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The Influence of Partisanship in Local School Board Elections: Evidence from Exit Polling in Michigan & Rhode Island

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Education in the U.S. has long been shaped by local school boards elected in nonpartisan contests, a structure intended to shield schools from broader political forces. Today, many states are considering reforms to make school board elections partisan, yet the impact on voters remains unclear. Using exit poll data from 839 voters in Michigan (nonpartisan elections) and Rhode Island (partisan elections), we examine how school board election structure influences voter decision-making. We find that partisanship strongly predicts voters' educational priorities in both contexts. Moreover, when party labels appear on ballots, voters are nearly 50 percentage points more likely to select a copartisan. These findings raise critical questions about how electoral reforms may reshape local education governance and democratic engagement.

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Abstract

Education in the U.S. has long been shaped by local school boards elected in nonpartisan contests, a structure intended to shield schools from broader political forces. Today, many states are considering reforms to make school board elections partisan, yet the impact on voters remains unclear. Using exit poll data from 839 voters in Michigan (nonpartisan elections) and Rhode Island (partisan elections), we examine how school board election structure influences voter decision-making. We find that partisanship strongly predicts voters' educational priorities in both contexts. Moreover, when party labels appear on ballots, voters are nearly 50 percentage points more likely to select a copartisan. These findings raise critical questions about how electoral reforms may reshape local education governance and democratic engagement.

Keywords: school boards, local elections, school governance, exit poll

For much of U.S. history, education has been shaped by nonpartisan, local school boards typically elected in off-cycle elections. This unique electoral arrangement is the result of Progressive reformers' efforts in the early 20th century to insulate educational decisions about curriculum, hiring, and discipline from the partisan nature of general-purpose electoral politics (Henig, 2013). The formal institutional barriers—nonpartisan and off-cycle elections—that contributed to the "one best system" spread across nearly all U.S. public school districts (Tyack, 1974) and are still largely intact today. However, in the context of nationalization and intense political polarization of American politics, the "one best system" is showing signs of strain as increasingly partisan-controlled states (Grumbach, 2022) consider electoral reforms to make school board elections partisan.

In recent years, school boards have become sites of heightened political conflict. Elections, once marked by near invisibility and low engagement, now attract significant media attention (Bennett & Norris, 2023), increased seat contestation (Jacob, 2024), and record-breaking fundraising efforts (Koumpilova & Vevea, 2025). National debates over COVID-19 and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) policies have further transformed school board elections into battlegrounds for polarized partisan agendas (Shah et al., 2024; Giersch, 2025; Gensterblum et al., 2026). While this increased attention reflects the important role that school boards play in shaping education, it also injects nationalized–and often partisan–politics into arenas often ill-prepared for such politics.

While a majority of school board elections are still formally nonpartisan, many conservative states have considered legislation in recent years to make school board elections partisan. Indiana passed legislation in 2024, becoming the most recent state to adopt partisan school board elections. As of 2025, 5 states (Alabama, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, and

Pennsylvania) require school board candidates to run with a party affiliation. Another five states (Georgia, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee) allow districts to decide whether to hold partisan elections, while the remaining forty states hold nonpartisan elections (Arnzen et al., 2025; Kogan et al., 2025). While only Tennessee and Indiana have officially become partisan in the last decade, many states have considered similar legislation (i.e. since 2023: Arkansas, Kentucky, Texas, West Virginia, Florida, Ohio, Michigan, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Iowa, Arizona, Idaho), and many Republican Party platforms specifically highlight partisan school board elections as a key priority (Richert, 2025). This is echoed by support from other prominent conservative advocacy groups such as the American Enterprise Institute, Moms for Liberty, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Blad, 2023).

While proponents of partisan school board elections argue they increase voter information, little research has examined this question. Instead, recent studies of partisan elections focus on the school board candidates (Kogan et al., 2025) or the political and policy outcomes (Hill et al., 2023). While it is assumed by policy advocates that partisan labels are beneficial for voters, we have no evidence of how voters make sense of party labels in school board elections. Moreover, in the current climate of partisan polarization, we do not know whether injection of formal partisanship may shape voters' educational priorities differently nor do we know how voters may weigh party labels against other school board candidate factors. We begin to fill this gap by focusing specifically on voters in school board elections.

We specifically focus on how voters make sense of and use partisan information about candidates in two contrasting cases: Michigan with formally nonpartisan school board elections and Rhode Island with formally partisan school board elections. We distinguish between formal and informal partisanship because, as we will demonstrate, the inclusion of candidate party

labels is not the only way in which partisanship influences school board elections. Understanding how electoral changes may shape voter thinking is critical in the current context of partisan polarization because formally partisan school board elections may amplify the effects of nationalization while nonpartisan structures may provide some buffer to polarizing forces. We investigate this dynamic at the individual voter level, drawing from a novel exit poll of school board voters (N = 839) in two states with on-cycle elections. We focus on on-cycle elections, as they are the cases in which nationalization and its accompanying partisan polarization will likely have the strongest effect.

Leveraging the fact that Rhode Island is one of the few states that holds partisan school board elections, we compare voter information use, attitudes and vote choice in two Rhode Island district elections to four Michigan school district elections. We find that, despite vastly different geographic contexts and school board election structures, voters in both states hold broadly similar attitudes, supporting claims of the nationalization of local education politics. We also find that voter priorities in both states have polarized along political party lines in similar ways despite Michigan holding nonpartisan school board elections. Though we find that voters' local educational priorities seem to have nationalized and polarized, we find that voters in partisan elections are far more likely to vote in nationalized ways, suggesting that formal partisan elections still do matter for voter behaviors. Our findings broadly contribute to our growing understanding of the consequences of the nationalization of local education politics by examining whether formally partisan elections lead voters to engage in more nationalized and/or polarized ways.

Nationalization & The New Politics of School Board Elections

Nationalization is the process by which political attitudes, voting behaviors, and election outcomes become increasingly shaped by national-level forces rather than local conditions (Hopkins, 2018). Nationalization buffs away the distinctiveness of local elections, replacing local issues with national priorities and leading voters to focus more heavily on national, partisan identities. Recent research has begun to illuminate how national forces are shaping local education politics (e.g. Henig et al., 2019; Gensterblum et al., 2026; and Weinschenk, 2022). In the case of school boards, nationalization reshapes election dynamics and policy agendas. For example, political activists, who live outside of the school district, are increasingly donating money to school board candidates to seed agendas in large school districts (Henig et al., 2019). The decline of local media and the rise of digital platforms have accelerated this shift, allowing national news and ideological cues to replace local information (Moskowitz, 2021). As a result, decisions that would have historically taken on a distinctively local tone such as curriculum, diversity, or pandemic response have now become replaced with contests over American identity and national partisan priorities (Gensterblum et al., 2026; Grossman, et al., 2021; Zimmerman, 2024).

Alongside nationalization, partisan polarization has seeped into education politics. While nationalization and partisan polarization are not the same things, in today's political landscape, they are deeply intertwined. Nationalization increases the salience of national party conflicts on down-ballot issues. By bringing national partisan conflicts to all levels of government, nationalization creates a feedback loop where partisan polarization becomes visible at all levels, further heightening voters' focus on party positions (Hopkins, 2018). As voters look to national actors for information, they begin to apply the same criteria to national and local candidates,

heightening partisan affiliations and national information in all elections, including those that had traditionally lacked partisan cleavages.

Historically, education debates produced "strange bedfellow" coalitions that cut across party lines (McGuinn, 2006; Henig, 2013). Education issues, no doubt, divided the public, but often along lines of race, religion, or age (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Recent research, however, documents clear partisan sorting on education issues, with Republicans and Democrats increasingly adopting separate policy positions (Houston, 2024; Shapiro et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated these dynamics, as partisan affiliation strongly predicted both districts' reopening policies and public opinion about school closures and masking (Grossmann et al., 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2022; Collins, 2023a).

The recent emergence of the parents' rights movement illustrates how national partisan narratives have reshaped local school governance. Despite its framing as a grassroots movement for parental input on curriculum, health protocols, and gender or sexuality policies, national partisan actors and advocacy organizations such as Moms for Liberty train and mobilize parents to bring issues to local school boards (Sinha et al., 2023; Gensterblum et al., 2026). Such "culture war" politics often disrupted school board operations (Gensterblum et al., 2026), reduced focus on student learning (Kogan, 2025), and created a financial burden for districts (Rogers et al., 2024). What was most striking about these battles was the remarkable similarity across place. From Cobb County, GA to Montclair, NJ to Scottsdale, AZ, nearly identical battles played out in local school board meetings.

While the *formal* buffers protecting school boards from partisan forces may still be intact in many places, they are beginning to erode. For some, this erosion may be a welcome change, providing much needed information to voters in low-information elections. Local school board

elections often receive minimal to no local coverage, limiting the ability of voters to learn about candidates and their issue positions (Henig et al., 2019). Thus, on the one hand, incorporating partisan cues in local elections may provide voters with the information they need in sorting through a list of candidates. Dowling et al. (2025) find that in nonpartisan local elections, partisan voters disproportionately cast ballots for non co-partisans compared to voters in explicitly partisan local elections. However, on the other hand, party labels may block or distort information that is more tied to local communities and their needs, distorting incentives for voters to learn about candidates and their policy stances. Party labels may also incentivize candidates to adopt more extreme, partisan policy stances aligned with national political parties..

Partisanship & School Board Elections

Until recently, partisanship played a minor role in local education politics. Formally nonpartisan elections, elections in which candidates run without affiliating with a political party, have historically provided over 90% of local school board members a buffer from the broader dynamics of American politics (Kogan et al., 2025; Ballotpedia, n.d.-a). Progressive reformers argued that this structure prevented domination of machine and patronage politics in schools by allowing voters to focus on issues specific to schools and students (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). However, scholars have since noted that this exceptional arrangement has also contributed to low and unequal engagement in education governance (Allen & Plank, 2005; Anzia, 2013; Kogan et al., 2021), raising concerns for democratic representation (Collins, 2023).

