Public Expectations of School Board Trustees

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Abstract
School board trustees play an important role in the education of children throughout Ontario. Using an online survey of Ontario residents, expectations of school board trustees are explored in detail. The survey included an open-ended question that asked respondents what role they see being performed by trustees, as well as a question that asked respondents whether they preferred a "delegate" governing model, which believes trustees should represent constituents, or a "trustee" model, which believes trustees should render decisions based on their best judgement. On the surface, respondents see three primary and distinct roles: represent the public; support the administrative functions of the school board, and to ensure educational outcomes are met. In addition, the sample tilts favourably towards the "delegate" governing model. Regression models identify some factors that help explain respondents' choices.

Keywords: school board trustee, delegate model, trustee model, advocacy

Introduction
Governance within a democratic setting assumes a bottom-up flow of power from voters to elected officials. It also assumes that officials, once elected, are responsive to input and can meet, or minimally acknowledge, voter and stakeholder expectations (Dahl, 1998). This notion of democratic governance often animates national and sub-national politics and elections. However, this theory that holds voter expectations into account has never really been applied to a widespread area of democratic activity, namely school board trustees.

School board trustees in Ontario are both elected officials and board members, and there are many (Davidson et al., 2020). In 2018, more than 1500 candidates campaigned for about 690 seats across the province (OESC, 2018). What do these trustees do? As elected officials, trustees must be responsive to the voters to ensure management is guiding the organization according to what the public wishes (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Trustees also act as board members who must adhere to principles of good governance (Caver, 2006; Gill, 2005).

While good governance and responsiveness to the membership are compatible roles for directors of a board (Piscitelli & Geobey, 2020), the size of the electorate for school board trustees suggests that understanding the expectations of members may be more of a challenge than with most boards. Many non-profit organizations hold elections for their board, but rarely do they involve so many members who are eligible to vote as is the case in Ontario school board elections. General elections mean that in Ontario, school boards have among the largest membership base of any non-profit organization in the province. However, research is lacking on voter expectations of school board trustees. What little research exists on school board trustees focuses mainly on electoral aspects (Davidson et al., 2020; Mc-

Gregor & Lucas, 2019). Research is still lacking on what voters even know about the role of trustees. In order to shine some light, we present the results of an online survey of 2,541 Ontario residents, with an oversampling of parents with school-aged children. The survey helps examine what parents and other members of school boards expect from trustees, as well as look at some correlates for those expectations. Overall, survey participants provided a wide variety of responses, many reflecting a lack of knowledge about what trustees do – with a noticeable group seeing no role for trustees at all. The responses of most others were summarized into three primary and distinct roles: represent the public, support the administrative functions of the school board, and ensure educational outcomes are met.

Responsiveness of Politicians

There is clear evidence that in the aggregate, voters respond to the actions of government when making decisions about whom they will support (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Stimson (1991, 2004) demonstrated that an overall policy mood exists in the United States among the general public. Citizens in the aggregate have weakly held policy preferences, which react to policy choices by the government. With the election of a new government, new policies are implemented, which causes the public to stop demanding changes in those domains. If the government continues to make changes, the policy mood shifts, and the public begins to demand some reversals. These shifts in policy mood can lead to shifts in aggregate voter preferences. Soroka and Wlezien (2010) found this same phenomenon using Canadian data labelling it the Thermostatic model. Under this approach, it is not necessary for people to understand the specifics of individual policy choices; people simply need to know if a "policy has gone 'too far' in one direction or 'not far enough' given their policy preferences" (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010, p. 31). They also found evidence that political parties respond to what the public demands and change their policy choices in response to changes in public preferences.

The relationship between school board trustees and citizens does not appear to be as strong as with national representatives. Berry and Howell (2007) examined if citizens base their vote for school board members on the performance of the board during the members' term in South Carolina. They found that in the 2000 election, which featured a great deal of media attention on new standardized tests, citizens voted retrospectively whereby they evaluated school board members on the performance of the students. However, in 2002 and 2004, when media attention was no longer as high, there was no relationship between performance and vote, suggesting that at the school board level, the connection between performance and vote is not as strong as at higher orders of government, and is highly dependent on the salience of some school board issue.

