

# Are School Boards Democratic?

(No! And ...)

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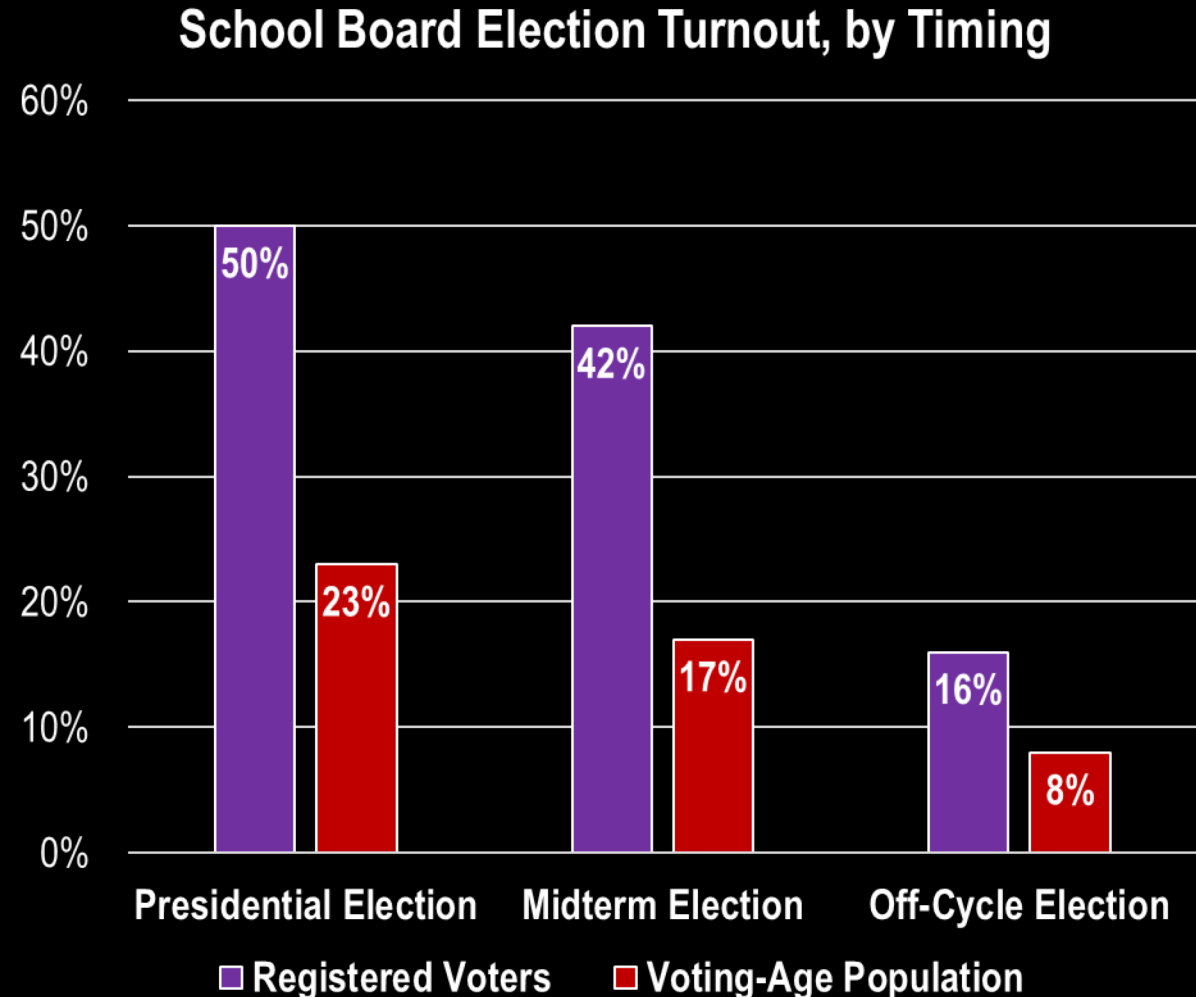
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# Overview

