

AUGUST 24, 2022

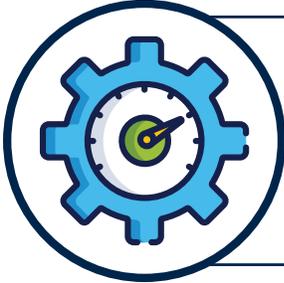


Off Cycle, Out of Mind: Why School Board Elections Should Be Held With Statewide Elections

Jonathan Bain
Senior Research Fellow

Jonathan Ingram
Vice President of Policy and Research

KEY FINDINGS



MOST STATES HOLD SOME OR ALL SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS OFF CYCLE.



ON-CYCLE ELECTIONS HAVE MORE THAN THREE TIMES AS MANY VOTERS TURN OUT ON ELECTION DAY AS OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS.



OFF-CYCLE ELECTIONS ARE DECIDED BY A SMALL PORTION OF THE ELECTORATE AND GIVE SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS MORE POWER OVER AMERICA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM.

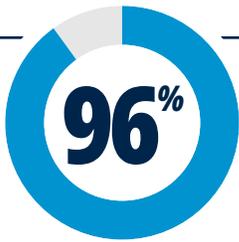
THE BOTTOM LINE:

LAWMAKERS SHOULD BOOST VOTER TURNOUT BY ALIGNING SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION CYCLES WITH MAJOR STATEWIDE ELECTIONS.

Overview

A well-rounded education is not only critical to a child’s development, but it is also the foundation children need to become informed, productive members of society.

Nearly 100,000 schools in nearly 13,500 districts make up America’s sprawling public school system.¹ These schools spend roughly \$800 billion annually, educating more than 50 million children.²⁻³ In virtually all of these districts, the school board members that often oversee everything from student transportation to teacher compensation to curriculum to instruction policies—and everything in between—are locally elected.⁴ Nationwide, more than 96 percent of school board members are elected, meaning local elections can have wide-reaching and lasting implications for taxpayers and students alike.⁵



NATIONWIDE, MORE THAN 96 PERCENT OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS ARE ELECTED.

Despite this, school board elections consistently have much lower voter turnout than other elections.⁶⁻⁷ One major reason is that school board elections are too often held “off cycle.”⁸ Elections are “off cycle” when they are not aligned with major statewide or federal races. In Kansas, for example, school board elections are held in November of odd-numbered years.⁹ And in Missouri, school board elections are held every April.¹⁰ Some or all school board elections are off cycle in 37 states across the country.¹¹

Despite their importance, voters often overlook school board elections to the detriment of students and taxpayers.

Off-cycle elections yield lower voter turnout

Voter turnout has been a persistent problem in local elections.¹² But one of the largest causes of low turnout is the intentional choice to hold elections off cycle.¹³ One study of voter turnout in California municipal elections revealed that turnout in off-cycle elections was less than half what turnout was in similar city elections held during the presidential election.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Additional studies of voter turnout in local elections found that elections held on cycle had roughly double the turnout as those held off cycle.¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Researchers have concluded that most of the difference in turnout can be explained by timing alone, and that whether elections are held on cycle or off cycle is “the most important factor” and the “single largest predictor” for voter turnout in local elections.¹⁸⁻²⁰

A first-of-its-kind analysis of turnout in off-cycle school board elections further highlights these problems. **Across 10 states with exclusively off-cycle school board elections, voter turnout in recent school board elections averaged a dismal 23 percent.**²¹⁻³³ But during the 2020 presidential election, voter turnout in those same counties averaged 77 percent—more than three times that of recent school board elections.³⁴⁻⁴⁵

VOTER TURNOUT PLUMMETED DURING RECENT OFF-CYCLE LOCAL ELECTIONS

Average county-level turnout during recent elections in the 15 largest school districts, by state

State	School Board Elections	2020 Presidential Election
Idaho	26%	88%
Illinois	15%	73%
Iowa	22%	77%
Kansas	21%	72%
Missouri	14%	77%
Montana	35%	81%
Ohio	24%	73%
Oregon	25%	82%
Pennsylvania	32%	76%
Wisconsin	24%	89%
AVERAGE	23%	77%

Source: State and local election offices

**The tables above show county-level turnout in the most recent off-cycle school board elections as compared to turnout in the same counties during the 2020 presidential election.*

A further look shows how critical the situation is in a handful of states.