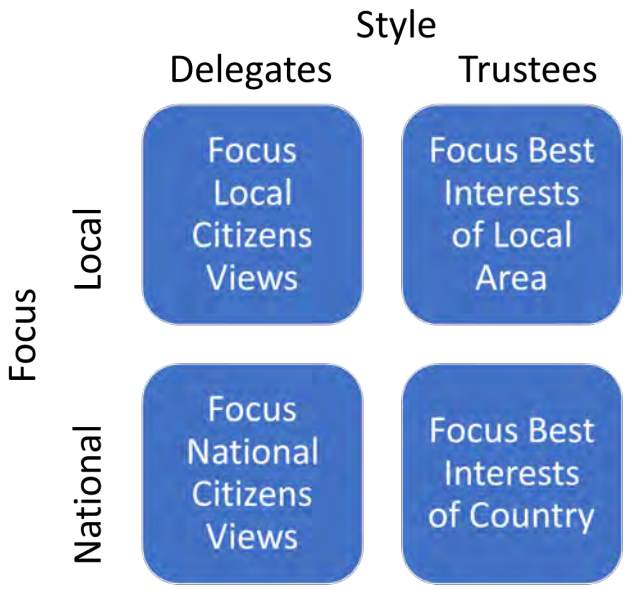
What voters expect from elected officials, however, is a bit clearer, albeit there is some variation. Carman (2007) offered some insight in his attempts to "better understand constituent preferences for the representational relationship" (p. 2) between voters and their elected representatives. He focused on two models of representation: the delegate model and the trustee model. In the delegate model, individuals expect their elected representatives to act as proxies, voting the preferences of those who elected them (Carman, 2007). Under the trustee model, individuals expect elected representatives to use their own best judgement, even if that goes against the majority view of their constituents (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010, 2012; Carman, 2007; Doherty, 2015; Farrell et al., 2018; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Rosset et al., 2017). Among the electorate, Carman (2007) found individuals with higher levels of education, higher levels of political efficacy and trust, females, and Black Americans were more likely to prefer a trustee relationship.[1] Rosset et al. (2017) added an interesting nuance distinguishing support between the delegate and the trustee model (see also Miller & Stokes, 1963). Support for the delegate model depends on how close an individual voter's views are to the median voter. The closer, the more they favour the delegate model. It is hypothesized that this support is a self-interested position, as the delegate model is more likely to advance policies reflecting that of the median voter. Rosset et al. (2017) also found that females are more likely to favour the delegate model, whereas those with higher levels of political trust, higher education, and older voters favour the trustee model.

Doherty (2015) suggested a two-dimensional model of representation preferences. His taxonomy creates four quadrants according to two dimensions: 1) style, either delegates or trustees at the top; and 2) focus, either local or national on the side. In the top-left quadrant are local delegates who try to reflect the local wishes of their constituents. In the top-right quadrant are local trustees who seek to do

[1] Age, party identification, income, and having voted in the past election were not significant predictors.

what they think is best for their local constituency. At the bottom-left are national delegates, who seek to vote for the best interests of the whole country. Finally, in the bottom-right are national trustees who seek to do what they think is best for the whole country[2].

Figure 1
Doherty (2015) Representation Preferences



Using data from Finland, Bengtsson and Wass (2010) examined three models of representation: a resemblance model, a delegate model, and a trustee model. The resemblance model suggests voters prefer to elect people that share the same physical and socio-economic characteristics. They find only a minority of survey respondents support the resemblance model. Farrell et al. (2018) similarly found limited support for the representation model among voters in Ireland. Bengtsson and Wass (2010) also found the delegate and trustee approach were seen as equally popular, but the survey did not force respondents to choose between these two. Instead, support for each was measured in different questions. They found men prefer the trustee model whereas younger voters, those with a strong party identification, a positive view of the responsiveness of the system, and on the political left preferred the delegate model. Notably, Bengtsson and Wass (2010) also suggested, although they did not examine it in detail, the possibility of a hybrid model between the delegate and trustee model. They characterized this as "a representative that both listens to voters and, when necessary, acts according to his/her preferences" (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010, p. 59).

Bengtsson and Wass (2012) followed up their previous study by comparing voters' and politicians' views. They found congruence between voters, elected members of parliament, and non-elected candidates who all favour a trustee approach over a delegate approach.

These studies present a well-rounded understanding of how citizens respond to political actions at the national level and of citizen preferences for members of legislative bodies. Certain key variables surface as relevant, such as gender, education, efficacy, trust, partisanship, and ideology. How these variables help understand what citizens expect of special-purpose bodies, such as school boards, is yet to be fully explored.

Relatively limited academic attention has been devoted to the study of special-purpose bodies in Canada (Lucas, 2016) and abroad (Skelcher, 2007). However, this is not to suggest that special-purpose bodies are not worthy of attention. The limited attention given to special purpose bodies is instead per-

[2] Doherty (2015) found that those who fall in the top-left, local delegates, are most likely to be re-elected.

haps indicative of the challenges related to studying them (Lucas, 2016), or of the propensity of scholars to focus on what Skelcher, in his comparative study of special-purpose bodies in the United Kingdom and the United States, referred to as "matters of high politics" (Skelcher, 2007, p. 64). In fact, Lucas expounded on their relevance not only for the numerous services they provide and their significant spending but also as they raise important questions of democratic accountability:

> In some cases, special purpose bodies are so distant from ordinary accountability structures that they effectively operate as their own level of government, enormously powerful but accountable to no one. Even in less extreme cases, special purpose bodies are often mysterious and opaque, their practices obscure, their personnel invisible, and their functions unclear. If we are interested in democratically accountable government in Canada, local special-purpose bodies ought to provoke our curiosity – and also, perhaps, our unease. (Lucas, 2016, p. 5)

Skelcher also saw the relevance of studying special-purpose bodies due to their range of democratic structures that "vary from directly elected governing councils, through hybrid boards consisting of managerial, nominated, and elected members, to executives constituted by appointment of a political principal or independent commission" (Skelcher, 2007, p. 64) and advances them as a suitable dataset to begin to attempt to address the overarching question the title of the article poses, "Does Democracy Matter?"(p. 61).

