

Switch: A Case Study of Voter Turnout following Electoral Change in a School
Board Election

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
Political Science

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2/21/11
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: School Boards, Voter Turnout, School Board Elections, Ward
Elections, At-large Elections

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to shed light into the realm of school boards, a frequently overlooked topic in political science literature. This study examines the relationship between a school board electoral structure and voter turnout levels. In particular, the author hypothesizes that ward-based elections due to their inherent smallness have higher voter turnout levels than at-large elections. In crafting such a relationship a mixed-method approach was used combining elements found in case studies with an intervention analysis. The paper describes voter turnout levels from 1989 to 2007 for a single, medium-sized school district in Illinois that had switched its style of elections from at-large to ward. It was found that following the switch to ward elections turnout actually decreased. However, the results were not statistically significant. The variable of competitiveness was also tested as it was thought that the more competitive elections were the more voter turnout increases. Here again, the author found no relationship between competitiveness and the election structure in ward and at-large elections. In concluding, the author states that some unseen intervening variable such as information costs may be influencing the relationship and significance between voter turnout and election structure.

Acknowledgements

I owe debt of gratitude to my advising committee Dr. Craig Brians, Dr. Karen Hult, Dr. Laura Jensen. Without their wise advice this project would never have been completed. I am grateful for their desire to become part of this process and assist me along the way.

Completing this thesis has been one of the biggest challenges of my educational career. I want to thank my wife Amy, whose sharp eye and even sharper mind caught many of my mistakes. I also want to thank my friends for supporting me throughout this project and in particular, Dr. Ajay Jetely for providing constructive criticism earlier in this process and my father-in-law Jay Utendorf for helping to edit this work. I also want to thank my parents Don and Kate Costa, my sister Emily Costa and, my brother-in-law Rob Bathurst for their relentless encouragement and assistance. Lastly, a huge thank you is in order for the men and women of UPS for their consistent and courteous service of package delivery in any weather.

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Chapter I: The “Dark Island”

1.1: Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with an introduction of what school boards are along with the characteristics of their members. This leads into a discussion of the different governing styles of school board members. Basic information on school board elections including campaign costs, election types and voter turnout levels is next described. The chapter ends with summary of this chapter, a brief overview of the succeeding chapters and, a statement of my hypothesis.

1.2: School Board Functions and Board Member Characteristics

Studies done on school boards are sparse, leading one magazine editor to declare these democratic bodies “[t]he dark island of American governance ...the institution that everyone knows of but few understand” (Danzberger 1987, 53). A series of personal interviews of 2,524 registered voters in three urban areas found that voters were indifferent and ill-informed on school-related matters (Carter 1960, 1). Fifteen years later, this lack of understanding of what a school board does was underlined in a survey of public perceptions. In this survey, 63% of non-parents and approximately 50% of parents with children in school were unable to name a single task that their school board is charged with (National School Boards Association 1975). This is rather striking as approximately 15,000 school boards exist in the United States, with 95,000 members being either elected or appointed (Viadero 2007, 16). The schools they manage are responsible for the education of almost 50 million students (Table 1). One might think that with the number of school boards and members, citizens would be more informed regarding their local school boards. As the evidence suggests, the average American has, at best, a vague understanding of what their school board does.

A public school board's main function is to educate the students. To facilitate that function a school board is designed to be an administrative entity, chartered by the state and charged with governing the education of students within its boundaries. These school boards perform several important functions. Boards may be responsible for the budgeting, the hiring/firing of employees (including superintendents) and school district policymaking. These responsibilities have been shown to be the most important factors affecting student achievement (Goodman et al. 1998).

Table 1: Number and percentage distribution of public elementary secondary students, by region and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 2000–01 through 2007–08

Year and region	Total enrollment	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
2000–01							
Total	46,120,425	100.0	61.0	17.0	16.6	4.2	1.2
Northeast	8,227,746	100.0	67.4	15.5	12.4	4.4	0.3
Midwest	10,749,486	100.0	76.6	14.7	5.7	2.2	0.9
South	16,040,151	100.0	54.9	26.7	15.3	2.1	1.0
West	11,103,042	100.0	50.1	6.5	32.1	8.9	2.4
2003–04							
Total	47,277,389	100.0	58.4	17.1	18.8	4.5	1.2
Northeast	8,303,699	100.0	65.7	15.6	13.6	4.8	0.3
Midwest	10,752,028	100.0	74.5	15.2	7.0	2.4	0.9
South	16,684,008	100.0	52.4	26.5	17.7	2.4	1.1
West	11,537,654	100.0	46.9	6.5	35.2	9.1	2.4
2007–08							
Total	48,397,895	100.0	55.8	17.0	21.2	4.8	1.2
Northeast	8,059,559	100.0	63.4	15.4	15.4	5.6	0.3
Midwest	10,555,854	100.0	72.6	15.2	8.5	2.8	0.9
South	18,149,304	100.0	50.4	25.8	20.0	2.8	1.1
West	11,633,178	100.0	43.7	6.2	38.4	9.4	2.2

NOTE: Enrollment counts exclude schools with no reported enrollment or missing race/ethnicity information. Total enrollment including students with missing race/ethnicity information was 47,060,714 in 2000–01; 48,353,523 in 2003–04; and 48,910,025 in 2007–08. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Northeast includes CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT; Midwest includes IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI; South includes AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV; West includes AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, and WY. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2000–01, 2003–04, and 2007–08 http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015/tables/table_7_1a.asp (accessed Aug. 1st, 2010).

Table 2: Number and enrollment of regular public school districts, by enrollment size of district: Selected years, 1979-80 through 2007-08

Year	Enrollment size of district									
	Total	25,000 or more	10,000 to 24,999	5,000 to 9,999	2,500 to 4,999	1,000 to 2,499	600 to 999	300 to 599	1 to 299	Size not reported
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Number of districts									
1979-80	15,944	181	478	1,106	2,039	3,475	1,841	2,298	4,223	303
1989-90	15,367	179	479	913	1,937	3,547	1,801	2,283	3,910	318
1994-95	14,772	207	542	996	2,013	3,579	1,777	2,113	3,173	372
1997-98	14,805	230	572	1,038	2,079	3,524	1,775	2,044	3,165	378
1998-99	14,891	236	574	1,026	2,062	3,496	1,790	2,066	3,245	396
1999- 2000	14,928	238	579	1,036	2,068	3,457	1,814	2,081	3,298	357
2000-01	14,859	240	581	1,036	2,060	3,448	1,776	2,107	3,265	346
2001-02	14,559	243	573	1,067	2,031	3,429	1,744	2,015	3,127	330
2002-03	14,465	248	587	1,062	2,033	3,411	1,745	1,987	3,117	275
2003-04	14,383	256	594	1,058	2,031	3,421	1,728	1,981	2,994	320
2004-05	14,205	264	589	1,056	2,018	3,391	1,739	1,931	2,881	336
2005-06	14,166	269	594	1,066	2,015	3,335	1,768	1,895	2,857	367
2006-07	13,856	275	598	1,066	2,006	3,334	1,730	1,898	2,685	264
2007-08	13,924	281	590	1,064	2,012	3,309	1,762	1,903	2,724	279
	Percentage distribution of districts									
1979-80	100.0	1.1	3.0	6.9	12.8	21.8	11.5	14.4	26.5	1.9
1989-90	100.0	1.2	3.1	5.9	12.6	23.1	11.7	14.9	25.4	2.1
1994-95	100.0	1.4	3.7	6.7	13.6	24.2	12.0	14.3	21.5	2.5
1997-98	100.0	1.6	3.9	7.0	14.0	23.8	12.0	13.8	21.4	2.6
1998-99	100.0	1.6	3.9	6.9	13.8	23.5	12.0	13.9	21.8	2.7
1999- 2000	100.0	1.6	3.9	6.9	13.9	23.2	12.2	13.9	22.1	2.4
2000-01	100.0	1.6	3.9	7.0	13.9	23.2	12.0	14.2	22.0	2.3
2001-02	100.0	1.7	3.9	7.3	14.0	23.6	12.0	13.8	21.5	2.3
2002-03	100.0	1.7	4.1	7.3	14.1	23.6	12.1	13.7	21.5	1.9
2003-04	100.0	1.8	4.1	7.4	14.1	23.8	12.0	13.8	20.8	2.2
2004-05	100.0	1.9	4.1	7.4	14.2	23.9	12.2	13.6	20.3	2.4
2005-06	100.0	1.9	4.2	7.5	14.2	23.5	12.5	13.4	20.2	2.6
2006-07	100.0	2.0	4.3	7.7	14.5	24.1	12.5	13.7	19.4	1.9
2007-08	100.0	2.0	4.2	7.6	14.4	23.8	12.7	13.7	19.6	2.0

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 1979-80 through 2007-08 (This table was prepared in September 2009)

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_087.asp (accessed Aug. 2nd, 2010).

Most school boards govern districts that are small in student population and typically enroll up to 4,999 students. The largest percent (23.8%) of students are enrolled in school districts with a student population between 1,000 and 2,499 (Table 2). Only 2% of school districts have 25,000 or more students, with the largest school district in the United States being New York City with close to a million students. Nationally, school districts are experiencing a change in student population. They are seeing white enrollment decline, black and Native-American/Alaskan-Native enrollment remain virtually static, significant increases in Hispanic enrollment, and Asian/Pacific-Islander enrollment rise more slowly (Table 1).

In examining school boards themselves, the first attempt to outline the social characteristics of a school board was done in the 1920s when George Counts surveyed 536 rural and urban school districts (1927, 78-79). He found that most school boards contained six members, of which one was a female. Most school board members came from a professional or managerial class as opposed to a labor class and roughly half had graduated from high school, had some college, or were college graduates. Most school board members were elected for three or four years and most devoted around 50 hours annually to the operation of the boards. For rural school districts pay was about three dollars a day for work, and for urban schools most members were uncompensated.

Currently, most members on school boards are paid nothing and yet on average work 25 hours a month on school-related issues (Hess 2002, 4). However, in larger school districts members may be paid an annual salary of \$10,000 or more and work longer hours (Hess 2002, 4). On average school boards have between 5-8 members with each serving an average length of 6.7 years (Hess 2002, 5). The members who are elected or appointed are mostly white and male but larger school districts are more likely to have female and minority representation (Hess 2002,

4-5). On average 38% of school board members are women (Deckman 2004). School board members have higher incomes and are better educated than the typical American (Hess 2002, 5). The typical school board member has a background in business or some other profession with a few having a background in professional education (Hess 2002, 5). The only differences between school boards currently and those in the past seem to be the amount of time spent working and the compensation received.

One important similarity between those school boards in the past and those currently is that survey data on school boards appear to show that the social-economic make-up of the members are higher than their constituents. This claim is further backed-up by empirical studies. A study done on appointed school boards in Virginia and elected school boards in Kentucky found that the school boards typically are unrepresentative of the people they represent (Powell 1975)¹. The author concludes that school board members come from the more “elite” classes of society (72). Indeed, school board members seem to have been and continue to be from the upper and more professional classes (Hess 2005, 5). This perceived misalignment between the social classes may influence the governing style of an elected school board official.

1.3: School Board Governing Styles

After getting elected candidates typically govern according to one of two models. Some scholars have found that school board officials typically govern according to a trustee model, in which they are elected to make the best decisions on behalf of the community they represent rather than to represent the community’s will. The other model is that of a delegate, where officials represent and act according to the will of the community. Most school board officials act according to a trustee model (Carol et al. 1986, 17; Cameron 1987, 182-183). This becomes

¹ Currently, the state of Virginia provides school districts the option of having either elected or appointed school boards.

particularly problematic for school board officials as most voters desire a candidate who governs according to the delegate model (Lutz and Garnon 1978, 12).

The perceived governing style gap can create problems as school boards tend to operate in a provincial fashion, and if they do not respond to their constituents they risk losing power (Ramsey 1978). Scholarly literature has identified and categorized the effects of a candidate's governing style into three different political theories. These theories are the Continuous participation theory, the decision-output theory, and the dissatisfaction theory of Democracy (Alsbury 2003, 668). The above theories suggest the political framework in which the local schools operate.

The Continuous Participation Theory views school board members governing according to a delegate model, where they respond to the demands of the constituents, maintain linkages with the community, and interact with the superintendent (Zeigler and Jennings 1974, 242). Citizen involvement is seen as individuals continuously pressuring their delegates to make changes. However, citizen involvement does not always happen. In fact, evidence to the contrary such as low voter turnout rates and the lack of competition suggest that this model is not an accurate description of how school boards operate. The authors conclude that the non-political nature of school boards suggest that as a democratic institution school boards are not very democratic (252-254).

The Decision-Output Theory argues that school board governance can be analyzed through a process of inputs (demands and resources) and outputs (programs and policies) (Wirt and Kirst, 1989; Alsbury 2003, 668). In this manner, school boards are again seen through the lens of the delegate model. However, what sets this theory apart from the Continuous Participation theory is both the framing of the decision-output theory in economic terms and the

use of the referenda to force change. For Wirt and Kirst the couching of school governance in economic terms attempts to make school board governance rational and logical thereby increasing the ability to describe, explain and, observe school governance phenomenon. Their use of the referendum as a measure of citizen involvement acknowledges the limits of the ideal version of school governance while allowing for citizen input if only at the margins (1989, 222-223). This model has some support in other scholarly literature as citizen involvement through the referenda has been identified as one method voters can express their desires, particularly as it relates to budgets (Feld and Grossman 1984).

The final governance model is the Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy. This views school board members in a delegate role but assumes much greater citizen involvement. Citizen involvement in the model is represented through episodic and intense electoral turnout, instead of continuous citizen participation throughout the process or citizens having power only at the margins. Incumbent defeat occurs, followed by several years of political stability, with an eventual build-up culminating in a new episode of incumbent defeat (Iannaccone and Lutz 1970; Lutz and Iannaccone 1978). This is particularly true if the misalignment between the socio-economic status of the school board and of the community is great, especially if a tax increase is being considered (Garberina 1975, 147). Voter dissatisfaction may also occur due to the difference between the perceived ideology of the elected members and the ideology desired by the voters (Mitchell and Thorsted 1976, 45). Regardless of where the root cause of voter dissatisfaction lies, incumbent defeat happens frequently in this model (Criswell 1979, 1981, Criswell and Mitchell 1980, 209).

1.4: School Board Elections

School board elections are relatively inexpensive affairs. School board members running for office are almost always re-elected and typically spend less than \$1,000 to do so (Hess 2002, 5;36). In an extreme case three candidates raised a combined 1.8 million dollars for the District 4 seat of the Los Angeles Unified School District in 2002 (Helfand 2001). However, the large expensive school board races where candidates spend thousands or millions of dollars to secure a seat are the exception rather than the rule.

In deciding how a candidate becomes a school board member, 96% of school board officials are elected with the remaining 4% appointed, usually by the mayors in large urban areas (Sell 2006, 75). School boards that have an elected route for membership allow representation either as an at-large or ward member.² Approximately, 57% of school board elections have candidates elected in at-large elections, meaning that the candidates are elected city-wide (Hess 2002, 32-33). For ward elections, meaning that candidates are elected to represent part of a city, 41% of school boards use such an election type (Hess 2002, 32-33). The remainder use a combination of ward and at-large elections concurrently, often termed “mixed elections” (Hess 2002, 32-33).

Despite school board elections being one of the most frequent, most common and most local of all elections, voter turnout has remained low in comparison to other elections (Copeland and Garn 2007). In rural areas turnout ranges between 6%-10% (Bartusek 2007) with urban areas faring no better: New York, Topeka and Albuquerque city school districts had 2%, 6% and 12% turnout respectively in their 1999 school board elections (Holloway 1999). However, even

² The terms ward, borough, district, sub-district and parish are all meant to convey the same meaning: a political unit that has a specific official who represents a specific area, geographic location or neighborhood. The term at-large refers to a political unit that has an official that represents an entire geographic area like a city as a whole rather than a part of a city.

those low numbers are not the lowest of the low as several voting precincts had 0% turnout. For example, in the May 2010 Austin, Texas, school board election three precincts had 0% turnout, and two others had one voter turnout and vote (Herman 2010). Another Texas city school board election held in 1998 had 0% voter turnout in 25 out of 66 precincts (Dallas Morning News, 1998). Geography plays a negligible role in school board voter turnout as Northern cities are not immune. Two voting precincts in a 1997 Cleveland school board election saw a 0% electoral turnout (Plain Dealer 1997). In the most extreme cases, the school board election is just canceled, and elected positions are filled through appointments (Gordon, 2010). This low turnout in school board elections is remarkable as other local government positions that may be perceived as insignificant have demonstrated higher voter turnout. For example the city of New Orleans had a voter turnout of 30.6% for Assessor and 29.9% for the position of Coroner in 2010 (Louisiana Election Results). The lack of voting in school board elections and the high turnout in other local government elections argues that some phenomenon is working to keep turnout low.

1.5: Chapter Conclusion

In sum, school boards are tasked with administrating and supervising the education of the students contained in its boundaries. Over 15,000 school boards currently exist, and of those most school board members are elected in at-large elections. School board officials cite student achievement and budgeting as their most important concerns. The typical school board candidate is a white male with a background in a professional or business career. As such they usually have higher education and incomes than the average American. Most members are unpaid and work about 25 hours a month on school related issues.

In describing what a school board is and what it is responsible for, it is clear that electing the best quality candidates to serve on a school board is of the utmost importance to the

education of the students. However, there appears to be a disconnection between the polity and the elected board as evidenced by quite low voter turnout rates. Accordingly, this thesis addresses two questions: since public school boards perform such an important function, what are the causes for low voter turnout, and what can be done to increase voter turnout rates?

1.5.1: Thesis and Chapter Summaries

This thesis explores the hypothesis that school districts that switch from at-large to ward-based elections see increases in turnout because of the smaller and more intimate nature of ward-based campaigns. In this manner, voters may feel closer to the school board candidates in their ward and mass media information maybe more directly relevant. Both of these factors lower voter information costs and facilitate voter mobilization, both of which may lead to increased turnout. In this study the dependent variable is voter turnout and the independent variable uses the type of election.

To better understand my hypothesis the paper is divided into two major parts. First, the thesis will introduce what a school board is and what it does. The succeeding chapters will present evidence of school boards being an academic topic and describe the history of school board development in the United States, particularly as it relates to voting. Chapter 2 will outline the problems of low voter turnout in school board elections and argue the need to increase turnout. Chapter 3 will examine the history and development of school boards in the United States. Chapter 4 will discuss the variables identified by scholars that impact voting in school board elections. It will culminate the discussion with the introduction of a school board election hypothesis. Chapter 5 and 6 will examine a school board that has switched its election style from at-large to ward elections. A case-study approach combined with statistical analysis will be utilized to test the hypothesis. The thesis will finish with Chapter 7 which will describe policy

recommendations and offer guidance for future school board election scholars. In conducting the research I hope that this study will answer the calls of some scholars who desire more light be shown the dark island of American governance (Wills 2003, 329).

