

SHORT ARTICLE

Schoolhouse Rocked: Pandemic Politics and the Nationalization of School Board Elections

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Abstract

We examine the influence of national politics and changing racial demographics on school board elections. We identify the districts where candidates campaigned on Critical Race Theory, COVID response, or parent control/transparency (what we call “conflict elections”) and examine two related questions. First, what characteristics define school districts that had elections involving these issues? Second, in the places that had conflict elections, how frequently did “conflict candidates” win, and what factors influenced their odds of winning? Utilizing a unique dataset of all school board elections in Wisconsin in 2022, we find that Republican presidential vote share is positively related to both the probability that a school district had a conflict election and that a conflict candidate won. We also find that in communities where the white population declined between 2010 and 2020, there was a higher likelihood that a conflict candidate won compared to communities where the size of the white population grew. Overall, our analysis confirms that school board elections are increasingly mirroring nationalized trends in other elections.

Keywords: interest groups and elections; political parties; state/local politics; nationalization; education policy

You have become our enemies and you will be removed, one way or the other.
Have a miserable, miserable day for the rest of your life you filthy traitor

– Letter sent to Worthington, Ohio school board members (CNN).

Introduction

Although considered local governments, school boards have become increasingly influenced by national politics since 2020. As one recent article highlighted, “School board races used to be sleeper, down-ballot contests...Suddenly they have become

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contentious political battlegrounds. No longer simply the entry point for political careers, school board races these days resonate with the hyper partisan debate of national politics.¹ Indeed, as the letter to Ohio school board members demonstrates, these elections have become rife with vitriol and threats of punishment. The letter further warned “We are coming after you,” and called for board members to be tried for treason, in part for “poisoning the minds of children” with Critical Race Theory (CRT).² According to Nikki Hudson, one of the board members seeking reelection, “It’s like nothing you would ever imagine in a local race” (qtd. in Simon 2021).

To some extent, education issues have always been personal and polarizing for parents because these decisions directly affect their children. However, the pandemic has further intensified parental angst. And while school board races are generally nonpartisan, the politics of such elections have become inescapable. Coupled with traditionally low voter turnout rates (Bain and Ingram 2022), school board elections can be susceptible to the whims of a small number of voters. Researchers have documented how small but organized groups can affect school board elections (and the policies that follow) by turning out voters (Anzia 2011; 2013).

In other words, school governance is harder these days, with boards tackling complex questions about public health, curriculum, and finances amid a great deal of volatility among voters and potential candidates. What is still unclear is how this uncertainty is changing the nature of school board elections and who wins and loses these elections. In this project, we investigate how recent school board elections fit the profile of increasingly nationalized subnational elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Hopkins 2018) and of elections where racial threat plays an increasingly important role (e.g., Jardina 2019). Here, we focus on “conflictual” elections, which are denoted by candidate campaign platforms that include anti-CRT/racial justice arguments; arguments against how the district handled COVID; or arguments for more parent control or transparency. We examine two related questions. First, what characteristics define school board districts that had contentious elections? Second, in the places that had conflict elections, how likely were “conflict” candidates to win, and what factors influence their odds of winning?

Theory and hypotheses

A common thread in the descriptions of recent school board elections is a change in the context of the communities – growing anxiety and unrest, coinciding with the pandemic and Donald Trump’s campaign and election. We build upon the recent research that examines two trends in American politics that created an environment conducive to conflict: the nationalization of elections and the activation of white racial fear in generating political anxiety.

Nationalization of elections

Recently, scholars have devoted increasing attention to the nationalization of subnational elections. Nationalization refers to “a process by which presidential and

¹<https://www.pennlive.com/news/2021/10/a-new-battleground-pa-school-board-races-mirror-national-partisan-clashes.html>.

²<https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/21/us/ohio-school-boards-contentious-elections/index.html>.

national politics exert greater influence over down-ballot contests” (Sievert and McKee 2019, 1055). To date, many studies have found significant declines in ticket-splitting and an increasing correlation between voting patterns in presidential and down-ballot elections. Congressional elections, for instance, are becoming highly linked to presidential voting patterns (Jacobson 2021; Sievert and McKee 2019). State-level elections also display high correlations with presidential elections (Hopkins 2018; Sievert and McKee 2019), a pattern that similarly extends to state legislative elections (Melusky and Richman 2020). Nationalization even appears to be occurring in low-salience elections, such as those for state supreme court and state superintendent (Weinschenk 2022; Weinschenk *et al.* 2020).