However, investigating new forms of public governance more broadly from a European context, Skelcher raised concerns similar to those noted above regarding democratic accountability, as well as the limitations of the prevailing tendency to view them through the lens of representative democracy based on "a principal-agent chain-linking citizens, elected representatives, public managers, and third-party providers" (Skelcher, 2010, p. 161). Skelcher likened attempting to analyze principals and agents within this context akin to "fishing in muddy waters" (p. 161):

> When researchers catch an actor that, from the perspective of representative democracy, looks like an agent, they sometimes find that the actor behaves more like a principal. And when they catch political principals, they find that their oversight of some forms of governance is highly constrained and that they are effectively disempowered. This muddy puddle of complex delegations, accountabilities, and authority is turning into a sizeable lake as traditional forms of representative government are supplemented, or supplanted, by alternative institutional arrangements predicated on the ideas of collaborative public management, partnership, and governance networks. (Skelcher, 2010, p. 172)

As a result of this challenge, Skelcher (2010) suggested that work is to be done "to design new ways to understand how these third-party governments respond to the challenges of democracy, in order that we can build theories of public governance that do not take representative democracy as a given" (p. 173). Our study, therefore, attempts not only to begin to address the special purpose body research gap identified above, but also to bring some clarity to these "muddy waters" by first understanding what citizens expect of their elected representatives within the special purpose body context in order to address the broader questions of representative democracy raised here by Skelcher.

How these citizens' expectations are addressed by their elected representatives and how they interpret their role in this regard, particularly in situations where their expectations may be more administrative in nature, may also provide interesting insight for understanding the political-administrative relations within the special purpose body context. This may similarly also provide insight for academics studying non-profit board governance in terms of the role of the board vis-à-vis the role of management and their interaction with the organization's ownership, as evidenced in the proceeding paragraphs.

Role of a Board of Directors

A board of director's primary responsibility is to ensure management is acting in the best interest of the ownership of the organization (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Unlike for-profit companies with shareholders, the ownership of a non-profit is not always clear. Carver (2006) suggested "for community boards, the ownership is the community at large; for membership associations, the membership is the ownership" (p. 26). While ownership is clear for membership associations, it is not as clear for non-profits. In particular, it is not always clear who constitutes the "community." Whether school boards are community organizations or membership associations is also not entirely clear. However, fortunately, for the purposes of this study, one thing that is clear is that voting members of the public constitute at least a large portion of the "ownership" of the school board.[3] Indeed, if one considers a school board a membership association, the voting public constitutes the entire membership[4]. Whereas if the school board is serving the community, the membership expands to other members of the public who do not vote, such as students and teachers living outside of the voting boundaries.

For board members to ensure management is acting in the interest of owners, it is important for the board to understand the wishes of the owners, or in the case of a non-profit such as a school board, the membership. Some of these interests can be inferred. For example, it is safe to assume the ownership wishes the board to hire competent staff. Modern governance theory recognizes the importance of a good staff as it is believed that hiring an effective CEO and then "rigorously monitoring that person's performance is the board's most important role" (Hoel, 2011, p. vii). Many specific wishes of the membership may not be so easy to determine.

Current governance theory (Carver, 2006; Gill, 2005; Piscitelli & Geobey, 2020) suggests effective governance of an organization requires the board to focus on big-picture issues while leaving operational matters to management. It is not clear if this theory aligns with the expectation of the membership of non-profit organizations. Indeed, looking at the functions of a board and comparing them to the expectations of the membership is a worthy exercise.

The two most common governance systems for non-profit boards are the results-based approach and the Carver policy governance approach. Both approaches split the role of the board and the role of management with some subtle differences in how this is done.

Policy governance was created by John Carver. According to the Carver model, the role of the board of directors is to establish ends or goals for the organization, to set limits on what the chief executive officer can do (or whoever is the top staff person in the organization, to monitoring organizational and chief executive officer performance), and to provide a linkage to the ownership of the organization (Carver, 2006). Carver's main distinction is in how policy is created. Under his model, policies are set as limitations as to what the chief executive officer cannot do with the implication being that anything that is not forbidden can be undertaken by the organization at the direction of the chief executive officer. The results-based model in contrast is not as rigid in its policy formulation approach.

The results-based approach does not have a clear creator but was instead established more organically. Gill (2005), using the results-based approach, suggested a board of directors has seven functions: establishing the organization's mission; financial oversight; human resources oversight; monitoring organizational performance; governing risk; ensuring stability during a crisis; and representing the community.