Chapter II: The Problem of Low Voter Turnout in School Board Elections

2.1: Chapter Introduction

The point of this chapter is to identify the need for higher voter turnout in school board elections. The chapter identifies why low voter turnout is a problem by focusing on interest group influences and the need for effective school boards. The chapter specifies housing prices and student achievement as two areas where higher voter turnout has been linked to positive outcomes. The chapter concludes with a description of potential outcomes if voter turnout does not improve.

2.2: The Need for Higher Voter Turnout

Increasing voter turnout in school board elections is important for several reasons. First, too low voter turnout implies that the democratic system may not be reflecting the will of the people. It calls into question basic democratic values such as political equality, minimization of elite power, legitimacy, representativeness and popular sovereignty (Hill 2006, 209). When voter turnout levels are too low it may make it difficult for an elected body to interpret the demands of the people. This may result in ineffective policies.

Secondly, the inability to interpret the demands of the voters may result in an unrepresented system where interest groups more easily step in to fill the power gap. While voters make up a form of interests, having too low turnout allows voters the ability to impress upon the school policies that they desire not policies that are good for whole. This gives certain groups unequal influence (Lijphart 1997). Therefore, increasing turnout would allow school boards to better interpret the demands of the people and create policies more reflective the broader community. Finally, increasing turnout may allow school boards to better align resources with policy demands and in doing so become more effective at meeting both the public's and

state's demands. Creating policies that better reflect the community is important in an era of mayoral and state takeover of locally controlled school districts (Marschall and Cuellar 2007). School boards that govern ineffectively may see their powers restricted or their district stripped from them, replaced by a different governing unit.

While some have stated that low turnout implies voter satisfaction with the status quo (Jackman 1987, 405-406), American non-voters seem to be less satisfied than voters about the state of their democracy (Wattenberg 1998, 14). The difference between satisfaction levels of voters and non-voters seem to indicate that a problem, unrelated to satisfaction, exists. One scholar suggested that higher turnout may limit the effectiveness of governance as high turnout may introduce political stalemates (Huntington 1974, 177). This finding is countered as "high rates of voter participation [as measured by voting] are not pernicious" (Jackman 1987, 419). This implies that while there may be a maximum voter participation limit of which government can effectively represent, increasing turnout itself may not necessarily cause harm to the operation of a government. Others have suggested that even if voter turnout were to increase policy preferences would not change (Highton and Wolfinger 2001, 179). This argument assumes that all potential voters represent the same policy preferences when voting may well be a way for voters to express the differences in their policy preferences by electing a candidate thought best to represent their views.

Whatever the arguments used in describing the need not to have higher turnout, the lack of voting in elections and, in particular for school boards, is of a concern. Too low turnout may allow interest groups to fill the power void left behind through influencing candidates to create policy preferences beneficial to a specific group rather than to the broader community. This in

turn may threaten the legitimacy of the institution and ultimately the students who receive benefits from the board's authority.

2.3: The Problem of Low Voter Turnout in School Board Elections

Low voter turnout in an election is a troubling problem for Madisonian democracy. Robert Dahl described the need for an "...electorate [that] is numerous, extended and, diverse in interests" in order to limit the development majority factions (2006, 33). If an electorate is numerous, extended and diverse in interests, then it will be more likely to elect a government more accountable to the public's wishes and more responsive to its needs as interests will compete with each other to best represent the public. However, when voter turnout levels are as low as 2%, it suggests an electorate that is disengaged. This may result in the school board easily controlled by a faction that is disconnected from important educational decisions and non-responsive to the public's needs. This is suggested in the literature as voter participation is not random but "systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens – those with higher incomes, greater wealth, and better education – and against less advantaged citizens" (Lijphart 1997, 1). This biased influence may result in candidates beholden to particular interests and weaken the ideals of fair representation. A school board with continuous low voter turnout in elections may result in public officials and interest groups using this democratic process to weaken democracy (Guttmann 1987, 15) and impair a board's ability to govern effectively.

Furthermore, too low turnout levels make it difficult for school boards to be effective as they are unable to interpret public policy preferences. This may create boards whose members are unable to share functions with the school superintendent, create policy, and prepare budgets. This may ultimately impact the boards' perception as the legitimate governing authority in the school district and impair the educational outcomes of the students in its jurisdiction.

2.4: Interest Group Involvement upon School Boards

Evidence of interest groups in education suggests they are involved throughout the entire election process. A case study involving elite interviews combined with a political ideological survey of seven school board members identified that some members were recruited by interest groups to represent their views and that the candidates generally reflect and vote based on the ideology of the group that recruited them (Hubbard 1969, 72-74). The aforementioned case study concluded that interest groups provided most of the funding and the support for the candidate (72-74). Anecdotal evidence suggests that interest groups may also seek to influence the outcome in school board decisions (Pomper 1984, 222). They accomplish this through tactics such as depressing voter turnout, thereby increasing the risk of electoral defeat for those candidates who dare to go against the interests of the groups (Raymond 2007, 12-13).

Although most funding for candidates comes from friends and family, teacher unions and business contractors are the most active contributors (Adams 2008, 413; Moe 2006). Unions and businesses will actively contribute to campaigns by providing time, volunteers, information and most importantly votes. A study done by Hess and Leal found that union-backed candidates were more likely to win elections (2005). Presumably, because of these contributions another study found that interest groups relied upon networks of “friends and family” as well as the media to increase name recognition of their candidates (Copeland and Garn 2007; Raymond 2007, 13).

As an example, during the 1974 New York District 1 community school boards election Puerto Ricans were beginning to exert influence at the school board level (Fuentes 1984, 129). The dominating interest group at the time, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), backed candidates who were all white whereas the Puerto Ricans backed candidates who better represented the multi-racial make-up of the district. To overcome the power of the interest

backed candidates, the superintendent led the charge to register as many parents in the district as possible (Fuentes 1984, 136). Despite the best efforts of the superintendent, the Puerto Rican backed candidates lost the election. However, it does appear that the election was tainted as accounts suggest that the UTF was putting political advertising on ballots and discriminating racially through UTF poll-watchers and inspectors in deciding who was allowed to vote (Fuentes 1984, 134). Further claims of interest taint is also backed up in judicial decision when a judge found that the polling places were disproportionately placed in areas of white-middle class residency and absent from areas of high Puerto Rican residency (*Coalition for Education in Dist. 1, et al.* 1974).

This is rather notable as the district had a 73% Puerto Rican student population (Fuentes 1984, 127). Yet the UTF expended “large amounts of money...to elect candidates that...held the union’s views on the dominance of the English Language in the classroom, strict discipline and adherence to the union contract in personnel hiring” (Peterson 1974). While having interest groups involved at the school board level could be considered a sign of democratic involvement, it is when they disrupt or exclude other opinions in the education process that makes their involvement unhealthy (American School Boards 1987, 25). Indeed, as the example suggests, the desire of interest groups to back candidates whose views are not congruent with the majority of individuals seem to counter the notion of representation.

As the example indicates, interest groups often back candidates who then become beholden to whatever constituency group help get them elected. These candidates may end up supporting the interest group that got them elected. With such support it makes it easier to continually win elections thereby becoming an incumbent. This is particularly true if the election is local, lacks information, and is of low participation (Krebs 1998, 921; Trounstone 2009).

Incumbents may also gain an advantage due to a previous term in office (Trounstine 2011, 17-18). Low turnout in school board elections appear to allow more incumbents to get re-elected, and as the example indicated, who may not have the district's best interests at heart. Indeed, Michelle Rhee who was Washington, D.C. School Chancellor from 2007-2010 similarly stated, "...textbook manufacturers, teachers unions, and food vendors work hard to dictate and determine policy" (2010). Rhee points out that interests spend "huge sums" of money to influence school boards resulting in boards who are focused on what is good for them rather than the district and students (2010). As a result efforts at change become resisted with the relationship among voters, candidates and interests exemplified as "one giant dysfunctional family" (Farkas 1993, 1).

Increasing turnout would signal to board members a more clearly defined set of policy choices. With a clearer set of policy choices school board candidates may be able to more effectively perform the tasks that they were elected to complete. It is the board members interactions that define the relationship between the board and superintendent, the tone and culture of the district, and set policy. The result of the board member interactions may ultimately influence the educational outcomes of the students in their jurisdictions. The importance of having effective board members has led national organizations like the National School Board Association (NSBA), American School Board Association (ASBA) and various state organizations like the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) to write about what effective board members do and the characteristics of effective school boards. Additionally, former board members and consultants have written extensively on what the characteristics of effective school boards are.

2.5: The Need for Effective School Boards

Numerous individuals like school board members, scholars, and consultants have argued passionately and qualitatively about what effective school boards should do. Pam Nutt, a multi-media specialist who served on a school board, indicated that effective school boards: communicate with others, listen, avoid micromanaging, network with others, and attend school board functions such as retreats and training seminars together (2000). In another example, Stephen Kleinsmith, a member of a twice named award-winning board in Nixa, Missouri, states that effective boards communicate honestly, openly and effectively (2005). He goes on to elaborate that good school boards attend professional development functions together, share information with new members, focus on only important issues, and keep each other informed. Grady McGonagill a board consultant cited that the three barriers to effective boards are “confused board/staff roles, board fragmentation and board/staff competition” (1987, 65). McGonagill implies that a good school board has delineated roles with the superintendent, presents a united front, and limits competition. In a final example, Angela Sewall, an associate professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, argued that effective school boards must retrain, reform and redirect effort to produce stability within the district and develop an agenda that both improves student achievement and assesses whether such achievement has been obtained (1993, 9).

In the limited amount of scholarly studies done on what constitutes an effective school board, several characteristics have been identified. One set of characteristics focused on what the board can do better and identified that effective school boards operate without micromanagement, communicate with the community, adopt a budget to provide resources and allows for school retreats for goal-setting purposes (Goodman et al. 1998). A different set of

characteristics cited in the same study found the relationship between the board and the superintendent to be vital in the operation of effective boards. It appears that effective boards allow the superintendent to operate as CEO, have an evaluation of the superintendent according to mutually agreed upon procedures, allows the superintendent to draft the agenda, and communicates effectively with the superintendent (Goodman et al. 1998). The study also argued that a concentration on student achievement and a desire to limit school board and superintendent turnover to be important concerns of effective school boards. Three years later, a study conducted by the IASB suggested that shared leadership, continuous improvement and shared decision making, the ability to create and sustain initiatives, a supportive workplace and staff, staff development, support for school sites through information and community involvement were effective practices by school boards that had high student academic achievement (2001).

From these two studies a few important characteristics of effective boards stand out. First, the ability of a school board to operate without role confusion was highlighted as an important factor in student achievement. Another characteristic is the ability of a school board to create specific policies or programs that target precise aspects student achievement. Lastly, the ability to sustain those policies through a budget that provides the needed resources was identified as a key characteristic.

2.5.1: The Need for Effective School Board Members

A good school board candidate is one who understands what effective boards do and realize that often the roles of the school board and superintendent are both unsettled and blurred (Campbell and Green 1994). Accordingly, a study conducted by the Institute for Educational Leadership found that school boards and superintendent's relationships follow several archetypes (Carol et al. 1986, 27). One type identified was a strong superintendent who had free rein but

was backed by the school board. The opposite was a school board that was into management and administration, essentially “cutting out” the superintendent. The last type is a mixture, where the school board and superintendent cross over into each other’s domain. Additionally, at least one researcher suggested that any attempt at “maintaining a clear boundary between policy and administration is often both unrealistic and undesirable” (McGonagill 1987, 65). However, in a national study of what school board members believe to be most essential to their effectiveness, avoiding role-confusion between the board and the superintendent was identified (Freeman 1990, 122). Nevertheless, it would appear that when the school board creates policy, the process often raises questions of administration of the proposed policy by the superintendent. Ideally, the school board officials and superintendent will create an arrangement regarding a specific policy that best meets their individual needs for a given task (Price 2001).

Due to the perceived overlapping of functions by a school board and a superintendent, an effective school board member must be one who is skillful at policy-making (Brodinsky 1977, 29), particularly when it comes to creating achievement-targeted policies. One study suggested that the reason that schools failed to make progress on state standards was district-level passivity on policy and failing to coordinate policy with what the individual teacher was required to do and what the student was supposed to achieve (Lashway 2002). Moreover, in analyzing the minutes of two different school board meetings found that school boards spend only a small percentage on policy-making (Land 2002, 259). Additionally, 40% of school board members surveyed in a major study said that they do not spend enough time on policy-making or policy assessment (Carol et al. 1986, 21). It is clear of the need to have school board members who work effectively with a superintendent to develop policies for the benefit of the students such as

utilizing time and resources to develop a policies and programs specifically designed to meet the needs of the students.

A good school board candidate is one who can work with stakeholders to create a budget by aligning district resources with the expected outcome, namely improving student achievement. In this regard, creating a budget has been cited as the most important issue followed closely by student achievement (Carol et al. 1986, 11; American School Board Journal 1998, A15; Hess 2002, 9; Land 2002, 261). Conversely, the lack of money is often a school board's biggest worry (Underwood et al. 1983, 21). Budgeting is often the most important topic as the majority of boards are financially independent from the city or county, and most school boards must levy taxes to fund a school district (Hess 2002, 30). School boards also are aware that the voting public to whom they are accountable "demand...a closer match between consumer tax payments and how [those] revenues [are] spent" (Steiner 1994, 5).

Table 3: Actual and alternative projected numbers for current expenditures and current expenditures per pupil in fall enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools: 1992–93 through 2017–18

School year	Fall enrollment (in thousands)	Current expenditures			
		Constant 2005–06 dollars ¹		Current dollars	
		Total (in billions)	Per pupil in fall enrollment	Total (in billions)	Per pupil in fall enrollment
Actual					
1992–93	42,823	\$308.6	\$7,205	\$220.9	\$5,160
1993–94	43,465	315.1	7,249	231.5	5,327
1994–95	44,111	322.7	7,315	243.9	5,529
1995–96	44,840	328.6	7,327	255.1	5,689
1996–97	45,611	338.4	7,418	270.2	5,923
1997–98	46,127	351.2	7,614	285.5	6,189
1998–99	46,539	366.3	7,871	302.9	6,508
1999–2000	46,857	380.7	8,125	323.9	6,912
2000–01	47,204	396.0	8,389	348.4	7,380
2001–02	47,672	411.5	8,631	368.4	7,727
2002–03	48,183	423.5	8,790	387.6	8,044
2003–04	48,540	431.4	8,887	403.4	8,310
2004–05	48,795	440.8	9,033	424.6	8,701
Middle alternative projections					
2005–06	49,113	446.9	9,099	446.9	9,099
2006–07	49,464	460.7	9,314	470.1	9,504
2007–08	49,644	473.8	9,543	492.9	9,929
2008–09	49,825	486.8	9,770	517.4	10,384
2009–10	50,067	500.9	10,005	542.9	10,844
2010–11	50,353	514.9	10,227	568.8	11,296
2011–12	50,722	528.6	10,422	–	–
2012–13	51,194	542.0	10,588	–	–
2013–14	51,701	556.1	10,756	–	–
2014–15	52,284	572.6	10,951	–	–
2015–16	52,910	590.4	11,159	–	–
2016–17	53,503	608.1	11,367	–	–
2017–18	54,087	626.4	11,582	–	–

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education,” 1992–93 through 2005–06; “National Public Education Financial Survey,” 1992–93 through 2004–05; National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment Model, 1972–2005; and Elementary and Secondary School Current Expenditures Model, 1969–70 through 2004–05 (This table was prepared in December 2007)

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/projections2017/tables/table_34.asp (accessed Aug. 2nd, 2010).

Due to the public pressures and the costs of running a school district, the budget is considered to be a critical task that school board members must carry as the budget defines what is considered to be important (American School Boards 1987; Hartley 1990, 29). In crafting a

budget, public schools in 2010 spent most of their revenue on teacher salaries, teacher benefits, and purchased services (Aud et al. 2010). While schools spent most of their money on supporting teachers they are apparently ill-trained in budget creating. At least one study identified that school boards were weak in areas they considered to be non-essential like budget building (Freeman 1990, 122-123). This probably explains why when some school boards are audited constituents, parents and lawmakers are shocked to find “missing money,” sloppy record keeping and, financial mismanagement (Chen 2010). The fact that school board members consider budget-building to be unimportant suggests a need to elect higher quality and more effective candidates. Electing better candidates who can work with others to create a budget becomes especially vital when one considers the national projected average of per pupil spending was \$10,844 in the 2009-2010 school year (Table 3).

2.6: The Impact upon Student Education

The school board candidates chosen by a plurality of the people have a direct impact on the quality of education a child receives through the policies they represent and how effective they are.³ Therefore, having an elected board of poor quality individuals may result in worse school superintendent relations (American School Boards 1987). The absence of an effective school board may cause dysfunction and disunity on the board, which may in turn lead to school board member and superintendent turnover (Olson and Bradley, 1992; Chalker and Haynes 1997). The frequent turnover in school leadership has been described as “not a stimulus for positive change” (Soult and Shannon 1993, 35). In sum, the constant churn of board members and superintendents may hurt the ability to establish a proper working relationship between the two.

³ Many studies have suggested a link, but see Land, Deborah. 2002. “Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Student’s Academic Achievement.” *Review of Educational Research* 72 (Summer): 229-278 for a synthesis of the research.

Having a poorly defined relationship between the board and the superintendent may hurt student achievement and lead the organization into disarray (Grady and Bryant, 1989; Goodman et al. 1998; Land 2002, 253). This constant turnover in school leaders is a concern as it may cause a lack of communication and policy agreement, which ultimately may hurt the board's accountability to the public and its responsibility to provide educational services. The theme common to these studies is that, without a proper relationship between the board and superintendent, it is difficult to coordinate policy. A board made up of higher quality candidates may be able to accomplish this, ultimately leading to student/district success more so than a board made up of lower quality candidates (Carol et al. 1986, 55; McCloud and McKenzie 1994, 382-384).

Low voter turnout may not only influence the ability of the board and superintendent to agree on policy issues but the absence of high-voter turnout has advantaged higher-income candidates particularly those from high-income backgrounds (Spring 1984, 402; Miller 1986, 88; Welch and Bledsoe 1988, 37). These business or professional candidates from higher-income brackets may not necessarily be interested in serving their constituents but rather themselves. These individuals may be more interested in the power and prestige the political position holds (Downs 1957, 30). Also, those with higher incomes or professional backgrounds may see serving on a school board as a stepping stone for other political offices (Robinson and Stacey 1984, 115; Miller 1986, 82).

