



Do District-Based Elections for School Board Help Minority Candidates Get Elected?

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There are over 10,000 local school districts in the United States. How voters elect their school board members varies across and within states. In some areas, school board candidates run for office across an entire district—at-large election systems. In other areas, candidates run for office within a specific sub-district or ward—district-based election systems.

History of School Board Election Research

Much of the research in the 1980's and 1990's suggested that at-large systems disadvantaged minority candidates. This concern was based on the idea that at-large elections require candidates to spend more money to appeal to voters across the entirety of a district. These larger costs were thought to disproportionately benefit candidates who had the time and resources to mount such a campaign—which, in many cases, would disproportionately be white candidates.

Many school districts across the country are geographically segregated by race or ethnicity, resulting in a concentration of minority communities' support for a particular candidate in particular areas. This reality made it all the more difficult for minority-supported candidates to win a seat on the board in at-large elections. As a consequence, some communities served by a school district had no representation on the school board. In extreme cases, winning candidates all came from the same community.

Current Research Findings

More recent studies on the effects of these electoral systems have mixed results. A study of 7,000 cities conducted in 2008 finds that district-based city council elections can *increase* diversity, but only if underrepresented groups are highly concentrated *and* compose a substantial portion of the population. Even in these cases, however, researchers find that only African American males and white females were much better off when running in district-based systems. In other words, African American women and Latinx candidates fared no better in district-based compared to at-large elections for city council.

Looking at just California, a 2019 study of all 476 municipalities took advantage of the passage of the California Voting Rights Act in 2001 to see if cities that switched from at large to single member districts saw an increase in minority representation on the city council and estimated a 10 percent increase.

One aspect of this study was consistent with the nationwide study of 7,000 cities—the effect of switching to district-based elections on minority representation was significantly greater in communities with high concentrations of minority residents. In contrast to the nationwide study, which found that district-based

elections advantaged African American men and white women but not Latinx candidates, this California-specific revealed a heightened effect (approximately a 20 percent increase in city council representation) specifically in high-Latinx cities.

The most relevant research about the relationship between school board representation and election type examined elections in the United States' 1,800 largest school between 2001 and 2008. This study finds that African Americans are overrepresented on school boards that have at-large elections when African Americans are a minority of the population in that district.

In 2010, a study of California school boards examined Latinx representation, including a large-scale survey of candidates. They find that, at the very least, *perceptions* about at-large elections are barriers to entry for Latinx candidates. At the same time – those same researchers, using 2004-2005 data, find that Latinx representation on school boards is no greater in district-based systems.

Analysis and Ways Forward

Although the evidence is mixed about whether district-based elections have effects on representation, it is important to note that it is mixed in only one direction. This is to say that depending on the type (school board, city council), the time, and the place of the elections, research shows district-based systems either close the representation gap on school boards or have no effect.

In other words—there is no research, as of yet, that demonstrates that district-based elections *disadvantage* underrepresented groups. It should also be noted that no study of at-large elections has yet accounted for a potential deterrence effect. This means we do not know how many candidates from underrepresented groups (if any) choose not to run for office because of perceived disadvantages in at-large elections.

Beyond the question about at-large vs. district-based election systems, it is also important to consider the other factors that affect minority candidate success. For example, researchers and candidates often identify low voter turnout as a barrier to entry. Further, the *timing* of school board elections likely affects these systems. Whether or not elections happen alongside state and federal races in November of even years has substantial implications for the electorate's size and demographic makeup.

For example, San Diego Unified holds a primary election on the same day as the presidential preference and California statewide primary on March 3. While turnout will likely be greater than in prior primary elections (due to the interest and number of candidates running for president), it will pale in comparison to the general election in November. School board candidates are subject to a district-based election during the primary stage, but the demographic makeup of the primary electorate is consistently whiter, older, and wealthier than the population as a whole. Policymakers may consider studying the feasibility of switching to district-based elections for both the primary and the general election *or* adopting a model similar to other school districts in the region—where only one election is held in November, when turnout is greatest, potentially encouraging minority candidates to run without the possibility of being eliminated in a primary election, when the electorate is less representative, or an at-large general when their electoral support is diluted.

How much information voters have about candidates also contributes to participation in the election. In California, school board and other local offices are officially nonpartisan, which is to say candidate party

affiliation does not appear on the ballot. This does not prevent actual politics from manifesting, however. [My own research shows](#) that there is no difference in how “partisan” the views of school board members are based on whether they are elected through nonpartisan elections (like California) or through traditional partisan contests.

The absence of party labels deprive voters of information and research has shown that it can lead to voters using other cues, such as candidate gender, race, or ethnicity, to inform their vote choice, if they choose to vote at all. This effect looms even larger in local races when most voters already have little information about the candidates.

There are steps potential candidates can take to mitigate these effects and boost voter participation, however. School board candidates are free to make their party affiliations known through avenues outside the ballot, just as parties are free to endorse candidates. The extent to which either of these paths can be explored may help boost voter participation.

Those interested in a healthier and more representative democracy for local school districts should consider all policy proposals that motivate greater levels of political participation.