Notably, both of these models mention a role for the board to represent the membership. Carver's idea of representation focuses on linkage with the ownership with the purpose of setting effective policy limitations and establishing the high-level goals of the organization. Results-based governance derives its ideas of representation from agency theory, thus suggesting that the representative role of the board is to align management interests with that of the membership (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Piscitelli & Geobey, 2020). In aligning those interests, it is essential to understand what the membership expects from the board of directors.

[3] Some people may feel a sense of ownership over school boards because they pay school board taxes. In Ontario, taxes still appear as a component of property taxes for local school boards and individuals can direct their taxes to the board of their choosing. In reality, this does not influence the amount of funding for the local boards as this is now primarily based on a per-student basis.

[4] In Ontario, residents direct their property taxes to a specific school board, the designation of property tax no longer impacts funding for school boards, but it does indicate which trustees a resident can vote for in school board elections (i.e., a person who designates their taxes to the English separate school board will vote for English Catholic trustees).

There may be a variety of expectations, some closer to the mission of what a school board is mandated to do, and some that may be more marginal, or even outside of the official role. While the key objective is to gain an understanding of what these expectations might be, a secondary objective is to identify any correlates as to why certain people indicate certain expectations.

Officially, what school boards do in practice tends to be divided between two models: a professional model and a political model (Greene, 1992; Newton & Sackney, 2005). Boards using the professional model view "educational governance as a primarily technical process" (Greene, 1992, p. 220). Professional boards are more likely to vote unanimously on issues and follow the recommendations of staff. Boards following the political model see "governance as a process of bargaining among the superintendent, boards, and community" (Greene, 1992, p. 220). Political boards are more focused on being responsive to community wishes; they are divided on issues and votes and tend to be more willing to act independently of staff. Most boards lean towards the professional model, with a focus on policy formulation (Butler et al., 2019; Galway et al., 2013; Maharaj, 2020; Sattler, 2012). However, how a trustee comes to be elected may impact their view of the role. Former school staff who become trustees typically see the role as providing broad oversight (typically former school staff), whereas parents who are elected typically see the role as advocates for local community (Maharaj, 2020). The Ontario Education Act (1990) favoured a view that trustees should focus on oversight. The act focused the role of trustee broadly on student achievement, stewardship of resources, oversight of the director of education, and multiyear planning. It is the director of education that is responsible for day-to-day operations (Carver, 2006; Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Galway et al. 2013; Gill, 2005; Lessard & Brassard, 2005).

Diminishing Role of Trustees

Education governance occurs at three levels: 1) the central authority (in Canada the provincial government); 2) the school board; and 3) the school itself (Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Lessard & Brassard, 2005). Notably, all three levels are a "place for democratic participation" (Lessard & Brassard, 2005, p. 7) but school board trustees are the only officials of the three levels entirely elected by local citizens with a focus solely on education issues. Members of provincial and federal parliaments are elected as well, but with a much wider mandate.

Of the three levels, arguably the school board is the one that has seen its power diminish the most. School boards in Ontario have been losing power for the past 30 years to the province (Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Galway et al., 2013; Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Owens, 1999; Sattler, 2012). Successive Ontario governments have removed the ability for school boards to directly tax and centralized funding, amalgamated boards, took more of a role in the curriculum (Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Sattler, 2012), and have begun to centrally bargain most issues with school board labour unions. Alongside this centralization, the trend has been a decentralization where more power is given to schools directly (Lessard & Brassard, 2005), for example, through the creation of school councils where parent and community representatives meet directly with the principal.

The loss of authority at school boards has led some to question if trustees are becoming obsolete (Galway et al., 2013; Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Owens, 1999). Political leaders are also taking some leadership in this way of thinking. In 1997, the number of trustees was reduced in Ontario by 66% as a result of school board consolidation (Garcea & Munroe, 2014). Fewer trustees weakened the local representative function (Galway et al., 2013) while also forcing school boards to become more bureaucratic, making trustees less responsive to parents (Owens, 1999). Trustee elections also face low voter turnout (Galway et al., 2013; McGregor & Lucas, 2019; Owens, 1999;) and a propensity for incumbents to win re-election regardless of school performance (Berry & Howell, 2007).[5] These questions have stimulated a debate within Ontario about the continuation of school boards (see for example D'amato, 2016; Piscitelli & Geobey, 2020).

This debate in Ontario is likely to continue given recent changes to school boards in other provincial jurisdictions. Manitoba's provincial government introduced legislation in November 2020 – Bill 64, that would replace elected school boards with a provincially appointed education authority, to be advised by a provincial advisory council representing the various regions within the province (MacLean, 2021). This legislation was ultimately scrapped after public consultations, but its introduction indicates govern-

[5] In 2018, 247 trustee seats in Ontario were acclaimed, and of the 436 trustees that were elected, slightly more than half (237) were incumbents (OESC, 2018).

ments are examining the role of school boards.