The nationalization of local, nonpartisan elections is somewhat more difficult to assess – without official party labels on the ballot, it is harder to determine the partisan or ideological attachments of candidates, though it is certainly possible to do so in many races by using data on endorsements, former elected positions, or campaign donations (e.g., de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016). To date, research on the nationalization of local elections has been somewhat limited, although several existing studies provide some sense of whether the trend of nationalization has occurred in the local context. Das, Sinclair, Webster, and Han (2022), for example, find that political rhetoric used by mayors on Twitter largely focuses on local topics as opposed to national politics. Interestingly, though, they find evidence that nationalized mayoral rhetoric is most likely to occur in cities with large populations. Scholars have also examined the role of some national forces in school board elections. Henig, Jacobson, and Reckhow (2019) and Reckhow, Henig, Jacobsen, and Litt (2017), for instance, find that large national donors have recently played a significant role in school board elections.

Subnational politics are also increasingly subject to the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and populism, rising toxic political rhetoric, and an uptick in political violence at the state and national levels. Uscinski *et al.* (2021) label this an “anti-establishment” orientation and find that elites can use this rhetoric as a “disruptive force” that destabilizes institutions, creates chaotic policy agendas by removing choice constraints, and integrates into the established order groups that were once excluded from, or antagonistic toward, that very order (Atkinson and DeWitt 2018). Within the school setting, we see this as the Republican rhetoric against “woke politics,” anti-Biden COVID responses, and the passage of parent “bills of rights.”

Given the abovementioned studies on the general trend toward the nationalization, we expect there will be a relationship between national political factors and the likelihood that a school district was the site of a “conflict election” and, relatedly, whether a “conflict” candidate won.

H1_a: *Trump vote share will be positively related to the probability that a school district had a “conflict” election in 2022.*

H1_b: *Trump vote share will be positively related to the probability that a “conflict” candidate won.*

Activating white racial fear

Early research by Sears *et al.* (1979; 1980) demonstrates that racial animus is a significant predictor of support for racialized policy areas, which in turn affects vote

choice. More recent research on racially charged campaign appeals finds they are an effective tool for swaying the political preferences of white voters (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Mendelberg 1997; 2008; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018). And scholars note that the Trump campaign prominently featured racialized appeals in an attempt to sway white voters (Schaffner, Williams, and Nteta 2018).

Moreover, there is an accumulating body of anecdotal evidence that Trump's racial rhetoric on the campaign trail emboldened members of the American public to more openly express and act on their existing prejudices – a phenomenon some have labeled the “Trump effect” (Costello 2016). Newman *et al.* (2021) find from experimental work that as elites tacitly condone racial animus and prejudiced language, they create a potential basis that threatens the norm, emboldening citizens to act on these prejudices. Moreover, entrepreneurial political elites can (and do) harness these undercurrents.

Demographic changes in the US provided the perfect canvas for these undercurrents to take hold. Republican elites in particular depicted these changes as the loss of America and the loss of white power (Major, Blodorn, and Blascovich 2018). Thus, coupled with the polarization over the pandemic, there was a renewed effort to stoke anxiety over racial changes in the United States. Divides between a shrinking white majority and fast-growing nonwhite minority, values, morality, lifestyles, and views about the proper role and size of government have been mirrored in the political parties (Abramowitz 2018). Republicans seized upon this rhetoric to mobilize voters, and again, we see this at both the national and local levels (Drakulich *et al.* 2020; Pollock *et al.* 2022).

H2_a: *As the size of the white population in a community declines, school districts will be more likely to have a “conflict” election.*

H2_b: *As the size of the white population in a community declines, there will be a greater likelihood that a “conflict” candidate won.*

Data and methods

Our analysis centers on school board elections in Wisconsin in 2022, an electoral “case study” useful for numerous reasons. First, Wisconsin has become a pivotal “purple” state in recent national elections, with many Republican and Democratic-leaning school districts. Second, Wisconsin holds annual school board elections in every district, allowing us to fully capture the influence of contextual variables across the state. Lastly, data from *Ballotpedia* indicates that about 90% of school districts in the United States hold nonpartisan elections.³ In this way, school board elections in Wisconsin are similar to those held in most other states (only four states hold partisan school board elections).

We relied on *Ballotpedia* to create a list of districts in 2022 with “conflictual elections” in Wisconsin.⁴ *Ballotpedia* labeled a district as having a conflictual election if there was at least one candidate who emerged around one of three issues: (1) Race in education/CRT, including the role of race in curricula and learning materials as well

³<https://news.ballotpedia.org/2022/10/03/state-law-in-four-states-requires-partisan-labels-for-school-board-elections/>.

