

Senate Election Law and Municipal Affairs Committee

Jessica Bourque 271-2104

HB 356, enabling school districts to adopt partisan school district elections.

Hearing Date: May 13, 2025

Time Opened: 9:32 a.m.

Time Closed: 9:45 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Gray, Rochefort, Perkins Kwoka and Long

Members of the Committee Absent: Senator Lang

Bill Analysis: This bill enables school districts to choose whether or not to adopt partisan school district elections.

Sponsors:

Rep. Wherry

Rep. Aylward

Rep. Boehm

Rep. Harvey-Bolia

Rep. Pauer

Rep. Creighton

Who supports the bill: Rep. Wherry, Rep. Diane Pauer, Rep. Ross Berry, Rep. Harvey-Bolia

Who opposes the bill: Brian Hawkins

Who is neutral on the bill: Barrett Christina

Summary of testimony presented:

Representative Bob Wherry, Prime Sponsor, Hillsborough-District 13

- This bill would allow for a partisan election in school district elections.
- Would provide several benefits to voters by promoting voter turnout and increasing their understanding of the candidates.
- This bill also enables an active committee to hold caucuses to identify, nominate, and select candidates.
- The primary opposition to this is that it could lead to greater political division.

Representative Ross Berry, Hillsborough-District 44

- This attempts to solve the low voter turnout in smaller towns; high voter turnout is good for democracy.

- Non-partisan elections often enable candidates to disguise their true intentions. This bill would assist voters in understanding what or who they are voting for.

Senator Perkins Kwoka asked if they had any testimony in favor of this bill in the House Election Law Committee.

- Rep. Berry said he isn't sure; they had a lot of bills in House Election Law.

Senator Perkins Kwoka asked if he thought this bill would increase partisanship at the school level.

- Rep. Berry said he believes partisanship is already at the school level and spoke about the teachers' union and salaries.

Senator Perkins Kwoka asked if he would believe that schools address many other issues aside from just salaries.

- School budgets are the most significant component of property taxes; salaries represent the most considerable portion of school budgets.

Barrett Christina, NH School Board Association

- NHSBA is taking no position on this bill.
- The partisan election provision has been in town law since 1970, but no towns have adopted the option, and they don't think bringing this to schools is a good idea.
- Less politics in school is a good thing.
- The ability of certain political parties to caucus behind closed doors raises significant concerns for NHSBA. They firmly believe that transparency is essential, and making decisions privately does not enhance transparency.
- Noted that the typical school board member is usually a parent with children in the district who runs to support the community, rather than for partisan reasons.
- "R" or "D" next to people's names assumes that all Republicans and all Democrats think the same way, which is not true.
- The prime responsibility of a school board is policy development, budget development, and the evaluation of the superintendent. Mr. Christina doesn't believe any of those things are partisan.

Senator Perkins Kwoka asked Mr. Christina to confirm that cities and towns already have this option, but only one town has adopted it.

- Portsmouth has done this to some degree, but theirs is modified.

Senator Perkins Kwoka followed up by stating that Portsmouth is essentially nonpartisan and asked Mr. Christina to confirm that, to the best of his knowledge, this is the only example he can think of.

- Mr. Christina said, as far as he knows, yes.

jab

Date Hearing Report completed: May 13, 2025