

ON-CYCLE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS MAKE IT EASIER TO VOTE

By Ken Blackwell

INTRODUCTION

There are roughly 14,000 school boards across the country, with about 100,000 school board members, and 95 percent of them are elected to their positions ([Burke et al., 2021](#)). They represent the largest group of elected officials in the country. However, school board elections—until recent years—have received little attention and experienced very low voter turnout. Ballotpedia tracked elections for 3,319 school board seats in 1,141 school districts across the United States from 2018 to 2021, finding that between 24 and 40 percent of the candidates ran unopposed each year ([School board elections, 2022](#)). In one example of low voter turnout, only 8.7 percent of eligible voters participated in the local school board election in Los Angeles County in 2019; in a 2017 Iowa race, just 10.05 percent of registered voters decided on the race for school board members in one district. In New Jersey in 2015, there were 805 uncontested seats—for more than 100 of those seats, no candidates were listed on the ballot ([Cai, 2020](#)). Sadly, this trend is consistent in many districts across the country.

Extremely low voter turnout for school board elections is troubling for a community's trust in their elected school leaders. Voting is a civic responsibility. Greater community participation and higher voter turnout lend a greater sense of legitimacy and faith in the government established. Higher turnout also makes elected officials more representative of the overall community. Currently, only a small minority of Americans decide who will govern America's schools—the very institutions shaping the minds of our future generations.

School board elections primarily have low turnout because they are often held in off-cycle elections in which few voters participate ([Hajnal et al., 2021](#)). The timing of elections significantly impacts voter participation in school board elections; however, other factors can result in low voter turnouts, such as a lack of awareness of candidates. “On-cycle” elections are those held in November of even-numbered years when voters elect Members of Congress, most state leaders, and—every 4 years—the president. The entire country votes in these elections; they receive substantial media attention and feature a higher turnout (Anzia, 2013). “Off-cycle” elections are held at other times such as the spring, summer, or fall of odd-numbered years. Off-cycle elections are primarily used to elect local officials, and their timing varies considerably. For instance, Alaska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin had local election days in 2022 on April 5; Texas had elections on May 7; New York and North Carolina had elections on May 17; Georgia had elections on May 24; Tennessee had elections on August 4; and Louisiana had elections on December 10 ([School board elections, 2022](#)). In addition, many states have multiple dates for local elections, not just those listed above. For example, within 2 years, New Jersey held four separate election days for federal office, state office, local school districts, and fire district commissioner ([Hersh, 2015](#)). Off-cycle elections attract much less media attention and have a significantly lower turnout. Currently, 13 states mandate on-cycle elections (AZ, CA, FL, IN, KY, LA, MD, MI, NE, NV, RI, UT, WY); eight states

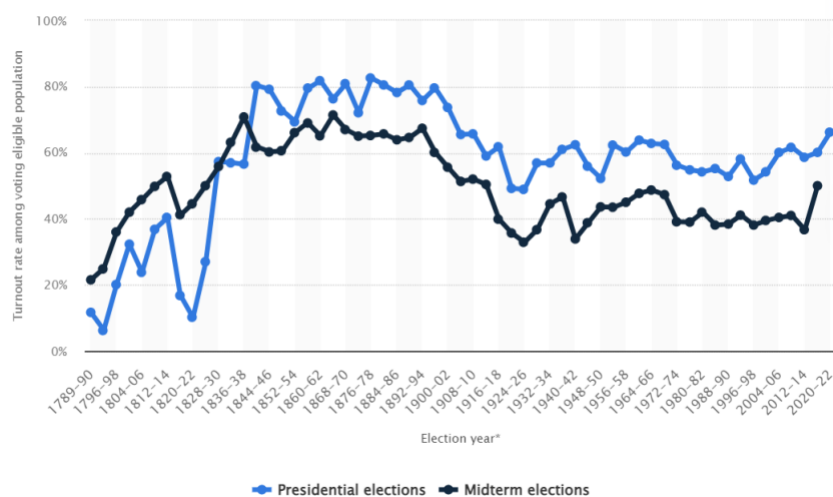
have school board elections in November of odd years (CO, ID, IA, KS, NM, OH, PA, WA); 16 states give discretion to localities (AL, AK, AR, CT, GA, ME, MA, MN, MS, NJ, NC, ND, SC, TN, TX, VA); and 12 states require non-November, off-cycle elections (DE, IL, MO, MT, NH, NY, OK, OR, SD, VT, WV, WI) ([Eden, 2021](#)).

