Partisanship and Professionalization:
School Board Decision-making in the midst of a pandemic

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school board members played a prominent role in deciding reopening plans. School boards have seen a dramatic increase in workload in an increasingly complex environment. Our central goal is to understand how the nationalized, polarized political context of pandemic responses shaped the decision-making processes of individual board members. Using an original large-scale survey of board members, we find partisan differences in how members see the role of the board as well as which sources members trusted. Members who identified as Republican were more likely to say that board members should be responsible for developing re-opening plans as opposed to health professionals as well as more likely to say that members should follow their own conscience instead of the district when there is a conflict. If the other party was in power at the state level, the members from opposing parties had less trust in that source.

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Introduction

As school boards have become a major focus point in national politics, due to battles over COVID-19 policies, book bans, and curriculum control, school boards have also received renewed attention in scholarly research (for example: Christian, Jacob and Singleton 2022; Ford and Ihrke 2021; Grossmann et al. 2021; Hartney and Finger 2022). There is a large body of existing research focused on school boards, particularly the impact school board decisions have on academic outcomes (Alsbury 2008, Ford and Ihrke 2016; Delagardelle 2008), financial outcomes (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005), and school segregation (Diem, Frankenberg and Cleary 2015, Macartney and Singleton 2018). Even though the impact of school board policymaking on public education is well documented, we do not have extensive descriptive data on who individual school board members are, how they view their role as local elected officials, or how they approach the decision making process. Even identifying school boards members is difficult; very few states have any centralized systems to identify school board members, and there are high barriers to collecting this data.

We know more about school boards at the district level, compared to our knowledge of how individual school board members assess their own roles. We know there are institutional differences - boards are elected at different times (Anzia 2011, Payson 2017), operate under different degrees of state control Morel (2018), oversee districts that vary wildly in size (Driscoll, Halcoussis and Svorny, 2003), and are professionalized to varying degrees (Grissom 2010, Grissom and Harrington 2013). As school boards have become center stage for some national battles, understanding who members are and how they approach decisions making is important. School board decisions impact a wide range of policy outcomes, and board decisions in response to COVID-19 have highlighted the impact school boards can have on student learning when deciding reopening plans. For example, evidence suggests that virtual learning furthers racial disparities in outcomes (Chetty et al., 2020). However, the pandemic also demonstrated that low-capacity institutions like school boards may be stressed by being responsible for sifting through complex and changing information in the midst of significant

political conflict.

To understand how boards have adjusted to the demands of decision making during the pandemic, we conducted a large-scale survey of school board members in multiple states during the summer of 2021. We asked members about how they saw the role of school boards in determining public health policy, who trusted to give them information or to delegate decision making to, how they view the role of public preferences, and the impact on their own workload and stress. After discussing the literature, we describe our methods for obtaining our sample of school board members and show how our sample matches the overall population of school board members within our 13 states. We then discuss descriptive results of our survey to provide more detailed information about who serves and institutional characteristics of school boards to update conventional wisdom about who tends to be on school boards. Finally, we test what factors are associated with the decision-making process of school boards in a series of regression analyses which include state fixed effects.

We find partisan differences in both how members see the role of the board in determining policy, as well as which sources of information or guidance members trusted. Members who identified as Republican were more likely to see that board members should be responsible for developing re-opening plans as opposed to health professionals. Republican members were also more likely to say that members should follow their own conscience instead of following what the district wants when there is a conflict. This partisan trend continued when we focused on which sources school board members trusted for information or guidance in setting district policy. School board members had less trust in government officials that were from a different party than themselves. We observed this for state legislatures, state boards of education, and even state departments of health. If the other party was in power at the state level, the school board members from opposing parties had less trust in that source. Non-partisan government boards had higher levels of trust, with County Health Boards being the most trusted. Partisanship shaped who school board members trusted in helping to inform them in their decision-making process during the pandemic.

To understand how members reacted to their roles receiving increased scrutiny and higher workloads, we also asked if school board members were likely to seek re-election and if the level of stress of the job was higher, the same, or lower than before the pandemic. Members who identified as Republican were more likely than members who identified as Democrat to say they are seeking re-election. And while there was not a partisan effect for stress (the vast majority said it was more stressful), there was a gender effect with women saying that the job was more stressful than previous years. School board members who self-identified as women were more likely to say COVID took a larger share of time to plan and more likely to indicate increased stress.

Pandemic Workload

School boards are an essential part of democracy, particularly at that local level. In a national survey experiment, Collins (2021a) finds that school boards are the preferred option of governance, and that preference grows when public deliberation is observed at meetings. School boards act essentially as small local legislatures, tasked with the purpose of administering public education within their school district. More importantly, these school boards are by and large non-professionalized.[1] A 2010 survey of school board members found that just over 60 percent of school board members are unpaid, over half devote four days or less to school board work a month, and only about half have access to staff to help with research (Hess and Meeks, 2010). Using that same 2010 data, a Fordham Institute study on school board capacity confirmed that most boards receive some professional development, often from state or national associations of school boards (Shober and Hartney, 2014). However, because school boards exist in many ways outside of existing political communities and have different pipelines to office, they lag behind many other legislatures in professional training and socialization into policy making (Danzberger et al., 1987). The districts that do have

[1] A professionalized legislature is one that models a legislature in which the members work full time in the representative capacity, are paid a high salary, and have access to resources (Squire, 2007).

higher levels of policy making capacity are those with more resources and larger, more diverse districts (Grissom (2010)).

School boards do not have extensive staff to rely on to help gather information, write policy, or do any other background work, and this aspect of capacity has effects on how informed school board members are, even about their own district. In other studies of school board capacity, almost half of school board members did not accurately report information about their district, including collective bargaining requirements, starting teacher salaries, per pupil spending, and the student-teacher ratio (Shober and Hartney, 2014). While some large, urban school districts might have the resources to deal with these complex issues, they are the exception, not the rule. Despite an increasing focus from state and federal policy- makers on the importance of social science research in decision making processes (Slavin 2002, Wiseman 2010), a study of three school boards in Wisconsin found that school board members rarely invoke published research in their deliberative process and more often rely on their own experiences, data (separate from studies), and testimony from community members (Asen et al., 2013). Board members may also learn from their local contexts; Norton (2007) finds that school board decision-making in planning of new school facilities is motivated by neighboring school districts and demographic changes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the information demands of the office increased as districts, states, and even the federal government developed multiple standards for safely opening schools. New research frequently emerged about what adequate safety measures looked like, and data on case counts and hospitalizations demonstrated how the situation was constantly in flux. A glance at the complexity of district policies reveals just how high the demands on board members was. Many districts were making decisions on a wide range of mitigation strategies, including school modality, mask and vaccine requirements, quarantine and isolation protocols, HVAC and sanitation upgrades, social distancing, and contact tracing. These members were also attempting to make these decisions based on a rapidly changing information environment as scientific knowledge about COVID-19 was

updated.

School Boards caught in the national political crossfire

In addition to dealing with a significant increase in workload during the pandemic, school boards found themselves caught in a national political conflict over pandemic responses. This trend has intensified since the pandemic; school boards have been the battle ground for a number of nationalized issues from Critical Race Theory to debates over LGBTQ issues. As Hopkins (2018) finds, one dimension of nationalization is that voters are more engaged with and more knowledgeable about national politics than that of state or local politics. For school boards, a consequence of this might mean that in their policymaking context, the local, on-the-ground situation when it comes to the pandemic might take a back seat to the national narrative.

State and local elected officials focus more on these nationalized issues due electoral pressures, which can encourage political polarization in state and local politics, driven by party elites. As governors and state legislatures made policies regarding COVID, they often put local school boards at the center of conflict, even overruling them: in Florida, the Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and the Education Commissioner ordered Miami-Dade County Public Schools to re-open in person classes two weeks earlier than their school board had agreed upon during a 29-hour long board meeting to discuss all the options (Strauss, 2020). In New York, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo accelerated the closings of schools in certain areas beyond what the local government's plans (McKinley and Ferre-Sadurni, 2020).

Research has found consistent evidence that many policy issues can become politicized and polarized (i.e. Achen and Bartels (2017), Mason (2018)), and this seems to be the case with local education policies crafted in response to the pandemic. Even a brief survey of local news reports during the summer of 2020 suggests that school boards faced both issue

polarization (Mason (2013)), where some members of the public staked out extreme position, and behavioral (affective) polarization, characterized by increasing party strength, partisan bias, activism, and anger (Mason (2013)). COVID-19 mitigation issues became more partisan over time, reflected in the behavioral responses in the public and among elected officials.

We have seen ample evidence of nationalization and polarization in response to the pandemic in both the public and elected officials. Several recent studies have found that partisanship make-up of the district and not severity of the pandemic in the local area mattered in school re-opening plans (Collins (2021*b*); Grossmann et al. (2021); Hartney and Finger (2022)).[2] In a national level survey, Collins (2022) finds that trust in information from elites drives public support for school re-opening plans. Individual level responses to the pandemic were also shaped by political ideology, race, and class, rather than health related metrics. In analyzing who complied with COVID stay-at-home orders, Goldstein and Wiedemann (2022) finds that partisanship plays an important role. When orders were given by co-partisan leaders, citizens were more likely to follow the orders (i.e. Republican leaning county more likely to follow orders from Republican governor). They also find higher levels of trust in government officials increase compliance in these orders. In a survey experiment testing messaging on vaccines, Golos et al. (2022) find that partisan messaging of the vaccine positively influenced those with congruent beliefs and from co-partisan leaders. Messages from opposing party leaders were received with extreme distrust. Scientific messaging, however, produced consistent positive effects across political affiliation.

Many of these studies so far have added to our understanding of how the education environment and local politics are shaped by nationalization and polarization. However, they have focused more on the outcomes of the decision-making process, i.e. school re- opening plans. We hope to further add to the literature by exploring how individual school board members make decisions through a survey of school board members, particularly in response to the pandemic. In addition to understanding their decision-making process, we

[2]This is not a new phenomenon; previous research has found that the partisan composition of school boards also matters for policies that decrease segregation (Reckhow et al., 2017).

also try to understand how school board members view their roles as elected officials, and how the pandemic and political context changed their roles. In the next section we outline the details of our survey of school board members. Here, we outline our expectations for the survey.

The 2009 survey of school board by Hess and Meeks (2010) found school board members to be largely white (80.7%), more educated than the general population (more than half with an advanced degree), and a plurality self-identified political moderates (47.3%). We expect our survey to have similar demographics, in terms of education, gender, and race/ethnicity based on how we selected our sample pool. Because we ask respondents to report their partisanship, we do expect members to be more likely to self-select into a party than identify as independent. People who choose to run for school board are likely higher in political knowledge and education, and therefore more likely to exhibit stronger partisan identification.[3]

We also expect that self-reported partisan identities of school board members will be related to how they engaged in the decision-making process as board members. Because school boards face so many resource constraints, boards must rely on outside sources of expertise and guidance, following the same dynamics that we see in less professionalized state legislatures.[4] However, we expect that reliance on outside sources in this context will exhibit a partisan pattern. While school boards were designed to focus on local issues and be responsive to citizens within their jurisdiction, issues facing school boards have been increasingly nationalized; i.e. following national cues instead of what is occurring on the ground in the district. We hypothesize that Democrats will report devoting more time to school re-opening plans than Republicans, reflecting the increased workload of incorporating mitigation measures, strengthening the district's capacity to incorporate distance learning and health monitoring, and keeping up with changing guidance. Because of the partisan divide over how to respond to the pandemic,

[3] We asked respondents partisanship at the end of the survey. Trust in sources a decision-making question were all asked prior to any demographic questions.