Quebec's provincial government has also made similar changes, passing Bill 40 in February 2020, which replaces the French elected school boards with service centres, governed by directors elected by staff and parents who then select community members to join the board as well (Montpetit, 2020); however, similar changes proposed to the English elected school boards in the province have been paused via a court injunction (Rukavina, 2020).

How these debates may ultimately play out is not entirely clear, as New Brunswick presents a cautionary tale. In the 1990s, New Brunswick abolished local school boards replacing them with more centralized authority and a school-parent council mechanism for garnering local input (Owens, 1999). However, with the election of a new government in 1999,[6] school boards were reconstituted in 2001 (Lessard & Brassard, 2005).

Ontario has four publicly funded school systems, an English public system, a French public system, an English Catholic system, and a French Catholic system. Catholic school board trustees see their role, partially, as protecting the Catholic school system from elimination (Davidson et al., 2020). Quebec and Newfoundland have eliminated their denominationally based school systems demonstrating that the threat of elimination of Catholic school is credible in Ontario (Galway et al., 2012; Trosow & Irwin, 2018).

Data and Methods

Every Ontario adult who is a Canadian citizen is technically a member of a local school board, meaning a survey of Ontario residents' expectations of trustees can be used to generalize about how Ontarians expect board members to represent their interests.

The online survey used here was conducted by Dynata between November 22 and December 2, 2020. A total of 2,541 people over the age of 18 participated, with an oversampling of parents with school-aged children (1,318 of total respondents). Respondents were selected from an opt-in panel recruited by Dynata.[7] Due to this opt-in nature, results are not necessarily representative of the population of Ontario as a whole. However, weights were computed in order to realign survey results more closely to population parameters.

Expectations in the survey were measured by the open-ended question: "What do you see as the role of a school board trustee?" Responses to this question were coded by each of the authors. Several iterations of coding led to a consensus on a coding scheme, which resulted in a Cohen's Kappa intercoder reliability of 80%. Cohen's Kappa is considered a conservative measure of association, making intercoder reliability of 80% or above acceptable (Lombard et al., 2002).

The coding results showed 17 distinct codes, which were grouped into three general categories. The first six identify trustee roles as related to advocacy or representation. This can vary according to which stakeholder was the object. Here is a list of each of these six advocacy/representative categories, and an example of a response to serve as an illustration.

- Code 1: advocating or representing students. "They [trustees] listen to students[sic] opinions and problems."
- Code 2: advocating or representing parents. "To advocate on behalf of parents in dealing with Teachers and Teachers Unions and the Government."
- Code 3: used when respondents specifically mentioned advocating or representing both students and parents. "Represent the interests of the parents and the children."
- Code 4: advocating or representing the broader community. "To be responsive to the values, beliefs and priorities of their communities while implementing the rule of the provincial government."
- Code 5: advocating or representing any other group not previously mentioned or any combination not previously noted. "To listen to the concerns of the parents and to act in the best interests of parents, students and teachers - to act justly and accordingly for the people who elected you to the office."
- Code 6: liaison or communication. "As liaison between the local community and school board

[6] The Liberal government that was in power since 1987 was replaced by Progressive Conservatives.

[7] Panelists received a reward for completing this survey, which was administered by Dyanata.

to represent student needs and priorities."

Respondents in this category all conceptualized the role of trustees as representing a group or performing a liaison function with them. It is notable that there was no wide agreement on which group was to be represented. Students and parents were the most frequent responses, but the community at large and other groups were also mentioned.

The next five codes include a mix of responses seen as appropriate governance roles for trustees and some that are not, but all focused on administrative functions.

- Code 7: oversight and compliance. "To ensure that school boards are implementing the curriculum and running efficiently."
- Code 8: policy development and the creation of policy. "Help set policies to administer schools."
- Code 9: budgetary decisions, for example, "allocate funds."
- Code 10: operations. "Oversee everyday [sic] operations."
- Code 11: focused on safety. "They should focus on ensuring safety in the schools."

Oversight and compliance, policy development and budgeting are generally seen as appropriate roles for a trustee (Gill, 2005). However, operations are clearly the domain of management (Carver, 2006; Galway et al., 2013; Gill, 2005). Safety is a grey area but it being a common response is not surprising given that the survey took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next two code categories relate to educational issues.

- Code 12 looked at pedagogical decisions, curriculum matters and classroom decisions. "The curriculum needs to be improved."
- Code 13 relates to student success. "Focus on student achievement and well-being."

