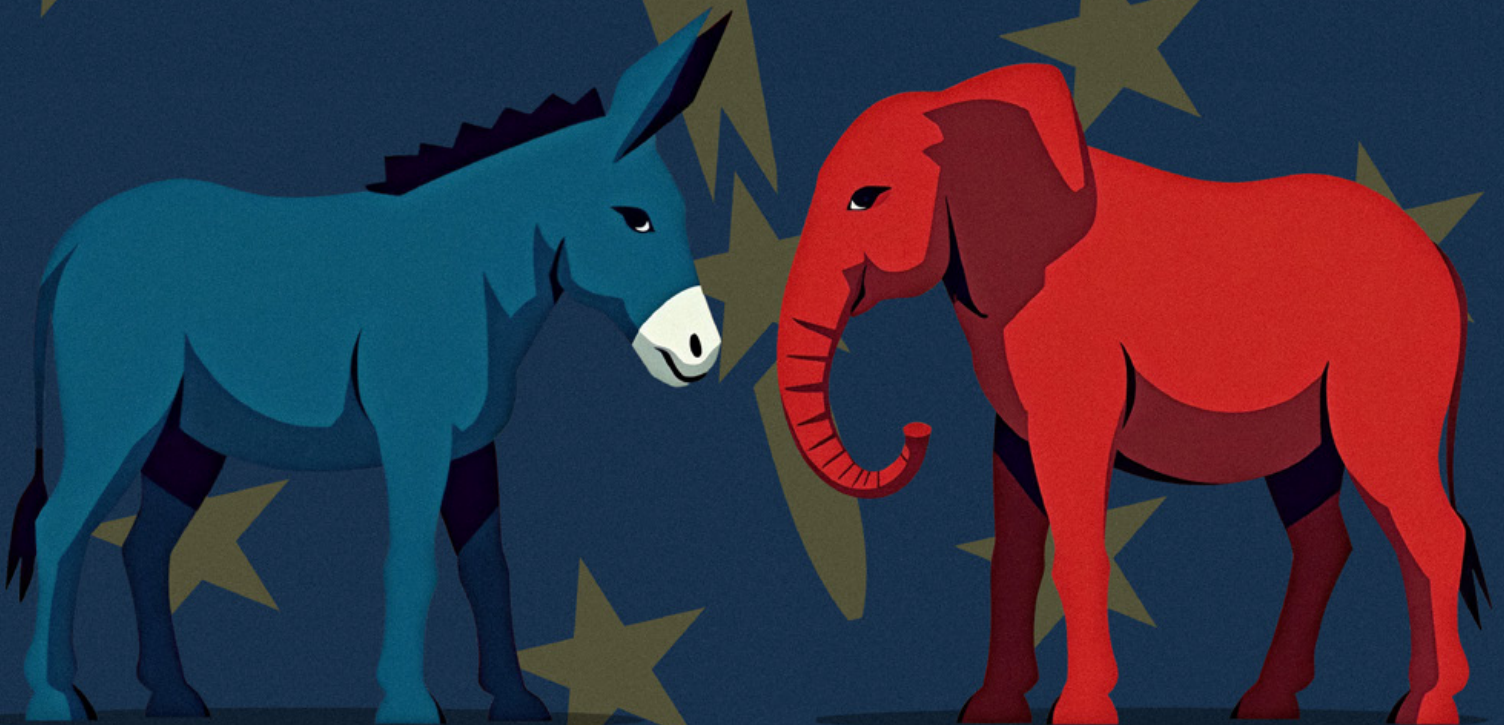


POLITICAL AFFILIATION IN
SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS:

THE NEW BALLOT LANDSCAPE

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As party labels enter school board ballots for the first time, the decision to run with or without a political affiliation requires careful consideration of several different factors. The choice reflects personal values and one's expectations for public service at large and school governance in particular.

Some school board candidates will feel compelled to openly share their political philosophy with voters, believing that clarity and transparency about their viewpoint reflects honesty and integrity. Others feel just as strongly that partisan politics should remain separate from school governance and will therefore decline to list an affiliation in order to underscore their focus on educational issues.

Then there are those who will approach the decision primarily through the strategic logic of what most effectively positions them for success on election night. These candidates must carefully assess the makeup of their local electorate to understand not just how their community votes, but how their community thinks about school governance.

When encountering political party labels on school board ballots for the first time this November, many voters will use the labels as a quick way to assess a candidate's general philosophy and values. A familiar party label can act as an efficient shortcut to differentiate among candidates, especially for school board seats where multiple candidates share similar professional or community involvement backgrounds. Some voters will use the party label as their primary, and perhaps only, piece of information when casting a vote, and some will only vote for candidates from their preferred party.

In school districts where one political party dominates, aligning with the majority viewpoint significantly improves a candidate's electability.