[4] For example, less professionalized legislatures will even outsource writing legislation by copying legislation from other states (Jansa, Hansen and Gray (2019)).

we hypothesize that school board members who identify as Democrat will be more likely than those who are Republican to rely more on health professionals or specialized task forces to help make decisions. We expect Republican members to want to maintain more control in deciding what path the school district should take. This parallels national trends in which the Democratic party embraced the larger health and science community at higher rates than the Republican party.

Furthermore, we hypothesize that the partisan alignment between school board members and other political actors involved in crafting pandemic responses will be related to how much school boards trusted other sources outside the board for guidance. We hypothesize that school board members will be less trusting of government officials when the officials are from opposing parties than their own. We also hypothesize that school board members will be more trusting of information from non-partisan sources compared to partisan sources, such as county health boards. We also expect that these trends in polarization and nationalization might affect school board members differently. We hypothesize that members who are Democrats might be less likely to seek re-election than those who are Republican. While both parties have become increasingly polarized, the rate of polarization has been faster for Republicans McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2016). Because the pandemic response became increasingly polarized under the Trump administration, we expect Democratic members to be less likely to seek re-election. Similarly, we hypothesize that Democrats would say that they are more stressed now than prior to the pandemic than Republicans are.

Sample of School Board Members

To gain a better descriptive picture of school boards and the way the COVID pandemic shaped decision-making, we collected data about and contact information for the vast majority of every school board member in 13 states. During the summer of 2021, we fielded a 50-question survey using originally developed questions about COVID policies, questions from a national school board survey fielded in 2009 by Hess and Meeks (2010), a survey of state

legislatures by (Carey et al., 2008), and the American Municipal Officials Survey (Barber and Dynes, N.d.). In the survey, we asked school board members to report information to help us understand the resources and constraints of the office, including time demands, development opportunities, pay, and staffing. We also collected information on the member's demographics, political preferences, their plans for future office, and their perspective on the politics of their constituents. Finally, we asked a series of questions about how they individually consider different sources and influences on their decision making. We first outline how we created our sample and then discuss how our survey respondents compare to all school board members within the 13 states.

To obtain our sample, we identified 13 states that capture diversity across several important dimensions, including state party control, election timing, rural/urban districts, variation in race and ethnicity of the populations, variation in re-opening plans within the state, and variation in timing of the COVID crisis. Because we wanted to include every school board member within the state in our sample, we did not have the capacity to collect all 50 states. The sample represents approximately a fourth of all school districts in the United States. The states are California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Virginia, and Wyoming. In all states, with the exception of California, we worked to obtain all school board information for every regular public school district in the state. We used the *2020-2021 common Core of Data (CCD) Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data, v.1a* to identify the list of school districts within each state (NCES, 2021). We excluded school districts that were classified as state agency, federal agency, specialized, or charter agencies. Table 1 shows the states in the sample, the number of districts within a state that we were able to collect information from, and the total number of school districts within that state based on the CCD. This sampling strategy allowed us to compare those that responded to the survey to the characteristics of school board members of the entire state to see how representative they were.

Table 1: Number of School Districts by State

State	Districts Collected	Number of Districts in 2020[5]
California	364	994
Colorado	168	178
Delaware	19	19
Florida	67	67
Georgia	170	180
Iowa	315	327
Kansas	280	286
Maryland	24	24
North Carolina	114	121
Rhode Island	34	36
South Dakota	146	149
Virginia	130	132
Wyoming	47	48
Total	1,975	2,561

For each school district, we identified each member on the school board through visiting school district websites[6] as well as collected email addresses[7] To identify the gender and race/ethnicity of those members, we relied on one of two processes depending on the state. For Florida, we used publicly available voter registration files to obtain this information in which the board member self-identified gender and race are reported. For the majority of school boards, we hand coded gender and race/ethnicity using the following criteria: we first looked to see if the school board member referred to themselves in terms of gender or race/ethnicity. While this did happen for some members, we could not find personal descriptions for most members. Our second strategy to identify gender was to look for gendered pronouns or titles used to describe the member (i.e. she/he or Ms./Mr.). In some cases, we did identify photographs and made a judgment based on them. We acknowledge that this could result in miss-classification. In cases in which we had nothing other than a name, we used the *gender()* package in R by

[6]The exception to this is California where we used (State, 2019) to help compile a list of school board members Because of the timing in which the list was created, we have roughly one-third of school districts from California.

[7]When email addresses were not posted, we were able to still contact some of these board members through contact links or other district email addresses available online.

Mullen (2021). This package codes gender based on names, time range, and the Social Security Administration's data set of first names. We used this in places where we could not find additional information as well as for a few states in our sample to save time.[8]

Race/ethnicity is much more difficult to code. We, therefore, kept our categories broad to include white, Black, and any other group. We felt the likelihood of miss-classification would increase if we created more granular categories. In terms of classifying members where little could be found online about them, we used the *wru* package in R, which is based on the methods described in Imai and Khanna (2016). This package uses both the surname of the board member and geographic location to predict a likely race of the board member.[9] By including the geographic location, the package improves the probability of predicting the correct race. We use the county in which the school board member resides because we do not have home addresses for board members.

We did test the reliability of both our hand-coding and the R packages by comparing it the voter registration files in Florida, in which school board members would have indicated themselves gender and race/ethnicity. The voter registration file identified 439 women board members and 246 men board members. The R package *gender()* correctly identified 433 women and 234 men. It incorrectly identified 12 men as women and 6 women as men. Overall, we believe that the package does well in assigning gender, but it does appear to struggle with more unique or gender-neutral names. The voter registration file identified 578 school board members as white, 68 as Black, and 43 as another racial/ethnic group (the voter registration files have 8 total categories). The *wru()* package correctly identified 542 white members, 24 Black members, and 14 members in a different category. It incorrectly classified 28 members as Black, while their voter registration file said white, and 44 members as white, while their voter registration file said Black. Because these racial groups are small, we are

[8] This includes Rhode Island, Delaware, Kansas, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The remaining states were hand coded, except where we could not find any information.

[9] This package is likely to be less accurate in cases of name changes, such as a name change from marriage.

more concerned with miss-classification. We, therefore, have only used this package when other information could not be found for the majority of states.[10] Our hand coding in Florida correctly identified 573 white school board members and 62 Black school board members. There were 5 members that were incorrectly coded as belonging to another racial/ethnic group who identified as white on their voter registration file as well as 5 members who were coded as white who identified as Black on their voter registration. Therefore, we have more trust in our hand-coding of race/ethnicity.

Survey of School Board Members

The survey was administered through Qualtrics over a six-week period from July 26, 2021 to September 15, 2021. We timed the survey several weeks prior to the start of the school year, and rolled out the survey state by state to reflect different school start dates in different states. We identified 9,655 emails from our list of 10,486 board members. For those we did not find email addresses, they are still included in our population. Of those surveyed, 1,022 members opened and started the survey. This is a response rate of approximately 10%. Of these that started the survey, 788 finished at least 50 percent of the survey and 751 respondents completed 100% of the survey. We are requiring that a respondent complete at least 50% of the survey to be included in our sample for analysis, which is a response rate of 7.5%. [11] Table 2 shows the number of emails by state, the percent of people that started the survey, and the percent of people who completed at least 50%. California had the highest response rate with 12% completing at least 50% of the survey, and Iowa had the lowest response rate with just three percent completing at least 50% of the survey. Moving to the school district level, there are 2,561 school districts in the states in our sample. We had a response from at least one board member in 687 districts or 26.8% of the districts. In

[10] Similar to the gender package, we did use it for the following states: South Dakota, Wyoming, Rhode Island, Kansas, and Delaware.

[11] Response rates of a survey of school board members administered by the National School Board Association was 23.6 percent in 2009 (Hess and Meeks, 2010) and 22 percent in a 2013 survey (Ford and Ihrke, 2016).

Table 2: Response Rate by State

State	Emails	Responses	Response Rate	Completed 50% or more
California	942	142	15%	12%
Colorado	954	104	11%	9.2%
Delaware	118	9	7.6%	6%
Florida	412	48	12%	10%
Georgia	1,076	94	8.7%	6%
Iowa	1,817	71	3.9%	3%
Kansas	1,933	143	7.4%	6%
Maryland	320	14	4.4%	4%
North Carolina	751	123	16%	11%
Rhode Island	203	29	14%	12%
South Dakota	830	40	4.8%	3.5%
Virginia	815	167	20%	16%
Wyoming	315	38	12%	10%
Total	10,486	1,022	9.7%	7.5%

most districts that we received a response from, we received one response (446 districts) or two responses (170 districts). However, there were 71 districts where three or more board members responded.

To determine how representative our sample is, we compare it to the population in two ways. First, how does our sample of school board members who started the survey match to our population of school board members in the 13 states? And second, how do school district characteristics match to the population of school district characteristics in those states? When we collected emails and names of school board members, we also collected information about gender and race. Table 3 shows school board level comparisons for those characteristics. In terms of the percentage of white board members, our sample is a close approximation to our population, although there is some variation across states. Gender is not as close; women are over-represented in our sample (52% in our sample compared to 45% in the overall population). Again, there is variation across states, with some state samples more representative than others. Tables 4 compares school district characteristics between the sample and population for a variety of characteristics within states state: number of

Table 3: Sample versus Population Comparison of Board Members

	% White			% Women		
State	Sample	Population	White/n	Sample	Population	Women/n
California[a]	79%	71%	667/942	54%	54%	510/942
Colorado	92%	90%	860/954	55%	48%	461/954
Delaware	100%	96%	113/118	56%	45%	53/118
Florida	85%	83%	342/412	75%	61%	252/412
Georgia	83%	80%	858/1,076	47%	37%	398/1,076
Iowa	99%	98%	1,782/1,817	49%	42%	765/1,817
Kansas	98%	98%	1,896/1,933	41%	39%	746/1,933
Maryland	64%	71%	227/320	71%	52%	168/320
North Carolina	73%	75%	564/751	43%	46%	349/751
Rhode Island	97%	90%	183/203	69%	50%	102/203
South Dakota	90%	95%	791/830	40%	41%	337/830
Virginia	86%	75%	613/815	59%	51%	419/815
Wyoming	95%	95%	299/315	53%	46%	145/315
Total	87%	88%	9,195/10,486	52%	45%	4,705/10,486

[a]: We have approximately one-third of the school districts from California.

students in district, % vote for Democratic presidential candidate within the school district[12]. Overall, characteristics are similar when comparing within state. We indicate when the sample mean is different from the population mean at a statistical threshold of 0.05. For example, the school districts in our sample from California has a slightly higher percent of people who attended college than our population (64.5% compared 62.6%). Of the 117 mean-comparison tests, 8 are statistically significant.[13]

[12]Precinct vote counts are aggregated to school district boundaries to get percentage based on Kitchens (2021) method

[13]We would expect 6 to be statistically significant just by random chance.

