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Demographic Trends in Texas Bond Elections

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The ability to hold a successful bond election is a vital part of the superintendency in Texas (Bordelon, 2005). Aging facilities, increasing student enrollments, and technological needs exacerbate the need to gain community support for capital improvement projects. Appropriate facilities are needed not only for the physical space they provide, but also because well-maintained appropriate buildings improve student achievement (Schneider, 2002). In

order to create successful bond election strategies a superintendent should be aware of factors involved in voter dispositions. The purpose of this study is to determine the demographic trends in ethnic groups, age levels, socioeconomic areas, and educational level. A superintendent developing committees and soliciting input must understand the need for trust, but are there certain demographic subpopulations that may be predisposed to

supporting an election? Understanding demographic trends may provide information to support committee make-up and provide an understanding of voters who may not naturally develop a connection with the school. Recognizing bond election trends adds to the knowledge that informs practice.

Bond Election Factors

Research suggests that the most important factor in school bond success is trust in the leadership and good communication (Faltys, 2006; Hickey, 2006b; Schrom, 2004). This trust is built through time, and as such, most bond referenda are decided long before the election is called (Koetter & Cannon, 1995). Failure to develop a history of trust with the community is a key factor in negative sentiment in bond elections.

One proven method to assist a school district in building trust is to solicit the involvement of the community, or at least key leaders in the community, during the bond development stage (Pappalardo, 2005; Clemens, 2003). Involved community leaders are more likely to see the need within the school district, communicate this need to others, and generally support the bond effort. Failure to connect with the community may result in poor election outcomes (Hickey, 2006b).

Although trust is important, there are general trends in bond elections among demographic groups. There have been previous studies focusing upon some of these factors. Tedin, Matland, and Weiher (2001) studied a Houston, Texas bond election and discovered that minority ethnic groups tended to vote in favor of bond elections. Hickey (2006a) had similar findings, with African-American and Hispanic populations having a positive correlation with "yes" votes on bond elections. This same study found a slight negative correlation for the white population.

Senior citizen voting has been found to have a negative impact on school bond elections (Dismuke, 1994; Speer, 1993). The belief is that senior citizens have few connections with local districts, and fearing any increase in taxes (even if their taxes will not actually go up), vote disproportionately against bonds. This belief has been supported by a recent study (Hickey, 2006a). However, senior citizens may vote in favor of bond elections when connections with the school district occur (Tedin et al., 2001).

There has been little research on socioeconomic trends in bond elections. The research that has been completed suggest a slight positive correlation for increasing percentages of low socioeconomic students with "yes" votes on bond referenda (Hickey, 2006a). The reason for this trend is unknown, but it suggests that local economic issues may not be a strong predictor of bond success.

Individuals with high levels of education vote at a much higher rate than the average person (Putnam, 2003); therefore, this demographic is likely to be important to any referendum. Educational level of the population has not been studied previously in any previous bond election study, but it is hypothesized that this demographic characteristic would positively correlate with bond election success.

Method

This research was designed to determine the correlation between the dependent variable of "yes" votes in Texas bond elections and the independent variables of city population percentage of white, African-American, and Hispanic groups, district percentage of white, African-American and Hispanic students, city poverty percentages, district socioeconomic percentages, median city household income, median age, senior citizen population percentage, and city percentage of residents

with a bachelor's degree. The city data was obtained from census data. School district student data was obtained from the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report. The percentage of "yes" votes was obtained either from newspapers, Internet, or directly from the individual school districts.

Bivariate correlation was completed through Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Each independent variable was entered with the dependent variable to determine relationships. Significance statistics were not used because the research was looking for general trends. Similar demographic characteristics were studied between the city where the school

resided and individual school district data to provide added support to any trends found. This support was especially important regarding city data, which was six years old at the time of the study.

The research collected data from school districts and cities that held bond elections during 2006 in Texas. Although every school bond election was studied, many were removed because of difficulty finding the percentage of "yes" votes, or the school district shared only part of a city, suggesting a possibility of poor data if the election was used in the study. The final database held information from 55% of the districts that held a bond election in 2006.

Results

The white demographic suggested a negative trend with bond election "yes" votes in the city ($r = -.086$) and district ($r = -.205$). Figure 1 illustrates these findings.