Low engagement also stems, in part, from low visibility. Local media decline along with the structural separation of local school politics sometimes leads to school board candidates and election issues receiving no reporting at all (Henig et al., 2019). This low engagement subsequently makes school board elections more susceptible to mobilization by organized

groups, particularly teachers' unions (Anzia, 2013; Hartney, 2024; Moe, 2011), though recent attention to education has also drawn new groups into school board elections such as individual donors and newly organized parent advocacy organizations (Gensterblum et al., 2026; Henig et al., 2019).

While concerns about low engagement are not new, renewed interest has led school board elections rules to rise on state policy agendas; many[1] states recently considered or are currently considering reforming timing and partisanship rules, often with the goals of boosting engagement and increasing voter information. Currently, just ten states allow partisan school board elections. Pennsylvania has long permitted partisan school board elections under a 1937 law, while Tennessee adopted them only in 2021. In 2024, Florida voters narrowly rejected a proposed constitutional amendment to make all school board elections partisan, and as recently as 2024, Indiana newly mandated that all school board elections be partisan (Carloni, 2025). Many other states, such as Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming, are actively considering similar changes (Richert, 2025; Dewitt, 2024; Wolfson, 2025).

This recent wave of school board election reform activity underscores that the education governance structures are a target of partisan reform efforts (e.g., Richert, 2025; Kogan et al., 2025). While such reforms may succeed in raising turnout, it remains an empirical question whether such reforms actually help voters develop their preferences and select candidates who align with their policy priorities.

We do have some research clues about how school boards and elections are being shaped by these forces. For example, Kogan and colleagues examine the impact of Tennessee's recent switch to partisan school board elections. They leverage Tennessee's new law allowing local

[1] We located news coverage in 13 states of proposed legislation since 2023 using Boolean google searches. The number may undercount current efforts if state media did not cover the legislation.

parties to decide whether to run in a partisan contest, finding that districts that switched to partisan contests doubled the rate of vote alignment between the president and the school board candidates compared to those that remained nonpartisan (Kogan et al., 2025). However, this project examines precinct-level returns, illuminating much about election outcomes but less about individual voters' attitudes or decisions. In another project, Hill and colleagues utilized North Carolina's locally-shifting partisan school board elections in a difference-in-difference framework, finding that the partisan elections increase the likelihood that Republicans win school board elections (Hill et al., 2023).

Further, we have evidence that formal electoral shifts to partisan elections may not be necessary to observe the impact of nationalization and partisan polarization. Partisanship can seep into local nonpartisan contests through a variety of mechanisms such as endorsements and donations (Henig et al., 2019) and issue conflicts (Shah et al., 2024). Crawford (2018) finds that candidates in nonpartisan school board elections are *more* polarized than those in partisan elections, suggesting that they have incentives to more directly and obviously signal to voters their partisan identity even when not formally required to do so. This work suggests that even the formally nonpartisan structure of school board elections may no longer protect them from nationalization and its accompanying partisan polarization, leading to little, if any, differences between formally partisan and nonpartisan school board races.

These recent studies provide insights into the ways partisan school board elections in the context of nationalization can change the tone of the campaign as well as the outcomes. We build on this work by focusing explicitly on voters and their decision-making processes and actions. We focus on voters because it remains unclear whether individual voters understand school board contests through a national lens. In many other local contests, research shows that

nationalization diminishes the salience of local issues to voters' choices, shifting attention toward national conflicts and partisan identities (Hutchings, 2021). For school board elections, this means that choices once informed by a candidate's ties to the local community or experience with local schools may matter less than their partisan affiliation or their stance on high-profile partisan issues.

Theory & Hypotheses

Given the growing tendency for national, partisan politics to overshadow local politics (Hopkins, 2018), and for outside actors to inject conflict and partisanship into school board elections (Henig et al, 2019; Shah et al, 2024), we ask whether formally nonpartisan school board elections structures matter for nationalized voter decision making and behavior? We hypothesize that formally partisan school board elections prompt voters to behave in a more nationalized and polarized manner in the voting booth. Specifically, we hypothesize…

- *Hypothesis 1 – Nationalized Education Priorities:* Given that local education politics has nationalized (Henig et al, 2019; Shah et al., 2024), we expect that voter educational priorities in formally nonpartisan school board elections will mirror those in formally partisan school board elections and that voters across both places will emphasize national, rather than context specific local issues.
- *Hypothesis 2 – Polarized Education Priorities:* Given the nationalization of local education politics and that political polarization has increased in attitudes toward education issues (Shapiro et al., 2021; Houston, 2024; Rogers et al., 2025), we expect that partisanship will similarly shape voters' educational priorities in both formally nonpartisan and formally partisan school board elections. In other words, we expect Rhode Island Republicans (or Democrats) will respond similarly to

Michigan Republicans (or Democrats) despite state and local contextual differences.

Next, we examine whether formally partisan elections matter for nationalized voter behavior. Hopkins (2018), a leading researcher on nationalization, conceptualizes nationalized voter behavior as straight-ticket voting, or voting for candidates of the same party across national, state, and local races. While it may seem to us today in our current environment that this has always been the case, Hopkins demonstrates that splitting one's votes across both parties and levels of government was, until recently, common. Formally nonpartisan school board elections may limit this behavior. While work in political science has long demonstrated that partisan attachment unwaveringly shapes vote choice (Campbell et al., 1960; Green et al., 2002; Achen & Bartels, 2017), other work has shown voters struggle to find the candidate they most closely align with when a candidate's party affiliation isn't available (e.g., Dowling et al., 2025). This is especially true in local elections where information about candidates is limited (Moskowitz, 2021). Based on the extant research, we pose the following hypothesis:

- *Hypothesis 3 – Nationalized School Board Voting:* Despite the nationalization and polarization of local education politics generally, we expect that voters in formally partisan school board elections will be more likely to exhibit nationalized voting behavior (i.e. straight-ticket voting) than those in formally nonpartisan elections.

Methods and Data: Exit Polling School Board Elections

Comparing voter attitudes and behaviors in partisan and nonpartisan school board elections allows us to assess whether partisan election structure can amplify or stymie the effects of nationalization and polarization. The most direct way to assess voter attitudes and choices is to ask them directly. To do this, we conducted an exit poll of school board voters in two states that

hold on-cycle school board elections–one with formally partisan elections and one with formally nonpartisan elections.

Case Selection. The authors utilized a comparative case study design to select school districts for exit polls based on theoretical, analytical, and practical reasons. First, selection was made at the state level: selecting states that host on-cycle school board elections but vary in whether they are partisan provides analytical leverage to explore the influence of formal partisanship on voter attitudes and behaviors. We focus on on-cycle elections because nationalization is more likely to occur in on-cycle elections.

Both Michigan and Rhode Island host on-cycle elections. However, Michigan school board elections are formally nonpartisan, while Rhode Island allows districts to decide whether or not they should be partisan (Arnzen et al., 2025). These states were also selected for exit polling based on the authors' states of residence. Because exit-polling requires substantial human resources, the authors needed to be able to draw upon our respective resources to be able to staff polling locations.

We also sampled cases at the school district level. To be selected, the district's elections needed to be politically competitive, meaning more candidates were running than seats were available. In Rhode Island, elections also needed to have at least one Republican and one Democrat competing for a seat. Other district level considerations included district size, district demographics, average income, and proximity to the authors' institutions to ease travel concerns for exit poll workers. Efforts were made to match districts across RI and MI based on these characteristics.

Finally, we sampled at the voter precinct level. Due to staffing constraints of poll workers, we could not staff all precincts in each sampled school district. Thus, we selected

precincts that were representative of the overall district demographics and when multiple precincts were viable, we selected the precincts with the largest voter turnout in the past election to maximize the pool of possible respondents.

The districts that were ultimately selected for exit polling are further described in Table 1 below. These cases allow for comparison between RI and MI districts. While the sample is not generalizable, this first exploration of voter decision making can provide new insights about how, in the context of nationalization and partisan polarization, formally nonpartisan/partisan school board elections shape voter attitudes and behaviors.

<< Table 1 About Here >>

Exit Polling. Exit polls, often used to project election results, also allow researchers the opportunity to develop real-time insights into voter attitudes and decision making (Lupia, 1994). The exit polls in this project were fielded by teams of graduate and undergraduate students from the authors' institutions. Students were staffed as exit poll workers on Election Day (November 5, 2024) from poll open to poll close. Throughout the day, students worked in teams to invite every other voter exiting the polling locations to complete a short survey. If the voter affirmed, they completed the exit poll survey. If they declined, the exit poll worker made note of the refusal, keeping track of the voter's demographic appearance (e.g., gender, race, and approximate age). Exit polling teams strictly adhered to this protocol in order to ensure randomization of respondents.

The Survey. Voters who consented to participate completed a short survey via Qualtrics on either the exit poll teams' iPads or their own devices with a QR code. Paper surveys were also administered in cases when a respondent requested a paper version. This maximized the likelihood of participation across all types of people. The survey consisted of questions asking:

1) what their priorities in education were, 2) where they got information about school board candidates, 3) which factors shaped their choice for school board, and 4) who they voted for across selected local, state, and national elections. The survey also collected a variety of demographic information, including age, race, income, education, and political party affiliation. The survey questions are detailed in Appendix A.