IOWA



Iowans headed to the polls in record numbers during the 2020 presidential election.⁴⁶ In fact, voter turnout from sampled counties was a whopping 77 percent.⁴⁷ Turnout ranged from a low of 70 percent in Des Moines County to 86 percent in Johnson County, home to Iowa City.⁴⁸

But voter participation plummeted just a year later. During the school board elections in November 2021, overall turnout from these counties was less than 22 percent.⁴⁹ In Des Moines County, turnout in the school board elections fell to just 12 percent.⁵⁰ And Johnson County, which had the highest turnout for the 2020 presidential election, saw turnout drop to just 19 percent of registered voters.⁵¹

MISSOURI



Missourians raced to vote in the 2020 presidential election, with more than 77 percent of voters in sampled counties and cities casting their ballot.⁵² But during the November 2021 off-cycle school board elections, voter turnout plummeted to only 14 percent.⁵³

In St. Charles County—part of the St. Louis metropolitan area—voter turnout during the 2020 election reached 77 percent.⁵⁴ But during the most recent school board election, turnout plummeted to 10 percent—a decrease of nearly 90 percent.⁵⁵ And in Greene County—home of Springfield, Missouri—only 13 percent of voters showed up for the 2021 school board elections, a massive drop from the 85 percent turnout during the 2020 presidential election.⁵⁶

Making matters worse, only one sampled jurisdiction had turnout higher than 14 percent—the independent city of St. Louis.⁵⁷ But even there, just 29 percent of voters cast their ballots in the 2021 elections—less than half the number that voted in 2020.⁵⁸

Altogether, Missouri voters were more than five times as likely to vote in on-cycle elections like the 2020 presidential race than in off-cycle elections like the 2021 school board elections.⁵⁹

MONTANA



In Big Sky Country, Montanans are also dealing with low turnout in school board elections.

In November 2020, 81 percent of registered voters in sampled counties cast a ballot in the presidential election.⁶⁰ But during the most recent school board election in May 2022, turnout plummeted to 35 percent—a decrease of 57 percent.⁶¹

In Cascade County, turnout for the school board election was just 27 percent—compared to 81 percent in the presidential election just a year and a half earlier.⁶² And in Lewis and Clark County, voter turnout in 2020 was more than double turnout of the 2022 school board election.⁶³

While Montana had higher school board election turnout than some other states, the major gap between on-cycle and off-cycle turnout is sizable and must be addressed.

PENNSYLVANIA



During the 2020 presidential election, 76 percent of Pennsylvanians in sampled counties turned out to vote.⁶⁴ But during the recent 2021 school board elections, less than 32 percent of registered voters in these same counties cast their ballots.⁶⁵

Philadelphia County—home to the largest school district in the state—saw turnout during the recent school board election of less than 22 percent.⁶⁶ In a jurisdiction that contains more than 200 schools serving more than 124,000 students—with an annual budget of more than \$3.6 billion—essentially one in five voters determined who would sit on the school board.⁶⁷⁻⁶⁸

Altogether, voter turnout in the 2021 school board elections was 58 percent lower than 2020 turnout in the sampled counties.⁶⁹

The data is clear: Voters are three times as likely to vote during on-cycle elections like the 2020 presidential election as they are in off-cycle school board elections. Thankfully, lawmakers have a simple solution to boost voter turnout in school board elections.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Lawmakers should align school board election cycles with major statewide elections.

When school board elections take place off cycle, voter turnout is significantly lower. The electorate for these low-turnout elections is often much less racially diverse and less likely to reflect the demographic makeup of the district's student body and community at large.⁷⁰⁻⁷¹ Even worse, powerful interest groups—like teachers unions—may face fewer hurdles in boosting turnout for their preferred candidates during off-cycle elections when voter engagement is lowest.⁷²⁻⁷³ Indeed, teachers unions are among the most active groups in local politics and union-backed candidates win roughly 70 percent of competitive school board elections.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁸ This can often lead to school boards making decisions more favorable to the interest groups that helped get them elected.⁷⁹

In many states, local elections were intentionally moved off cycle to ensure lower turnout.⁸⁰ This puts the power of electing local leaders into the hands of the few, rather than the many. And unfortunately, the impact of holding school board elections off cycle extends far beyond voter participation. Schools with off-cycle elections are associated with lower academic performance.⁸¹

Fortunately, there is an effective solution for lawmakers to boost turnout in school board elections—syncing school board elections with statewide elections. States that have moved school board elections on cycle have seen significant increases in voter turnout.



