



**School District Issues Related to Implementing an Earlier Primary Election
Prepared for the SAVA Committee by Lance Melton, Executive Director, MTSBA
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Introduction:

The Montana School Boards Association has no position on an earlier primary election provided that it does not change school elections at all. We realize that the intent of the study is to look at the potential of incorporating the school elections to be conducted at the same time as the primary election and we respect that. However there is nothing in the study resolution that would mandate the consolidation of all school levy elections with an earlier primary election, nor is there language in the resolution that proposes to do so.

Without extensive changes in the law, the best solution is to leave school districts out of any consolidated primary election at which all other elections must occur and allow school district general fund levy elections to remain on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in May.

Questions to Address:

What do you see as the biggest opportunity of this study?

For the Montana School Boards Association, the biggest opportunity of this study is to increase awareness of the intricacies of school finance and school elections among a broader set of legislators than those with whom we regularly interact. There are legislators serving on the SAVA committee who have extensive background in public education issues by virtue of service on either house education or Senate education. We believe that those legislators will serve the SAVA committee well with their understanding of school issues.

What is your biggest concern about changing the date of the primary election?

Our biggest concern with changing the date of the primary election is that not just school levy elections but all school elections will somehow be gathered up and consolidated with that primary date. We are also concerned and would like to ensure against any possibility that the study will proceed without sufficient context for the effect on public schools that could lead to underestimating the significance of the changes that would be needed.

Consolidating school elections on any primary election day will not work without an extensive rewrite of school finance and other laws pertaining to school elections.

What is one thing you hope the committee will keep in mind as they work on the study?

There are several things of which MTSBA would hope the committee will keep in mind as it works on the study.

1. **MTSBA encourages the committee to limit its consideration of coordinating an earlier primary with school levy elections to focus solely on the trustee and general fund levy elections** currently scheduled each year on the 1st Tuesday following the first Monday in May. If the committee does limit its consideration of coordination to just the trustee elections and the general fund levy elections, the coordination for schools would be much simpler and potentially manageable provided that the date is not set much if any earlier than the current date for school levy elections and trustee elections.
2. **There are two tightly coordinated statutory timelines that require that general fund levy elections remain as close to their current date as possible.**
 - a. First, over 80% of a school district's budget is based upon its student account. A school district student count for funding purposes is calculated based upon the number of students enrolled in early October averaged with the number of students who are enrolled in early February. This is what's typically referred to as the count days for purposes of A&B. It is a fairly laborious process across the state, and the information is submitted to the office of public instruction shortly after the February count day. It typically takes the office of public instruction at least until mid-March to let school districts know what their budgeted ANB (average number belonging) count is. Until a school district has that number, it does not know how much it may increase its budget, if any, without a vote. Correspondingly, if there is to be a vote to help support the budget needs of the school district, this information must be in the hands of the trustees before they are called upon to pass a resolution for a school levy election.
 - b. Second, school district funding is driven by actions of the Legislature. The current date for elections in May typically works, in that school districts usually know what the Legislature has adopted for funding sufficiently in advance of the May elections to make at least an educated guess regarding their budgetary needs. Any earlier than May, however, and school districts would lack sufficient information regarding the actions of the Legislature and would be required to run levies that could overstate or understate their budgetary needs.
 - c. **It should also be noted that the current school funding formula not only contemplates but requires a local voted levy in order to allow a school district to increase their budget by the inflationary amounts adopted by the legislature.** We find that this particular condition is not well understood within the legislature. The current funding formula only provides an automatic increase for 80% of most school districts budgets. What that means, for example, is that when the legislature adopted a 3% increase in funding for schools in the 2025 session, the average school district only receives 2.4% unless it asks its voters to bridge the remaining gap up to 3%. Voted levies are instrumental to ensuring the ongoing educational relevance and sufficiency of school funding.

3. **There is a significant emphasis within Montana law on requiring voter approval of a variety of issues, some of which have nothing to do with funding levels or levies. These voted issues should either be left alone with school district discretion over when to run them or they should be eliminated.** School districts are governed by constitutionally empowered trustees who have authority under Article 10 of the Montana constitution to “supervise and control” the schools in in each district. The statutory framework for voter approval requirements does not currently align with the extent of this authority granted in the constitution. For example, school boards are required to obtain voter approval to sell any property of the school district, no matter how small, regardless of whether that is real property or personal property. School boards are also required to obtain voter approval to purchase property, even if the school district already has the resources necessary to complete the transaction without any additional burden on property taxpayers.
4. **Additional issues requiring voter approval, each of which should be left as is in current law and which should not be consolidated with and limited to an election on the primary date, include but are not limited to:**
 - a. 20-6-505, opening a junior high school where a county high school exists (even after voters have approved a bond to build such school)
 - b. 20-6-603, elections required to purchase, build, exchange, or otherwise acquire, sell, or dispose of sites and buildings.
 - c. 20-6-609, lease purchase agreements.
 - d. 20-6-621, approval of sites for school buildings (not just schools but all school buildings)
 - e. 20-9-421, Election to authorize the issuance of school district bonds ...
 - f. 20-9-705, Joint interstate school agreements
 - g. 20-6-312, County high school unification
 - h. 20-6-422, District annexation
 - i. 20-6-423, District consolidation
 - j. 20-9-208, Transfers from fund to fund
 - k. 20-9-422, School district bond election
 - l. 20-9-502:
 - i. Building Reserve
 - ii. Transitional Funding
 - iii. Safety levies
 - m. 20-9-533, Technology Depreciation Levies
 - n. 20-10-126, Establishment of transportation service areas

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) recognizes the importance of the HJ48 study and appreciates the opportunity to provide input. While MTSBA has no position on an earlier primary election as a stand-alone proposition, we respectfully urge that the Committee recognize the need to preserve the current structure and timing of school elections to ensure

alignment with statutory timelines, legislative funding decisions, and the intricacies of school finance.

If school elections are to be considered in the context of HJ 48, we urge the committee to focus solely on trustee and general fund levy elections if at all, avoid disrupting timeframes that provide a narrow window for property informing levy elections for schools, and avoid impingements on the constitutional authority of school boards. MTSBA stands ready to assist the committee in any way possible as it conducts the HJ48 study and works toward solutions that support both the electoral process and the needs of Montana's public schools.