⁴https://ballotpedia.org/Conflicts_in_school_board_elections,_2021-2023.

as district-specific equity and/or diversity plans, (2) Responses to the COVID pandemic, including mask requirements, vaccine requirements, and school reopening or distance learning plans, or (3) Sex and gender in schools, including sexual education curricula and learning materials as well as the usage of gender-specific facilities (restrooms, locker rooms, etc.). They identified school district elections through a daily news-checking process.

Using a list of all school districts in Wisconsin from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, we developed a dataset that identifies whether a district was a “conflict” district (1 = yes, 0 = no) and whether, in “conflict” districts, a “conflict” candidate won in the district (1 = yes, 0 = no). In total, our dataset includes 415 school districts in Wisconsin, 92 of which had a “conflict election” (22.1%) and 323 of which did not (77.8%) in 2022. Within the 92 districts with “conflict elections,” 54% saw one (or more) “conflict” candidate win, while in 46% of the districts, none of the “conflict” candidates won.

We are primarily interested in the role of national politics and the role of changing racial demographics in school district elections. We measure the influence of national politics in school board elections by using the average Republican share of the two-party vote in the 2020 and 2016 presidential elections. For all of the school districts in Wisconsin, we identified the county that each school district is located in and calculated the average county-level Trump vote share (2016 and 2020) using data from MIT’s Election Lab.⁵ To measure change in the size of the white population, we used data from the US Census report “Race and Ethnicity in the United States: 2010 Census and 2020 Census,” which includes the percentage change in the size of the white population in each county from 2010 to 2020. In our dataset, the measure ranges from -15% to $+18.9\%$, with the mean being -2.86% ($sd = 4.34$).

We include several controls in our models: the percentage of families in the district that are below the poverty line, the percentage of parents in each district who have a college degree or higher, the percentage of students in the district who are racial/ethnic minorities, and the size of the district (logged number of students who are enrolled). All of these measures were collected from the National Center for Education Statistics. We expect that poverty will be negatively related to having a conflict election and candidates, as schools with large number of students in poverty are likely to be more focused on issues related to resources. We expect that parental educational attainment will be negatively related to the odds of having a conflict election and having conflict candidates win. Recent research suggests that “More educated Americans who have at least some college education or more were slightly more supportive of teaching about how racism continues to impact American society compared to those with a high school degree or less” (Safarpour *et al.* 2021). In terms of the percentage of students in the district who are racial/ethnic minorities, our expectation is that districts with large minority populations will be less inclined to see “conflict” elections and candidates because of the likelihood of backlash from minority students and/or families. Lastly, larger school districts may have important resource concerns and will be less likely to find themselves with conflictual elections and candidates.⁶

⁵<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/VOQCHQ>.

⁶In the Supplementary Material, we include for interested readers Table A1 showing the correlations among our independent variables. Overall, the variables are related in expected ways. In addition, we note that although there is some overlap between variables (e.g., parental education and poverty are negatively related), none of the correlations exceed $-.47$. In short, multicollinearity does not appear to be a major issue.

Table 1. Logit models predicting whether school district had a conflict election (model 1) and whether a conflict candidate won (model 2)

	Model 1: Conflict Election	Model 2: Conflict Candidate Won
	b/se	b/se
Trump vote share [2016 and 2020 avg.]	0.031* 0.014 0.033	0.097** 0.031 -0.168*
Percent Δ white population, 2010–2020	0.034 0.016 0.033	0.093
Percent families in poverty	0.031**	0.039
Percent parents w/ BA or higher	0.010 -0.067*	0.024 -0.126**
Percent minority students	0.032 1.769***	0.038 0.783*
District size (logged)	0.242	0.369 0.939*
Number of seats up	-16.452***	0.460 -14.629***
Constant	2.415	3.771
Pseudo R^2	0.34	0.25
Number of observations	401	91

Note. SEs are clustered by county.

* $p < .10$,

** $p < .05$,

*** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Results and analysis

We begin by examining the factors that predict whether a school district had a “conflict” election (Model 1 in Table 1).⁷ Turning first to our measure of the influence of national politics, we see that it is a positive and statistically significant predictor of whether a district had a conflict election. Districts located in areas where Trump support was strong are more likely than those in heavily Democratic areas to have conflict elections. The substantive effect of this variable is shown in Figure 1. In places where Trump support is low (20% of the two-party vote share), the predicted probability of having a conflict election for school board is 0.13. On the other hand, in places where Trump support is high (70% of the two-party vote share), the predicted probability of having a conflict election is nearly 0.30. When it comes to our measure of racial change, we do not find a statistically significant relationship. The extent to which the size of the white population has changed in an area does not seem to play an important role in differentiating districts that had conflict elections and those that did not.

