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An Analysis of Parent Voting Patterns in Rural School Bond Elections

Gary Greene and Gary Bergman

Introduction

The United States has the lowest voter turnout of any democracy in the world. While voter turnout since 1972 had shown some increases, overall voter turnout in 1988 dropped to 57 percent. Declines in turnout occurred in all age groups, except the oldest. Black turnout was down approximately 4 percent; hispanic turnout was also down by 4 percent; white turnout was down by approximately 2 percent. Declines of 2 to 3 percent from 1984 were reported in all regions of the country (Bureau of the Census, 1989).

Low voter turnout in school bond elections should not be a problem, though, since those most likely to make the effort to turnout and vote would be expected to be school bond supporters. However, data on the approval rate of school bond issues shows a significant decline between the fiscal years 1957-58 and 1976-77 (Weiler, 1982). In 1981, advocates of tax increases were clearly outnumbered by opponents by a two-to-one margin. Parents with children in the public school were slightly more favorable to school bond issues.

Annual survey data from Gallup and others indicate a relationship between public confidence in education and confidence in the authority and legitimacy of the state, both of which declined during the 1960s and 1970s (Weiler, 1982). Growing cynicism toward public government in general seems to induce an erosion of confidence in public education, which could account for negative voting. Furthermore, while parents who are cynical toward government may perceive voting for a bond issue as affirming the government of which they disapprove, they may also perceive voting against a bond issue as undermining the educational well-being of their children. Consequently, they may perceive not voting as a way to avoid this dilemma.

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Some studies indicate that people who are uninformed about the issues are less likely vote, while other studies indicate that a lack of thorough information does not necessarily discourage voting (Lupia, 1994). Confidence in the knowledge one possesses on an issue appears to have greater influence on voting attitude and behavior than the quantity of one's knowledge. People need enough knowledge about the issue to feel confident about voting (Ahmed, 1993). Each person's need for information varies according to individual perception of responsibility and sense of involvement with education (Newman, 1986). Voter confidence can be increased by documented need for a bond issue and demonstrating that a community's well-being and economic development is enhanced by good schools and quality education (Surratt, 1987). Honest dissemination of information and provisions for feedback are also important in voter confidence (Kanige & Ritterbusch, 1986).

A positive attitude among the school's constituency and the support of the business community are prerequisites to a successful bond issue (Surratt, 1987). Attitudes about community involvement in policy-making, school community relations, school discipline and the teaching of democracy, present level of spending, and present level of taxes are some of the voter attitudes that affect voter behavior in fiscal elections (Milstein & Burke, 1980). Voter attitudes that have very little effect include perceptions of school quality and social conditions.

The timing of an election, financial consideration of the districts, the socioeconomic status of the district's residents, and the race or ethnicity of the students have been found to influence voter turnout (Osman & Gemello, 1981). Some studies have shown that low socioeconomic status has a strong impact on participation of parents in school elections (Lewis, 1991). This impact is typically related to their educational level. Low economic status and lack of education decrease the chances that a person will vote. Conversely, the willingness of parents to support school reform is not necessarily determined by racial group membership (Luis, 1991). Blacks tend to vote for school reforms more than whites since their children are more likely to study in public schools, even though registration rates for blacks tend to be lower (Button, 1993). However, analysis of voting statistics indicates the outcome of elections would not be substantially different even if turnout rates were equal for groups of different race, level of income, or education (Teixeira, 1992).

