

# KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

**PARTY AFFILIATION GIVES  
VOTERS THE SIGNAL THEY NEED  
IN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS**



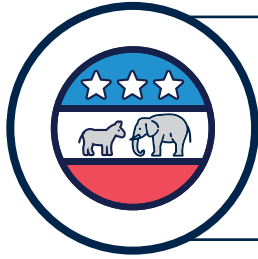
**FEBRUARY 16, 2024**

**Michael Greibrok**  
*Senior Research Fellow*

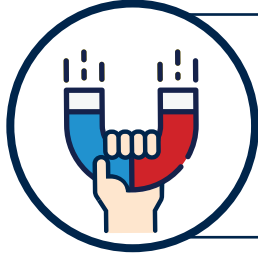


[TheFGA.org/research/party-affiliation-gives-voters-signal-school-board-elections](https://TheFGA.org/research/party-affiliation-gives-voters-signal-school-board-elections)

# KEY FINDINGS



ROUGHLY 90 PERCENT OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS HOLD NON-PARTISAN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.



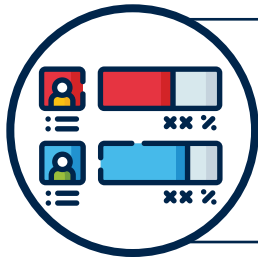
NON-PARTISAN ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS ARE OFTEN MORE POLITICALLY POLARIZED THAN MEMBERS WHO DECLARE THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION.



NON-PARTISAN ELECTIONS ALLOW ENTRENCHED INTERESTS LIKE TEACHERS' UNIONS TO HAVE AN OUTSIZED INFLUENCE ON SCHOOL POLICIES.



DECLARING PARTY AFFILIATION PROVIDES MORE INFORMATION TO VOTERS, ALLOWING THEM TO MAKE A BETTER-INFORMED DECISION.



STATES CAN PROTECT PARENT AND TAXPAYER INTERESTS BY REQUIRING PARTY AFFILIATION IN ALL SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.

## THE BOTTOM LINE:

STATES SHOULD REQUIRE CANDIDATES TO DECLARE THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION IN ALL SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.

## Overview

Most school districts across the country elect school board members in non-partisan elections.<sup>1</sup> Some believe this keeps politics out of the classroom. But non-partisan elections do not mean that the candidates are not political. Elected board members are still mostly registered Democrats or Republicans, and they hold strong political beliefs.

Instead, non-partisan elections **hide candidates' political beliefs from voters, which reduces the number of people who vote in the election.**<sup>2</sup> This allows entrenched interests, like teachers' unions, to dominate elections and leads to a mismatch between board members and the community they represent. All while research shows that non-partisan elected school board members are often more politically polarized than members who declare their party affiliation.

To fix this, states should require candidates for school board to declare their party affiliation.<sup>3</sup>



**NON-PARTISAN ELECTIONS LEAD TO  
A MISMATCH BETWEEN BOARD MEMBERS  
AND THE COMMUNITY THEY REPRESENT.**

## Education is essential, and parents and taxpayers must demand accountability

Basic education is a critical component in preventing dependency in adulthood.<sup>4</sup> By graduation, students should be able to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic while understanding American civics.

But within the last decade, this mission of educating the next generation has been sidetracked. The deterioration was accelerated during COVID-19 lockdowns and debates over school closings and remote learning.<sup>5-7</sup> Now, debates are raging over critical race theory and gender identification.<sup>8-12</sup> All this is dropping students behind, and test scores are showing it.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is basic education critical, but it is also expensive, costing taxpayers nearly \$800 billion annually.<sup>14-15</sup> This money is spread across 13,500 school districts, with nearly 100,000 school board members directing the education of 50 million students.<sup>16-19</sup> These school board members often oversee important aspects of education like curriculum and instruction policies to teacher compensation and administrative staffing.<sup>20</sup> **Whoever controls the school boards controls the type of education students receive.**

It is not only students and parents who should want access to a quality public education. Taxpayers also must demand accountability and expect a return on their hard-earned money. Developing quality schools also benefits taxpayers financially by increasing demand for and the value of homes in the neighborhood.<sup>21-22</sup>

## Most school board elections are non-partisan, but non-partisan does not mean candidates are not political

Many Americans want politics entirely out of the classroom. This is understandable, but it is not a realistic option.

Non-partisan school board elections do not mean candidates are not political. Candidates do not leave their politics at the schoolhouse doors. In fact, research shows that candidates in non-partisan elections are often even more polarized about public policy than those elected in partisan races.<sup>23</sup>



**Research shows that candidates in non-partisan elections are often even more polarized about public policy than those elected in partisan races.**



Regrettably, thanks to leftist reformers who wanted education in the hands of “experts” instead of citizens, roughly 90 percent of school districts hold non-partisan school board elections today.<sup>24-25</sup> Rather than removing politics from schools, **this simply keeps parents and taxpayers in the dark** about who they are voting for and what school policies they support.

