

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Steady Leadership for State Education after 2020 Elections

By Joseph Hedger and Abigail Potts

While voters delivered a significant presidential change in the 2020 elections, they opted for steady state leadership. When former Vice President Joe Biden was elected to serve as the 46th president, it marked only the 10th time an incumbent's reelection bid failed. Meanwhile, voters returned the vast majority of state candidates to office.

In the race for statewide office, voters in two states elected new governors to open seats, while nine states returned incumbents. Only one state elected a new chief state school officer. State houses broke records for the least amount of change in party control, with only two state houses shifting party control and one still to be decided.¹ Sixty-one state board of education seats in 12 states and territories were on the ballot, with 32 open seats in the

general election and only seven incumbents losing their reelection bid. No state board flipped in partisan control.² In elections for national office, Democrats kept a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, albeit with a smaller margin, and pivotal races for the U.S. Senate majority are headed to a runoff.

Amid a pandemic and conversations on race and social justice, keeping a stable center of state leadership was the clear choice in 2020. This steady course is expected to maintain existing efforts to provide students safe, high-quality learning experiences.

GOVERNOR ELECTIONS

Of the 11 governor races across the U.S., only Montana and Utah elected new governors to open seats, with only Montana shifting political party (see map). Greg Gianforte won the governor race in Montana, where he will gain the authority to appoint state board members. Spencer Cox's win

in Utah, however, will leave the makeup of the elected state board largely unaffected. In a display of unity, Utah's governor's race attracted national attention, with the two candidates putting aside partisan politics to release a video calling for voters to embrace civility and vote without violence or animosity toward their political adversaries.³

Two U.S. territories also held gubernatorial elections. Lt. Gov. Lemanu Sialega Mauga won his bid for the governor race in American Samoa, and Pedro Pierluisi Urrutia of the New Progressive Party won by a small margin in Puerto Rico.

ELECTED STATE EDUCATION CHIEFS

Of the four chief seats up for election, incumbents in Montana, North Dakota, and Washington won reelection, while Republican Catherine Truitt won the open seat in North Carolina. Incumbent Mark Johnson left his role as chief to run for lieutenant governor. However, he lost in the primary.

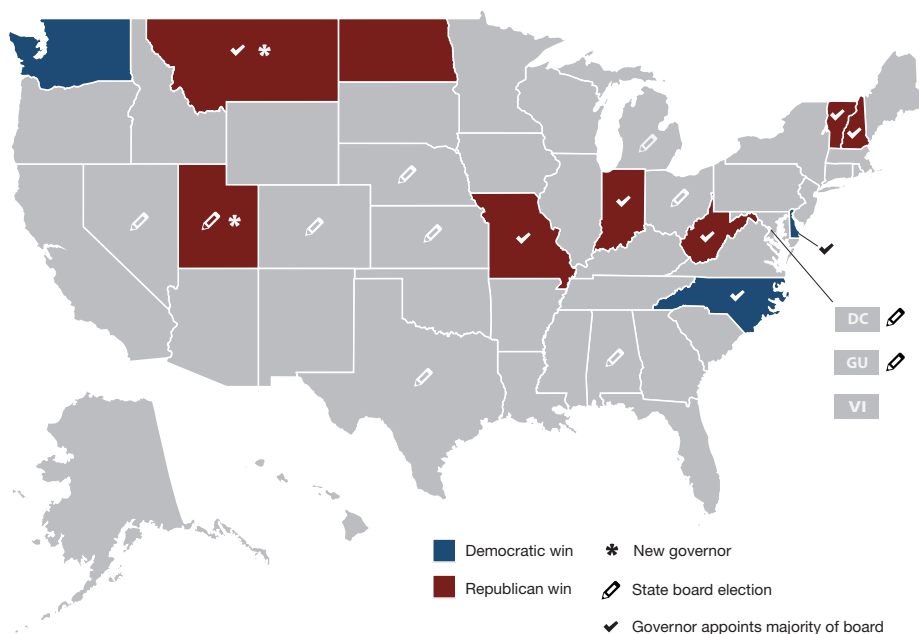
Indiana's chief state school officer was not on the ballot in 2020, marking a significant governance shift in the state. In 2017, Indiana approved new legislation whereby the chief state school officer would receive nomination by the governor, originally beginning in 2025. Indiana's chief state school officer declined to seek another term in office, accelerating the timeline for this important shift, which was officially approved in 2019.⁴

ELECTED STATE BOARDS

Twelve states and territories, including the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, held elections for a total of 61 state board seats. Seven of these boards held partisan elections, while candidates for the rest ran without a listed political affiliation (see table). Governors also appoint board members in 39 states, so appointments to fill expiring terms are likely to be made early in 2021.

Four seats were up for election on the **Alabama** state board, with several close primary races. Incumbents Jackie Zeigler and

Figure 1. Gubernatorial Elections, 2020



Stephanie Bell kept their seats. Republican candidate Belina Palmer McRae won District 7 without opposition, and Democrat Tonya Smith Chestnut was elected to represent District 5. In March, Alabama citizens voted on an amendment to the state constitution that would have changed the state board from being elected to being appointed by the governor. However, about 75 percent of voters turned down this amendment, choosing to continue electing state board members.

