



Why Nonpartisan – Versus Partisan – School Board Elections Do Not Tell the Whole Story

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Local government elections often do not identify candidates by their party affiliation. According to the best estimates, between two-thirds and three-fourths of all U.S. localities use “nonpartisan” ballots. Most school board races are nonpartisan (with some notable exceptions in states like Pennsylvania, Louisiana, and Alabama). In an important counter-trend, however, over the last five years, legislatures in Kansas, Tennessee, Indiana, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida have all considered legislation that would either mandate their local school districts move to a partisan election model or allow districts to switch at will.

What differences, if any, separate partisan and nonpartisan school boards? To date, there has been no systematic examination of this issue. But my new research shows that the relationship between partisan elections and the policy views of elected school board members is complicated. On some issues, Democrats and Republicans elected in nonpartisan contests actually express *more polarized* views than their fellow Democrats and Republicans who run in partisan elections. At the same time, the formal designation does have some effect. My data show that reminding school board members of each political party’s position on a particular issue affects board member opinions more directly if they are elected in partisan contests.

Assessing Whether Partisan Elections Matter

Proponents of partisan elections often make the argument that placing party labels on the ballot provides voters with additional information about the candidates and will, in turn, increase voter turnout. Opponents of partisan labelling argue that local government and school governance in particular should not be entangled with party politics. In the same way that the apolitical ideal of a judge’s job offers a rationale for nonpartisan judicial elections, so too goes the argument for school boards.

What are the facts? Do party labels actually inform school board voters in valuable ways? Or do nonpartisan elections reframe the competition to focus on candidates’ plans for running a school system free from partisanship? To illuminate this debate, part of my dissertation research involved an original survey of North Carolina and Georgia school board members. I asked questions about their motivations, campaign behavior, priorities, policy views, and ambition.

North Carolina and Georgia are unique in that localities within these states vary with respect to whether or not school board candidates list their party affiliations. Approximately 50 percent of Georgia counties and 17 percent of North Carolina counties hold partisan elections. As part of the survey design, I randomly assigned board members to two groups. A “control group” was asked about their level of support for three policies (Common Core, school vouchers, and school prayer) in a neutral manner. A “treatment group” was asked about the same three policies but also informed of the general position each party held on the relevant issues.

- **Control Group:** “In recent years, the implementation of Common Core State Standards has been the subject of debate in state legislatures. All things considered, do you generally support or oppose the Common Core State Standards?”
- **Treatment Group:** “In recent years, the implementation of Common Core State Standards has been the subject of debate in state legislatures. The Republican Party has generally opposed the Common Core State Standards and has taken steps to repeal or replace them. The Democratic Party has generally supported the Common Core State Standards and has sought to maintain them. All things considered, do you generally support or oppose the Common Core State Standards?”

The Results Reveal Polarized “Nonpartisans” and the Effect of Partisan Information

Somewhat surprisingly, on each of the three policy questions, the gap in average policy support expressed by Democrats and Republicans was greater amongst *nonpartisan-elected board members* than it was amongst partisan-elected board members. In fact, amongst the partisan-elected board members, the average levels of policy support expressed by Democrats and Republicans were statistically indistinguishable from each other.

But what effect did informing partisan- and nonpartisan-elected officials of the major party positions on policy issues have on their support? With respect to Common Core, being told that the Democrats generally supported the standards and Republicans generally opposed them increased support amongst Democratic board members and decreased support amongst Republican board members. This effect was similar for board members elected in either nonpartisan or partisan elections. In other words, for board members elected in both types of contests, being informed of the parties’ position on Common Core widened the gap in support for Common Core between Democratic and Republican board members.

However, similar effects were not found for the other two policy questions. When informed of the general position each party held for school vouchers and school prayer, the gap in policy support *widened amongst partisan-elected board members only*. On nonpartisan school boards, such information had no effect on the differences between Democrats and Republicans.

Overall, while nonpartisan-elected officials displayed more polarized policy support than one might have expected, partisan-elected officials responded more sharply along party lines than their nonpartisan-elected peers when given partisan cues about key policies.

Moving Forward

Debates surrounding the best way to elect local school boards continue in state legislatures, despite a dearth of evidence about differences between the two systems. My results show that nonpartisan-elected officials are just as likely – and sometimes more likely – to express polarized policy views. At the same time, there is evidence that, when new partisan cues are introduced about policy issues, partisan-elected officials are more likely to be affected than counterparts elected in nonpartisan contests. Clearly, additional research is needed on these issues, especially because debates about the best way to elect local leaders are not likely to go away any time soon.

Read more in Evan Crawford, "How Nonpartisan Ballot Design Conceals Partisanship: A Survey Experiment of School Board Members in Two States." *Political Research Quarterly* (2017).