Sample Summary. Table 2 illustrates the summary statistics of the sample. In total, 839 voters responded to the exit poll. However, many participants declined to answer particular questions, especially related to personal demographic information. In part, the reluctance to respond to these questions reflects the contentiousness of the November 2024 election. Respondents shared with poll workers that some of the questions were, for example, "too sensitive," "none of our damn business," and not something they "felt comfortable sharing." Thus, while 839 people completed at least some parts of the survey, individual question response rates vary. Despite this limitation, our sample reflects variation across political dimensions in both presidential preference and political party identity, and ideological identity. Just over one-third of our sample identified as a Democrat, 28% identified as a Republican, and 30% identified as an Independent. This variation is critical, as partisanship is the primary dimension of inquiry in this study.

<< Table 2 About Here >>

Results: Do Formally Nonpartisan School Board Elections Matter?

Voters' Nationalized Education Attitudes

One theorized consequence of nationalization is the replacement of local priorities with a national policy agenda which is infused with partisan polarization. Previous research focused on state politics finds that nationalization has contributed to a political environment in which

"…salient, divisive issues in politics are likely to be the same across otherwise disparate places." (Hopkins, 2018, p. 89). To explore the extent to which nationalization shaped voter priorities in local education elections, we asked respondents to select the five most important education issues. The list of issues was compiled using candidate materials and local news coverage of the school board election (a comprehensive list of the responses is available in Appendix A). Figure 1 presents the share of respondents selecting each issue in spider plots in which 0 means no respondents selected that issue and 1 means that all respondents selected that issue. These plots allow for easy comparison across issue priorities as well as across groups.

<< Figure 1 About Here >>

Aggregate results (top panel) show broad support for issues like academic improvement, student safety, mental health, and preparation for post-graduation goals, issues less associated with national, partisan battles. Comparisons between Michigan and Rhode Island (bottom) show remarkably similar patterns. In the context of nationalization, voters in school districts in two disparate states, with different partisan election structures, show remarkably similar priorities, supporting H1 that nationalization minimizes local flavor and context specific priorities.[2] Broadly, these initial results suggest that participating in formally partisan school board elections (Rhode Island) or formally nonpartisan school board elections (Michigan) is not associated with meaningfully different issue priorities for voters.

We additionally asked voters to identify factors that influenced their choice of school board candidate(s). This list included factors such as a candidate's political party affiliation, their occupational background, their policy priorities, their incumbent status, their endorsements, their length of time in community, whether they have children in the district, personal knowledge of

[2] Voter priorities also look similar when comparing parents and nonparents, which can be found in Appendix Figure 1.

the candidate, and friends' and/or family's opinions of the candidate. As with educational priorities above, we explore how these factors vary across formally partisan and nonpartisan election structures. Figure 2 presents the results in aggregate and by state. In general, voters report a candidate's policy stances as the most important factor (a top factor for roughly 57% of voters). This is, however, followed closely by a candidate's political party (a top factor for roughly 48% of voters). Personal knowledge of the candidate(s), the candidate(s)' time in the district, and their occupation followed.

<< Figure 2 About Here >>

Disaggregating the results by state reveals differences between our states. In Rhode Island, where school board elections are formally partisan, voters were 20 percentage points more likely to cite party affiliation as important. Conversely, voters in Michigan (formally nonpartisan) were approximately 15 percentage points more likely to report that an endorsement of a candidate was important and were slightly more likely to rank information from friends and family and/or a candidate's occupation as important. While our results cannot be interpreted as causal, they raise interesting questions about the ways in which voters use partisanship as information in school board elections.

One interpretation of the differences we find between RI and MI is that there is a link between the presence of partisan labels and the elevation of partisanship as a key factor in the minds of voters. It may be that nonpartisan elections inhibit the relative importance of political party in selecting school board candidates (Figure 2) and may also make other factors such as endorsements and information from friends and family or a candidate's occupation slightly more important to voters. However, even in MI with formally nonpartisan elections 40% of voters rank political party as a top five factor for their choice of candidate(s). We also observe MI voters

selecting endorsements as important to their vote choice. Endorsements have the ability to inject partisanship into formally nonpartisan elections as endorsers may be explicitly partisan (i.e., county party endorsements) or strongly linked with a party (i.e., a parent's right advocacy group endorsements such as Moms For Liberty). Interpreted in this way, voter decision making between the states in this study is more similar than different, they simply obtain partisan information through different mechanisms. To further investigate this, we next turn to how election structures may shape partisan polarization in voter attitudes in school board elections. Further, we explore this point further below when we examine directly the role of endorsements in elections.

Voters' Polarized Educational Attitudes

Because national politics is currently highly polarized along party lines (Druckman et al., 2021), in this context nationalization brings partisan polarization to even nonpartisan local politics (Hopkins, 2018; Carson et al., 2024). We explore the extent of political polarization in voter attitudes in formally partisan and formally nonpartisan school board elections by disaggregating voter educational priorities by political party in Figure 3 below.

<< Figure 3 About Here >>

We find notable variation when disaggregating the results by partisanship (bottom). Democrats in our study prioritized mental health, DEI, civility, and staffing, while Republicans focused on getting back to the basics, parental rights, and limiting sex/gender education. These issue priorities mirror national leaders' talking points (e.g. For Republicans: Tiffany Justice of M4L, Christopher Rufo of The Manhattan Institute, and President Trump and for Democrats: Katie Paris of Red, Wine, and Blue and Randi Weingarten of the AFT). The differences we highlight here also reflect findings from recent public opinion polls that document large partisan

divides on these issues (Polikoff, 2022; Saavedra, 2025). Compared to the minimal state differences and parent/non-parent differences in our data, these partisan differences are stark. Despite shared concern for issues like academic improvement and student safety, partisan polarization in educational priorities (Houston, 2024) appears to be seeping into local school board voter priorities. We next turn to whether the partisan divergence in voters' educational priorities generally is related to formal election structures.

To further assess whether election structure mediates the polarization nationalization brings to all local education elections observed in Figure 1, we compare priorities by party across Michigan (nonpartisan school boards) and Rhode Island (partisan school boards) in Figure 4. The patterns are strikingly similar across states, suggesting that partisan polarization does not seem to be heightened by election structure. Though we observe minor differences between the two states included in this study, broad trends suggest that partisans' attitudes in Michigan (nonpartisan elections) largely mirror their peers in Rhode Island (partisan elections).[3] Whereas previous research examined primarily large cities where we might expect nationalization to be strongest, the findings here provide support for the theory that the nationalization of local education politics is occurring across the country, even in smaller and lower profile districts such as those studied here. Further, we demonstrate that nationalization of education politics in our current climate of partisan polarizations appears to be linked to partisan differences in local voter priorities.

<< Figure 4 About Here >>

The results in Figure 4 broadly suggest that formal election structures may matter little for voter educational priorities. However, partisan actors are increasingly involved in nonpartisan races (Henig et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2024), elevating the possibility that these informally

[3] Though there are a few differences between the states, these differences are likely within the margins of error given that the partisan/state subgroupings tend to be significantly smaller.

partisan elections may be contributing to the broad similarities we observed. To examine this, we compare elections in Michigan in which political parties endorse school board candidates with those that did not have political party endorsements. Figure 5 compares voters' education priorities across Michigan districts with and without partisan endorsements to examine if they serve as possible avenues for which partisan politics can enter local, nonpartisan contests.

<< Figure 5 About Here >>

The trends in Figure 5 show broad similarities across Michigan districts with and without partisan endorsements, with a few exceptions that largely fall within the margins of error for the small district subgroup analyses. The findings above suggest broadly that partisan endorsements appear to have limited, disjointed effect. Rather, the alignment between RI voters and MI voters appears to be more closely related to nationalization trends than to formal or informal partisanship cues.

Finally, we also investigate the factors important for school board candidate vote choice by political party in Figure 6. Unlike with general educational priorities (Figure 3 and Figure 4), self-identified Republican and Democrat voters appear to be aligned in what they deem important for selecting a school board candidate.

<< Figure 6 About Here >>

A candidate's policy stances are important to both Independents, Democrats, and Republicans, though slightly less important to Republicans. A candidate's political party is most important to Democrats, though only slightly more so than to Republicans, while Independents/others place the least importance on a candidate's political party. However, together, policy stances and a candidate's political party are more important than any other factor to both Democrats and Republicans. Taken together, these results show that partisans act in

comparable partisan ways. To the extent that partisanship matters, it appears to matter in the curation and prioritization of information about candidates (Figure 2) rather than how that information is used.

Nationalization and Electoral Structure in School Board Voters Behaviors

Thus far we've focused on the dimension of nationalization that focuses on how national political framing and national issues shape the policy priorities of down-ballot elections at the state and local level (Henig et al., 2019). Another dimension of nationalization can be observed in voter behaviors (Hopkins, 2018). It used to be more common for voters to split their ticket, meaning there was often less alignment between top of the ticket party vote choice and down ballot vote choice. However, most work on nationalization explores the increasing alignment between presidential and state-level contests (Hopkins, 2018; Carson et al., 2024), while this phenomenon has largely yet to be explored with respect to local elections.

To explore how nationalization has shaped the voting behaviors of local school board voters, we rely on three questions from our survey. The first asks voters "Generally speaking, how do you vote?" Voters can respond, "All Republican/Democrat," "Mostly Republican/Democrat," "Slightly More Republican than Democrat (or vice versa)," and "Split Ticket Evenly." We then coded responses of self-reported straight-ticket voting as 1 and split-ticket voting as 0. We consider this as *self-reported nationalized voting,* accounting for how individuals intend to vote.

The second measure of nationalized voting that we explore, *actual nationalized voting,* relies on two questions. First, we ask voters who they voted for in the presidential election. We also ask voters who they voted for in their districts' school board races. We then coded a binary variable for each respondent as to whether their party choice for president aligned with their

party choice for school board. Given that party affiliations were only available for candidates in Rhode Island, we construct party affiliations for candidates in Michigan based on their endorsements (being endorsed by political parties) and their stances absent endorsements. Additionally, because school board races often allow voters to select more than one candidate, a 0 in our binary outcome represents complete misalignment between presidential vote choice and school board candidate vote choice, while races that allowed multiple votes are given a score based on their proportional alignment (i.e., a voter who selected Trump for president and one Democrat and one Republican for school board would receive a 0.5 score for *actual nationalized voting*). Table 3 depicts models of both *self reported nationalized voting* (Model 1) and *actual nationalized voting* (Model 2) to allow for comparison across individual's indented voting behaviors and actual voting decisions. Specifically, this allows us to roughly estimate the influence of partisanship in local school board elections.

