

All Politics Is Organizational

An Analysis of Candidate Recruitment and Political Influence in Pennsylvania School Board Elections

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This article seeks to enhance the limited research dedicated to local school board elections by investigating whether Pennsylvania school board members are recruited candidates or are self-starters. The article also investigates which kinds of organizations are the most active sources of candidate recruitment and engagement in Pennsylvania school board races and which organizations are the most and least influential in local school board politics. Using a unique dataset obtained through the statewide Pennsylvania School Board Survey and interviews with current state legislators who began their political careers as local school board members, this article finds that local political party organizations play a larger than expected role in influencing local school board elections and recruiting candidates. Board members themselves are also found to be highly engaged in political party activity within their communities before ever seeking office. Also explored are the implications of these findings for school board politics and the discipline's view of local party organizations.

The study of America's school boards, the citizens who serve on them, and the politics and policy they influence converge to make school board politics a dynamic center for the study of numerous interlocking components of research in the local government arena. These components include local governance and elections, education politics and policy making,

the power of personality, the impact of individual citizens on the democratic process, participation among interest groups and parties, and the pursuit of power. As an academic discipline, political science has a central role to play in explaining substantial questions about school board politics given that roughly 14,000 of these local governing bodies exist in the United States, with the clear majority of their membership being elected to serve. Additionally, as the home to 499 separately elected public school boards, Pennsylvania represents fertile ground in the effort to enhance the discipline's understanding of school board politics and those serving as school board members.

America's school boards are among the most underexamined of the country's political institutions. Likewise, individuals who govern the nation's public education system are largely unknown actors whose jobs require the dedication of significant amounts of time to positions that are unpaid and in many respects, somewhat unappreciated by those they serve. Because they seek positions that exist on a small scale, individuals dedicating time and resources to running for these offices and then governing the school districts must stand before the citizens in their neighborhoods and towns, directly asking for their votes. Candidates for public school board seats in states like Pennsylvania run in "off-year" elections. This presents a unique challenge for these candidates given that "off-year" election turnout tends to be considerably lower than election years featuring prominent races for positions such as president, governor, or for other federal and state offices.

According to Berkman and Plutzer (2005) and Hess and Meeks (2010), over nine out of 10 of America's public school board members are elected to office in local or county elections, with the remainder appointed to their positions. Board members are charged with performing a multitude of administrative and policy-oriented tasks, including "set district policy, approve the budget, and hire and evaluate the superintendent" (Duke 2010, 61). Despite the expectations and job requirements, board members tend to be "amateurs when it comes to the professional practice of education" (Duke 2010, 60). School boards throughout the nation, which are dispersed across just under 14,000 school districts (Berkman and Plutzer 2005, 1), are charged with developing educational policy, studying and implementing curriculum, negotiating labor contracts, hiring and firing administrators, overseeing immense numbers of educators (although day-to-day management tends to be done by principals), overseeing the instruction of the country's public school children, and meeting annual budgeting requirements to manage the district's finances.

Although scholarship in the area of public school board research in general is quite broad, this particular study examines several specific questions that have not been thoroughly addressed in the existing literature on school

board elections. First, I investigate the question of who serves on Pennsylvania school boards and how the composition of boards within the Keystone State compares to the demographic composition of the Commonwealth itself and public school boards nationally. Second, upon establishing who serves on Pennsylvania's school boards it is important to determine whether these individuals were recruited to seek office or if they are self-starters. Simultaneously, this study investigates which political and nonpolitical organizations within Pennsylvania communities are the most and least likely to be engaged in recruiting candidates for school board seats. The article also considers which groups exert the greatest influence over school board elections in the districts. Last, the article examines the question of whether Pennsylvania school board members are politically engaged citizens *prior* to seeking a position on the board and what this means for school district politics and governance.

The Role of America's Public School Boards

America's school boards play a considerable role in running the country's public education system while also managing a considerable amount of public money. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as of the 2013–2014 fiscal year, school boards in the United States were responsible for overseeing more than \$625 billion in public funds (NCES 2016c) with about \$280 billion of those dollars being raised locally by taxpayers within the school districts. They're also charged with managing the schooling of over 55 million enrolled students as of 2015 (NCES 2016a) and handling the hiring and firing of over 3.1 million teachers as of 2014 (NCES 2016b).

It is essential to draw attention to this \$625 billion expenditure figure due to its sheer size and because this helps demonstrate the magnitude of the financial responsibilities placed on the shoulders of America's public school boards. As a means of comparison, the National Priorities Project reports that about \$599 billion in federal money was appropriated to the United States Military in Fiscal Year 2015. Additionally, the same organization reported that the cost of all American military operations in Afghanistan between September 2001 and December 2016 is just north of \$756 billion. In other words, America's public school board members—the clear majority of whom are elected within their communities—are collectively responsible for raising, spending, and managing a significant sum of taxpayer-generated dollars, making them a body of government officials worthy of detailed examination.

In most states—including Pennsylvania—school board members have a hand in determining whether local school tax rates in the districts they serve will increase or decrease. They often have the power to establish a school

district's spending priorities, making critical choices about whether the new high school football stadium or neighborhood elementary school will be built, deciding how to fund academic and athletic programs and projects, and determining how to award building contracts. These individuals can affect the content of what America's children learn in the classroom through decisions regarding curriculum choices, textbook selection, and the acquisition of instructional materials available to teachers and students.

A closer look at the public education finance data indicates that Pennsylvania is among the states most reliant upon locally-generated tax dollars. Table 1 shows that as of Fiscal Year 2014, Pennsylvania collects a considerably lower share of its elementary and secondary education dollars from state coffers and a larger than average share from local taxpayers than school districts nationally. Additionally, data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2016) show that only Connecticut, Nebraska, and New Hampshire had a *higher* local share than Pennsylvania in FY 2014. Meanwhile, only Illinois, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and South Dakota collected a *smaller* share of their elementary and secondary education funds from state sources.

Bogui (2008) finds that state and local governmental bodies can either be classified as being fiscally dependent or fiscally independent entities (28). Fiscally independent bodies such as local school boards have the legal authority to create their own budgets and thus raise revenue, while fiscally dependent boards must rely upon other governmental agencies or bodies to provide revenue. The North Carolina School Boards Association (NCSBA) found that among all "local boards of education nationwide, over 90% are fiscally independent. This is because school boards in most states are considered independent units of government" (n.d., n.p.). Pennsylvania's elected school boards fall into this category and have the power to levy local property taxes, although these locally raised dollars are their main, but not their only, source of revenue.

The local property tax is the most commonly accepted source of school district revenue among Pennsylvania school districts. As noted in Table 1,

Entity	Federal	State	Local
Pennsylvania	6.6%	37.2%	56.3%
United States	8.6%	46.7%	44.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data—2014, available at <https://www.census.gov/govs/school/>, accessed March 13, 2017.

over 56% of Pennsylvania's elementary and secondary education dollars are locally raised. McNulty found that for school districts in the Keystone State, "property taxes accounted for 85.5% of local school district tax revenues. However, there is wide disparity in dependence on property taxes among the different districts across Pennsylvania" (McNulty 2014, 1). McNulty indicates that 10% of the remaining local dollars constitute local earned income taxes, 1.5% come from local business taxes, and 2.4% come from other local revenue streams (2014, 2). The presence of these local income and business taxes varies greatly from district to district.