Fortunately, there is an effective solution for lawmakers to boost turnout in school board elections—syncing school board elections with statewide elections.



In Texas, for example, a 2006 law changed nearly 20 percent of school districts to on-cycle elections.⁸² As a result, turnout significantly increased in these school districts relative to those districts who continued holding off-cycle elections.⁸³

In California, a 1986 law allowed school districts to move off-cycle elections to on-cycle years.⁸⁴ By 2008, roughly two-thirds of school districts had moved to on-cycle elections.⁸⁵ Controlling for other factors, this simple change increased voter turnout in school board elections by an astounding 150 percent.⁸⁶

School boards play a key role in the success of public school students. By aligning school board elections with major statewide races, school boards would be more representative of the local electorate and place student success at the forefront of the agenda.

APPENDIX 1: VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, BY STATE

State	% Turnout	State	% Turnout
Alabama	62.8%	Montana	81.3%
Alaska	60.2%	Nebraska	76.3%
Arizona	79.9%	Nevada	78.2%
Arkansas	66.9%	New Hampshire	72.8%
California	80.7%	New Jersey	72.4%
Colorado	78.2%	New Mexico	68.4%
Connecticut	79.6%	New York	70.3%
Delaware	68.9%	North Carolina	75.2%
District of Columbia	66.9%	North Dakota	62.7%
Florida	77.2%	Ohio	74.0%
Georgia	65.7%	Oklahoma	69.3%
Hawaii	69.6%	Oregon	78.5%
Idaho	88.3%	Pennsylvania	76.5%
Illinois	72.9%	Rhode Island	70.2%
Indiana	64.6%	South Carolina	72.1%
Iowa	75.8%	South Dakota	73.9%
Kansas	70.9%	Tennessee	69.3%
Kentucky	60.3%	Texas	66.7%
Louisiana	70.1%	Utah	88.5%
Maine	73.0%	Vermont	73.3%
Maryland	74.6%	Virginia	75.1%
Massachusetts	76.0%	Washington	84.1%
Michigan	78.0%	West Virginia	63.2%
Minnesota	80.0%	Wisconsin	89.5%
Mississippi	66.1%	Wyoming	103.6%
Missouri	69.8%	TOTAL	74.0%

Source: State election offices

Note: Wyoming election data shows voter turnout above 100 percent. The denominator of registered voters for this analysis reflects voters on the active voter rolls prior to Election Day. Because Wyoming allows same-day voter registration, a number of new voters registered on Election Day and are counted among those casting ballots. Because data on how many voters registered on Election Day in Wyoming is unavailable, turnout appears higher than 100 percent.

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21. Authors’ calculations based upon data provided by state and local election offices in Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.
22. For purposes of this analysis, the Foundation for Government Accountability identified the 15 largest school districts in 10 states that exclusively hold school board elections off cycle. School districts with appointed school boards were excluded from the analysis. Because local election offices do not provide registered voter data disaggregated by school district, this analysis relied upon county-level voter turnout in the election as a whole. This would overstate total turnout in school board elections, as some individuals cast ballots for other offices in the same election without casting a ballot for school board candidates. County-level voter turnout in recent school board elections was collected from county election offices. In some states, multiple school districts are located within the same county, and this analysis groups the results from those districts together.
23. Most voters in the selected states live in the sampled counties. For example, more than two-thirds of Idaho voters live in the sampled counties, nearly 55 percent of Kansas voters live in the sampled counties, and more than three-quarters of Oregon voters live in the sampled counties.
24. In Idaho, the 15 largest school districts are located in Ada, Bannock, Bonneville, Canyon, Jefferson, Kootenai, Madison, Oneida, and Twin Falls counties. Oneida, Jefferson, and Madison counties did not have publicly accessible voter turnout data for the November 2021 school board elections and/or the 2020 presidential election, and were excluded from this analysis. Among the remaining counties, voter turnout in the November 2021 school board elections averaged 26.0 percent.
25. In Illinois, the 15 largest school districts are located in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, McLean, Peoria, Sangamon, Will, and Winnebago counties. The City of Chicago School District 299—located within Cook County—does not elect its school board and was excluded from this analysis. This analysis limited Cook County turnout data to precincts outside of the City of Chicago. Among these counties, voter turnout in the April 2021 school board elections averaged 14.9 percent.