Several of the control variables are significantly related to the likelihood that a district had a conflict election. District size (logged number of students) is positively related to the probability of having a conflict election. In addition, the size of the minority population in a district is negatively related to having a conflict election.

⁷We initially estimated a Heckman selection model (i.e., having a conflict election or not and, if so, whether a conflict candidate won or not), but a test of independent equations indicated that a two-stage model was not necessary ($\chi^2 = 0.28$, Prob $> \chi^2 = 0.5996$).

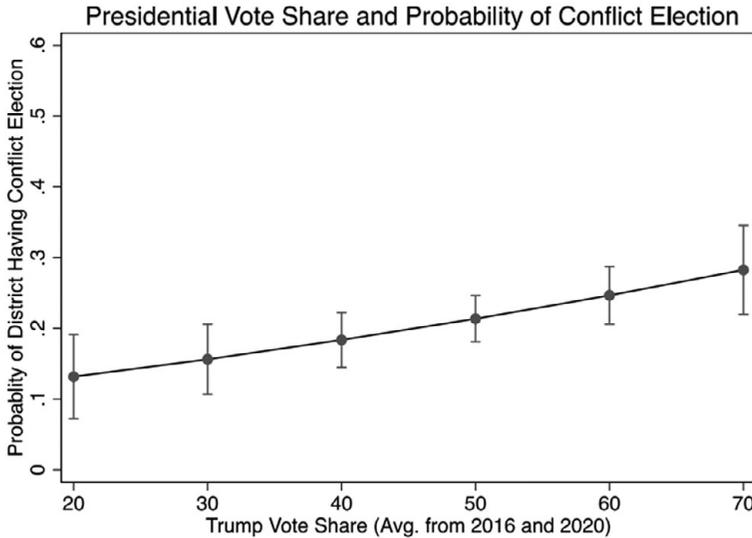


Figure 1. Relationship between presidential vote share and probability of having a conflict election.

Finally, the percentage of parents with a college degree or higher is positively related to the probability that a district had a conflict election.

We are also interested in the factors that influence the likelihood that at least one “conflict” candidate won in districts that had a conflict election. In Model 2, we examine the predictors of conflict candidates winning. Starting with our measure of nationalization, we see that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship. Conflict candidates were more likely to win in heavily Trump areas than in more Democratic areas. The substantive effect of this measure is shown in Figure 2. When Trump support is low (20% of the two-party vote share), the predicted probability of a conflict candidate winning is 0.08. In places where Trump support is high (70% of the two-party vote share), the predicted probability of a conflict candidate winning is 0.79. Although the size of the change in the white population was not related to the likelihood of having a conflict election, Model 2 indicates that it is related to the odds that a conflict candidate won ($p = 0.070$, two-tailed) and the relationship is negative. Figure 3 plots the predicted relationship between the change in the size of the white population and the probability that a conflict candidate won. In places where there has been a large decline in the size of the white population (-10%), the predicted probability of a conflict candidate winning is about 0.75. In contrast, in places where the size of the white population has grown substantially ($+10\%$), the probability of a conflict candidate winning is much lower at about 0.22. Once again, several of the control variables are significantly related to the likelihood that a conflict candidate won. District size and the number of seats up for election are both positively related to the odds that a conflict candidate won. The size of the minority population in a district is also negatively related to the probability that a conflict candidate won.

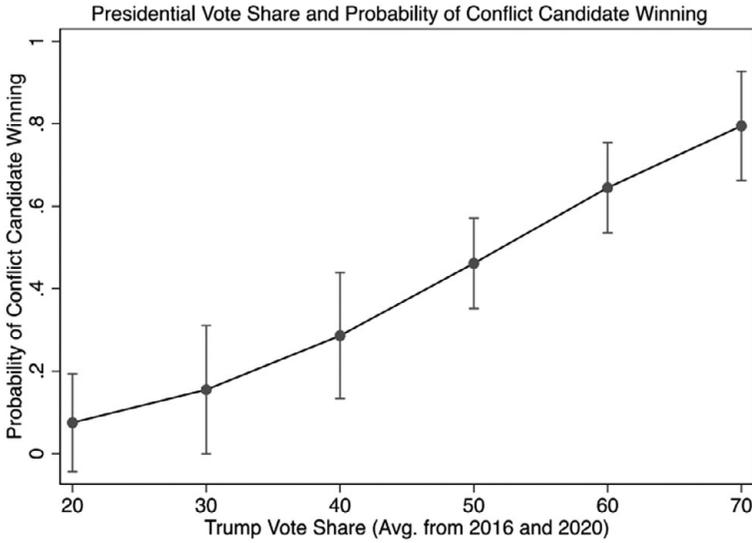


Figure 2. Relationship between presidential vote share and probability of conflict candidate winning.