In Pennsylvania there have been several notable efforts to diminish what is perceived by some to be an over-reliance on property taxes for financing the local share of public education funding. One of these efforts—The Taxpayer Relief Act of 2006—provided local property tax relief through state-collected gaming revenue while attempting to limit the ability of local school boards to raise taxes "unless the school district either obtains approval from the voters to increase taxes above the index or applies and qualifies for one of the limited and specific referendum exceptions provided in the law" (PSBA 2014, n.p.). The Harrisburg *Patriot-News* concluded that as of 2011, the effort had "been a failure" (Malawskey 2011, n.p.) as "school districts had asked the state 1,345 times to raise property taxes without seeking the approval of voters. They have been approved the vast majority of the time. Those exceptions range from a few thousand to millions of dollars" (Malawskey 2011, n.p.). Later that year the legislature attempted to correct this by reducing the number of reasons local districts could seek exceptions.

According to McNulty, "Act 25 of 2011 limited the exceptions to two relating to paying off indebtedness, one relating to special education costs and one to address the situation when the school's required share of retirement payments to the Pennsylvania Public School Employees' Retirement System (PSERS) increases more than the index" (2014, 6). Despite attempts to limit the exceptions available to school districts, a Pennsylvania School Boards Association analysis found that in "2013–14, there were 171 school districts that sought and were granted approval for referendum exceptions; of that, there were 93 districts that used the [PSERS] exception. For 2014–2015, there were 164 districts that sought and were granted approval for referendum exceptions" (Pennsylvania School Boards Association 2014, n.p.). Despite most all of these exemption requests being made for purposes related to pensions and special education, the example shows that school boards in Pennsylvania continue to retain the capability of raising local taxes and that they are still "on the hook" for a disproportionate share—over 56% as of FY 2014—of financing public education in Pennsylvania.

A related question is whether state and federal mandates have worked to diminish the ability of school boards to truly act as autonomous governing entities. Stover (2011, 2) wrote that “the gradual whittling away of board authority through endless state and federal mandates and regulations” is a serious threat to the ability of school boards to maintain local control of public education through the policy-making process. Prior to the 2015–2016 legislative session, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association released a special report on school district mandates (2014) to help signal the organization’s interest in seeking mandate reform from Harrisburg. The report indicated that although local school districts must address certain federal mandates, the bulk of the mandates placed on districts come from the state government. A comprehensive laundry list of state mandates covering policy areas such as taxation, construction, planning, reporting, operations, transportation, testing, personnel, and several other categories totaled roughly 140 state-specific mandates imposed on local districts in Pennsylvania. Specifically, the PSBA report found that perhaps the two most serious concerns for local school boards in Pennsylvania have become paying for increasing retirement contributions and mandated payments to charter schools, which combine to account for “Almost 14 cents of every dollar spent by school districts in 2014–2015” (Pennsylvania School Boards Association 2014, 9). Although there is clearly a concern among school boards regarding the erosion of their power due to state and federal mandates, local school boards have retained their power over local finances as nearly 45% of public education funds are raised locally in the United States (and over 50% in Pennsylvania). School districts have also retained control over the power to hire and fire educators and administrators while making decisions regarding curriculum and district requirements over time.

The existing academic literature pertaining to America’s school boards can be divided into three general categories: school board elections and politics, administration and management of school districts, and mechanisms for reforming education through school board leadership. Studies on the politics of school board campaigns (Deckman 2004; Hess and Leal 2005; Moe 2005; Meier and Juenke 2005; Hess 2008) address the types of issues that commonly arise in campaigns for public school board seats in the United States, interest group participation, and the intersection of complex policy issues that board members (and candidates) must address. A second category explains the administrative and organizational nature of education leadership, including school boards (Callahan 1962; Tucker and Ziegler 1978; Hussey 2003; Epstein 2004; Eadie 2005; Reimer 2008; Mayer 2011). This literature is largely explanatory in nature and describes the role of school board members as they relate to school governance. The overarching theme of this literature focuses on

effective leadership and managerial techniques for board members, superintendents, and other administrators.

A third general category of school board-themed literature examines mechanisms for reforming the way school leadership structures are designed and explains ways school board members and school leadership can improve the education system (Peterson 1985; Blackwell 2006; Reimer 2008; Kowalski 2008; Duke 2010; Maeroff 2010; Mayer 2011). Several additional pieces of research conducted by McCarty and Ramsey (1971) and Iannaccone and Cistone (1974) bridge research pertaining to education politics with school organization and management. I explain below why and how the themes addressed in this research do not fit neatly within any of these categories and are largely unexamined within the existing body of academic literature pertaining to public school boards.

School Board Candidate Recruitment and Major Local Stakeholders

One of the most important objectives of this study is to analyze candidate emergence and recruitment among those serving on public school boards in Pennsylvania. As such, Table 2 contains nearly 30 opportunities and motives that may be taken into consideration by a citizen who decides to run for a seat on a public school board or by a recruitment agent, such as a political party, labor union, religious organization, business organization, nonpolitical community organization, parent organization, or an individual elected official who engages in the practice of candidate recruitment.

As indicated in Table 2, these motivations can be distilled into six larger categories: finance and budget, education and curriculum, politics, civic duty, associational interests, and general district management. A variety of these motives are rooted in policy preferences, such as in the financial/budgetary and education/curriculum categories, while others, such as those ascribed to the personnel, general management, associational, and politics categories, may or may not include a motivation that is driven by a desire to see a specific policy implemented or rejected. For example, the motives and opportunities contained within the civic duty category tend to represent a personal outlook embodied through the notion of civic engagement and public responsibility rather than a political or policy-driven purpose behind candidacy for the public school board. Consequently, although some individuals who seek public school board seats may be motivated by policy concerns, such as what is being taught in the science curriculum or whether tax dollars should be appropriated for constructing a new elementary school, it should come as no surprise

Table 2. Opportunities and Motives for Seeking School Board Positions or Recruiting Candidates to Seek School Board Positions

1. Financial/budgetary	Increase/reduce/maintain property tax levels
	Increase/reduce/maintain spending and borrowing
	Increase/reduce/maintain expenditures on certain budget items
	Address unfunded mandates
2. Education/curriculum	Enhance/change/maintain quality of educational programs
	Support/oppose components of district curriculum
	Favor/oppose adoption of textbooks
3. Politics	Support/oppose various ideological agendas
	Hold seat for my party/block opposing party from holding seat
	Opportunity to lobby legislators for support of district needs
	Gain experience to use seat as springboard to higher office
4. Civic duty	Opportunity to give back to community
	Frustrated with lack of interest in schools within community
	In need of something to do
	Own kids had positive/negative experience in district and wanted to maintain/change things on the basis of their experiences
5. Associational interests	Recruited to run by organization that I support
	Recruited to run by individual leader that I support
	Support/oppose agenda of incumbent(s) that I agree/disagree with
6. District management	Approve/disapprove of changes to physical plant
	Play role in awarding building contracts
	Improve communication with constituents or taxpayers
	Oversee athletic programs
	Govern student-based organizations in district
	Approve/disapprove of professional conference/student trip attendance
	Interested in overseeing district while own children are enrolled
	Manage/hire/fire superintendent and leadership team
	Play role in negotiating labor contracts with district staff
	Influence general personnel or hiring decisions

Sources: This menu of motives and opportunities was developed on the basis of the the school board literature discussed in the text, the author's own experiences interacting with local school board members and candidates, conversations with the leaders of education-focused organizations (such as the Education Policy and Leadership Center and Pennsylvania State Education Association), and discussions with several state legislators interviewed for this project who once served as members of their school boards.

that some may be driven by purposes related to oversight, district management concerns, self-interest, or civic duty.

