



Public Opinion on Electoral Policy: Evidence from U.S. School Board Elections

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Changes to electoral systems are relatively rare in established democracies. Conventional explanations for this stability suggest elected officials and citizens who stand to lose influence under new arrangements will oppose change. We explore the nature of public awareness and opinion regarding an electoral institution that has undergone notable change in recent decades—the timing of local school board elections. Traditionally, most of these races were held “off-cycle”—on a different day than the national elections held in November of even-numbered years—depressing voter turnout and making the electorate less representative of the population. However, many districts have shifted to on-cycle races in recent years. Using survey questions and experiments with a sample of 8,625 respondents, including a nationally representative oversample of K-12 public school teachers, we show majority levels of public support for on-cycle elections but low levels of awareness and interest in election timing. The public is easily swayed by arguments both for and against on-cycle elections, but it appears more difficult to increase public perceptions of the issue’s import. Teachers have even higher levels of support for on-cycle elections than the general public. Overall, the patterns of results are inconsistent with the idea that public opinion on this electoral policy is primarily shaped by political self-interest.

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**Public Opinion on Electoral Policy:
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Abstract: Changes to electoral systems are relatively rare in established democracies. Conventional explanations for this stability suggest elected officials and citizens who stand to lose influence under new arrangements will oppose change. We explore the nature of public awareness and opinion regarding an electoral institution that has undergone notable change in recent decades—the timing of local school board elections. Traditionally, most of these races were held “off-cycle”—on a different day than the national elections held in November of even-numbered years—depressing voter turnout and making the electorate less representative of the population. However, many districts have shifted to on-cycle races in recent years. Using survey questions and experiments with a sample of 8,625 respondents, including a nationally representative oversample of K-12 public school teachers, we show majority levels of public support for on-cycle elections but low levels of awareness and interest in election timing. The public is easily swayed by arguments both for and against on-cycle elections, but it appears more difficult to increase public perceptions of the issue’s import. Teachers have even higher levels of support for on-cycle elections than the general public. Overall, the patterns of results are inconsistent with the idea that public opinion on this electoral policy is primarily shaped by political self-interest.

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Introduction

The formal elements of electoral systems in democratic governments—such as how legislative districts are drawn, the use of proportional versus plurality representation, or the eligibility requirements for voters—inevitably influence the size and composition of the electorate, the types of candidates most likely to win, the issues that rise to the top of the political agenda, and the kinds of policies that elected officials ultimately pursue. The traditional view in the study of electoral institutions is that significant changes are relatively rare in established democracies (Benoit 2004; Dunleavy and Margetts 1995; Katz 1980; 2005; Lijphart 1984; Norris 1995; Renwick 2010; Shepsle 2001). This perception of stability may be driven, in part, by the existing literature’s emphasis on national institutions. Attempts at electoral reform appear more common at the subnational level. However, the success rate of such attempts to change electoral policies at all levels of government remains low (Bowler and Donovan 2013).

Traditionally, the primary theoretical explanation for this institutional stability is that political elites are biased toward the status quo. Having acquired power under the existing rules of the game, elected officials and other political insiders may be resistant to changing electoral institutions in ways that could threaten their access to power or the access of their preferred successors (Boix 1999; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2006; Cox 1997; North 1990; Shepsle 2001). This explanation may be more salient for electoral reforms at higher levels of government where those making the rules are also the elected officials who will be most directly impacted by those rules. The connection between electoral institutions and the electoral fates of decision-makers may be less direct at lower levels of government. In the American context, for example, it is often state-level officials that set local election policies.

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A related explanation invokes the ephemerality of public support for institutional reform. Like political elites, individual citizens' views of electoral institutions may be shaped by perceptions of political self-interest, and therefore those who stand to lose influence under new arrangements often staunchly oppose such changes (Banducci and Karp 1999; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Tolbert, Smith, and Green 2009). Although surveys of the public often reveal broad support for many alterations to existing electoral institutions in the abstract (including both smaller-scale changes like requiring voters to display government-issued photo identification as well as more dramatic changes like eliminating the Electoral College in American presidential elections), that support tends to dissipate when the potential political consequences are made clear (Biggers 2019; Bowler and Donovan 2007; Doherty et al. 2024; Jones 2024). While citizens are motivated by more than mere self-interest when evaluating changes to electoral rules—evidence also points to the importance of advancing pro-democratic values and procedural fairness—many are willing to support reforms perceived as unfair if the political advantages accrue to their own party (Biggers and Bowler 2022; 2023). Conversely, opposition to politically disadvantageous reform is high, regardless of its perceived fairness. In other words, when respondents are reasonably well-informed of the political implications of proposed changes, public opinion on electoral reforms tends to reflect the distribution of anticipated political gains and losses of those reforms.

Of course, the linkage between public opinion and actual government action is, at best, indirect. Insofar as public opinion tends to influence the behavior of elected officials and shape public policy, such effects tend to be more pronounced for exceptionally salient issues—a category that sometimes includes electoral reform, but only when the political stakes are perceived to be high (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020; Page and Shapiro 1983;

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Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). That said, public opinion could be more relevant for shaping local-level electoral policies than those at higher levels of government because of the greater disconnect between the political elites making the policy and the impacted elected officials. In the U.S. context, state-level actors are often responsible for determining the local electoral arrangements, but these local policies do not determine their own electoral fates. Therefore, influence of public opinion in the policymaking process might be relatively higher than usual in this case because it would not be offset by officials' own electoral incentives.

We contribute to this literature on public opinion of electoral reform by exploring the nature of opinion regarding a local electoral institution which has—unlike most areas of electoral policy—undergone a substantial degree of change over the last few decades: school board election timing in the United States. Given state-level actors are often involved in making electoral policy regarding the timing of school board elections, this is also an area where public opinion may play an important role. Specifically, we examine the public's attitudes regarding whether school board elections ought to be held on the same day as state and national elections in November of even-numbered years (“on-cycle” elections) or some other date (“off-cycle” elections). We do so in part because election timing has a major impact on public participation in elections and the composition of the electorate (Anzia, 2014; Berry 2024; Berry & Gersen, 2011; de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw, 2024; Dynes et al., 2021; Hajnal et al., 2022; Hartney 2021; Kogan et al., 2021; Marschall & Lappie, 2018). Although political scientists have turned their attention to school board politics in greater numbers recently (e.g., Collins, 2021; Hartney and Kogan 2024; Kitchens & Goldberg, 2024; Payson 2017), little is known about mass public knowledge and opinion on school board elections and the extent to which public views appear to

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facilitate or inhibit institutional change.

Over the course of 2023, we conducted a series of surveys of more than 8,000 U.S. adults, including a nationally representative oversample of approximately 1,000 K-12 public school teachers. This group is of special interest because the outcomes of school board elections have direct material consequences for public school teachers, and the conventional wisdom suggests that off-cycle races benefit their labor union’s ability to influence elections (e.g., Anzia, 2014; Moe 2005, 2011). Therefore, examining the opinions of teachers—as well as other key subgroups—allows us to explore the extent to which political and/or economic self-interest may be playing a role in the formation of opinions regarding electoral policy. We used the survey to inquire about participants’ knowledge of school board election timing and voter turnout, their preferences regarding school board election timing, and the extent to which they believe that school board election timing is important. We also randomly assigned some participants to receive brief informational messages about the potential benefits and drawbacks of on-cycle versus off-cycle elections. This allowed us to address the following research questions:

- 1) What does the public know and think about school board elections and their timing?
- 2) Does knowledge and opinion vary for K-12 public school teachers?
- 3) Does prompting respondents to consider the effects of election timing on voter turnout, representation, and/or union influence impact public opinion?

We reveal that a large majority of Americans support on-cycle school board elections, but only a small proportion view this issue as particularly important and there are low levels of public awareness about school board electoral policy. Public opinion on school board election

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timing is malleable, but it appears harder to influence the perceived importance of these policies among members of the public. Interestingly, none of the treatments reduce support for on-cycle elections to a non-plurality position, and we observe no evidence of a latent majority in favor of off-cycle elections that could be readily assembled if only the political stakes were clarified.