This final category of responses contains three subcategories: pedagogical decisions, curriculum and classroom decisions, and ensure student success. The first contains a mix of items that would generally be seen as the domain of the director of education and staff, while the second is clearly a role of trustees under the current governance paradigm. Interestingly, many trustees would see ensuring student success as their most important function.[8]

The remaining codes (14 to 17) were excluded from analysis. They do offer some interesting insight, but for various reasons did not form the core of our inquiry. Code 14 captured individuals who said trustees do nothing or that the position should be abolished. For example, one respondent said trustees are "a useless position that should be eliminated, they have no role and barely do any work." While fascinating, particularly in light of the diminishing role of trustees and their increasingly bureaucratized functions, this category was excluded as it only accounted for less than 5% of responses, too small to yield any meaningful results for our quantitative models. Code 15 captured all "other" responses that did not clearly fit any of the other more clearly defined categories. Here is one example: "somebody who cares about schools and who frequents them." Such a response is somewhat vague but does not neatly fit with any of the other defined categories. Furthermore, responses lacked similarity to warrant a new category. Code 16 captured those who indicated that they do not know or were unsure. Finally, Code 17 was for irrelevant answers, such as "Sadly the system was[sic] left all the kids down, need more upgrades to protect students."

The categories of representation, administration, and educational expectation approximates what the literature has identified as common models of representation. Those who indicated they favoured a representation function could be seen as analogous to the delegate model. Whereas the administration and educational responses can be seen as closer to the trustee model. These three categories formed the dependent variable of a multinominal logistic regression model.

A second analysis examines factors that explain whether voters are more likely to lean towards the delegate versus trustee model. The model was tested using the question: "Which of the following comes closest to your view?" A score of 1 was assigned to those who selected the delegate model response: "Trustees should vote the way the majority of people in their area want even if they disagree with the decision." A score of 0 was assigned to those who selected the trustee model: "Trustees should use their own best judgement when making decisions, even if it goes against what the people in their area want." With the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the analysis relied on logistic regression.

[8] This finding has been identified through interviews with 25 school board trustees in Ontario as part of the same Social Science and Humanities Research Council Insight Development Grant funded project from which this research is funded.

In both cases, models will include as independent variables those that were identified in previous studies as yielding some association, or those that have produced some mixed results. These include party identification, which has had conflicting results in the past. In one study, it was associated with the delegate model (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010), whereas in another study it was not significant at all (Carman, 2007). We look at party identification according to how respondents voted in the previous provincial election. Four dummy variables were created based on whether a respondent voted for the NDP, Liberals, Progressive Conservatives, or Green Party. The reference category for each of these dummy variables was the option: "voting for another party not listed."[9]

A second political dummy variable reflects whether a respondent voted in the previous federal election. This is included to re-test Carman's (2007) finding in a Canadian setting that voting is not a significant predictor of the delegate versus trustee model.

The third political variable reflects ideology. As noted by Bengtsson and Wass (2010), those on the left have been found to prefer the delegate model. We test that here through an item that measures respondent's self-placement on the left-right spectrum using a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 on the left and 10 on the right. This question has been replicated from the Canadian Election Study, which in 2019 had an average score of 5 indicating that most Canadians cluster around the middle of the scale (Stephenson et al., 2020).

Models also include a measure that takes into account distinctions among parents based on whether their children attend a Catholic school. There has been debate about abolishing the Catholic school boards and merging them with the public systems at least as far back as the 1990s (Faubert & Paulson, 2020; Lucas, 2016; Trosow & Irwin, 2018). The idea has often been met with some resistance, with Catholics being naturally more prone to defend their school boards from elimination (Davidson et al., 2020; Faubert & Paulson, 2020). Affiliation with a Catholic board is, therefore, plausibly linked with different visions of how the system should be led and the role of trustees. To account for this possibility, a dummy variable scores a 1 for respondents who send their child(ren) to only a Catholic school; all others were coded zero.

Finally, models include as controls standard demographic questions, namely gender, age, education, and income. Gender is a dummy variable with males as 1, all others as 0. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, which was included as is in the model. Education was coded using a variable that ranged 1 to 10, where 1 indicated the respondent had not completed past grade school, 2 completed high school, 3 some college, 4 trade school, 5 completed college, 6 some university, 7 an undergraduate, 8 a post-graduate certificate, 9 a masters, and 10 a doctorate. Income was coded using a variable that ranged from 1 to 6. A response of 1 indicated an income less than $20,000, 2 $20,000 to $50,000, 3 $50,000 to $70,000, 4, $70,000 to $100,000, 5, $100,000 to $150,000, and 6 over $150,000. Of these controls, gender and education is expected to yield some effect (Carman, 2007), with females and the higher educated being more likely to support a trustee model.

Results

An initial look at the disaggregated 17 categories in Table 1 shows that the most common response is "don't know/unsure," with 386 responses.[10] This is not overly surprising given that most people do not give school board trustees much thought, and consequently have struggled to respond to the question. The second most frequent category is Code 17, "irrelevant answer," which accounts for 302 fairly random thoughts. In third place is the catch-all "other" group, which contains 188 random responses. As noted, these three, and the 111 who indicated that trustees have "no role," are excluded from the analysis, but nonetheless form a sizeable 987 responses. One general conclusion from these excluded categories is that, at best, people's views of school board trustees lack structure. Indeed, it is clear that about a third of respondents do not have a clear concept of what trustees do.

When the remaining categories are combined into the three coherent clusters, the most dominant category is "administration." Most people believe trustees function as managers. Also, the prominence of this category may reflect the increased bureaucratization of trustees.