Having addressed a wide range of motivating factors that could lead citizens to either become “self-starters” and run for their local school board independently or be recruited by an organization or political actor within the community, it is important to discuss the chief stakeholders in school district politics, attempting to discern why and how they may be motivated to participate in the process of convincing like-minded individuals to run for school board seats. These stakeholder groups who likely have political motivations can be broken down into four general categories, as per the literature: teachers and teacher unions, church-related organizations, parent organizations, and political party organizations.

Of America’s teachers, 79% are unionized, while 64% are covered by collective bargaining agreements (Moe 2011, 155). Although these numbers may sound quite large, Bureau of Labor Statistics data released in 2015 found a sharp decline in unionized public school teachers in recent years, with just 2.5 million of the nation’s 5.2 million teachers represented by a labor union (Toppo and Overberg 2015) today.

Moe suggests that school boards are at a disadvantage—at least in the public’s eye—when dealing with teachers because teachers are known and respected within communities. This maximizes the bargaining leverage held by teachers and their labor unions in contract negotiations, enhancing their influence within school district politics. According to Moe’s perspective, the number of teachers represented by unions and their ability to bargain collectively has led to a critical view of the imprint unions have made on education reform efforts. Alleging that unions have insisted on “bigger budgets, higher salaries, job protections, and other union-favored objectives” (2011, 10), Moe contends that the unions have presented a roadblock to certain reforms and made the cost of funding public education untenable in many districts. Moe argues that teachers unions and those who belong to them have a powerful advantage within school districts given “that their members are teachers, and Americans like teachers. They admire them, they trust them, they often interact with them personally, and they see them as caring about children and quality education” (Moe 2011, 22).

As stakeholders, teachers and teacher unions play a critical role in the politics of local elections and can influence elections for public school board seats through campaign donations, grassroots mobilization, candidate recruitment efforts, and collective action to support or oppose certain candidates or slates of candidates for school board positions. Moe’s study of California school board races found that teacher “unions are typically the most powerful

participants in school board elections” (2006, 13), are equally powerful across districts of all sizes, and have generally been successful in helping elect pro-union school board members who are viewed by the teachers as being helpful and powerful allies during times of contract negotiations. As per Moe’s findings, teachers unions have a great incentive to engage in recruiting candidates to run for school board seats because the unions have a vested interest in how the outcome of those elections relate to their ability to gain favorable concessions during bargaining sessions.

Similar to labor unions, church-related organizations have numerous incentives to engage in candidate recruitment at the school district level. Deckman (2004) posits that religious or church organizations affiliated with the Christian faith have a long history of recruiting local candidates for school board seats due to concerns regarding the teaching of evolution, the presence of sex education curriculum, support for local control of education as opposed to intrusion by the federal government, advocating for what they believe to be “traditional” Christian values, and issues related to textbook selection. Anecdotal evidence that I have gathered from personal conversations with school board members, union officials, and conservative activists regarding school board elections also indicates that church-affiliated or religious groups occasionally become intertwined with other political organizations, such as anti-tax organizations, which may combine their resources to recruit candidates and promote slates of multiple candidates conducive to advancing the agendas of both types of organizations.

Additionally, education-oriented organizations, such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs), Good Schools Pennsylvania, Parents United for Public Education, and Students First, are all active in various parts of the state. Groups such as these are involved in grassroots organizing on behalf of various education-related issues, are active in the day-to-day affairs of the school districts, and are led by individuals who have a strong commitment to working on education policies and management. Moe argues parent groups “tend to be wholly unorganized outside (perhaps) the PTA—which is a parent-teacher organization, not simply a parent organization, and almost always an ally of the unions” (2006, 11). There could be some blending between the types of individuals involved in these groups. Another example is the group Students First, which comprises education advocates and businesspeople seeking to expand school choice in the Commonwealth. Although parents of school-age children are ostensibly behind the organization’s grassroots operation, several well-endowed business leaders are the chief financiers of the group’s efforts.

Parents involved with the PTA or PTO groups may be driven to recruit candidates or become active in school board elections if they sense that a

situation or problem unfolding within one of the schools or across the entire district is not being adequately handled by the district's professional administrators or the school board. It is also probable that these recruits are parents with school-age children and sense that their membership on the school board will allow them to help manage the district while their kids are in attendance. This fits with the assessment of Rosenstone and Hansen, who argued that when it comes to parents and their interaction with the schools, "specific concerns are quite narrow, focusing on the educational needs of their own children" (1993, 103) rather than the district as a whole.

Local political party organizations likely have considerably less to gain when it comes to candidate recruitment and activity in local school board seats. Likewise, these organizations are generally viewed as waning due to the increasing centralization of power within the two major parties at the national level, which ostensibly weakens the power of the party organizations at the local level. As such, Hershey describes local party organizations as structures that correspond "to the levels of government at which voters elect officeholders. This structure is often pictured as a pyramid base in the grassroots and stretching up to the statewide organization" (Hershey 2009, 49). She describes the structure in the following manner: "In a typical state, the smallest voting district of the state—the precinct, ward, or township—will have its own party organization composed of men and women elected to the party's local committee (called committeemen and committeewomen). Then come a series of party committees at the city, county, and sometimes even the state legislative, judicial, and congressional districts" (p. 49). The party organizations whose jurisdiction would overlap with local school boards are most likely to be the party organizations found at the local level and organized by ward and precinct.

Local or county party committees are the official organizations that work on behalf of the Democratic and Republican parties within those municipalities or counties on projects such as voter registration, voter contact, canvassing, phone banking, placing campaign signs, taking candidates around their precincts, and meeting voters outside the entries to the precinct polling places during primary and general elections. They are the party's front line in any electoral battle. According to Hershey, many party committee positions at the local level, which are volunteer-driven, are vacant (2009, 50) and reeling from the gradual realignment over time that has led to stronger national party organizations at the expense of the local entities (2009, 78). Considering this, I expect to find that organizations like church or religious groups, unions, or parent organizations are more likely to be engaged in the practice of recruiting school board candidates than local political parties.

Despite the variety of ways the academic literature treats public school boards, there is a general absence of discussion about who sits on America's

school boards, their political orientation, and the intersection of electoral politics, candidate recruitment, and the work of political parties at the school board level. This study should be able to help begin the process of filling that void, at least as it pertains to Pennsylvania school districts.