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election change?
Anaconda-DL	9,510	I don't think we should change the date.
Beaverhead	9,719	Prefer that you do not move the primary election.
Big Horn	12,851	I don't think we should change the date.
Blaine	6,936	<p>Montana's current primary election date comes too late in the national election cycle, which limits both the state's influence and voter engagement. Moving the primary to an earlier date would strengthen Montana's voice in the democratic process, provide more time for General election preparation, and increase voter participation.</p> <p>First, an earlier primary would give Montana voters a more meaningful role in shaping national contests. By the time Montana votes, many national and statewide primary races are already decided, leaving voters with little opportunity to influence the outcome. Shifting the date earlier would allow Montanans to cast their ballots while races are still competitive—giving our state a stronger and earlier voice in selecting candidates who may go on to lead at both the state and national levels.</p> <p>Second, holding the primary earlier would give candidates, parties, and election officials more time to prepare for the general election. The additional time between the primary and November allows for smoother transitions and better-informed campaigns. Voters would have more opportunity to learn about the nominees from each party, while election administrators would gain valuable lead time to finalize ballots, address technical or procedural issues, and ensure everything is ready for the general election. This change would support better decision-making, stronger voter education, and improved administrative readiness.</p> <p>Finally, an earlier primary could help boost voter turnout and interest. When primaries are held late in the season—after major races are already settled—voters are often less motivated to participate. By moving the election to a time when the national spotlight is still on the primary process, Montana could benefit from higher enthusiasm and engagement. An earlier date would make the election more relevant, encourage competition, and help reinvigorate voter participation across the state.</p> <p>In short, moving Montana's primary election to an earlier date would give voters a stronger voice, improve General election administration, and foster greater civic participation—ensuring Montana's elections are as meaningful and effective as possible.</p>
Broadwater	7,793	If we can change the election so that there is more time in between school and federal primary, that would be excellent.
Butte-SB	36,068	(No response.)
Carbon	11,179	I do not think the primary date should be changed.
Carter	1,382	I see no need to change the date of the primary. The date has been what it is for many years.
Cascade	84,864	There is a current mindset that having it in June is too late for their vote to count on a national level.
Chouteau	5,898	I do not want it changed.
Custer	12,032	(No response.)
Daniels	1,628	I think the voters would feel like their votes might matter.
Dawson	8,830	Voters feel like other states determine the outcome of who Montana gets to vote on for major candidates.
Fallon	3,011	Don't change.
Fergus	11,663	Not sure I can answer this for them as to why they should...

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election change?
Flathead	111,814	(No response.)
Gallatin	124,857	From the perspective of an Election Office that conducts local school elections, we would like to see more time between the school elections and the Primary Election. It is quite difficult to have them only a month apart. The canvass for the school and special district elections is two weeks after the election, thus only two weeks before the primary. We also have to prep and mail the primary ballots the same week as the school election. It is also difficult to prep for the canvass for the school and special district elections when we are in the late registration period for the primary. Also, having a presidential primary earlier can add relevance to the election for Montana nationally.
Garfield	1,218	N/A
Glacier	13,681	Dates interfere with one another in our election system. Each election had different dates that make it complicated to keep track of when working two different elections that are held at two different times.
Golden Valley	835	We don't have the same issues as the bigger counties, so I don't think it will really affect us either way.
Granite	3,502	?
Hill	16,068	(No response.)
Jefferson	12,826	It'd be nice for Montana to have a say in the presidential primary, which is kind of already determined by the time our June primary occurs, and we have candidates that have already dropped out but still show up on our ballots.
Judith Basin	2,105	I'm not sure that it should change.
Lake	32,853	I am not convinced it should change. If the Legislature does change the date, I think it has the potential to give Montana a greater influence and relevance in the nomination process. If the Primary Election was held in March, it would take some of the pressure off of the school and special district election.
Lewis & Clark	73,832	<p>There are two main arguments for a date change:</p> <p>First, to provide distance between the primary election and the school election. Currently, the school election and federal primary elections are in May and June respectively, so giving more time between the two elections will allow election administrators to reset between elections and will give voters a distinct break between the two elections.</p> <p>Second, to provide Montana's primary with greater visibility to nationwide groups and candidates, especially during a presidential election year. Currently, by the time Montana holds its primary in June, a majority of states have already held their presidential primary, leading to Montana getting little to no attention from presidential candidates. As our state grows, having a primary that is earlier in the year will provide further attention from candidates for each party seeking delegates and votes for them to secure the presidential nomination from their respective parties. As an added bonus, the legislature would also be able to consider changing statutes related to primary elections in odd numbered years to consider whether primary elections should be held in the same month no matter what year, or if the current split style still best serves voters.</p>
Liberty	1,972	They should not move it.
Lincoln	21,525	To allow more time for the general, especially on Federal election years.
Madison	1,709	I do not want to see the Primary and school elections on the same date. I think the Primary should stay in June and would like to see the schools go back to March.
McCone	9,265	(No response.)

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election change?
Meagher	2,013	Deadlines and ballot printing can be affected when candidates file and withdraw.
Mineral	5,058	(No response.)
Missoula	121,041	I do not see a need to change the date.
Musselshell	5,197	I don't think it should be changed. Voters don't like change.
Park	17,790	The Legislature should only change the date for the Primary Election if it pushes a larger gap between the Primary and School/Special District Elections. I would support a Primary date earlier in the year, just so there is not such a scramble to get primary ballots out while simultaneously running school and special district elections. The larger the gap between the two elections, the better.
Petroleum	524	To give more breathing room in between the school election and primary election.
Phillips	4,240	I feel it would be best to leave it in June.
Pondera	6,078	To better allow Montana voters to have a say in which candidates are nominated.
Powder River	1,725	I am not sure it should.
Powell	7,051	??? Montana has one of the latest...
Prairie	1,107	I have to be honest, this does not affect me as bad as others since we are a smaller county. We do not have as many district and boundaries as others which also affects the ballot. The only benefit I could see is that the dates could spread them out a bit but again that would depend on the date of the election change. Having them on the same day would really complicate matters and make things more complex.
Ravalli	47,298	I don't think it should change.
Richland	11,237	I am not sure a change is needed.
Roosevelt	10,572	(No response.)
Rosebud	8,088	The Primary Election date should remain the same.
Sanders	13,442	Two fold: 1) To better align Montana federal elections with Super Tuesday in March; and 2) To put more separation between the May school election and the primary. There is currently only a month separation, which causes confusion with voters (and perhaps voter fatigue).
Sheridan	3,564	To be more in line with other states' Primary Elections.
Stillwater	9,177	I honestly can't think of a good reason to change the date of the election.
Sweet Grass	3,715	It might make our primary feel more meaningful. As of now, by the time our primary happens, it feels like the national races are all determined.
Teton	6,368	Extra time between school/special district elections and the Primary would be beneficial.
Toole	5,082	I don't believe it should change.
Treasure	758	(No response.)
Valley	7,513	No opinion.
Wheatland	2,032	To help Montana stay relevant with other states for Federal elections.
Wibaux	919	No opinion on this matter.
Yellowstone	169,852	(No response.)