<< Table 3 About Here >>

Those who identified as either a Republican or a Democrat are much more likely to report voting straight-ticket compared to Independents and individuals who did not want to identify with any political affiliation (Model 1). Compared to Independents/other, partisans are about 30 percentage points more likely to report that they voted straight-ticket. This self-reported behavior is similar across age and income levels, though individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to report voting straight-ticket ($p < 0.05$) as are parents with kids in school ($p < 0.01$). Importantly, there is no statistically significant difference in reported straight-ticket voting across the two states in our sample–partisans in Rhode Island are just as likely as partisans in Michigan to report voting straight ticket. This self-reported voting measure confirms Hopkins' (2018) thesis: partisan voters are highly willing to report that they vote for candidates

of one party or the other, no matter the state or context of the elections that they are voting for. In the context of nationalization, local uniqueness doesn't matter, and partisans want to vote for co-partisans.

The second model in Table 3 depicts the results of our *actual nationalized voting,* or the likelihood that a voter aligns their presidential vote choice with their school board vote choice in terms of their political party. This allows us to roughly estimate how the party labels in partisan school board elections differently contribute to voter behaviors compared to nonpartisan elections. In this model, Democrats are still about 30 percentage points more likely to vote in a nationalized manner. However, Republicans appear to not be doing so. Put differently, Democrats are likely to vote for Democrats even in nonpartisan, local races. Republicans, in contrast, often split their tickets by voting for Democrats in local elections—their presidential vote choice does not always align with their vote choice in the local school board elections.

Unlike in self-reported nationalized voting, the partisan school board elections matter a great deal for voter actual nationalized voting behaviors. Voters in Rhode Island are about 48 percentage points more likely to align their school board vote choice with their presidential vote choice than voters in Michigan where there are no formal party cues on the ballot ($p < 0.01$). This result, while large in magnitude, is rather intuitive; voters have a much easier time aligning their down ballot vote choice with their party preference in partisan elections. It may be that voters in Michigan focus less on party cues when selecting their preferred school board candidates. Alternatively, it could be that voters in Michigan, especially Republican voters, were unable to identify their co-partisan candidate in the local school board elections due to the lack of party labels.

We measure the Republican crossover in Michigan in our data by limiting our sample to partisans (Democrats and Republicans) and including an interaction term for Republican and nonpartisan elections in Table 4. The coefficient estimates the percentage of Republicans who vote "crossover" or vote for a candidate of the different party. As indicated, partisans (Democrats and Republicans) in nonpartisan school board elections are 38 percentage points less likely to align their presidential and school board vote choices ($p < 0.01$). However, Republicans are an additional 41 percentage points less likely than Democrats to find their co-partisans.[4]

<< Table 4 About Here >>

These findings, taken together, suggest that party cues on the ballot are incredibly powerful, but that they are much more likely to help Republicans find their co-partisans, as they are more likely to exhibit voter cross-over (Dowling et al., 2025) absent party labels.

We further disaggregate the relationship between partisanship, partisan school board races, and actual nationalized voting by regressing our actual nationalized voting outcome on our 7-point party identity scale. The results are illustrated in Figure 7.

<< Figure 7 About Here >>

Rhode Island voters are represented by the gray bars, while Michigan voters are represented by the black bars. In school board elections with formal partisan cues on the ballots, we observe an expected u-shape. Stronger partisans are more likely to align their school board votes with their presidential vote in terms of political party. This mirrors expectations for nationalized voting behavior in previous literature (Hopkins, 2018). Despite similar rates of self-

[4] However, some degree of this could be due to moderate Republicans not voting for Donald Trump (Republican) and voting for Republican school board members and/or moderate Democrats not voting for Kamala Harris (Democrat) and voting for Democrat school board members.

reported nationalized voting across states, Figure 7 shows that voters in Michigan, Republicans do not vote for their co-partisans in school board elections

Discussion

Our findings underscore the extent to which nationalization and partisan polarization are reshaping local school board elections—in both formally partisan and formally nonpartisan contexts. As nationalization continues to dominate American politics, national issue priorities and conflicts dominate voters' attention and priorities (Hopkins, 2018; Carson et al., 2024).While previous research documents the impact of nationalization on state elections, here we provide evidence of nationalization across local school board elections in both Michigan's nonpartisan and Rhode Island's partisan elections. Voters' educational priorities in both states appeared to be virtually the same, with limited evidence of local interests. In both states, student safety, mental health, and preparing students for post graduation goals surfaced as top priorities. Factors shaping vote choices also looked similar across states, aside from two factors: political party and endorsements. Rhode Island voters cared far more about a candidate's political party than Michiganders, which aligns with the fact that Rhode Island runs partisan school board races. Michigan voters cared slightly more about endorsements than Rhode Islanders, suggesting that endorsements may be filling some of the gap of political party labels.

Our findings also underscore that school board voters' educational priorities, once resistant to partisan polarization (Grumbach, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2021; Houston, 2024), have now starkly diverged along partisan lines. When disaggregated along party lines, Democrats prioritized DEI, mental health, and civility, while Republicans focused on parental rights, "back to basics" academics, and restricting gender and sexuality education—and these priorities varied little across state context, suggesting that formally partisan elections do not necessarily matter for

voters' electoral priorities. Further analyses showing similar results from Michigan elections with partisan endorsements and without partisan endorsements also raise questions about the extent to which informal partisanship conveys signals. Taken together, these findings illustrate that the nationalization of American politics has brought national party policies and politics squarely into even some of the most nonpartisan contests.

Additionally, in Rhode Island, where voters have party labels for their school board candidates, they are roughly 50 percentage points more likely to align their presidential party selection with their school board candidate party selection. Michigan Republicans are the group that seem to vote across the aisle most often. This asymmetric crossover voting could suggest that Democrats pay more attention in school board elections or that Republicans are simply more willing to vote for Democrats. Alternatively, it could be that the general policy mood in local education politics tends to favor Democrats and their policy stances simply fare better when voters cannot rely on party labels to select a candidate. Historically, Democrats have been "more trusted" with educational issues (Peartree & Winston, 2025). Absent the push/pull of party labels, what come to be "Democrat" education positions may simply do better among voters– explaining why both Michigan Republicans and Michigan Democrats are more likely to vote for Democrats in nonpartisan school board elections (Figure 7).

Nonpartisan school board races may foster spaces for candidates across the political spectrum to campaign more in line with the "public school ideology" (Moe, 2002), or the affective attachment that individuals have to public schools. Given the ongoing national partisan sorting on educational issues, the Republican platform is gravitating toward privatization and school choice while the Democratic platform is gravitating toward public schools (Houston, 2024; Houston, 2025). Democratic school board candidates increasingly campaign on an agenda

focused on public education and protecting schools from privatization, while many new Republican school board candidates have campaigned on "culture war" issues (Shah et al., 2024; Gensterblum et al., 2026; Giersch, 2025), topics that do not even appeal to the majority of even Republican voters (Polikoff, 2022; Saavedra et al., 2025). In nonpartisan school board elections when the party labels don't crowd out policy discourse, perhaps the public school ideology is a winning one. Michigan Democratic candidates we observed campaigned on issues of "teacher retention, academic excellence, and educational opportunity", perhaps evoking the "public school ideology" and pulling Republicans across the aisle.

In American politics, political partisanship has become more than just a signal of political preferences. Considerable work has demonstrated that individuals increasingly see political party as a social identity and use it to make decisions and justify behaviors (Iyengar et al., 2019). The party labels present on ballots in explicitly partisan school board elections may explicitly invoke this social identity, overriding any public school ideology and crowding out concern for education-specific issues, though we cannot fully address this in our data. This raises a number of questions about how partisanship shapes educational priorities and decisions both for voters in elections and for school boards after elections are held.

The role of partisanship in local school board elections presents an interesting puzzle for researchers and voters alike. From a strategic, political party standpoint, it may be beneficial to Republicans for states to switch to formally partisan school board elections. However, given the potency of partisanship in shaping politics and campaigns, it is unclear if such a change is helpful for school boards and, ultimately, for schools.

Limitations

Through a novel exit poll of voters, this research provides important insights into a question many state legislatures are currently debating: should school board elections be partisan? In our nationalized, hyper-polarized context, understanding how this seemingly small change may shape local education politics is imperative. By going straight to the source—the voters themselves—these data shed new light on nationalization of local politics and local education politics as they undergo rapid transformation

Though our data illuminate several interesting findings, there are also important limitations that ought to prompt other researchers to take up this question. First, our exit polls were conducted in a small set of districts across two states and are not nationally representative. Future work should corroborate or challenge these findings in other contexts. As with any survey, our data is also confined to this particular point in time and to the particular questions asked of our respondents. Digging deeper with voters about why they selected the responses they did may yield important insight about how voters prioritize partisan cues in school board contexts–particularly in nonpartisan contests. Finally, we focus on voter behavior rather than downstream effects on governance or educational outcomes. Future research should also extend to other contexts and connect voter choices to governance and policy outcomes to fully capture the consequences of nationalization in school board elections.