However, not all districts fit neatly into a single partisan profile. In "purple" districts—characterized by mixed leanings or shifting demographics—declaring a party affiliation may help mobilize one segment of the electorate but may simultaneously limit appeal by alienating another. Candidates must consider whether their

community includes a significant number of crossover voters—individuals willing to support candidates who do not share their party. In these districts, signaling neutrality may offer greater electoral advantage.

Even in areas with strong partisan profiles, many voters prefer nonpartisan leadership for their schools. The presence of party labels may be read, rightly or wrongly, as a red flag for voters who worry that partisan identifiers will polarize board dynamics and shift decision making from practical problem solving to ideological positioning, complicating collaboration and eroding the board's ability to govern effectively. Candidates who declare a party will want to be prepared to manage the assumptions that voters project onto that label.

Party alignment can open valuable doors to organized support such as volunteer networks, endorsements, established communications channels, donor lists, and increased visibility through party events. These tools can help a candidate reach more voters and run a more effective campaign. However, candidates

must evaluate whether the potential support gained from party affiliation outweighs the additional scrutiny, pressure, and opposition that may follow.

The introduction of the partisan school board ballot carries significant implications. Of course, not every community interprets a party label the same way. In some school districts, a party label reassures voters by signaling shared beliefs; in others, it triggers concerns about injecting partisanship into schools. Some welcome party labels as tools for greater transparency; others fear

they will turn schools into battlegrounds for ideological disputes. Understanding how local voters view political identity in the context of education is essential for candidates weighing whether affiliation will support or undermine their message and overall electability.

▶ **Voters Who Want More Transparency From Candidates**

Some voters will appreciate the party identification because they believe these identifiers offer greater transparency about a candidate's general worldview. Even in a race that is not driven by party platforms, these voters value having cues that help them understand a candidate's likely values and how the candidate might approach challenging or controversial issues. In lower information

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contests—where voters may know little about the individuals running—party affiliation can reduce uncertainty and give voters more confidence in their choices.

They may see the decision to publicly claim a political affiliation as a sign of honesty, that the candidate is willing to be accountable for their perspectives and consistent in their identity. For these transparency oriented voters, the inclusion of a partisan identifier is less about introducing politics into school governance and more about ensuring clarity and straightforward communication from those seeking to serve.

▶ **Voters Who See Party Labels as Taking a “Side” in Cultural Wars or Education Debates**

Especially in communities that have recently experienced divisive school debates, voters may interpret party labels as shorthand for where a candidate stands in broader cultural or education related conflicts around issues such as curriculum transparency, equity and diversity, library materials, or student support policies, regardless of whether the candidate has taken a firm position on these particular topics.

Because cultural debates can evoke strong emotions, voters may project their own hopes or fears onto candidates based solely on the partisan indicator next to their name. Some may feel reassured, believing the label aligns the candidate with a narrative or philosophy they support. Others may react negatively, assuming the candidate represents an ideological stance they oppose. As a result, the label can shape voter reactions in ways that extend well beyond the traditional scope of school board responsibilities.

▶ **Voters Motivated by Trust and Personal Reputation**

When voters already know a candidate personally—or recognize them through years of community service or civic participation—the presence of a party affiliation on the ballot may have little influence on their decision. In these cases, voter judgment is shaped less by political identity and more by confidence in the candidate’s commitment to the district’s students and schools. Because the bond between these voters and the candidate is rooted in familiarity and trust, partisan cues may feel secondary or even irrelevant. Some may overlook the label entirely,

relying instead on their personal knowledge of the individual’s integrity, work ethic, and past contributions.

▶ **Voters Who May Be Confused About What a Party Label Actually Means**

Because party labels are appearing on Indiana school board ballots for the first time, many voters may feel uncertain about what the designation truly signals for their local schools. Unlike offices where party affiliation is long established and deeply connected to legislative platforms, school board roles have traditionally been nonpartisan and operational in nature—centered on budgets, personnel, academic programs, and governance processes. As a result, some community members may be unsure how to interpret a partisan label in this new context.

This uncertainty can lead voters to ask whether a candidate’s party affiliation indicates something more formal than it does. Some may wonder if the political party now exercises influence over the candidate’s decisions, or whether the school board itself will begin functioning the way partisan legislative bodies do. Others may question whether candidates will feel obligated to follow the preferences of party leaders or adopt positions that align with broader political agendas rather than local educational needs. These concerns reflect a broader ambiguity about how much, if

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at all, a party label changes the nature of school board governance. For many voters, the introduction of these labels may raise more questions than answers, leading them to seek clarification about what the designation truly portends for the future of their public schools.

▶ **Voters Who Are Motivated to Engage in School Board Races for the First Time**

The introduction of party labels may also draw new voters into school board elections—individuals who previously paid little attention to these races but are now motivated by heightened visibility and clearer political cues. When campaigns become more coordinated through party networks, voters may encounter more messaging, endorsements, and outreach than in past election cycles. This increased exposure can raise awareness about who is running and what the candidates represent, prompting some community

members to engage with school board issues for the first time.