Data shows moving school board elections from off-cycle to on-cycle years would not only make it easier to vote and raise voter participation but would also increase government accountability, save taxpayer dollars, reduce the power of special interest groups, and elect candidates who better represent their constituents demographically and on policy preference.

OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS MAKE IT HARDER TO VOTE

Using off-cycle elections drastically reduces voter turnout. In any election, the highest office on the ballot has the greatest effect on voter turnout. Figure 1 below shows that even higher offices, such as the U.S. House, Senate, and governorships, generally do not bring out nearly as many voters as presidential elections. The difference in turnout is—at times—almost 20 percentage points.

Figure 1: [Turnout Rates](#) in U.S. Presidential and Midterm Elections from 1789 to 2020



Elections where the highest office on the ballot is more low-profile, such as a mayor, county commissioner, city councilor, or school board member, draw significantly lower voter turnout ([Maciag, 2014](#)). Research shows that turnout in standalone off-cycle local elections averages half that of on-cycle elections ([Hajnal et al., 2021](#)). Electing school boards in off-cycle elections makes voting more difficult and reduces transparency around elections, resulting in exceptionally low voter turnout. Moreover, off-cycle elections particularly stifle minority turnout. Studies find that minority voters are disproportionately less likely to vote in off-cycle elections than white voters ([Hajnal et al., 2021](#); [Einstein & Palmer](#)).

CASE STUDIES

DeKalb County, Georgia

DeKalb County, Georgia, illustrates how off-cycle elections reduce voter turnout. In May 2018, DeKalb County residents voted in the primaries for the midterm elections. The bottom of the ballot included general elections for nonpartisan local offices. Each voter could vote in the

Republican Primary, Democratic Primary, or just the nonpartisan elections. In this election, there were 471,302 registered voters, and 104,049 ballots were cast, yielding a voter turnout of 22.08 percent ([Election Results-Primary, 2018](#)).¹

Voter turnout increased dramatically 6 months later in the midterm election: 313,672 out of 494,731 registered voters cast ballots, or 63.40 percent. Turnout nearly tripled for the on-cycle election ([Election Results-General Election, 2018](#)).

The same pattern was repeated in the presidential election year of 2020. In the May 2020 primary, 197,233 of 529,175 registered voters turned out (37.27 percent) ([Election Results-General Primary, 2020](#)). In the November general election, 373,439 of 546,711 voters turned out (68.31 percent), a 31.04 percentage point increase in voter turnout ([Election Results-General Election, 2020](#)).

Michigan School Boards

Reforms in Michigan demonstrate how switching to on-cycle elections raises turnout in school board elections. In 2011, the Michigan legislature passed a law requiring on-cycle school board elections ([HB 4005, 2011](#)). Previously, the election dates varied by school district, with some on-cycle, some during the August primary election, and some in the spring or other times during the year. The reform was associated with substantially increased voter turnout in school board elections. In some districts, voter turnout went from under 10 percent in the years before 2011 to more than 60 percent in 2012 ([Canvass Report, 2008](#) and [Cumulative Report, 2012](#)).

TEACHERS UNIONS, SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS, AND ON OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS

Officials elected with higher turnouts are more likely to reflect the views of their community because the majority of the community supports and selects them. Unsurprisingly, researchers have found that “[school] boards that are chosen in on-cycle races are far more likely to hold political preferences that mirror the views of their constituents than boards elected in off-cycle elections” ([Dynes et al., 2021](#)).

