



North Carolina Is Evidence of Why School Board Candidates Should Declare Party Affiliation

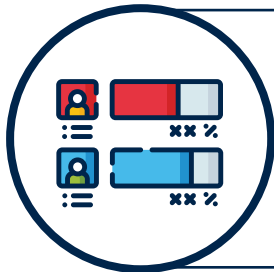
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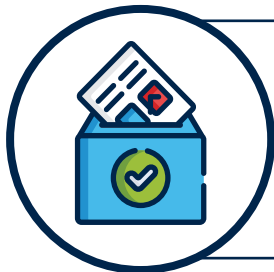


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KEY FINDINGS



NORTH CAROLINA ALLOWS COUNTIES TO HOLD SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS ON A PARTISAN OR NON-PARTISAN BASIS, PROVIDING A REAL-WORLD STUDY OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO FORMATS.



VOTERS IN COUNTIES WITH NON-PARTISAN ELECTIONS ARE FIVE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO NOT VOTE FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS THAN THOSE IN COUNTIES WITH PARTISAN ELECTIONS.



FOURTEEN NORTH CAROLINA COUNTIES THAT VOTED FOR REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES FOR CONGRESS ELECTED REGISTERED DEMOCRATS IN NON-PARTISAN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.



LAWMAKERS SHOULD REQUIRE SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES TO DECLARE THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION TO ENSURE THAT VOTERS CAN CONFIDENTLY VOTE FOR CANDIDATES WHO SHARE THEIR PRIORITIES.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

TO ENCOURAGE VOTER PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWER VOTERS TO MAKE MORE INFORMED DECISIONS, STATES SHOULD REQUIRE SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES TO DECLARE THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION.

Overview

While many people want politics out of their schools, the reality is that this is impossible. Candidates do not leave their politics behind when they are elected to school boards. Politically charged debates occur in school board meetings across the county.¹⁻³

Non-partisan school board elections do not prevent politics from creeping into schools. Instead, they all but guarantee a misalignment in priorities between the voters and the school board members that represent them—all while reducing voter participation in the election process.



CANDIDATES DO NOT LEAVE THEIR POLITICS BEHIND WHEN THEY ARE ELECTED TO SCHOOL BOARDS. POLITICALLY CHARGED DEBATES OCCUR IN SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS ACROSS THE COUNTY.

North Carolina is a perfect example of the problem with non-partisan school board elections. The state has some counties that hold partisan school board elections and others that hold non-partisan elections. In counties with non-partisan school board elections, hundreds of thousands of voters did not vote for school board members while voting for candidates in other races with declared party affiliations. Counties with non-partisan elections also revealed several examples of elected school board members not holding the same interests and priorities as the voters they are elected to represent.

To encourage voter participation and to help ensure alignment in principles of voters and elected officials, North Carolina and other states should require all school board candidates to declare party affiliation.

Non-partisan school board elections leave voters in the dark

Schools will always be faced with politically charged decisions. This was evidenced by the years-long debates over mask mandates and remote learning.⁴⁻⁷ Debates over pronoun use in schools, age-appropriate books in school libraries, and which bathrooms students and teachers can use continue across the country.⁸⁻¹⁰ This is all outside of the debate over school curriculum, which is often politically heated.¹¹⁻¹²

Some of the flashiest clashes over school board policies may be in Loudoun County, Virginia, but they are happening across the country.¹³⁻¹⁸ School board members are being recalled or voted out of office, but only after their politics are actually discovered by voters.¹⁹⁻²¹



SCHOOLS WILL ALWAYS BE FACED WITH POLITICALLY CHARGED DECISIONS. THIS WAS EVIDENCED BY THE YEARS-LONG DEBATES OVER MASK MANDATES AND REMOTE LEARNING.

Many voters are kept in the dark about the politics of the school board candidates they are voting for because about 90 percent of school districts across the country hold non-partisan elections.²² This requirement all but guarantees a mismatch in priorities between school board members and the voters they represent.

The situation would be much improved, and less heated, if voters were fully aware of who they were voting for and their politics before controversy erupts. This is what partisan school board elections allow. By linking candidates with their party affiliation, it signals to voters what a candidate's priorities are. This ensures that people can confidently vote for candidates that align with their interests. North Carolina provides a perfect contrast between partisan and non-partisan school board elections.



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North Carolina shows that voter participation is greater in partisan school board elections

State law in North Carolina allows counties to hold school board elections on a partisan or non-partisan basis.²³⁻²⁴ This provides a real-world study of the difference between these election formats.

A sampling of 20 non-partisan and 16 partisan counties representing more than 1.7 million ballots cast in the 2022 election shows a huge gap in voter participation between the two.

In counties with partisan school board elections, 96 percent of total ballots cast also voted for candidates for school board.²⁵ But in counties with non-partisan elections this number was only 78 percent.²⁶ This means that non-partisan elections had a participation rate five times lower than partisan elections.



IN COUNTIES WITH PARTISAN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS, 96 PERCENT OF TOTAL BALLOTS CAST ALSO VOTED FOR CANDIDATES FOR SCHOOL BOARD.