For these voters, the presence of party identifiers can serve as an entry point into a race they might otherwise have overlooked. Political communication—whether through mailers, canvassing, social media, or community events—can signal that the stakes are higher or that the race is connected to broader debates they already care about. As a result, some individuals may feel newly compelled to vote in school board elections, attend meetings, or follow board actions once elected. While these voters may bring fresh energy and engagement to the process, their participation may also shift the overall dynamics of school board elections simply by increasing turnout and expanding the pool of voices involved.

That brings us to the question of how, and to what extent, partisan school board ballots change the dynamics of local school board governance.

POST-ELECTION SCHOOL BOARD DYNAMICS

School boards have historically operated as nonpartisan bodies, but the introduction of political party labels on school board ballots has the potential to reshape how board members relate to one another and how they are perceived by their communities.

When board members are publicly aligned with a political party, they may naturally feel a sense of informal affiliation with colleagues who share that label. This can subtly influence discussions, coalition building, and the way members approach challenging decisions.

Beyond internal relationships, board members may also be perceived—by voters, parents, and community stakeholders—as representatives of broader political ideologies rather than as independent decision makers focused solely on local needs. Whether accurate or not, this perception can shape public expectations about how individual members will vote on specific issues or how they will respond to controversial questions.

Board members may face new pressures, not just from constituents but potentially from party activists or local party officials who expect consistency with the values associated with that label. Even if such expectations are informal or unspoken, the perceived obligation can alter how board members approach their work.

These shifts in identity and perception can have meaningful governance consequences. One possible outcome is the formation of voting blocs, where members aligned with the same party vote together more frequently. While some degree of consensus is typical on school boards, party driven blocs may reduce the

willingness of members to break from group dynamics or support ideas introduced by colleagues from another party. This can, in turn, diminish the incentives for compromise—an essential element in effective governance where diverse perspectives must be balanced.

Over time, this reduced inclination to compromise may make it harder for school boards to stay narrowly focused on educational goals, operational needs, and student outcomes. Discussions that were once primarily grounded in practical considerations—budget constraints, staffing needs, curriculum adoption cycles, building maintenance—may take on an ideological frame, even when the issues themselves do not inherently carry political meaning. This can shift the tone and structure of board deliberations, increasing the likelihood that debates become more symbolic, more polarized, or more connected to external political narratives.

SUPERINTENDENT AND STAFF INTERACTIONS

The introduction of party labels may also complicate the working relationship between the superintendent, staff, and the school board. Administrators may feel the need to navigate ideological differences more carefully, particularly if board members are publicly associated with distinct political identities. Decisions involving curriculum, instructional materials, DEI initiatives, student supports, or school safety may face heightened scrutiny or be questioned through the lens of broader political debates rather than purely educational considerations. As a result, the superintendent's role as a neutral advisor—focused on evidence, policy, and operational effectiveness—may become more challenging. Board members' partisan affiliations, even if informal, can shift how recommendations are received and may require administrators to devote additional effort to framing their guidance in ways that maintain trust, clarity, and shared focus on the district's core educational mission.

BOARD COHESION AND DECISION MAKING

When board members are publicly identified with political parties, reaching consensus may become more challenging, as discussions risk being shaped by ideological boundaries rather than by shared problem solving. Issues that were once routine or operational could take on symbolic weight, leading to longer, more contentious debates and increasing the likelihood that disagreements become tied to broader political narratives rather than the specifics of the district's needs. In some cases, these dynamics may foster tension or mistrust among board members who hold differing political identities, complicating collaborative

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governance and making it harder to build the unified leadership that school districts rely upon.

At the same time, the presence of clear partisan labels may, in some districts, make board interactions more predictable and transparent. When members understand one another's general philosophical starting points, they may find it easier to anticipate concerns, identify areas of common ground, or negotiate compromises. In such settings, partisan identities can offer clarity rather than division. Ultimately, the effect on board cohesion and decision making will depend heavily on local culture, the personalities of board members, and the strength of norms that support respectful, education centered governance.

Ultimately, the post-election impact on school board dynamics will vary significantly from one district to another, depending on local culture and

the personalities of board members.

Although party labels provide voters with a convenient reference point, they also invite assumptions that may exceed a candidate's actual positions. For many residents, the label becomes a symbol of larger cultural debates, often disconnected from the day to day responsibilities of school governance.

In this new environment, listing a party has become a strategic decision shaped by community culture, voter expectations, and the evolving role of politics in public education. While party identification can amplify visibility and mobilize supporters, it can also polarize races traditionally grounded in local decision making. Determining which effect will prevail requires a clear understanding of voter behavior, community attitudes, and campaign dynamics. ▶



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