Table 4: Characteristics of School Districts

Population:

State	Number of Students	% Dem Pres Vote	% White Student	% Black Student	% Hispanic Student	County Population	County % College	Median Income	Districts
California	11,589	60.2	30.6	3.8	48.3	2,103,842	62.6	76,656	364
Colorado	5,306	32.7	63.8	1.6	29.8	172,651	62.3	58,684	168
Delaware	6,366	46.4	47.0	27.4	17.2	322,645	57.5	65,958	19
Florida	41,975	36.0	53.8	17.9	21.6	320,563	51.9	51,290	67
Georgia	8,328	34.3	48.8	34.5	11.5	71,831	46.6	47,138	170
Iowa	1,568	33.8	86.4	1.8	7.8	51,270	57.5	58,708	315
Kansas	1,774	22.5	80.2	1.9	12.1	54,035	59.3	54,164	280
Maryland	37,220	47.1	53.3	24.5	12.3	251,903	59.7	77,542	24
North Carolina	12,719	40.4	51.2	23.6	16.6	109,143	54.6	48,626	114
Rhode Island	3,880	54.6	74.0	4.8	13.4	360,638	62.7	70,052	34
South Dakota	940	28.6	79.6	0.8	4.2	24,034	56.8	56,547	146
Virginia	9,825	41.7	60.8	21.4	10.0	63,741	55.4	60,056	130
Wyoming	1,977	19.6	77.9	0.6	10.1	26,634	61.8	60,892	47
Avg	7,685	38%	62%	9%	19%	485,452	58 %	60,091	1,878

Sample:

State	Number of Students	% Dem Pres Vote	% White Student	% Black Student	% Hispanic Student	County Population	County % College	Median Income	Districts
California	10,395	61.7	31.7	4.0	43.1	2,207,309	64.5*	82,487	114
Colorado	6,058	38.7*	59.0	1.7	33.6	193,364	65.3*	62,984	67
Delaware	9,991	53.9	37.6	31.0	412,035	58.8	68,972	22.3	7
Florida	50,750	38.0	51.8	16.2	25.4	391,800	54.4	52,839	34
Georgia	9,284	35.3	47.3	32.9	14.5	107,588	49.2	49,941	67
Iowa	2,046	34.7	82.5	2.2	10.5	71,272	60.0*	62,061*	52
Kansas	2,992*	26.3*	79.2	2.5	11.9	82,679	60.4	55,025	103
Maryland	56,028	53.8	45.9	31.2	13.9	387,058	59.7	77,761	12
North Carolina	13,654	42.5	50.3	23.9	16.4	114,899	56.5	50,167	67
Rhode Island	3,640	55.8	76.5	4.3	10.4	330,818	63.9	71,869	19
South Dakota	2,332*	28.9	75.3	1.3	5.4	42,178	56.6	55,796	31
Virginia	11,489	41.9	62.4	19.6	10.0	74,238	56.6	61,440	90
Wyoming	2,868	22.4	79.2	0.6	10.5	32,494	62.4	62,038	24
Avg	10,560*	41%**	59%**	11%**	20%	476,888	59%**	61,938*	687

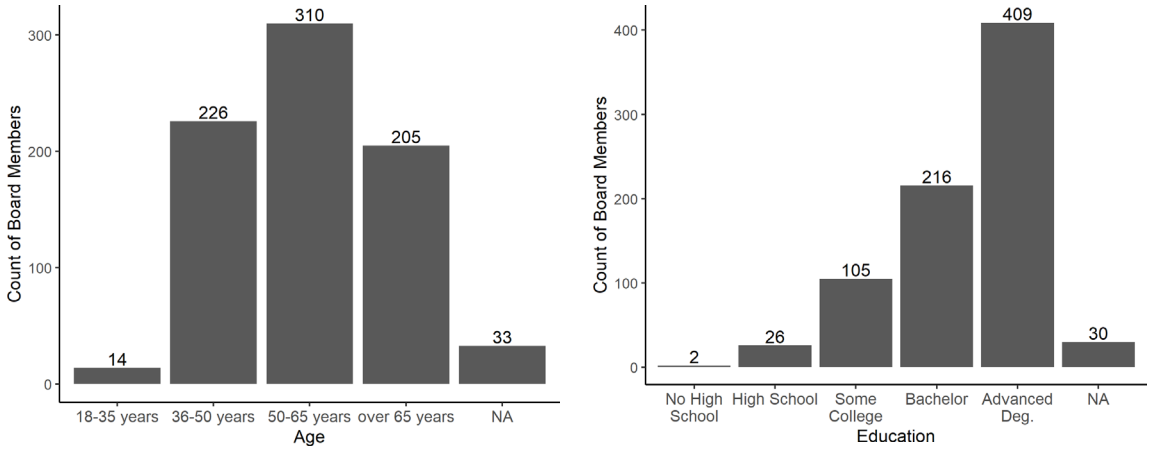
Note: We conducted means comparison t-tests between population and sample for means for each variable within a state. We use the following to denote statistically different mean from the population: *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Descriptive School Board Results

Individual Characteristics

One of the goals of the survey was to get a sense of *who* serves on school boards. To keep a consistent sample for our analysis, we focus on the 788 survey respondents that completed at least 50% of the survey. In the appendix, we report frequency tables for each question asked on the survey. We found that most board members are highly educated, with 54% having an advanced degree of some kind. Board members tend to older than the general population, with 70% over the age of 50. Sixty-four percent of members reported incomes over $100,000. Interestingly, 21.9% of board members do not have children, while another 2.5% have children enrolled in a different district than they represent. Most members, 78.6%, are not part of a teacher's union. The most common occupation for members were education (17/6%), professional services (12.1%), and retired (18.9%). Less than five percent of our sample were appointed to the position of school board, while the rest were elected to the position.

Figure 1: School Board Member Demographics

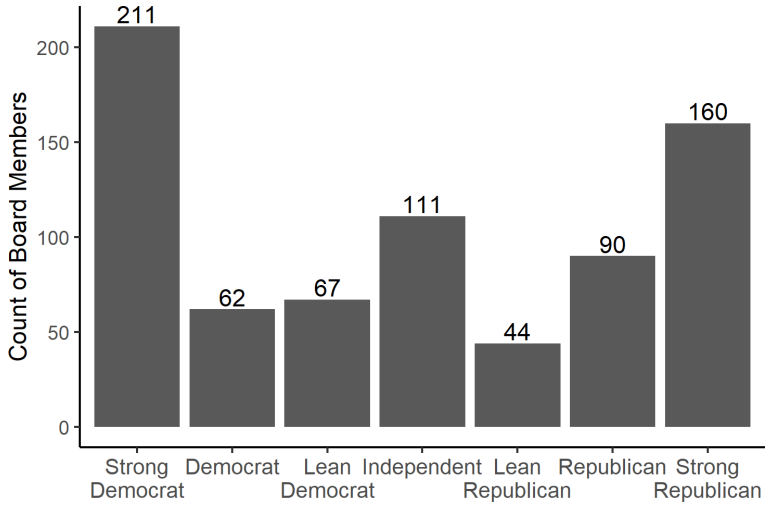


In terms of self-identified gender, approximately half of the sample identified as women.[14] The vast majority of the school board members identified as white (80.4%) with 7%

[14] This is slightly different than our gender totals presented earlier because we used our coding of gender there. There were 32 people who did not answer this question here that we identified in our data set.

identified as Black and 8.5% in a different race category. In terms of ethnicity, 4.5% of members identified as Hispanic. Because most school board elections are nonpartisan, we often do not know as much about the political composition of school boards. However, our survey asked members to report their partisan identification.[15]. Figure 2 shows the distribution of partisanship among school board members in the sample. The sample of school board members skews slightly Democratic. Most notably, the sample shows a distribution consistent with polarization; the most common answers were "strong Democrat" or "strong Republican."

Figure 2: Partisanship of School Board Members



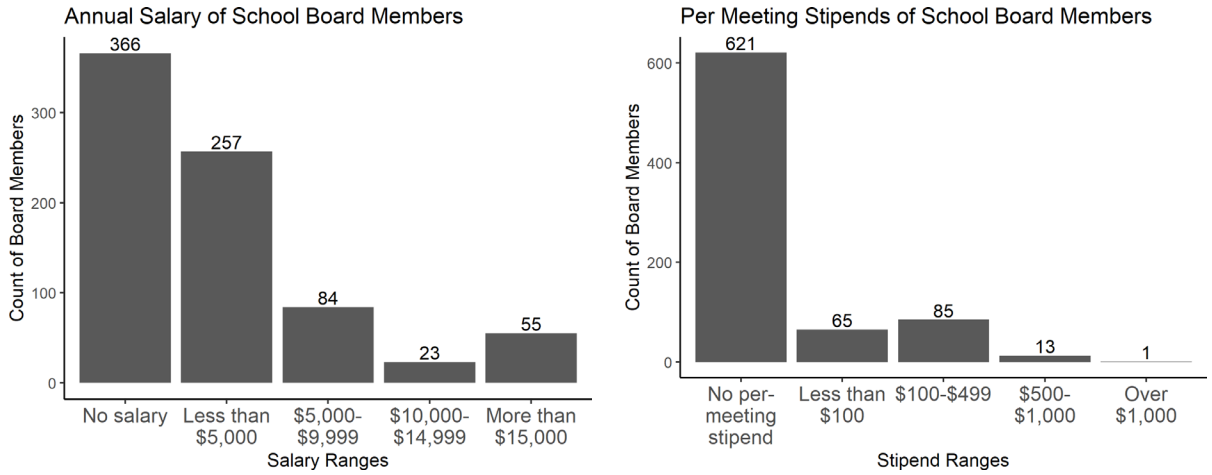
Institutional Characteristics

Our survey shows that school boards are very much "citizen legislatures;" they are, in many cases, essentially volunteer positions or have minimal compensation, and they have few resources at their disposal. Figure 3 illustrates this phenomenon. School board members might receive compensation through a yearly salary or through per meeting stipends, if they are paid at all. Of those that receive yearly salaries, the graph on the left in Figure 3 shows that most members receive less than $5000 in annual compensation. On the right,

[15] We followed the same wording and branching as the American National Election Study. Respondents are coded into a 7-point party identification scale from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican."

Figure 3 shows that the majority receive no compensation for meetings. Between these two methods of compensation, the modal response was a totally volunteer position with zero compensation.

Figure 3: Board Member Compensation



It is unsurprising, based on the low compensation levels, that school board members do not necessarily have the time to make district governance their full-time job. Without compensation, they need another source of income. We asked school board members to report how much time they spend on board activities in a typical month. The modal school board member spends 7-14 hours per month on board related activities. The lack of compensation may also play a role in constraining the amount of time members devote to board related activities, which means that boards may be trying to accomplish a great deal with a short time schedule. One of our other goals with the survey was to understand how much the pandemic changed the workload of school board members; Figure 4 shows the percent of that time spent during the summer of 2020 and the 2020-2021 academic year spent working on COVID reopening plans. As citizen legislators with limited resources, the pandemic placed additional stress on these institutions - and created significant stress for the members themselves. We asked how the stress of the job had changed because of the pandemic (see Table A.4 in the appendix). The overwhelming majority believe that the stress was much more than it had been prior to the pandemic. The sizable constraints on school boards

as institutions should make school board members more likely to outsource many tasks to institutions with more capacity.