In a state like North Carolina, with nearly 3.8 million votes cast, transitioning from completely non-partisan to partisan would result in much more voter participation in school board races.²⁷ For instance, if the 16 sampled non-partisan counties held partisan school board elections, the survey could expect nearly 200,000 additional votes for school board.²⁸

The sampling reveals a nearly 20 million vote difference nationwide in 2022 if every school board election were held on a partisan basis instead of a non-partisan basis.²⁹ This number would be even greater in a presidential year. With 90 percent of school districts holding non-partisan elections, millions of voters across the country are choosing not to vote for their school board members.



WITH 90 PERCENT OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS HOLDING NON-PARTISAN ELECTIONS, MILLIONS OF VOTERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE CHOOSING NOT TO VOTE FOR THEIR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS.

This makes sense from a voter’s perspective. When voters are confident in the priorities of the candidates they are voting for, which naturally happens in partisan elections, they are more comfortable voting for the candidates. But when candidates’ politics are hidden without putting time into research, like in non-partisan elections, voters may be hesitant to give any candidate their vote.

But it is not just lack of voter participation that is worrisome with non-partisan elections. Some voters choose to vote for silly reasons rather than not voting at all. All things being equal, the name that appears first on a ballot is more likely to be voted for.³⁰⁻³² Name recognition also plays a factor in voter support, especially in low-information races.³³ This is a boost to incumbents and is often difficult for challengers to overcome.³⁴

Beyond the astounding difference in voter turnout, non-partisan school board elections also led to unexpected results in multiple North Carolina counties.

Non-partisan elected school board officials do not align with voters’ priorities

Non-partisan school board elections resulted in elected officials not aligning with their constituents’ priorities. In North Carolina, there were 14 counties that voted for Republican candidates in federal Senate and House races in 2022 but elected registered Democrats in non-partisan school board races.



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This includes one county that elected three registered Democrats and one non-partisan candidate who votes in Democratic primaries to its four open school board seats.³⁵ In this county, in every race where a Republican candidate appeared on the ballot they were elected.³⁶ This is a county that voted for Republican candidates, but the non-partisan nature of its school board races resulted in a mismatch between voters and their elected school board officials.

Another North Carolina county with four available school board seats elected two registered Democrats, one non-partisan who votes in Democratic primaries, and one registered Republican.³⁷ This county voted for the Republican candidates for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives with 67 percent and 69 percent of the vote respectively.³⁸ This is another example of a county that voted for Republicans but elected Democrats likely because of the non-partisan nature of their school board elections.



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Finally, a county that voted for the Republican Senate candidate (69 percent) and House candidate (72 percent) in the federal election re-elected a registered Democrat to their school board in a non-partisan election.³⁹ This member, along with the three remaining incumbents, was able to outvote three recently elected school board members on votes for chair and vice chair.⁴⁰ The registered Democrat beat out a registered Republican by just 32 votes.⁴¹

North Carolina lawmakers passed legislation that requires this county to hold partisan school board elections going forward, a move that should be followed throughout the country.⁴²

States should require school board candidates to declare their party affiliation to empower voters to make informed choices

To encourage full voter participation and prevent misaligned representation, states should require that school board members declare their party affiliation.

The North Carolina General Assembly recently required a handful of counties to switch from non-partisan to partisan elections for school boards and should now require this in all counties.⁴³⁻⁴⁴ Likewise, voters across the country would benefit from states requiring this move.

Party affiliation attached to candidates signals to voters the candidates' interests and priorities. This allows voters to confidently vote for the candidate that best matches their own.

People who make the active decision to vote and take the time to do so should be empowered with the necessary information to make an informed decision. Requiring partisan elections does this and allows voters to elect candidates who share their priorities.



PEOPLE WHO MAKE THE ACTIVE DECISION TO VOTE AND TAKE THE TIME TO DO SO SHOULD BE EMPOWERED WITH THE NECESSARY INFORMATION TO MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION.

THE BOTTOM LINE: To encourage voter participation and empower voters to make more informed decisions, states should require school board candidates to declare their party affiliation.

North Carolina is a perfect example of why lawmakers should require partisan school board elections. While some want to imagine a world in which politics stay out of the classroom, this is not a real possibility. Pretending differently only sets voters up for disappointment.

Just one year of elections in the state revealed the problem with non-partisan school board elections. Hundreds of thousands of voters chose not to participate because they did not know the policies of the candidates that were asking for their votes. In other instances, candidates were elected who did not share the priorities of the electorate.

“ While some want to imagine a world in which politics stay out of the classroom, this is not a real possibility. Pretending differently only sets voters up for disappointment. ”

This problem is a national one thanks to the 90 percent of school districts that hold non-partisan school board elections.⁴⁵ North Carolina should be applauded for requiring some counties to hold partisan school board elections, but the policy should be instituted across the state, and then across the country.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ Other states should follow North Carolina’s lead and require partisan school board elections.

It is a fantasy to keep politics out of schools or classrooms, but states can help school politics align with that of the voters.

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