Conclusion

This study provides new evidence of how nationalization and partisan polarization have reshaped school board elections, not only in campaign dynamics but in the behavior of individual voters. Our findings specifically shed light on nonpartisan school board elections as one of the last vestiges of the “one best system” erected to buffer education from partisan electoral politics. In terms of voters’ attitudes, nonpartisan elections appear to matter little—voter priorities look

broadly the same across electoral contexts. However, in terms of voter behaviors, these structures appear critically important—partisanship dominates voters' choices in formally partisan elections compared to formally nonpartisan contests, for good or for bad. While our data do not tell us whether voters in formally nonpartisan contests are voting "purposefully" and crossing party lines or "guessing" and missing their mark in a low information election, partisan contests nevertheless raise important questions of significant consequence. Specifically, a majority of voters—of every political affiliation—in partisan school board contests believed school board elections should be nonpartisan, yet they do not always do as they say. If partisan cues (formal or informal) become dominant features of school board elections, how will this impact the functioning of our largest public institution? Will partisan polarization further disillusion voters as to the worth of democratic governance? Or will partisan cues raise the visibility of school board elections, reinvigorating engagement and democratic oversight?

Partisanship now structures issue priorities and candidate selection across both formally partisan and nonpartisan elections. Even in Michigan, where ballots omit party labels, we observe a moderate degree of partisan influence in voters' priorities for school board elections, suggesting nationalization has reshaped local school board priorities. In Rhode Island, formal party labels increase nationalized voting behavior, creating a direct path for partisan polarization to reshape local education outcomes. These findings suggest that laws making school board elections partisan may amplify the degree of partisanship. Equally important, however, is the finding that nonpartisan elections are no panacea for the polarization plaguing U.S. democracy. Even our MI nonpartisan school board elections were not insulated from the broader currents of national politics. Partisanship cues seep in through many avenues—most of which have yet to be explored.

At the same time, our results highlight a paradox at the heart of education politics. Voters seem to be saying “Do as I say, not as I do.” Continued exploration of this paradox may not only help us understand local education politics but also offer insights into political currents that run across all levels of U.S. politics today.

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Tables

Table 1.
School District Case Selection

Michigan Districts				Rhode Island Districts			
District	**Urbanicity**	**Precincts**	**Election**	**District**	**Urbanicity**	**Precincts**	**Election**
Hartland	Suburban	5	Nonpartisan	Smithfield	Suburban	2	Partisan
Dexter	Suburban	2	Nonpartisan				
Brighton	Suburban	3	Nonpartisan				
Mason	Rural	3	Nonpartisan	Richmond	Rural	1	Partisan

Notes: Due to differences in staff capacity and budget, the Rhode Island exit polling was smaller scale. Exit poll workers were staffed at polling locations to maximize voter interaction (occasionally multiple precincts vote at one location) and ensure a voter sample representative of the overall demographics of the district.

Table 2.
Summary Statistics & Response Rates

Variable	Mean	Standard Error	Response Rate
Voted for Kamala Harris	53.6%	0.019	80%
Voted for Donald Trump	41.0%	0.019	80%
Voted for Other	5.4%	0.009	80%
Democrat	35.6%	0.018	82%
Independent	30.4%	0.014	82%
Republican	28.0%	0.017	82%
Conservative	38.5%	0.019	76%
Liberal	41.9%	0.020	76%
Parent	42.6%	0.019	85%
Location			
Michigan	**61.7%**	**0.017**	**100%**
Hartland, MI	10.3%	0.014	100%
Dexter, MI	19.8%	0.015	100%
Brighton, MI	27.1%	0.010	100%
Mason, MI	4.8%	0.007	100%
Rhode Island	**38.1%**	**0.017**	**100%**
Smithfield, RI	31.2%	0.016	100%
Richmond, RI	6.9%	0.008	100%

Notes: The response rate is the number of respondents that answered each question divided by the 839 total respondents, as some questions were more likely to be skipped than others, particularly the questions about who you voted for and your political leaning.

Table 3.
Determinants of Nationalized Voting in School Board Elections

	(1) Self-Reported Nationalized Voting	(2) Actual Nationalized Voting
Democrat	0.32 **	0.30 **
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Republican	0.29 **	-0.08
	(0.03)	(0.06)
Age		
25-34	-0.01	-0.06
	(0.06)	(0.09)
35-44	0.04	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.09)
45-54	0.02	0.01
	(0.05)	(0.09)
55-64	0.02	-0.04
	(0.06)	(0.09)
65+	0.00	-0.04
	(0.06)	(0.10)
Income		
$20,000 to $49,999	-0.10	-0.27
	(0.09)	(0.14)
$50,000 to $89,999	-0.07	-0.00
	(0.07)	(0.12)
$90,000 to $129,999	-0.05	-0.03
	(0.07)	(0.12)
$130,000 to $149,999	-0.08	0.13
	(0.08)	(0.14)
$150,000+	-0.06	0.02
	(0.07)	(0.11)
Education		
High School Diploma	-0.41 *	-0.23
	(0.21)	(0.44)
Some College or Associate's Degree	-0.41 *	-0.26
	(0.20)	(0.43)
Bachelor's Degree	-0.47 *	-0.28
	(0.20)	(0.43)
Post Graduate Degree	-0.44 *	-0.38
	(0.20)	(0.43)
Parent	-0.09 **	-0.06
	(0.03)	(0.06)
Partisan SB Elections (RI)	-0.05	0.48 **
	(0.04)	(0.07)
District Fixed Effects	*Yes*	*Yes*
N	*486*	*410*

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

***Notes**:* Self-reported nationalization accounts for whether a respondent reports voting straight-ticket for one party (0 or 1). Actual nationalized voting accounts for whether the school board candidate(s) a respondent voted for aligned with their presidential vote choice. The reference category for political party is "Independent" and for education is "no high school diploma." The smaller *N* in model 2 is due to less respondents reporting who they voted for in the presidential election.

Table 4.
Republican Crossover in Nonpartisan School Board Elections

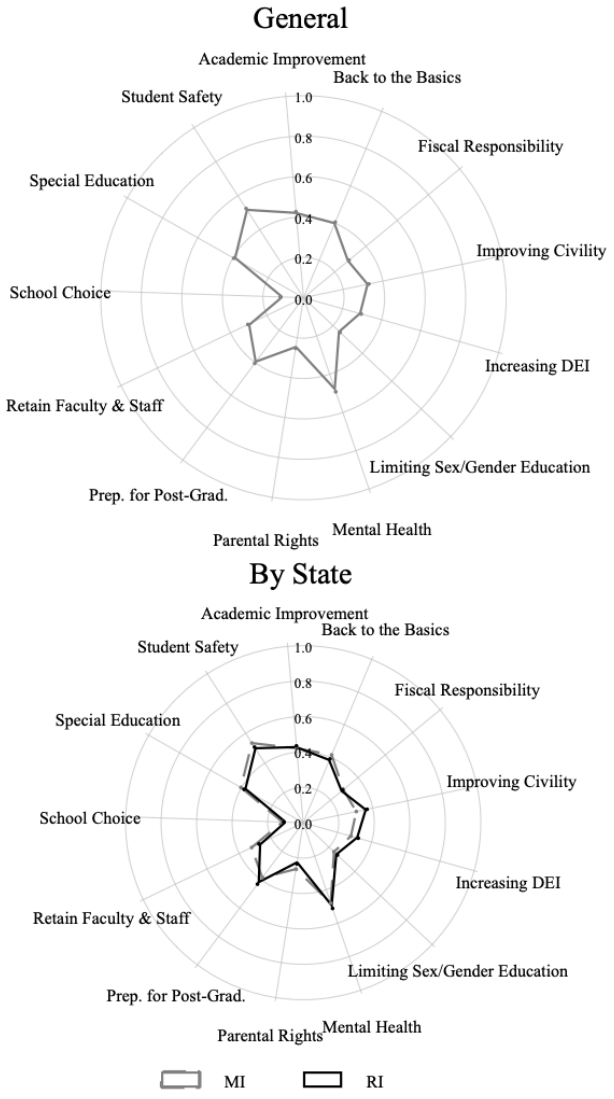
	Nationalized Voting (1)	
Republican	0.01	
	(0.09)	
Nonpartisan SB Elections (MI)	-0.38	**
	(0.08)	
Republican *X* Partisan SB Elections (MI)	-0.41	**
	(0.11)	
Controls	*Yes*	
District Fixed Effects	*Yes*	
N	*362*	

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

Notes: Nationalized voting accounts for whether the school board candidate(s) a respondent voted for aligned with their presidential vote choice. This sample contains only partisans (Democrats and Republicans), so the reference category is Democrat.