2.7: Effect of Higher Turnout on Student Test Scores

While interest-groups and higher-income individuals have an advantage over others when it comes to serving on and influencing school boards, voters are starting to hold school board members responsible for declines in student scores (Berry and Howell 2007). In one study there

appeared to be a correlation between increased turnout and school board accountability. If voter turnout increased, then board members were held accountable for the quality of education in the school district (as measured by student learning gains); if voter turnout did not increase then the school board was not held accountable for student test score gains (Howell 2005, 26). Another study, of 206 Missouri schools from 1998-2001, found that a 1% increase in voter turnout was associated with a 1% increase in student scores (Webber 2010, 93). In these examples, higher turnout may have sent signals of the public's policy preferences to the school board who respond to their demands.

Increasing student achievement through increased voter turnout may have a cascading influence upon housing values in the community. A study by Brasington and Haurin showed a 7.1% increase in housing prices in a school district that increased its student test scores by one standard deviation (2006), while another study by Bayer and Ferreira showed a 1% increase in housing prices for each 5% increase in test scores (2003). Student test scores, school district spending and housing prices are all factors that people may take into account when choosing where to live. In this manner finding ways to increase voter turnout in school board elections becomes all the more meaningful.

2.8: Chapter Conclusion

In sum, elected school board officials ought to use voter turnout as a measure of accountability as previous studies indicate that low voter turnout suggests low accountability to the constituents and district. The lack of school board involvement may result in deference to interests, lower test scores, and an increased probability of state takeover. Indeed, low turnout may also raise questions of policy effectiveness as it suggests a disengaged polity (Twentieth Century Fund Task Force, 1992). Having a disengaged polity may result in a school board

perceived as an illegitimate body, unable to interpret and translate the public preferences into beneficial policy. Thus, if citizens do not organize, debate, compromise and vote, then the civic identity, even in the most local of elections, will shift to the personal concerns (like power or prestige) and not the collective good (Oliver 2001, 91).

This shift may result in school districts that fail to achieve the desired state/federal demands, thereby increasing the risks of being taken over by the mayor or the state. A mayoral or state takeover would imply that the school district in question has problems that may impact a citizen's decision to relocate to the district along with hurting the image and standing of the school district. Additionally, an outside takeover would strip important powers from the local school board, making the board a figurehead rather than a functioning institution. Considering, that 58% of the public wants school boards to be responsible for the selection of subject matter taught in public schools, the need to increase voter turnout to prevent school boards from becoming "figureheads" becomes even more meaningful (Rose and Gallup 2006).

I hoped that this thesis will prove to be useful to two groups of people. First, for educational scholars it will add evidence greatly needed in the area of school board studies. Secondly, if the findings are persuasive it would suggest a method local policymakers may use to increase turnout thereby improving democracy and staving off outside takeovers.

Chapter III: The Context and Development of School Boards

3.1: Chapter Introduction

This chapter's purpose is to give the reader a sense of the direction of school boards. In doing so, it focuses on the development of school boards both as an academic topic and as an institution. As a result it gives school boards the academic and institutional prestige to make studying them an important area of research. The chapter concludes with the need to identify the causes of low voter turnout.

3.2: School Boards as Academic Topic

Considering, school boards as an institution or as an academic subject area is not new. The concept of having someone run a public school has been around since the late 1640s. Initially, information on school boards and school districts came from local school officials or the state. Eventually, in 1867 the federal government created an educational agency designed to "...improve American education by providing educational information to the state and local education authorities" (National Library of Education 2006). This allowed the federal government to provide information to schools and states regarding national trends and educational concerns. While both the federal and state governments were involved with publishing educational information on both schools and school boards, scholars did not turn their attention to the topic until the Progressive Era when there was a push to professionalize school management.

During the Progressive Era several educational trade journals like *Phi Delta Kappan* and *American School Board Journal* were founded.⁴ The content of the early educational trade journals focused mainly on superintendent and board relations, school board governance and discussions regarding the professionalization of teaching. To assist school superintendents to

⁴ *Phi Delta Kappan* was founded in 1906 and *American School Board Journal* was founded in 1891.

better manage school districts and school boards, several surveys were conducted that provided insights into the characteristics of school districts and boards of education (Nearing 1917, Struble 1922, Counts 1927, Ludeman 1929). These surveys found that the majority of school board officials came from the upper social classes and therefore were socially unrepresentative of the community in which they served. Scholars in the future would examine the political outcomes created by the social representation misalignment between the school board and the community.

Following the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, scholarly articles began appearing that addressed the politics in education rather than management and district characteristics. The articles were narrowly focused on the public school decision making process (Lutz 1965), the conflict and response inherent in school system politics, particularly in cities (Minar 1966; Salisbury, 1967), or incumbent defeat (Iannaccone and Lutz 1970; Lutz and Iannaccone 1978). Other scholars examined the school board as an agent of legitimization (Kerr 1964). While these academics were some of the first to shed light into the “dark island of American governance,” these articles focused mainly on power conflicts between the school board and other stakeholders be it the superintendent or the community. The articles did not put school board politics into a larger context and did not examine the types of influences upon school boards.

It was not until the mid 1970s that academics began to examine school boards as a unit-of-analysis in part of a larger context. In 1975 a symposium of scholars was organized to discuss key topics in school board research. The symposium did much to highlight the available data on school boards and provide direction on where further research should go. The dominant theme of the conference was school boards and their role in a democracy. The evidence that was presented argued that studies on school boards reflected this theme with representation, political culture,

school board development and diversity as the dominant fields of inquiry (Cistone 1975, 256). The symposium ended with a warning that “school boards...must broaden their base of support to remain viable as influential public bodies” (Cistone 1975, 274). Following the symposium additional articles began to appear concentrating on both descriptive and institutional representation. The variables discussed included non-partisanship, off-cycle elections, and election structure. The goal of these studies was to identify the relationship between institutional variables and turnout.

The next big wave in school board research did not occur until the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2002.⁵ Another symposium was created to examine the current state of school board knowledge in 2007 (Alsburly 2007). Like that in 1975, the new symposium provided an opportunity to share knowledge and provide direction in the field of school board governance, leadership and effectiveness. The dominant theme in this symposium was not democracy but rather school board effectiveness. The new lines of inquiry on school board effectiveness were on school board accountability, school board outcomes, and student achievement (Alsburly 2007, xvi). The outcome of the symposium suggested that student achievement would be an important variable in measuring the effectiveness of school boards.

3.3: School Board Development

While the study of school boards and the establishment of important variables seem to respond to changes in federal laws, the concept of a school board has not changed since they were established. In 1647 the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law requiring all towns of a certain size to maintain a grammar school (Chubberly 1919, 17-18). The colony was interested in preventing Satan from infringing upon youthful minds and the establishment of a formal system

⁵ The No Child Left Behind was passed by both houses of Congress in 2001 and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. No Child Left Behind is the common term used to describe the re-authorization (with subsequent amendments) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

of state education was thought to be the key. The management of such schools was originally placed in the hands of local officials. However, as towns grew; management was delegated to local committees. These local committees were created with the specific function of appointing inspectors to “visit annually and inspect the free writing schools which are supported by the Town’s charge” (Boston Municipal Research Bureau Inc. 1996).

Progressing into the 1700s these inspectors could no longer meet the demands of a growing colonial population. The new growth suggested a need to adopt a formal system of managing schools, and local government was thought to be ideally placed. Local government was thought best to handle the governing of schools as it was closest to the people and therefore could mold virtuous citizens ready to partake in republican government (Alexander 2002, 195). In 1789, Samuel Adams led the fight to create separate school local government committees, divorced from the city/town. These first committees consisted of a mix of selectmen (what we would now consider city council members) and individuals elected annually from districts (Boston Municipal Research Bureau Inc 1996). These elected committees put the power of education directly into the hands of the people who then could direct educational affairs. Eventually, these school committees were formalized as boards and, through agreements with the state, localities gained the corporate powers to tax, build, own, and manage their own schools (Fuller 1982, 43).

As America expanded outward in the 1800s, this model was copied by virtually all states and local units (Chubberly 1919, 161-162; Callahan 1975, 19-20). By 1900, over 200,000 school districts were in operation (Fischel 2006b). Eventually, all states except Hawaii (where only a single state-run school district exists) adopted the Massachusetts localized model of education (Sell 2006, 72). Placing control of educational matters in the hands of local boards became the

dominant control mechanism as it offered citizens the opportunity for direct participation and influence regarding specific education outcomes.

3.3.1: Voting in Rural and Urban School Boards

Voting in early rural school board elections was mainly an informal process. Rural residents from the surrounding community would gather for an annual meeting at the school house and vote to elect townsmen to the board. Those elected to the board would be responsible collecting the school tax, contracting for classroom supplies, hiring the teachers (both male and female), and determining the length of the school year (Fuller 1982, 46-49). This is a stunning example of a representative democracy at work as voters would vote directly for the individuals charged with administrating, staffing and supplying the local school house. While no official record exists, it has been identified that thousands of citizens attended and participated in these meetings (Fuller 1982, 51). It is evident that what the rural schools lacked in population was made up for in participation. This method of voting, however, differed in urban districts.

Originally, when urban districts were small enough to have voting, they functioned similarly to rural school districts. However, when cities began to increase in population, individuals and city officials found that they could no longer rely on voluntary services done by individuals. From this stemmed the need to centralize the operation of the schools (Tyack 1974, 33). To assist in centralizing urban education, superintendents were hired to provide an additional level of administrative and managerial support for the board. Board members in the large urban cities, like today, were either appointed or elected. Electing urban school board members was done using secret ballots, where voters would be handed a piece of paper, place marks on it to indicate a choice, and then drop it in a box. What the urban district lacked in informal arrangements was made up for in formal processes like the standardization of years,

grades and electoral procedures. The need to standardize and centralize would eventually evolve into school district consolidation.

3.3.2: School District Consolidation

At one point numerous urban and rural school districts existed.⁶ However, these school districts consisted mainly of single one-room school houses (in essence, a one school school district). These school houses had no age-grading standards and no standardized year (Fischel 2006b). Towards the end of the 19th century America was growing in population through both immigration and internal migration of the rural population to the cities. This growing population demonstrated a need to provide more varied instruction and to prepare students for high school.⁷ The old way of providing instruction with a single teacher teaching multiple subjects in a multi-grade setting was both inefficient and insufficient at preparing students for high school in an urban setting.

The need to more efficiently prepare students for future grades along with an improved rural road network put pressures on school districts to consolidate. Consolidation of the numerous single school-house school districts into a larger unit was thought the best way to prepare students for high school and achieve economies of scale through a standardized year and age-grading (Lawrence and Schmidt 1994; Fischel 2007). By the 1970s school district consolidation was basically complete. School boards today currently number approximately 15,000 with 95,000 members being either elected or appointed (Viadero 2007, 16).

⁶ The U.S. Census did not report the number of school districts until 1932, when it identified 127,531 school districts in the U.S. See: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics, series H 412. One could assume that prior to 1932 more school districts did exist.

⁷ The U.S. Census reports that between 1880 and 1920 the percent of workers employed in agriculture fell from 50% to 27%. See: U.S. Bureau of Census. 1975. Historical Statistics of the U.S., Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial ed. Part 2: Washington D.C., pg 138. From the census report it is clear that the population began to move to the cities to seek better economic conditions.

3.4: Chapter Conclusion

The history of school boards is one of change across time. In responding to external economical, societal and political pressures, school boards underwent a rapid transition. School boards changed from an informal and de-centralized decision-making processes to one of centralization and consolidation. This physical and geographical consolidation and centralization of school districts ultimately would be mirrored in the political consolidation of school boards into at-large election types. Extending from this, one might logically predict that with the population growth and school district consolidation voter turnout in school board elections would change positively because school districts would be covering a larger geographical area, which may incorporate more people, thus giving more people an opportunity to vote in elections. However, we know that this is not the case or else school boards would have higher voter turnouts compared to other elections. The following chapter seeks to shed needed light on the causes of low voter turnout in school board elections along with evidence on how to increase it.

Chapter IV: Shedding Light on Voter Turnout in the “Dark Island”

4.1: Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the variables the academic literature has identified to be most influential on school board elections. The chapter’s focus is on the Progressive Era reforms, voter characteristics, and information costs as the three major variables thought to influence voter turnout in school board elections. This leads into a discussion of the impact size has on voter turnout. This in turn helps identify characteristics and results from local elections that have switched their election arrangements. Finally, the chapter ends with a restatement of the chapter’s main points.

4.2: Progressive Era Reforms

An examination of the literature reveals several factors that may account for low voter turnout in school board elections. First, some argue that a decline in turnout at the local level (which includes school boards) is thought to have originated with Progressive Era reforms like making elections nonpartisan and off-cycle, and switching from ward-based elections to at-large elections (Alford and Lee 1968; Zeigler and Jennings 1974; Karnig and Walter 1983). Secondly, the type of voter mobilized to vote has been found to influence turnout in public school board elections. Voters who perceive themselves as sharing similar characteristics with a candidate, have certain individual characteristics, have a perceived closeness to schools, and consider themselves a constituency voter are hypothesized to be more likely turnout and vote. The last variable thought to influence voter turnout is information costs. School board elections have higher information costs, which makes it difficult for potential voters to get information on both the candidates and election.

Voter turnout declines at the local level, was thought to begin during the Progressive Era. Between the 1890s and 1920s a series of political, societal and economic reform movements took place and became commonly known as the Progressive Era (Flanagan 2007, vi-vii). The political reforms of the Progressive Era sought to separate the political party machines from government. This, the reformers thought, would counter the corrupting influences of local party bosses, thereby making elections fairer.

4.2.1: Nonpartisan Elections

One method used by local districts was to remove partisan labels from candidates in local elections. While good in the abstract, removing partisan labels from local elections has resulted in voter confusion as voters are unable to take cues from partisan labeling. A study that examined several mayoral, municipal and state legislative elections, using a paired comparison and interrupted time series analysis, concluded that nonpartisan elections depress voter turnout (Schaffner et al. 2001). The same result has also been identified at the school board level. A qualitative analysis of the Los Angeles School Board between the years 1909-1944 found that the lack of partisan labeling meant that voters did not have an opportunity to learn policy differences between candidates and therefore abstained from voting (Ostrom 1945, 188-189). Without such labeling voters do not know how to vote and therefore may abstain from doing so, resulting in lower turnout for local elections like school boards. This is because partisan elections tend to aggregate the educational attitudes and opinions of candidates running for school board office (Nielson and Robinson 1980).

Nonpartisan elections may also contribute to campaigns that are focused on personal attributes not policy issues. A case study that surveyed 96 school board members of the Boulder, Colorado school district between 1951-1970 it found that the non-partisan nature of school board

elections was responsible for campaigns that focused on personal attributes, not political issues (Smucker 1971). It also found that candidates disproportionately represented the upper class and therefore may not have represented the whole community (1971). In response to this, one scholar argued that partisan labeling increases the visibility of issues and increases participation as partisan conflict is what involves people in politics (Schattschneider 1975). Additionally, educational researchers have opined that partisan elections may include more of the electorate and center campaigns on issues, not personalities (McCaffrey 1971, 59).

If removing partisan labels causes turnout to decline, then the reverse is also true. Studies looking at partisan school board elections have shown that partisan elections can increase turnout and focus the campaigns on issues. In this sense, the state of Florida is distinctive as it had partisan school board elections as recently as 1998.⁸ A longitudinal analysis of Florida's congressional, state, county, and school board elections prior to 1998 found that school board elections had turnout rates that rivaled gubernatorial elections (Bickel and Milton 1982, 155). Partisan school board elections are not limited to America. A case study of a Canadian school board election in Vancouver found that partisan elections mobilize voters, increase participation, give voters a ballot cue and, increase issue-oriented campaigns (Nielson and Robinson 1980).

4.2.2: Off-Cycle Elections

The Progressive Era reforms that made elections nonpartisan also impacted voter turnout by taking elections off-cycle. Another part of the 20th century progressive movement was to schedule local elections off-year in the hopes that local elections would be freed from the connections of corrupt political parties and separate from other levels of government (Wirt and Kirst 1989). However, this appears to have had the adverse effect of depressing school board

⁸ In 1998, voters approved a repeal of the part of the Florida Constitution that required conducting local elections (like school boards) in a partisan matter.

election turnout. It has been hypothesized that merging school board elections with the even-numbered November general elections (either state or congressional) would achieve economies of scale, resulting in increased turnout as information, transportation and other election costs would be significantly lower.

Several studies found that putting elections on cycle did result in increased voter turnout. A cross-year examination of local elections in all of Florida's 67 counties found that the combination of mid-year federal elections with state and local ones resulted in fewer people abstaining from voting for a school board candidate (Milton 1983, 650).⁹ Indeed, the article reported that abstention rates for school board candidates were the same as those for US Senator and much less than municipal positions (650). Additionally, in a 1994 study of one California school district, it was found that changing school board elections from an odd-year to an even-year resulted in an average 43.84% increase in voter turnout (Townley et al. 1994, 61). This suggests that changing the election timing will yield significant increases in voter turnout. Two other studies conducted about ten years later explored the results of moving local elections to coincide with federal elections. These studies found that consolidating elections with the November general elections may lead to an increase in school board voter turnout but suggested it could change the composition of voters (Hajnal and Lewis 2003, 658; Allen and Plank 2005, 510).

4.2.3: The Change to At-Large Elections

While the Progressive Era reforms of moving elections off-cycle may have led to decreased turnout it is not the last of the reforms. The last part of the progressive movement dealt with the electoral structure of local governments. The electoral arrangement can be identified as

⁹ Florida is distinctive as at the time of this study it did not separate local elections. Instead it kept them on cycle with mid-year federal elections along with any state elections that happened to occur.

“specific institutional structures, rules and procedures that formally or informally define relationships among individuals and, in turn, influence individual behavior [like voting]” (Johnson et al. 2002). The influence of the progressive era reforms meant that local government officials would be pushed to consider alternative local election methods. Stemming from the reforms, local governments would be categorized either into a ward based or at-large elections. This in turn would influence local voter turnout and therefore impact school board elections.

During the Progressive era, local governments began a series of reforms designed to decrease corruption at the local level. One of these reforms involved switching from ward to at-large elections (Zimmerman 1992, 5). For many Americans, corruption appeared endemic and switching from ward to at-large was trumpeted as a way to end ward corruption. It was thought that at-large candidates would be more focused on the common good as ward based candidates inherently fight on behalf of a part of a city or school district rather than on behalf of the whole community (Deffenbaugh 1922, 6). This corruption was to be found in both urban and rural areas (Campbell 2005, 143) and included both local and school board elections.