Despite prior work suggesting public school teachers derive nontrivial organizational benefits from off-cycle elections, we show that teachers support on-cycle elections at an even higher rate than the public as a whole. Moreover, teachers are not differentially impacted by arguments for or against on-cycle elections and robust support for on-cycle elections among teachers persists even when we directly inform them of the potential threat to the interests of their labor unions.

While we do observe some suggestive evidence that political messaging about the potential disadvantages of on-cycle elections for teachers' unions may be more influential among teachers who live and work in the same school district—and who therefore have some of the most direct material interests in the outcomes of school board elections—the negative effects we observe are not large enough to flip opinion in favor of off-cycle elections.

Taken as a whole, the results are not consistent with the idea that political or economic self-interest is the primary driver of opinion formation on electoral reforms at the local level, at least when it comes to the electoral policies governing educational decision-makers. Therefore, our work demonstrates that some of the theorized obstacles to institutional change—namely, that public backing for reform is shallow and that those who stand to lose under alternative arrangements will defend the status quo when more fully informed—are either modest or non-existent in the case of school board election timing. This may help explain the considerable degree of movement away from off-cycle elections and toward on-cycle elections in recent years.

Why Study School Boards?

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The 80,000+ school board members make up the largest single group of elected officials in the country, overseeing more than 13,000 school districts. Despite the growing authority of states and the federal government over K-12 education policy during the last half century, school boards remain a potent and influential political force given much of the consequential decision-making over K-12 education is delegated to this decentralized system of local actors (Blazar & Schueler 2023). In many districts, school boards manage a multi-million-dollar budget, levy and collect tax revenues, appoint the superintendent, negotiate a collective bargaining agreement with the local teachers' union, approve curricular materials, set school attendance zones, and adjudicate student discipline matters (Hess & Leal 2005; Howell 2005; Kirst and Wirt 2009; Manna 2006; 2010; Marsh et al., 2026; McGuinn 2006; Mitra 2018; Reed 2014). Collectively educational budgets make up almost \$1 trillion in annual spending, an amount that is comparable to federal Medicare and defense spending (Biasi et al. 2025; National Center for Education Statistics 2023). School boards also often serve as a pivotal inflection point in the U.S.'s decentralized education system, with sufficient autonomy to comply or resist state-level mandates (recent examples include regulations concerning the rights of transgender students), affecting intergovernmental relations and conflict (Valant 2022). During the Covid-19 pandemic, school boards played a key role in deciding when to re-open schools for in-person instruction, with lasting consequences for students' academic, social, and economic trajectories (Fahle et al., 2023; Goldhaber et al. 2023; Hartney & Finger, 2022; Kitchens and Goldberg 2024; Werner and Woessmann 2023).

Given the authority school boards hold, it is therefore not surprising that a growing body of literature suggests that the makeup of a board matters for important policy outcomes. Many papers in this area rely on close elections or random ballot ordering to estimate the causal effect

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of a candidate with a particular characteristic winning a seat on the school board. The board member characteristics under study have included candidate partisanship (Macartney & Singleton 2018), political ideology (Biasi, Park, Singleton & Zimmerman 2025; Grissom 2010), professional experience in education (Shi & Singleton 2023), and race/ethnicity (Kogan, Lavertu & Peskowitz 2021; Fischer 2023). Researchers have explored outcomes ranging from intra-board conflict, policy adoption, educational spending, test-based academic achievement (e.g., Honingh, Ruiter & van Thiel, 2018), within-district racial segregation, to equity of spending and academic performance outcomes. Overall, this literature illustrates that school board elections are quite consequential.

School Board Elections

Despite the importance of these races, voter turnout for school board elections is generally very low, often in the single digits as a percentage of all registered voters, compared to 60 percent or higher in presidential elections (Hartney 2021; National School Boards Association 2020). Both the school board electorate and school board members themselves tend to be older, whiter, and wealthier than the U.S. population as a whole (Hess and Meeks 2010; Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2021b; National School Boards Association 2018). There are frequently large racial/ethnic differences between voters in school board elections and the students enrolled in the local public schools, with larger representational gaps associated with larger racial/ethnic gaps in students' academic performance (Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2021b).

One factor that contributes to low levels of participation in school board elections and the unrepresentative nature of the electorate is election timing. Most U.S. school board elections have historically been held on a separate day from national elections held in November of even-numbered years, a product of Progressive Era reforms from the turn of the 20th century with the

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ostensible purpose of buffering public school governance from partisan politics and the patronage system (Henig 2013; Kirst 2004; Tyack 1974). However, Anzia (2012) argues that when shifts have occurred, changes to election timing frequently served political ends, pursued by partisan actors seeking electoral advantage. As recently as 2002, 47 percent of school districts consistently held their school board elections on the same day as national elections (Hess 2002). The rate of so-called “on-cycle” school board elections, however, has trended upward in more recent years. By 2010, 51 percent of school districts consistently held on-cycle elections, rising to an estimated 56 percent in 2018 (Hess and Meeks 2010; National School Boards Association 2018). Moreover, the most recent available estimate does not reflect subsequent shifts in this direction. For example, California recently passed legislation mandating on-cycle elections for all of its nearly 1,000 school districts (Hartney 2021). Despite these shifts, over half of all states still hold most of their local school board elections off cycle (Ballotpedia 2026).

The timing of elections represents a key political institution influencing voter turnout, the representativeness of the electorate, the extent to which elected officials hold views and pursue policies that align with their constituents’ preferences, the relative influence of major interest groups, and the level of political accountability for relevant policy outcomes (Anzia 2014; Berry 2009; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2024; Dynes, Hartney, and Hayes 2021; Hajnal, Kogan, and Markarian 2022; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Marschall & Lappie 2018; Oliver and Ha 2007; Wood 2002). In the case of school boards and other education-related political contests such as school tax referenda, off-cycle elections are associated with decreased turnout (Berry and Gersen 2011; Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2018; Payson 2017), an electorate that diverges demographically from both the population as a whole as well as the local student body (Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2018; 2021), the election of board members with unrepresentative

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ideological dispositions and policy views (Hartney and Hayes 2021), higher compensation for teachers (Anzia 2011, who argues that this is the product of the outsized influence of teachers' unions in low-turnout elections), and a weakened relationship between indicators of students' academic performance and political outcomes such as incumbents' electoral success or the passage of school funding levies (Berry and Howell 2007; Holbein 2016; Kitchens 2023; Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2016a; Payson 2017).

Defenders of off-cycle elections note that the subset of voters who do make their way to the polls during atypical times are potentially better informed about the relevant issues at stake (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002) although there is limited empirical evidence in support of this argument. In addition, the conventional wisdom holds that Republican and right-leaning candidates tend to perform better with the older, whiter, and better educated electorate that votes in off-cycle elections, lending a partisan dynamic to the debate (Hansford and Gomez 2010). However, given the inversion of the relationship between political party affiliation and educational attainment in recent years, the partisan advantage conferred by off-cycle elections has grown more ambiguous (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024).

Teachers and Their Unions

Public school teachers and the labor unions that represent them have long been viewed as a key interest group wielding significant organizational advantages in school board elections, especially when they are held off cycle (Anzia 2014; Hamilton and Cohen 1974; Moe 2011). School boards have considerable influence over teachers' salaries, benefits, and working conditions (Moe 2006). As such, it comes as no surprise that teachers' unions are active participants in local school board politics, frequently making endorsements of specific candidates, engaging in door-to-door canvassing, and hosting phone drives (Moe 2005). The fruits

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of these political activities are nontrivial. Teachers' union endorsements are very influential, with a roughly equivalent average effect on vote choice as shared partisanship (Hartney and Kogan 2024). Union-endorsed school board candidates win approximately 70 percent of contested elections (Moe 2006). Moreover, union-endorsed candidates are more positively disposed to the collective bargaining process, and boards with a larger proportion of teachers and union-endorsed members tend to adopt collective bargaining agreements with more favorable terms for teachers (Moe 2011; Strunk and Grissom 2010).

Anzia (2011) proposes two potential mechanisms through which lower-turnout off-cycle elections ought to benefit teachers and their unions. First, because teachers traditionally vote at high rates (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) and because the outcomes of school board elections have direct material implications for them as a group, teachers are more likely than non-teachers to cast a ballot regardless of election timing, thereby constituting a higher proportion of the voting population when overall turnout is low. Second, teachers' unions' efforts to inform, persuade, and mobilize voters are more likely to have a decisive influence on the outcome when fewer total votes are necessary to obtain a majority. In short, when school board elections are held on a separate date from general state and national elections, teachers and the unions that represent their professional interests have greater capacity to tip the balance toward their preferred candidates.