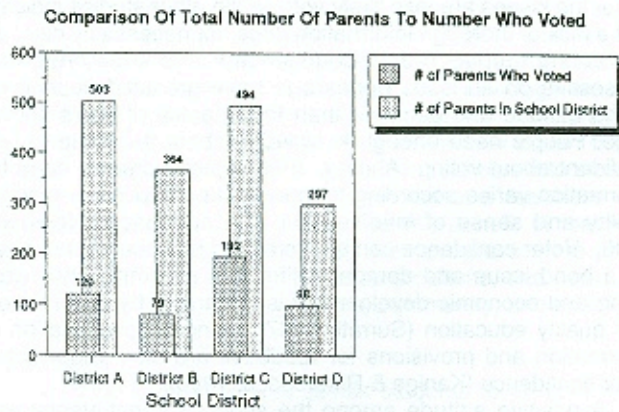
Low turnout in the 1970s has been attributed to a sense of alienation in non-voters, and more recently low turnout has been attributed to a sense of indifference in non-voters (Gans, 1988). However, neither alienation nor indifference provide a plausible theory to explain why a significant number of parents do not vote in school bond elections even though the outcome of the election directly impacts the educational well-being of their children.

In March, 1990, school bond issues were defeated in each of four rural Oklahoma school districts. According to public voting records in each of these elections, a significant number of parents with at least one child enrolled in the public school did not vote (see Figure 1). Parents who did not vote ranged from 63 to 73 percent of total parents in each district. The purpose of this descriptive study was to discover the reasons for not voting as stated by parents.

Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis

Each of the four school districts provided a list of at least twenty names of parents who, according to the public voting record, had not voted in the school bond election. Each of these parents had at least one child enrolled in the public school at the time of the election. Linear systematic sampling

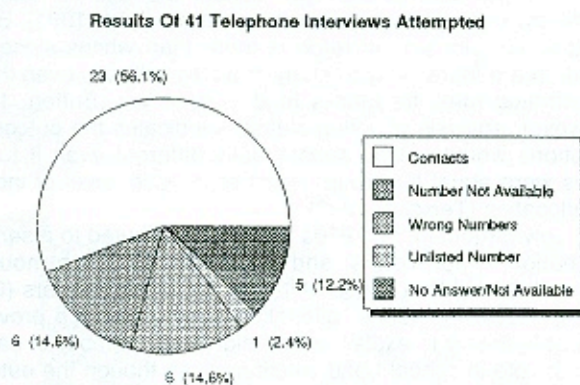
Figure 1. Voter Turnout of Parents.



was used to obtain a random sample of 41 parents from the four lists: ten parents from each of three school districts and eleven from the fourth school district.

Contacts were made with 23 of the 41 parents in the sample, for a response rate of 56.1 percent (see Figure 2). Contact was not possible with thirteen parents in the sample: telephone numbers of six parents were not available from directory assistance; telephone numbers provided for six other parents were determined to be wrong numbers or numbers no longer in service and a correct number could not be obtained; and one parent had an unlisted number. Of the remaining five parents in the sample, four parents did not answer or were not available in three attempts to contact them; the fifth was answered by an unidentified person who did not speak English and, consequently, no communication was possible.

Figure 2. Sample Response Rate.



Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to collect the data in this study. An interview guide was developed consisting of a statement explaining the general purpose of the research study, a primary open-ended question about the reason for not voting in the school bond election, and a second open-ended question about the relative importance of school bond elections. Written notes were used to record each response in verbatim. Interview statements were analyzed for similarities and response categories were formed. Each response was then coded and classified into the appropriate response category.

Findings

An analysis of the responses by parents to the primary question regarding the reason for not voting generated six response categories. Eleven parents did not offer a specific

reason for not voting, including four parents who declined to make any comment. Five parents indicated that they are not eligible to vote: four parents stated they were not registered at the time of the election and one did not actually live in the district where his children attended school. Work conflicts prevented three parents from voting. One parent reported being out of town on the day of the election. One parent insisted he had in fact voted in the election. An intentional decision not to vote was the reason given by two parents. Actual responses of parents are listed by category in Table 1.

Table 1. Responses Given By Parents For Not Voting In School Bond Elections

Specific Reason Not Given

- I don't really remember why.
- I don't remember.
- No reason; I just don't keep up with stuff like that.
- No reason; I haven't voted at all in any election.
- I don't remember why. I think my dad was in the hospital.
- I just didn't go. I didn't make it to the polls.
- I don't know; I didn't think about doing it.