In one instance the officers of the ninth ward election for alderman to the Knoxville, Tennessee city council were accused of fraud when discrepancies of their voter return numbers differed from a Grand Jury’s numbers (Knoxville Journal 1894). In another instance, several hundred ballots went “unaccounted for,” ward judges opened ballot boxes without approval, and individuals who owed their job to the candidates not only clerked the voting booths but refused to deposit ballots they disagreed with (Cleveland Gazette 1922). In rural counties the best known examples were in Rhode Island where the governor declared in 1903 that, “the sale of votes in country districts of his state was so common that no attempt was made to conceal the practice”

and the systemic vote-buying practices of Adams County, Ohio between 1885-1911 (Gist 1961, 60-78).

School boards in the Progressive Era were not immune to corruption accusations or fraud. In a “severe arraignment” a local doctor publicly accused the St. Louis City School board of awarding contracts to the highest-bidder, of using no-bid contracts that would only benefit friends of the board, and of “political shenanigans” at refusing to hear the concerns of the local city Democrats (St. Louis Republic 1896). In fact the corruption in the St. Louis City School Board was so pervasive that it led to a grand jury investigation one year later, which resulted in the previous school board members losing their seats (St. Louis Republic 1897). In another instance of corruption, an Omaha City Schools contract that paid 85 cents to \$1 per seat was awarded for the cleaning of 7,656 seats, when in fact the normal price paid to seat cleaners was between 40-60 cents per seat (Omaha World Herald 1900). For school boards of this era it was not unusual for:

Board officials to tip off their friends about land that the school board wanted to buy so that they could quickly buy it and resell it to the board at inflated prices. Some school officials would order unnecessary equipment from favored vendors and award lucrative contracts to shell companies (Segal 2004, 4).

Besides offering typical forms of corruption and fraud, school boards because of their perceived lesser importance lent themselves to more enterprising forms of fraud. For example, elections to the Comanche County School Board along with the entire county of Comanche, Kansas was fraudulently made up in 1873 (Sedan Lance 1894). In this example the masterminds forged city and school board election results and completed the ruse with fake certifications of the imaginary results. The fraud was perpetrated for the purpose of selling tens of thousands of dollars worth of bonds to unsuspecting individuals and the state government (Comanche 1981, 8-9).

However, it was not just school boards that lent themselves to corruption but the means by which many members were chosen. In particular, school boards chosen by ward elections were thought to foster problems. One district superintendent noted that ward elections had a habit of creating “unscrupulous politicians...who do not hesitate to improve every opportunity to sacrifice the interests of the schools to the purposes of the political machines” (Tyack 1974, 89). This is further reinforced by a series of statements by superintendents and school experts who identified ward elections as having the tendency to respond to narrow interests with teacherships being awarded to those who supported the ward bosses (Tyack 1969, 30-34). Additionally, a survey of school districts in 1885 by the then, U.S. Bureau of Education, found that many ward politicians sacrificed the school system to the purposes of the party machine which produced a harmful influence on local schools (Philbrick 1885, 14-15). This is of a particular note as the “machine bosses”--like William M. Tweed of New York City, Martin Behrman of New Orleans and James McManes of Philadelphia--got some of their political experience by starting off as members of elected school boards (Zink 1930, 50). Evidence from newspapers further highlights the corruption found in school districts that used ward based elections. According to the *New York Herald*, in 1864 the New York City School Board removed the 4th ward official after an investigative committee found him to be running a “ring” in which he charged teachers a special “school tax” and secured kickbacks from individuals seeking favorable positions, particularly to teach at a new school (New York Herald 1864).

Even more recently, concerns about corruption in school board ward elections have not gone away. A survey found that school districts using ward-based elections to elect board members were more likely to be influenced by stakeholder interests than school districts that elect their members in at-large elections (Carol et al. 1986). In some of America’s largest cities

that utilize wards like Los Angeles, New York and pre-1997 Chicago,¹⁰ fraud, corruption, bribes, and theft are problems in the school board system (Segel 2004, 19). To reduce corruption, the idea of switching election structures from ward to at-large eventually spread throughout municipalities (including both school boards and city councils) in both the North and the South.

4.2.3.1: The influence of At-Large Elections on Minority Voters

Despite the best intentions at stopping corruption, switching from ward elections to at-large elections had the unfortunate side effect of disenfranchising minorities through voter dilution both in the North and South. Indeed, the idea of switching from ward-based elections to at-large elections was considered a viable tactic to use in diluting the voting strength of a particular minority group like blacks in the South (Davidson 1994, 24). In the North, “the [mere] imposition of such election procedures made it much less likely that European ethnics-many of them impoverished immigrants recently arrived from Ireland or from southern and eastern Europe- would be elected from the heavily ethnic wards” (Davidson and Grofman 1994, 7). This tactic of switching from ward to at-large elections for the purposes of voter dilution first occurred during the 1868 city council elections in Atlanta. In Atlanta white Democrats “secured from the legislature the general ticket system...to guard against [the] possibility of the election of black city officials” (Watts 1974, 272-273).

It did not take long for the tactic to spread to school board elections. The 1874 and 1876 Redeemer legislatures of Mobile, Alabama fought and succeeded in changing school board elections from ward-based ones, which were originally designed to guarantee minority representation, to at-large ones which did not (Kousser 1984, 32-33). While the type of election was different the point of using at-large elections in both the North and South remained to,

¹⁰ Following a series of reforms the ward-based elected school district was replaced with a school board appointed by the mayor. See: Rury, John. 2005. “Schools and Education.” Chicago Historical Society. <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1124.html> (accessed Sept. 17th, 2010).

“deprive African-Americans [and other minorities] of symbolic representation by having elected a candidate of own choice and of having an advocate in the councils of government and therefore governmental benefits” (Davidson 1994, 23).

Without relying, on academic literature or established political theory to guide decision making, those who engaged in the tactic of switching from ward elections to at-large ones were empirically successful. Numerous studies have concluded that the election structure, particularly the at-large type, can depress minority representation on city councils and school boards (Robinson and England 1981, 501; Engstrom and McDonald 1981, 344-354; Robinson et al. 1985, 981). More recent studies also found that at-large elections depress minority representation of both blacks and Hispanics on local government councils (Fraga et al. 1986, 870; Arrington and Watts 1991, 1105; Scarrow 1999; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005; Hajnal and Trounstine 2007, 101). Depression of minority turnout and minority representation occurs as at-large elections force minorities to run in areas with white (Anglo) majorities.

Although empirical evidence suggests that at-large election structures depress minority voter turnout evidence also exists of the reverse. Ward elections can increase minority turnout. In particular, studies have extended the examination of the impact of election structure by *specifically* examining the relationship between ward-based school board elections and minority representation. In a 2003 study examining the relationship between Hispanics and ward elections, it was found that ward based school board elections increased the percentage of Latino representatives relative to the population (Meier and Junke 2003). The same is true for African-Americans in school board elections that use wards (Dennis 1990; Marschall 2005, 194-195, Wills 2007, xviii).

Whatever the rationale used for switching, local governments (including school boards) during the Progressive Era began to move away from ward-based elections to at-large elections. It was thought that change would encourage candidates to represent the entire city and not just a specific area. By the 1920s, the political shift from ward-based to at-large elections was mostly complete. For example, a survey of major metropolitan school districts succinctly stated that, “[w]ard...representation has practically disappeared” (Deffenbaugh 1923, 2, 4). This is confirmed in a survey of big city school districts completed in 1927, where 72.4% of school boards were elected at-large and 10.8% were elected from wards (Counts 1927, 15-16).

However, this switching was not to be permanent. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965¹¹ and subsequent federal court interpretations it was acknowledged that the federal government would take direct action on behalf of minorities, bypassing the state court systems if necessary. The act required “preclearance,” or the submittal of any changes “in any voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice or procedure with respect to voting” to either the attorney general or the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (Grofman et al. 1992, 17). It became clear that if municipalities wanted to avoid lawsuits and federal intervention they would need to adopt single-member districts like wards (Davidson 1994, 35-36). This led local governments (and school districts) to change from an at-large system to an entirely ward based system or to create hybrids in which city elections included a combination of ward and at-large members. A longitudinal study from 1970s-1980s of cities with at least a 10% black (or a combination of Native American and black or Hispanic and black as in the case of Texas used in the sample) population in eight Southern states found “dramatic gains in black

¹¹ The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is also refers the subsequent extensions, re-authorizations and amendments since then unless the extensions, re-authorizations, and/or amendments are otherwise explicitly stated and referred to. In those cases the extensions, re-authorizations and/or amendments stand as their own topic for analysis and discussion.

representation follow[ing the] abolition of at-large elections” (Grofman and Davidson 1994, 319).

4.3: The Type of Voter

The second factor regarding voter turnout in school board elections is the focus not on the electoral institutions but on the type of voter mobilized. Such individual, rather than institutional, factors argue in favor of a candidate’s characteristics and voter proximity to the school as the influences on voter turnout levels. The sex and ethnicity of a candidate along with the proximity of a voter psychologically, geographically and temporally to the school district and to their polling place all seem to influence turnout in school board elections. Changing any part these individual values could cause changes in voter turnout.

A candidate’s characteristics can stimulate increased turnout rates in low-level nonpartisan elections, particularly along racial or gender lines. The ethnicity of the candidate related to the general population has been shown to affect turnout. One study of Chicano and Anglo voters in a school board election found that Chicano candidates were linked to turnouts of higher Chicano voters than Anglo candidates turned out Anglo voters (Garcia 1976). A separate study of a nonpartisan, low-level judicial election showed that having a black candidate can help mobilize the voting power and turnout of the black electorate (Atkins et al. 1985). Additionally, voter turnout for both blacks and whites increased 2-3 percentage points when black democratic candidates were placed on the ballot (Washington 2006). Besides increasing turnout in response to a candidate’s ethnicity, voters will also cast ballots based upon it. A report that examined a non-partisan city council election with 133 candidates found that local voters relied upon ethnic identity as a cue (Mueller 1970, 401). The research shows that voters both turn out and vote

based upon a candidate's ethnicity, particularly if the candidate ethnicity matches the districts' majority ethnicity.

Besides ethnicity, the sex of a candidate also may contribute voter turnout. Several studies argue tentatively that a woman voter tends to support woman candidates (Seltzer et al. 1997, 7,102; Brians 2005, 368). This is an import finding as women are not only more likely to vote in low level elections like those for school board (Rubinfeld and Thomas 1980, 324) but also to get elected to them (Welch and Karnig 1979, 485,487). Indeed, women are more likely to serve at the school board level than any other level of government (Deckman 2004). Subsequently, areas with more women may see more women voters, more women candidates and more women in elected positions.

Proximity is also important in school board elections. The closer a voter feels to the school system, the more likely they will vote in a school board election. While not relying on quantitative data, Roscoe Martin, a political science professor at Stanford University, hypothesized that due to the highly specific and separate nature of school board elections, the only people who would vote in such an election would be "constituent voters" (1970).¹² By "constituent voters" Martin means people who have a vested interest in the election or the school district.

Evidence since then seems to support his hypothesis as voters in local elections have been identified as belonging to two broad groups. One is a "constituent voter," an individual who works for a governmental unit or receives benefits from it like a contractor, teacher or parent (Taebel 1977, 154). These constituent voters would vote according to the benefits distributed by the government and due to their position are closest to it. These individuals therefore would

¹² In Martin's definition of a "constituent voter," he uses the phrase "clientele voter" to describe that type of voter's characteristics. In this thesis I did not use Martin's original wording as I did not want to confuse the reader.

almost always vote in a school board election. The other group is a “clientele voter,” whose stake is less direct and whose benefits are generalized in nature (Taebel 1977, 156). These individuals would be the farthest from a governmental unit and hence may not always participate in elections.

In examining the voters of a school board election, Taebel was able to add to and clarify Martin’s hypothesis. Taebel found that clientele voters turn out in greater absolute numbers than constituent voters (1977, 161). Yet, constituent voters have a “significant role disproportionate to their community strength” in comparison with the general population (1977, 161).¹³ In other words, constituent voters offer more support and in smaller elections, like school boards may make the difference between losing and winning.

Examining those constituency voters in more detail reveals several shared characteristics. Several studies demonstrated that the number of children in public school and a greater number of years as a resident in the community were better at predicting voting in local school board elections than income, age and marital status (Carter 1960, 6; Rubinfeld and Thomas 1980, 324-325).¹⁴ The variable “number of children” was found to be related to voting in a school board election. Parents with more children had more social capital and were therefore more likely to participate in the election (Fischel 2006a). While no studies have been identified that specifically examine the relationship between voter education and turnout in school board elections, the variable education can be eliminated as a characteristic of constituency voters by examining

¹³ Taebel’s study looked at 810 school board election voters in a moderately sized city in the Southwest. He found that 32.2% were constituent voters and 68.8% were clientele voters.

¹⁴ On the variable of “number of kids in school,” the scholars found no difference between turn out of individuals with kids in public or private school. In this same study it was found that the effect of age on turnout was statistically insignificant. This may be due to the fact older voters do not have children in school and may be less likely to vote. Marriage was also evaluated and it suggested that it had a mild effect on voter turnout. This could stem from married couples who are concerned about future educational benefits for future kids and vote accordingly in regard to future, expected benefits. The effect of income on school board voter turnout was considered statistically insignificant. The scholars did not examine the effect of voter education on school board voter turnout.

municipal elections. Several studies found that voter education levels did not influence turnout in city elections (Hamilton 1971, 1140; Karnig and Walter 1983, 493).

Overall, the closeness that voters feel to the school district has a great influence on voter turnout. However, it is not the only factor that can influence turnout. Geographic and temporal proximity are also important. After controlling for socioeconomic and demographic variables a study of 300 voting precincts in Maryland during the 2000 presidential election found “that accessibility [to the voting booth] does make a significant difference to turnout” (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003). The geographic influences on turnout also impact local elections. A study of polling places in a Vestal, New York school board election found that “...[increasing the] distance [by a voter] to a polling location negatively impacts their propensity to vote” (McNulty 2007). This was supported on a smaller scale using county as the level of analysis as opposed to a city (Comber and Dehart 2007). Voters valued the transportation costs to a polling place over the search costs of finding a new polling place. Additionally, how close one is in temporal proximity affects voter turnout. One study found that “...past polling place voting patterns are the single most significant indicator for predicting the outcome of a school budget election...” (Piele and Hall 1976, 17). The closer a school board voter is to the polls both physically and continuously, the greater the increase in voting.

4.4: Information Costs

The last factor that influences turnout is the information costs associated with voting. Elections at the local level, particularly school board elections, have high information costs as they are low-level and non-professional positions. As mentioned previously, voters as a whole are typically ill-informed on school-related matters, campaigns, and school board elections. This lack of knowledge translates into a lack of available money for candidates to spend during their

campaigns so voters may be unaware a school board election is even taking place. A series of surveys found that candidate fund raising was only \$1000 in small districts and \$25,000 in larger districts (Hess and Leal 2005). This lack of money spent on informing constituents probably explains why the majority of local voters report relying on a network of “friends and family” for information about the candidates (Carter 1960, 14; Copeland and Garn 2007). Indeed, school boards usually rely upon highly motivated individuals who, due to the lack of information typically available in a school board race, seek out their own information, thereby becoming self-mobilized and motivated to turn out and vote (Stelzer 1974, 391-392). Reliance upon such a narrow constituency suggests only the “right” type of voter votes in school board elections which due to its weak voter mobilization efforts results in lower turnout relative to other elections.

By using the mass media in nonpartisan local elections candidates may overcome high information costs and mobilize voters (Conway 1968, 76). When it comes to local elections such as mayoral races or city council elections a local newspaper endorsement can have a large impact on turnout (Gregg 1965; Andrews 1966, 256-257; Hain 1975, 340). This influence is magnified if the local newspaper has many subscribers (Mueller 1970), the election is nonpartisan (Erickson and Luttbeg 1973) and the election is of low visibility (Shaw 1977, 73). A study of 10 Texas newspapers from 1960-1971 found that an endorsed candidate received more space in the newspaper and was elected 88% of the time (McCleneghan 1978, 366). Despite accusations of bias in the media, a study of newspaper election coverage from 11 Texas cities from 1975-1977 concluded that all candidates had a fair chance at having equal news space from their respective (hometown) papers (McCleneghan 1978, 793).¹⁵

The effect of information costs on voter turnout rates can be found in school board races too. A content-analysis study of Texas newspaper coverage found that “...that local newspapers

¹⁵ Fairness in this study was determined by measuring in inches news stories regarding the candidates.

can raise public consciousness of [school board elections] and thereby encourage voting” (Luttbeg 1988, 888). The results of this study have been reproduced in several reports, suggesting that daily newspaper endorsements increase total voter turnout and predict winners (Mueller 1970, 400; McCleneghan and Ragland 2002; Raymond 2007, 13).¹⁶ This increased knowledge about school-related matters may increase the likelihood of a school participation activity such as voting (Coombs and Merrit 1977, 191). The lack of media can also have an impact as when the *Cincinnati Post* closed in 2007 “[f]ewer people voted in elections for city council, city commission and, school board” (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garride 2009, 1).

While local newspapers are an importance source of advertising for local elections, newspaper readership in generally across the U.S. has decreased (Meyer 2009, 1). To counter the decline of newspaper readership and make it easier to access information, candidates will often try to get closer to the voter. In this way school board ward elections are well suited as they allow more intimate contact with voters on a neighborhood level. It is easier to contact more voters if the district is smaller (in terms of both physical area and population) such as a ward than if the district is larger such as an at-large. Thus, it could be considered that the smaller the political unit is the more likely it is to lower information costs, thereby increasing turnout.

Television advertising by candidates may be one way to lower information costs and get closer to a potential voter. However, since most school board candidates, as already mentioned, spend less than \$1,000 to get elected television advertising is often unaffordable. Even if a candidate were to spend money on local TV advertising it may not translate into support as “the farther a voter resides from the candidate’s home media market, the less likely it is that the voter knows about the candidate” (Bowler et al. 1993). Moreover, TV advertising does not guarantee

¹⁶ In the 2002 study, newspaper endorsements helped predict winners in areas without TV and with the incumbency effect controlled.

that a candidate's message will be heard by the voters a candidate seeks to mobilize. TV and radio broadcasts do not stay within a defined area. The failure to target specific groups and the costly nature of advertising may explain why school board candidates often try a more personal approach. In this personal approach, a candidate may rely on a social network of friends and neighbors to actively knock on doors and campaign in the community. This method increases the likelihood of a voter voting in a particular election as they are influenced to vote by their friends and neighbors (Conway, 1968, 76; Green and Gerber 2008, 10).