Subsequent scholarship has added some wrinkles and caveats to Anzia's hypothesized mechanisms. For example, Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2018) demonstrate that even though teachers make up a slightly larger proportion of the electorate in off-cycle elections, their absolute numbers remain relatively low. The larger compositional consequence of off-cycle elections is the greater proportion of older voters without school-age children, who might be

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expected to counter-balance teachers' preferences for additional educational spending. In addition, Hartney and Kogan's (2024) exploration of the relative influence of teachers' union endorsements on vote choice raises the prospect that such endorsements might be even more influential in higher-turnout on-cycle elections that feature a larger proportion of voters with less direct attachments to the local schools. Despite these complications, the conventional wisdom that off-cycle elections confer an advantage on teachers' unions appears to have some currency with teachers' unions themselves, who have advocated for off-cycle elections in a number of cases (Anzia 2014).

The normative implications of the organizational advantages conferred on teachers and teachers' unions by off-cycle elections are not straightforward. When the interests of teachers and other relevant constituencies (e.g., students and families) align, then heightened teacher influence ought to be mutually beneficial. While such convergence seems plausible in many cases, the gaps in public opinion on a variety of education policy issues between teachers and the general public are often quite large—larger even than analogous gaps based on political party affiliation, race/ethnicity, or income (Peterson, Henderson, and West 2014). In one well-publicized (although often over-simplified) example, teachers' unions frequently pressed for extended remote instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic (Goldstein and Shapiro 2020). The dominant mode of instruction in each community (i.e., fully in-person, fully remote, or a hybrid option) largely tracked local preferences, suggesting a reasonably high degree of congruence (Barnum 2021; Haderlein et al. 2021; Hartney and Finger 2022; Houston and Steinberg 2025; although see Kogan, 2021, for evidence that local preferences potentially followed rather than guided the decision-making of educational leaders). However, both contemporaneous and retrospective research has suggested that schools may not have served as significant sources of viral

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transmission (Heavey et al. 2020; Neil-Sztramko et al. 2024) except in communities with moderate to high levels of pre-existing cases (Goldhaber et al. 2022), and extended closures led to major declines in students' academic performance and social-emotional well-being (e.g., Fahle et al. 2023; Goldhaber et al. 2023). In short, interest alignment between teachers and other constituencies on educational issues is, at the very least, imperfect and complex.

The preferences of teachers themselves, when it comes to electoral policies, are not entirely clear although we do know based on prior work that their views on other education policy issues tend to diverge from the general public more so than other subgroups. On the one hand, we might expect teachers to favor the electoral arrangements that advantage their own professional interests and therefore their unions. On the other hand, we know that public school teachers tend to lean to the left of the general public politically (Greene & Paul 2021; Lin, Parker & Horowitz 2024). Public school educators may have other commitments such as favoring greater representative for young people and people of color, or generally stronger pro-democracy views, which may lead them to support on-cycle school board elections. We will test these possibilities empirically.

Data and Methods

Recruitment. We recruited a total of 8,634 participants to complete a survey in two waves over the course of 2023. For the first wave, we used the Prolific online platform, which allows researchers to screen potential participants for short online tasks (such as completing a survey) by their location and demographic characteristics. At the time we conducted our surveys, Prolific samples outperformed other online behavioral research platforms including Amazon Mechanical Turk, CouldResearch, Qualtrics and Dynata in terms of a variety of data quality aspects such as respondent comprehension, attention, and honesty (Albert & Smilek, 2023;

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Douglas, Ewell & Brauer, 2023; Kay 2025; Peer et al. 2021) and also demonstrated high generalizability to the nation as a whole (Tang et al., 2022). We initially recruited 7,604 U.S. adults via Prolific through six survey administrations conducted between February and September 2023. There were no duplicate respondents across administrations. We embedded two attention checks within the survey and over 99 percent of all respondents passed both checks. The Prolific sample included 419 K-12 public school teachers.

To supplement the Prolific sample, we conducted a second wave in October of 2023, for which we embedded key elements of our survey in the Omnibus American Teacher Panel (ATP) Survey, conducted annually by the RAND Corporation with a nationally representative sample of K-12 public school teachers. Significant evidence is available to demonstrate the overall quality of this data source (RAND, 2024). The ability to focus in on K-12 public school teachers was a valuable feature of the RAND survey given that many other surveys can identify whether respondents work in the field of education but not necessarily whether they are currently working as K-12 public school teachers (versus private school teachers, administrators, tutors, or higher education staff members, for example). This was uniquely important given our substantive interest in understanding the perceptions of K-12 public school teachers relative to the public as a whole. The RAND teacher sample included 1,020 respondents.

Sample. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of our resulting sample. We first compare the unweighted sample to the composition of the national public in column three drawn from the 2020 Census, 2024 Pew Survey, and the nationally representative 2022 *Education Next* (EN) poll of the public's attitudes toward education. The EN poll has previously been used in several peer-reviewed research articles about public opinion on education policy issues (e.g., Houston et al., 2021; Schueler & West, 2015). By virtue of using the EN poll as our

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reference point, we are able to demonstrate that the participants in our sample are similarly knowledgeable about education-related issues (e.g., average teachers' salaries in their state) and hold similar opinions about the quality of public schools locally and nationwide. This provides some confidence in the representativeness of the sample.

However, Table 1 shows that our unweighted pooled sample was not perfectly representative of the nation on all dimensions. We employed Prolific's built-in tools to recruit nationally representative samples, but these were limited to simple quotas using current US Census proportions by sex, age, and racial/ethnic identity. Our Prolific samples significantly overrepresented college graduates and Democrats. In addition, our use of the ATP survey dramatically increased the proportion of our sample identifying as a K-12 teacher. Therefore, we generated survey weights using a technique known as raking, which iteratively estimates weights across a set of variables with known distributions in the population as a whole, repeating the process until the sample matches the target population as closely as possible for each variable (Bailey, 2024; Pasek et al., 2014). We calculated weights based on participants' educational attainment, race/ethnicity, gender, political party, and K-12 teacher status. Our weighted sample closely approximates the demographic composition of the US adult population, as we show in the second column of Table 1. We therefore use these weights when reporting out descriptive statistics on respondents' knowledge and opinions.

Survey Instrument. Our survey inquired about participants' perceptions of school quality, their knowledge of local education spending levels, their awareness of local education-related electoral institutions, their awareness of voter turnout levels, their views on the timing of school board elections, and the perceived importance they place on school board election timing among other issues (for the complete survey instruments, please see Appendix A). Some of the questions

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were adapted directly from previous administrations of the nationally representative EN poll to allow for comparability. These questions were posed prior to any experimental manipulation except for the two questions that formed the basis for our outcomes—one on support for on-cycle elections and the other for the perceived importance of school board election timing.

Prior to asking participants whether they supported holding school board elections on the same day as national elections (i.e., in November of even-numbered years) or on different days than national elections, we randomly assigned them to receive a brief message about potential advantages or disadvantages of different election timings. This allowed us to test the malleability of the public’s views to various arguments for and against on-cycle school board elections. All respondents, including the control group, saw the text “School board elections are often held on a different day than national elections (national elections occur in November in even-numbered years).” Table 2 displays the different messages that treatment group participants then received. Respondents were randomly assigned to see one of these messages or to a control group that saw no additional message.

We report out results for three different treatment arms. The first arm was designed to prompt respondents to consider the likely impact of election timing on voter turnout in school board races. There were two different versions of this treatment arm—one that simply indicated “some people argue that holding school board elections on the same day as national elections increases the number of people who turn out to vote for the school board.” The second version gave respondents an estimate of current turnout rates in school board elections compared to presidential elections. We pool the results for these two versions of the prompt into one “turnout” arm for the sake of simplicity, as doing so does not change our conclusions. The second treatment arm was meant to have respondents consider how election timing could affect the

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composition of the electorate, raising the argument that on cycle elections make it “more likely that the people who turn out to vote for the school board are representative of the whole community.” The third and final arm had respondents consider the possibility that timing could impact teacher union influence, highlighting that an on-cycle election “makes it harder for organized interest groups—such as teachers’ unions—to influence the outcome of school board elections.” Two of these arms we consider pro-on-cycle messages—the messages about increasing turnout and increasing the representativeness of the electorate. The third message is ambiguous in that the direction of the message is likely dependent on how the respondent feels about union influence.