Figure 4: Proportion of members time on planning reopening plans

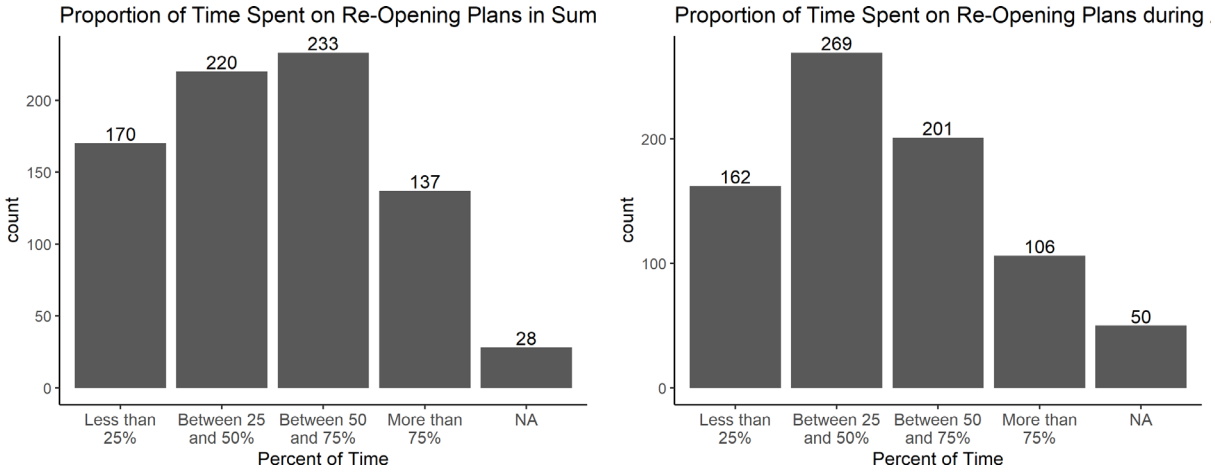
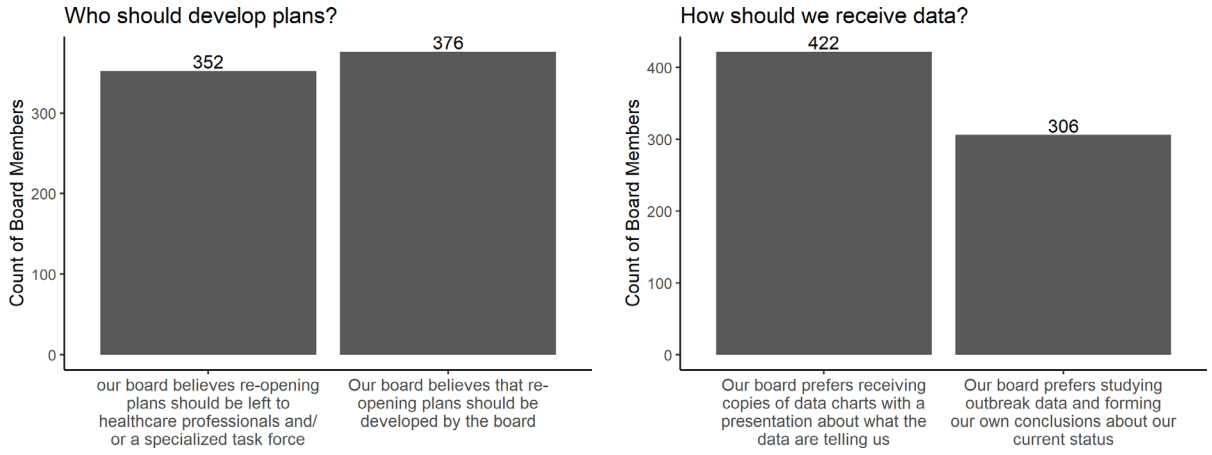


Figure 5: Preference for Control vs. Outsourcing



Note: Board members were fairly evenly split on whether boards or public health experts should craft mitigation policies, but a majority of members reported that their boards do like to receive presentations about what the current data show, rather than interpreting data themselves.

There is some evidence that board members accrue experience over time; responses to the survey indicated that the modal school board member actually has more than five years of experience. However, approximately 250 school board members had less than two years experience. For many of those members, they had very little time to gain experience before

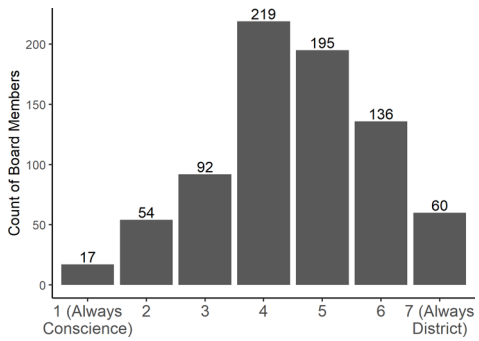
the pandemic forced districts to focus on COVID-19 related policies. Board members reported bringing some expertise as parents, former educators, or from professional experience in finance, but it is rare that members have extensive experience in school administration or public health.[16] For those members who have little relevant experience coming into their positions, they often must learn the job as they do it. Members may participate in occasional professional development (often by the state school board association), but reported time commitment suggests that members likely are not devoting tremendous time to development.[17]

Although members did report significant time and salary constraints, many did report that they have access to some staff and administrative support, including research staff (see Table B.26 in appendix). This may help reduce some of their workload, although these support staff may also report to the superintendent. However, even in light of difficulties faced by members in these roles, a slight majority reported a preference for controlling the re-opening plans as shown in Figure 5 (left). More board members did indicate that they preferred to outsource more technical tasks like interpreting outbreak data as shown in Figure 5 (right). This suggests that there may be some resistance by the board to give up control, even as the board has little legislative capacity at its disposal. Finally, Figure 6 shows that there is variation in dealing with conflict between member's own conscience and the district when they disagree. While many indicate that they would try to find a balance, the distribution skews toward following the districts wishes over their own conscience.

[16] Figure B.25 in Appendix B shows the proportion of members who reported bringing expertise in finance, education, or parenting.

[17] Figure B.28 in Appendix B shows the distribution of members who participate in professional development and the frequency of those opportunities.

Figure 6: When there is a conflict, do you follow your own conscience or follow what the people in your district want?



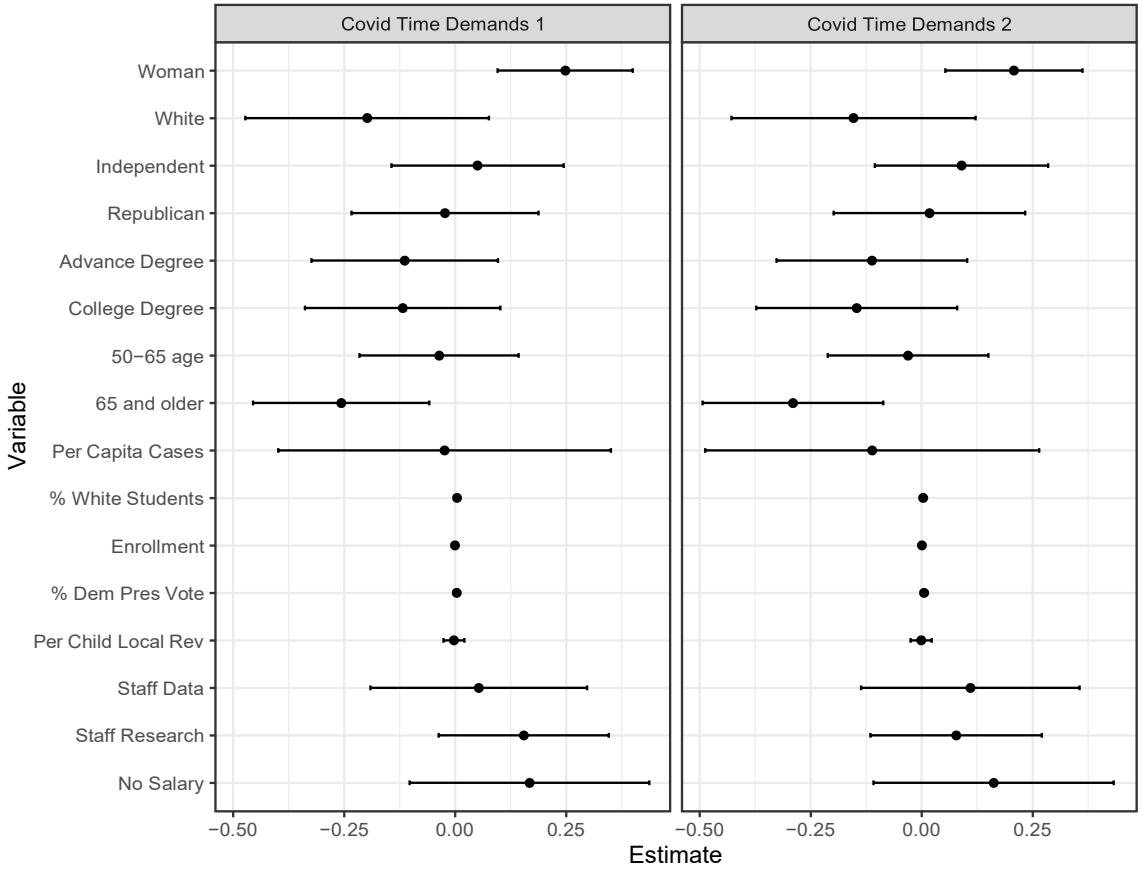
Note: The majority indicate that they try to balance between their own conscience and the district.

Regression Results:

Identifying what shapes decision-making

We first focus on explaining variation in time devoted to school re-opening plans, then move to differences in the decision-making process, and finally we focus on explaining variation in trust in sources. Because state-level factors mattered significantly in developing plans (i.e. state-wide mask mandates), state fixed effects help control for state-specific variation. We include individual level variables and district level variables in our models. At the individual level, we include gender, race, education, age, and partisanship. These are all from the survey and as reported by the individual taking the survey. At the district level, we include whether the board receives a salary, has staff for data analysis, has staff for research, size of the district, % of the school district that voted for the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate, % of the students who are white, per capita Covid cases in June of 2020 in the county, and per child local revenue of the district. We report robust standard errors.

Figure 7: Percent of Time Developing COVID Plans



Figures plot the coefficients from the model as well as their 95% confidence intervals. State fixed effects are included in the model but not plotted.

Time Devoted to Reopening Plans

We first focus on what factors predicted time devoted to COVID re-opening plans in summer 2020 (COVID Time 1) and the 2020-2021 school year (COVID Time 2). For simplicity, we ran an OLS regression model with the dependent variable coded 1 through 4, with 1 representing less than 25% of time and 4 representing more than 75% of time. Regression coefficients are plotted in Figure 7 and Table A.3. Interestingly, the only factors that is statistically related to share of time spent are gender and age. Contrary to our hypothesis, we do not find a partisan effect. Women were more likely to say COVID planning took up a larger share of their time, while individuals over the age of 65 were less likely to say

COVID planning took up a larger share of their time. District resources and salary are not statistically related nor where there partisan differences in planning.

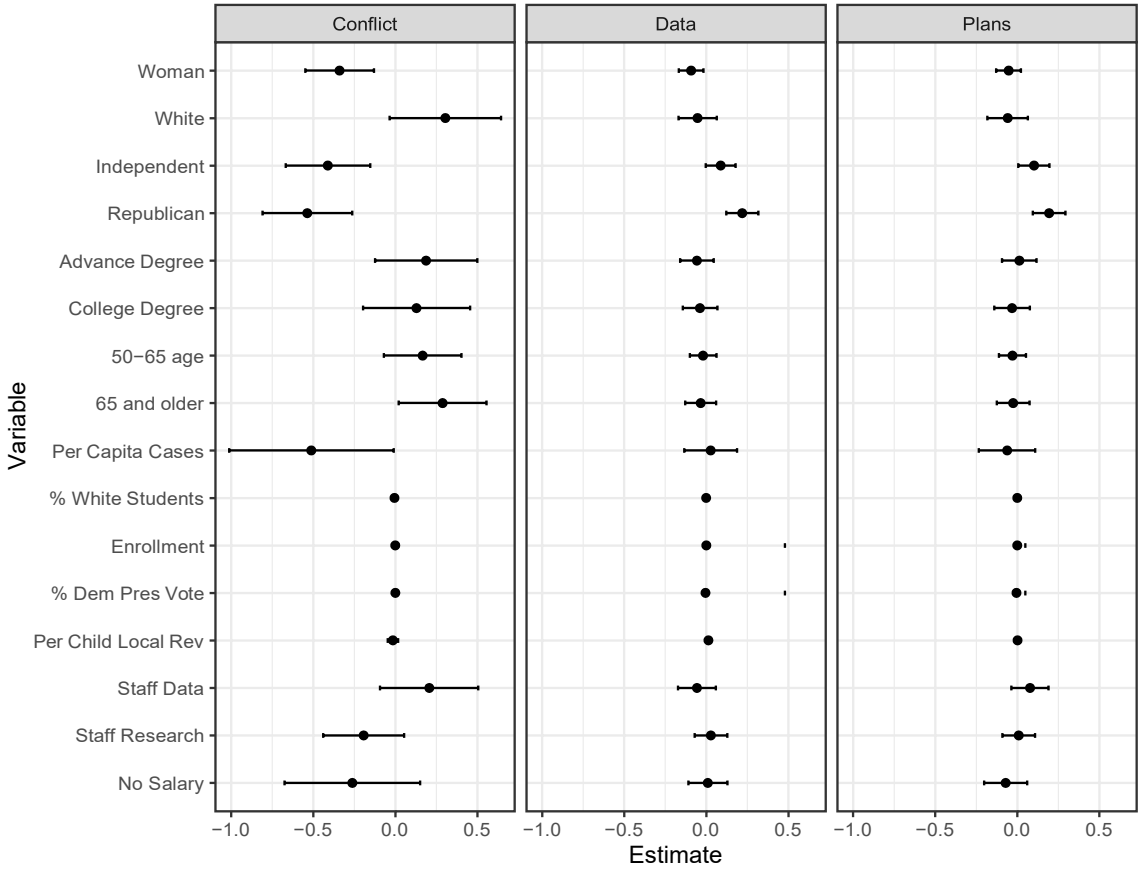
The Role of the Board

We next looked at the decision-making process of board members through three questions. The first question asks, when there is a conflict between what you think is best and what the people in your district want, do you think you should follow your own conscience or follow what the people in your district want? Respondents could answer from 1 (always conscience) to 7 (always district). This regression is labeled *Conflict* in Figure 8 and Table A.2 in the appendix, which displays the full regression results. Similar to the previous results, we find a gender and age effect. Women were more likely to report going with their conscience than men (coef. -0.34), while those over 65 were more likely to report going with the district (coef. 0.29). There was also a strong partisan effect, with both Independents and Republicans reporting going with conscience at higher rates than Democrats.

