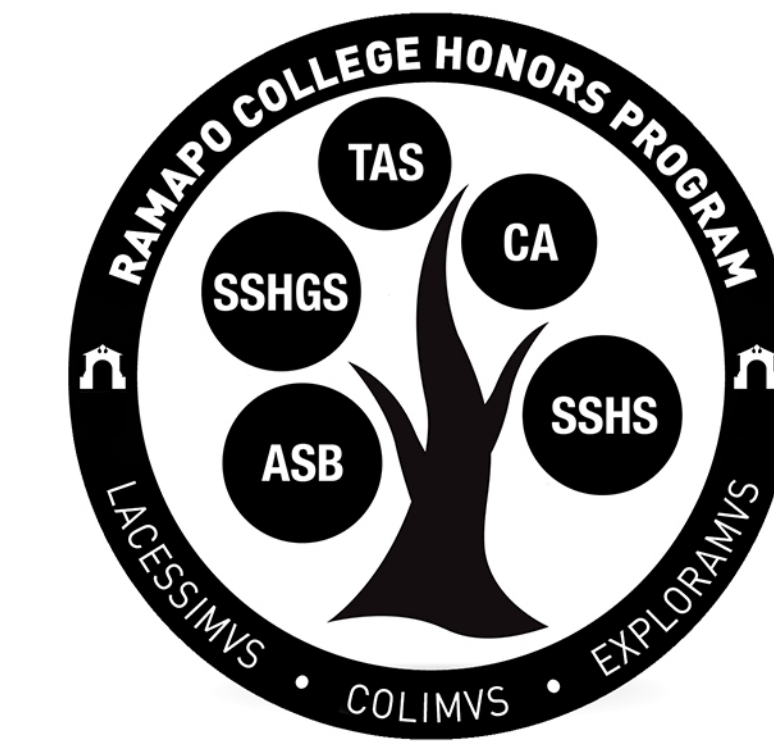




Why Locals Run: What Compels Townspeople to Run for their Local Boards of Education