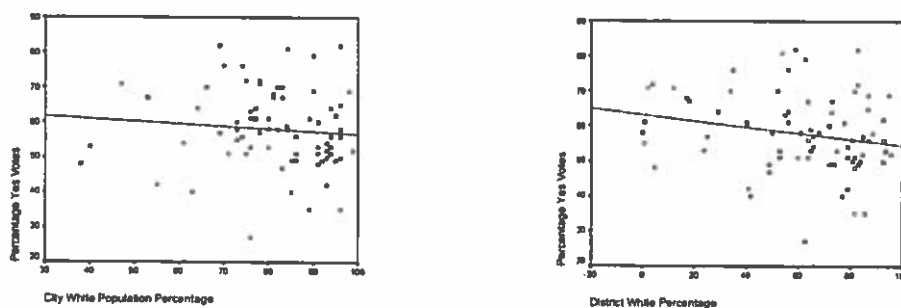


Figure 1: Trend lines for white population percentage as correlated with "yes" votes

The African-American demographic suggested a slightly negative trend as well for both the city ($r = -.079$) and district ($r = -.042$). Figure 2 illustrates these trends.

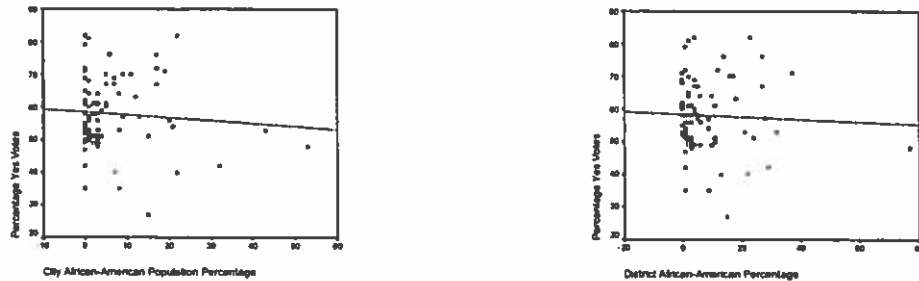


Figure 2: Trend lines for African-American population percentage as correlated with “yes” votes

The Hispanic demographic showed a positive correlation in both the city ($r = .176$) and district ($r = .223$). Figure 3 illustrates these trends.

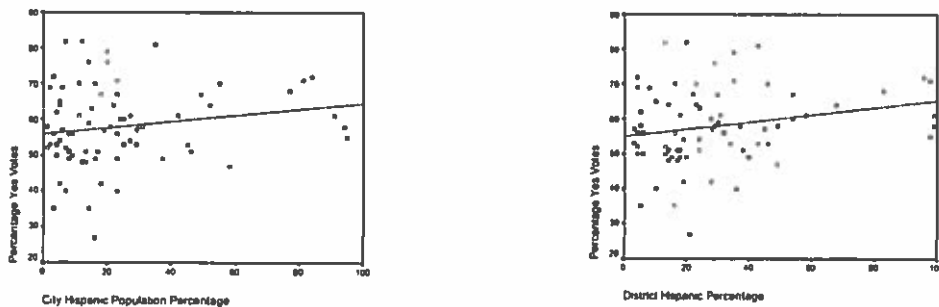


Figure 3: Trend lines for Hispanic population percentage as correlated with “yes” votes

The correlations related to socioeconomic level were inconsistent, with the city poverty level suggesting a negative trend ($r = -.059$), district socioeconomic level being slightly positive ($r = .027$), and median city income being positive ($r = .107$). Figure 4 illustrates trend lines as related to socioeconomic levels.

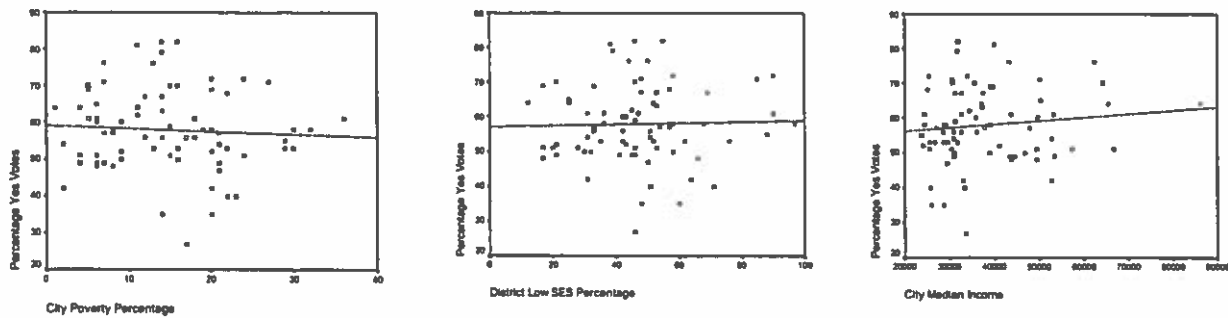


Figure 4: Trend lines for socioeconomic level percentage as correlated with “yes” votes.