4.5: Population Size and Voter Turnout

In analyzing the impact of the different influences on voting what is essentially being debated is the relationship between population size and voter turnout. Size is often a contributing factor in voter turnout across all studies. Multiple studies cite the population size of a district to be a major contributing factor to voter turnout. A meta-analysis of 83 studies found that population size has a statistically significant negative effect on voter turnout (Geys, 2006, 643; 653). Another study found that the population size of a school district is directly proportional to the power of teachers' unions (Rose and Sonstelie 2010). When one takes into consideration the role played by teachers' unions in elections, the advantage held by school district size becomes obvious (Moe 2006). Size can often have an influence on the power relationships among different interests in a school district as size may shift the balance of power in one direction or another or depress turnout.

While scholars understand the importance of population size there are contrasting viewpoints as to whether or not voter turnout is related to the population size in ward and at-large elections. On the one hand some scholars believe that the larger population of a political unit, such as in an at-large election, the more voting is likely to happen as larger areas encourage

more people to socialize more (Milbrath 1977, 106-110). This may be because larger areas may encourage more social events where voters may informally discuss the election, which may increase the likelihood of a political action (e.g. voting). Another thought is that the need for a broad-based appeal in an at-large election encourages candidates to appeal to the entire electorate, rather than to a narrow few, and in the process electoral competition encourages more people to vote (Bullock 1990, 542). Lastly, turnout for an at-large election may increase because candidates typically have more financial resources, due to their appeal to a wide electorate, which may be used to mobilize more voters to turn out and cast ballots (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Prewitt 1970; Adrian and Press 1977; Welch and Bledsoe 1988, 35). This in turn helps candidates in at-large elections overcome the information costs by spending more money on the mass media thereby increasing the saliency of the election/candidate in voter's minds leading more to turn out and vote (Jewell 1982, 133).

On the other hand scholars suggest larger areas are more impersonal and complicated and are likely to have lower participation rates (Verba and Nie 1972, 247). One study found that smaller counties are more likely to have competitive school board elections (Bickel and Milton 1982, 13). The more competitive an election is, the more information may exist and therefore increase the saliency of the election in the eyes of the voter. An election with high saliency may result in a higher turnout. Moreover, small cities have been found to have higher turnouts than large cities (Kushner et al. 1997, 542). A quantitative analysis of larger political areas and turnout found that “[t]he larger a city becomes the less likely...its citizens [are] to participate in local affairs [such as voting]” (Oliver 2000, 367). The same article stated that voters living in a city were less likely to be mobilized than those who lived in rural areas (369).

This feature of increased turnout among smaller populated areas is also found abroad. In a longitudinal study of six Western European nations and nine out of 10 West German states from 1959-1979 that examined the link between turnout and population found that “voting turnout...was highest in municipalities of less than 5,000 population and scaled quite consistently downward through increasingly larger size categories” (Morlan 1984, 460,469). An updated version of the study done in 2002 found that after examining turnout in local elections since 1970 the smaller communities in Europe over time tend to have increased voter turnout as compared to larger communities (Frandsen 2002, 853,866).¹⁷

Scholars have suggested numerous reasons for increased voter turnout in districts with lower populations. One thought is that the smaller elections encourage voters to see a candidate as “theirs”. Research conducted on a Canadian city school board election by De Vlieger in 1980 suggests that because a candidate represents a specific part of an electorate in the city, it may encourage voters to turn out in increased numbers as they are supporting “their” candidate. This may occur as smaller elections allow the candidate to be accessible and present in the community.

Another reason could be that elections in smaller sized districts help lower information costs. A study by Oliver and Ha, done in 2007, evidence was provided to suggest that elections in smaller sized districts encourage voters to become more informed and mobilized thereby increasing the likelihood of casting a ballot (404). The same study found the size of the district to be inversely related to the level of information possessed by the voters. Another group of scholars argue that because smaller districts and more local elections provide a greater sense of

¹⁷ The study looked at Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It also stated that while turnout increased in smaller communities compared to larger ones, the strength of the relationship varies among the different countries, suggesting other factors may have an effect on turnout like the type of electoral system and whether or not voting is compulsory.

community they increase social connections among the community, which leads to greater voter turnout (Nunnery and Kimbrough 1971 39-42; Marschall 2001, 242-244). It appears from these studies individuals may gain information on elections informally through social networks rather than formally from a traditional media outlet such as a newspaper or local news/radio.

The last reason for more turn out in smaller sized districts more Downsian in nature. “[I]f [voters are] going to exercise any influence at all, [they] must limit [their] awareness to areas where intervention [like voting] pays off the most and information costs the least” (Downs 1957, 258). Stemming from this, elections that rely on a smaller electorate logically increase people’s perception of having a greater chance of casting the deciding vote, thereby having the most influence. Thus, having such elections increases the perception that an individual’s vote is worth more. Hence, one would expect turnout to increase ward elections. However, small elections like wards may make information costs expensive because candidates do not spend or have the money to overcome the information costs and small elections may not generate the broadcasting interest desired by traditional media outlets. This lack of information about an election may exert downward pressure causing voters to be unaware that an election is even occurring.

A final group of scholars rejects the relationship between district size and electoral turnout. In *Size and Democracy* the authors examined the relationship and concluded through using the logs of population, size, and population density to produce the correlates that “size has no relationship with electoral turnout” (Dahl and Tufte 1973, 44). For Dahl and Tufte the more likely relationship is the one between the costs of voting and turnout (1973, 45). While on the surface their claims appear solid, their unit of analysis was at the national level not the local level. Additionally, the authors fail to report on how electoral turnout was calculated, making the

study hard to replicate. The scholars' replication problem and unit of analysis make the study hard to generalize to elections with smaller districts like school boards.

4.6: Characteristics of Electoral Switching

A case study of switching election structures in Raleigh, North Carolina offers insight into the impact on turnout. In 1972 the city of Raleigh switched from at-large to district elections in its city elections. The authors compared six nonpartisan at-large city elections from 1961-1971 with three nonpartisan district elections, following the switch, from 1972-1977. They found that when the city switched from at-large to district elections it saw an increase in turnout from 36% in the last at-large election to 55% in the first district election (Clary and Williams 1982, 64). However, the same study contended that the increased turnout probably resulted more from active neighborhood groups, which then helped to mobilize voters; it cautioned that simply switching election structure may not result in a sustained increase of voter turnout (64). In this example, the increased voter turnout following a switch stemmed from an increased awareness of the election promulgated the increased activities of the group resulting in increased voter awareness and information.

While the Raleigh study does suggest increased turnout following a switch, several concerns arise. One of the most glaring is that the study did not include the methods used in calculating voter turnout, which makes repeating it difficult. Another concern is only a total of nine electoral observations were made across the time span of 15 years, which makes the study hard to generalize. Lastly, the numbers of observations are unbalanced, giving greater weight to the at-large elections. This calls into question the authors' results. Future studies should include a description of how voter turnout was calculated, have more observations than nine, and allow for an equal number of pre-and post-switch observations. Despite the problems, the Raleigh study is

in line with what a previous author had suggested: district elections are associated with increased turnout, particularly if combined with nonpartisan elections (Svara 1977, 175).

In reviewing the academic literature on the impact of electoral switch on voter turnout, three characteristics emerge. First, it appears that turnout levels following a switch are fleeting. Secondly, turnout levels probably are not related to the election structure. Thirdly, concerns exist about research design and data collection.

Some evidence suggests that voter turnout levels following the switch to ward elections from at-large are fleeting. For example, one set of studies that examined the link between switching an election structure and turnout, found that while voter turnout did indeed increase the effects appeared to be ephemeral and not last beyond a handful of future elections (Andrews 1966, 254-255; Clary and Williams 1982, 64; Heilig and Mundt 1984, 77; Bullock 1990, 547). The initial high turnout rate probably resulted from information saturation in letting citizens know the expected changes. Following the change over voter turnout rates eventually went back to similar levels as before the switch.

Other evidence argues that voter turnout rates after a switch in an election structure either had no increase or had no statistically significant influence. For example, a cross-sectional study demonstrated that while the mean voter turnout rate increased when city elections switched from district to at-large no correlation existed between the electoral arrangement and voter turnout (Wood 2002, 223,227). In another example, scholars used a case study method to examine the impact of switching the electoral structure in the 1977 San Francisco city council elections from at-large to district, and found that turnout actually “was one of the lowest figures for...city elections in many years” (Lee and Rothman 1978, 177). They went on to say that ward-based elections did not impact voter turnout to any noticeable degree (151). This corresponds

with a 2002 cross-sectional study of 350 city councils in California that compared voter turnout rates between ward and at-large election structures. This study found that California district elections did not have a significant increase in voter turnout over at-large elections (Hajnal 2002, 64).

A third characteristic, of such studies is the research design and the data. Like the Raleigh, many of the studies rely on observations from either a single political unit at a single point in time or from numerous political units at a single point in time in a cross-sectional analysis. The data that come from such research designs are suspect as they use too few observations of political units across too few points in time, impacting the reliability of the results. Future studies ought to incorporate a longitudinal analysis using many observations of a political unit across many points in time. Additionally, future studies might benefit from a more careful selection of comparative case analysis that describes a better sense of how the relationships unfold.

4.7: Chapter Conclusion

Scholars have identified three factors that influence turnout in local elections, like school boards. The Progressive Era reforms like making elections non-partisan, putting them off-cycle and switching from ward to at-large elections had the unfortunate side effects of lowering turnout generally and in particular preventing racial and ethnic minorities from gaining representation. The research also found that the type of voter and candidate can influence turnout levels. Lastly, information costs are associated with differing levels of voter turnout. The underlying debate that the factors are based upon is how the population size of a particular area influences turnout. Some scholars argue that smaller areas result in lower turnout while others argue the opposite. Still other scholars reject the relationship outright. The next chapter introduces a framework to

examine if voter turnout rates increase following a switch in a school board's election structure from at-large elections to ward elections.

Chapter V: Research Design

5.1: Chapter Introduction

This chapter's focus is to describe the research design. I describe the type of design chosen and state how I improve upon past research. The chapter describes the case selection and then identifies one. In identifying a case I describe the case history, demographics, the reasons for switching and, how the case switched its election arrangement. The chapter concludes with the need to critically examine the data to see what happened to voter turnout.

5.2: Design Utilized

The literature on school board elections has identified three factors that influence turnout. First, institutional variables such as scheduling elections off-cycle, holding partisan elections, and a districts electoral arrangement probably influence turnout. Secondly, while the relationship between a political unit's population size and voter turnout has not been resolved the evidence suggests that turnout may have an important social aspect to it, particularly in lower level elections. Lastly, voter mobilization seems to be dependent on how close a voter feels to a school district and/or the candidates running along with influences by candidate endorsements in newspapers. Operating in the background of these factors lies the debate on the impact of population size on voter turnout levels.

This study will use a case study approach. The approach is useful in describing and exploring an observed phenomenon, such as turnout rates in school board elections following an electoral switch when little is actually known on the topic or when data are either unavailable or lacking important parts. The case study here relies mainly on qualitative analysis in order to capture the complexity of the case and understand its activity rather than using a battery of measurements to identify any empirical interactions (Stake 1995, xi).

Much as other studies already examined in the literature review used an intervention analysis so does this research. This allows for an easier comparison of the changes in voter turnout levels before and after the switch a school district's electoral structure. Using an intervention analysis is similar to what previous authors have utilized when examining pre- and post-turnout levels in school districts that have switched their election structure (Davidson and Korbel 1981, 998). This study blends a case study approach with an intervention analysis and in doing so shares several design aspects with past ones. However, this study will also contain important differences.

5.2.1: Improving Upon Previous Research

One of the major areas of improvement is the need for an explicit voter turnout calculation. To improve upon past research, voter turnout was calculated by using VAP (voting age method). This method involves dividing the total number of votes by the voting age population (MacDonald and Popkin 2001, 963). The resulting number would then mean to convey a percent of voter turnout. Data for the total number voted came from the state board of elections or the city registrar. The voting age population was the number of citizens 18 years or older. Data for the voting age population will come from the U.S. Census category of "population 18 years or older." I used VAP as measuring turnout using was method is similar to other studies examining local election turnout (Holbrook and Heidbreder 2010, 159). Also, in an aggregate study on voter turnout at the district, municipality, state or county level found that 43% of all the studies examined used this operational method to measure turnout (Geys 2006, 639).¹⁸ Additionally, the census information is readily available whereas election data such as

¹⁸ The percent is an author-calculated percent that took the number 36 (the number of studies that Geys found that used the voter turnout formula "total number voted/voting age population") and divided it by 83 (the total number of studies examined by Geys).

registration rolls at the local level are not well stored, not readily available, and not always accurate (Bullock 1990, 539; McDonald and Popkin 2001, 964; Caren 2007, 34-36).

While using a voting eligible population (VEP) measure can be desirable, it is not applicable in this context due to data problems. At this time, there is no reliable method to calculate VEP estimates at the local level. Indeed, even if such a method were constructed, using it would prove to be challenging as one needs to “adjust for ineligible but included groups, such as noncitizens and felons, and eligible but excluded groups, such as overseas citizens” (McDonald and Popkin 2001). Such data may be difficult to obtain or non-existent at the local level.¹⁹

Moreover, studies on school boards rely mainly on surveys for collecting data. While surveys are acceptable, reliance on them as the sole data collecting technique may potentially introduce bias. To solve this problem used aggregate data from the school district, state and the U.S. Census. Lastly, previous school board research has relied on case studies and focused on the individual behavior of school board members (Cistone 2008, 27). Certainly, case studies have their usefulness but when they exclusively examine school districts at a single point in time and then draw conclusions, it hurts the validity and generalizability of the results. To enhance the case study approach, I augmented the research with an intervention model examining a school board in two different representation systems and a longitudinal one that uses many data observations across a longer period of time than other studies. By doing so, I not only reconcile the best approaches in the literature but add a new approach which will create a blueprint for

¹⁹ However, some studies have used VEP at the state level. For a discussion see: Holbrook, Thomas and Brianne Heidbreder. 2010. “Does Measurement Matter? The Case of VAP and VEP in Models of Voter Turnout in the U.S.” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 10: 157-179.

empirically studying and measuring a variable that is thought to limit voter turnout in school board elections.

5.3: Case Selection

Several specific features must also be included and excluded in the case selection. The local jurisdiction had to have switched from ward to at-large or from at-large to ward elections. Lexis-Nexis and Pro-quest searches were used to identify such a district.

In order to have a valid comparison between at-large and ward elections, ward elections were expressed as either a total number for all the wards if every ward held an election in the same year or as a cyclical number when at the end of a two-year ward election cycle all the wards have held an election. In this manner ward votes are comparable to at-large votes.

Elections included in the school district case need to be both nonpartisan and off-cycle.²⁰ Off-cycle elections may include state and local elections (including referenda) but not national elections. The election cases included in this study are to be considered “non-partisan” and hold elections “off-cycle”. The rationale for excluding partisan elections and on-cycle elections is that previous research has found that making elections partisan and scheduling them on cycle with federal elections increases turnout. Therefore, it is important to identify a population of school districts with elections that are non-partisan so that the design avoids spurious relationships.

Special elections were included if they were conducted during a regular election cycle and write-in ballots were included if they fit certain criteria.²¹ Typically, a voter will vote for a write-in candidate by marking the write-in indicator on the ballot and write the candidate’s name in the space provided on the ballot (Dawkins and Gilbert 2010, 45). The Champaign County

²⁰ The term “nonpartisan” means districts that do not permit partisan elections or ballots. The term “off-cycle” means separate from any federal elections.

²¹ The term special election is meant to convey an election that is not held during routine election cycles. The term write-in ballot is meant to convey a type of ballot that lacks the printed names of the candidates.

Board of Elections probably did not report write-ballot totals for any of the elections as indicated by the lack of a spot on the voter turnout rolls. However, the only write-in ballots included in the analysis of voter turnout were if they occupied a single space on the ballot. This is because school board elections sometimes have last minute filings as individuals get pressured to run because no one else will. The last minute filing forces a candidate to run as a write-in because the ballot had already been created.

Cases that involve a mixture of both ward and at-large elections (often designated as “mixed” by election boards) were excluded. Even though some scholars classify mixed elections as district elections for measurement purposes (Lineberry and Fowler 1967). Nevertheless, for operational purposes there is a need to have a reliable pre-event and post-event comparison and therefore “mixed” elections are excluded. The school district must have reliable and readily accessible voter turnout data for a long period of time. Finally, to be able to gather such data the school district boundaries must match up reasonably well to a local political unit like a city or county.

5.3.1: The Selected Case

In identifying a case the Urbana, Illinois School District 116 was selected. It was generally representative of an average school district and school board. It had elected school boards with reliable and accessible election data over a time span of 20 years. It had boundaries close to other local jurisdictions with usable U.S. Census data. It also had switched its election structure at some point.

Table 4: Urbana School District Other Financial Indicators

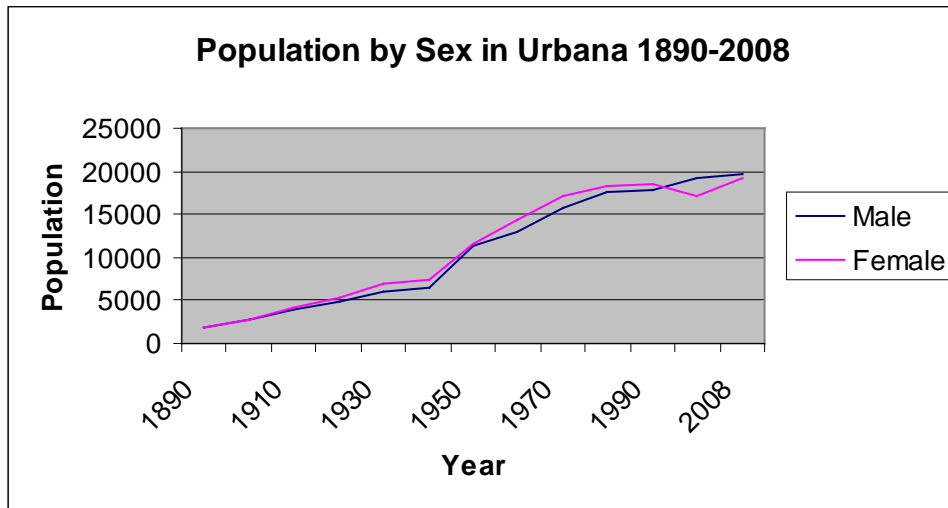
OTHER FINANCIAL INDICATORS				
	2006 Equalized Assessed Valuation per Pupil	2006 Total School Tax Rate per \$100	2007-08 Instructional Expenditure per Pupil	2007-08 Operating Expenditure per Pupil
District	\$164,040	4.34	\$7,139	\$12,481
State	**	**	\$6,103	\$10,417

Source: State of Illinois, Department of Education, 2009 Urbana SD 116 Illinois District Report Cards.