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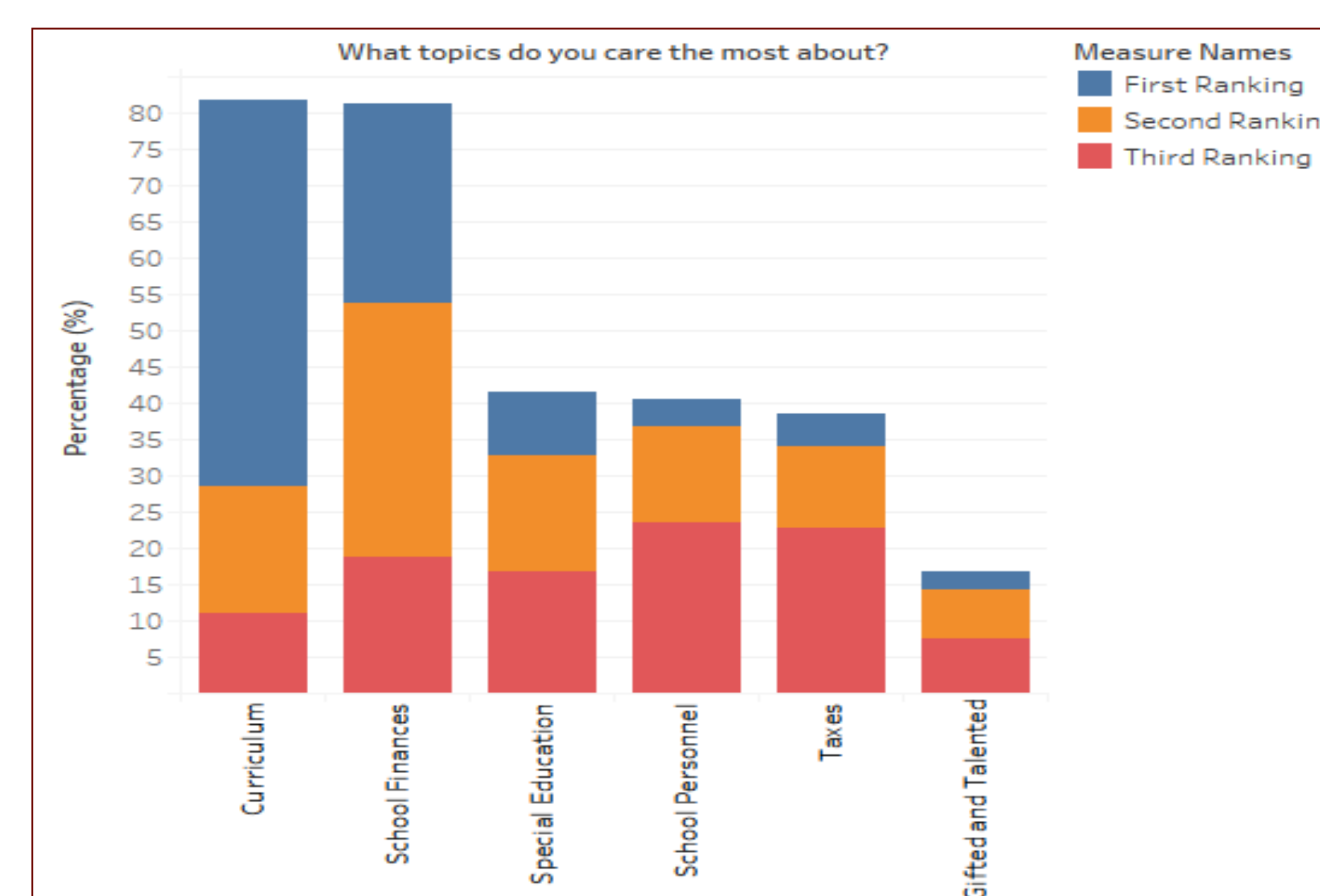
