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Elections for thee, not me

by [Max Brantley @ArkansasBlog](#)

The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette editorial page last Saturday lamented the low turnout in school board elections.

Only 1,500 voters in the Little Rock and North Little Rock districts turned out with three contested seats.

The editorial added support to the campaign by Gary Newton to move school elections to a regular election day. Newton is employed by at least two Walton-fortune-financed groups, the pro-charter school Arkansas Learns and Arkansans for Education Reform. His work, coincidentally, earned Newton a High Profile feature in the Sunday Democrat-Gazette. Publisher Walter Hussman is a supporter — financially and otherwise — of the charter school movement. He sold his former Arkansas Gazette building to eStem Charter School and a son-in-law is employed in the legal battle to create more charter schools in Arkansas.

The argument about moving school elections is an old one. Advocates think bigger turnouts would beat more school tax increases and give special interest money a lot more clout in school board races.

But my issue isn't election timing. It's hypocrisy. Wrote the Democrat-Gazette editorialist:

"Most school boards in the state — and those who manipulate them — prefer having their elections when most of the rest of us aren't paying attention. That way, they don't have to deal with an overly enthusiastic public messing around with delicate matters like voting and the like. That should be left to a select few, i.e., themselves. Can't have the public being overly involved in the public's business. That would come dangerously close to democracy."

This from the same newspaper and same lobby groups that are trying to establish dozens of charter schools — each an independent school district operated with public money. The Billionaire Boys Club (Waltons, Stephenses, Hussman, Murphy scions) particularly thirsts to get these quasi-private schools established in Pulaski County, the better to cripple the Little Rock School District and its teachers union. Charter schools have NO elected school boards and receive precious little outside oversight except periodic reviews by the state Board of Education (its power recently diminished by the legislature at the behest of Walton lobbyists). They are often operated by profit-making private corporations, whose corporate workings are shielded from public inspection. Many only grudgingly comply with the open records law that applies to them. They operate more like private schools than public schools. Their founders call the shots. Or the control comes from private management corporations — their internal workings removed from public inspection entirely. Newton, for example, is promoting the hiring of a private Texas charter school operator to run the white-flight middle school he's trying to get approved in

upscale West Little Rock. The D-G and Gary Newton would be more credible when they invoke the "public's business" and "democracy" if they also believed in a democratic process for charter school governance. They don't.

Don't be confused if a charter school defender tries to alibi that charter schools don't have local property taxes and thus should somehow be exempt from public accountability. Property ownership isn't required to vote in the U.S. Not yet, anyway. Also, the state school finance system favors charters in this respect. Every regular public school district is required to help meet the state school foundation minimum, now about \$6,300 per child, with a contribution of at least 25 mills of local property tax. The state pays the rest. Charter schools get the full \$6,300 reimbursement with no property tax contribution.

Given that total subsidy, maybe the entire state should vote on school boards for charter schools. They're paying for them. Doesn't that make them the public's business? And wouldn't that be democratic?