[9] Those who indicated that they would not vote were excluded from analysis.

[10] Analysis is based on weighted data as the demographic distribution of sample does not fully match population parameters.

Table 1
Role of School Board Trustees

Role of School Board Trustees	Frequency	Percent	Weighted Percent
Representation	**375**	**15.4**	**15.1**
Advocate/Represent Students	77	3.2	3.1
Advocate/Represent Parents	27	1.1	1.0
Advocate/Represent Students & Parents	30	1.2	1.4
Advocate/Represent Community	92	3.8	3.9
Advocate/Represent Other	72	3.0	2.9
Liaison/Communication	77	3.2	3.4
Administration	**776**	**31.9**	**31.4**
Oversight/Compliance	301	12.4	12.3
Policy Development/Create Policy	106	4.4	4.8
Budget Decisions	112	4.6	4.8
Operations	133	5.5	5.6
Safety	124	5.1	5.3
Educational	**291**	**12.0**	**12.1**
Pedagogical Decisions/Curriculum/Classroom Decisions	107	4.4	4.5
Ensure Student Success	184	7.6	8.2
Excluded	**987**	**40.6**	**41.4**
Nothing/They Have No Role	111	4.6	4.4
Other	188	7.7	7.1
Don’t know/Unsure	386	15.9	15.8
Irrelevant Answer	302	12.4	11.5
Total	2429	100.0	100.0
Did Not Answer	112		

The next step takes a closer look at whether respondent attributes can separate them in any meaningful manner in what they indicate as their expectations of trustees, as well as their overall view and understanding of the role of trustees. We generate two different regression models; the first looks at the three-category expectations variable, the second examines the delegate-vs.-trustee model of governance.

The multinominal logistic regression models in Table 2 set administration (the mode) as the reference category. Two models are generated. The first contains the full list of independent variables; the second is more parsimonious. Support for an advocacy role compared to an administrative role is found among females, those whose children attend Catholic school,[11] those whose ideology are further to the left, and higher-income earners. Those who support a more educational role compared to administrative role appear mostly among the higher educated. NDP supporters and older respondents appear more likely to expect an administrative function out of trustees. The same can be said of older respondents, however, the negative coefficient for age is only marginally significant ($p<.10$).

[11] Significance is .051, slightly above conventional thresholds.

Table 2
Multinomial Logistic Estimate of Role Expectations for Trustees

	Model 1: Full specification						**Model 2: Voting variables excluded**					
	Representation			Educational			Representation			Educational		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.
Male	-.721	.163	.000	-.075	.172	.664	-.770	.146	.000	-.054	.150	.721
Catholic school	.539	.277	.051	.275	.316	.386	.550	.252	.029	.242	.287	.400
Voted PC	.688	1.471	.640	-.947	.682	.165	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted Liberal	.777	1.473	.598	-1.051	.688	.127	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted NDP	.565	1.479	.702	-1.538	.714	.031	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted Green	.394	1.522	.796	-.615	.761	.419	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted federal election	-.232	.618	.707	-.548	.539	.309	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideology	-.143	.041	.001	-.027	.043	.523	-.136	.035	.000	.013	.035	.704
Income	.146	.062	.018	-.204	.066	.002	.158	.053	.003	-.149	.056	.008
Education	.020	.037	.595	.087	.040	.030	.012	.033	.713	.067	.034	.052
Age	.005	.005	.353	-.009	.005	.092	.005	.004	.215	-.008	.004	.064
Intercept	-1.122	1.627	.491	1.428	.970	.141	-.692	.384	.072	-.485	.392	.215
N	998						1234					
Pseudo R-sq	.093						.075					
-2 Log likelihood	1898.431						2374.453					

Results are generally replicated with the voting variables removed (see Model 2). Females, those whose children attend Catholic school, those on the left, and higher-income earners positively relate to the representation expectation. Results in the advocacy model are mainly unchanged from Model 1, as well.

The greater preference of Catholic school parents to expect a representation role for Trustees is notable here. Ontario has retained a publicly funded Catholic school system while many other provinces have moved away from this model to a single French-English public school system. It is possible that Catholic parents value the empowerment that comes with a representation function in order to retain their system.

The next analysis examines the delegate versus trustee model of representation. Weighted results show that 36.8% of respondents favour the trustee model, where trustees are expected to use their own best judgement in making decisions, while 63.2% favour the delegate model, where trustees are expected to vote according to what the majority of constituents want. A logistic regression evaluating the trustee versus delegate model includes the same independent variables as in the multinomial logistic models. In addition, the three-category expectation variable was included as a set of two dummy variables, one each for educational and representation, with administration set as the reference category.