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election NOT change?
Anaconda-DL	9,510	I have the same concerns that were already mentioned in the Committee meeting. Climate, judge availability during colder months, logistical issues with running two elections at the same time or with very little turnaround.
Beaverhead	9,719	A lot of my judges are snow birds and would not be available for training or to work the election. It would also push a lot of the election prep back into December. We have a lot of judges who are also ranchers and are busy calving in early spring.
Big Horn	12,851	I think changing the date will confuse the voters. Most don't follow policy changes. If they come to vote when they historically know voting is and its not happening, we will have upset disenfranchised voters.
Blaine	6,936	<p>Maintaining Montana’s current primary election date is essential to ensuring that counties can successfully conduct secure, accessible, and well-administered elections. Moving the date earlier in the year would create significant logistical and staffing challenges for local election offices and the communities they serve.</p> <p>First, the current timeline works because it aligns with the availability of both polling locations and election staff. Most schools—key polling sites across Montana—are no longer in session during the current primary schedule. This allows counties to use these facilities without disrupting classroom instruction or student activities. An earlier election would likely conflict with the school calendar, forcing counties to find alternative spaces that may not meet accessibility, security, or capacity requirements.</p> <p>Second, election staffing would become substantially more difficult. Every county in Montana faces challenges recruiting and retaining poll workers, and the available pool is already limited. Many of our most experienced and reliable poll workers are seasonal residents who return to Montana in late May—just in time for election training and the June primary. If the primary were moved earlier, these “snowbirds” would still be out of state, reducing the number of trained workers available to serve and placing an even heavier burden on local offices.</p> <p>Finally, the existing schedule is carefully balanced with the many other responsibilities handled by Clerk & Recorder offices. Earlier elections would compress an already demanding timeline for preparing ballots, conducting training, processing candidate filings, and managing other statutory duties such as property assessments and recording services. For smaller counties especially, this strain could compromise the quality and efficiency of election administration.</p> <p>In short, the current primary date works because it reflects the realities of Montana’s communities—our climate, our schools, and our workforce. Moving the primary earlier would not improve election integrity or voter access; instead, it would make elections harder to staff, more expensive to administer, and more disruptive to schools and local governments.</p>
Broadwater	7,793	Just need to make sure that all other dates are pushed back on the legal election calendar. There are probably 50 MCA codes that need shifting for a June election change. It is doable, but those dates need to be considered.
Butte-SB	36,068	(No response.)
Carbon	11,179	I do not think we should change the date. I understand the thought process of wanting Montana's voice being heard, but we need to weigh the pros and cons. We would need to push everything back. Filing dates, election certification, judge training, etc. We have snow birds that make up a huge majority of the judge pull and do not return until April. I think the actual cost (funding-wise) and restructure would be more of a cost than the 4 electoral votes Montana has. I believe the General is the big election for us.

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election NOT change?
Carter	1,382	The date has been what it is for many years, and it is working.
Cascade	84,864	I'm not sure there is a good reason not to change the date, but the impacts to current election calendars would have to be modified accordingly and the impacts to the other elections evaluated for proper implementation.
Chouteau	5,898	Combining the school and the primary election causes a lot of confusion. There would be multiple ballot styles due to school district splits within the precinct. We already have multiple party ballots during the primary. This would be a burden in my smaller populated county and would be a total nightmare in larger populated counties.
Custer	12,032	(No response.)
Daniels	1,628	I don't see a reason except that everyone is used to the date now.
Dawson	8,830	Complications of making election calendars work so they can be conducted accurately and efficiently.
Fallon	3,011	It's fine in June.
Fergus	11,663	To be fiscally responsible...This is going to be a VERY expensive move.
Flathead	111,814	(No response.)
Gallatin	124,857	We should not combine the election with the school and special district elections as that makes them very complex with the extreme number of split ballots.
Garfield	1,218	N/A
Glacier	13,681	It does separate two elections, however, if one election is not changed the other should be. If the primary dates stay the same, then change the school election date. or vise versa.
Golden Valley	835	We don't have the same issues as the bigger counties, so I don't think it will really affect us either way.
Granite	3,502	?
Hill	16,068	(No response.)
Jefferson	12,826	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Depending on when it's changed to, there could be overlap with other elections. 2. All statutory deadlines would need to be considered and possibly changed (filing, notices, mailings, election judge appointments, etc.). 3. EA certification would/should probably be moved up, but the new Title 13 isn't completed by that training as it is, let alone the election judge handbook which would be needed for us and training our judges. 4. Training judges would probably have to be planned before Thanksgiving/Christmas due to family/traveling, which puts us training judges during a municipal election. 5. Also election judges are volunteers and not many will volunteer to travel to training/polling places during the weather we have between November and February. There are multiple mountain passes/canyons in my county between my office and polling places.
Judith Basin	2,105	Party ballots vs. Non-party ballots: All the splits would be a nightmare.
Lake	32,853	I have concerns about the weather, election judge availability and deadlines/processes happening during the holidays.I haven't looked at what an exact schedule would look like, so I am not 100% sure as to all of my concerns. Then again it may be a great thing!

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election NOT change?
Lewis & Clark	73,832	<p>There are a few reasons why changing the date for the primary may be a bad idea, the biggest among them is timing. Montana weather can be capricious, though June typically has good weather. If the primary were moved earlier in the year, weather could start to weight in, causing roads to be more difficult to drive. This would impact election judges, voters, and the return of ballots. If these areas are impacted, it could lead to vote counts taking more time depending on the severity of the weather.</p> <p>Further, election judges could be snowbirds who haven't returned to the state yet when the primary occurs. While they may return in time for the primary once it has been moved, it is difficult to know for sure ahead of time whether they will be available.</p> <p>Lastly, the calendar for the various election tasks would need to be rewritten to accommodate the change. For example, list maintenance would need to shift accordingly (as it cannot be conducted within 90 days of a federal election), Election Administrator Certification would need to be moved from February, and election judge training for the counties would need to take place earlier. Candidate filing timelines would also shift, likely also causing an initial pain point for candidates.</p>
Liberty	1,972	We are already 15th chronologically across the United States, sharing that date with 6 other states.
Lincoln	21,525	People don't like change.
Madison	1,709	Having both the Primary and the school elections together would create more ballot styles and result in longer ballots. I also feel it would cause more confusion.
McCone	9,265	(No response.)
Meagher	2,013	Depending on the day, it could make timelines very short between other elections, like schools, etc.
Mineral	5,058	(No response.)
Missoula	121,041	Moving it to an earlier date would impact election judge training. The later this can be accomplished, the more time there is for courts to make a ruling on election laws being challenged and it provides more clarity through training.
Musselshell	5,197	Voters get confused when dates are changed.
Park	17,790	The Legislature should NOT change the election date if it is to match the School/Special district dates. I would rather keep the original June date.
Petroleum	524	The cost may be a problem.
Phillips	4,240	Changing this date would shift back several processes in place for elections such as list maintenance, election judge training, candidate filing, etc. I believe there is a nice separation between school and primary as it is right now.
Pondera	6,078	There would be a lot of confusion with school and special district elections happening at the same time.
Powder River	1,725	I believe what we are doing now is working just fine.
Powell	7,051	Same old, same old.
Prairie	1,107	Again, I am not affected like some of the larger counties with multiple districts, etc. I do not have the challenges that many of them do other than the dates cross over.
Ravalli	47,298	I don't believe the pros will out way the cons. Yes it is sooner, but then it makes it so filing and training will be during the holidays, campaigning will occur during horrible weather, and we will lose many of our election workers as many are snow birds or work their ranches. The voters will also have to endure voting in horrible weather (twice--Primary & General). This counteracts what the Legislature is trying to do, which is improve voter turnout. I just don't think it is worth it.