Student enrollment for Urbana City schools as of 2009 is 3,765 students. The student population matches well with national data considering the majority of school districts in the United States are small and have fewer than 4,999 students. The Urbana school district is also experiencing similar changes to those in the national public school student population: a decrease in white enrollment, static black enrollment, and an increase in Hispanic enrollment (Appendix A). As of 2009, the district spent an average of \$9,810 (Table 4) per pupil which is higher than the state average yet below the national middle projected average in the 2009-2010 school year of \$10,844 (Table 3).²²

²² The average per pupil spending (for both the state and the district) was calculated by adding the categories of “2007-2008 Instructional Expenditure per Pupil,” which was \$7,139, and “2007-2008 Operating Expenditure per Pupil” of \$12,481 and dividing by two to find the mean.

Figure 1: Population by Sex in Urbana 1890-2008



Source: U.S. Census, 1870-2000 and 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates. Notes on the data: The year 1890 was chosen as it is the first year in which reliable and accessible data for Urbana City sex is available.

In 2010 the board appeared to consist of two white males, one black female, and four white females.²³ The racial make-up of the board conforms to national statistics, as most school boards are white. However, the gender make-up of the board is different as most individuals who serve on school boards are men. This may be explained historically since Urbana has always had more females than males despite the apparent reversal of the trend (Figure 1). The board currently has seven elected positions with each position elected to a four year term. The school board elections are staggered across two years, with each odd-year seeing between three and four board seats up for reelection. This fits with the national average of boards having between five and eight members, each elected to a four year term.²⁴

Besides offering a representative fit, Urbana School District also has several other broad characteristics that are important for the study. The elections it holds are non-partisan and are off-cycle. The district prior to the switch had used cumulative voting. Cumulative voting is

²³ Relevant characteristics were inferred from the school board members official photos

²⁴ The number of board members and the term of service were obtained from the district website.

See: Urbana School District 116. <http://www.usd116.org/home/board/schoolboard2.html> (accessed Oct. 1st, 2010).

where the number of votes a voter can cast is equal to the number of candidates running. Voters are free to cast all their votes for one candidate, divide them among several, or cast fewer votes than number of candidates running. Cumulative voting allow voters to express their intensities for a particular candidate, however, the downside to this method is it makes it difficult to determine exact turnout numbers. Following the switch the need to use cumulative voting declined as each voter in the ward election only elects one candidate not several such as in at-large elections. Fortunately, since 1989 the number of ballots cast has been reported by Champaign County, making it easy to identify the exact number of votes. Voter turnout data are compiled and stored by Champaign County, and reported to the Illinois State Board of Elections and therefore should be considered reliable. Voter turnout data starting from 1980 are accessible and available on the Champaign County board of election's website.

The boundaries of the Urbana school district match reasonable well to the Urbana city boundaries. Having political boundaries of the school district and the city match well is important as it demonstrates that those individuals polled in the U.S. Census surveys for Urbana also live in the school district boundary. This increases the reliability of utilizing U.S. Census data to generate voter turnout numbers.

The northern boundary of the Urbana is Olympian Drive (Country Road. 1900); to the East is High Cross Road (Country Road 1600 East); to the South is Windsor Road (County Road 1400 North); and in the West is Wright Street (Appendix D). The school district's boundaries fit well within these city boundaries (Appendix C). The school board is bounded in the north by Country Road 2200 North, which is three blocks north of boundary for the city. The eastern boundary is County Road 1800 East, which is two blocks past the eastern boundary for the city. The southern boundary is County Road 1300 North, which terminates one block away from the

city's southern boundary. Lastly, in the west the school board uses Wright Street as the boundary. One major difference in boundaries is whereas the city ward boundaries include the University of Illinois, the school district does not.

The closeness in boundaries between the cities and school districts in the state of Illinois is also suggested in quantitative literature. A study on matching school district boundaries to other local government boundaries found that cities with populations between 25,000 and 40,000 have a 61% substantial overlap with other political boundaries, including school districts (Fischel 2007, 11). The city of Urbana in 2009 had a population of almost 40,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). In Illinois, 74% of cities sampled substantially overlapped with the city school district boundaries (Fischel 2007, 12). From the evidence provided on boundary matching it can be implied that the boundaries in this case match reasonable well suggesting that U.S. Census data can be used to determine population numbers in the category, "population 18 years or older".²⁵

The Urbana school district also fits the specific requirement of having switched its arrangements for school board elections. Under criticism for not having enough minority representation on the board and for having a disproportionate number of board members from one geographic area, the school board approved a change from at-large elections to district ones (Dey 2007). The election to adopt the change occurred in 1998 and 60% of the voters chose to support it ("Urbana School Board Needs" 2003). Indeed, 10,921 voters of the 1990 "18 or over population" of 30,475 voted, a turnout of 35.8% of the electorate as calculated by VAP. Prior to 1999, the school district for almost twenty years elected six school board members with at-large

²⁵ I did not have access to GIS mapping software to make an exact match between the boundaries.

elections staggered across two years.²⁶ Following the success of the proposition the school district would elect seven members with ward-elections staggered across two year intervals.

5.3.2: History and Demographics of Selected Case

For a school district that offers a good fit of an average city school district, it is one of six school districts out of 900 in the state of Illinois that use ward-based elections (“Urbana School Board Needs” 2003). There are a few broad historical trends that can account for the switch. One reason is the shifting demographics of the community. Changes in federal policy and a visit by the Office of Civil Rights are another. Lastly, one is an interest group that perceived the board as being unrepresentative of the community’s demographics and geography.

Illinois first became a state in 1818. Settlers began moving into Champaign County in the early 1820s, with the first settler arriving in the area now known as Urbana in 1828 (Champaign County Timeline 2010). By 1832 Champaign County was officially organized with the first school house being built near Urbana. The following year, the city of Urbana was founded. By 1850s there was a need replace the existing structure so a building was purchased by the City of Urbana for \$5,000. It was used as a free school for all grades (1-12) until 1872. Several other schools were built in different sections of the city, such that by the turn of the century, the Urbana school system included four elementary schools and one high school (Urbana School District 2010a). Between the turn of the century and World War Two the city’s population increased from 5,728 in 1900 to 14,064 in 1940 (Appendix B). This change in demographics resulted in new schools being built and renovated. Post-World War II saw school enrollment increase, primarily as a result of expanded home building within and outside the city limits, which brought more people to the community. This is reflected in the data as the total population

²⁶ The twenty year number was inferred from the Champaign County Board of Elections electoral returns as the earliest Urban City School Board #116 electoral returns I could find was from the at-large elections in 1981.

jumped to 22,834 in 1950, topping out around 39,000 in 2010 (Appendix B). The result today is one early childhood school, six elementary schools, one high school and one adult education school (Urbana School District 2010a).

As the total population has continued to expand it has changed the descriptive representation of the community. The data in Appendix F indicates that the total white population has declined since 1980, while the total Black, Hispanic/Spanish Origin, and Asian/Pacific-Islander categories have increased relative to the total white population decline.²⁷ These changes occurred, such that by 2008 the total non-white population was about 36% of the total population.²⁸ This is a notable increase as only thirty years ago the total non-white population was around 16%.²⁹ In fact, Urbana's minority growth rate is slightly faster than the national average of 34% (Minckler 2008).

Likewise, data in Figure 1 indicate that historically Urbana always had more women in the community than men. It has only been within the last twenty years that a population has occurred. However, it appears by at least 2008 the population gap between the sexes in Urbana is narrowing. As of the most recent American Community 3-year estimate survey, Urbana's population was 50.6% male and 49.4% female (U.S. Census Bureau 2006-2008)³⁰. As indicated in the American Community 3-year estimate survey, Urbana has more males than the national average of 49.3% and fewer females than the national average of 50.7%.

²⁷ Native-Americans are not tracked because they make up such an insignificant minority both in the community and in the schools (see Appendix A and B).

²⁸ The number "36%" was calculated by taking 14,113 (which itself is calculated by adding the total black, Hispanic/Spanish-Origin, Asian/Pacific-Islander population for 2008) and dividing it by 38,984 (total population for 2008).

²⁹ The number "16%" was calculated by taking 5,804 (which itself is calculated by adding the total, black, Hispanic/Spanish-Origin, Asian/Pacific-Islander population for 1980) and dividing it by 35,978 (total population for 1980).

³⁰ For the time period under consideration Urbana had a total of 19,472 males and 19,243 females.

Having such a large ethnic minority in the community offers an opportunity for school board candidates to campaign for better demographic representation on the school board. While the school board has had racial minorities serve on it in the past when it had at-large elections, it was only intermittently (Dey 2007; Wood 2009). Indeed, the racial minorities that served on the at-large elected school board in the past were most likely elected as a result of the school district's use of cumulative voting, which has a tendency to favor minority candidates (Engstrom 1992, 136-137; Still 1992, 191-193; Cooper 2007). When the school district switched to ward elections, it dropped the cumulative voting in exchange for a "one-person, one-vote" rule. The changing community demographics echo the similar changes taking place in federal policy.

As mentioned previously, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as a goal attempted to establish equality for minorities in regards to registration and voting. The Voting Rights Act and subsequent amendments, re-authorizations and court interpretations have been significant for local elections because of the signals they have sent. For lower level political districts, like those for school boards, if they wished to avoid lawsuits and federal government intervention, then they needed to make changes so as to not disenfranchise minority voters.

For example, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), a bureau in the U.S. Department of Education, initiated a proactive compliance check on the Urbana school system in December 1996 regarding Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The OCR found two major issues. One was African-American students and special education. The school district had more African-Americans classified as special-education disproportionate to their numbers in the general population (Adams and Ternasky 1998, 43). The other was unequal opportunities for African-Americans to participate in gifted courses and accelerated classes. Following the findings, the OCR and the school district struck an agreement on how to solve the issues. By the end of 1998

Urbana City schools had fixed most of the problems related to the two major issues. The rest were monitored until October of 2002 when the OCR reported that Urbana City schools had fulfilled its obligations in solving the issues (Cook March 27th, 2003).

In fulfilling its obligations it appears that Urbana City schools requested an outside group from Western Illinois University to come and conduct an equity and educational climate audit. Two key findings from the report are relevant for this thesis. One concluded that inequities in academic progress for minority students, especially African-American students, were present (Adam and Ternasky 1998, 1). Building off that finding, the other one suggested that descriptive representative inequalities existed on the school board (Adam and Ternasky 1998, 11). Due to the perceived descriptive inequalities of political representation on the school board, it was therefore implied that all households may not be adequately represented with an all-white school board.

5.4: The Switch

Against the background of a federal compliance check and subsequent changes, several grassroots interest groups sprang up. Each group at its core was concerned with righting the perceived descriptive inequalities that existed in the political structure of the school board. The first one, Concerned Citizens for a Quality Education (CCQE), revolved around whether the African-American community residing north of University Street had unduly shouldered the burden of school integration, particularly as it relates to busing (Adams and Ternasky 1998, 8). The second group, Citizens for a Representative School Board (CARSB), was concerned with the inequalities on the school board both geographically and racially (Adams and Ternasky 1998, 11). CARSB reported that between 1981-1997 80% of the school board members came from two of the ten census tracts (Tract 57 and 58) and that the racial make-up in the tracts was mostly

white, hence leading to a mostly white school board (Adams and Ternasky 1998, 11). Using the inequalities as an issue, CARSB was able to get 1700 signatures to put a referendum to change the way the school board elects representatives from at-large to ward in 1998 November election (Adams and Ternasky, 1998, 11).

During the proposed switch the local newspaper, *The News-Gazette* did not support the change and ran editorials and articles against the change. Cope Cumpston was a former Urbana City School Board member, helped get the proposed switch on the ballot. In a conversation with me she said that *The News-Gazette* was regularly against the change and complained about it (2010). In a separate email conversation with Esther Pratt she, a former elected official in Urbana City, described the newspaper editors as “Republican” and therefore prefer at-large over ward elections as “it helps get more Republicans elected” (2010). As Esther further elaborates, *The News-Gazette* “promoted and practically ran the campaign to add two at-large seats to the seven member [ward-based] city council in Urbana in...2004.”³¹ Nevertheless, 10,921 individuals voted in the 1998 referendum election as already noted. Forty percent of the electorate voted no, with 60% voting yes. Despite the complaints by the local newspaper, the measure passed and the first ward elections for the school board would be held the following year in 1999.

When a district decides to do redistricting, there appears to be two different approaches. In one type, a school district could redistrict in order to prevent legal challenges. School districts that decide on the legal protection route tend to create districts that provide equal protection, representational equality, and prevent minority voter dilution (Morrison and Clark 1992, 58-

³¹ The plan to add two at-large seats was defeated, 63 against and 37 for it.

59).³² For the first route it appears that the region that a city is located in can also influence the approach choice as the Midwest has the highest proportion of cities with apportioned districts that have equal population (Lyons and Jewell 1980, 77). The other approach is a school district that may redistrict its boundaries to favor incumbents (Lyons and Jewell 1980, 77).

For Urbana, in creating the new ward boundaries, several proposals were offered and discussed in public meetings. In the end, the plan that was adopted by the school board was the one that allowed the majority of previously elected at-large members to represent the ward in which they were currently residing (Pratt 2010). Rather than rely on an independent redistricting commission to draw the lines, the adopted proposal for ward boundaries was drawn up by a school board member who had access to re-districting software (Cumpston 2010). As striking as the board's action seems the school board does not deviate from the limited scholarly literature on the subject of local redistricting.

Most districts do redistricting themselves with some staff assistance (Lyons and Jewell 1980, 80). When Urbana redistricted it did so with internal staff assistance as opposed to external help. Local political units attempt to either follow existing political boundaries or use technical assistance in the form of computers or consultants to ensure population equality (Lyons and Jewell 1980, 78-80). It appears that in comparing Appendices C and D it does suggest that the school board, when drawing the new ward lines, took its boundary cues from the existing city ward boundaries. Additionally, as the conversation with Cope Cumpston suggested, the school board relied on computer software to make the final ward boundary lines. In this manner, the school board appears to have followed standard procedures in redistricting local political boundaries (2010).

³² In the article "equal protection" is summarized as "one person, one vote," and "representational equality" means each legislator represents an equal number of persons as every other legislator.

5.5: Chapter Conclusion

Since the change the local newspaper has not supported switch and has called it reform in need of a reform (Dey 2007). Specifically, the newspaper has focused on low voter turnout, declaring the elections not to be elections but rather “confirmations” of the incumbents (“Urbana School Board Needs” 2003). Indeed, the newspaper blames the dismal electoral returns completely on the switch from at-large school board elections to ward-based ones, citing that voters in 1999 bought a “pig in a poke” (“Another Fiasco” 2007). As of 2007, Urbana council members have spoken out against the change, and several current and former Urbana school board members including one of the original proponents of the switch have expressed disappointment with the results (Dey 2007). With the community starting to regret the decision to switch and continual opposition of the newspaper, there is a need to explore just how accurate the community’s feelings are. An analysis of the electoral data may help in understanding if turnout increases in school board elections because of a switch from at-large elections to ward ones.

Chapter VI: Data Analysis

6.1: Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and explain the inclusion or exclusion of the data. I analyze data with several tables and a figure offered as evidence to suggest a decline in voter turnout exists in the district but is not statistically significant to the type of electoral structure used by the district or the competitiveness of the elections. Following the analysis, I offer suggestions as to why turnout did not increase as expected. The chapter concludes with descriptions of the dangers of low voter turnout and need to be cautious in deciding blame for the low voter turnout.

6.2: Data Used

The Urbana school board elections studied are those at-large elections held in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1997. Table 1 also includes the 1995 at-large special election held to elect a candidate to complete a two year unexpired term. The 2005-2007 election cycle under the category of “total number of candidates” includes only those names listed on the ballot except for the District #1 ward election in 2007 in which no individual met the filing deadline and therefore the sole candidate had to run as a write-in candidate. Additionally, the 2005-2007 election cycle it includes the 2005 District #2 special election held to complete a two year unexpired term. This election was needed as in 2003 a candidate was elected but had to resign because she did not live within the district boundaries (Cook April 8th, 2003). The 1998 referendum adoption election is excluded since no candidates were elected.

Although turnout data for the Urbana City School Board District #116 are available in 1981, the study begins in 1989, since the State of Illinois only began reporting the number of “ballots cast” with the 1989 Urbana School Board elections. Previous elections because of the

use of cumulative voting only reported the accumulated vote totals per candidate not, the total count of ballots cast. This makes it difficult to determine the total voter turnout as one could not compute turnout by adding up total ballots and dividing them by the number of candidates running due to the variation in voter ballot casting. All the ward elections in the 1999 and 2003 elections along with the cyclical elections of 2005-2007 are included. The ward election of 2001 is excluded as it was used to stagger the new election cycle and therefore is not part of a regular election cycle (Cumpston 2010).³³ The most recent election of 2009 is not included as it is the start of an election cycle that will be completed in 2011. “Total number of candidates” is the number of candidates listed on the ballot including “write-ins” if they are the only “candidate” on the ballot as reported by the Champaign County Board of Elections. “Seats Available” is the number of seats up for election as reported by Champaign County Board of Elections. Lastly, “Surplus Candidates” means that in each ward there were more candidates than seats available. The number for “Surplus Candidates” is calculated by subtracting the number of seats available from the total number of candidates. By doing so a comparable measure of competitiveness between the at-large and ward elections is created. For the 2005-2007 election cycle, the election held in Ward #7 in 2007 is where that surplus candidate number originates from. The rest of the ward elections in that cycle were not competitive.

Additionally, in this analysis candidate age, income, occupation, status, sex and ethnicity were not examined for. While the variables of candidate sex and ethnicity in previous studies of turnout rates in local government elections are important considerations, Urbana does not differ greatly enough from the national average in sex to warrant such an investigation into the impact of candidate sex on voter turnout and gathering candidate ethnicity (along with occupation,

³³ In the conversation she mentioned that in order to stagger the elections half of the school board members got an initial two year term and half got a four year term.

status, age and income) data to 1989 (the start of the study) was beyond the capacity of the author. Another variable considered was the influence of the geographic location of a candidate on turnout. However, I did not have access to GIS software that would enable a proper testing of candidate geography on turnout.