After receiving one of the above messages, all respondents were asked, “Do you think that school board elections should be held on a different day than national elections? Or should school board elections be held on the same day as national elections?” Respondents received five answer choices: (1) strongly support different day than national elections, (2) somewhat support different day than national elections, (3) somewhat support same day as national elections, (4) strongly support same day as national elections, and (5) no preference. All respondents were also asked “How important is the issue of whether school board elections are held on the same day or a different day than national elections to you personally?” They were then given five answer choices ranging from “not at all important” to “extremely important.”

Finally, the survey concluded with questions about respondents’ demographic characteristics which allowed us to conduct subgroup analyses and to include covariates in our models. Importantly for our research questions, we were not only able to identify K-12 public school teachers, but we also asked teachers whether they were members of a teachers’ union and (following Moe) whether they lived in the same school district where they worked. This allowed

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us to identify subsets of teachers for whom local elections would have the greatest direct material impact on their political and economic interests. Members of unions are more likely to benefit from union influence in local school board races. Teachers who live where they work have the ability to vote in the local elections that impact their own working conditions.

Outcome Measures. Both of our key outcomes were measured on a 5-point scale, and we report out descriptive statistics on the full range of answer choices in many cases. However, for the purpose of our regression-based estimates, we dichotomized these outcomes to represent either support for on-cycle school board elections (yes/no) or perceived importance of school board election timing (yes/no). Therefore, the first outcome on support for on-cycle elections was equal to one if a respondent answered strongly support or somewhat support same day as national elections and was equal to zero if they answered strongly or somewhat support different day than national elections or if they answered, “no preference.” The second outcome on perceived importance was equal to one if a respondent answered election timing was extremely, very or somewhat important to them and equal to zero if they answered not too or not at all important. Therefore, our outcomes can be interpreted as capturing whether or not a respondent expressed support for on-cycle school board elections and whether or not a respondent said they believed school board election timing was important to them personally.

Analysis. To estimate the average effects of each randomly-assigned message, we employed the following OLS equation:

$$Y_{is} = \alpha + \beta D_{is} + \delta \mathbf{X}_{is} + \gamma_s + \epsilon_{is}$$

where Y is either a dichotomous measure of support for on-cycle school board elections or a dichotomous measure of perceiving school board election timing to be important for survey participant i in survey administration s . D_{ijs} is a dichotomous indicator for whether a respondent

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was presented with a particular message regarding on-cycle school board races. We ran the results separately for each of the treatment arms, always limiting the sample to the control group and the experimental group in question. Therefore, β represents the coefficient of interest with regard to the impact of each message on support for on-cycle elections and perceived importance of election timing. \mathbf{X}_{is} is a vector of individual-level demographic characteristics, including age, income, gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, political party affiliation, whether the respondent identifies as a parent of a K-12 student, and whether the respondent identifies as a K-12 teacher. γ_s is a set of survey administration fixed effects, to account for the fact that there were six different administrations of the Prolific survey and one RAND ATP survey administration (all conducted in 2023 as described above). We report out results from OLS models but confirm that results are robust to the use of logistic regression, given the binary nature of our outcomes.

Appendix Table A1 provides evidence that randomization successfully generated experimental groups that were balanced in terms of their demographic characteristics. We see fewer statistically significant differences between groups than we would expect based on chance alone. However, in our preferred model specification described above, we note that we adjusted for observable characteristics (\mathbf{X}_{is}) to increase the precision of our estimates and to address minor individual imbalances between experimental groups. We also confirm that our findings are not sensitive to the exclusion of these covariates.

Finally, when testing for heterogeneous treatment effects, we simply limited our sample to the relevant subgroups of interest and estimated the above model on the smaller sample. These are the preferred results presented in the main text tables. However, to more formally test whether any observed differences were statistically significant, we also ran versions of the above

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model where we included interaction terms between the treatment indicator variable and the potential source of variation (e.g., K-12 teacher status). All results are robust to the exclusion of the RAND sample, confirming that differences between teachers and non-teachers do not simply represent differences in survey administration.

Findings

Public Knowledge. We begin by describing public knowledge of the process through which school board members come to power. We asked respondents whether their own local board members are elected or appointed to the best of their knowledge. In the top panel of Figure 1, we show that a non-trivial share of the public (32 percent) indicated that they did not know, comparable to *Education Next* results from 2021 (39 percent) (Henderson et al., 2021). Teachers were more confident than non-teachers in their knowledge with only 6 percent expressing uncertainty. This was true for teachers overall and consistent for union members and teachers who lived in the same district where they taught. Black and Hispanic respondents were even less confident in their knowledge than White respondents with 37 and 28 percent saying they did not know, respectively, although we note that we have smaller samples and are less confident that our racial and ethnic subgroup samples are representative of their respective groups than we are for our sample of K-12 public school teachers. Among those respondents who provided an answer, the proportions indicating their board members were elected versus appointed were not too far off from our best estimates of the reality in which roughly 88 percent of boards are elected and 12 percent appointed (National School Board Association 2018), with the large majority indicating their members were elected, both for the public as a whole and K-12 teachers as a subgroup.

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The public also had quite limited awareness of school board election timing. In the bottom panel of Figure 1 we show that a large plurality (45 percent) of respondents indicated they did not know whether board races in their district were held on or off cycle. Again, teachers were more confident than other members of the public but still revealed notably low levels of awareness with 27 percent indicating a lack of knowledge. Among those who provided a response, respondents again appeared not to be too far off the mark with the best estimates about the reality of election timing. Among the public as a whole, 20 percent indicated elections were held off-cycle, comparable to National School Board Association survey results indicating 24 percent are never held on the same day as national elections, 20 percent are sometimes held the same day as national elections, and 56 are always held the same day as national elections (National School Board Association 2018). If anything, respondents underestimate how often board elections are held off cycle.

Respondents were overly optimistic about the levels of public participation in school board elections. In Figure 2 we show the distribution of guesses for turnout rates in both presidential and board elections, for the public overall (top two panels) and among teachers (bottom panels). The public overestimated turnout in board races by 16 percentage points, guessing 28 percent while our best estimates suggest turnout is typically more like 12 percent (Hartney, 2021). The public is more knowledgeable about turnout rates in presidential elections and, if anything, underestimates participation by four percentage points (58 versus 62 percent in reality) (Bernstein & Shannon, 2022). Interestingly, teachers are even less accurate than other members of the public when it comes to both school board and presidential election turnout. They overestimate participation in board races by 20 percentage points and underestimate it for

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presidential races by eight percentage points, on average. That said, respondents did express awareness that turnout rates were quite a bit lower for school board races than presidential ones.

Public Opinion. Turning to opinion regarding school board election timing, we find that the public is generally supportive of on-cycle elections. As we show in the top panel of Figure 3, a majority (55 percent) of respondents overall indicated that they either strongly or somewhat supported on-cycle races while only 23 percent defended off-cycle races. A non-trivial share (22 percent) appeared malleable, expressing no preference either way. Teachers were more likely to have an opinion (only 8 percent gave no preference). Interestingly, teachers were even more strongly supportive of on-cycle races than the broader public, with 72 percent expressing support for on-cycle elections. This was consistent across subgroups of teachers including union members and teachers who lived in the same school district where they were employed. Interestingly, respondents of color were somewhat more likely than other members of the public to express no preference regarding election timing.

The public does not seem to consider school board election timing as a high priority. Roughly half of all respondents indicated it was not at all or not too important. And only 18 percent indicated it was very or extremely important. A larger share of teachers consider board election timing to be at least somewhat important: 63 percent versus 50 percent for the public as a whole. This pattern was consistent for union members and teachers who teach/work where they live. Older respondents (60+ years) also expressed higher levels of concern. In Figure 4, we show that the public places a relatively low level of importance to school board election timing relative to other policy issues. Perhaps most revealingly, the public cares more about school cafeteria food than school board election timing, with 84 percent versus 49 percent indicating it was at least somewhat important, respectively. Respondents placed similar importance on

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cafeteria food and voter turnout overall (even including national elections). Of all four issues we asked about on our survey, respondents said they cared the most about school safety with 95 percent saying this was at least somewhat important and nearly half of respondents indicating it was extremely important.