Political party signals are missing in non-partisan races, leaving voters without an easy way to discern candidates’ positions on important school matters. Many voters are unsure about which candidate best matches their priorities. Because of this, thousands of would-be voters do not participate in school board elections while voting for preferred candidates in other races.<sup>26</sup>

This leads to both entrenched interests wielding greater power and board members that do not match the priorities of their voters.

## Teachers’ unions dominate non-partisan school board elections

Because voters in non-partisan elections are left in the dark about school board candidates’ politics, entrenched interests like teachers’ unions have an outsized influence on election outcomes. **Union-endorsed candidates win roughly 70 percent of all competitive races,**<sup>27-28</sup> winning a high percentage of races in blue, purple, and even red school districts.<sup>29</sup>

A teachers' union endorsement raises a candidate's support by six to eight percent, enough to turn a loser into a winner in a competitive race.<sup>30</sup> This is greater than the effect of other sought-after endorsements like those from the local paper or business community.<sup>31</sup> A union endorsement can even have a bigger effect than incumbency or past student academic achievement.<sup>32</sup>

This is troubling in itself, but also the evidence does not support the idea that unions endorse candidates based on what is best for students and their families.<sup>33</sup> Rather than student performance or increased parental involvement, they base their support on who will push for raises for teachers.<sup>34</sup>



**UNION-ENDORSED CANDIDATES WIN ROUGHLY 70 PERCENT OF ALL COMPETITIVE RACES.**

Because of the reduced voter participation in non-partisan races, teachers' unions have even more say in the outcome of elections.<sup>35</sup> With fewer overall votes, each voter the unions steer to the polls is more meaningful to the outcome of the race.

Without the strong signal that party affiliation provides, those who actually do vote often default to incumbents or who interested parties say are the best candidates. The result is the candidates with the biggest push, provided by teachers' unions, get elected instead of those matching voter values.

## Registered Democrats are winning in red districts

Not only do non-partisan elections allow entrenched interests to dominate elections, but they also lead to Democrats being elected in reliable Republican counties.

In four large Florida counties (Hillsborough, Palm Beach, Seminole, and Volusia) where Republican candidates dominate statewide elections, the school boards are controlled by registered Democrats.<sup>36</sup> While the elections are non-partisan, the candidates that run for the seats are not, and Democrats are taking advantage.



**WHILE THE ELECTIONS ARE NON-PARTISAN, THE CANDIDATES THAT RUN FOR THE SEATS ARE NOT, AND DEMOCRATS ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE.**

Likewise, in Kentucky, counties that overwhelmingly voted for the Republican candidate for United States Senate see school policy and curriculum set by registered Democrats.<sup>37</sup>

Schools in toss-up states in the Heartland are also dominated by registered Democrats because of the non-partisan nature of their school board elections. In a swing county in Iowa that recently voted Republican for governor, secretary of state, and United States Senate, its largest school district has no registered Republicans on its board, only registered Democrats.<sup>38</sup>

Because of the non-partisan nature, these elections have unforeseeable outcomes and lead to a mismatch between board members and the voters they are supposed to serve. In districts across the country, voters are electing Republicans to represent them in statewide office but choosing registered Democrats as school board members. This misalignment will continue so long as voters are left in the dark about the policies that school board candidates support because of the lack of party affiliation on the ballot.

## **States must take action to protect parents and taxpayers**

Despite these problems, and perhaps in some cases because, only four states generally allow party labels in school board elections and another five allow local authorities to decide.<sup>39</sup> This means that the vast majority of school board members across the country are elected without the benefit of party labels.

North Carolina recently required certain counties to switch from non-partisan to partisan school board elections, but states should go further.<sup>40-41</sup> **States should help voters better understand who they are voting for by requiring candidates to declare their party affiliation in school board elections.** Political parties are a strong signal to voters of what a candidate's priorities will be. This will both take power away from entrenched interests that do not prioritize student education and help match school policies and curricula with those of parents and taxpayers. Education is too important to leave voters in the dark.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE: States should require candidates to declare their party affiliation in all school board elections.**

Education has a huge impact on life outcomes and is the largest budget item from state general funds.<sup>42</sup> Because of this, parents, taxpayers, and legislators alike should demand accountability for school spending and policies.

While non-partisan elections may sound enticing and are widely used, they do not provide adequate signals to voters in school board elections. Instead, they allow teachers' unions to have an outsized effect on elections, resulting in a mismatch between board members and the people they represent.

To fix this, states should require candidates to declare party affiliation in all school board elections.