County	Population	Why should the date for the Primary Election NOT change?
Richland	11,237	<p>Things that need to be considered:</p> <p>EA training from the SOS would need to happen earlier.</p> <p>Election judge training would have to happen earlier and would we get judges trained as they may winter in warmer weather.</p> <p>Many of us use school teachers in June and I would not be able to get those teachers for the primary.</p> <p>Depending on the date chosen we may struggle to get judges because they are helping with calving season or other farm/ranch activities.</p>
Roosevelt	10,572	(No response.)
Rosebud	8,088	There is no need to change the primary election date.
Sanders	13,442	The Legislature should not change the date for the primary if the only option under consideration is to consolidate the primary with the May school/special district election. Doing that would exponentially increase ballot complexity and logistics because of the different boundary lines involved.
Sheridan	3,564	It will result in a lot of changes in the Election process (dates, timelines, etc.) and might cause confusion among Electors.
Stillwater	9,177	<p>I would lose election judges as I have some that are snowbirds and ranchers. If I lose judges, I am going to have to look at consolidating polling places. I try to keep the voting experience for my voters as convenient and consistent as possible. I wonder if we asked the voters how they felt about the change if they would be in favor of it. My voters are used to voting on the days that are already in statute. I personally do not want to train and conduct training during the holidays. I and my fellow Clerks and EA's are very dedicated to our jobs. We put in a lot of extra hours doing this job. If the date is moved up, I can't think of a timeline where we are not going to be training during the holidays. Sometimes things sound like a good idea until the time comes to implement it--I think this is one of those things. It does not seem necessary or practical at all.</p>
Sweet Grass	3,715	Any earlier and the dates will coincide with and complicate the school elections.
Teton	6,368	I'm not sure it needs to be changed. It would impact the training for our election judges.
Toole	5,082	<p>If the date is changed it will cause a lot of changes to MCA with other dates.</p> <p>It will confuse the public even more on elections.</p> <p>Depending on the date chosen you will need to take into consideration other elections, school, special district etc.</p> <p>Putting the primary in the mix of those other elections will cause confusion for the public who could be receiving multiple ballots tracking ballots for each elections that is going on at the same time.</p> <p>Could increase the cost to counties having to hire more help to manage multiple elections at one time.</p>
Treasure	758	(No response.)
Valley	7,513	No opinion.
Wheatland	2,032	It will make tighter deadlines.
Wibaux	919	No opinion on this matter.
Yellowstone	169,852	(No response.)

County	Population	What obstacles might the Legislature face in changing the date?
Anaconda-DL	9,510	I think that it could cause issues with NVRA/NCOA list maintenance, candidate registration, petition deadlines, etc. I think an exhaustive inquiry into what other rules/laws would be affected before any changes are made. Often laws are changed by legislators that don't understand the full process and it makes elections more difficult and less secure.
Beaverhead	9,719	It should not be linked with any of the school or special district elections due to all of the numerous district boundaries which would create multiple ballot styles and would be extremely confusing for voters and election judges.
Big Horn	12,851	It can technically change, but hopefully the Legislature keeps their voters in mind when doing so.
Blaine	6,936	A primary date is not freestanding. Many other statutes (filing windows, withdrawal deadlines, mailing deadlines, ballot printing, absentee deadlines, certification deadlines) depend on or reference that date. If the legislature changes the date, it must comprehensively adjust all dependent statutory deadlines. Otherwise, you could end up with internal conflicts or impractical timelines. Even if the law changes, election administration bodies (Secretary of State's office, county election administrators, clerks & recorders) need sufficient lead time to redesign processes, inform voters, adjust logistics, and train staff. A too-abrupt change might create chaos.
Broadwater	7,793	Need to consider timeline of MCA for voter list maintenance, election judge training, school election, etc.
Butte-SB	36,068	(No response.)
Carbon	11,179	It can be done, but it comes with challenges as previously stated.
Carter	1,382	I don't know of any obstacles the legislature would face in changing the date of the primary.
Cascade	84,864	Previously stated. There may also be some federal obstacles?
Chouteau	5,898	Aside from what was previously stated, it would involve a lot of changes in Montana Code.
Custer	12,032	(No response.)
Daniels	1,628	N/A
Dawson	8,830	Combining schools/special districts with primary election is a different subject but would create numerous ballot styles that would be VERY complicated to manage.
Fallon	3,011	We can't change the School dates, due to budgets and funding. Changing the primary to May would not be a good idea due to multiple splits and multiple ballots--it's too confusing with too much room for error on part of the Judges and at the Elections Office.
Fergus	11,663	Unknown of legislative obstacles.
Flathead	111,814	(No response.)
Gallatin	124,857	There may be conflicting list maintenance dates and other things in the law that would also have to be changed if the primary date is moved.
Garfield	1,218	N/A
Glacier	13,681	Election law dates that are currently in effect.
Golden Valley	835	We don't have the same issues as the bigger counties, so I don't think it will really affect us either way.
Granite	3,502	?
Hill	16,068	(No response.)

County	Population	What obstacles might the Legislature face in changing the date?
Jefferson	12,826	It would stir up a lot of issues listed in the "should" section above.
Judith Basin	2,105	Unknown what obstacles the legislature would face.
Lake	32,853	Great question! I think it's possible, but I it's a big undertaking.
Lewis & Clark	73,832	An added hurdle may present itself in the way of pushback from the national parties. The primary calendar is often set at the national level by the political parties in our country and the dates for each state may or may not be influenced by either the party itself, state law, or a mix of the two. Moving Montana's primary to a date that has other states conducting a primary election on the same day may cause some conflict within the national parties (especially if, for example, attempting to conduct the primary before New Hampshire, which has a state law requiring they hold their presidential primary a full week prior to anyone else).
Liberty	1,972	No sure what obstacles the Legislature would face.
Lincoln	21,525	Don't know what they'll face.
Madison	1,709	I do not know what obstacles the Legislature would face.
McCone	9,265	(No response.)
Meagher	2,013	For the Legislature? Not sure?
Mineral	5,058	(No response.)
Missoula	121,041	Don't know what obstacles they'll face.
Musselshell	5,197	People don't like change.
Park	17,790	<p>First of all, the logistical nightmare concerning ballot styles if the date is changed to the same as School/special district elections.</p> <p>Then there is the different voter qualifications for each district--some landowners will be able to vote in special districts but not the primary.</p> <p>I think there are still a lot of logistics that will need to be addressed if the Primary Election is moved to earlier in the year, simply because of campaigning and filing dates, but that is all doable (and preferable) if the Legislature really wants to.</p>
Petroleum	524	Legislatively, I don't know the obstacles.
Phillips	4,240	See previous.
Pondera	6,078	Unknown
Powder River	1,725	The June date works great.
Powell	7,051	Unknown
Prairie	1,107	The dates need to be set according to the laws that currently exist and fall within the calendar that we receive from the SOS and Commissioner of Political Practice. There is a lot to consider, not just changing the date.
Ravalli	47,298	As long as we do NOT combine school/special district elections with the primary and leave enough space in between, it can be done, but I don't believe it needs to be done.
Richland	11,237	Legally it can likely be done. See previous response for obstacles we'll face.
Roosevelt	10,572	(No response.)

County	Population	What obstacles might the Legislature face in changing the date?
Rosebud	8,088	The calendar has already been set for the Primary Election so please don't change anything because the municipal election was a little hectic bouncing between the original and updated calendar.
Sanders	13,442	There could be multiple statutes that would need to be examined and revised.
Sheridan	3,564	N/A
Stillwater	9,177	See previous.
Sweet Grass	3,715	I don't know. See previous.
Teton	6,368	There are many laws that would need to be addressed--you can't just simply "change a date."
Toole	5,082	See previous answer.
Treasure	758	(No response.)
Valley	7,513	No opinion.
Wheatland	2,032	Unknown.
Wibaux	919	No opinion on this matter.
Yellowstone	169,852	(No response.)