Pennsylvania as a Case Study

Pennsylvania's cultural, political, and economic diversity as detailed by Cooke (1960), Beers (1980), Madonna and Bresler (1997), Flint (2001), Treadway (2005), Kennedy (2006), Lamis (2008), and Shrader (2011) makes the state a meaningful case for the purpose of exploring research questions related to the public school boards and those serving on them. The state is also a political swing state featuring voters who are known for ticket splitting in statewide and down-ballot races. This adds to the intrigue of examining the offices that often appear at the very end of the ballot and are selected using partially partisan elections in which candidates can opt to file to run in both party primary elections. In short, Pennsylvania's 499 individual school districts, each with its own elected board of nine members represent a subset of 499 unique cases within a single state study. It must also be noted that although the Commonwealth actually has 500 school districts, the Philadelphia School District—which happens to be the state's largest—has an appointed School Reform Commission (SRC) rather than an elected board. Established in 2001, the SRC consists of three gubernatorial appointees and two mayoral appointees. None of the representatives who serve on the SRC are chosen by the voters and were therefore not included in the universe of survey participants.¹

Aside from Philadelphia, voters in the remaining 499 individual districts elect nine individuals as school directors (or board members) to serve for four-year terms. Board members can be elected in one of four methods, with the majority running at-large within their districts. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association reported in January 2016 that 63% of districts elect board members at-large, 28% use a three-region (or electoral districts within the school district) system, 6% use a nine-region system, and 3% of districts have an at-large/region hybrid scheme for electing board members (2). According to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, the only legal requirements for school board service include Pennsylvania citizenship, being at least 18 years of age, one year of residence in the district, and "good moral character" (n.d., n.p.). The school board members elected to lead these districts are charged with handling a myriad of governmental functions at the local level. Data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2016) show that public school board members were responsible for over \$15.8 billion in locally raised tax dollars as of the 2014–2015 fiscal year. According to the nonpartisan,

Harrisburg-based Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC), the responsibilities of public school boards in Pennsylvania are distributed across five categories. These categories include

1. *Planning* through the creation of strategic plans, setting educational goals and priorities, budgeting, and professional development
2. *Policy making* through board operations and establishing expected outcomes
3. *Monitoring* by evaluating the performance of the district superintendent, regular assessment of student performance, and by overseeing the district's finances
4. *Communicating* procedures, expectations, and policies to staff, parents, students, and the general public through regular reports and public meetings
5. *Advocating* for the children who attend the schools by serving as lobbyists or liaisons to policymakers at all levels. (2004, 13–14)

Meanwhile, the specific powers of Pennsylvania's elected public school boards are enumerated in Article V of the Pennsylvania School Code. The extensive list of responsibilities indicated in Table 3 is adapted from the list of powers and duties outlined by the EPLC (2014, 13–14) and helps to demonstrate the array of powers and duties granted to Pennsylvania school boards and school board members. In summary, the individuals serving on public school boards are important to understand, observe, and analyze due to the significance

Table 3. Powers and Duties of Pennsylvania School Board Members via Pennsylvania School Code

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt an annual budget • Adopt policies to govern student organizations • Adopt policies to manage the district • Adopt textbooks • Adopt the curriculum • Appoint and dismiss professional staff • Appoint and dismiss the superintendent • Authorize staff participation in professional conferences • Authorize student field trips • Borrow money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine depositories for school funds • Determine salaries of all personnel • Determine the location of school buildings • Determine the school calendar • Enter into contracts • Establish schools and programs • Levy and collect taxes • Operate school cafeterias • Organize school safety patrols • Purchase and sell land
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Source: Education Policy and Leadership Center, "Strengthening the Work of School Boards in Pennsylvania," 2004, pp. 13–14, available at <http://www.eplc.org/K12GovernanceReport.pdf>, accessed September 3, 2013.

of the responsibilities they bear according to Article V of the Pennsylvania School Code. Likewise, their actions can affect a multitude of stakeholders in each school district, such as students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers.

Research Agenda

The Pennsylvania School Board Study was originally crafted as a comprehensive effort to contribute to our understanding of the demographic and political profile of those serving on Pennsylvania school boards, their political and ideological philosophies, the levels of civic and political engagement among these public servants, the reasons why these individuals sought local school board seats, and the relationship between the board members and their district superintendents. This article assesses the question of who serves on school boards in Pennsylvania, as well as several important, yet largely unaddressed, questions pertaining to the role of political and nonpolitical organizations in local Pennsylvania school board politics. The following questions are addressed:

1. Who serves on Pennsylvania school boards and how does their composition compare to that of public school boards nationally and the demographics of the state?
2. Are Pennsylvania's elected public school board members self-starters or are they recruited to run for office? Among those who are recruited, which organizations or entities are most responsible for enlisting and organizing school board candidates?
3. Are the citizens elected to serve on Pennsylvania's public school boards engaged in the political process before running for office? If so, what does this mean for the practice of politics within school districts?

On the basis of the research cited earlier, I expect to find that organizations such as labor unions, church-related groups, and nonpartisan education organizations such as Parent-Teacher Associations and other school-oriented groups are most likely responsible for recruiting local school board candidates and exerting influence over the local political process at the school district level. I also expect to find that local political party organizations are somewhat active in these areas, but not to the same extent as labor, religious, and school or education-oriented organizations. Due to the lack of available demographic information on who serves on Pennsylvania's public school boards, I do not have a very clear expectation on the likely outcome of the first question,

although I would not be astonished to find that the profile of Pennsylvania's school board members looks something like their counterparts in the national sample to which it is later compared.

Methodology

This study consisted of a statewide survey of sitting school board members in Pennsylvania and interviews with 5 of the 16 members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly (as of November 2013) who began their careers in public service as members of a local school board.² The Pennsylvania School Board Survey, which was funded by the Temple University Institute for Public Affairs, was administered to all 4,476 public school board members in the Commonwealth between November 2013 and March 2014. Previous research on public school boards led me to the conclusion that while some academics and professional organizations have gone to great lengths to explain what school boards do, how they are structured, and the kinds of policies they address, very little information exists to help inform us about the people serving on these boards and their political attitudes and experiences. Chiefly, the project sought to ask questions to help understand who these actors are, where they come from, why they are serving in these positions, and what are their political experiences and motivations. The survey mainly served to collect data describing demographics of those serving on Pennsylvania school boards, the political and policy interests of these elected officials, motivation for seeking these positions, sources of candidate recruitment, levels of political and community engagement among the members, individual political ambition, and the impact of recruitment and political ambition on governing.

The Pennsylvania School Board Survey was housed online at a site built exclusively for this project—www.PennsylvaniaSchoolBoardSurvey.com. An introductory letter containing relevant information about the project, a participant security code, and specific completion instructions were sent via the U.S. Postal Service to the school district office addresses of all board members, arriving in late November 2013. A follow-up email was sent two months later to a subset of 1,000 members with publicly available email addresses with another email being sent to 412 (of 499) school superintendents, school board secretaries, or administrative assistants who work for school district superintendents for the purpose of encouraging the school board members in their districts to participate. Last, in early February 2014, a reminder postcard with security code information and completion instructions was mailed to the original universe of 4,476 members as well as one final email reminder to the subset of 1,000 with available addresses.

The Pennsylvania School Board Survey received a total of 380 responses for an overall response rate of 9%. Unfortunately, since very few surveys of local school board members in either the nation or Pennsylvania have been published, there are limited opportunities to draw comparisons between the overall response rate for the Pennsylvania School Board Survey and similar survey-based studies. For example, the 2010 Hess and Meeks national school board study relied upon a stratified sample of school board members and superintendents nationally and received a response rate of 24%. A survey conducted by the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Appropriations Committee in 2013 is instructive about response rate expectations. The Senate Appropriations survey was distributed to 27,000 public school teachers, all building principals, all superintendents, all intermediate unit directors, and all elected school directors in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Respondents were asked in this survey “to assess our current system, evaluate recent reform efforts, and provide their own suggestions to improve public education programs in Pennsylvania” (Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Appropriations Committee 2013, 2). The Senate study received responses from 282 school board members for a 6.3% overall response rate.