Results in Table 3 show the voting-related variables as important factors. Those who support the three main provincial parties appear more likely to prefer a delegate model, as do respondents who have voted in the previous federal election (see Model 1). In addition, those who are ideologically to the right, higher educated, and whose expectations of trustee roles fall mainly in the "representation" category are also likely to prefer a delegate model. When the vote-related variables are excluded (see Model 2), the remaining variables remain mainly unchanged from Model 1. There is a change to one important variable: when the set of two expectations dummies are excluded, gender emerges as significant (see Model 3), with females appearing more likely to prefer a delegate model. This potentially suggests expectations functions as a mediating variable, itself affected by gender (as revealed in Table 2). In addition, the exclusion of the two expectations dummies reduces the pseudo r-square, suggesting that these two dummies hold an important place in shaping what governance model people prefer.

Discussion

Despite what a good number of respondents may think, school board trustees do pursue definite tasks, and function in a manner not too dissimilar to other non-profit boards. Gill (2005), as previously noted, sees seven functions for a board of directors: establishing the organization's mission, financial oversight, human resources oversight, monitoring organizational performance, governing risk, ensuring stability during a crisis, and representing the community. Responses in the "administrative" category mentioned financial oversight, human resources oversight, and monitoring organizational performance under the sub-category of "oversight/compliance." While ensuring stability in a crisis was not clearly identified, comments about "safety" indicated that respondents recognized trustees have a role to play in the COVID-19 crisis. Governing risk was not clearly identified in our survey but could be inferred as well from the safety category and from comments related to operations. A role for representation was also clearly identified. Establishing the organization's mission had the weakest link but can be inferred from responses focused on "student success," as arguably this is the mission many saw for their local school board.

Our analytical models confirm some expectations, but not all. A significant association was found between a perception of trustees pursuing a representation function and a belief in a delegate model. However, this finding is not overly surprising as it is consistent with the delegate model, which suggests that trustees should make decisions on behalf of those they represent, rather than governing according to their own judgement.

While ideology appears as a significant factor, it is pointing in a different direction. Bengtsson and Wass (2010) found the left prefer the delegate model; here, we see that support among the right. Similarly, the null findings related to education also challenge previous research that higher levels of education are associated with the trustee model (Carman, 2007; Rosset et al., 2017), but again, our data suggest otherwise.

Table 3
Logistic Estimates for Delegated Model

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.
Male	.021	.138	.878	-.144	.123	.241	-.188	.095	.047
Catholic School	-.072	.253	.777	-.106	.229	.644	-.079	.180	.661
Voted PC	1.356	.724	.061	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted Liberal	1.628	.728	.025	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted NDP	1.893	.741	.011	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted Green	1.264	.785	.107	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voted federal election	1.009	.492	.040	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideology	.102	.035	.003	.057	.029	.048	.053	.022	.018
Income	.021	.052	.686	.043	.045	.338	.024	.035	.493
Education	.093	.032	.004	.083	.028	.003	.080	.022	.000
Age	.000	.004	.978	.003	.004	.444	.003	.003	.243
Educational	.021	.172	.905	-.097	.152	.521	-	-	-
Representation	.851	.175	.000	.654	.154	.000	-	-	-
Intercept	-3.456	.953	.000	-.624	.329	.058	-.310	.237	.190
N	1023			1273			2202		
Pseudo r-sq	.076			.045			.017		
-2 Log likelihood	1267.923			1579.824			2620.480		

Conclusion

Our approach to use an open-ended question to gauge people's expectation of schoolboard trustees has a benefit over closed ended question, whereby a closed-ended question with response choices can prime respondents for accurate answers. Here, we left it open, and one big result was a lot of noise. A large number of respondents appear not to understand the role of trustee suggests that trustees are not highly relevant to many Ontarians. This lack of understanding is also evidence as to why provincial governments have considered abolishing the position.

Nonetheless, among those who did provide a response, some patterns emerged that can help improve an understanding of the relationship schoolboards have with the public. First, it is obvious that such a relationship needs some work. Schoolboards, if they are to remain relevant, must at the very least be more present.

Second, our models shed some light into the manner in which the public wishes to engage with board members. There are competing expectations and competing models. Results show that two-thirds of respondents favour the delegate model, preferring for trustees to act on the behalf of constituents, even if trustees disagree with the public mood. This presents a challenge as the Ontario Education Act, corporate law, and modern governance theory requires trustees to act in the best interests of the entity and must thereby use proper judgement. In cases where a trustee's judgement conflicts with the wishes of the membership fulfilling their fiduciary duties, voters could pose a challenge in granting re-election. Future research should examine if trustees have encountered conflicts between what their constituencies wish them to do and what they see as the best interest of the school board. During these conflicts, how trustees acted is worth exploring. Did trustees wish losing re-election or did they risk sacrificing their best judgement in the interest of acting as a delegate for their constituencies?

It is perhaps this tension between voter expectations of representation and trustee obligations that animate some of the discourse around the need to maintain school board trustees. However, in our sample, a minority of respondents, 4.4 percent, see no role for trustees, which runs contrary to such a narrative. Our sample does not appear to scream in outrage to demand their dismantlement, which then leaves trustees to determine how best to engage voters.

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