Explaining Higher Teacher Support for On-Cycle Elections. We next attempt to unpack why K-12 public school teachers express higher support for on-cycle school board elections than non-teachers and display relevant results in Table 3. Here, the outcome is a binary indicator for whether a respondent expressed support for on-cycle elections. In column one we show that teachers were 11 percentage points more likely to support on-cycle elections than non-teachers. In the columns to the right, we separately control for various factors to examine hypotheses for the teacher/non-teacher gap empirically. One hypothesis is that teachers are simply more knowledgeable about school boards and/or elections. Therefore, in the second column, we control for various indicators of knowledge, including whether a respondent indicated that they did not know if their own board members were elected or appointed, indicated they did not know whether their own board elections are held off cycle, the extent to which they underestimated presidential election turnout rates when guessing, and the extent to which they overestimated turnout in school board races. This does not meaningfully change the observed relationship between teachers and support for on-cycle elections, which remains at roughly 0.10 (if rounding) and statistically significant. Another hypothesis could be that teachers are simply more likely to be participators; however, controlling for whether a respondent reported voting in the last school board race does not meaningfully alter the coefficient on teachers. Perhaps teachers are simply more likely to rate things important in general. However, controlling for whether respondents

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think voter turnout overall and cafeteria food are important does not meaningfully change the coefficient.

The story changes once we control for whether a respondent indicated that school board election timing, specifically, was important. This attenuates the magnitude of the teacher effect (to 0.05) and the coefficient is no longer statistically significant. Controlling for demographic characteristics does not alter the relationship for teachers, except when we account for education levels. When we control for whether a respondent has a bachelor's degree, we no longer observe any relationship between identifying as a teacher and support for on-cycle elections. In other words, the teacher/non-teacher gap in support for on-cycle school board races is explained by the fact that teachers are more likely to consider board election timing to be an important issue compared to the rest of the general public and that teachers are very likely to hold a college degree (regardless of teacher status, college-educated respondents have higher levels of support for on-cycle races).

Malleability of Opinion. We next turn to the results from our survey experiment. In sum, we find that the public is persuadable in both directions when it comes to their opinions on school board election timing. As we illustrate in the first column of Table 4, all three treatment arms causally impacted respondents' levels of support for on-cycle elections. The two pro-on-cycle messages both increased the likelihood that respondents said they support on-cycle races by comparable magnitudes: by 8 percentage points for the message about on-cycle timing increasing voter turnout, and by 9 percentage points for the message about how on-cycle races make the electorate more representative of the population. In contrast, the message about on-cycle elections making things harder for unions reduced support for on-cycle races by 11 percentage points, consistent with the idea that the public is sympathetic to organized labor.

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Teachers were moved by the messages always in the same direction and by similar magnitudes as the general public, as shown in the third column of Table 4. Here, we are simply limiting the samples to the relevant subgroups, but we also confirm through formal tests, shown in Appendix Table A2, that none of the effects for teachers are statistically different from the effects for non-teachers. When we limit the sample to teachers who are union members, the direction of the effects and rough magnitudes remain quite similar although none of the treatment effects achieve statistical significance. This is likely because there is limited statistical power to detect effects with this smaller sample. When we focus the sample on teachers who live in the same school district where they work as teachers, and are therefore likely to have the strongest professional incentives, we find that the pro-on-cycle messages have no effect on support for on-cycle elections. Teachers who teach where they live have lower levels of support for on-cycle races when prompted to consider the negative effects on union influence, and the magnitude of this effect is somewhat larger than for the public as a whole. However, when we formally test for whether these subgroup differences are statistically significant, none of the differences achieve statistical significance (see Appendix Table A3). That said, our sample size and therefore statistical power is limited to detect effects here when limiting the sample.

We also examine the impact of the messages on whether respondents perceive school board election timing to be important and report out the results in Table 5. Overall, it appears to be more difficult to alter the perceived importance of this issue than to shift opinion on it. Prompting voters to consider the implications of election timing on voter turnout increased the proportion of respondents who said school board election timing is somewhat or extremely important by five percentage points. However, neither of the other two treatment arms had statistically significant effects. The direction of the effects was consistent with the effects on

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opinion (positive for the treatment arm about the representativeness of the electorate and negative for the arm about the harms to union influence). None of the messages had a statistically significant impact on teachers' or the teacher subgroups' perceived importance of school board election timing. In Appendix Table A4, we show that none of the differences in treatment effects between teachers and the rest of the sample achieved statistical significance but again we have limited power to detect effects.

Discussion

This study examines public knowledge and opinion on school board elections—an electoral policy area that has undergone notable change in recent years. We find that a slim majority of the public supports on-cycle races for selecting local educational decision-makers. However, we also reveal that this is not a high-priority issue or area of significant public awareness. Our results suggest that public opinion on board election timing is malleable in both directions, but shifting the public's perceived importance of this issue is more difficult. This matters because the broad agenda setting literature showing that control of the agenda and influence over issue prioritization has a major impact on policy adoption and on who wins elections (e.g., Kingdon, 2010; Witko, Morgan, Kelly & Enns, 2021). It would therefore be useful for future research to examine promising avenues for increasing the import of these electoral policies and generally increasing public awareness of school board governance.

We speculate that the low salience of school board election timing derives in part from the decentralized and fragmented nature of public-school governance in the U.S., in which a nontrivial degree of decision-making authority continues to be wielded outside of state capitols and Washington, where political debates are subject to greater media coverage. We suspect similar dynamics are likely with respect to other local political institutions at the city or county

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level, particularly in areas without robust local media ecosystems. Our results, therefore, contribute to the field's understanding of the conditions under which proposed changes to electoral institutions are more or less likely to mobilize large-scale responses among the public. That said, it would be worth examining whether the effects we find here persist when asking voters about other local elections beyond school board races.

Interestingly, subgroup opinion regarding election timing does not always align with what you would expect if public preferences primarily reflected in-group egocentrism (assuming full information). Older respondents, age 60 and above, had higher levels of support for on-cycle elections than the average respondent, despite the fact that older voters are overrepresented in off-cycle races. Black and Hispanic respondents had lower levels of support for on-cycle elections than white respondents (although still a plurality in support), despite the fact that voters from these groups tend to be more underrepresented in off- than on-cycle elections. Most notably, we find that teachers have high levels of support for on-cycle races relative to the broader public. This is explained, in part, by their higher prioritization of the school board election issue and is explained entirely by the fact that teachers have higher average education levels than the rest of the public. This finding that education is a strong predictor of opinion regarding election timing is consistent with the robust literature on the civic returns to education, particularly the college degree (Dee, 2004; Doyle & Skinner, 2017). This result also raises the question of whether the teacher-public gap on other education policy issues could also be explained by differences in average education levels between teachers and non-teachers.

Our findings are consistent with prior work demonstrating a large “teacher-public gap” in opinion on education policy issues (Peterson, Henderson & West 2014). However, the direction of the differences may be surprising given the conventional wisdom about the benefits to teacher

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unions of off-cycle elections. We observe even higher levels of support for on-cycle elections among teachers who live and work in the same district (and would therefore have an even greater professional stake in politically advantageous election timing). Indeed, our results run counter to what we might expect if teachers' views on this issue were shaped primarily by perceived self-interest. While we find some suggestive evidence that teachers—and especially teachers who live and work in the same district—are less likely to support on-cycle elections upon learning that such a shift might reduce the political influence of teachers' unions, such messaging did not induce a latent majority in support of off-cycle elections to materialize. In fact, the negative effect of this message was roughly similar in magnitude for teachers as it was for the public as a whole. These effects are consistent with public opinion polling showing that organized labor is one of the few institutions that has maintained confidence among members of the public in recent years (Gallup, 2025). Therefore, teacher resistance to shifting school board elections on cycle does not appear to be a key barrier to change in places where off-cycle elections persist, at least in the absence of major union campaigning and mobilization.