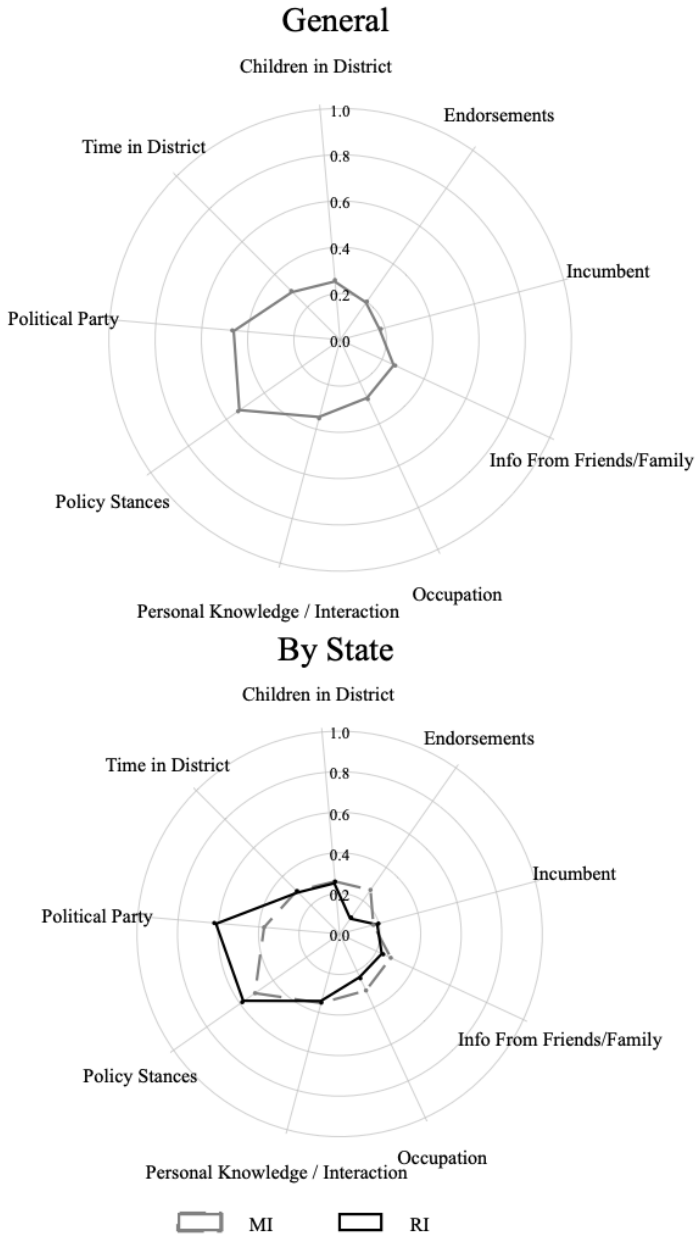
Figures

Figure 1.
Voters' Educational Priorities



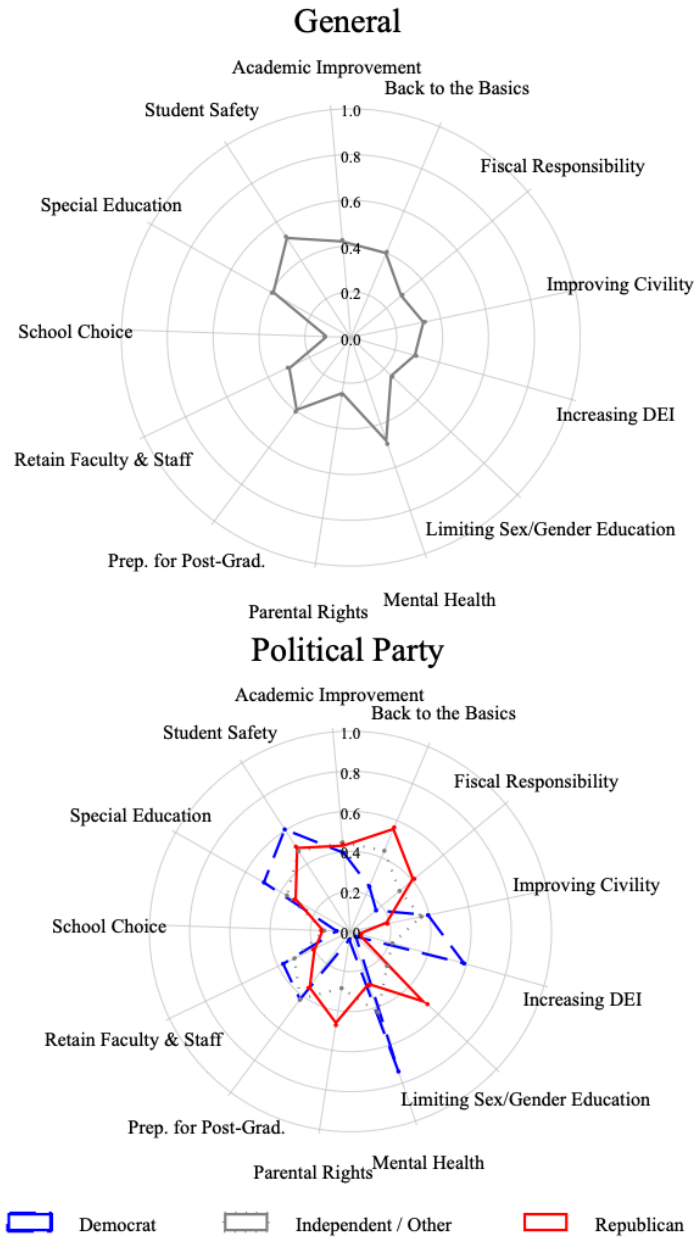
Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. Rhode Island *N* includes 320 respondents total. Michigan *N* includes 519 respondents total.

Figure 2.
Factors Important for School Board Candidate Vote Choice



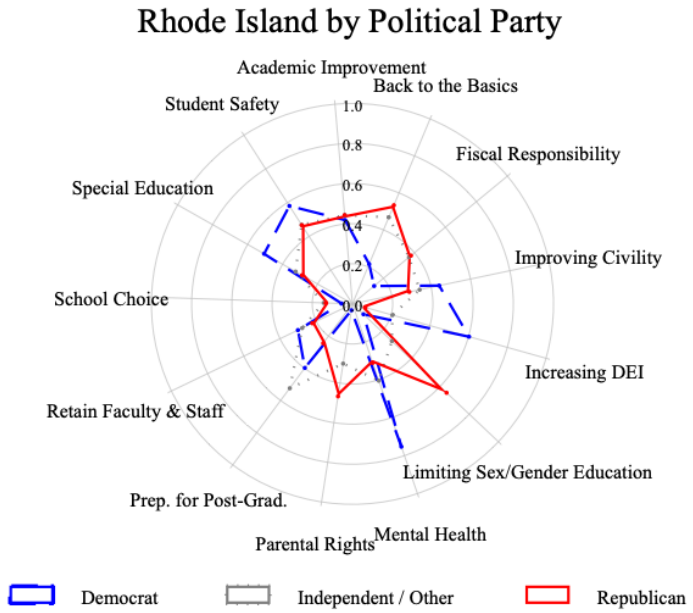
Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. Rhode Island *N* includes 320 respondents total. Michigan *N* includes 519 respondents total.

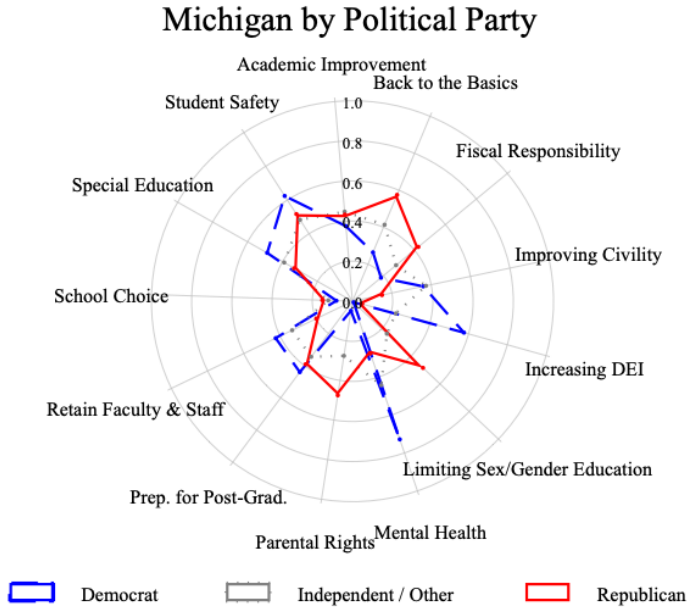
Figure 3.
Voters' Educational Priorities by Political Party



Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. In the second figure, the *N* includes 244 Democrats; 403 Independents/Other; and 292 Republicans for 839 respondents total.

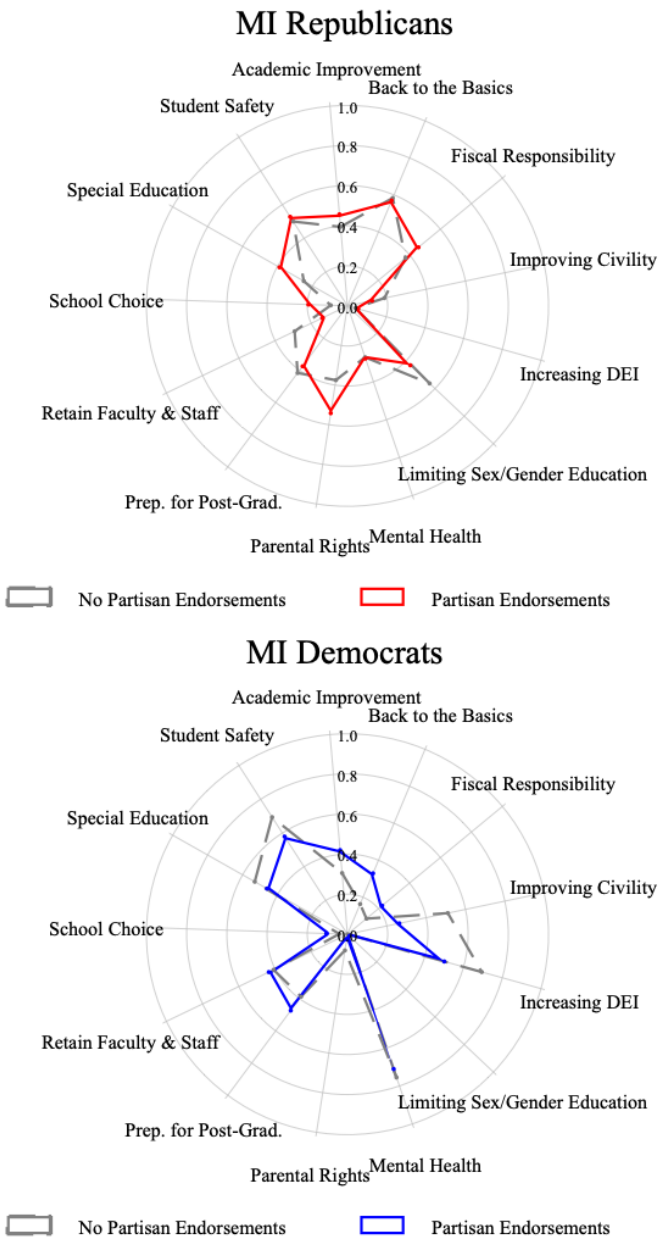
Figure 4.
Voters' Educational Priorities by State and Political Party