County	Population	What is a better time and/or date other than the first Tuesday in June to hold the Primary?
Anaconda-DL	9,510	I don't have a specific date in mind. However if it is going to change, I would prefer it to be moved earlier. I just don't want the calendar to in the previous year through the holidays.
Beaverhead	9,719	Please do not move it.
Big Horn	12,851	I don't think we should change the date.
Blaine	6,936	First Tuesday in April. PROS - More influence in national primary contests, since most states are still competing in April. - More time between the primary and the General Election for campaigning, ballot preparation, and issue resolution. - Voters may be more engaged earlier in the season before election fatigue. CHALLENGES - Possible conflict with school calendars (spring break, testing, etc.). - More difficult to recruit poll workers who may still be away (e.g. "snowbirds") or occupied with other duties. - Compressed time for candidate filing, certification, and logistical setup. All statutory deadlines and dependent timelines would need to shift.
Broadwater	7,793	Super Tuesday.
Butte-SB	36,068	(No response.)
Carbon	11,179	First Tuesday in February.
Carter	1,382	I would like it to stay as is right now, but if I HAD to pick a date I would like to pick the first Tuesday of April.
Cascade	84,864	Closer to Super Tuesday
Chouteau	5,898	I prefer the June primary. Any earlier than May would be difficult for training election judges.
Custer	12,032	(No response.)
Daniels	1,628	March? It seems that is a slow month for us.
Dawson	8,830	Possibly March
Fallon	3,011	Before May at least by two months.
Fergus	11,663	Absolutely NOT on School/Special District election day. If they insist on moving it, put MORE distance date-wise between the school/special district and Primary dates.
Flathead	111,814	(No response.)
Gallatin	124,857	Could do the first Tuesday after the first Monday in March (Super Tuesday in a presidential year). This would put two months between the school and primary elections, but the filing period would then be during the holidays.
Garfield	1,218	N/A
Glacier	13,681	Same date as the Municipal Election in September. Although, it is putting the primary with another election different then the school election. Most counties conduct the municipal election as a lot of counties do not conduct their school's election. By having the primary moved to the same date as the municipal, then municipal candidates can be on the primary ballot just as all county elected offices are.
Golden Valley	835	We don't have the same issues as the bigger counties, so I don't think it will really affect us either way.

County	Population	What is a better time and/or date other than the first Tuesday in June to hold the Primary?
Granite	3,502	?
Hill	16,068	(No response.)
Jefferson	12,826	I think March/May, but still see the issues with the EA certification and election judge availability during those times.
Judith Basin	2,105	Unknown.
Lake	32,853	I can't say it is a better time, but I think if you are going to move it, move it to a date spread that actually makes a change, like early March.
Lewis & Clark	73,832	<p>Twenty-eight states hold their presidential primary in March, with a few more holding their presidential primary contests in February. However, many states break their presidential primary off from the rest of their primary contests. These tend to fall in May, June, August, or September. Keeping all this in mind for the timing related to preparation and compared to other elections, holding the primary for all races in March would likely work best. This timing would allow counties to get print materials ready ahead of time over the holidays, especially as this is typically a slower time for election offices. Stock could be purchased, supplies readied, and notices prepared in advance.</p> <p>Another possibility is to move the School Elections to April or June, while holding the primary elections in the opposite month (i.e., School Elections in April, Primary in June, or vice versa). This option would have less impact on the current election calendar, but would likely see pushback from the schools as the May date works well for them due to their budget process. This would need buy-in from OPI to accomplish.</p> <p>A third possibility, and one that may lead to schools and special districts saving money, would be to shift school and special district elections into odd-numbered years entirely. These would alternate each year with the federal primary, allowing the primary and the school/special district elections to possibly share the same date, but making it unlikely that they would ever be run together. For example, the school and special district elections could occur in May 2027, 2029, and 2031, while the federal primary could occur in May 2026, 2028, and 2030. This would require shifting terms for the school district trustees and many special districts from three years to four, and would require some counties to shift terms to accommodate the updated time frame (i.e., if a sewer district typically has an election in even numbered years for its four year terms, then the term would need to be shifted to match the new timeline). This would at least require fire district trustees, school district trustees, irrigation districts, and hospital district trustees to shift from a three year term to a four year term. There are likely other district types this would affect too. School levies could be run either at that odd year school election or as a special election as currently written in statute.</p>
Liberty	1,972	3rd Tuesday in May
Lincoln	21,525	I would prefer May. That does present some challenges. School elections would need to move to March. Judges training will need to be in January-February. These are all doable and allows sufficient time.
Madison	1,709	I don't see a better date. I don't think it should be moved.
McCone	9,265	(No response.)
Meagher	2,013	Not sure?
Mineral	5,058	(No response.)
Missoula	121,041	N/A

County	Population	What is a better time and/or date other than the first Tuesday in June to hold the Primary?
Musselshell	5,197	None
Park	17,790	I think Super Tuesday in March is a good idea. It leaves plenty of time between elections for preparation, and voter turnout may increase due to the early election on a National level.
Petroleum	524	It would be nice if the primary election was in March so there was more space between the school election and primary election.
Phillips	4,240	If they must move the date, please do not combine it with the school election. Perhaps March?
Pondera	6,078	Before the school elections.
Powder River	1,725	I am not sure.
Powell	7,051	Run it with the school(s) or Super Tuesday.
Prairie	1,107	I would tend to say March but again I am not affected like others so I am not sure that is the best date either. As stated above, it would have to fall within the other guidelines and dates.
Ravalli	47,298	I don't think it is a better time, but I think we could make super Tuesday in March work if we had to.
Richland	11,237	I am not sure but please to NOT combine it with schools.
Roosevelt	10,572	(No response.)
Rosebud	8,088	Just don't move it.
Sanders	13,442	Yes
Sheridan	3,564	First Tuesday in February, March or April.
Stillwater	9,177	Not Super Tuesday.
Sweet Grass	3,715	I would think anything that didn't land in the middle of the school election would be okay.
Teton	6,368	Not sure.
Toole	5,082	The June election is actually the first Tuesday after the first Monday in June per statute. So maybe the first Tuesday after the first Monday in February.
Treasure	758	(No response.)
Valley	7,513	No opinion.
Wheatland	2,032	Earlier to coincide with other states.
Wibaux	919	No opinion on this matter.
Yellowstone	169,852	(No response.)

County	Population	Does your county administer school elections?
Anaconda-DL	9,510	No
Beaverhead	9,719	Yes - We conduct both the high school and middle school elections. The high school election is almost county wide with an exception of the Lima School District.
Big Horn	12,851	Yes
Blaine	6,936	No - The county chooses not to administer the school elections at this time.
Broadwater	7,793	Yes - Moving the Primary would be helpful for those of us that administer the school election.
Butte-SB	36,068	(No response.)
Carbon	11,179	Yes
Carter	1,382	Yes - Carter county holds 2 school district elections which are small. We do not hold the election for the biggest school election.
Cascade	84,864	Yes
Chouteau	5,898	No
Custer	12,032	(No response.)
Daniels	1,628	No
Dawson	8,830	Yes - This has happened over the last 10 years. Large absentee percentage of about 70%. Only administer by mail.
Fallon	3,011	Yes - We do one school district, and the other other one handles their own elections
Fergus	11,663	Yes
Flathead	111,814	(No response.)
Gallatin	124,857	Yes
Garfield	1,218	No
Glacier	13,681	No - Not usually, although I have two school districts that resolutioned our County to conduct their election in May of 2026.
Golden Valley	835	No
Granite	3,502	No
Hill	16,068	(No response.)
Jefferson	12,826	Yes
Judith Basin	2,105	Yes
Lake	32,853	Yes
Lewis & Clark	73,832	Yes - Elections for Helena School District and East Helena School District are typically conducted each year by our county.
Liberty	1,972	No
Lincoln	21,525	Yes - All school elections.
Madison	1,709	Yes
McCone	9,265	(No response.)
Meagher	2,013	No - We don't run it but very much walk side-by-side with them for the whole process with guidance, help, and supplies.

