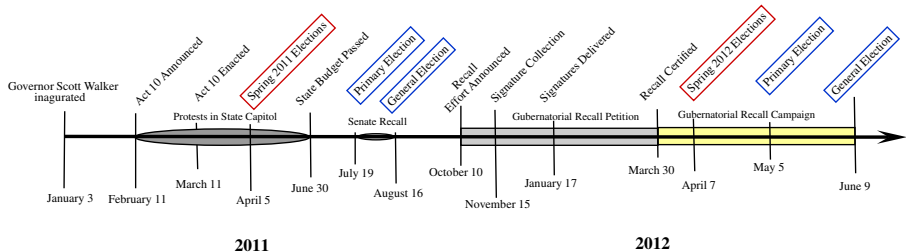
- Administrative records on school district characteristics
- Panel of ten years of consistent measures
- Diverse set of measures
- Census demographic information
- Political and fiscal information aggregated from MCDs



- Shock provided by Act 10



Timeline





- Small communities have *very little* school board contestation, but high profile fiscal decisions explain challenges to board seats
- Turnout in board elections, while reduced, has *many of the same* predictors as national and state elections
- Voters in non-partisan spring elections are unlikely to be representative of wider community or fall general electorate in many communities
- Act 10 and the wider state debate over education policy *had only weak and sporadic* effects on school board elections across the state
- Board elections have no impact on student performance, but some evidence of impact on superintendent retention decisions and tax rates



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- Measurement challenges with both independent and dependent variables
- Most variability in democratic measures of school boards are explained by unobservable district characteristics
- Lack of information about voter preferences or rationales
- Too soon after Act 10 to fully encapsulate effects
- One state with specific features