The next dependent variable in this set of models asked about how the school board should receive data. Responses are coded 1 if board members say that the board prefers studying outbreak data and forming on conclusions and 0 if they responded that they prefer receiving presentations about what the data are telling them. This regression is labeled *Data* in Figure 8 and Table A.2 in the appendix, which displays the full regression results. Republicans are more likely to prefer to reach own conclusions about the data than Democrats, with independents being marginally significant. District partisanship also matters; board members in districts of higher Democratic voters are more likely to prefer receiving presentations about data. Gender is statistically significant, with women preferring to have presentations instead of drawing own conclusions. Finally in school districts that have higher per child local revenue, school board members are more likely to prefer to draw their own conclusions. Again, staff support and salary are not significant predictors.

The last dependent variable focuses on re-opening plans. Respondents were asked to

Figure 8: What is the role of the board?



Figures plot the coefficients from the model as well as their 95% confidence intervals. State fixed effects are included in the model but not plotted.

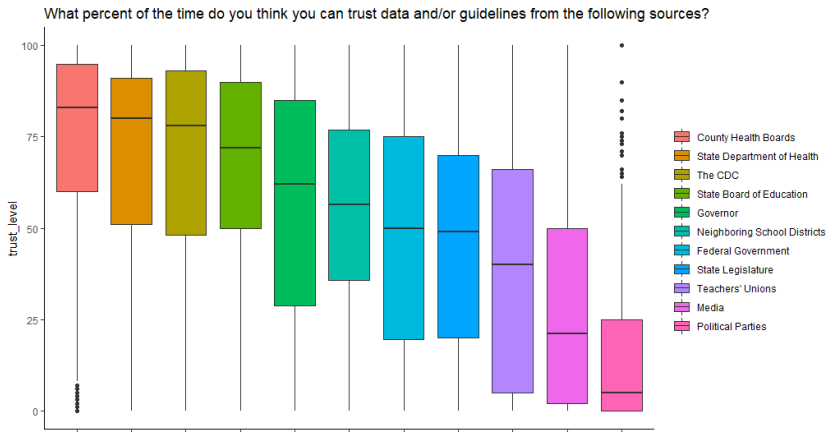
choose which best describes their board: our board believes re-opening plans should be l e f t to healthcare professionals and/or a specialized task force or our board believes re- opening plans should be developed by the board. For respondents that believed the board should develop the plans, we coded this as 1. Those that responded that it should be left to the professionals were coded as 0. This regression is labeled *Plans* in Figure 8 and Table A.2 in the appendix, which displays the full regression results. In this model, only partisanship is statistically significant, with Republicans and Independents more likely than Democrats to say that plans should be developed by the board. We also see that district partisanship matters here. That is, the higher the percentage of the school district that voted for Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election, the more likely board member

was to favor healthcare professionals and/or specialized task force. Staff support and salary are not significant predictors.

Trust in Sources

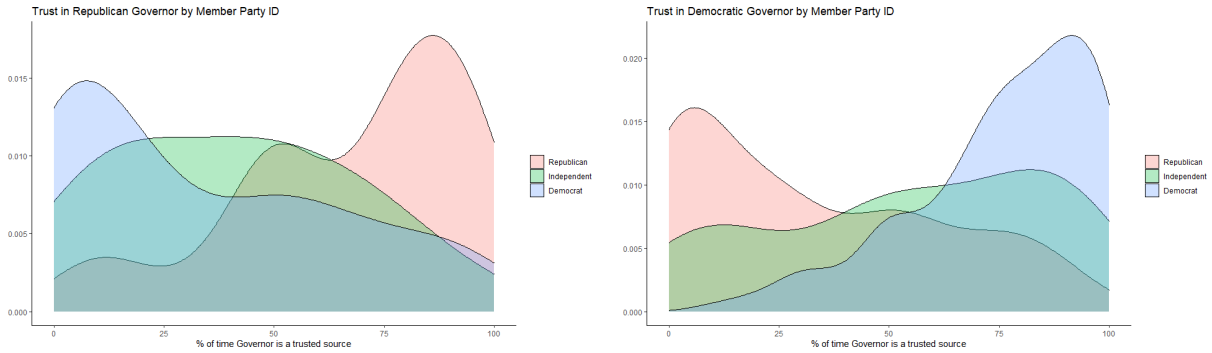
We turned our focus to the level of trust that school board members had in ten different sources when it came to COVID decision-making. School board members were asked how much they trusted each individual source and to select a number between 0 and 100 to indicate the level of trust. Zero indicates no trust while 100 would indicate complete trust. Figure 9 shows the distribution of scores for each source. The most trusted source was County Health Boards (73.1), followed by State Department of Health (70.0). We hypothesize that the strongest predictor of how much a school board member trusts a source is how aligned their partisanship is. Figure 10 shows the distribution of trust in governors based on board member partisanship before adding controls to illustrate this. The graph on the left is trust in the Republican Governor and the graph on the right is trust in the Democratic Governor. Members who identify as Republican have high trust when it is a Republican governor but low trust when it is a Democratic governor. The same is true for members who identify as a Democrat.

Figure 9: Trust in Sources



Note: The most trusted source was County Health Boards, and the least trusted source was political parties.

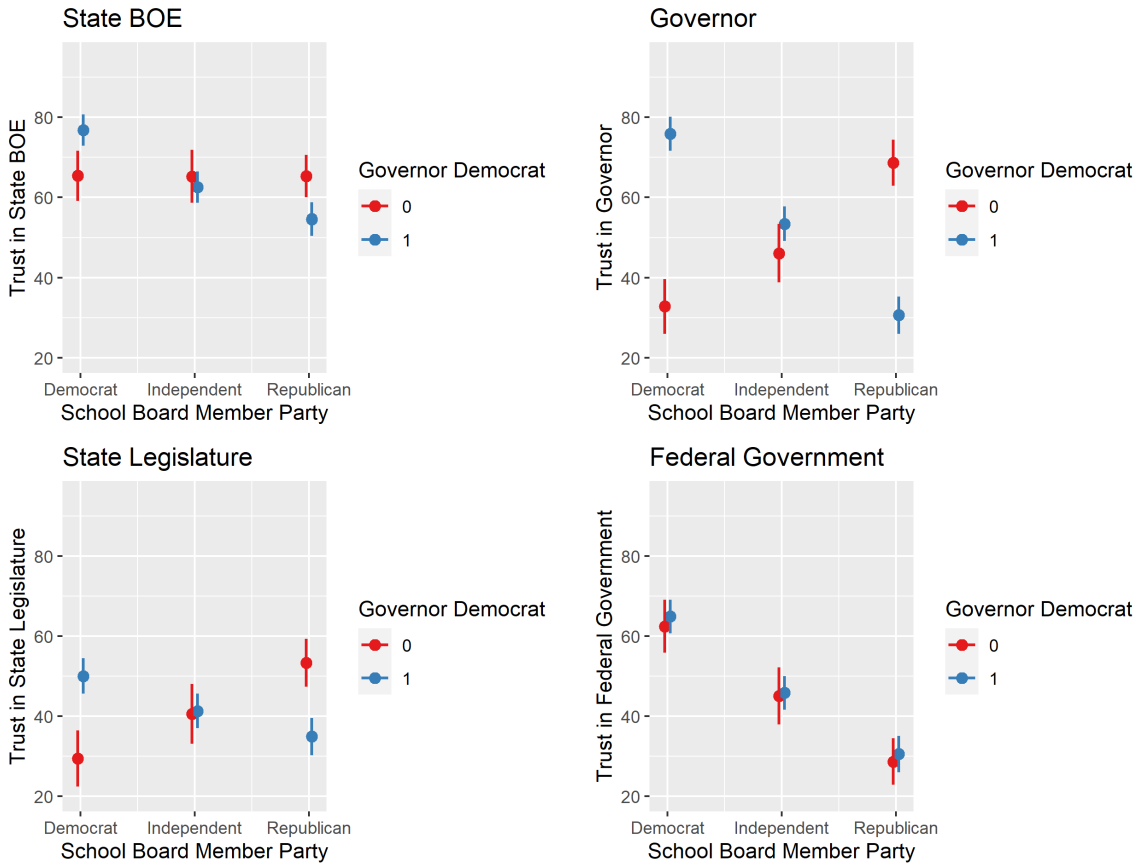
Figure 10: Trust in Governors



We then ran a series of regressions predicting trust in source. We include the same set of controls as the previous runs but we also include a dummy variable for a Democrat Governor. We interact board member party ID with party of Governor at the state level. Regression results are reported in Table A.5 and Table A.6. We then plotted in the interaction effects in Figure 11 and Figure 12. While the level of trust does depend on the source, several interesting patterns emerged across sources. First, women consistently ranked each source higher in trust than men. In almost all models, it is statistically significant and positive. Individuals who identified as white tended to have lower trust in many sources: Governor, State Legislature, Political Parties, State Board of Education, and other school districts. However, this effect was not present for trust in health-related sources: County Health Boards, State Department of Health, of the CDC. School board members in larger school districts also reported lower levels of trust across all sources.

Partisanship played a strong role and depended both the self-identified party id of the school board member and the party of the Governor of the state that the school board member was in. Figure 11 plots the interaction for the four state and federal sources from four separate regressions. The dependent variable in each sub-figure is the trust in that particular source. The State Board of Education has a small partisan effect (top left figure). In states that have a Democrat for a governor, members who identify as Democrat have the greatest trust in this source. But the overall trust declines for a Democrat member who has a Republican governor. The reverse is true for Republican school board members.