Regardless of the limitations of this study, our results suggest that the traditionally theorized obstacles to electoral policy change—that those who stand to lose under alternative arrangements will defend the status quo when more fully informed about the disadvantages to their in-group—are modest or non-existent in the case of school board election timing. This is perhaps due to the low awareness, low salience, and/or low perceived importance of this issue. These findings could also help explain why the past two decades have seen more change when it comes to school board election timing than other electoral policies in the U.S. and perhaps portend the possibility of more change to come.

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Table 1. Describing the Sample

	Our Sample (n=8,625)		Nation
	Unweighted	Weighted	
Female	52	53	51
Black	10	12	15
Hispanic	8	17	19
White	77	67	76
Other	2	3	15
K-12 Parent	28	25	22
K-12 Teacher	17	3	2
BA Degree	64	40	38
Unemployed	7	10	4
Democrat	63	44	46
Teacher Salary Guess	\$46,971	\$45,857	\$42,122
Local Schools Grade			
A	9	8	13
B	42	39	39
C	33	35	33
D	11	12	9
F	5	6	7
National Schools Grade			
A	1	1	2
B	16	18	20
C	53	49	51
D	23	24	18
F	7	8	9

Note: National demographic information is drawn from the 2020 Census or 2024 Pew Survey. National survey data is drawn from the Education Next 2022 nationally representative poll.

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Table 2. Experimental Conditions

Group	Message
Control	[No message]
Turnout – General	Some people argue that holding school board elections on the same day as national elections increases the number of people who turn out to vote for the school board.
Turnout – Info	In the average school board election, roughly 12% of registered voters turn out to vote for the school board (compared to 62% in the average presidential election). Some people argue that holding school board elections on the same day as national elections increases the number of people who turn out to vote for the school board.
Representative	Some people argue that holding school board elections on the same day as national elections makes it more likely that the people who turn out to vote for the school board are representative of the whole community.
Harder for Unions	Some people argue that holding school board elections on the same day as national elections makes it harder for organized interest groups—such as teachers' unions—to influence the outcome of school board elections.

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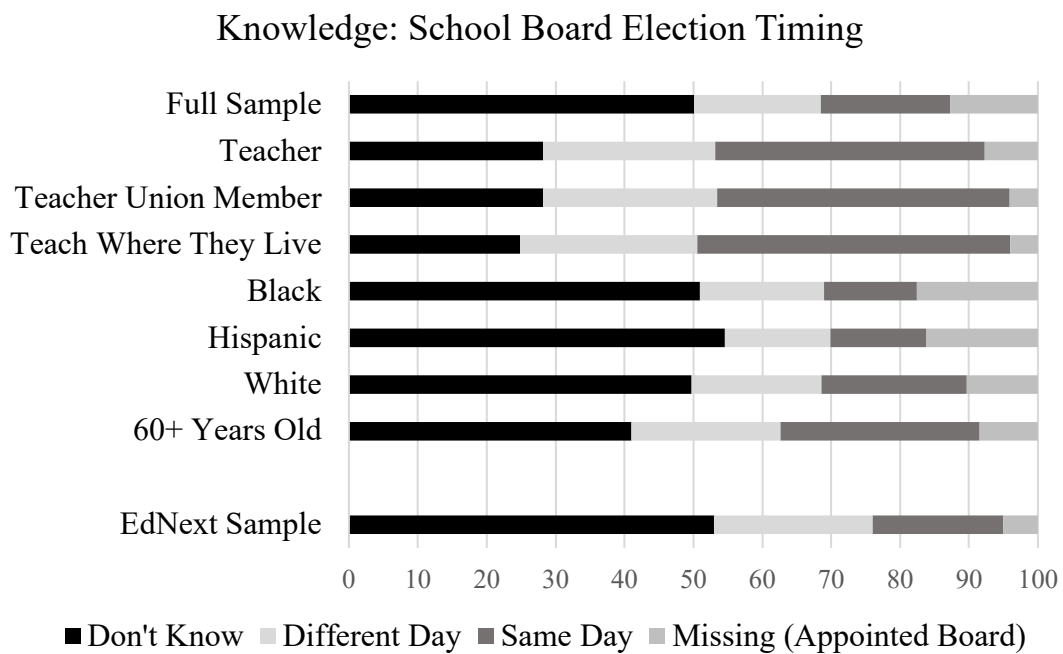
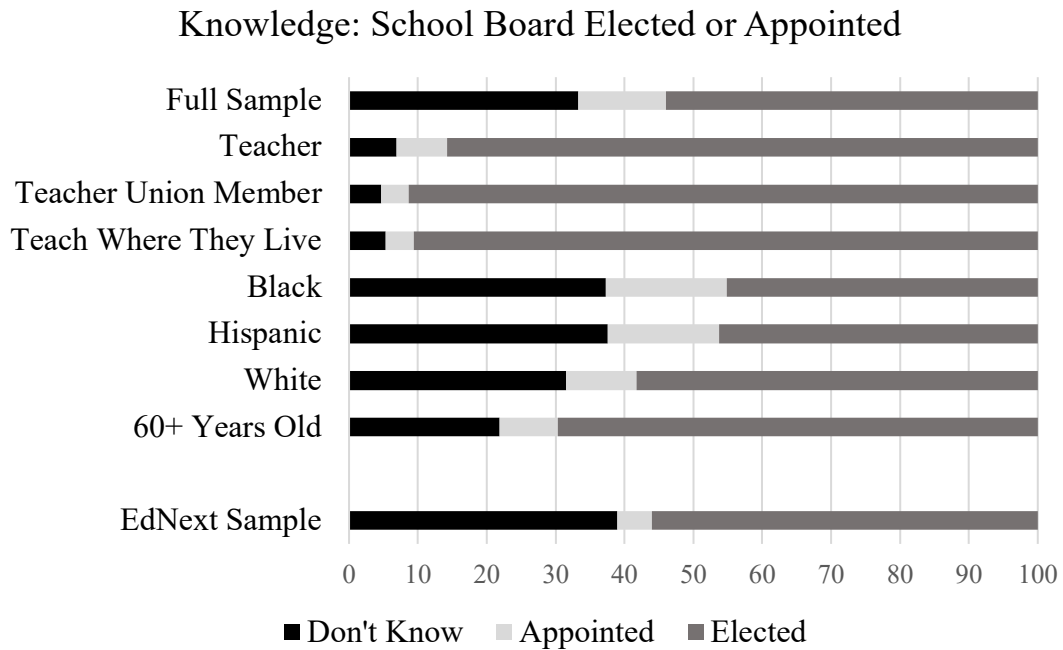


Figure 1. Public Knowledge of the School Board Selection Process, Overall and for Subgroups