On the basis of the regional distribution of responses to the Pennsylvania School Board Survey, it was determined that the sample tracked closely with the actual distribution of school board members within geographic regions of the Commonwealth. This determination was made by calculating the percentage of responses coming from board members within six regions (again, minus Philadelphia) and the number of school board seats available in each of the six regions. Since the survey was anonymous, respondents were not asked to include their names, the city or town in which they live, or the school district they represent. Instead, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question listing the name of the county in which their school district is located. Based upon the regional division of Pennsylvania counties used by Franklin & Marshall College’s Keystone Poll, each county was coded based upon the region. Table 4 demonstrates that the sample tracks closely with the geographic distribution of school board seats within the six regions. The data show that the percentage of respondents within the region fall within two to four percentage points of the number of seats, falling within this range in five of six regions covered by the study.

It is also necessary to note several specific limitations to this study, or perhaps any study that is based largely upon survey research. First, survey-based research allows for a methodical examination of trends and patterns within the responses and permits the researcher to ask questions of the universe of respondents that could not be investigated otherwise. However, as

Table 4. Pennsylvania School Board Survey: Responses by Region Compared to Number of School Board Seats per Region			
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count	Number of School Board Seats per Region
Allegheny	9.7%	35	7.3%
Northeast	11.9%	43	15.3%
Southeast	15.3%	55	11.4%
Northwest	10.8%	39	16.4%
Southwest	14.7%	53	15.9%
Central	37.5%	135	33.6%
Answered question		360	
Skipped question		20	
Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.			

political scientist Andrew Gelman explained in a *Washington Post* “Monkey Cage” installment, any survey or “poll is a snapshot” (2013), meaning that findings can and will change over time with shifting circumstances and even a changing universe of respondents. Despite this, the Pennsylvania School Board Survey appears to be the first of its kind conducted within the state for the purpose of probing for answers to questions pertaining to composition of Pennsylvania school boards, the political attributes and actions of their members, and the intersection of political and nonpolitical community organizations in local school board politics.

Second, although providing for an otherwise nonexistent means of systematically analyzing Pennsylvania school board members, the survey—especially in relation to the questions of candidate recruitment and engagement—includes only victorious candidates and not those who ran unsuccessfully for school board seats. Notwithstanding attempts to gain access to mailing lists or even candidate lists for all of Pennsylvania’s 499 school board seats in the most recent cycle, it was determined that these lists would either have to be obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests through each county or in some cases on a district-by-district basis. Although this would be a worthwhile project to pursue, it also appeared to be costly in terms of both time and monetary resources that could have hindered the ability to produce valid and timely research.

With regard to the distribution of survey responses, there appears to be a slightly weaker response rate among members serving districts in northwestern Pennsylvania than other districts in the state. The variation between the percentage of respondents representing districts within five of the six regions

represented here ranged within two to four percentage points of the distribution of school board seats within said regions. The discrepancy was 5.6% for northwestern Pennsylvania respondents. Despite these potential limitations, I am quite confident that the findings of the Pennsylvania School Board Survey and this study are valuable to the discipline of political science, the study of local politics, and the actual applied practice of political engagement at the school board level.

Last, a review of each of the 253 legislator biographies (203 in the House, 50 in the Senate) contained in volume 119 of the *Pennsylvania Manual* for the 2009–2010 session revealed that as of 2009 there were 16 members serving in one of the two legislative chambers who once served on a public school board. Much like the survey sample of Pennsylvania school board members, these state legislators are mostly Republican, with 14 of the 16 being members of the Grand Old Party and two Democrats. It was my belief that these General Assembly members were uniquely positioned to help explain whether those who begin their political careers by serving in a local position such as the school board eventually climb to a position such as the legislature. Five of these members were interviewed following the collection of survey data and asked to comment on some of the patterns observed in the results.

Findings

Who Serves on Pennsylvania School Boards?

A brief overview of the demographic and political traits associated with Pennsylvania's elected school board membership as per the Pennsylvania School Board Survey's findings is contained in Table 5. The data compare those serving on Pennsylvania's public school boards, the state population, and when available or applicable, the 2010 national school board sample drawn by Hess and Meeks.

These data indicate that there are some substantial personal, demographic, and political differences between those serving on Pennsylvania public school boards, the state's population and electorate, and the national school board sample from 2010. Pennsylvania's school board membership tends to contain a larger share of men than the national school board sample or the state's population itself. The Commonwealth—whose population is over 11% black—contains a black school board membership of just 1.6%. The levels of educational attainment between the Pennsylvania school board sample and the state population is striking, with nearly 80% of those serving on school boards holding at least a bachelor's degree compared to 27% of the state's general population. School board members in Pennsylvania are also significantly

Table 5. Demographic and Political Data			
	Pennsylvania School Board Membership (%)	Pennsylvania Population or Electorate (%)	National School Board Sample (%)
Male	61.7	51.2	56.0
Female	38.3	48.8	44.0
White	95.1	83.5	80.7
Black	1.6	11.4	12.3
Other	3.3	5.1	17.0
Married	88.8	50.2	NA
Divorced	3.0	8.5	NA
No degree	0.3	11.7	0.1
High school or GED	4.9	37.2	5.1
Bachelor's degree	34.9	16.6	27.7
Advanced degree	42.5	10.4	46.5
Household earns under \$50k/year	9.5	48.1	9.7
Household earns \$50k–\$99.9k/year	38.1	31.2	41.8
Household earns more than \$100k/year	14.6	4.0	9.5
Has school-age children	39.4	29.9	38.1
Does not have school-age children	60.6	70.1	61.9
Democrat	39.6	50.0	NA
Republican	58.5	37.0	NA
Other	1.9	13.0	NA
Conservative	40.4	34.0	30.3
Liberal	14.7	26.0	20.3
Moderate	44.9	36.0	49.3

Sources: (1) Pennsylvania school board figures from Pennsylvania School Board Survey. (2) Figures on gender, race, marital status, educational attainment, household income, and presence of school-age children from U.S. Census Bureau. (3) Figures for party affiliation from Pennsylvania Department of State. (4) Ideology figures from July 2014 Franklin & Marshall Poll. (5) National School Board Sample figures from Frederick M. Hess and Oliva Meeks, "Governance in the Accountability Era" (Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association, 2010).

more likely to come from households making between \$50,000 and \$99,999 or over \$100,000 per year (about 53%) than the state populace (about 35%). They are also about 10% more likely to have school-age children than the state's overall population.