County	Population	Does your county administer school elections?
Mineral	5,058	(No response.)
Missoula	121,041	Yes
Musselshell	5,197	No - We only help with the absentee ballots.
Park	17,790	Yes - We administer all (5) school districts in Park County.
Petroleum	524	Yes
Phillips	4,240	Yes
Pondera	6,078	No
Powder River	1,725	No
Powell	7,051	Yes
Prairie	1,107	Yes - Our county just started doing the school election. This would have been the 2nd year, but we did not have to do conduct an election, because candidates ran uncontested. The school did their own in prior years, so we do not have the experience.
Ravalli	47,298	Yes - I am hopeful the passage of HB 406 will encourage more county election administrators to run school elections. It will take time but I think it will happen.
Richland	11,237	No - If combined with school elections, a few issues I would face are as follows: Finding enough judges, with the amount splits and ballots we would have. Secrecy of voters with the splits would be difficult. Cost to provide all ballot types. This would raise the schools cost for an election greatly.
Roosevelt	10,572	(No response.)
Rosebud	8,088	No
Sanders	13,442	Yes
Sheridan	3,564	Yes
Stillwater	9,177	No
Sweet Grass	3,715	Yes
Teton	6,368	Yes - We administer school elections for a few of our smaller school districts.
Toole	5,082	No
Treasure	758	(No response.)
Valley	7,513	Yes
Wheatland	2,032	No
Wibaux	919	No
Yellowstone	169,852	(No response.)
TOTAL		19 No, 28 Yes (9 No Response Provided)



November 17, 2029

To: **Members of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee (SAVA)**

My name is Shelley Turner, and I am submitting this testimony in my capacity as Executive Director of the Montana Association of School Business Officials (MASBO) and on behalf of MASBO as an organization. I was unable to attend the September meeting due to other professional obligations and will be out of state for the upcoming November 17 meeting; however, I want the committee to know that I am monitoring these discussions closely and am available at any time to assist the committee with questions or concerns related to school election administration.

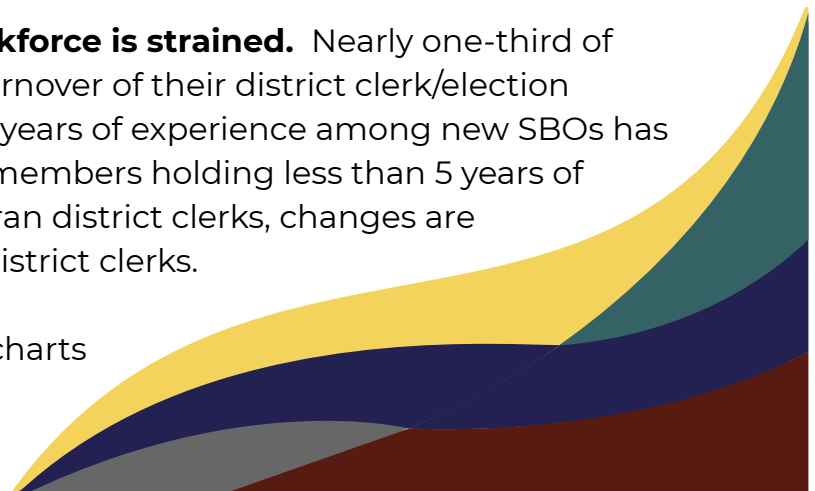
I would also like to express MASBO's appreciation for the testimony provided by Lance Melton of the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) at the prior meeting. His remarks accurately reflected the interconnected nature of school governance structures, trustee timelines, and election processes, and MASBO strongly supports and aligns with his perspective. School Business Officials (SBOs) serve as the clerks to Montana's school boards, and MASBO works closely with MTSBA to ensure the lawful operation of local school governance systems.

School elections cannot absorb unexamined changes. They operate on one of the most compressed and intricate statutory timelines in Montana law. Even a small modification to statewide election timelines has significant ripple effects.

A holistic review would be required before altering any timelines. Before modifying any election date or process that intersects with school calendar requirements, Montana would need a full review of trustee election laws, levy timelines, SBO staffing capacity, county coordination, publication requirements, leadership transitions, budget adoption cycles, and more.

The school finance and election workforce is strained. Nearly one-third of Montana districts have experienced turnover of their district clerk/election administrator this year alone. Average years of experience among new SBOs has dropped sharply with over half of our members holding less than 5 years of experience. Changes are hard for veteran district clerks, changes are unsurmountable mountains for new district clerks.

Please see accompanying tables and charts on the last pages of this document.





MASBO's statewide coordination with OPI and county election

administrators. Last week MASBO partnered with OPI to host a statewide webinar reviewing legislative changes affecting school elections. Over 150 SBOs and county election administrators attended, underscoring the need for coordinated guidance. MASBO continues to also partner with MTSBA throughout the year to share important dates and deadlines with our public schools.

Request to the Committee:

1. Any proposed changes to statewide election law should be carefully evaluated for school-district impact before advancing.
2. The existing school election timeline must be protected unless a comprehensive study is completed.
3. Stakeholders including MASBO, OPI, MTSBA, and county election administrators must be included in discussions.

Closing:

Thank you for your time and your willingness to consider the operational realities of Montana's public schools.

Respectfully submitted,

Shelley Turner, Executive Director
Montana Association of School Business Officials (MASBO)



