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f BOARD focus

The Political Nature of Trusteeship: Are Californians Different?

aRE CALIFORNIA TRUSTEES different than their counterparts in other states with elected trustees? Yes, they are! But the differences are a matter of degree only. That is, most California trustees have similar attitudes and experiences related to the political nature of their position as other locally elected trustees across the nation. Yet, there are enough California community college board members with differing characteristics and opinions to report many statistically significant differences.

In 1999, the authors surveyed locally elected and appointed trustees across the nation about the politics of their position, and the results showed that elected and appointed trustees were far more similar than different. Over 2000 trustees responded, including 150 California community college trustees and 524 trustees from 12 other states that elect their board members.

The results indicate that California trustees are

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similar to trustees across the nation in that they seek the office to serve the community and the college; credit their election to prior leadership in the community; feel accountable to many groups in the community and state; and rely on many sources of information when making decisions. They are important advocates for the college: over half are active in local politics and communicate with local and state officials.

However, out of 102 items on the survey, the researchers discovered 50 statistically significant differences between Californians and other elected trustees. California trustees are more likely to be female, Democratic, and liberal. They are also likely to be somewhat more politically active. They are more likely to be open to input from wider assortments of local individuals and groups. They are more connected to their local communities through their communications with leaders and their political involvement.

Out of 102 items on the survey, the researchers discovered 50 statistically significant differences between Californians and other elected trustees.

52 30% Female

59% Democrat

55% Republican

25 43% Conservative

◆ Californians
◆ Other elected trustees

And, while the numbers are relatively small, California trustees are more likely than others to be interested in changing something in the institution, raise funds for campaigns, actively campaign for the board, be involved in local politics, be interested in other political positions, and feel political "pressures."

Survey Results

Demographics

The trustees were asked to provide some demographic information including gender, age, time on board, political party, and political leaning. **TABLE 1 SHOWS** statistically significant differences between California trustees and trustees from other states with elected boards.

There were no differences based on age (66% are 55 years and older), or years served on the board (64% have less than 10 years on the board).

Motivation for Seeking the Position

While the most important reasons that motivated trustees nationally to seek election were to serve the community (85%), serve the college (80%), and improve programs for students (73%), there were two differences between California trustees and other elected trustees. "Improving programs for students" (99%) and "to address a problem in the institution" (54%) were more often selected by California trustees as motivators. While California trustees are primarily motivated by public service, this result indicates that California trustees may be somewhat more likely than those in other states to have an interest in specific programs or single issues when they run for the board.

Seeking the Position

There were 20 survey items dealing with running for the trustee position. Nationally, 74% indicated there was no political party involvement in their candidacy, and slightly over half had little or weak opposition in their races. Only 25 to 40% of the trustees actively campaigned for the position, and

just over 30% were endorsed by any group.

California trustees were more likely to a) be endorsed by a political party (56%), b) use campaign methods such as telephoning constituents, walking precincts, using flyers and posters, and doing mass mailings, c) get endorsements from newspapers, employee organizations, political parties, special interest groups, and individuals, and d) use their own funds for campaigns. California trustees seem to campaign more actively than those in other states.

Achieving the Position

When asked to what did they credit their success in being elected, over 75% of elected trustees nationally checked "prior leadership in the community;" about 50% checked "experience in education." California trustees were similar to those in other states on these items.

Accountability

The researchers asked trustees to rate the level of accountability they felt to 14 different entities. Nationally over 90% of elected trustees stated they were "very accountable" to current students and citizens of the college region, followed by over 80% who stated "electorate" and "future students," and over 70%, "other members of the board" and "college employees." Less than half of California trustees felt accountable to individuals and groups who funded their campaigns, but it was a higher percentage than those in other states. They felt less accountable than their counterparts to state government, businesses/employers, and other board members.

Sources of Information

The survey identified 11 possible sources of information and advice for decision making listed for trustees. Nationally, over 90% of elected trustees depended most on college administrators, other trustees on the board, students and college staff; over 80% relied on individual community members and state associations. California trustees tended to rely more on those people who funded their campaigns, employee associations/unions, and students. They relied less on advice from other trustees and the national trustee organization.

In this section an additional question was asked concerning how much influence possible political pressures had on trustee votes on board decisions. California trustees were more likely to select “some” influence and less likely to choose “little influence”.

Involvement in the Political System

The study asked how often trustees communicated with politicians (nationally, over half indicated they talked with state and local politicians at least 4 times a year), how active they were politically, (nationally, 60–70% indicated they were somewhat to very active), whether or not they held elected or appointed positions in the past (nationally, just over half), and whether they intended to seek future offices in the next six years (less than 10% nationally).

California respondents were more likely than elected trustees from other states to take an active part in local politics, local elections, and state elections.

Attitudes and Opinions

A number of questions were asked related to trustee opinions about involvement in politics, responsiveness to political pressures, quality of leadership, use of the position as a step toward other political offices, and community college educators serving on governing boards.

Importance of political involvement. Almost 84% of elected trustees thought it somewhat to very important that trustees are involved in the local political scene. California trustees were more likely to rate political involvement in local politics as “very important”.

Responsiveness to political influence. About 40% of elected trustees thought that appointed and elected trustees are equally responsive to political pressure. However, 35% thought appointed trustees are more responsive, while 19% thought elected trustees are more responsive to political pressure. California trustees were less likely to check that appointed trustees are more responsive to political pressures than are elected trustees.

California respondents were more likely that elected trustees from other states to take an active part in local politics, local elections, and state elections.

Quality of leadership. Nationally, about 50% of elected trustees do not believe that the quality of the board depends on whether the board is elected or appointed. However 2.5% believe appointed boards are better and 45% think elected boards are better. Californians were no different from their peers in their perceptions.

Trustee position as a stepping stone. Nationally, 7.3% of the trustees thought the position should serve as a stepping stone to another political office; 14% of California board members thought so—a significant difference.

Educators as trustees. Nationally, close to 40% supported the practice of former employees serving on the board, while approximately 30% opposed it. In response to whether community college employees should serve on the board of another district, 22% supported it, and 51% opposed it. California trustees were more likely to support the latter practice.

Campaign contributions.

California board members were more supportive (39% vs. 14% from other states) of accepting campaign funds from employee associations/unions and individual college employees.

Political nature of trusteeship. Finally we asked the degree to which elected trustees thought being a community college trustee is political. There was a significant difference in this category with more California trustees

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saying their positions are “often” or “very often” political.

Implications

Locally elected governing boards are both commended and criticized for their political nature. On one hand, trustees are lauded for their connections to the community and advocacy on behalf of the college. They feel accountable to many groups in the community, and are therefore instrumental in fostering strong college-community linkages. On the other hand, they are accused of being controlled by single or narrow interests, and of bending to political pressures rather than focusing on the good of the institution as a whole.

Comparing California’s responses to other elected trustees suggests that Californians are more politically active; the strengths and drawbacks of political activism would therefore be more notable.

Political activism creates challenges in achieving consensus and agreement. However, many different voices are expressed and heard, which bodes well for the strength of our communities and their colleges.

Rather than decrying or criticizing the many voices and influences on our boards, communities and policy-makers can choose to capitalize on the commitment of active trustees to the college and community. Active and engaged trustees will make outstanding contributions if they have the tools, information, and skills to be outstanding policy makers and advocates for their institutions and communities, and if they base decisions on the good of the entire community and college rather than personal and political agendas.

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