In **Colorado**, Republican Joyce Rankin won her district as the only running incumbent. In Districts 1 and 7, Democrat candidates Lisa Escárcega and Karla Esser replaced incumbent Val Flores and NASBE past-president Jane Goff, who had reached her term limit. No seats were flipped, leaving a Democrat majority on the Colorado state board.

In **Kansas**, five of the board's 10 seats were up for election, with incumbents Ann Mah, Deena Horst, and Jim McNiece running unopposed. Newcomer Melanie Haas won her bid for District 2, and Betty Arnold narrowly beat board chair Kathy Busch for District 8, both seats flipping from Republican to Democrat. These races garnered more attention than usual, as they followed on the heels of the board's split vote on Governor Laura Kelly's proposal to delay the reopening of schools. Meanwhile, Ellen Lipton and Jason Strayhorn won the at-large election to replace Lupe Ramos-Montigny and Michelle Fecteau, who had finished their terms on the **Michigan** state board.

The **Nebraska** state board's nonpartisan election returned incumbents Patsy Koch Johns and Lisa Fricke, while newcomers Patti Gubbles and Jacquelyn Morrison won Districts 3 and 4. The **Nevada** state board also held a nonpartisan election, with newcomer Katie Coombs and incumbent Felicia Ortiz running unopposed. Meanwhile, Tim Hughes and Rene Cantu won seats for Districts 1 and 4.

In **Ohio**, voters elected six of the eleven elected positions on the state board in a nonpartisan election. The other eight seats on the board are nominated by the governor. Incumbent candidates Antoinette Miranda and Meryl Johnson won their districts, and Diana Fessler, who served on the Ohio board two decades prior, ran unopposed for District 1.

On the **Texas** state board, eight seats were up for a partisan election, with four incumbents running and winning their districts. After being appointed as board chair last year, Republican candidate Keven Ellis successfully kept his seat. Of the four newcomers, three candidates won their district seats while holding the same political affiliations as their forebears, and Democrat Rebecca Bell-Metereau flipped District 5 with her win.

In 2016, the **Utah** legislature passed a statute calling for partisan elections on state board of education races.⁵ Thus, 2020 marked the Utah state board's first partisan election, with six candidates running unopposed for nine district seats. Incumbents Carol Barlow Lear and Janet Cannon reclaimed their seats representing Districts 7 and 8 respectively, and incumbent Mike Haynes lost in the Republican convention. Seven Republican candidates won the remaining open seats on the board.

The **District of Columbia** state board added newcomers to four of their nine seats, with incumbent Frazier O'Leary Jr. returning to represent Ward 4, and candidates Allister Change, Eboni-Rose Thompson, Carlene Reid, and Jacque Patterson winning the other four seats.

Incumbents Maria Gutierrez, Mark Mendiola, and Lourdes Benavente won their bids for re-election on the **Guam** board. Newcomers Mary Okada, Peter Ada, and Robert Crisostomo were also elected to join the board.

The **U.S. Virgin Islands** elected five new members to the board of education, with Democrat candidate Angel Bolques winning the at-large seat. In the St. Croix district, newcomers Emmanuella Perez-Cassius and Shawna Richards will join the board, defeating incumbents Mary Moorhead and Martial Webster, and incumbent Kyza Callwood and newcomer Nandi Sekou won the two seats in the St. Thomas district.

BALLOT INITIATIVES

State ballot initiatives aimed at increasing public education funding were largely successful in 2020, including in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. Arizona passed a measure that will raise taxes on incomes above \$250,000 to fund teacher salaries

and schools. Colorado increased the tax on tobacco products and e-cigarettes to fund education and health programs, and New Mexico passed a bond initiative.

California's school and local communities funding act and its repeal of Proposition 209 on Affirmative Action failed. In Washington, 54 percent of voters chose to mandate comprehensive sexual education.

Despite the uncertainty that marked the days and weeks following November 4, states worked diligently to count the record-breaking number of votes by mail-in ballot. Young people specifically showed up in large numbers in 2020. As of November 9, 50 to 52 percent of voting-eligible young people, ages 18–29, cast a ballot in the 2020 elections, which is nearly 10 percentage points higher than in 2016. Projections estimate this rate may rise to 53 to 56 percent once all votes are counted.⁶

As the pandemic continues to affect schools across the nation and a new federal administration enters office, state leadership will face daunting challenges, experience will matter, and new officeholders will need to get quickly up to speed.

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NOTES

1 Tim Storey and Wendy Underhill, "2020 Legislative Election Results: It's Status Quo in the States" (Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, Nov. 5, 2020).

2 Only six of 15 elected boards hold partisan elections.

3 John Bowden, "Utah Governor Candidates Release Ads Together Calling for Unity," *The Hill* (Oct. 20, 2020), <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/521856-utah-governor-candidates-release-ads-together-calling-for-civility>.