Figure 11: Interaction Effect in State and Federal Government Models

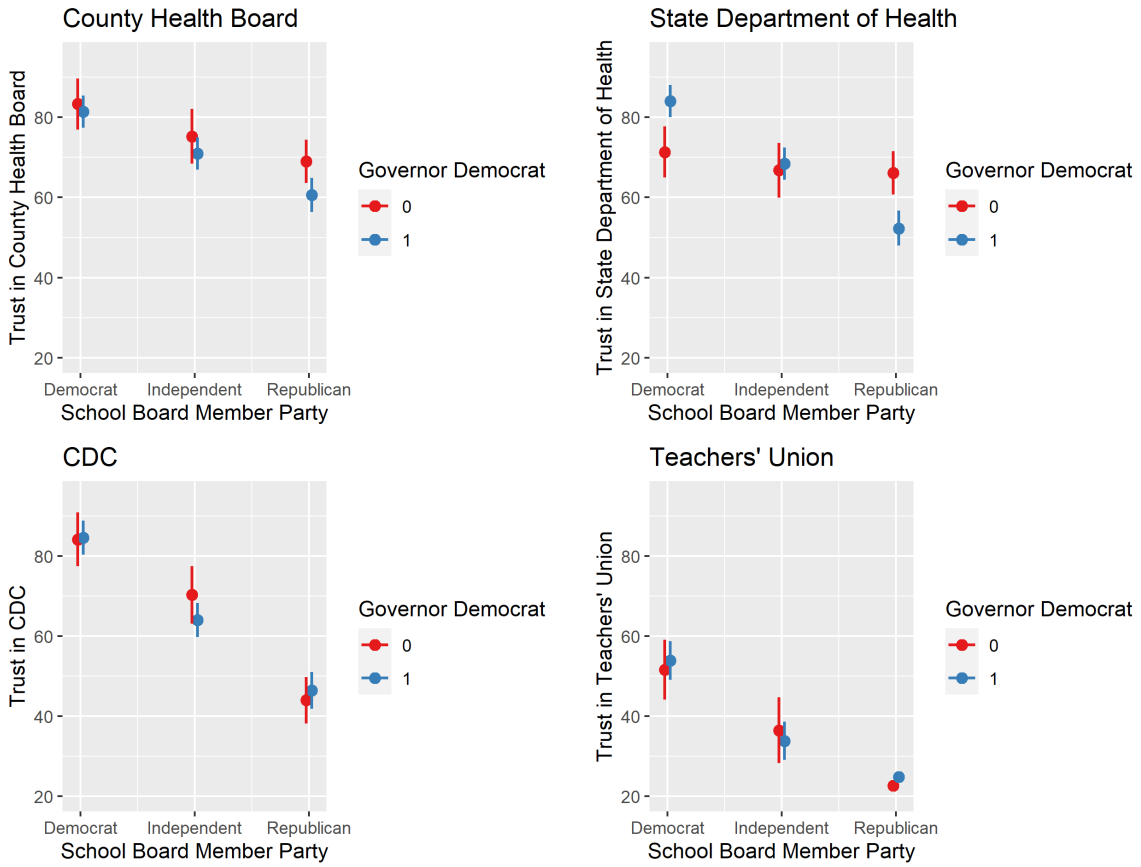


Figures plot the interaction effect for school board member political party and party of governor in the state. Standard errors are clustered by state.

However, the decline in trust is relatively small and around 10 points. There is a much larger partisan effect when the source is governor (top right figure). When a school board member has a governor from the opposing party, the trust in them declines roughly 40 points. Similarly state legislatures see this same effect, but to a lesser degree (bottom left figure). Perhaps because their overall trust is lower. Finally, the federal government sees a strong partisan effect, but not an interactive one. This is what we would expect, with Democrats having a much more trusting view of the federal government than the Republicans when the presidency, House, and Senate were controlled by Democrats.

Turning to non-partisan sources in Figure 12, the interaction effects mostly disappear. County Health Boards see the highest levels of trust (top left figure). And while Republican

Figure 12: Interaction Effect in Health Models



Figures plot the interaction effect for school board member political party and party of governor in the state. Standard errors are clustered by state.

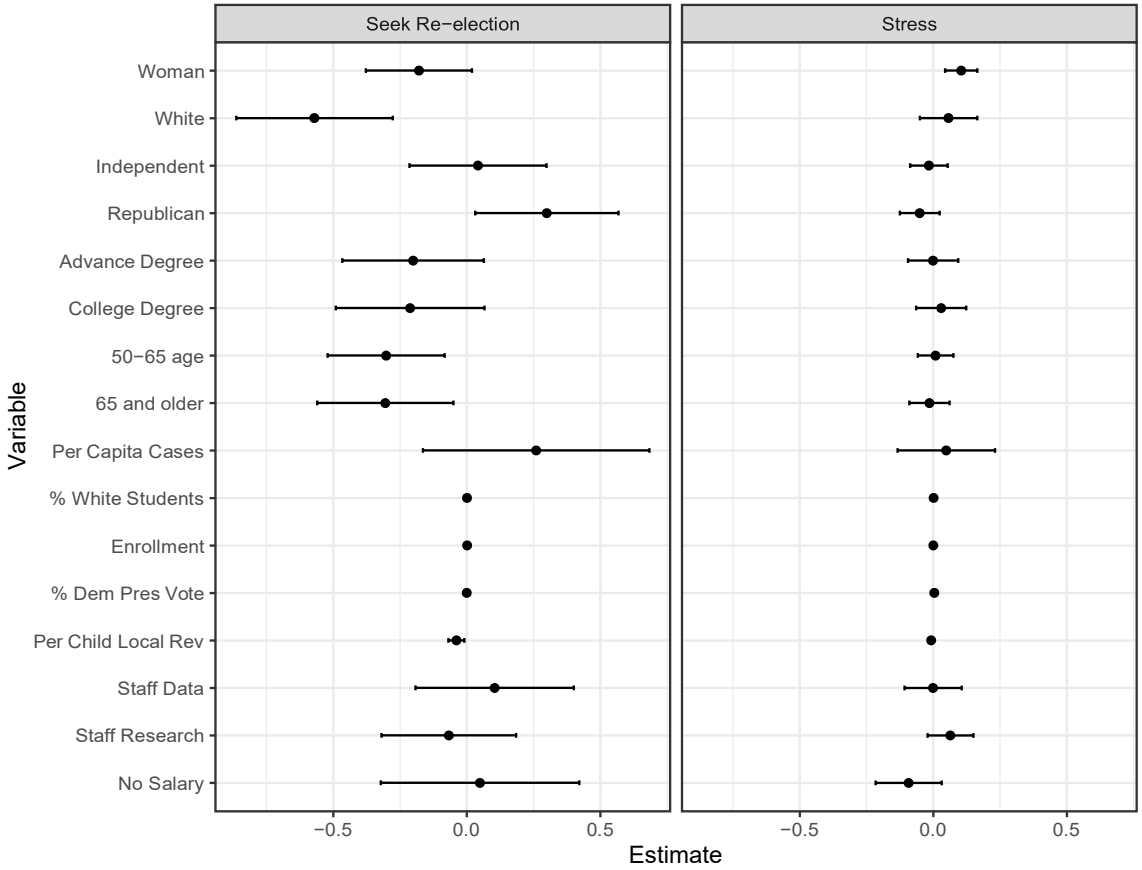
members reported lower levels of trust of these boards, the difference was small. It is also the source that Republican members reported trusting the most. Trust in the CDC followed the same partisan pattern as the federal government, but overall levels were higher for the CDC than the federal government (bottom left figure). When a school board member has a governor from the opposing party, the trust in State department of health declines roughly 10 points (top right figure), and Republican members have lower trust in the State Department of Health than Democrat members. Finally, teacher's unions have some of the lowest levels of trust (bottom right figure).

Stress of Job and Seeking Re-election

Finally, we looked to see what factors predicted stress of the job and likelihood of seeking re-election. For stress of job, we excluded anyone who said it was their first year, and then re-coded so that 1 indicated less stressful as the year previously, 2 was about the same, and 3 indicated more stress. Coefficients from the regression are plotted in Figure 13 on the right. Women were more likely to indicate higher levels of stress than men. The only other variable that was statistically significant was the percent of the school district that voted for the Democratic candidate in the presidential race. In areas that voted at higher rates for the Democrat candidate, members were likely to report a slight increase in stress.

For seeking re-election, we again turned our variable into a numeric scale with 1 indicating definitely not seeking re-election to 5 definitely running again. Those who self-identified as white are less likely to say they are seeking re-election compared to those who did not. Members who identified as Republicans are more likely to say they are seeking re-election compared to Democrats. Women are marginally less likely to say they are seeking re-election (p-value is 0.06).

Figure 13: Predicting Stress of Job and likelihood of seeking re-election



Figures plot the coefficients from the model as well as their 95% confidence intervals. State fixed effects are included in the model but not plotted.

Discussion and Conclusion

In open-ended responses on the survey, school board members highlighted their frustration with the politicization of the pandemic. One member wrote: “Political messaging made things more difficult.” Another member wrote, “It seemed to me that the governor was reacting to political pressure. I preferred safety first” while another stated “All the governing bodies need to get on the same page. THIS IS NOT POLITICAL!!! We have a responsibility to educate children, and in that process their safety while under our care has to be #1.” In speaking directly with school board members in one-on-one interviews, we received the same message: decisions should be about children’s health and education and

nothing else. However, we observe again and again that a member's partisanship shaped the process. Members were much more likely to identify at the extremes, as a strong Democrat or a strong Republican. And how they identified mattered in who they trusted to tell them information, how much control they felt the board should have in the process of re-opening plans, and who should interpret data about COVID. Most school board elections are non-partisan, but that does not mean that the members themselves do not strongly identify with a party.

As school boards have moved to the forefront of national conflict in culture war issues around the pandemic, LGBTQ+ rights, and race, board members are increasingly weighing in on issues that are polarizing along party lines. The nationalization of issues school boards are dealing with has several implications. But perhaps one of the most important implications is that nationalization fundamentally goes against the purpose of local school boards. School boards were designed to be responsive to the issues facing a community. As Hopkins (2018) notes, if local politics is focused on the same issues as national politics, there is likely to be a disconnect between issues and needs that the voters (and students) face and what dominates the political debates. School boards with public deliberation are the preferred governing option of schools (Collins, 2021*a*). This helps facilitate local democracy and allows members to be responsive to local needs. The majority of school board members in our survey said that citizen involvement was higher now than pre-pandemic (see Tables B.40 and B.41).

We spoke with 53 school board members in one-on-one interviews after the initial survey. Many members noted that the increased involvement was seen as a positive for most members as long as it was not hostile and from actual constituents. However, many noticed a pattern with the increased participation in meetings- it did not always follow that the increased citizen involvement helped in better understanding what should be done for students within a school district. A school board member in Virginia described the phenomenon:

> And people are coming to the meetings, they're speaking out, it's kind of blended into

> some of the things we're seeing in the election cycle. So like critical race theory. You know, mask mandates, vaccine mandates things that people are talking about in the political sphere, are now people are talking about when they sign up to speak at citizen common time. Even if we're not making any decisions on those items, right at the last minute on your agenda, they're putting it on our agenda. They're driving our agenda.

While there had been trends of nationalization in school boards prior to the pandemic (i.e. Reckhow et al. (2017)), the pandemic has propelled school boards to the center of the culture wars battles. And for the foreseeable future, it seems that is where they will stay. Not only are elites helping to reinforce the polarization and nationalization trends, so too are constituents. Because these are mostly unpaid positions, the increased demands and politicization of the position will likely affect who is willing to serve as school board members in the future.