Table 5 also offers several valuable findings concerning partisanship and ideology. Simply put, Pennsylvania's overall electorate is considerably more Democratic than those serving on the state's public school boards. The state's

electorate is over 10% *more* Democratic than the school board sample. The school board membership is nearly 22% *more* Republican than the rest of the state and about 11% *less* likely to be associated with a third party or independent than the rest of the Commonwealth's electorate. One possible explanation for some of these partisan differences between the school board sample and party affiliation in the state is that Philadelphia, with an appointed School Reform Commission, is not included in the sample of school board members. Figures from the Pennsylvania Department of State's Division of Voter Registration indicate that just under 20% of all registered Democrats in Pennsylvania live in Philadelphia County. Additionally, there are striking ideological differences as well, with the school board population being roughly 6% more conservative and about 11% less liberal than the rest of the state. Last, Pennsylvania's school board members are over 10% more conservative, about 5% less liberal, and nearly 5% less moderate than the nation's school board members.

In summation, these demographic data help to underscore the importance of understanding who serves in these positions and where they emerge from and are even more crucial for both the field of political science and the public interest. Discrepancies between the descriptive, political, educational, and socioeconomic attributes of Pennsylvania's public school board members and the citizens they serve introduce valuable questions for consideration pertaining to representation, decision making, and outcomes. The following section analyzes how the practice of candidate recruitment, development of candidate slates, and sources of political engagement influence Pennsylvania's school districts.

School Board Candidate Recruitment and Organizational Activity

Respondents to the Pennsylvania School Board Survey were asked to indicate whether they were contacted and urged to run by any organizations prior to deciding to run for a seat on the school board. A majority of respondents reported that they were *not* recruited to run for the school board by any organizations in their districts. About 76% said that no such recruitment efforts occurred, while about 24% said that an organization did contact them to encourage them to seek a seat on the school board. Those who indicated that they were initially recruited to run for their seats were then asked to indicate which type of organization or organizations served as the recruiting agent that reached out to them.

As indicated in Table 6, the survey found that political party committees or organizations were the most common recruiting agent, with nearly 43% of recruited school board members having been enlisted by such an organization. This level of recruitment activity by party organizations seems relatively

Table 6. Question 8: “If yes, which type of organization or organizations contacted you (please check all that apply)?”

Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
Political party committee or organization	42.8%	39
A nonpolitical community/neighborhood group or organization	36.3%	33
A church-affiliated organization	3.3%	3
A labor organization	7.7%	7
A business organization	2.2%	2
A fraternal organization	0.0%	0
Incumbent member(s) of the school board	8.8%	8
An education-oriented organization within the district	7.7%	7
Other	8.8%	8
Answered question		91
Skipped question		289

Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.

high in comparison to the literature, especially the work of Deckman (2004) and Moe (2001, 2005, 2006, and 2011), who respectively suggest that religious organizations and labor unions are exceptionally active in school board elections. The findings here demonstrate that only about 8% of board members who were recruited were enlisted by labor organizations, while just over 3% were recruited by a church-affiliated group. These findings indicate that local political party committees and organizations play a larger than expected role in seeking out individuals to run for school board seats.

Another means of determining organizational activity is the establishment of candidate slates. Candidate “slating” occurs when a political party organization, political action committee, interest group, or some other type of group organizes multiple candidates to seek positions as a team in a race in which there may be multiple victors. Through this practice, an organization would essentially endorse a slate of candidates and work toward the election of every member on the slate through what becomes a joint campaign coordinated by that organizing source. When asked whether they had ever run for election or reelection to the school board as part of a slate of candidates, a majority (65%) replied that they have not campaigned as part of a slate.

Respondents that ran on a slate of candidates were then presented a follow-up question asking who was chiefly responsible for organizing that “team” effort intended to elect multiple candidates to fill multiple seats. Nearly 30%

said that a political party or an official affiliated with a political party was responsible, while 22% attributed the effort to an incumbent member of the school board. Almost 20% indicated that their friends and neighbors organized the slate campaign, while 12% cited a nonpolitical community or neighborhood group or organization. Less than 1% said that a labor organization was responsible for the slate effort, while zero respondents cited a church-affiliated organization, a business organization, or a fraternal organization. Another 16% responded “other.” Eleven of the 19 respondents who opted to enter a response in the “other” category said that the candidates themselves organized the slate. Once again, the organizational work of the local party committees stands out (Table 7).

Survey participants were unable to identify a specific type of organization that is overwhelmingly influential in local elections held within their districts. Respondents were asked to evaluate how influential a variety of organizations were on local elections in their districts. The results are presented in Table 8.

Nearly 40% of respondents stated that political parties or organizations are “extremely” or “very” influential over local elections. Overall, 35% reported that school or education groups are influential in this way, and 34% said the same of community and neighborhood organizations. Just 10% said that church organizations are influential over local elections in their districts,

Table 7. Question 10: “If yes [to Question 9], who organized this effort [to slate candidates]?”		
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
A political party or an official affiliated with a political party	29.8%	36
A nonpolitical community/neighborhood group or organization	11.6%	14
A church-affiliated organization	0.0%	0
A labor organization	0.8%	1
A business organization	0.0%	0
A fraternal organization	0.0%	0
Friends and neighbors	19.8%	24
An incumbent member of the school board	22.3%	27
The candidates themselves	9.0%	11
Other	6.6%	8
Answered question		121
<i>Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.</i>		

Table 8. Question 16: “Which types of *organizations* have the most influence over local elections in your district? For each of the organizations listed below, please select whether these groups are extremely influential, very influential, somewhat influential, or not at all influential over local elections in your district.”

Answer Options	Extremely Influential	Very Influential	Somewhat Influential	Not at All Influential	Response Count
Political party committees or organizations	13.9%	23.7%	34.8%	27.6%	359
Community and neighborhood groups or organizations	7.0%	26.5%	49.4%	17.0%	358
Church-affiliated groups and organizations	2.2%	7.8%	35.2%	54.7%	358
Organized labor groups	4.2%	13.0%	29.1%	53.7%	354
Business organizations	1.1%	7.7%	36.6%	54.5%	352
Fraternal clubs and organizations	0.9%	4.3%	28.8%	66.1%	351
School- or education-oriented organizations	8.7%	26.0%	43.0%	22.3%	358
Answered question					363
Skipped question					17
<i>Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.</i>					

while 17% said the same of labor organizations. Fewer than 10% said that business or fraternal organizations held sway over local elections, according to respondents.

Although opinion appears to be somewhat weak when it comes to identifying extremely or very influential organizations, a majority of respondents identified four types of organizations that they believe are clearly “not influential” in local elections. These organizations include fraternal clubs or organizations (66%), church-affiliated groups or organizations (55%), business organizations (55%), and organized labor groups (54%). This is again a departure from the expectation regarding the role of church and labor affiliated groups.

Legislators Confirm Participatory Role of Party Organizations

A second component of this study featured interviews with 5 of the 16 members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly (as of 2013) who began their careers in public service as members of their local school boards. These

interviews were conducted with the promise of anonymity in the district offices of each member. My initial expectation was that local party organizations would play less of a role in either recruiting candidates or influencing local school board elections. However, the interviews conducted with the members showed that these seasoned practitioners were not surprised when respondents to the Pennsylvania School Board Survey reported a larger than anticipated role for local parties and local party organizations.