4 Indiana House Bill 1005 (2017).

5 Richards v. Cox, 2019 UT 57 (2019).

6 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, "Youth Voter Turnout Increased in 2020" (Medford, MA: Tufts University, November 2020).

State Board Elections, 2020

| State | Result | Impact on SBE |
|--|--|--|
| Alabama (partisan ballot) | SBE: Jackie Zeigler, R (1)*; Stephanie Bell, R (3)*; Tonya Smith Chestnut, D (5); Belina Palmer McRae, R (7) | Republicans remain the majority party. Four of eight voting seats were on the ballot. Two new board members were elected to open seats, and two incumbents will return to the state board. |
| Colorado (partisan ballot) | SBE: Lisa Escárcega, D (1); Joyce Rankin, R (3)*; Karla Esser, D (7) | Democrats remain the majority party. Three of seven voting seats were on the ballot. Lisa Escárcega defeated incumbent Val Flores, and Karla Esser replaced Jane Goff, who completed her last term. |
| Kansas (partisan ballot) | SBE: Melanie Haas, D (2); Ann Mah, D (4)*; Deena Horst, R (6)*; Betty Arnold, D (8); Jim McNiece, R (10)* | Republicans remain the majority party. Three incumbents will return to the state board. Two new board members were elected, both flipping their seat from Republican to Democrat. Newcomer Betty Arnold narrowly defeated board chair Kathy Busch. |
| Michigan (partisan ballot) | SBE: Ellen Lipton, D; Jason Strayhorn, D | Democrats remain the majority party. Two new candidates won open seats. |
| Nebraska (nonpartisan ballot) | SBE: Patsy Koch Johns (1)*; Lisa Fricke (2)*; Patti Gubbels (3); Jacquelyn Morrison (4) | Four of eight voting seats were on the ballot. Two incumbents won reelection, and two new candidates will join the board. |
| Nevada (4 elected; governor appoints 3) | SBE: Tim Hughes (1); Katie Coombs (2); Felicia Ortiz (3)*; Rene Cantu (4) | All four elected voting seats were on the ballot. One incumbent won reelection. Three new candidates will join the board, including Rene Cantu, who defeated incumbent Mark Newburn for District 4. |
| Ohio (11 elected by nonpartisan ballot; governor appoints 8) | SBE: Diana Fessler (1); Christina Collins (5); Antoinette Miranda (6)*; Michelle Newman (9); Brendan Shea (10); Meryl Johnson (11)* | Six of eleven elected voting seats were on the ballot. Two incumbents won reelection, and four new candidates will join the board, including Christina Collins, who narrowly defeated incumbent Lisa Woods. |
| Texas (partisan ballot) | SBE: Georgina C. Pérez, D (1)*; Rebecca Bell-Metereau, D (5); Will Hickman, R (6); Audrey Young, R (8); Keven Ellis, R (9)*; Tom Maynard, R (10)*; Sue Melton-Malone, R (14)*; Jay Johnson, R (15) | Republicans remain the majority party. Eight of 15 voting seats were on the ballot. Four incumbents won reelection, and four new candidates will join the board. Newcomer Rebecca Bell-Metereau flipped the open seat in District 5 from Republican to Democrat. |
| Utah (partisan ballot) | SBE: Matt Hymas, R (3); Brent Strate, R (4); Carol Barlow Lear, D (7)*; Janet Cannon, R (8)*; Molly Hart, R (10); Natalie Cline, R (11); James Moss, R (12); Randy Boothe, R (13); Kristan Norton, R (15) | Nine of 15 voting seats were on the ballot. Two incumbents won reelection, while incumbents Laurieann Thorpe and Mike Haynes failed to win the Republican convention. Seven Republican newcomers will join the board. This year marked the first partisan election for the state board. |
| District of Columbia (nonpartisan ballot) | SBE: Allister Chang (2); Frazier O'Leary Jr. (4)*; Eboni-Rose Thompson (7); Carlene Reid (8); Jacque Patterson (at-large) | Five of nine voting seats were on the ballot. Incumbent Frazier O'Leary Jr. won reelection, and four new candidates will join the board. Newcomer Eboni-Rose Thompson defeated incumbent Karen Williams for Ward 7. |
| Guam (6 elected at large; governor appoints 3) | SBE: Mary Okada; Maria Gutierrez*; Peter Ada; Mark Mendiola*; Lourdes Benavente*; Robert Crisostomo | All six elected voting seats were on the ballot. Three incumbents won reelection, and three newcomers will join the board. Incumbent Lawrence Alcairo failed to win reelection. |
| U.S. Virgin Islands (partisan ballot) | SBE: Angel Bolques, D (at-large); Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, D (St. Croix); Shawna Richards, D (St. Croix); Kyza Callwood, D (St. Thomas)*; Nandi Sekou, D (St. Thomas) | One incumbent won reelection. New candidates Emmanuella Perez-Cassius and Shawna Richards defeated incumbents Mary Moorhead and Martial Webster in the St. Croix district, shifting both seats to Democrat. Incumbent Arah Lockhart failed to win the Democratic primary in St. Thomas district. |

* incumbent