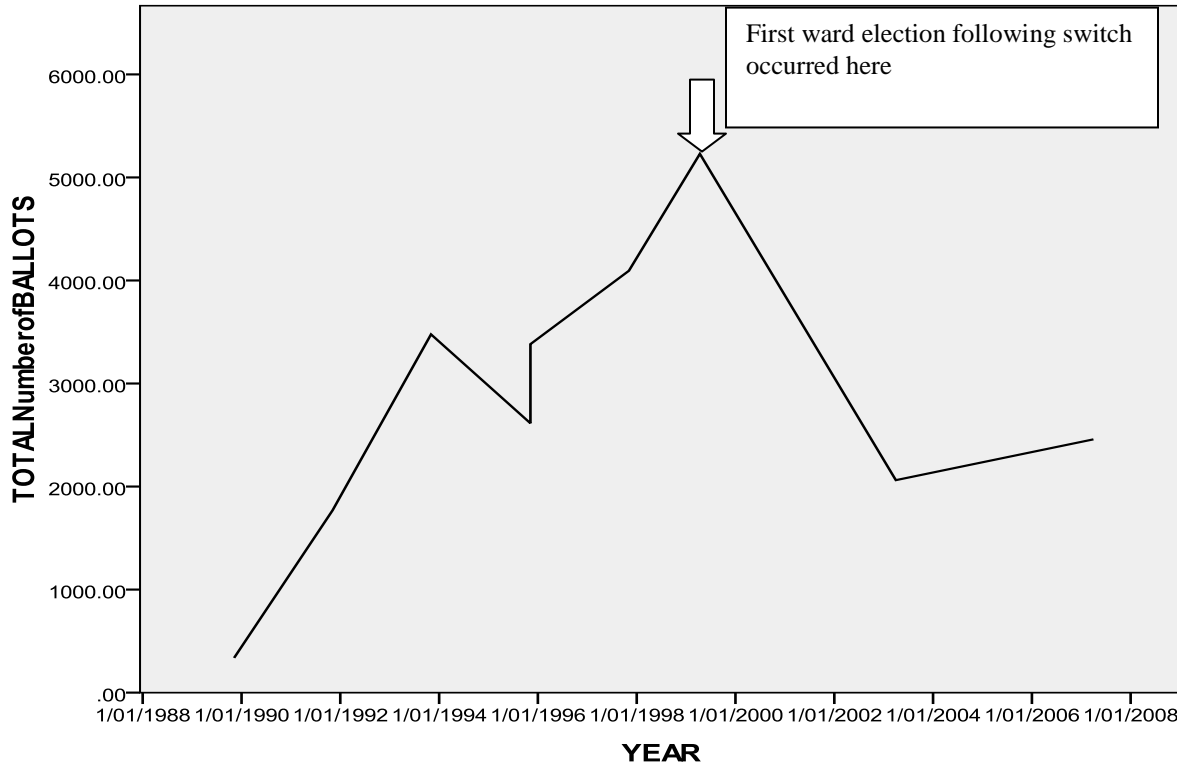
Table 5: At-large and Ward Election Turnout Data for the Urbana City School Board 1989-2007

Year	Election Type	Total Number of Ballots	Percent of VEP Turnout	Total number of candidates	Seats Available	Surplus Candidates
1989	At-large	337	1.1%	6	4	2
1991	At-large	4094	13.4%	5	3	2
1993	At-large	3477	11.4%	7	4	3
1995	At-large	3382	11.1%	6	3	3
1995	At-large	2614	8.6%	2	1	1
1997	At-large	4094	13.4%	6	4	2
1999	Ward	5229	17.10%	9	7	2
	All Wards Elected					
2003	Ward	2062	6.7%	9	7	2
	All Wards Elected					
2005-2007	Ward	2458	7.9%	10	8	3
	Electoral Cycle					

Source: Champaign County Clerk. *Champaign County Election Returns*.
<http://www.champaigncountyclerk.com/elections/results/index.html> (accessed Oct. 20th, 2010).

6.3: Data Results

Figure 2: Percent of Ballots Cast calculated using VAP from 1989 to 2009



Source: Table 5, previous page.

As indicated in Table 5 and Figure 2, Urbana School District 116 had, prior to the start of ward elections, seen a steady increase in turnout. In fact Urbana went from 1.1% turnout in 1989 to 13.4% in 1997, two years before the switch. Overall, the median turnout percent of the at-large elections observed is 11.25%. While turnout did increase to 17.10% of the electorate in the first ward election following the 1998 change, since then it has had a steady decline.³⁴ As mentioned by Clary and Williams (1982, 64) this is an expected result of changes in an electoral structure be it for city councils or for school boards. While we know that turnout has dropped since the switch we need to identify if it is because of the electoral switch.

³⁴ I plotted a graph looking at total ballots cast across time and found a similar phenomenon; voter turnout numbers drop following the introduction of the ward election.

Given that “election type” is nominal and ”voter turnout” is an interval variable, an Independent T-test of the difference of the means will be the best approach. A 2-tailed t-test is the best method chosen for this type of research as the variables are not matched and, despite the hypothesis predicting a single direction, the 2-tailed test would allow an analysis of the p-value in both directions as I am not absolutely certain of the exact direction.

Table 6: Mean Differences between At-large and Ward Election Voter Turnout

Group Statistics					
	ElectionType	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TOTALNumberofBALLOTS	AT-LARGE	6	2612.1667	1372.86029	560.46787
	WARD	3	3249.6667	1725.55044	996.24701

The output from Table 6 shows that the six sampled at-large elections had a mean of total ballots cast of 2,612, while the three sampled ward elections had a mean of total ballots cast of 3,249. Interpreting the data, it does suggest a difference between the means. It is important to determine if the difference as indicated in the Table 6 is statistically significant. An analysis of the t-test may provide an answer.

In running a t-test it was determined that the p-value was .562 for a 2-tailed test. To determine if a difference between the means is statistically significant, the alpha of .05 is used. The alpha of .05 was chosen as it is commonly assumed in social science literature that having a 5% probability of a difference between the means occurring by chance is a reliable basis for declaring a result to be statistically significant. In this analysis, the critical t-value for a two-tailed test with an alpha of .05 would be a critical t-value of ± 2.306 . Since our obtained p-value of .562 is smaller than the critical t-value we must reject the hypothesis in favor of the null

hypothesis that switching from at-large to ward elections was not associated with higher voter turnout in a school board election.³⁵

Due to the exploratory nature of this thesis I ran a one-tailed test and I changed confidence levels for all statistical tests utilized. When I ran a one-tailed test the p-value was .000. At this point I stopped as any one-tailed critical t-value set at any confidence level would be more than the observed p-value. This meant that I had to reject my hypothesis in favor of the null. I also changed confidence levels to 90% and found no support for my hypothesis.

The lack of a statistically significant difference argues in favor of some other variable that may have more of an impact on turnout than the election structure. One possibility could be the competitiveness of an election. Ward elections may have fewer barriers of entry as they may not cost candidates much in terms of resources to mount campaigns in smaller areas aimed at mobilizing smaller electoral populations. Due to their smallness in both eligible voters and area wards elections may encourage more candidates to get involved which may increase the competitive nature of an election resulting in more media attention and a higher turnout rate. Table 7 tests the competitiveness of the elections using the variable “Surplus Candidates”.

³⁵ I also ran a t-test for equality of the means comparing the percent of voter turnout to election type (ward and at-large) using the same level of significance and arrived at the same conclusion, namely, no support for the influence of the type of election on voter turnout. I also dropped the 1989 election in examining total ballots and percent of voter turnout. I found no support for my hypothesis.

Table 7: Mean Differences between At-large and Ward Elections in Surplus Candidates

Group Statistics					
	ElectionType	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SurplusCandidates	AT-LARGE	6	2.0000	.63246	.25820
	WARD	3	2.3333	.57735	.33333

As shown in Table 7, both election types have a mean “surplus candidates” difference of .33.³⁶ The data shown suggest that neither ward nor at-large elections impact the competitiveness of elections as shown by a lack of a significant difference between the means. While some individual elections may be competitive, longer term data comparing at-large to ward elections suggest no meaningful difference in the likelihood of contested elections. Due to the lack of a clear difference between the means, no further analysis is necessary. This lack of a statistically significant difference in competitiveness and the type of election structure suggests a different variable is at work in school board elections keeping voter turnout low.

³⁶ The term “surplus candidates” is defined as more candidates than seats available

6.4: Alternative Explanations

One reason turnout did not increase following a switch from at-large elections to ward elections may be information costs. Each ward may be too small for a candidate to effectively campaign in, especially as it relates to the candidates' ability to get volunteers, mobilize voters in the district and obtain monetary support for election expenses. Indeed, in one ward election the only candidate running was a write-in who had lower voter turnout numbers when compared to the candidates whose names were on the ballot (Champaign County Clerk).³⁷ This may suggest that an information barrier exists, resulting in a community unaware that a school board election is even occurring.

The high information costs in ward elections may be the result of non-competitive elections and/or media inattention may be another reason. Ward elections involve not only a smaller area but each is separate and distinct from another. This may result in the inability of each ward election to create enough competition between candidates. These discrete and separate ward elections may lead the local media to pay less attention to each individual ward election. Additionally, ward elections often occur simultaneously with other ward elections, and therefore may lower the level of media interest to report on each individual election. Too many elections may lower the ability of the media to report on any one election. As a result of media inattention the costs to get information increases and turnout is depressed (Downs 1957, 258-259).

An additional reason could be the type of voter mobilized. The fact that there is a lack of difference between turnout rates between at-large and ward elections suggests that the same types of people could be voting in the election. This is an important finding as it lends credit to Taebel who contended that only constituency voters (people who receive a benefit from the

³⁷ The 2007 District #1 election had 54 ballots cast for a write-in candidate. While not included in this study, the 2009 District #3 election had 44 ballots cast for a write-in candidate which was lower than candidates who had names on the ballot for that ward.

institution) like contractors, parents and teachers vote in school board elections (1977). In other words only those affected by the outcomes or who have a stake in the outcomes vote in school board elections.

The lack of a statistical relationship between the competitiveness of an election and the election structure may suggest that incumbency plays a role. As mentioned previously, Urbana seemed to have utilized internal staff assistance in creating boundary lines and in doing so appears to have constructed ward district boundaries to benefit incumbents. Drawing lines to benefit incumbents may have prevented the statistical relationship between the variables as the advantages of being an incumbent may be an intervening variable between the two.³⁸

Additionally, perhaps the underlying assumption that voting is the best method at measuring citizen participation is wrong. Perhaps, voting is costly for the community and individuals are using the most parsimonious method of expression. Indeed, defining participation to include attendance at parent-teacher and school board meetings may actually show a higher rate.

A final reason could be with the data and design. The low number of observations of wards or at-large elections could impact the predicted result. Perhaps studies that include data from future ward elections or incorporated the initial ward elections used to stagger the terms would see a different result. Additionally, the outcome might be different had a population of school boards that switched elections been identified and sampled rather than focusing on just one. Finally, having more accurate descriptions of the population (both in number and characteristics) in each ward would allow the turnout percentage to be described more precisely, which may influence the final result.

³⁸ For a brief discussion of the incumbency advantage at the local level see: Trounstone, Jessica. 2009. "Information, Turnout and Incumbency in Local Elections." Center for the Study of Democratic Policies. Princeton: Princeton University. <http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Trounstone020509/> (accessed Jun. 1st, 2009), 6-7.

6.5: Chapter Conclusion

Whatever the cause for low voter turnout, it is particularly dangerous in school board elections as power may shift away from eligible voters to other interests that may not work in for the best interests of a school district. In Urbana, if voters are not involved, then elected officials may get replaced by appointees or more strikingly through a private sector process of submitting resumes to the district and then interviewing for the positions during closed meetings (Urbana School District 2010b). This is problematic as it removes the voters from representative process. This may result in voters having even less of a say in local school matters. Additionally, it may make it harder for the school board to govern as school boards appointed in this manner may be perceived as illegitimate. Finally, it leaves the school board without a mandate as the members may be less able to interpret the policy preferences of the community.

As identified in the data from one school board in the Midwest, changing election type impacts neither voter turnout nor the competitiveness of the elections. While the criticism from the community and the local newspaper regarding the low turnout rate in school board elections is important, it is disingenuous to place the blame solely upon the change from at-large elections to ward elections. It should be understood that school boards routinely have low voter turnout when compared to other contests for “higher” offices, regardless of the type of school board election. Moreover, there is precedent in the community, as the 1989 at-large election showed that voter turnout, in spite of the election type, can be quite low.

Chapter VII: Conclusion and Limitations

7.1: Chapter Introduction

This chapter serves to reviews the possible benefits of higher turnout in school board elections, the potential problems associated with low turnout, and how this Thesis studied one proposed way of addressing this challenge to a representative democracy. Moreover, I describe the study's limitations and suggest areas where further "light" maybe needed. The chapter concludes with a statement on the significance and implications of the findings along with prescribing some policy alternatives for the Urbana school board.

7.2: Thesis Review

Broader participation in school board elections is needed as it may suggest to elected officials the policy preferences of the community and allows the board to be seen as a legitimate institution. The lack of higher turnout rates invites interest groups to fill the void left barren by voters. This may result in candidates who may become beholden to interest groups as opposed to the broader constituents. Low turnout has a secondary effect of creating ineffective boards as the members on the boards may be unable to interpret the wishes of the people into acceptable policy preferences. This may invite conflict along with poor budgeting and shoddy policy all of which may negatively impact the educational achievement of the students in a school district's jurisdiction.

Many scholars feel that school boards were created with the idea of linking the people to the control of schools which would mold citizens ready to participate in republican government. Participation in early school board elections was an informal affair. However, with the successive waves of immigration and the internal emigration to the cities in the 19th century there

was a need to centralize, formulize, and consolidate the election process. Voter turnout in these early school board elections appeared to be high.

The need to provide better information for the local board policymakers and the community led to school boards becoming a topic of academic concern. Scholars have identified numerous variables that have influenced voter involvement in school board elections but the ones most prominent are those related the Progressive Era. Many government officials during the Progressive Era sought to take local elections off-cycle, make them nonpartisan, and move from ward-based to at-large elections. It was thought that those reforms would reduce corruption. While it may have lowered corruption it had the side-effect of depressing both overall voter turnout and minority turnout, as in the case of moving to at-large elections. Other important variables that influence turnout at the local level are certain individual characteristics of the voter, costs of receiving local election information, and the institutional variables such as the election structure.

It is the variable election structure that I examined in this Thesis. Previous research suggested a link between district size and voter turnout levels. Also, I sought to shed new light into an area of election studies that has remained dark relative to other election types. To test the hypothesis that school boards that switch from at-large to ward-based elections see an increase in voter turnout levels, I studied the Urbana schools. In this manner I utilized an in-depth case study approach and attempted to improve past research by incorporating election data over a longer period of time (18 years) and precisely stating how voter turnout was calculated.

The analysis of a single, medium-sized school district in Illinois found that switching from at-large to ward elections did not increase voter turnout. Turnout did increase following the first ward elections after the switch in 1999, but ward-based voter turnout was statistically

insignificant from at-large voter turnout. Additionally, there was no statistically significance association between the competitiveness of ward and at-large elections. This lack of a statistically significant change suggests that future studies should incorporate other alternative explanations such as high information costs, the type of voter mobilized along with, providing more refined data and more observations.

7.3: Study Limitations and Areas of Improvement

This study does have limitations. “Individual voting history” and “information costs” were excluded from this study because the only way to acquire data on individual voting history would have been to distribute surveys to individual voters. Unfortunately, the electoral system change occurred 12 years ago, making a before and after survey impossible. Surveying current residents about their knowledge of school board elections suffers from similar challenges. Conducting a content analysis that examines election news provided in newspapers could provide clues about the information environment, and would be a useful point of departure. Future research on school boards could benefit if individual level data collected by a survey were combined with an analysis of how voters get local election information. This future approach would overcome the most serious limitations of this study and because of the different data collection techniques make the results more reliable and less biased.

The study also is limited by the available turnout data. These numbers are only (reliably) available for Urbana school board elections since 1989. In turn, this limits the number of observations, increases the difficulty of having a balanced number of pre and post switch observations, and makes it hard to generalize to other areas. Additionally, using Voting Eligible Population (VEP) rather than Voting Age Population (VAP) as the voting turnout denominator may be a more valid measurement of turnout. Unfortunately, the VEP is not currently available

below the state level. Furthermore, GIS mapping of U.S. Census tracts with local election districts may provide more refined turnout numbers.

Other variables such as voter income, age, education, ethnicity, marital status, religion, political identification, political environment and mobility and candidate occupation were excluded. As absent individual-level data, it is impossible to fully control for these variables.³⁹ Even though some studies have found a relationship between income, occupation and turnout in city elections (Hamilton 1971, 1140) it appears that when one focuses only on school boards, the degree of importance of variables that operate at national, state or even municipal levels appear to drop drastically. This may suggest that voter participation in low turnout elections is a function of something else, such as information costs rather than the aforementioned variables.

7.4: Significance and Implications of Findings

Despite failing to find statistically significant voter turnout and election competition results associated with a change in school board electoral systems, this Thesis is able to shed light into those “dark islands” of political governance. The findings imply that in terms of district size and population, going from a large area (like an at-large election) to a smaller area (like a ward election) neither increase turnout or election competition are stable over time.

The absence of a statistically significant link between the size of the jurisdiction represented and higher turnout counters some previous research findings. Specifically, Verba and

³⁹ Of course, some previous research has found mild or insignificant effects on local turnout depending on voters' income, age and education. Thus they are not expected to systematically covary with the variables of interest, reducing the value of controlling for them. See Rubinfeld, Daniel and Randall Thomas. 1980. “On the Economics of Vote Turnout in Local School Board Elections.” *Public Choice* 35 (Jan): 324-325. This was also found in a separate analysis to be true. See: Delbert Taebel. 1997. “Politics of School Board Elections.” *Urban Education* 12(July): 153-166. Also, ethnicity of voter, religion, political predispositions and political environment has been found at a local level not to influence voter turnout. See: Robert Alford and Harry Schoble. 1968. “Sources of Local Political Involvement.” *The American Political Science Review* 62(Dec): 1192-1206. The variables of age, ethnicity, education and mobility were found to have no impact on voter turnout as reported by: Karnig, Albert and Oliver Walter. 1983. “Decline in Municipal Voter Turnout: A Function of Changing Structure.” *American Politics Quarterly* 11(Oct): 491-505. Also, candidate occupation in one study did not matter much as reported by: Mueller, John. 1970. “Choosing among 133 Candidates.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 34 (Autumn): 395-402.

Nie (1972, 247) found that the more a community increases in size (both in area and population) the lower the participation rates (of which voting is a part) the community has, while Milbrath (1977, 106-110) who found that larger areas see increased turnout. The findings of Dahl and Tufte (1973, 44) are reinforced as they identified that population size is not related to voter turnout. Additionally, the results of Clary and Williams (1982, 64) who found that turnout rates drop when the election structure switches from at-large to ward are supported as well.