## REFERENCES

1. Samuel Wonacott, "State law in four states require partisan labels for school board elections," Ballotpedia News (2022), <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2022/10/03/state-law-in-four-states-requires-partisan-labels-for-school-board-elections/>.
2. Michael Greibrok, "North Carolina is evidence of why school board candidates should declare party affiliation," Foundation for Government Accountability (2023), <https://thefga.org/research/north-carolina-evidence-school-board-candidates-party-affiliation/>.
3. Evan Crawford, "How nonpartisan ballot design conceals partisanship: A survey experiment of school board," University of San Diego (2018), <https://digital.sandiego.edu/psir-faculty/1/>.
4. W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, "The power of the success sequence," American Enterprise Institute (2022), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-power-of-the-success-sequence/>.
5. María C. Cortés-Albornoz, et al., "Effects of remote learning during COVID-19 lockdown on children's learning abilities and school performance: A systematic review," International Journal of Educational Development (2023), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10266495/>.
6. Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, "Data insights: Evidence of the pandemic's impact on students in 2020-2021," State of Ohio (2021), <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Research-Evaluation-and-Advanced-Analytics/Data-Insights/Data-Insights>.
7. National Center for Education Statistics, "More than 80 percent of public schools report pandemic has negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development," National Center for Education Statistics (2022), [https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/07\\_06\\_2022.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp).
8. Ballotpedia, "Conflicts in school board elections about race in education/critical race theory, 2021-2023," Ballotpedia (2023), [https://ballotpedia.org/Conflicts\\_in\\_school\\_board\\_elections\\_about\\_race\\_in\\_education/critical\\_race\\_theory,\\_2021-2023](https://ballotpedia.org/Conflicts_in_school_board_elections_about_race_in_education/critical_race_theory,_2021-2023).
9. Douglas Belkin, "Mask mandates, critical race theory heat up in school board elections," The Wall Street Journal (2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mask-mandates-critical-race-theory-heat-up-school-board-elections-11635598800>.
10. Asher Notheis, "Ohio school district spent over \$24,000 on how to hide children's 'gender transitions' from parents: Report," Washington Examiner (2023), [https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/ohio-school-\\$24000-children-s-gender-transitions-parents](https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/ohio-school-$24000-children-s-gender-transitions-parents).
11. Yaron Steinbuch, "Loudoun County students stage walkout to protest transgender bathroom policy," New York Post (2023), <https://nypost.com/2023/11/03/news/loudoun-county-students-protest-gender-bathroom-policy/>.
12. Alexander Hall, "Ohio students protest school's new transgender bathroom policy: 'School board hasn't been listening'," Fox News (2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/ohio-students-protest-schools-new-transgender-bathroom-policy-school-board-hasnt-been-listening>.
13. Ben Chapman and Douglas Belkin, "Reading and math scores plummeted during pandemic, new data show," The Wall Street Journal (2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/education-departments-first-pandemic-era-trend-data-show-worst-reading-math-declines-in-decades-11662004860>.
14. Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 106.20 Expenditures of educational institutions, by level and control of institution: Selected years, 1899-1900 through 2019-20," National Center for Education Statistics (2023), [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_106.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_106.20.asp).
15. Jonathan Bain and Jonathan Ingram, "Off cycle, out of mind: Why school board elections should be held with statewide elections," Foundation for Government Accountability (2022), <https://thefga.org/research/school-board-elections-should-be-held-with-statewide-elections/>.
16. Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 214.10 Number of public school districts and public and private elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2018-19," National Center for Education Statistics (2023), [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_214.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_214.10.asp).
17. Andrew Bauld, "The school board, explained," U.S. News & World Report (2023), <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/the-school-board-explained>.
18. Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 216.20 Enrollment of public elementary and secondary schools, by school level, type, and charter, magnet, and virtual status: 2009-10 through 2019-20," National Center for Education Statistics (2023), [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21\\_216.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_216.20.asp).
19. Jonathan Bain and Jonathan Ingram, "Off cycle, out of mind: Why school board elections should be held with statewide elections," Foundation for Government Accountability (2022), <https://thefga.org/research/school-board-elections-should-be-held-with-statewide-elections/>.
20. Ibid.
21. John Wulsin, "An analysis of the effects of public school quality on house prices in Durham, North Carolina," Honors Thesis - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2009), [https://sites.duke.edu/djepapers/files/2016/10/Wulsin\\_DJE.pdf](https://sites.duke.edu/djepapers/files/2016/10/Wulsin_DJE.pdf).
22. Dale Lavine, "School district impact on property values and home prices," Cardinal Financial (2022), <https://www.cardinalfinancial.com/blog/school-district-impact-on-property-values/>.
23. Evan Crawford, "How nonpartisan ballot design conceals partisanship: A survey experiment of school board," University of San Diego (2018), <https://digital.sandiego.edu/psir-faculty/1/>.
24. Max Eden, "Move school board elections on-cycle to restore local control," American Enterprise Institute (2021), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Move-school-board-elections-on-cycle-to-restore-local-control.pdf?x91208>.
25. Samuel Wonacott, "State law in four states require partisan labels for school board elections," Ballotpedia News (2022), <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2022/10/03/state-law-in-four-states-requires-partisan-labels-for-school-board-elections/>.

