

# Voters reject culture war tactics in school board elections

November 20 2023, by Nina Raffio

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Diversity and inclusion programs, book bans, censorship and debates over school curricula are all signs that America's culture wars have moved into a new combat zone: school boards.

School board races have become increasingly partisan and polarized, despite boards' statuses as nonpartisan institutions. In some districts, civil liberties are at stake as board members and candidates campaign on "wedge issues" that can divide voters and their communities.

But on Nov. 7, voters in many districts nationwide embraced progressive and moderate candidates in high-profile school board races, including in critical battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Virginia, Iowa and Kansas. USC experts said the results provide a window into next year's presidential election season.

"These results suggest voters and especially parents in many districts have grown tired of talking about pronouns, book bans and bathrooms, and are ready for local leaders to once again focus on the core work of education: teaching and learning," said Julie Marsh, professor of education policy at the USC Rossier School of Education and the USC Price School of Public Policy.

"Many saw these elections as battle-testing conservative messages on a small scale, and from what we see, the parents' rights agenda may be losing steam in some places. It may not be the powerful wedge issue conservatives were hoping for."

## **Voters send a message: Keep national politics out of local schools**

Republican candidates on Election Day suffered major losses in several high-profile districts that had been at the forefront of national culture war debates over the past year. Even though voters may not have voted conservatives into their school boards, experts say that there are indications from polls in recent years that voters are increasingly focused on cultural issues.

In Pennsylvania's Central Bucks School District, which made headlines for its book bans and anti-LGBTQ+ stances, Democrats flipped the board and secured all five seats. In Iowa, all but one of the 13 candidates endorsed by Moms for Liberty—a self-described "parental rights" group known for opposing COVID-19 safety measures in schools, advocating for book bans and restricting discussions about race and LGBTQ+ identities—lost their election bids.

In Virginia's Spotsylvania County, none of the GOP-backed candidates emerged victorious. Similarly, in central Ohio, despite the support of conservative groups such as Moms for Liberty and the 1776 Project, only 2 out of 10 endorsed candidates secured seats on their local school boards. Experts highlight that in both states, voters also chose to enshrine protections for abortion and other reproductive rights into their state constitutions.

Conservative candidates saw encouraging outcomes in other parts of the country, such as Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Alaska, where voters reelected conservative incumbents to the local school board.

Overall, results of the Nov. 7 elections suggest that the politics of school boards may be shifting once again, Marsh said.

"As low-turnout events, school board elections have been an easy way for organized groups and disruptors to have an outsize influence," she said. "But these elections suggest that perhaps the public is catching on to the importance of school boards and participating in greater numbers."

Marsh emphasized that [education policy](#) is poised to take center stage in the 2024 presidential election, a trend that has already begun to manifest in recent political events. Republican presidential hopefuls including former President Donald Trump, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former

U.N. Ambassador and South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson and former biotech CEO Vivek Ramaswamy took the stage at the Moms for Liberty summit this summer. Experts say the candidates' turnout signaled the group's rising political influence.

"The 'parental rights' language has a lot of currency," Marsh said, a stance backed up by polling from the Brookings Institution, which found that 65% of American teachers independently chose to limit discussing political or social issues in class due to lack of support from school leaders and fear of conflicts with upset parents.

"People are watching these November elections to see how well these issues play with voters in states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Virginia. They want to see how well candidates who espouse these ideas do," she said. "The outcomes of these elections will provide valuable insights for candidates across all levels, from the presidential to state races, as they strategize for the upcoming electoral cycle."

## **How Americans really feel about controversial topics in schools**

In fall 2022, [education researchers](#) at the Center for Economic and Social Research at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences found that a majority of Americans supported teaching [high school students](#) about controversial issues from multiple perspectives, including debates about abortion, immigration and gun control.

The study, which surveyed a nationally representative sample of nearly 3,800 U.S. adults, found that 3 in 4 American adults support teaching pro-choice and pro-life positions to high schoolers.

"Our results suggest there's not as much support for restricting what children learn in school, as some candidates might assume, especially at the high school level," said Anna Saavedra, a behavioral scientist at the Center for Economic and Social Research and one of the study's co-authors. "There is more bipartisan agreement than political rhetoric might suggest."

The researchers drew their sample from the center's [Understanding America Study](#), a comprehensive internet panel of approximately 13,000 households representing the U.S. population. The study is one of the most robust sources of panel data available in the U.S. and is used by researchers in and beyond USC to accurately measure national public opinion on timely social, political and economic issues.

While the results of the education-focused survey demonstrated that adults' beliefs about what children should be learning in school are more nuanced at the elementary school level, with a more limited range of topics deemed appropriate for younger children, the overall trend holds true: Most participants support teaching younger children how to think critically and introducing material related to slavery, racial inequality and the contributions of marginalized groups.

"My read on the results of these elections is that hardline candidates want to clamp down on teaching controversial issues in schools more than the American public actually wants," Saavedra said.

She adds that groups seeking to limit the topics children learn about in school often hold, or capitalize upon, misconceptions about the topics they seek to restrict.

For example, the Understanding America Study education team's research highlights that 96% of Americans lack sufficient knowledge about critical race theory to explain it to others. In addition,

approximately half of Americans don't know whether gender identity and racial inequality are discussed in high school classrooms.

The study's findings highlighted an equal lack of knowledge about critical race theory among both Democrats and Republicans. However, their viewpoints diverge when it comes to implementing the theory in K-12 education. While 40% of Democrats support its inclusion, 55% of Republicans oppose it. Yet, a significant portion of individuals from both parties remains uncertain: 40% of Republicans and 50% of Democrats neither explicitly support nor oppose the teaching of critical race theory.

## **Erosion of civic education fuels school culture wars**

The widening political polarization of school boards and education-related issues can be attributed to a number of factors, but experts overwhelmingly point to one key factor: the decline of civic education in America.

For generations, civic education was a cornerstone of education in the United States, teaching students about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, the foundations of American democracy and the importance of civil discourse.

In recent decades, civic education has become increasingly polarized among politicians more than parents, Saavedra's [past research](#) has shown. Civic education has been squeezed out of [school](#) curricula, often in favor of other subjects deemed more essential for required standardized testing, according to experts. This decline in civic education has left many students ill-equipped to engage in informed and respectful debate on complex issues. This means they are more susceptible to manipulation by partisan agendas and less able to find common ground, experts say.

"Schools have historically served a civic purpose, but over time, the emphasis has shifted toward preparing students for the workforce rather than fostering civic engagement," Saavedra said.

She added that one worrisome consequence of this shift is that many people, including adults eligible to vote, lack the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively in a democratic society.

Other experts agree.

"We've kicked out civic education and citizenship from our schools and replaced it with narrative-based cultural perspectives," said Frank Zerunyan, a USC Price professor of the practice of governance and director of executive education programs at the USC Price Bedrosian Center on Governance.

Political discourse has devolved into a clash of competing narratives, devoid of the nuance and compromise necessary for effective governance, he adds.

"Both parties have realized that they can best fight their culture wars at the local level and target [school boards](#) as a way of influencing education. The more you separate people, the more you have currency to control," Zerunyan said. "Yet, the outcomes of the recent elections highlight a growing desire among voters for moderation, tolerance of views, common-sense decision-making and objective approaches to governance."

Provided by University of Southern California

Citation: Voters reject culture war tactics in school board elections (2023, November 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-11-voters-culture-war-tactics-school.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.