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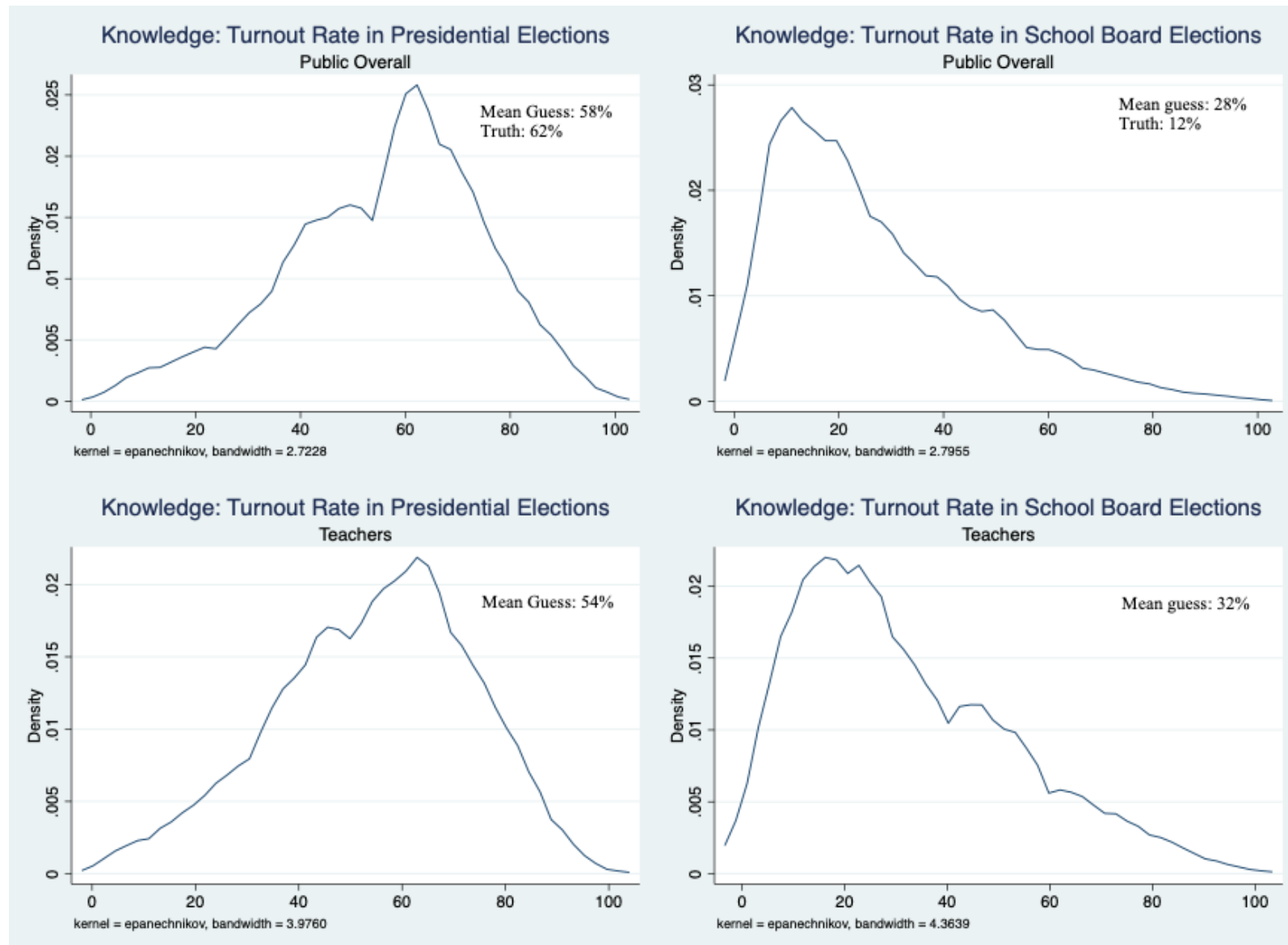


Figure 2. Public Knowledge of Turnout Rates in Presidential and School Board Elections, Overall and for Teachers

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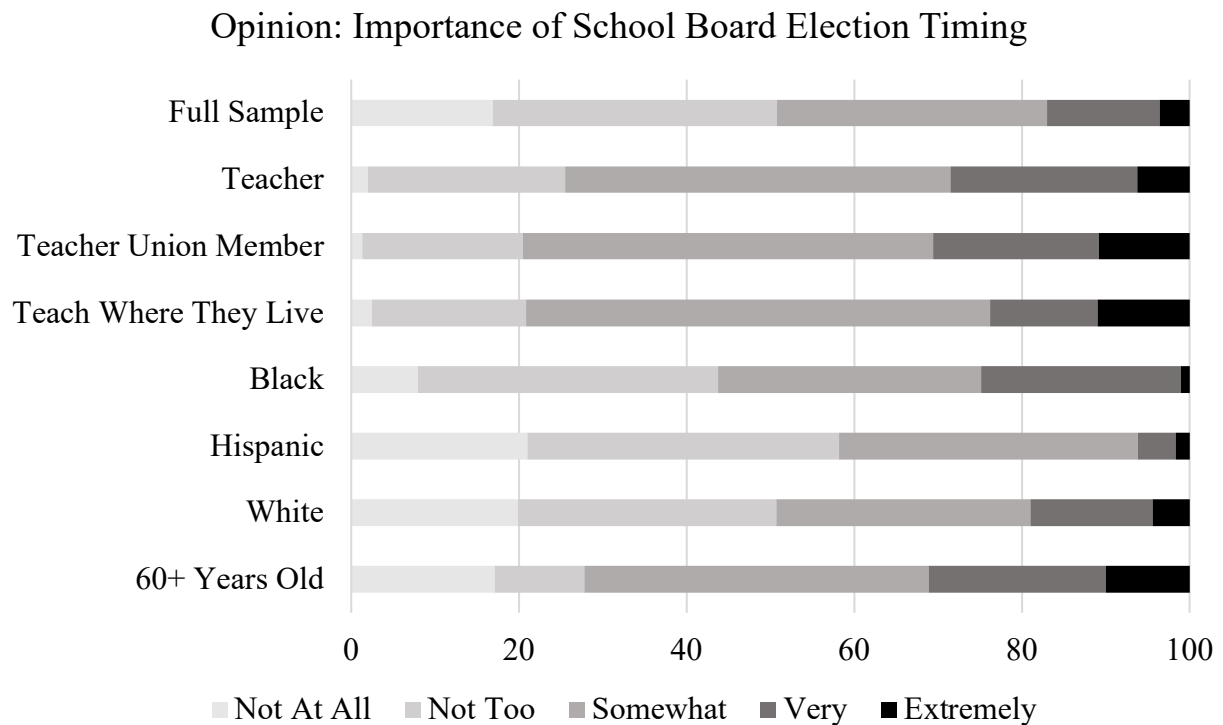
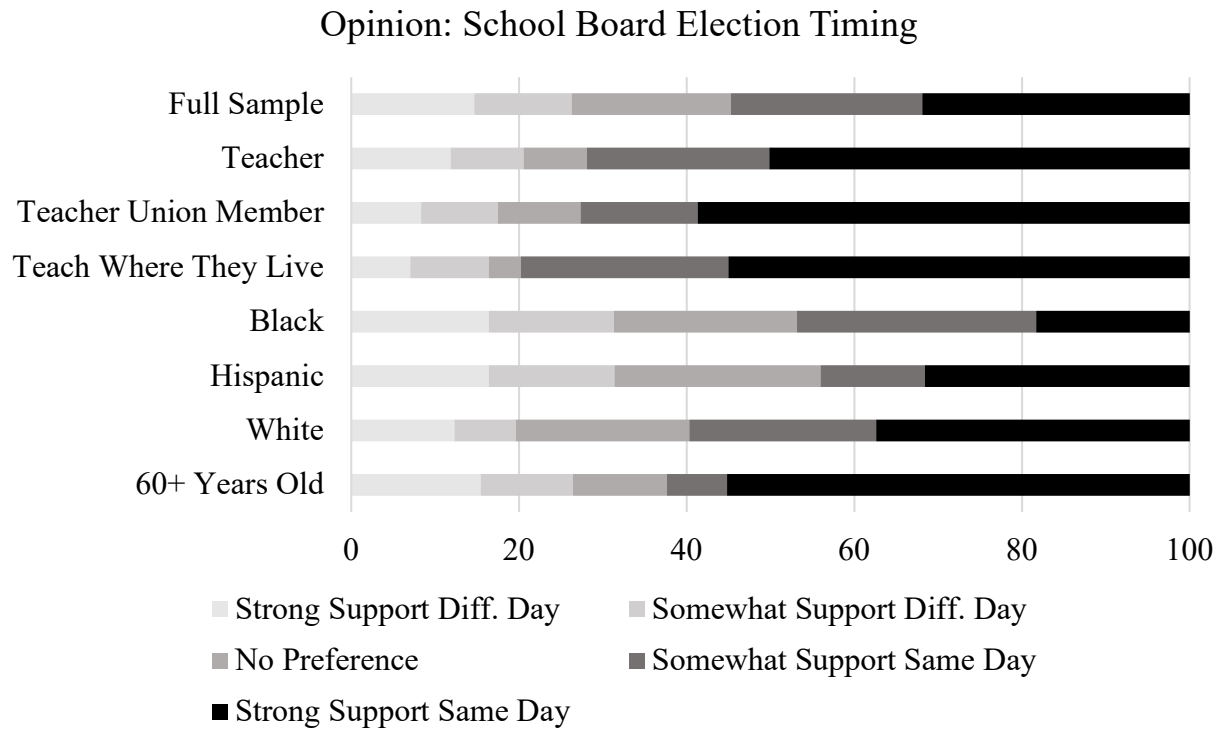


Figure 3. Public Opinion and Perceived Importance of School Board Election Timing