There were several other fascinating patterns gleaned from these five interviews as it relates to the party organizations. First, three of the five believe that political party organizations are instrumental in recruiting school board candidates in their districts and in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Second, three of the five reported having been personally recruited to run for the school board by a political party, one was self-recruited, and a third was recruited by an incumbent board member. The last interview subject was recruited by an incumbent board member who happened to be the individual's father, an active party member. Furthermore, four of the five stated that they were personally involved in local politics in their communities before their first campaign for the school board, meaning that even if they weren't recruited by a party organization, they were "plugged in" to the local political scene from day one. As previously noted, the fifth member's father was an incumbent who was politically active, thus likely providing Legislator 5 with a higher-than-usual level of name identification and inroads with politically aware individuals within the community. That fifth member also informed me that he had served for decades as the chair of his local party and actively recruits school board candidates on a regular basis within his community.

Political Engagement

The third research question asks whether the citizens who are elected to serve on Pennsylvania's public school boards engaged in the political process before running for office and what this may mean for the practice of politics at the local level. The Pennsylvania School Board Survey makes it possible to reach some conclusions about this. First, respondents were asked to describe the level of activity among the party organizations in their districts. As indicated in Table 9, over 60% of Pennsylvania's school board members are from districts with *at least one* active political party organization. Nearly 28% of respondents report that both parties have very active organizations in their districts, almost 21% says that their districts have an active Republican Party organization, while close to 12% say the same about an active Democratic Party organization. The fact that more than 60% of Pennsylvania's school

Table 9. Question 15: “Which of the following options most closely describes the political parties in your district?”		
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
Both political parties have very active organizations in my district.	27.9%	102
My district has a very active Democratic Party organization only.	11.7%	43
My district has a very active Republican Party organization only.	20.8%	76
Neither political party has a very active organization in my district.	39.6%	145
Answered question		366
Skipped question		14
<i>Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.</i>		

board members come from districts with at least one active party organization indicates that the local parties are likely more influential or active in local races than noted within the existing literature or assumed prior to the undertaking of this study. I am intrigued by these findings because there is a general impression among many political and governmental professionals that local parties in Pennsylvania are largely inactive or absent from the scene. These findings contradict conventional wisdom.

As reported earlier, nearly 59% of Pennsylvania’s school board members identify as being Republicans compared to just about 40% who say they are Democrats. These numbers do not align with the overall electorate in the state, which is about 50% Democratic and 37% Republican. The data uncovered in Table 9 provide at least a partial explanation for this imbalance as nearly 21% of board members represent districts featuring only an active Republican organization as compared to nearly 12% who come from districts with only a strong Democratic organization. It could be argued that there are more Republican school board members since more school districts contain active Republican Party organizations as compared to those with active Democratic Party organizations. This can possibly serve as both recognition of the organizing strength of Republicans locally and a way to rouse dormant Democratic organizations from their slumber.

Second, the Pennsylvania School Board Survey discovered that the individuals serving on the state’s school boards had long histories of both political and community engagement prior to running for a seat on the local school

board. Table 10 represents the response rates to the question pertaining to political or governmental activity. Respondents were asked to select all forms of political or governmental engagement prior to their candidacies. The results associated with this question helped inform me that these voluntary public servants are more than just concerned citizens seeking to do good for their communities; they are incredibly well-connected in the political lives of their communities and have extensive personal histories of political involvement prior to holding office.

The figures below are rather astounding because they help demonstrate that Pennsylvania's elected school board members are extremely engaged and involved in the political process *before* seeking positions on the school board. Over 44% report having volunteered on other political campaigns, over 18% have helped raise money for candidates, 16% held another public office in the past, nearly 13% served as a member of a political party committee, and about 11% also sought some other office in the past. Another 11% were involved in campaigns through a business, labor, or professional organization. A total

Table 10. Question 21: "Were you engaged in any of the following political or governmental activities prior to running for a seat on the school board (please check all that apply)?"		
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
Ran for public office in the past (9)	10.7%	28
Held public office in the past (5)	16.0%	42
Served as a party committeeperson (6)	12.6%	33
Volunteered on other political campaigns (1)	44.3%	116
Helped raise money for political candidates (4)	18.3%	48
Involved in campaigns through a business, labor, or professional organization (9)	10.7%	28
Worked for a government office, agency, or other public official (5)	16.0%	42
Lobbied or contacted a government official or agency in support/opposition of a policy (3)	30.2%	79
Organized people in my community to take action regarding an issue or concern (2)	33.6%	88
Other (7)	12.2%	32
None (8)	11.4%	30
Answered question		262
Skipped question		118
<i>Source: Pennsylvania School Board Survey.</i>		

of 16% worked in government or for a public official. Incredibly, nearly 34% organized people in their communities to take action on a certain issue, while over 30% had lobbied or contacted a government official or agency.

In short, these findings demonstrate that Pennsylvania's school board members are not amateurs in the world of politics. Conversely, the findings indicate that they are perhaps the most highly involved citizens within their communities when it comes to political engagement. These findings are significant because it changes the conversation about locally elected school board members being "regular folks" like their neighbors or Cincinnatus-like public servants who reluctantly leave their plow and till in the field in order to aid their communities. Pennsylvania's school board members are among the political elite of their communities and far more astute at the game of politics than their fellow citizens. Duke noted that school board members tend to be "amateurs when it comes to the practice of education" (2010, 60), but these findings show that this is not the case when it comes to politics.

Discussion

In summary, the findings presented throughout this study help reach the following conclusions in relation to the original research questions.

Demographics

These demographic findings help illuminate a level of detachment between the individuals who compose Pennsylvania's public school boards and the public itself on descriptive and political indicators alike. The data show that Pennsylvania's school board members tend to be wealthier, more highly educated, considerably more likely to lean toward the Republican Party (and conservatism), and much less racially diverse than the state's populace. The state's school board membership is also less diverse in terms of race, gender, ideology, and income level than their counterparts in the national sample. The ramifications of these descriptive and political differences between the board members and populace they govern could have legitimate ramifications for the policy-making process within the districts. For example, the election of a disproportionate number of self-identified conservative or Republican school board members within a district may have an impact on the consequential decisions made by board members when it comes to some of the previously noted responsibilities of school boards, such as approving certain types of textbooks, adopting the curriculum, deciding upon the local property tax rate, and negotiating union contracts with the district workforce.

As for the apparent incongruity between the state's school board membership and the general population on descriptive measures such as race, ethnicity, and gender, ample research has shown that the presence or absence of elected political leadership among minority groups can influence the formulation of policies crafted by legislative bodies and the type of representation received by individuals within these groups. For example, a 2003 study of elected legislators in Texas and California by Pantoja and Segura found that the presence of Latino legislative representation is modestly associated with greater Latino empowerment within those districts. Similarly, in their study of descriptive representation of racial minorities within the U.S. Congress, Bowen and Clark determined that "among many of the activities both legislators and constituents care deeply about—such as constituent service, securing funds for local projects, and citizen-legislator communication—MCs' [members of Congress's] representational activities are more positively evaluated and better recognized among members of their own racial or ethnic group" (2014, 703). Although neither the Pennsylvania School Board Survey nor this article specifically examines policy making within the districts, the clear lack of diversity on school boards in the areas of gender, race, class, educational attainment, partisanship, and political ideology represents serious challenges worth considering in the area of policy making at the school district level.