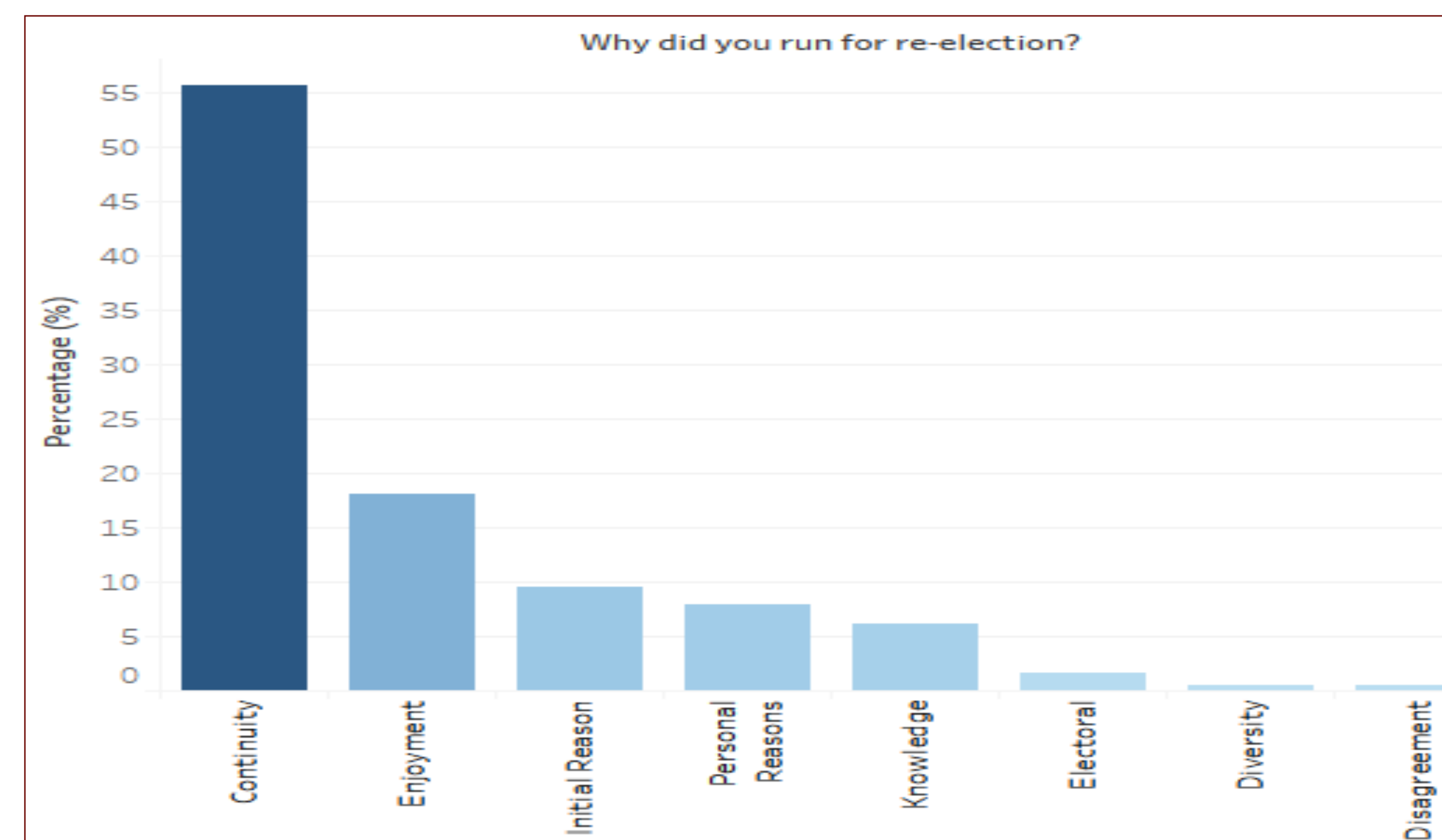
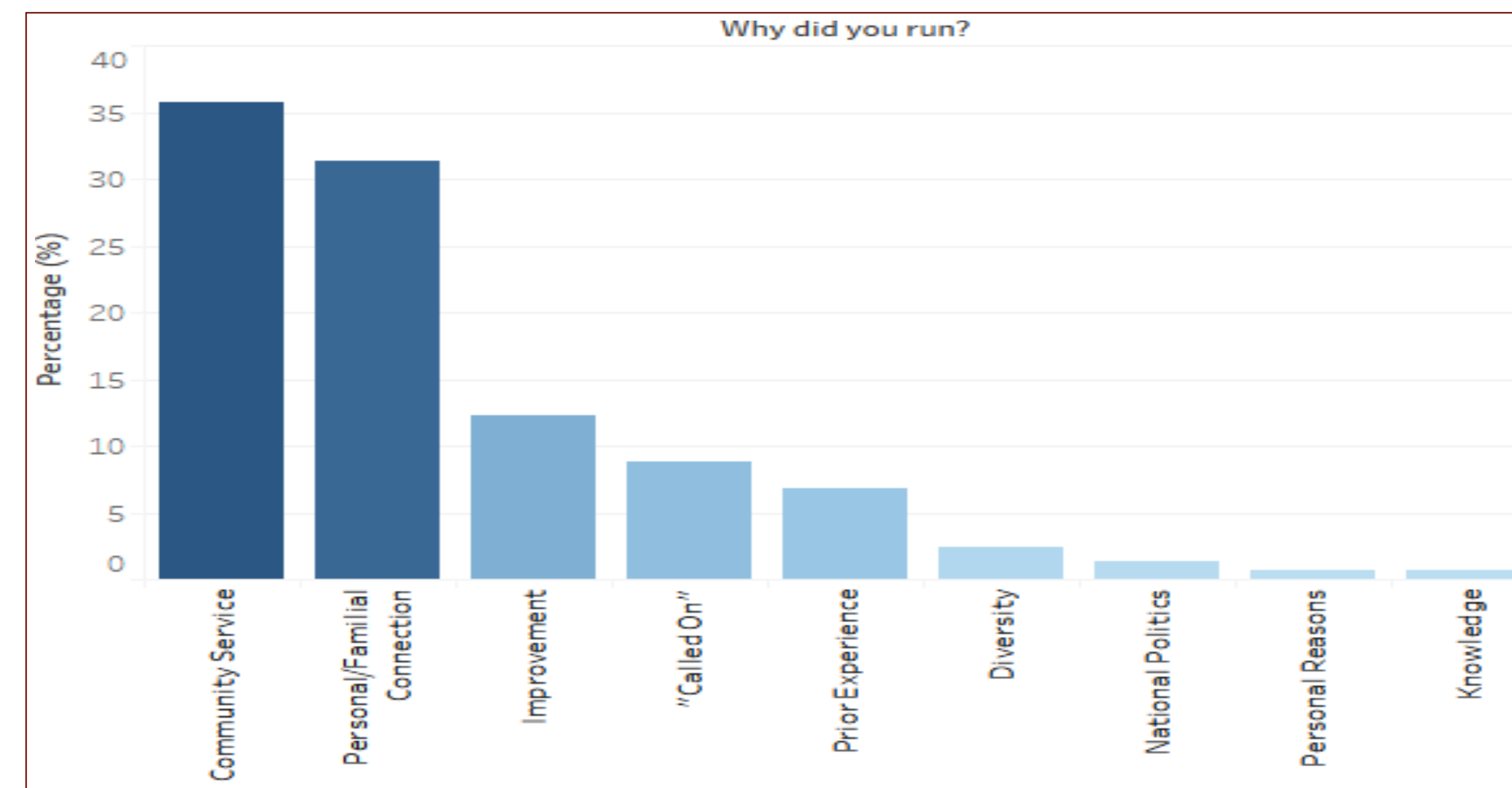