Age trends showed a slightly negative correlation for senior citizen percentage ($r = -.037$) and almost no correlation for city median age ($r = .003$). Figure 5 illustrates trend lines associated with age.

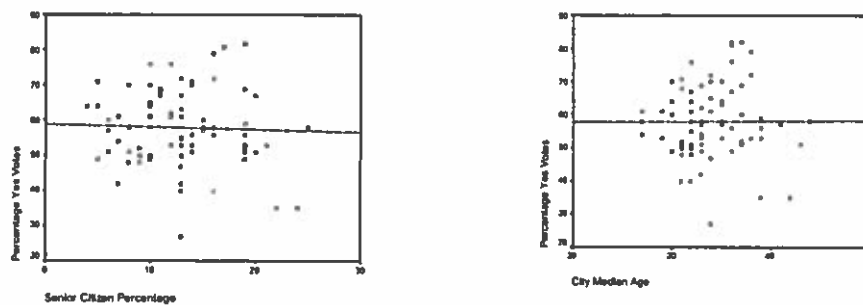


Figure 5: Trend lines for age as correlated with “yes” votes

The correlation for “yes” votes on bond election with the percentage of the city with a bachelor’s degree was strongly positive ($r = .257$). Figure 6 illustrates the voting trend among cities with greater education as defined by bachelor’s degrees.

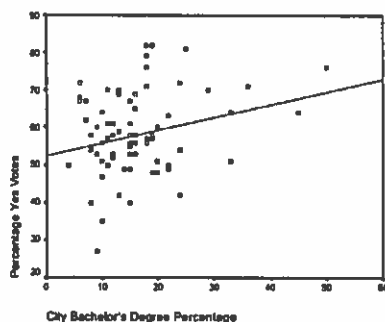


Figure 6: Trend line correlating city’s Bachelor’s degree percentage and “yes” votes

Discussion

The 2006 Texas bond elections suggest several demographic trends. There appears to be a slightly negative correlations between “yes” vote percentage and white and African-American populations, both at the city and district level. This negative trend can also be found with senior citizen populations, although not as strong as some previous studies indicate.

Since trust and communication are important factors in bond election success, perhaps there are problems in connecting with these demographics. A superintendent should build trust with these groups consistently, but awareness of negative trends should make school leaders more anxious to respond to the tough questions that come from these demographic populations. These are a district’s toughest critics. A superintendent who can address their concerns should be able to respond appropriately to all stakeholders.

Economic factors provide contradictory trends. Low socioeconomic status on the district level suggested a slightly positive trend, whereas poverty levels in the city was negatively correlated with bond election “yes” votes. This contradiction may simply mean that socioeconomic level alone should not be a major concern for school districts pursuing a bond election. No one likes to have their taxes increased, regardless of income, but a superintendent who can communicate the district’s building needs is likely to get support at all economic levels.

The strongest positive correlations existed with Hispanic city and district populations, as well as the factor of population percentage who hold a bachelor’s degree. The reason for this trend for bachelor’s degree percentages may be the value this group places on education. Individuals who have benefited

from a strong education may be more likely to recognize the benefit for their children and for the importance for the community in general. This is a demographic group that a superintendent can utilize for their educational example, as well as their predisposition toward bond elections.

The Hispanic trend may exist due to the rapid population growth of this demographic, and as a result, school districts that have high percentages of Hispanic families and students are often rapidly increasing enrollment. The dynamics involved in being in a district with expanding enrollment may create a sense of urgency among community members and voters in general. The community's self-

interest in providing students with acceptable schools may drive this trend.

The data in this article suggests current factors that trend toward bond election support, but research emphasizes the need for building trust among all groups. The data increases the knowledge of superintendent and educational leaders in understanding which demographic groups exhibit a tendency to vote for or against bond election proposals. Although all stakeholders should be addressed, school leaders may use the data to understand which groups have the toughest critics. District leadership that can use data to recognize support and respond to concerns are likely to help themselves at the polls.

Author Biographies


Wesley Hickey is an assistant professor in the department of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Texas in Tyler. He is a former high school biology teacher, middle school principal, and superintendent. Hickey's research generally focuses on bond elections and church/state issues.

A former secondary English teacher, educational consultant, and high school principal, Genie Bingham Linn teaches in the principal program at the University of Texas at Tyler. Her research interests include issues of social justice and principal concerns.

Vance Vaughn is a former high school math teacher, principal, and superintendent. He teaches in the superintendent and principal programs at the University of Texas in Tyler. His research generally focuses on minority achievement and superintendent issues.

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