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26. In Iowa, the 15 largest school districts are located in Black Hawk, Dallas, Des Moines, Dubuque, Johnson, Linn, Polk, Pottawattamie, Scott, and Woodbury counties. Dubuque and Pottawattamie counties did not have publicly accessible voter turnout data for the November 2021 school board elections and/or the 2020 presidential election, and were excluded from this analysis. Among the remaining counties, voter turnout in the November 2021 school board elections averaged 21.6 percent.
27. In Kansas, the 15 largest school districts are located in Butler, Douglas, Finney, Ford, Geary, Johnson, Saline, Sedgwick, Shawnee, and Wyandotte counties. Shawnee and Butler counties did not have publicly accessible voter turnout data for the November 2021 school board elections and/or the 2020 presidential election, and were excluded from this analysis. Among the remaining counties, voter turnout in the November 2021 school board elections averaged 21.0 percent.
28. In Missouri, the 15 largest school districts are located in Boone, Clay, Greene, Jackson, St. Charles, and St. Louis counties, and the independent city of St. Louis. Voter turnout in the April 2021 school board elections averaged 14.2 percent.
29. In Montana, the 15 largest school districts are located in Cascade, Flathead, Gallatin, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone counties. Flathead and Silver Bow counties did not have publicly accessible voter turnout data for the November 2021 school board elections and/or the 2020 presidential election, and were excluded from this analysis. Among the remaining counties, voter turnout in the May 2022 school board elections averaged 35.1 percent.
30. In Ohio, the 15 largest school districts are located in Butler, Cuyahoga, Delaware, Fairfield, Franklin, Hamilton, Lucas, Montgomery, and Summit counties. Voter turnout in the November 2021 school board elections averaged 24.4 percent.
31. In Oregon, the 15 largest school districts are located in Clackamas, Deschutes, Jackson, Lane, Linn, Marion, Multnomah, and Washington counties. Voter turnout in the May 2021 school board elections averaged 25.4 percent.
32. In Pennsylvania, the 15 largest school districts are located in Allegheny, Beaver, Berks, Bucks, Chester, Dauphin, Delaware, Lehigh, Luzerne, Montgomery, Northampton, and Philadelphia counties. Voter turnout in the November 2021 school board elections averaged 32.0 percent.
33. In Wisconsin, the 15 largest school districts are located in Brown, Dane, Eau Claire, Kenosha, Marathon, Milwaukee, Outagamie, Racine, Rock, Sheboygan, Waukesha, and Winnebago counties. Voter turnout in the April 2021 school board elections averaged 24.1 percent.
34. Authors' calculations based upon data provided by state and local election offices in Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.
35. In the sampled Idaho counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 88.4 percent. Idaho's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 88.3 percent.
36. In the sampled Illinois counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 72.8 percent. Illinois' total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 72.9 percent.
37. In the sampled Iowa counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 77.4 percent. Iowa's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 75.8 percent.
38. In the sampled Kansas counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 72.0 percent. Kansas' total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 70.9 percent.
39. In the sampled Missouri counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 77.1 percent. Missouri's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 69.8 percent.
40. In the sampled Montana counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 81.3 percent. Montana's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 81.3 percent.
41. In the sampled Ohio counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 72.5 percent. Ohio's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 74.0 percent.
42. In the sampled Oregon counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 82.0 percent. Oregon's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 78.5 percent.
43. In the sampled Pennsylvania counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 75.9 percent. Pennsylvania's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 76.5 percent.
44. In the sampled Wisconsin counties, voter turnout in the November 2020 election was 88.5 percent. Pennsylvania's total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election was 89.5 percent.
45. Voter turnout in the November 2020 election averaged 77.0 percent in sampled counties across all 10 states. Total statewide turnout in the November 2020 election averaged 76.0 percent across those same states. Nationwide, voter turnout in the November 2020 election averaged 74.0 percent.
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15275 Collier Boulevard | Suite 201-279
Naples, Florida 34119
(239) 244-8808

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