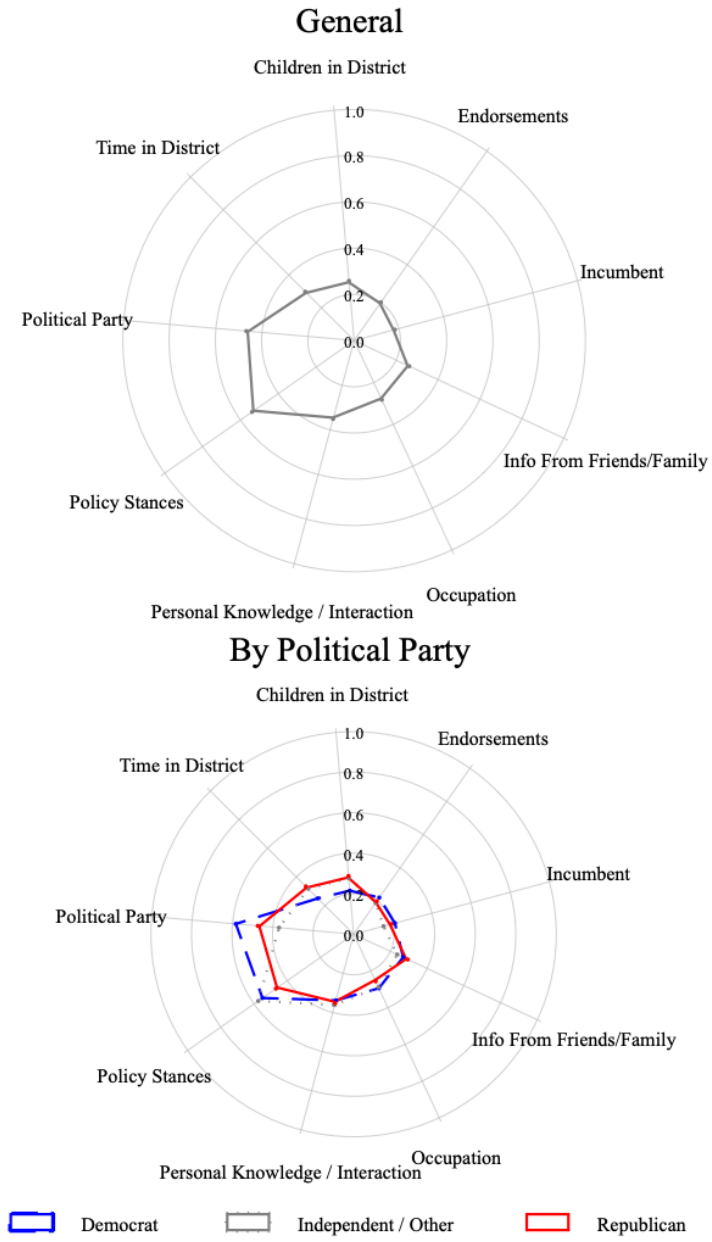
Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. Rhode Island *N* includes 98 Democrats, 170 Independents/Other, and 52 Republicans for 320 respondents total. Michigan *N* includes 146 Democrats, 233 Independents/Other, and 240 Republicans for 519 respondents total.

Figure 5.
Michigan Voters' Educational Priorities by Informal Partisanship



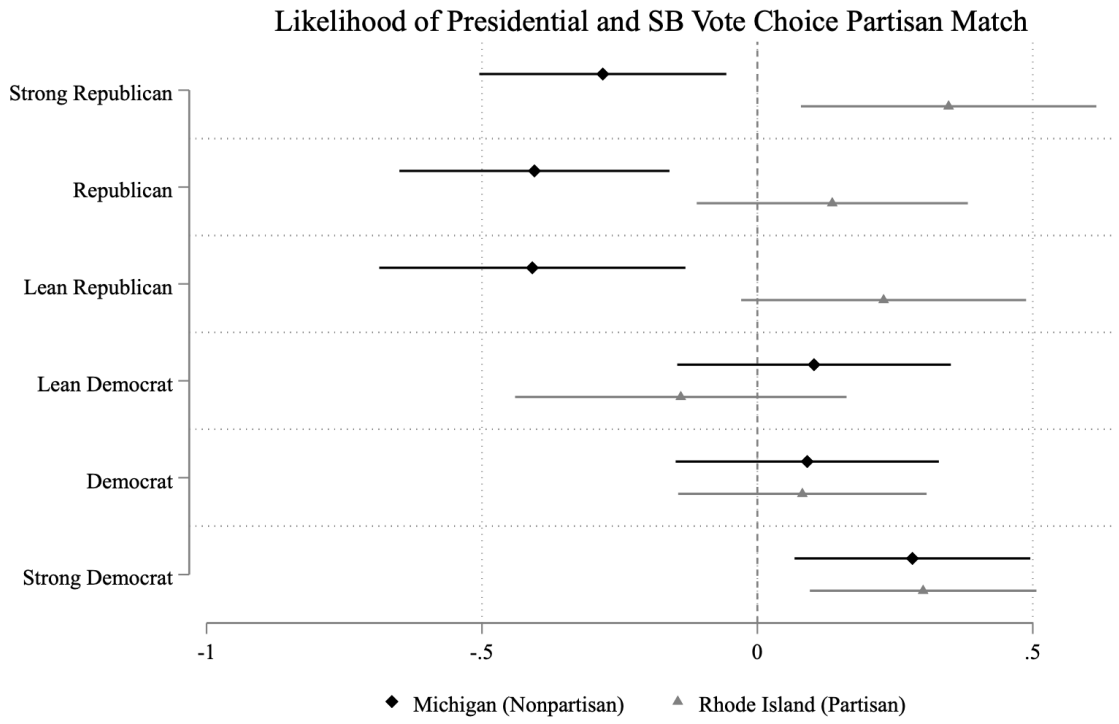
Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. Rhode Island *N* includes 98 Democrats, 170 Independents/Other, and 52 Republicans for 320 respondents total. Michigan *N* includes 146 Democrats, 233 Independents/Other, and 240 Republicans for 519 respondents total.

Figure 6.
Factors Important for School Board Candidate Vote Choice by Political Party



Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. In the second figure, the *N* includes 244 Democrats; 403 Independents/Other; and 292 Republicans for 839 respondents total.

Figure 7.
Factors Important for School Board Candidate Vote Choice by Political Party



Notes: Actual nationalized voting accounts for whether the school board candidate(s) a respondent voted for aligned with their presidential vote choice. This model includes voters who responded to the question about their party affiliation (315 voters in Michigan and 199 voters in Rhode Island). The model includes controls and fixed effects depicted in Model 2, Table 3.

Appendix

Appendix A. Survey Questions

1. Did you vote in today's school board election?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Why did you decide to vote in today's school board election? This response is optional, but your input is appreciated and valuable to our research.

   _____

   _____

3. **Please RANK UP TO FIVE** of the following education issues that were the MOST important to you when deciding who to vote for the school board today. **Please rank them in order of their importance from most (1) to least (5) important.**
   _____ Limiting Sex and Gender Education in Schools
   _____ Increasing the focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
   _____ Focusing on Academic Improvement and Learning Loss
   _____ Focusing the Curriculum on Academics (Getting Back to the Basics)
   _____ Fiscal Responsibility
   _____ Attract and Retaining Faculty, Staff and Students
   _____ Student Mental Health and Wellbeing
   _____ Student Safety
   _____ Increasing Parental Rights and District Transparency
   _____ Supports for Students with Special Needs
   _____ Preparing Students for Post-Graduation Goals
   _____ Improving Civility and Respect
   _____ Expansion of School Choice
   _____ Other (please fill in) _____
4. Which candidates did you vote for in the Full-Term Seat School Board Election? **(You may select up to 2 candidates)**
   ○ SB Candidate 1 (Political party if applicable)
   ○ SB Candidate 2 (Political party if applicable)
   ○ ….
   ○ I do not remember
5. We know that information is sometimes hard to access in school board elections. **Please RANK UP TO FIVE sources that were available to you from most (1) to least (5) important.**
   _____ Party affiliation (Republican, Democrat, Independent)
   _____ Occupational background of candidate
   _____ Candidate's policy priorities
   _____ Incumbent status (currently serving as a school board member)
   _____ Endorsement that the candidate received
   _____ Length of time in community
   _____ Children (currently or past) in the school district
   _____ Personal knowledge and/or interactions with the candidate
   _____ Opinions of my friends and/or family
   _____ Other (please fill in) _____
   _____ None of the Above

6. Where did you get information about the school board candidates? **(Select All That Apply)**
   ○ Candidate campaign websites
   ○ Candidate social media (e.g. Facebook, X/Twitter, etc.)

