MOST
POLICY INITIATIVE

School Board Elections

How are school board elections run in other states?

County school board election procedures vary across states and localities.

There are 13,194 school districts in the U.S., with 82,423 school board members (NCES 2023). The majority of members are elected to their positions, with the exception of HI and some localities in IN. HI only has an appointed State School Board and some localities in IN are filled by appointment.

- In MO, the 518 school boards are filled by local election (NCES 2023).

The procedures for running for a school board seat vary significantly by state, and in many cases by locality. Oftentimes, there are different procedures for county, city, and state school board elections.

Localities often have some control over local elections:

- Municipalities with "home rule" are allowed to set different procedures from the rest of the state.
- Some states allow localities to choose from several sets of deadlines and election dates.
- In some states, all municipal governments retain "home rule" and run school board elections independently of the state.

Research Highlights

The 518 MO school boards are filled by local nonpartisan elections.

The timing of filing deadlines and election dates for school board candidates varies significantly between states.

Most school board elections are held between nonpartisan candidates.

Nominating documents must be submitted to election officials by a certain deadline. The time between the declaration of candidacy deadline and the election varies widely between states: from 1 month to 1 year in advance of the general election (**Figure 1**).

- **MO** candidates submit candidacy documents to the Secretary of State by December 26, for next year's spring election.

School board election day varies by state and locality:

- 22 states put school board candidates on the fall General Election ballot with national and state candidates.
- 14 states set other local election dates, 12 in the spring or summer and 2 in the fall.
- 10 states leave this decision to localities.

Local election timing sources: AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, DE, FL, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, MA, ME, MD, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NH, NV, NJ, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VT, WA, WV, WI, WY

March 11, 2024
Legislative Science Note

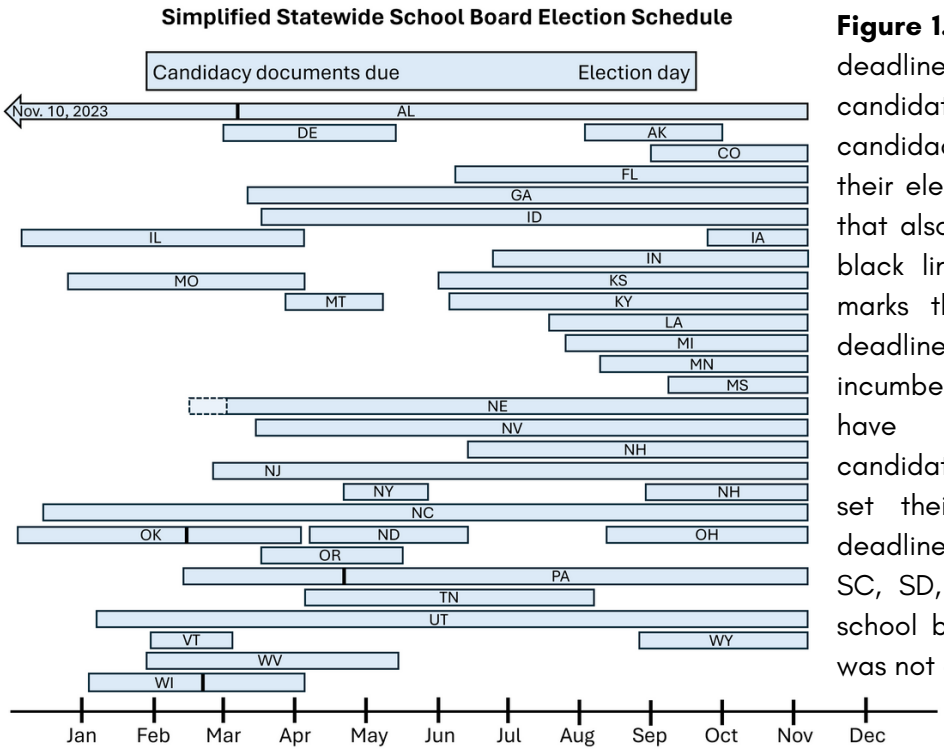

Figure 1. The time between the state's deadline for a local school board candidate to turn in required candidacy declaration documents and their election day varies. In the states that also have a primary election, the black line in the middle of the box marks the date. NE has two filing deadlines, for incumbents and non-incumbents. States not shown do not have statewide school board candidate timelines because localities set their election days and filing deadlines (AR, AZ, CA, MA, MD, ME, SC, SD, TX, WA), do not have local school boards (HI), or the information was not available (VA, RI, CT).

The impact of partisan school board elections is unclear.

In 41 states including MO, school board races occur between candidates that do not declare a partisan affiliation. AL, CT, LA, and PA have partisan school board candidates, and 5 additional states have districts that use both systems.

In 2021, **TN** enacted legislation to allow school board elections to be optionally partisan and allow political parties to nominate candidates, where races were previously nonpartisan. A current **FL ballot measure** seeks to require partisan school board elections, and within states that use both systems, more localities are choosing to run partisan races (Personal communication).

Holding partisan elections tends to benefit the majority party (Schaffner 2007). Without the partisan "cue" on the ballot, voters tend to rely on incumbency in their voting decisions (Schaffer 2001).

A study of the partisanship of school board members could not find evidence that those elected on a nonpartisan ballot were any less partisan than those elected on partisan ballots (Crawford 2018).

Local election timing impacts turnout.

Local elections tend to be held on days other than National Election Day (Wood 2022). Local election dates vary significantly. and can either be during state and national election years (on-cycle) or held during off-years (off-cycle).

- When local elections are held on the same day as state and national contests, turnout is higher, sometimes doubled (MIT Election Lab 2022, Hajnal 2021, Kogan 2018, Anzia 2013).
- Additionally, the voters that turn out are more diverse in race, age, and partisanship (Hajnal 2021).

MOST Policy Initiative is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that provides nonpartisan research information to members of the Missouri General Assembly upon request. This Science Note is intended for informational purposes and does not indicate support or opposition to a particular bill or policy approach. A full list of references used in this Science Note may be found at https://mostpolicyinitiative.org/science-note/school-board-elections/. Please contact info@mostpolicyinitiative.org with any questions.