By contrast, low turnouts in off-cycle elections give special interest groups greater influence over the results. For example, voters who have a vested interest in an election are more likely to vote than those who do not; consequently, “when turnout is low, each supportive voter mobilized by the interest group is more important to the outcome than she would be in an on-cycle election” ([Anzia, 2012](#)).

The onset of COVID-19 gave parents more control over their child’s education and left many parents upset about what and how their children were being forced to learn, resulting in a highly engaged movement of parents. Before the parent movement in 2020, teachers’ unions were the most powerful special interest group affected by school board elections. Holding the elections off-cycle thus gives unions considerable influence over the results. Unions would mobilize their supporters, making up a disproportionately large share of the relatively small number of residents who vote off-cycle. A study that observed the 1997-2000

¹ It is important to note that these numbers are referring to the county as a whole. When the lower ballot tallies came up, there were even fewer that participated.

voter turnout in local school elections concluded that “low turnout gives the unions an opportunity to mobilize support and tip the scale toward candidates they favor” ([Moe, 2006](#)). Before the parent movements began in 2020, there were fewer organized efforts and awareness campaigns to mobilize *all* parents and citizens to vote. Historically, while unions consistently turned out their members to vote, parents and citizens who did not consider themselves to have a significant stake in school board elections turned out much less frequently.

As a result, union support has often been decisive in school board elections. For example, another study found that “for candidates who are not incumbents, teacher union support increases the probability of winning substantially. Indeed, it is roughly equal to, and may well exceed, the impact of incumbency itself” ([Sand, 2013](#)). Moreover, low-turnout and off-cycle elections often effectively enable unions to choose who governs public schools.

Switching from off-cycle to on-cycle school board elections raises turnout and dilutes the effectiveness of union mobilization. With higher turnout in on-cycle elections, winning candidates are more likely to align with the interests of parents—not necessarily those of unions.

Researchers have found that winning candidates are much more likely to align with community policy preferences when elected on-cycle rather than off-cycle. When analyzing union policy, [Dynes et al. \(2012\)](#) concluded, “For on-cycle districts, the strongest pro-union candidates were significantly less likely to win their election when the majority of their district’s voters supported the anti-union ballot initiative,” such as when they are competing in anti-union districts. Nonetheless, “in off-cycle districts, these same staunchly pro-union candidates were significantly more likely to win a board seat than their anti-union counterparts, even though the majority of voters in these districts were themselves anti-union” ([Dynes et al., 2021](#)).

THE EFFECTS OF TEACHERS UNIONS AND SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS ON SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS AND POLICIES

Mitigating the effect that special interest groups have on school board elections is crucial to a well-functioning democratic republic. School boards and teachers’ unions have different primary objectives, leading to conflicts of interest. Teachers’ unions try to maximize the benefits for their members, sometimes at the expense of student wellbeing ([Stern, 1997](#)). For example, despite studies demonstrating how the COVID-19 lockdowns negatively affected students’ learning and mental health, teachers’ unions consistently pushed to extend remote learning and avoid returning to the classroom ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021](#)). The Chicago Teachers Union’s refusal to return to in-person classes at the beginning of 2022—long after the COVID-19 vaccine was widely available—forced the district to cancel classes for several days ([Balevic, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, school boards are meant to—first and foremost—uphold the education of the child and “the values, beliefs and priorities of its community” ([Sand, 2013](#)). As Stanford professor [Terry Moe](#) explains,

School-board elections are supposed to be the democratic means by which ordinary citizens govern their own schools. The board is supposed to represent “the people.” But in many districts it really doesn’t. For with unions so powerful, employee interests are given far more weight in personnel and policy decisions than warranted, and school boards are partially captured by their own employees. Democracy threatens to

be little more than a charade, serving less as a mechanism of popular control than as a means by which employees promote their own special interests.