PUBLIC OPINION ON SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

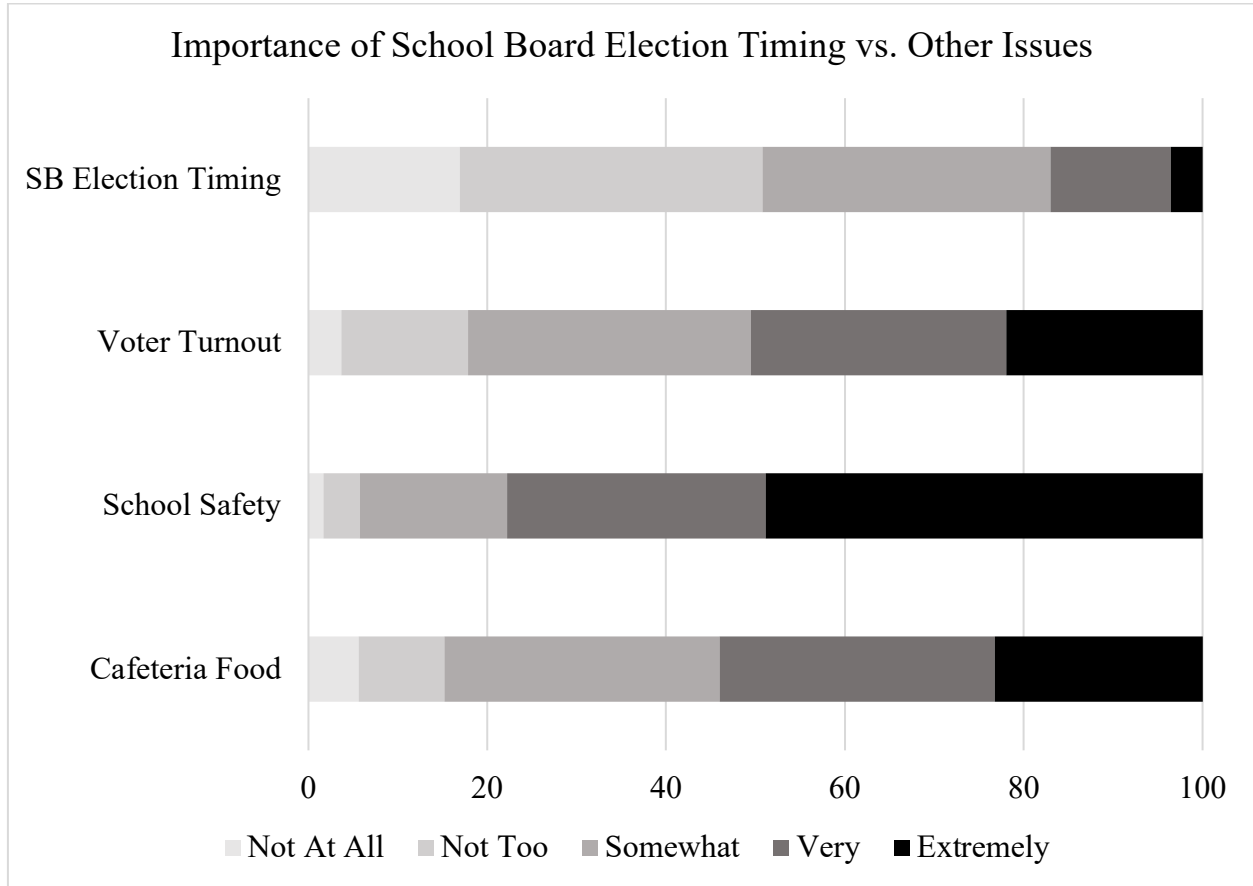


Figure 4. Public Perceived Importance of School Board Election Timing Versus Other Issues

PUBLIC OPINION ON SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

Table 3. Examining Higher Levels of Teacher Support for On-Cycle School Board Elections

	Teacher	Knowledge	Participation	Importance	School Board Election Importance	Demo-graphics	Education	SB Election Importance & Education
Teacher	0.11*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Don't Know SB Elected		-0.14*** (0.01)						
Don't Know SB Timing		-0.02 (0.01)						
Underest. Pres. Turnout		-0.00*** (0.00)						
Overest. SB Turnout		-0.00*** (0.00)						
Voted in Last SB Race			0.21*** (0.01)					
Voter Turnout Important				0.08*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)			
Cafeteria Food Important				-0.02*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)			
SB Election Important					0.11*** (0.01)			0.11*** (0.01)
Bachelors Degree							0.15*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.01)
Demographic Covariates						X	X	
Observations	7,082	7,082	7,082	7,082	7,082	7,082	7,082	7,082

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Covariates: age, female, Black, Hispanic, White, parent, unemployed, Democrat.

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Table 4. Effects of Arguments on Support for On-Cycle Elections

	<u>Full Sample</u>	<u>Non- Teachers</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Union Members</u>	<u>Teach Where They Live</u>
Turnout	0.08*** (0.02) 2,157	0.08*** (0.02) 1,692	0.09** (0.04) 465	0.06 (0.06) 279	-0.01 (0.06) 240
Representative	0.09*** (0.02) 1,500	0.08*** (0.03) 1,184	0.11** (0.05) 316	0.07 (0.06) 211	0.00 (0.07) 163
Harder for Unions	-0.11*** (0.03) 1,487	-0.12*** (0.03) 1,188	-0.08 (0.06) 298	-0.07 (0.07) 198	-0.18** (0.08) 153

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

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Table 5. Effects of Arguments on Perceptions that Election Timing is Important

	Full Sample	Non- Teachers	Teachers	Union Members	Teach Where They Live
Turnout	0.05** (0.02) 2,007	0.06** (0.03) 1,548	0.02 (0.05) 459	-0.02 (0.06) 275	-0.01 (0.06) 238
Representative	0.02 (0.03) 1,350	0.01 (0.03) 1,040	0.03 (0.05) 310	0.01 (0.07) 207	0.08 (0.07) 161
Harder for Unions	-0.04 (0.03) 1,337	-0.05 (0.03) 1,044	-0.03 (0.05) 292	-0.02 (0.07) 194	0.03 (0.07) 151

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

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Appendix

Table A1. Balance Between Treatment Arm Groups, Unweighted

	Control Group	Turnout General	Turnout Info	Represent- ative	Harder for Unions
Age	40.19	39.12	39.15	40.63	38.66
Female	45.28	49.29	49.57	48.94	47.95
Asian	8.46	7.22	9.09	9.17	8.20
Black	9.87	10.48	9.52	8.32	10.47
Hispanic	8.60	8.22	7.53	7.05	7.92
White	77.01	78.47	76.42	80.11	76.38
Other	1.97	2.55	1.70	2.26	1.70
Parent	24.82	26.77	24.86	22.57	25.32
Teacher	6.91	8.36	6.96	6.77	5.80
Bachelors	57.69	60.76	60.09	60.93	56.29
Income	74383	75779	75071	75264	73497
Unemployed	7.62	6.37	6.82	6.77	7.92
Democrat	61.35	63.31	68.75**	67.98**	64.07
N	709	706	704	709	707

Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; Asterisks indicate differences between the treatment arm and the control group.

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Table A2. Variation in Treatment Effects on Support for On-Cycle School Board Elections by Teacher Status

	Turnout	Representative	Harder for Unions
TreatmentXTeacher	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)
Treatment	0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)
Observations	2,157	1,500	1,487
TreatmentXUnion Member	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)
Treatment	0.08*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)
Observations	2,157	1,500	1,487
TreatmentXTeach Where They Live	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)
Treatment	0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.03)	-0.10*** (0.03)
Observations	2,157	1,500	1,487

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models include covariates.

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Table A3. Variation in Treatment Effects on Perceived Importance of Election Timing by Teacher Status

	Turnout	Representative	Harder for Unions
TreatmentXTeacher	-0.04 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.07)
Treatment	0.06** (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Observations	2,007	1,350	1,337
TreatmentXUnion Member	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.07)	0.03 (0.08)
Treatment	0.06** (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Observations	2,007	1,350	1,337
TreatmentXTeach Where They Live	-0.04 (0.07)	0.07 (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)
Treatment	0.06** (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.05* (0.03)
Observations	2,007	1,350	1,337

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models include covariates.