- **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

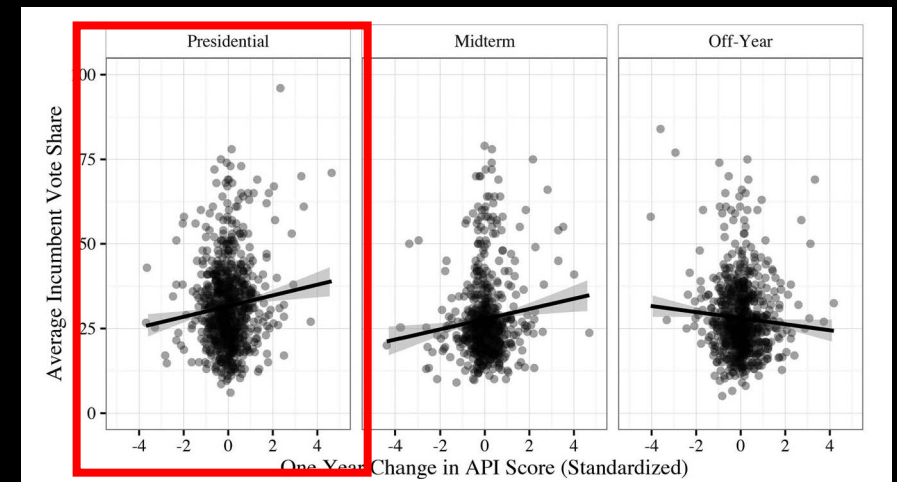


# Measure 2: Are Elections Competitive?

- 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



Source: Julia Payson, 2017, "When Are Local Incumbents Held Accountable for Government Performance? Evidence from US School Districts," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 42(3): pp. 421-448.

# 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)

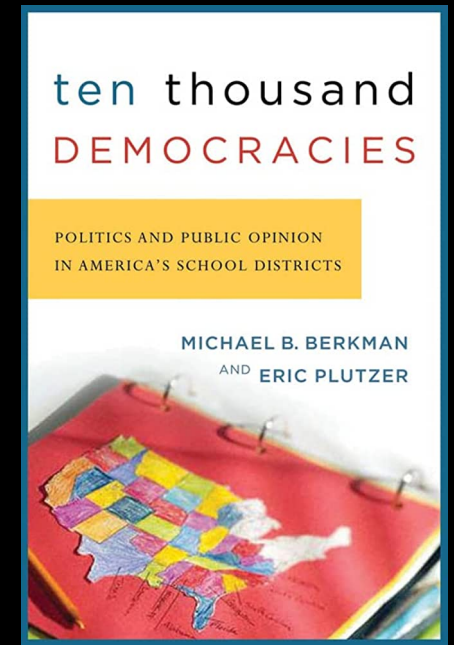
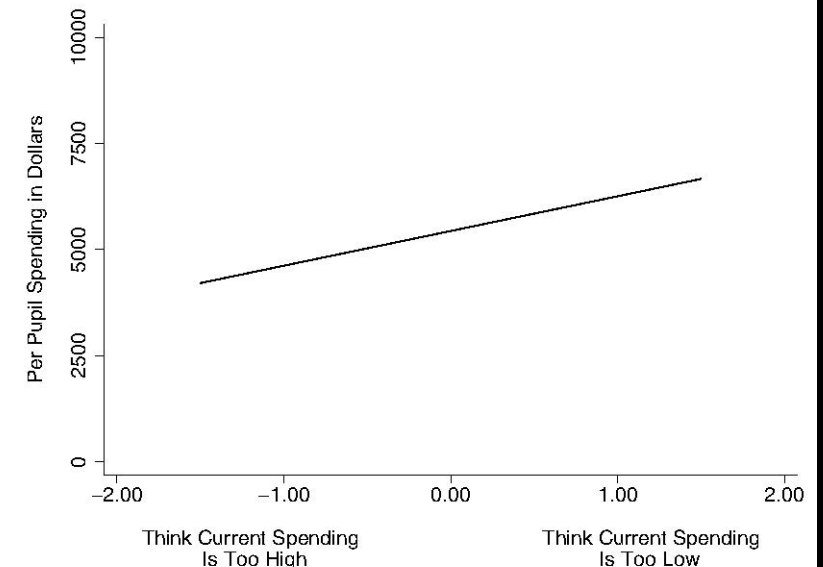


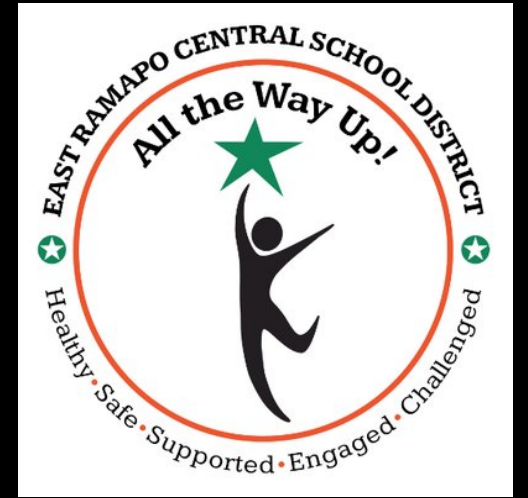
Figure 3.2. Local Opinion toward School Spending Has a Strong and Positive Impact on Local Spending Levels



