Are School Boards Democratic?

(No! And …)

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Overview

• How to measure “democracy?”
  • Process: Participation and contestation
  • Outcomes: Accountability and responsiveness

• Why this is the wrong question!

• A Modest Proposal … for reform
Measure 1: How Many People Vote?

- Data from California school board elections 2006-2014
- Looking at average turnout net of roll off as percent of registered voters (and of voting-age population), by timing
Measure 2: Are Elections Competitive?

• We have assembled the largest database of school board elections available, covering 50,000 contests in 16 states during 2002-2017

• Findings:
  • Nearly 40% of races are uncontested
  • Incumbents win 80% of the time (when they run)
  • Average margin of victory: 38%! 
Measure 3: Are Incumbents Held Accountable?

- **Retrospective voting**: Rewarding good, punishing bad performance
  - Important for incentives we want: Better student outcomes

- **Summary**: Accountability is exception, not rule in SB elections

- Even when found, **effect sizes are very small** — much smaller than effect of teacher union endorsement

Measure 4: Does Policy Match Voter Preferences?

- “The empirical story shows that school districts are indeed democratic. To a degree that surprised both authors of this book, there is a high correspondence between what citizens want and what they get.”

- Tells us nothing about quality of representative democracy!
  - Eliminating elections and picking boards via random lottery will also produce responsiveness (not clear if more or less)
This Is the Wrong Question!

• Schools exist to educate students. Asking if school boards are democratic has nothing to do with how well they are executing that function!

• We evaluate public water systems based on whether they provide safe and clean water, not based on how “democratic” they are

• We evaluate public hospitals based on patient outcomes, not on turnout in elections, # of people speaking at public comment, etc.

• “Democracy” is about adults, which tells us little about how students are served
East Ramapo Central School District

- Public school students: 8,800
  - 92% Black or Latino
- Private school students: 29,200
  - 98% White
Democratic Deficit in Education Governance

- It turns out *most* large, urban, low-performing districts look like East Ramapo
  - Most voters don’t have kids, and look quite different from the kids being educated in public schools
  - Most majority-minority school districts (in terms of enrollment) have majority white school board electorates
Democratic Deficit in Education Governance

• Fundamental problem: **Misalignment** between **political incentives** (what adults want) and **student interests**

• Example: HBO’s “The Wire”
A Modest Proposal for Reform

• Make school quality more salient to voters
  • Emphasize growth over proficiency (which largely captures SES composition)
  • Release information in close proximity to school board elections
  • Print district performance ratings on the ballot (instead of party labels!)

• Move school board elections to be held in November even years
  • Not only is turnout much higher, but parents represent larger share of voters
  • This is when Julia Payson’s research suggests incumbents are actually held accountable (but only a little)
A Modest Proposal for Reform

• Increase **school choice options** (e.g., open enrollment, charter schools, vouchers)
  • Directly empowers parents, not the few adults who happen to vote
  • Overwhelming evidence of positive *competition* effects, improving alignment of incentives
  • Programs should be targeted (rather than universal), with proactive quality control measures

• *No Adult Left Behind* coming in 2024!