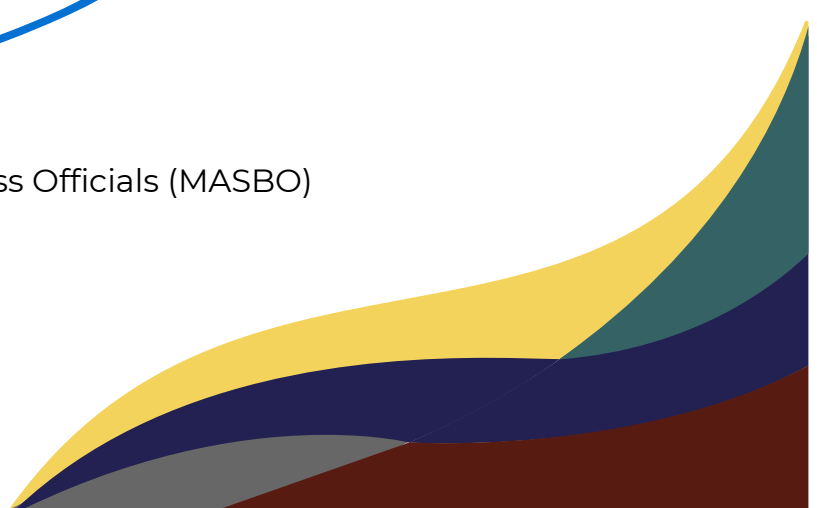
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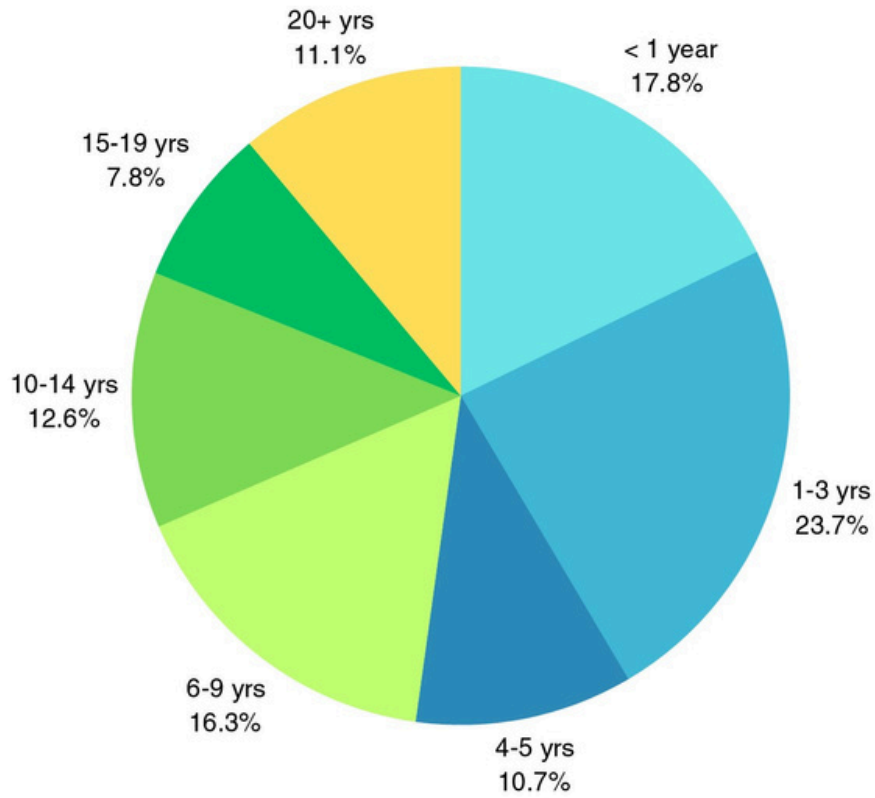


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#437, Helena, MT 59601

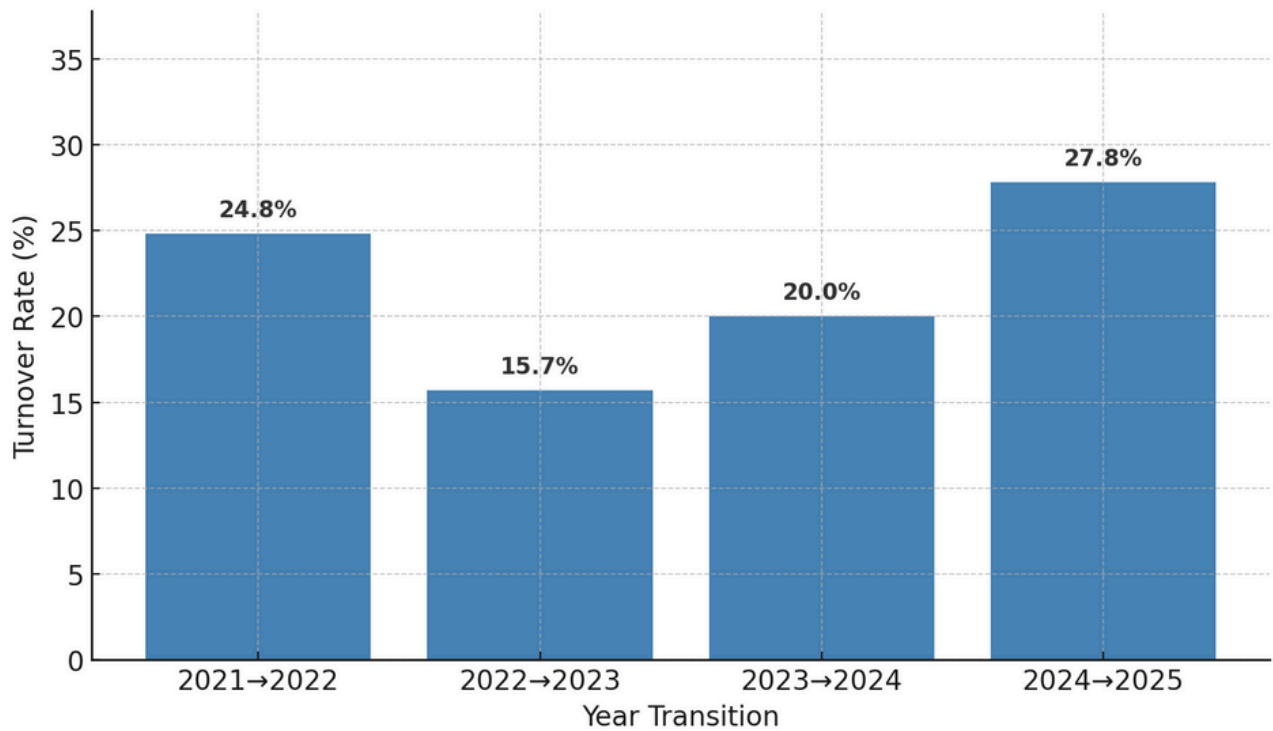


MASBO District Clerk Experience Levels

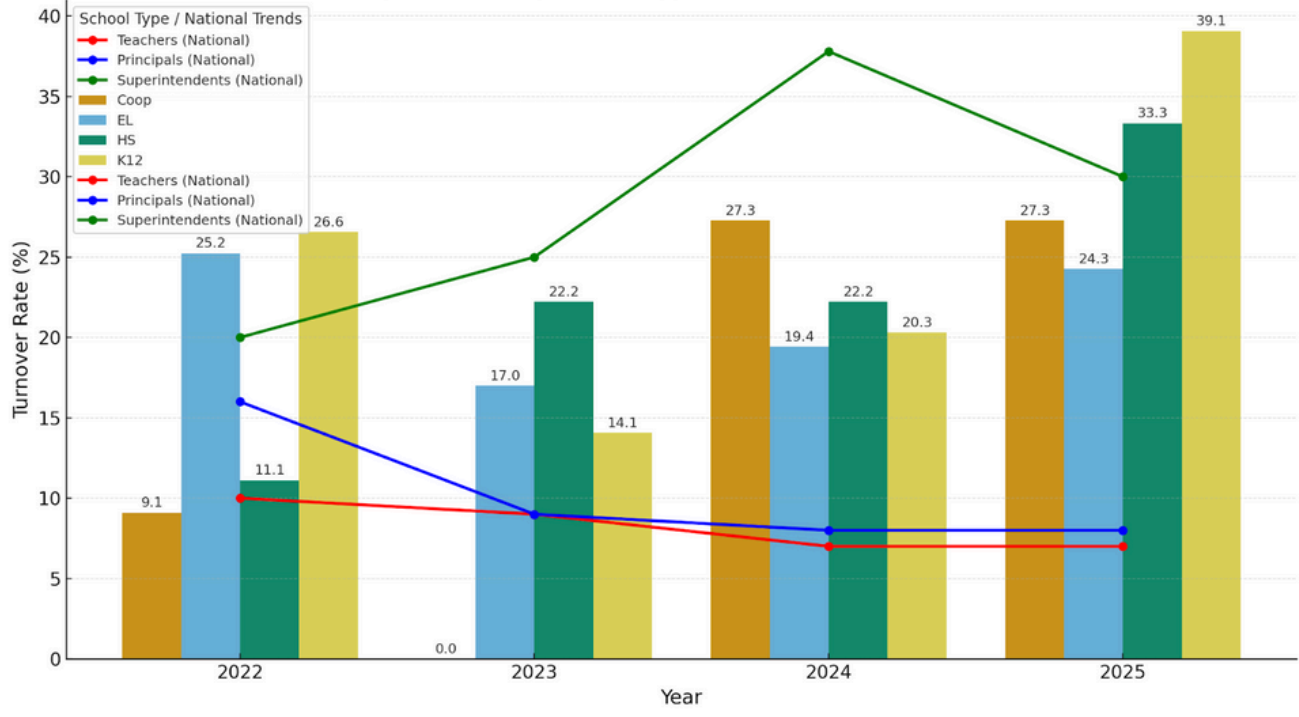
November 2025



District Clerk Turnover Rates (2021-2025)