Intro: One of the most understudied areas of electoral politics in political science research is that of the school board. Despite voluntarily running campaigns and spending free time making decisions regarding millions of dollars in taxes and salaries, not to mention the education of future generations, there is very little exploratory research into the minds of elected school board members. This study attempted to do just that, surveying elected school board members in the state of New Jersey, attempting to answer three questions:

1. Why do people run for their school boards?
2. Why do people run for reelection to their local school boards?
3. What issues do school board members care about the most?

Results were compiled and analyzed, and several categories of responses were established, indicating various trends in why people run for a local school board seat.

Data and Methods: The data in this research comes from an anonymous survey of 294 current (as of February, 2020) school board members. The survey was created and distributed online; it was sent to over 3000 current school board member email addresses provided by the New Jersey School Board Association. The data was collected between February 9th, 2020 and February 20th, 2020. After electronically agreeing to informed consent, participants in the survey were asked their age range and how many years they have been on their board. After that, respondents were prompted with two open-ended questions: “What inspired you to first run for the board of education?” and “If you have run for re-election, what was your motivation to run again?” Participants were then asked to select three topics that they are most concerned about, out of six possible topics: curriculum, school finances (what the school is spending money on), taxes (the amount town residents pay), special education students, gifted and talented students, and school personnel.



Findings: So, why do people run for the school board?
Community service: to give back to the community.
Personal/Familial Connection: either they went to the district or they have a kid/grandkid in the district.
Improvement: they want to improve the district.
Called On: someone told them to run, or they saw an open election and decided to throw their hat in the ring.
Prior Experience: they have some career insight that could be beneficial to the board (education, legal, etc.).
Diversity: to diversify the schools and/or board.
National Politics: involvement due to 2016 election.
Personal Reasons: had free time or wanted relevance.
Knowledge: wanted to learn more about the district.

Why do people run for re-election?
Continuity: they want to continue what they started.
Enjoyment: they love being on the board.
Initial Reason: same as why they initially ran.
Personal Reasons: personally felt beneficial to the board.
Knowledge: learned a lot in their first term.
Electoral: there was no one challenging their seat.
Disagreement: did not like the ideologies on the board.
Diversity: emphasize diversity and inclusion in district.

What topics do board members prioritize?
 Curriculum: 81.63%
 School Finances: 81.29%
 Special Education: 41.50%
 School Personnel: 40.48%
 Taxes: 38.44%
 Gifted and Talented: 16.67%

Conclusion/Implications: Overall, the top reason why people run for the school board is for community service. People run for reelection to continue their efforts. Finally, a large majority of school board members care about curricular and school finance matters over most others. Overall, more research and attention should be placed on these crucial volunteers who oversee millions of dollars in taxes and the education of future generations.