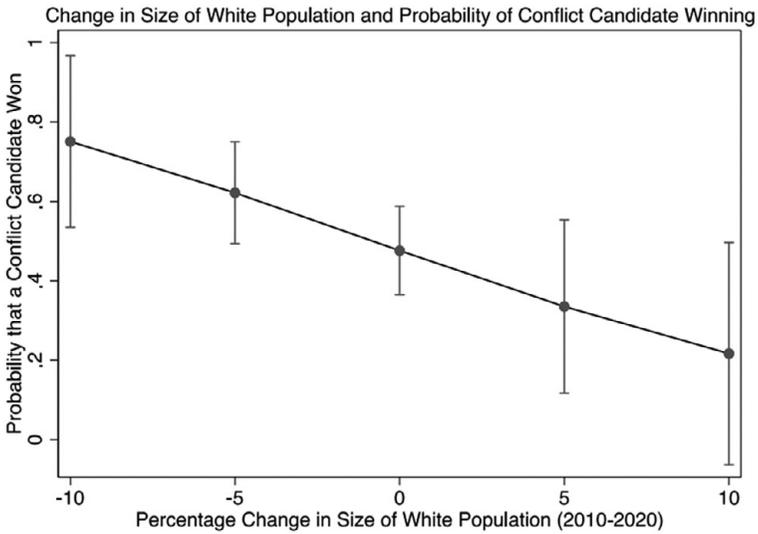


Figure 3. Relationship between change in size of white population and probability of conflict candidate winning.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, our results fit with the growing trend of nationalized subnational elections. As a 2022 *Time Magazine*⁸ article put it, "...school board races have grown more competitive as once-quiet, non-partisan races evolve into battle grounds between

⁸<https://time.com/6159177/school-board-elections-covid-19-critical-race-theory/>.

conservatives and progressives.” We examined the influence of national politics and changing racial demographics in Wisconsin school board elections and campaigns centered on “conflict” (i.e., where CRT, COVID response, and/or parent control/transparency were talking points) in 2022. We found that Trump vote share was positively related to the likelihood that a school district had a conflict election. We also examined the factors that were related to whether a “conflict” candidate won. Here, we found that conflict candidates were more likely to win in heavily Republican areas than in heavily Democratic communities. Racial factors also appear to matter when it comes to conflict candidates winning. In communities where the size of the white population declined between 2010 and 2020, there was a higher likelihood that a conflict candidate won compared to communities where the size of the white population grew.

Given the findings above, which are based only on data from Wisconsin, it is important to end by taking a moment to think a bit about the issue of generalizability. As we noted above, Wisconsin holds nonpartisan school board elections, similar to those held in most other states (only four states hold partisan school board elections). Of course, while nonpartisan elections keep partisan labels off the ballot, partisan and ideological cues can (and do) make their way into races in other ways (e.g., endorsements, mailers, rhetoric). Wisconsin is widely viewed as a battleground state in the context of national elections, and therefore different dynamics may be at play in its local elections compared to states where one party regularly dominates in elections (e.g., the contentious nature of national elections may trickle down to subnational elections in highly competitive states).

Future analyses that replicate the models here in a state(s) where they hold nonpartisan school board elections but where party politics is not particularly competitive would add to our understanding of these dynamics. One hypothesis worth exploring is that the nationalization and hyperpartisanship we observe in nonpartisan school board elections are even more potent in places that hold partisan elections. It would be particularly useful to compare the dynamics of school board elections in partisan and nonpartisan states, which would yield important insights about the extent to which the factors examined in this article exert similar (or different) effects across various institutional contexts.

Beyond future research focusing on the above themes, we would also encourage scholars to build on our analysis, which focuses on just one election cycle, by gathering data on school board elections *over time* in order to examine whether and to what extent the trend of nationalized elections continues. Additionally, it will be important to examine nationalization in the context of other types of elections. During the 2022 election cycle, elections for many “under the radar” state-level positions, such as those for secretary of state and attorney general, involved national issues and partisan themes (e.g., denial of 2020 election results).⁹ It would be valuable to study the extent to which nationalization characterizes these kinds of races and why certain elections become more nationalized than others.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2023.28>.

⁹<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/why-should-you-care-about-your-secretary-of-state>.

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