Leadership Turnover by School Type vs National Trends (2022-2025)





To: State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee
From: Lance Melton, Montana School Boards Association
Date: January 12, 2026
Subject: HJ 48: Study of Moving the Primary Election

Dear Members of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's panel discussion on HJ 48, which examines the potential impacts of moving the primary election date. This issue is critical to ensuring the stability and effectiveness of Montana's school districts.

Implications of Changing the Regular School Election Date

Too Early – The Harm of an Earlier Regular School Election Date

Moving the election date to early April would disrupt the budgeting process for school districts, as they rely on finalized student count data to accurately determine funding needs and prepare ballot language. These counts, verified by the Office of Public Instruction, are typically finalized in mid-March. Without this essential data, districts would face significant challenges in planning for the upcoming fiscal year, jeopardizing their ability to meet legal deadlines and ensure financial stability.

Too Late – The Harm of a Later Regular School Election Date

If the election date is moved to early June, school districts would be forced to make premature and potentially unnecessary non-renewal decisions for teachers due to the June 1 deadline for notifying staff. Approximately 85% of school spending is allocated to staff compensation and benefits, making staffing adjustments the primary method for addressing budgetary constraints. Without clarity on their financial situation, districts would have to preemptively issue non-renewal notices, harming staff morale, disrupting recruitment efforts, and jeopardizing the retention of high-quality educators.

Additionally, classified staff, whose contracted services typically end in late May or early June, must be provided reasonable assurance of continued employment for the following year to avoid significant liability for unemployment benefits during the summer months. Without finalized budget information, districts would be unable to confidently provide these assurances, creating uncertainty for classified staff and exposing districts to financial risks. A June election date would make it impossible for districts to meet these obligations, further destabilizing school operations.

While some may propose moving the June 1 deadline later in the fiscal year, this would only exacerbate instability. Teachers and classified staff facing uncertainty about their employment would be more likely to seek positions elsewhere, undermining the ability of districts to retain skilled personnel and maintain continuity in their workforce.

Just Right – The May Regular Election Date

The current May election date is optimal, as it balances the goal of maximizing voter turnout with the practical needs of school districts to finalize budgets and make informed staffing decisions. This timing supports both democratic participation and the stability of Montana's education system.

Aligning the primary election with the regular school election date in May could further boost voter turnout for school levy and trustee elections, while preserving the stability and efficiency of school district operations. The Montana School Boards Association fully supports this alignment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Montana School Boards Association strongly supports efforts to increase voter turnout but emphasizes that maintaining the regular school election date in May is essential for the stability of school district operations. This date ensures districts can effectively plan budgets, make informed staffing decisions, and deliver quality education to Montana's students. It also allows districts to provide classified staff with reasonable assurances of continued employment, avoiding financial liabilities for unemployment benefits during the summer months and ensuring workforce stability.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to discussing these considerations further during the panel discussion.

Sincerely,

Lance Melton Executive Director Montana School Boards Association



January 25, 2026

To: State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee
From: Shay Baize, Montana Association of School Business Officials
Subject: Study of Moving the Primary Election (HJ48)

Dear State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee,

I want to begin by thanking the committee for its willingness to take a thoughtful and comprehensive look at Montana's election processes, including how primary, general, and school elections interact with one another. However, we have serious concerns that altering the school election calendar—without careful planning and meaningful statutory relief—would result in significant unintended consequences for Montana schools.

I appreciate the opportunity to outline a few key reasons why we believe moving the school election day, and subsequently the entire school election calendar, is not in the best interest of Montana students.

First, school levy elections are deeply tied to school budgeting and staffing decisions. Montana law requires districts to notify teachers of their intent to offer contracts by June 1st. To do that responsibly, districts must know whether they have sufficient budget authority—some of which may depend on a voted levy. Moving school elections later creates funding uncertainty at the exact moment districts must make staffing decisions. This can lead to unnecessary layoffs, delayed hiring, harm to teacher retention, and negative impacts on students and their learning.

Conversely, moving the school election date earlier would require districts to receive taxable values from the Department of Revenue and ANB and preliminary budget calculations from OPI earlier, which would require substantial state-level process changes. Without accurate data, districts cannot provide voters with reliable budget or tax impact information. In our view, moving the school election date in any direction increases risk rather than efficiency.

Second, and critically, this change would occur in the context of high turnover and limited administrative capacity. School Business Officials—particularly in rural and small districts—experience regular turnover and are often single-staffed, with no overlap, backup staff, or institutional memory. These roles already require expertise in election law compliance, levy administration, budgeting, board governance, public records, payroll, HR, and more.

Our statewide data as of July 2025 shows that approximately 49 percent of SBOs have less than five years of experience, and 17 percent have less than one year. Montana's school election laws are spread across multiple titles and depend heavily on institutional knowledge and precise calendar compliance. Shifting timelines without simplifying requirements increases the likelihood that new or interim staff will be administering high-stakes elections with limited preparation, leading to inadvertent noncompliance and increased legal and financial exposure for districts, despite good-faith efforts.

This risk is compounded by limited statewide training capacity. Outside of professional associations such as MASBO and MTSBA, and a small number of experts at OPI, there is no comprehensive training infrastructure for school election administration.

Third, Montana's school election system is governed by over 200 laws, with 32 revised just last session, and MCA has not yet been fully updated. Any change to election dates triggers a statutory domino effect and significantly increases the risk of conflict and litigation during transition years.

We also want to note that trustee elections are not as time-sensitive as levy elections and do not carry the same budgetary consequences. While separating them could provide flexibility, it would also require districts to administer two separate elections each year—increasing, not reducing, administrative burden.

Finally, if the Legislature does proceed with a change, MASBO respectfully requests two key considerations. First, a statutory two-year grace period or fail-safe provision to ensure election results cannot be invalidated due to unintentional, good-faith errors during the transition. Second, serious consideration of eliminating the requirement for schools to seek voter approval solely to adopt their inflationary increase, or longer-term, allowing districts to automatically access 100 percent of their maximum general fund budget. We recognize the cost of these policy choices, but without reforms like these, schools are being asked to absorb risk without relief.

In closing, moving the school election calendar without offsetting reforms increases risk, cost, and the likelihood of failure, while placing that burden squarely on schools and local taxpayers. MASBO respectfully urges the committee to leave the school election calendar unchanged, or to pair any change with meaningful statutory simplification, transition protections, and funding reforms.

Thank you for your time and for considering the real-world impacts on Montana's schools, staff, and students.



Shay Baize, SFO & MCSBO

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