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Appendix A: Additional Tables

Table A.1: Partisan breakdown by gender

	Man	Other	Woman	Total
Democrat	89 (32.6%)	1 (0.3%)	183 (67%)	273 (100%)
Independent	116 (52.3)	3 (1.3%)	103 (46.4%)	222 (100%)
Republican	142 (56.8%)	1 (0.4%)	107(42.8%)	250 (100%)
Total	347	5	393	745

Table A.2: Board Vs. District

	Plans	Data	Conflict
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Woman	−0.053	−0.093**	−0.339***
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.107)
White	−0.059	−0.053	0.304*
	(0.063)	(0.059)	(0.173)
Independent	0.101**	0.087*	−0.411***
	(0.049)	(0.046)	(0.131)
Republican	0.194***	0.219***	−0.536***
	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.139)
Advance Degree	0.012	−0.058	0.188
	(0.054)	(0.052)	(0.159)
College Degree	−0.032	−0.038	0.129
	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.166)
50-65 age	−0.029	−0.020	0.166
	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.121)
65 and older	−0.025	−0.035	0.288**
	(0.051)	(0.048)	(0.137)
Per Capita Cases	−0.062	0.026	−0.512**
	(0.088)	(0.082)	(0.256)
% White Students	−0.0001	−0.002	−0.005
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.004)
Enrollment	−0.001	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Dem Pres Vote	−0.005***	−0.006***	−0.0003
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.005)
Per Child Local Rev	0.002	0.012**	−0.014
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.016)
Staff Data	0.077	−0.058	0.207
	(0.058)	(0.059)	(0.153)
Staff Research	0.009	0.028	−0.192
	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.126)
No Salary	−0.071	0.009	−0.261
	(0.067)	(0.061)	(0.211)
Constant	0.649***	0.613***	5.217***
	(0.148)	(0.148)	(0.456)
Observations	685	685	726

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.3: Covid Time Demands

	Summer 2020	2020-2021
	(1)	(2)
Woman	0.248***	0.208***
	(0.078)	(0.079)
White	−0.198	−0.153
	(0.140)	(0.140)
Independent	0.051	0.090
	(0.099)	(0.100)
Republican	−0.023	0.017
	(0.107)	(0.110)
Advance Degree	−0.113	−0.112
	(0.107)	(0.110)
College Degree	−0.118	−0.146
	(0.112)	(0.116)
50-65 age	−0.036	−0.031
	(0.092)	(0.092)
65 and older	−0.257**	−0.290***
	(0.101)	(0.104)
Per Capita Cases	−0.024	−0.111
	(0.191)	(0.192)
% White Students	0.004	0.003
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Enrollment	−0.0002	0.0004
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Dem Pres Vote	0.004	0.006
	(0.004)	(0.004)
Per Child Local Rev	−0.003	−0.001
	(0.012)	(0.012)
Staff Data	0.053	0.110
	(0.124)	(0.126)
Staff Research	0.155	0.078
	(0.098)	(0.099)
No Salary	0.167	0.162
	(0.138)	(0.138)
Constant	2.385***	2.323***
	(0.324)	(0.328)
Observations	718	692

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.4: Re-election and Stress

	Re-election	Stress
	(1)	(2)
Woman	−0.179*	0.104***
	(0.101)	(0.031)
White	−0.570***	0.057
	(0.150)	(0.055)
Independent	0.042	−0.016
	(0.131)	(0.036)
Republican	0.299**	−0.051
	(0.137)	(0.038)
Advance Degree	−0.201	−0.001
	(0.135)	(0.048)
College Degree	−0.212	0.029
	(0.142)	(0.048)
50-65 age	−0.302***	0.009
	(0.112)	(0.034)
65 and older	−0.305**	−0.015
	(0.130)	(0.038)
Per Capita Cases	0.260	0.049
	(0.216)	(0.093)
% White Students	0.001	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.001)
Enrollment	0.002	−0.0002
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Dem Pres Vote	0.0001	0.003**
	(0.005)	(0.001)
Per Child Local Rev	−0.039**	−0.008
	(0.015)	(0.005)
Staff Data	0.104	−0.001
	(0.151)	(0.055)
Staff Research	−0.068	0.064
	(0.129)	(0.044)
No Salary	0.050	−0.093
	(0.190)	(0.063)
Constant	4.325***	2.554***
	(0.424)	(0.127)
Observations	731	644

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.5: Trust in Source

	State BOE	Governor	State Leg	Federal Gov	Parties
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Woman	5.04***	3.20	5.28**	7.22***	4.88***
	(1.94)	(2.07)	(2.16)	(2.09)	(1.64)
White	−6.60**	−9.36***	−15.91***	−0.30	−8.76***
	(3.09)	(3.34)	(3.59)	(3.44)	(3.30)
Independent	−0.16	13.27**	11.12**	−17.38***	−6.50*
	(4.59)	(5.49)	(5.13)	(4.77)	(3.93)
Republican	−0.09	35.76***	23.93***	−33.79***	−4.52
	(4.12)	(4.81)	(4.15)	(4.20)	(3.70)
Advance Degree	1.98	6.92**	−1.35	2.30	−3.03
	(2.92)	(3.23)	(3.11)	(3.11)	(2.50)
College Degree	0.51	5.30	−1.59	−4.07	−5.75**
	(3.02)	(3.29)	(3.22)	(3.23)	(2.48)
50-65 age	2.41	1.02	−1.70	0.06	−0.76
	(2.25)	(2.45)	(2.41)	(2.40)	(1.82)
65 and older	0.91	2.59	−4.62*	1.54	2.12
	(2.47)	(2.71)	(2.75)	(2.72)	(2.10)
Per Capita Cases	−0.65	−4.46	8.42*	2.24	2.01
	(4.12)	(5.36)	(5.06)	(4.64)	(3.71)
% White Students	0.13**	0.11*	0.09	0.07	0.04
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Enrollment	−0.15***	−0.07*	−0.11***	−0.03	−0.09***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Dem Pres Vote	0.09	0.04	0.13	0.08	0.08
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Per Child Local Rev	−0.60**	−0.59**	−0.21	−0.07	−0.09
	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.21)
Staff Data	−0.003	−1.76	−0.94	−0.93	−0.74
	(2.86)	(3.29)	(3.26)	(3.20)	(2.55)
Staff Research	−0.05	0.17	0.91	−2.36	1.09
	(2.20)	(2.76)	(2.74)	(2.65)	(2.10)
Dem Gov	11.41***	43.07***	20.63***	2.45	1.93
	(3.54)	(4.15)	(3.72)	(3.66)	(3.37)
Indep X Dem Gov	−14.04***	−35.67***	−19.89***	−1.70	−1.94
	(5.18)	(6.04)	(5.83)	(5.53)	(4.49)
Rep X Dem Gov	−22.10***	−81.02***	−39.10***	−0.57	−4.53
	(4.81)	(5.39)	(5.05)	(4.97)	(4.23)
Constant	61.11***	32.46***	35.30***	53.27***	22.90***
	(7.02)	(8.08)	(7.85)	(7.22)	(6.43)
Observations	724	719	716	711	627

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.6: Trust in Source

	County Health Boards	State Dep. of Health	CDC	Teachers Union	Other Districts
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Woman	4.78**	4.85**	6.55***	7.26***	3.15
	(1.98)	(1.99)	(2.16)	(2.42)	(2.18)
White	−1.85	−5.58*	−3.28	−1.15	−7.53*
	(2.85)	(3.06)	(3.14)	(4.17)	(3.91)
Independent	−8.09**	−4.57	−13.84***	−15.12***	0.12
	(3.91)	(4.69)	(4.22)	(5.53)	(4.84)
Republican	−14.32***	−5.27	−40.18***	−29.01***	−1.72
	(3.46)	(4.17)	(4.11)	(4.78)	(4.35)
Advance Degree	10.18***	7.42**	8.20**	−1.40	−1.38
	(3.14)	(3.19)	(3.48)	(3.39)	(3.17)
College Degree	5.89*	3.05	0.63	−3.50	−2.53
	(3.28)	(3.33)	(3.67)	(3.61)	(3.37)
50-65 age	3.73	0.22	−0.33	−6.08**	3.52
	(2.34)	(2.33)	(2.44)	(2.71)	(2.53)
65 and older	4.00	2.85	2.63	−6.13**	2.21
	(2.55)	(2.51)	(2.69)	(3.12)	(2.92)
Per Capita Cases	−8.61	−1.10	−9.07*	4.29	2.98
	(5.71)	(5.20)	(4.98)	(5.31)	(4.90)
% White Students	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.05	0.15**
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Enrollment	−0.07**	−0.09***	−0.06**	−0.09**	−0.07*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Dem Pres Vote	0.10	0.10	0.04	0.04	0.01
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Per Child Local Rev	−0.27	−0.56**	−0.07	−0.06	−0.34
	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.32)	(0.32)
Staff Data	7.75**	7.53**	1.17	2.59	−0.38
	(3.12)	(3.17)	(3.27)	(3.57)	(3.31)
Staff Research	0.02	0.01	0.46	0.37	2.14
	(2.41)	(2.44)	(2.65)	(2.91)	(2.80)
Dem Gov	−1.96	12.69***	0.49	2.34	3.22
	(2.73)	(3.47)	(2.45)	(4.30)	(3.82)
Indep X Dem Gov	−2.34	−11.05**	−6.81	−4.99	−6.18
	(4.63)	(5.22)	(4.87)	(6.30)	(5.56)
Rep X Dem Gov	−6.43	−26.39***	1.99	−0.15	−4.27
	(4.48)	(4.95)	(4.95)	(5.59)	(5.23)
Constant	66.85***	58.78***	78.91***	48.18***	51.49***
	(7.46)	(7.24)	(7.09)	(8.35)	(8.33)
Observations	720	722	715	643	668

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix B: Survey Details

Table B.1: What gender do you identify as?

Gender	Count	%
Man	354	44.9
Woman	397	50.4
Non-binary	5	0.6
NAs	32	4.1
Total	788	100

Table B.2: What is your age?

Age	Count	%
18-35 years	14	1.7
36-50 years	226	28.6
50-65 years	310	39.3
over 65 years	205	26.0
NA's	33	4.1
Total	788	100

Table B.3: What is your level of education?

Education	Count	%
Did not complete high school	2	0.3
High school graduate or GED	26	3.3
Some college	105	13.3
Bachelor's degree	216	27.4
Advanced degree	409	51.9
NA's	30	3.8
Total	788	100

Table B.4: What is your annual household income?

Income	Count	%
Less than $25,000	8	1.0
$25,000 to $49,999	45	5.7
$50,00 to $99,999	183	23.2
$100,000 to $200,000	350	44.4
More than $200,000	156	19.7
NA's	46	5.8
Total	788	100

Table B.5: Please select the race(s) you consider yourself to be:

Race	Count	%
Native American	6	0.7
Asian	4	0.5
Black	55	7
Other	58	7.3
White	634	80.4
NA's	31	3.9
Total	788	100

Table B.6: Do you identify as Hispanic?

Hispanic	Count	%
Hispanic	36	4.6
Not Hispanic	670	85.0
NA's	82	10.4
Total	788	100

Table B.7: Do you currently have any children in school?

Children	Count	%
No children	173	21.9
Children are not school aged	231	29.3
Yes, in another district/school system	20	2.5
Yes, in the same district	333	42.3
NA's	31	3.9
Total	788	100

Table B.8: Are you a current or former member of an educators' union?

Union	Count	%
No	620	78.6
Yes, a local union	73	9.3
Yes, a national union	28	3.5
Yes, both a local and a national	36	4.6
NA's	31	3.9
Total	788	100

Table B.9: Please select the option that best describes your occupation

Occupation	Count	%
Business/Commerce	88	11.1
Construction	14	1.7
Education	139	17.6
Farming/fishing/forestry	41	5.2
Government	51	6.5
Homemaker	20	2.5
Labor/production	9	1.1
Nonprofit	42	5.3
Other	62	7.9
Professional services	95	12.1
Retired	149	18.9
Sales	20	2.5
Transportation	7	0.9
NA's	51	6.5
Total	788	100

Table B.10: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?