The leadership of teachers' unions and the community at large often do not share common values. For example, the National Education Association—America's largest teacher's union—has endorsed teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT) in every classroom ([Rufo, 2021](#)). However, the overwhelming majority of Americans reject this approach. For example, [one survey](#) found that 80 percent of Americans oppose using the classroom for political activism, and 69 percent oppose teaching that America is a structurally racist society. [Another survey](#) found that 75 percent of parents with K-12 students did not believe schools should teach that “the founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written, and America's history must be reframed.” Nonetheless, many school boards have embraced the union's values, not those of the larger community. As a result, school districts across America widely inculcate CRT and racial essentialism in students.

In essence, numerous school boards promote ideologies that the broader community rejects because unions, to a certain extent, have more power in getting their candidates elected. As stated by Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Brigham Young University, [Adam Dynes](#),

Since governments that are elected in off-cycle races are chosen by a median voter that is systematically less representative of their community, we should observe politics being moved ‘off-center,’ away from the average citizen's preferences. The political preferences held by officials who are elected in off-cycle races should therefore be less aligned with their community's median constituent, causing governments to deviate from the preferences of the median constituent even as it predictably conforms to the preferences of an unrepresentative median voter.

Moving school board elections from off-cycle to on-cycle would produce school boards that better reflect community values and priorities while reducing the influence of special interests, such as teachers' unions.

COST SAVINGS WITH FEWER ELECTION DAYS

Moving local elections on-cycle would also reduce costs for local governments. Localities typically cover the cost of off-cycle local elections themselves. Holding elections on-cycle reduces the number of separate votes held, reducing total expenses. Additionally, state funding often covers part of the cost of on-cycle elections because they elect representatives to state and federal offices. The city of Concord, California, estimated that to hold their local elections on-cycle would cost them less than half of what it does to hold their local elections off-cycle. ([Hajnal, 2020](#)).

THE PUSH FOR ON-CYCLE ELECTIONS

Several states and localities have pushed to transition to on-cycle school board elections. These efforts have typically faced strenuous opposition from teachers' unions and other special interest groups. For example, when Michigan moved to on-cycle school board elections in 2011, the bill faced severe resistance from special interests. As influential author [Sarah Anzia](#) (2013, p.105) stated,

That [on cycle] proposal met a flurry of opposition from outside groups, including the Michigan Education Association, the Michigan Association of School Boards, the Michigan Association of School Administrators, and the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, all of which testified against the bill in committee. The only outside support for the bill came from the Michigan Department of State and the state associations of municipal and county clerks.

Another circumstance of legislation failure was in Texas in 2005. H.B. 855 was a bill that would have moved all school trustee elections to be held on-cycle, while the federal and state general elections were to be held in November of even-numbered years. The opposition from the Texas Association of School Boards, teachers' unions, and school trustees was enough for the bill—and similar bills moving those elections on-cycle—to ultimately fail ([Anzia, 2011](#)). Across the country, many other states have tried to pass legislation to force school board elections on-cycle yet have met similar resistance from special interest groups and unions.

CONCLUSION

For our Republic to function smoothly, the voices of the people must be heard, especially on Election Day. Placing elections at obscure times does not promote democracy—it inhibits it. Moving school board elections from off-cycle to on-cycle not only makes voting more accessible and increases voter turnout, but it also allows for more accurate measurements of what the median voter in each community stands for, holds school boards accountable, and produces higher academic results. As reported by the [National School Board Association \(2020\)](#):

Research shows that school board elections with relatively higher voter turnout and a broader range of constituents (e.g., holding school board elections at the same time as state- or national-level elections) are associated with higher academic performance of students, as opposed to elections with lower voter turnout.

Data shows that off-cycle elections have exponentially lower voter turnout; unsurprisingly, the push to keep off-cycle elections comes primarily from special interest groups that can more easily influence low turnout elections. Moreover, off-cycle elections are a financial burden to taxpayers and have disproportionately lower voter turnout amongst minority communities. Modifying the election dates transforms the influence of the electorate. Moving school board elections from off-cycle to on-cycle has many benefits, yet the most significant advantage is that the American people will finally have their priorities put first.

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