While the few observations used make it risky to generalize, the study does offer some general implications for future policy decisions. In general, school boards that seek to increase turnout should do more research rather than relying on switching their electoral arrangement as a method of increasing turnout. If school boards want to increase turnout other options that appear to be more reliable are available. However, if school boards wish to change to ward elections the community should be prepared to see a decline in turnout. Additionally, the data imply that voters see voting as a novelty factor (and, thus, participate more) in the first set of ward elections but steadily decrease their turnout in ward elections thereafter. Policymakers should be cautious in announcing success after the first election as turnout may decay over time.

The study also has implications for incumbents. The uncompetitive nature of school board elections will only serve to strengthen the incumbency advantage. Too strong an advantage in low-participation elections may result in candidates only doing the minimum in responding to constituent demands (Trounstine 2009, 36). The failure to hold the school board accountable to constituent demands may provide an incentive for school board candidates to govern less effectively knowing that the advantage of being an incumbent provides the necessary support to win the succeeding election cycles. This in turn may drive turnout lower as voters may decide not to vote in school board elections as their vote is perceived as having little power.

7.5: The Future

In the unlikely event that this Thesis' findings are highly publicized and many Urbana voters wish to switch back to at-large elections, the community would need to mobilize a *majority* of registered voters in each of the seven wards to approve such a referendum ("Urbana School Election" 2009). Due to the already low voter turnout rate getting a majority of voters to turnout in the wards may prove to be an impossible feat.

On the other hand, Urbana might choose to (1) encourage minority candidates and also (2) increase voter turnout, even without a referendum. There are three main policy alternatives suggested by the literature that might lead to these outcomes.

In the first, Urbana could continue with the ward elections as the turnout rate is statistically no worse than it was before the switch (Table 6). While this may neutrally impact voter turnout it does support the election of minority candidates. In the second type, the Urbana school board could present petitions to the State of Illinois to amend the Illinois Code to allow for an easier method of approval to switch back to at-large school board elections. Also, the school board could petition the state of Illinois to allow school board elections to coincide with midterm congressional and U.S. presidential elections to increase turnout (Milton 1983, 650; Townley et al. 1994; Hajnal 2003, 658; Allen and Plank 2005, 510) or allow for partisan elections, which as described, should increase voter turnout rates (Nielson and Robinson 1980; Bickel and Milton 1982, 155). The third solution involves the school board using public funds to advertise the election. More money spent on advertising the election may lower the information costs leading to an increase in voter turnout (Mueller 1970, 400; Luttbeg 1988, 888; McCleneghan and Ragland 2002; Raymond 2007, 13).

This study's purpose was to shed light into an area of electoral politics where little has been written. Although this Thesis provides additional evidence about the possible turnout implications (or lack thereof) of switching to smaller jurisdictions in low saliency elections, questions regarding voter turnout in school board elections remain unanswered. One direction for scholars to pursue could be to examine how voters in school board elections get their information. Another area to examine is how incumbents have influenced competition in school board elections. A final question to analyze is how individuals express participation in a school district. It is hoped that by building on this Thesis the light shed by future researchers studying participation in school district elections can move from a spotlight to a floodlight.

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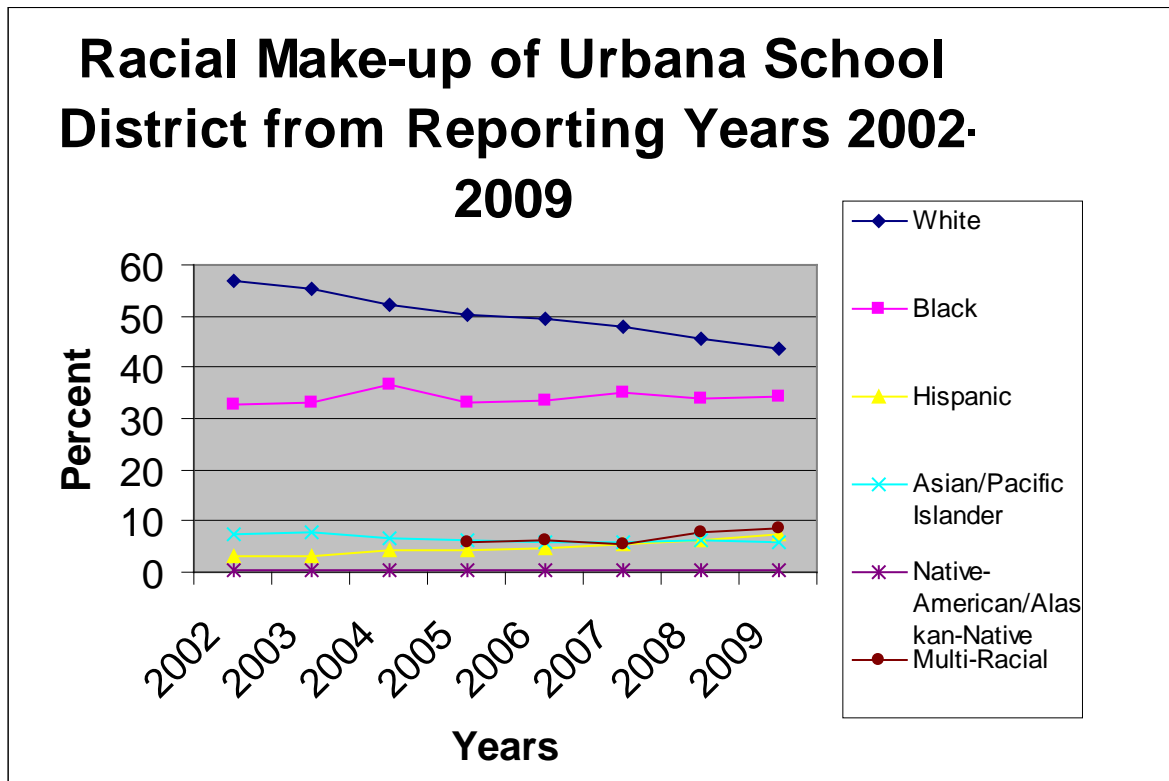
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Appendices

Appendix A: Racial Make-up of Urbana School District from Reporting Years 2002-2009

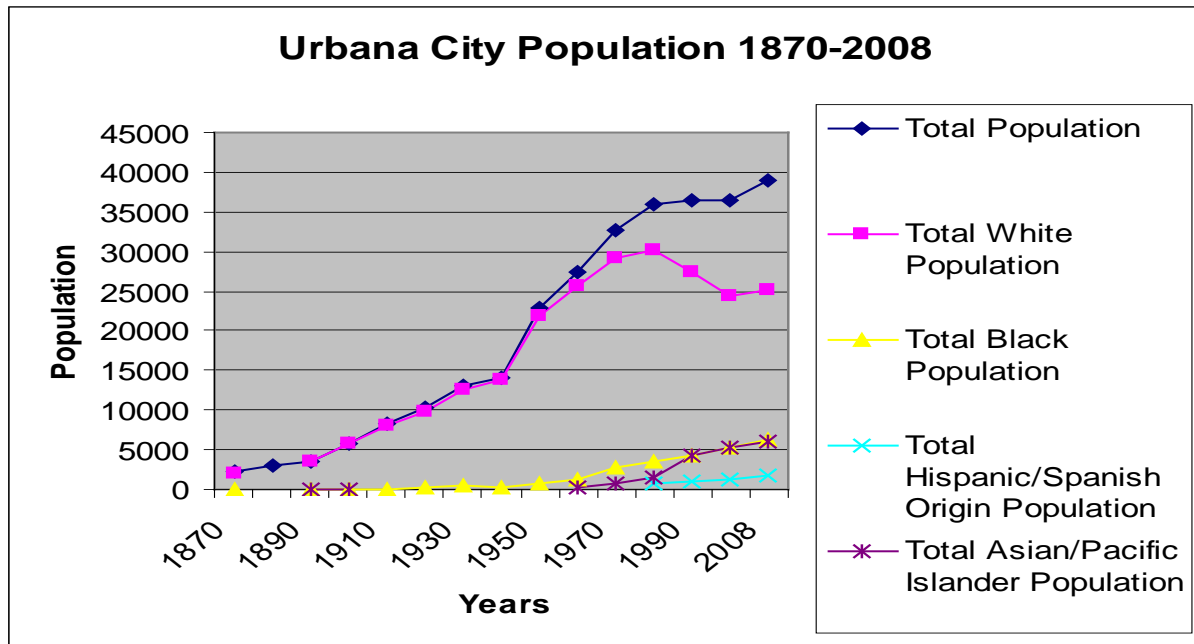


Source: State of Illinois, Department of Education, 2002-2009 Urbana SD 116 Illinois District Report Cards.

Note on the data:

The state of Illinois began tracking the data on a state level in 2002 to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Inferring from the chart, white enrollment has decreased; black enrollment has maintained a virtually steady line, hovering around the mid-30s. However, Hispanic enrollment has increased almost to 10% from around 3% earlier in the decade. The other category is multi-racial, which the state of Illinois introduced in 2002. That category has also had a large increase. While no national data are available on multi-racial student enrollment, the Urbana School District like the state of Illinois has seen an increase in this enrollment category for students.

Appendix B: Urbana City Population 1870-2008



Source: U.S. Census, 1870-2000 and 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.

Notes on the data:

1870 is used as the starting point for data because that is when reliable numbers for total black population is available as opposed to having separate categories for Free Blacks and Slave Blacks. While one might combine such free and slave categories to provide a “total black population” number doing so would provide no additional explanatory power to the chart. Indeed, if the numbers of blacks in 1870 are of any consequence blacks prior to 1870 would be an insignificant minority population. The same rationale holds true for both Hispanic/Spanish Origin and Asian/Pacific-Islander Categories. It is in this manner that the chart starts at 1870. The chart ends in 2008 as that is when the most reliable data are available as the 2010 US Census has yet to be finally completed. Data for the year 2008 comes from the 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.

For the Census years of 1870, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 ‘Total White Population’ is calculated as the combined total of "Native White" and "Non-native White" categories.

For Census years 1870, 1880, 1890 and 1900 it includes just the second-lined "Urbana" category for "Total Population" as the first line is an indication of the Total Urbana population which includes both the township and the city. By 1910 the Urbana Township drops out as statistical category.

For the 1880 Census no data for Race are available as the 1880 Census only provided data on race for cities that have 4,000 and upwards in total population. Urbana in this instance did not qualify for such in-depth analysis.

For Census year 1950 "Total White Population" is calculated as the combined total of "Native White, Male," "Native White, Female," "Non-Native White, Male," and "Non-Native White, Female" categories. Similarly, for the 1950 Census year "Total Black Population" is calculated as the combined total of "Male, Negro" and "Female, Negro" categories.

For the Census year 1960 "Total White Population" is calculated as adding the "Total White Male" and the "Total White Female" categories. Similarly, "Total Black Population" is calculated as adding the "Total Black Male" with the "Total Black Female" categories. For the category of "Total Asian/Pacific Islander" it is calculated as adding the categories of "Japanese, Male," "Japanese, Female," "Chinese, Male," "Chinese Female," "Filipano, Male," "Filipano, Female". The 1960 Census marks the first time for Urbana when different Asiatic groups are partitioned out into separate and distinct categories suggesting that enough Asiatic individuals exist so as to create a need to separate them in ethnic groups. Previous censuses had a habit of classifying all "Indians" "Japanese" "Chinese" and/or "Other" into one generic category making it difficult to distinguish distinct minority population rates or if separate categories existed for the Asian ethnic groups such as in the 1890 and 1900 Censuses years Urbana had 0 of the ethnic groups.

For Census year 1970 "Total Asian/Pacific Islander" is calculated as taking the total of census categories of "Japanese," "Chinese" and "Filipano" populations.

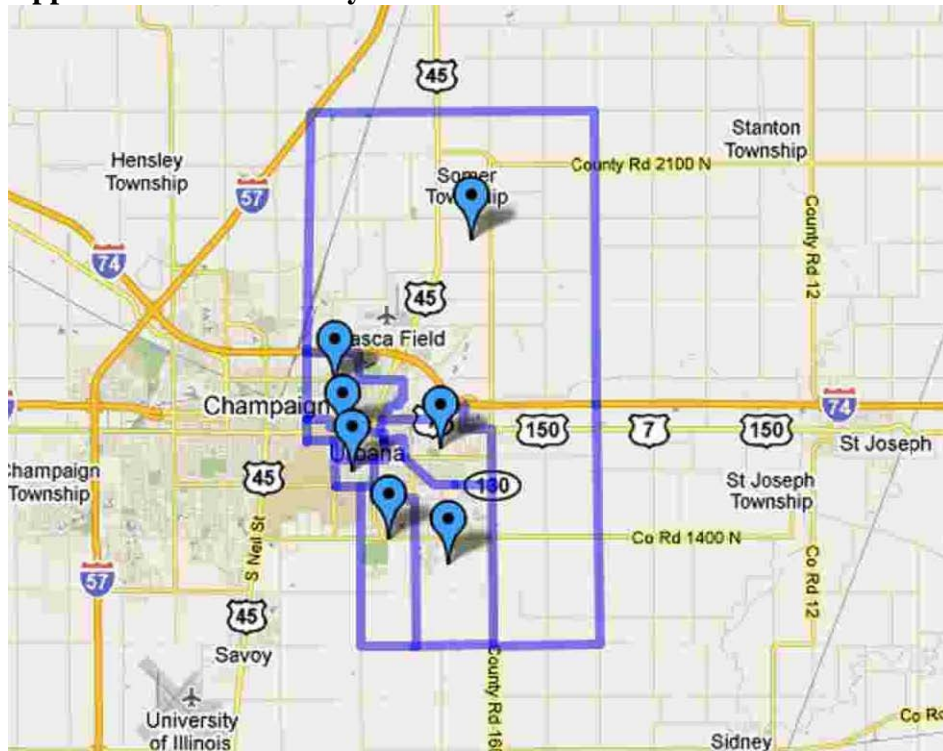
For the Census year of 1990 the category of "Total Hispanic/Spanish origin" uses the U.S. Census category of "Persons of Hispanic Origin" as the origin of that number.

Data for 2008 comes from the Census categories of "One Race, White" for "Total White Population," "Black or African-American, one race" for "Total Black Population," "Hispanic or Latino (of any race)" for "Total Hispanic/Spanish Origin" category and, "Asian" added with "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander" for "Total Asian/Pacific Islander" category.

Data used under the Census categories of "Negro," "Colored" and, "African-American" are also included in the meaning of "Total Black Population" data. Similarly, data used under the Census category of "Latino, of any race," "Hispanic," "Spanish Origin" are also included in the category of "Total Hispanic/Spanish Origin" data.

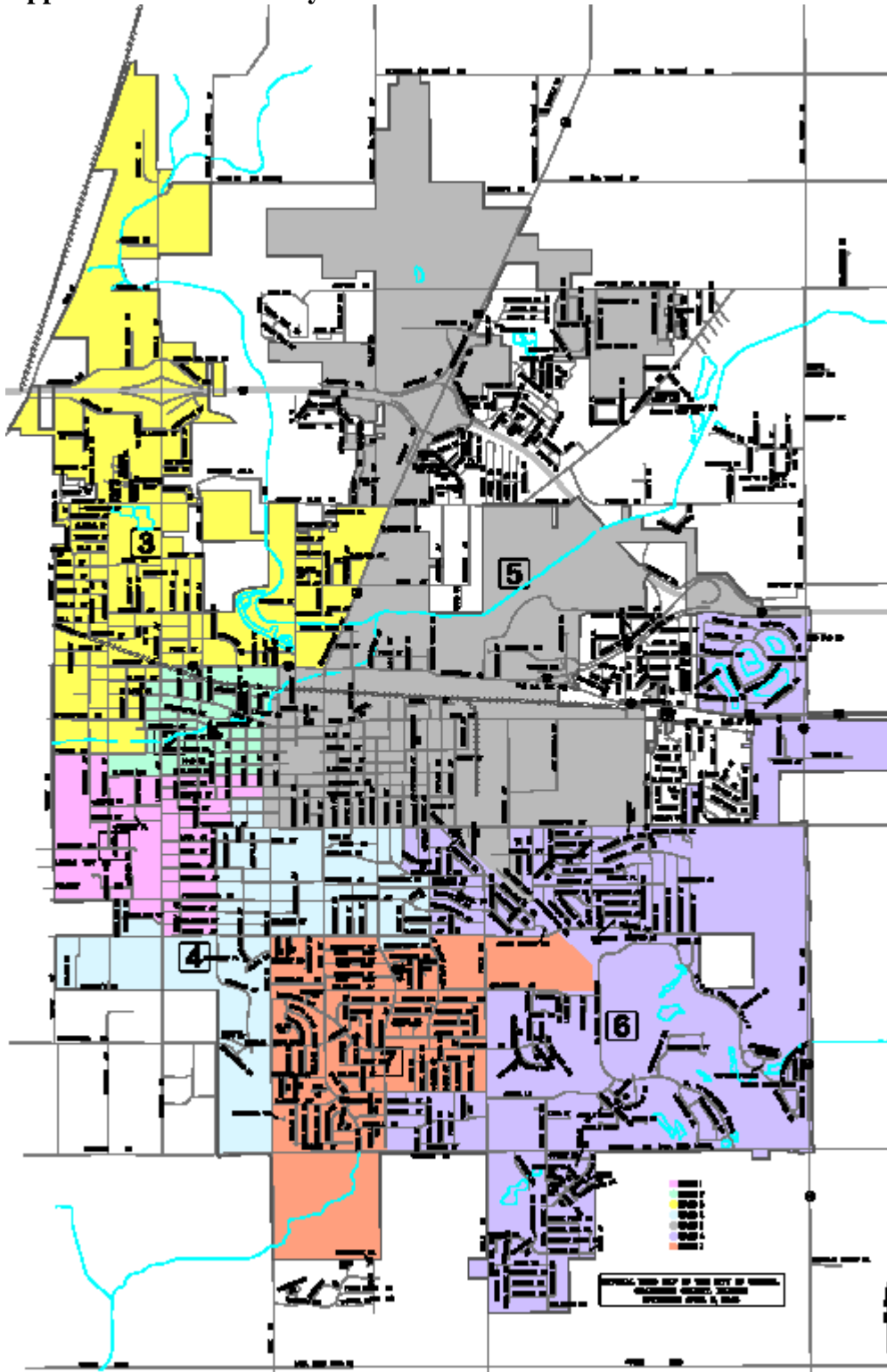
Native-Americans are not tracked because they make-up an insignificant minority both in the community and in the school (see Appendix A).

Appendix C: Urbana City School District Boundaries



Source: Urbana School District #116 of Illinois 2010 school district ward boundaries. <http://www.usd116.org/home/subdistricts.html> (Aug 1st 2010). District boundaries were put into Googlemaps, ©2010 Google, Map Data ©2010 Tele Atlas. The blue “push-pins” signify a city school board ward.

Appendix D: Urbana City Ward Boundaries



Source: City of Urbana, Illinois 2010 City Ward Boundaries.