- ○ Voter guide
- ○ Yard signs
- ○ Mailbox flyer from the candidate
- ○ Mailbox flyer from an organization
- ○ Friends and/or family
- ○ Local news coverage/candidate profiles
- ○ In-person event(s)
- ○ Personal knowledge of the candidate
- ○ I didn't get any information about the candidates

7. Often, the **local or state teacher union** endorses school board candidates. Would this endorsement be important to you? (Circle One)

   Very Important Important Moderately Important Slightly Important Not Important

8. If a candidate is endorsed by a **teacher union**, how likely are you to vote for them? (Circle One)

   Very likely Somewhat likely Neither More or Less Likely Somewhat Unlikely Very Unlikely

9. Were you aware of any endorsements from the **teacher union** in today's school board election?

   Yes No

10. Sometimes, **local political parties** make endorsements in local school board elections. Would this endorsement be important to you? (Circle One)

    Very Important Important Moderately Important. Slightly Important. Not Important

11. If a candidate is endorsed by the **Democrat Party**, how likely are you to vote for them? (Circle One)

    Very likely Somewhat likely Neither More or Less Likely Somewhat Unlikely Very Unlikely

12. If a candidate is endorsed by the **Republican Party**, how likely are you to vote for them? (Circle One)

    Very likely Somewhat likely Neither More or Less Likely Somewhat Unlikely Very Unlikely

13. Were you aware of any endorsements from **political parties** in today's school board election?

    Yes No

14. Who did you vote for today in the Presidential election? (Circle One)

    Kamala D. Harris Donald J. Trump Other

15. Generally speaking, how do you vote?
    - ○ All Republican
    - ○ Mostly Republican
    - ○ Slightly more Republican that Democrat
    - ○ Split your ticket evenly
    - ○ Slightly more Democrat that Republican
    - ○ Mostly Democrat
    - ○ All Democrat
16. Have you ever attended a school board meeting? If so, how recently?
    - ○ Within the last year

- ◯ Between 2-5 years ago
- ◯ Between 6-10 years ago
- ◯ Over 10 years ago
- ◯ I have never attended a school board meeting

17. How much do you trust local officials like school board members to do what is best for people like you? (Circle One)

A great deal A lot A moderate amount A little None at all

18. Currently, unlike most states, Rhode Island School Board Elections can be partisan, meaning candidates can run as Republicans or Democrats. Most states hold nonpartisan elections for school boards. Would you support this change in Rhode Island? Fill in why you believe this. The written response is optional, but your input is appreciated and valuable to our research.
    - ◯ Yes: _____
    - ◯ No: _____
19. Do you have children under the age of 18?

Yes No

20. **IF you are a parent of a child under 18, <u>please skip this question</u>.** Which of the following options come closest to describing your relationship with the public schools in your district?
    - ◯ K-12 public school employee
    - ◯ Member of a union or civic group that is active in the local schools
    - ◯ Community member who is individually active in the schools
    - ◯ Non-parent who is not active in the schools
    - ◯ None of these _____
21. What type of school does your oldest child under 18 attend?
    - ◯ No School Aged Children
    - ◯ Public school (select which type below)
        - ▪ Charter School
        - ▪ Locally zoned public school
        - ▪ Another public school in my district
        - ▪ A public school outside of my district
    - ◯ Private school
        - ▪ Is it religiously affiliated? Yes No
    - ◯ Homeschool
    - ◯ Other _____
22. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, on independent, or what?
    - ◯ Strong Republican
    - ◯ Not a very strong Republican
    - ◯ Lean Republican
    - ◯ Independent
    - ◯ Lean Democrat
    - ◯ Not a very strong Democrat
    - ◯ Strong Democrat

23. Politically, do you consider yourself to be liberal, moderate, or conservative?
    - ◯ Very liberal
    - ◯ Somewhat Liberal

- ◯ Lean Liberal
- ◯ Moderate
- ◯ Lean Conservative
- ◯ Somewhat Conservative
- ◯ Very Conservative
- ◯ Conservative

24. How often do you vote in presidential elections?

    Always Most of the time Sometimes This is my first

25. How often do you vote in midterm elections?

    Always Most of the time Sometimes

26. How often do you vote in school board elections?

    Always Most of the time Sometimes This is my first

27. Are you White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. For this survey, Hispanic origin is not a race. **Please select all that apply.**

- ◯ White
- ◯ Black or African American
- ◯ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ◯ Asian
- ◯ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

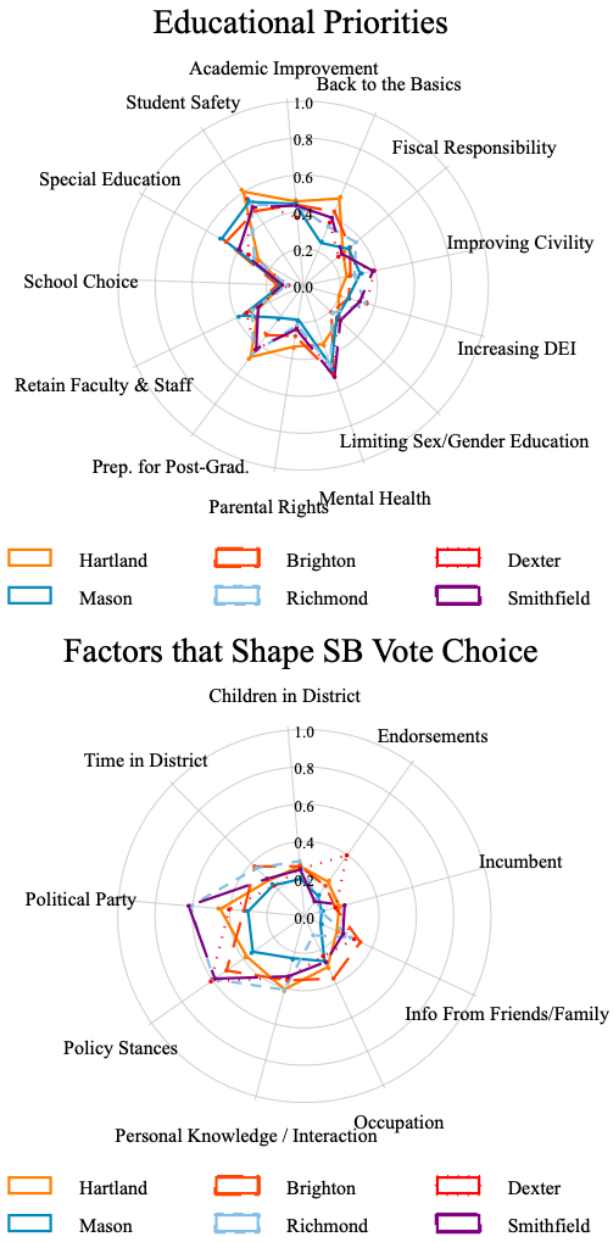
28. Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
    - ◯ Yes
    - ◯ No
29. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    - ◯ Some High School
    - ◯ High School Diploma
    - ◯ Some College, No Degree
    - ◯ Associate degree or trade/technical/vocational school
    - ◯ Bachelor's degree
    - ◯ Post Graduate Degree (e.g. Master's Degree, PhD, etc.)
30. What is your age?

    _____

31. The last question is about the total combined income of all members of your family during the past 12 months. This includes money from jobs, net income from business, farm or rent, pensions, dividends, interest, Social Security payments, and any other money income received by members of your family who are 15 years of age or older. What was the total income of your family during the past 12 months? Write the number. Your best guess is fine.

Appendix B. District Comparisons

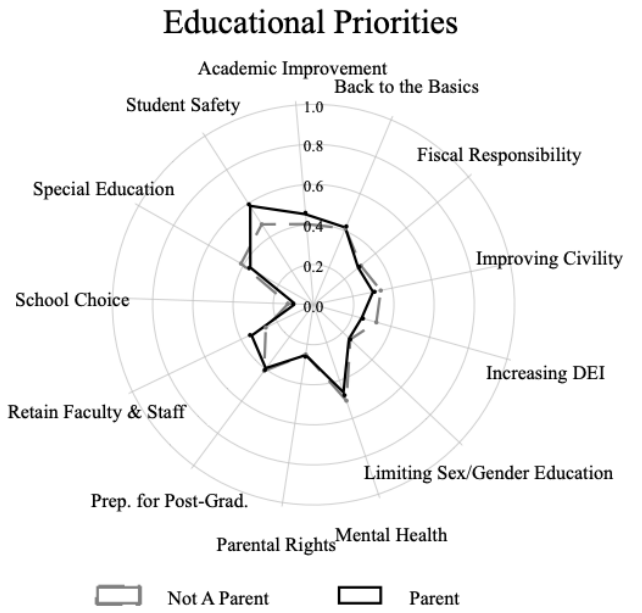
Appendix Figure 1. Analyses by School District

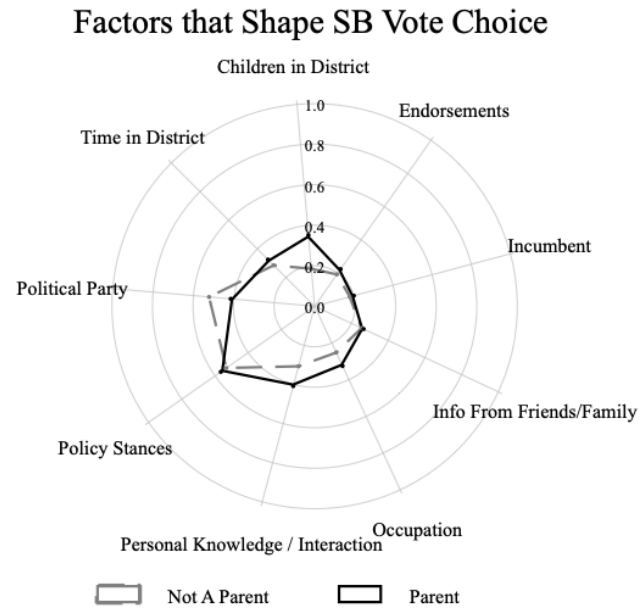


Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. Individuals are distributed across the 6 districts in our sample: Hartland, MI (N: 86); Brighton, MI (N: 227); Dexter, MI (N: 166); Mason, MI (N: 40); Richmond, RI (N: 58); and Smithfield, RI (N: 262) for a total of 839 respondents.

Appendix C: Parental Status Comparisons

Appendix Figure 2. Analyses by Parental Status





Notes: The scale for these figures ranges from 0 to 1, accounting for how often each priority was ranked as a top-five priority for respondents. A 1 would mean every respondent ranked that priority, while a 0 means that no respondent ranked that priority. In these figures 304 individuals have children under 18 while 409 individuals do not, for a total of 713 individuals.