# **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

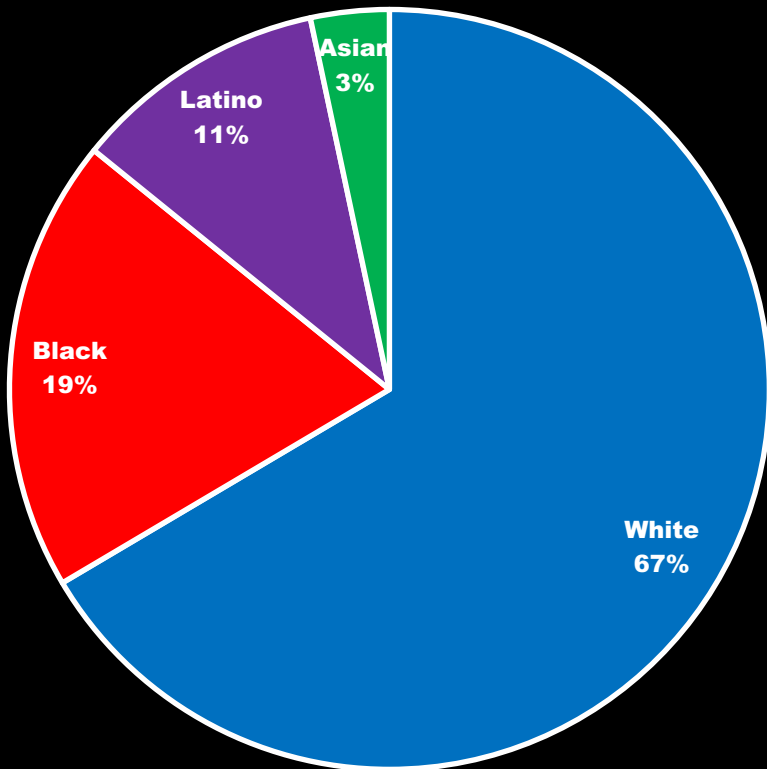


- **Public school students: 8,800**

- 92% Black or Latino

- **Private school students: 29,200**

- 98% White



This American Life Archive Recommended How to Listen About Q f t Store

534 | September 12, 2014

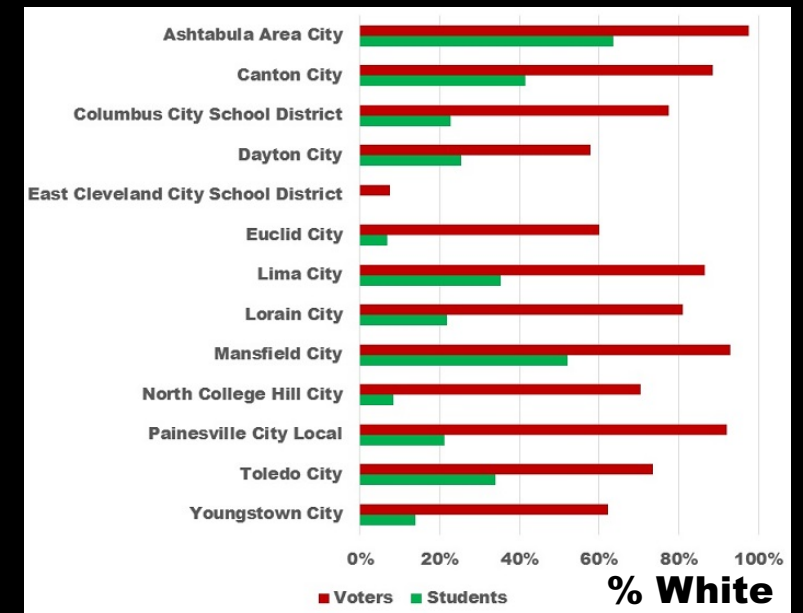
## ▶ Not-So-Simple Majority

We take it for granted that the majority calls the shots. But in one NY school district, that idea — majority rules — has led to an all-out war. School board disputes are pretty common, but not like this one. This involves multimillion-dollar land deals, lawyers threatening to beat up parents, felony criminal charges, and the highest levels of state government. Meanwhile, the students are caught in the middle.



# 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!**