Recruitment, Organization, and Influence

The initial research questions sought to identify the organizations that serve as the chief sources of candidate recruitment in local school board races. These groups tend to be the most likely to be engaged in organizing and promoting slates of candidates in school board elections, while serving as the most politically influential organizations at the local school board level in Pennsylvania. This research has found that *local political party organizations* are considerably more active in these areas than expected. Furthermore, they are substantially more involved in the activities of candidate recruitment, slate organizing, and exerting general political influence over local school board elections than their counterparts in organized labor, church-related groups, or even education or school-related group at the school district level than initially anticipated.

Although the general expectations at the outset of this study were incorrect in predicting or anticipating the considerable role of local party organizations, the impact of these findings are significant when compared against what could be expected given the existing academic literature. Despite Moe's frequent admonitions against the calamitous effects of organized labor's

influence in local education politics, there is very little to report regarding labor's presence in Pennsylvania school board elections. The findings of this study demonstrate that fewer than 8% of those who were recruited to seek school board seats in Pennsylvania were enlisted by labor. Less than 1% of those who ran as part of a slate of candidates for the school board reported that this effort was organized and carried out by a labor organization. Likewise, nearly 54% of all respondents said that organized labor groups were *not* influential whatsoever in local elections in their districts. Compare this to the paltry 17% who said that labor organizations were either extremely or very influential.

The Pennsylvania School Board Survey shows that labor unions and their influence in school board politics are largely absent from the political scene when it comes to recruiting candidates in school board elections and influencing the outcomes of school board races. Several specific data points offer an explanation that is contradictory to the conventional wisdom about labor unions essentially controlling school boards and school district business. Although there is nominal evidence of at least some union influence in Pennsylvania school boards—16% of members report to be either past or present union members—this research has led me to conclude that the union-controlled school system as depicted in the literature is not prevalent in this state. I have found no systemic or clear evidence suggesting that Moe's portrait of local education systems being controlled by union elites is true regarding Pennsylvania's public school boards. Lyndon Johnson was known for dismissing ideas that made little sense to him by opining that "that dog just don't hunt" (Safire 1993, 790). Regarding local school board elections in the Keystone State, Moe's union power thesis "just don't hunt." The same can be said of religious or church-affiliated organizations that also appear to be absent in the discussion of candidate recruitment, organizing, and exerting influence over school board elections in Pennsylvania.

This study has largely found that local political party organizations are the most active sources of candidate recruitment for local school board seats. It has also determined that local political party organizations are more likely than any other entity within the school districts to organize slates of board candidates. Last, we have discovered that political party organizations are substantially more influential in local school board elections than expected—more so than their counterparts in church, business, labor, community or neighborhood, and education groups. With that said, there are two other instructive pieces of information in the Pennsylvania School Board Survey that help build the case for stronger-than-expected local political party organizations at the school district level.

Emphasis on Local Party Committees and Organizations

Thanks to this study, we have determined that local political party organizations are the most active recruiters of school board candidates in Pennsylvania and the most likely to establish slates of candidates for school board seats. They are also the most likely sources of influence in local school board races as determined by the sitting school board members themselves. At this time it is worth asking why local parties would be engaged in such activities. This is especially worth exploring because these organizations are not commonly recognized as key stakeholders in the community when considering what local school boards do and the fact that the constituencies they serve tend to be parents, families, teachers and their unions, students, school administrators such as superintendents, and taxpayers rather than politicians and partisan groups.

Local party organizations may be engaged in the action of candidate recruitment and slate organization because it is a point of pride for them to demonstrate that they are capable of running candidates for these positions and winning the seats. It is conceivable that victories for these so-called down-ballot races serve as basic markers for success for the organizations themselves. In other words, they seek out candidates and promote unified slates of these candidates in order to win. Although this seems like a sensible action for a political party to engage in, it had not been demonstrated by earlier research in this area. A second possible explanation is that party organizations are engaged in these actions because they also have a sense that they are as influential in local politics as the board members themselves indicated in the survey findings. Thus, they want to capitalize on those substantial levels of influence or at least exploit the perceptions of such levels of influence.

Last, local party organizations could be recruiting candidates to “audition talent” for future races for positions such as county commissioner, state legislator, or county row officer. This could serve as a means for the party to watch how these individuals behave or perform as candidates in order to get a better sense of whether they are worth considering for other positions in the future. Although the Pennsylvania School Board Survey finds that just a quarter of respondents are politically ambitious, this does not necessarily mean that the party leaders who are recruiting candidates are not mindful of the need to create a dependable bench of future starting players for their party’s rosters. In support of this point, the survey findings revealed that over 13% of school board members report to having served on a party committee before seeking office. Meanwhile, on the basis of the number of party committee positions

in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, it is unlikely that more than 0.003% of the state's population could serve in this capacity at one point in time. This indicates that a significantly higher share of school board members are connected to their local party organizations than the typical citizen and thus likely have prior relationships with county and local party leaders.

It is worth diving a bit deeper into the data regarding candidates who ran as part of a slate of candidates. Perhaps as a testament to the power of running as part of an organized slate, over 75% of those who ran as a member of a candidate slate reported that *all* members of their slate of candidates were successful in *both* the primary and general elections. Meanwhile, about 16% said that all of their slate's members were successful *only* in the primary election and about 9% reported that their entire slate was victorious *only* in the general election.

These findings could be interpreted as demonstrating the fact that being coupled or teamed with other candidates on a slate can enhance the opportunity of all of the participating candidates to successfully navigate *both* the primary and the general elections for Pennsylvania school board seats. This is especially interesting given that 30% of candidate slates were organized by political party organizations or officials affiliated with a political party organization and that 22% were organized by incumbent members of the school board, who tend to be deeply connected with the local political party structures.

Conclusions

These findings demonstrate that local political party organizations play a major role in local school board politics. They are more likely than other types of organizations at the local level to engage in the recruitment of candidates for public school board positions. The local parties—not church-affiliated, labor union, or parent groups—are the most highly engaged in the development and formulation of slates of candidates for seats on public school boards and are rated by incumbent board members as the most influential group in elections for local school board seats in Pennsylvania. It has also been discovered that Pennsylvania's public school board members are among the most politically engaged members of their communities and are far from being local political neophytes.

The findings associated with this study are noteworthy because they run counter to prior scholarship, which emphasizes the role of labor, religious, and education-related organizations in the realm of school district politics. Furthermore, these findings present the opportunity to develop a fascinating

stream of research in the area of local political party organizations. Largely thought to be declining due to the centralization of political party operations by the Democratic and Republican National Committees, this study determines that the local parties are still influential, active, and effective (especially when considering the success rate of those reporting to have run as a part of a slate of candidates, which was most likely to be organized by a local party organization).

Moving forward, I propose that it is essential to dig deeper into the actual organization and operation of local party organizations to offer a clear and descriptive explanation of how they perform the types of operations discussed within the findings of this study. Fueled by this exploration of school board politics, these types of research questions should include an assessment of the people who constitute these local organizations, how their leadership structures are developed, and the types of tactics they use when recruiting potential candidates, electing officeholders under the party banner, and conveying their messages to voters at the precinct level of local politics.

NOTES

1. Travers (2003) documents the history of the creation of the Philadelphia School Reform Commission.

2. Interviews were conducted in the legislators' district offices in late 2013 and early 2014. Legislator 1 was interviewed on November 15, 2013, legislator 2 on November 22, 2013, legislator 3 on December 6, 2013, legislator 4 on January 8, 2014 and legislator 5 on January 24, 2014.

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