## REFERENCES CONT'D

26. Michael Greibrok, "North Carolina is evidence of why school board candidates should declare party affiliation," Foundation for Government Accountability (2023), <https://thefga.org/research/north-carolina-evidence-school-board-candidates-party-affiliation/>.
27. Michael Hartney, "Still the ones to beat: Teachers' unions and school board elections," Manhattan Institute (2022), <https://manhattan.institute/article/still-the-ones-to-beat-teachers-unions-and-school-board-elections>.
28. Jonathan Bain and Jonathan Ingram, "Off cycle, out of mind: Why school board elections should be held with statewide elections," Foundation for Government Accountability (2022), <https://thefga.org/research/school-board-elections-should-be-held-with-statewide-elections/>.
29. Michael Hartney, "Still the ones to beat: Teachers' unions and school board elections," Manhattan Institute (2022), <https://manhattan.institute/article/still-the-ones-to-beat-teachers-unions-and-school-board-elections>.
30. Caitlynn Peetz, "Running for a school board seat? This is the most powerful endorsement you can get," Education Week (2023), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/running-for-a-school-board-seat-this-is-the-most-powerful-endorsement-you-can-get/2023/09>.
31. Ibid.
32. Michael T. Hartney and Vladimir Kogan, "The politics of teachers' union endorsements," Ed Working Paper (2023), [https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-841\\_0.pdf](https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-841_0.pdf).
33. Caitlynn Peetz, "Running for a school board seat? This is the most powerful endorsement you can get," Education Week (2023), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/running-for-a-school-board-seat-this-is-the-most-powerful-endorsement-you-can-get/2023/09>.
34. Ibid.
35. See Jonathan Bain and Jonathan Ingram, "Off cycle, out of mind: Why school board elections should be held with statewide elections," Foundation for Government Accountability (2022), <https://thefga.org/research/school-board-elections-should-be-held-with-statewide-elections/>.
36. Party affiliation comes from a third party that compiles voter registration and voting history of individuals. County-level data is from the 2022 official election results of Hillsborough, Palm Beach, Seminole, and Volusia counties. See Division of Elections, "Election results: November 8, 2022 general election," Florida Department of State (2022), <https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=11/8/2022&DATAMODE=>.
37. Party affiliation comes from a third party that compiles voter registration and voting history of individuals. County-level data is from the 2022 official election results of Bullitt, Daviess, Kenton, and Pike counties. See Michael G. Adams, "Official 2022 general election results," Commonwealth of Kentucky (2022), <https://elect.ky.gov/results/2020-2029/Documents/1.17.2023%20Certified%20General%20Election%20Results.pdf>.
38. Party affiliation comes from a third party that compiles voter registration and voting history of individuals. County-level data is from the 2022 official election results. See Dallas County, Iowa, "2022 general election," Dallas County, Iowa, (2022), <https://electionresults.iowa.gov/IA/Dallas/115666/web.303253/#/summary>.
39. Samuel Wonacott, "State law in four states require partisan labels for school board elections," Ballotpedia News (2022), <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2022/10/03/state-law-in-four-states-requires-partisan-labels-for-school-board-elections/>.
40. Session Law 2023-32, "House bill 66," General Assembly of North Carolina (2023), <https://ncleg.gov/Sessions/2023/Bills/House/PDF/H66v7.pdf>.
41. Liz Schlemmer, "NCGA passes changes to school board elections in Buncombe County and others," WUNC North Carolina Public Radio (2023), <https://www.wunc.org/education/2023-06-07/nc-senate-passes-changes-school-board-elections-buncombe-county>.
42. National Association of State Budget Officers, "Summary: 2022 state expenditure report," National Association of State Budget Officers (2022), [https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/NASBO/9d2d2db1-c943-4f1b-b750-0fca152d64c2/UploadedImages/Reports/2022\\_State\\_Expenditure\\_Report\\_-\\_Summary.pdf](https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/NASBO/9d2d2db1-c943-4f1b-b750-0fca152d64c2/UploadedImages/Reports/2022_State_Expenditure_Report_-_Summary.pdf)





15275 Collier Boulevard | Suite 201-279  
Naples, Florida 34119  
(239) 244-8808

[TheFGA.org](http://TheFGA.org) | [X @TheFGA](https://twitter.com/TheFGA) | [@ TheFGA](https://www.instagram.com/TheFGA) | [f TheFGA](https://www.facebook.com/TheFGA)