Party	Count	%
Democrat	273	34.6
Independent	182	23.1
Other	40	5.1
Republican	250	31.7
NA's	43	5.5
Total	788	100

Table B.11: Pick the category that describes the annual salary you receive for your board service:

Salary	Count	%
No salary	366	46.4
Less than $5,000	257	32.6
$5,000-$9,999	84	10.6
$10,000-$14,999	23	2.9
More than $15,000	55	7.0
NA's	3	0.4
Total	788	100

Table B.12: Pick the category that describes the per-meeting stipend you receive for your board service:

Stipend	Count	%
No per-meeting stipend	621	78.8
Less than $100	65	8.2
$100-$499	85	10.8
$500-$1,000	13	1.6
Over $1,000	1	0.1
NA's	3	0.4
Total	788	100

Table B.13: Generally speaking, do you think of the people in your district as Republican, Democratic, Independent, or what?

Party	Count	%
Democratic	161	20.431
Independent	69	8.8
Other	104	13.2
Republican	425	53.9
NA's	29	3.7
Total	788	100

Table B.14: In a typical month, how many hours do you spend on board work?

Workload	Count	%
Fewer than 7 hours	136	17.3
7-14 hours	266	33.8
15-24 hours	178	22.6
25-40 hours	126	15.9
More than 40 hours	77	9.7
NA's	5	0.6
Total	788	100

Table B.15: Select the statement that best describes the main reason you initially ran for the board:

	Count	%
I was appointed	36	4.6
I was recruited	56	7.1
to balance out the political perspectives on the board	14	1.8
to develop my role as a public leader in my community	6	0.8
to ensure our children's schools are the best they can be	398	50.5
to ensure that a different candidate did not get on the board	9	1.1
to fix specific issues in the schools/district	58	7.4
to give back to my community (civic duty)	131	16.6
to represent my constituency in school-related issues	37	4.7
Other	14	1.8
NA's	29	3.7
Total	788	100

Table B.16: Between March 2020 and August 2020, how would you characterize the percentage of board time spent on developing re-opening plans?

% of Time	Count	%
Less than 25%	170	21.6
Between 25 and 50%	220	27.9
Between 50 and 75%	233	29.6
More than 75%	137	17.3
NA's	28	3.5
Total	788	100

Table B.17: During the 2020-2021 academic year, how would you characterize the percentage of board time spent on developing re-opening plans or other COVID-19 related policies?

% of Time	Count	%
Less than 25%	162	20.6
Between 25 and 50%	269	34.1
Between 50 and 75%	201	25.5
More than 75%	106	13.4
NA's	50	6.3
Total	788	100

Table B.18: How has the stress level of the job changed compared to previous years?

Stress	Count	%
Less than previous years	4	0.5
About the same as previous years	111	14.1
More than previous years	570	72.3
This is my first year	55	7.0
NA's	48	6.1
Total	788	100

Table B.19: Are you planning to seek an additional term?

Re-Election	Count	%
Definitely not	100	12.7
Probably not	122	15.4
Might or might not	162	20.5
Probably yes	209	26.5
Definitely yes	186	23.6
NA's	9	1.1
Total	788	100

Table B.20: Were you opposed in your last election campaign?

Re-Election	Count	%
No	350	44.4
Yes	408	51.8
NA's	30	3.8
Total	788	100

Table B.21: Approximately how much money was spent in the election campaign by you, your campaign, or groups supporting your election?

Re-Election	Count	%
I did not spend any money	361	45.8
less than $1,000	189	23.9
$1,000-$4,999	91	11.5
$5,000-$10,000	45	5.7
Above $10,000	66	8.4
Unsure	7	0.9
NA's	29	3.7
Total	788	100

Table B.22: Approximately how much money was spent in the election campaign by your main opponent, their campaign, or groups supporting their election?

Re-Election	Count	%
They did not spend any money	46	11.3
$1,000-$4,999	67	16.4
$5,000-$10,000	34	8.3
Above $10,000	39	9.6
Unsure	114	27.9
NAs	10	2.5
Total	408	100

Note: Subset to those who ran against an opponent

Table B.23: What personal or professional expertise do you bring to the board? Select all that apply.

	Count	%
Educator or Administrator	367	46.6
Financial	255	32.4
Parent experience	668	84.8
Other	398	50.5

Table B.24: Did you hold a prior office

	Count	%
No	677	85.9
Yes	82	10.4
NA's	29	3.7
Total	788	100

Table B.25: Have you ever been employed by the school district?

	Count	%
No	502	63.7
Yes	255	32.4
NA's	31	3.9
Total	788	100

Table B.26: Please indicate which resources your board has access to:

	Count	%
Administrative support	741	94.0
Communications staff	486	61.7
Legal counsel	750	95.2
Staff to assist with research	515	65.4
Staff to assist with student learning data analysis and interpretation	627	79.6

Table B.27: During the past year, has your board participated in any development or training, such as workshops, conferences, online courses or webinars?

Development	Count	%
I have not participated in any development	6	0.7
Once per month	135	17.1
Quarterly	210	26.6
Twice per year	195	24.7
Once per year	94	11.9
NA's	148	18.8
Total	788	100

Table B.28: What organizations have provided the board development/training that you have received? Select all that apply:

Consultants/Vendors	194	24.6
Higher education institutions	32	4.1
National school boards association	95	12.1
Regional service agencies	153	19.4
State Department of Education	157	19.9
State school boards association	565	71.7
US Department of Education	27	3.4
Your own board or district	369	46.8
Other	36	4.5

Table B.29: After service in the present board, what are you likely to do?

Development	Count	%
Appointed public office	6	0.8
Consulting	16	2.0
Lobbying	5	0.6
No further office	364	46.2
Other	59	7.5
Retire	130	16.5
Return to full-time career	68	8.6
Run for local or county office	81	10.3
Run for statewide office	14	1.8
Run for US House or Senate seat	6	08
NA's	39	4.9
Total	788	100

Table B.30: How often do you consult the following sources to get the information you need to make board decisions?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always	NA
Superintendent	0.4	0.6	7.4	28.4	61.9	1.3
National Org.	25.5	33.8	25.7	9.3	2.2	3.2
State Org.	4.4	12.2	34.3	36.9	10.1	2.0
Ed Week	28.5	28.04	26.1	10.7	2.5	4.1
Newspaper/TV	12.1	21.7	30.5	23.2	8.9	3.6
Research Journals	15.7	22.8	35.5	16.9	5.3	3.7
Gov. Agencies	6.7	17.8	41.9	24.9	6	2.7
Foundations	31.7	36.8	20.6	4.9	1.0	4.9
Google	10.8	22.1	36	21.8	5.6	3.7
Other	3.7	4.6	9.5	8.5	5.8	67.9

Table B.31: Do you trust the following to make decisions that are in the best interest of the students and teachers in your school district?

	No trust	Some trust	A great deal of	Not Applicable/NA
State Board of Education	6.6	50.5	35.8	7.1
Governor	24.7	44.0	23.7	7.5
State Legislature	25.6	57.0	10.2	7.2
Federal Government	27.2	55.8	9.5	7.5
Teachers' Unions	23.1	44.9	17.6	14.3
Other interest groups	26.9	47.6	2.8	22.7
Parents/families	0.6	41.0	51.5	6.9
Other constitutents	3.4	65.5	18.8	12.3
Media	43.4	43.5	2.4	10.7
Neighboring School Districts	5.6	64.1	22.2	8.1
Other	3.0	8.4	6.7	81.9

Table B.32: During the summer of 2020, what do you think was the relative influence of the following actors in determining your re-opening plans for the fall of 2020?

	No Influence	Some influence	Strong influence	Not Applicable/NA
State Board of Education	14.1	37.8	40.2	7.9
Governor	8.5	31.0	52.9	7.6
State Legislature	23.5	43.4	24.5	8.6
Federal Government	25.4	47.5	18.5	8.6
Teachers' Unions	31.2	35.3	17.9	15.6
Other interest groups	36.3	34.8	6.6	22.3
Parents/families	6.2	40.7	45.1	8.0
Other constituents	21.4	46.2	13.6	18.8
Media	50.3	33.0	4.9	11.8
Neighboring School Districts	16.2	54.4	20.9	8.4
Other	7.2	4.9	12.4	75.4

Table B.33: Can members of the public access school board meetings virtually?

Development	Count	%
No	106	13.5
Other	48	6.1
Yes	629	79.8
NA's	5	0.6
Total	788	100

Table B.34: When there is a conflict between what you think is best and what the people in your district want, do you think you should follow your own conscience or follow what the people in your district want?

Development	Count	%
Always Conscience	17	2.2
2	54	6.9
3	92	11.7
4	219	27.8
5	195	24.7
6	136	17.3
Always district	60	7.6
Total	788	100

Table B.35: which best describes your board: the board and district staff

	Count	%
inform the community about district preferences for COVID-19 responses	369	46.8
engage the community in determining district preferences for COVID-19 responses	366	46.4
NA's	53	6.7
Total	788	100

Table B.36: Which best describes your board:Our board prefers

	Count	%
receiving copies of data charts with a presentation about what the data are telling us	422	53.5
studying outbreak data and forming our own conclusions about our current status	306	38.8
NA's	60	7.614
Total	788	100

Table B.37: On a scale of 0-100, what percent of the time do you think you can trust data and/or guidelines from the following sources?

Source	Mean	SD	n
State Board of Education	66.8	26.1	771
Governor	56.0	32.6	764
State Legislature	45.3	9.0	760
Federal Government	47.8	30.7	755
County Health Boards	73.1	27.6	765
State Department of Health	70.0	28.7	767
The Center for Disease Control (CDC)	66.5	32.6	760
Teachers's Unions	38.8	31.2	679
Political Parties	16.2	20.7	661
Media	29.0	27.7	667
Other School Districts	55.0	7.4	708

Table B.38: Our board believes re-opening plans should be

Plans	Count	%
left to healthcare professionals and/or a specialized task force	352	44.7
developed by the board	376	47.7
NA's	60	7.6
Total	788	100

Table B.39: Did your district's re-opening plans change during the 2020-2021 academic year?

Plans	Count	%
No	226	28.6
Yes	512	65.0
NA's	50	6.3
Total	788	100

Table B.40: Between March 2020 and August 2020, how would you describe citizen involvement in board meetings (such as attending meetings and addressing the board during public comments)?

Plans	Count	%
Less involvement prior to the pandemic	98	12.4
About the same level of involvement prior to the pandemic	230	29.2
More involvement compared to prior to the pandemic	407	51.7
NA's	53	6.7
Total	788	100

Table B.41: During the 2020-2021 academic year, how would you describe citizen involvement in board meetings (such as attending meetings and addressing the board during public comments)?

Plans	Count	%
Less involvement prior to the pandemic	79	10.0
About the same level of involvement prior to the pandemic	221	28.0
More involvement compared to prior to the pandemic	435	55.2
NA's	53	6.7
Total	788	100

Table B.42: For the 2021-2022 school year, what is your school district doing in regards to COVID (check all that apply)

Plans	Count	%
Extra Cleaning of Classrooms/schools	583	74.0
Fully reopen/back to normal	571	72.5
Improved Ventilation throughout the schools	473	60.0
Physical Distancing	376	47.7
Providing Virtual School	360	45.7
Requiring all over 12 to be vaccinated	13	1.6
Requiring all to mask	290	36.8
Requiring unvaccinated to mask	93	11.8

Table B.43: Did the state legislature ever tried to enact legislation that would preempt or change COVID-19 policies passed by your district?

	Count	%
Failed	164	20.8
Tried, but failed	120	15.2
Yes, and succeeded	279	35.4
NA's	225	28.5
Total	788	100

Table B.44: On what issue areas did the state legislature preempt (or attempt to preempt) your board? Select all that apply.

Plans	Count	%
Athletics and other extracurricular	263	33.4
Contact Tracing	121	15.4
Masking	289	36.7
Modality (in person,online, hybrid)	218	27.7
Other	184	23.4
Quarantine and Isolation policies	185	23.5
Testing	133	16.9
Vaccine requirements	65	8.2