Not Eligible To Vote

- I have never registered.
- I wasn't registered; I only just registered before this last presidential election.
- I wasn't registered.
- We hadn't been in the state long enough to vote.
- I don't live in this local school district. I actually live across the road that is the dividing line in another school district; but my business is in this community and that's where my children go to school.

Work Conflict

- I work at night and sleep during the day.
- I work out of the county and probably didn't make it back in time.
- I didn't get off work in time; I work in another city and probably didn't get back in time to vote.

Out of Town

- I was probably out of town.

Did Vote in Election

- I **did** vote on the last bond issue.

Intentionally Decided Not To Vote

- I didn't want to. I'm not going to vote until the school system is straightened out!
- I was too busy to vote.

An analysis of the responses to the second question about the relative importance of school bond elections also generated six response categories. All of the parents suggested that school bond elections are important. Three parents felt concern for their children was the reason school bond elections were important. Financial concern was the reason given by two parents as to why the elections were important. Four parents stated that elections were important because elections gave people the opportunity to express an opinion. Choice was mentioned by one parent as the reason elections were important. Two parents provided only general agreement that elections were important but failed to offer a specific reason. Two parents indicated that they did not have sufficient information to offer an opinion about the importance of elections. Actual responses of parents are listed by category in Table 2.

Table 2. Responses Given By Parents For Importance of School Bond Elections**Concern For Children**

- *I have children in school and it's important.*
- *It's very important. It concerns the education of my children.*
- *It's real important. I have two boys in school.*

Financial Concern

- *Voting is very important; if the money goes where it's supposed to.*
- *It's real important; it affects our tax dollars.*

Opportunity To Express Opinion

- *Everyone can give their opinion; what they think is right. It makes a difference.*
- *It's very important. It gives people a voice in the local school district.*
- *It gives people a chance to state their feelings; whether they want to foot the bill or not.*
- *It makes a big difference. It gives you a chance to express your opinion.*

Opportunity for Choice

- *It's important for everyone to have a choice; to have the right of choice. It makes a difference.*

General Agreement

- *It's real important.*
- *It makes a difference.*

Insufficient Information To Offer Opinion

- *I don't know that much about it.*
- *It's real important, although I'm not familiar with it.*

Discussion and Implications

Several areas of concern for public school officials seeking to launch a successful school bond election are highlighted by this study. The findings suggest that strategies or campaigns to address these issues could provide positive results in voter turnout.

The largest category of responses did not give a specific reason for not voting. These parents did not appear unconcerned, but rather unfamiliar with the process or uninformed about the issues. Efforts to involve the community early in the election process and to communicate more fully about the issues should have a positive impact on these parents. Radio or newspaper advertisements, campaign literature, and the importance of friends and neighbors as a source of information about issues should all be given careful consideration. As previously noted, parents must have enough information to feel confident about voting on the bond issue.

In the second largest category of responses, four of the five parents indicated they were not eligible to vote at the time of the election because they were not registered. Identifying parents who are not registered and providing them with a convenient opportunity to register to vote would provide a positive contact between the school and these parents and also provide an occasion to enlist their support.

Finally, information about alternative voting opportunities (e.g., absentee voting procedures) could be provided to those who do not vote because of work conflicts or out of town trips. However, school officials should carefully consider the impact such an effort might have on the outcome of the election. One research study revealed 50 percent or more of absentee ballots are cast against school finance issues (Calkins, 1986). Campaigns to increase absentee balloting, however well-intentioned, could have an adverse affect on the outcome of the election.

Additionally, school officials should also remember that attempts to increase affirmative voter turnout are in actuality attempts to change the habits of voters. Research indicates that the variable of habit has a greater than expected influence on the decision to vote (Nownes, 1992). This is not encouraging given the difficulty of altering a person's habits.

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