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STAFFING DEMOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING POLL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN U.S. ELECTIONS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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Abstract

The United States relies on citizens to make elections run smoothly. In fact, over a million individuals choose to participate in the electoral process so citizens may continue to vote in free and fair elections. Unfortunately, the United States has faced a decline in citizen volunteerism, from nonprofit institutions to public causes, such as election work. Recruitment difficulty ebbs and flows, but administrators have reported high levels of recruitment issues for multiple election cycles. Since 2020, COVID-19 and a rise in threats and violence against election workers have exacerbated this problem. This project looks at poll worker recruitment from several angles, including perceived difficulty levels of recruitment by election administrators, issues that administrators claim to increase or decrease the ease of recruitment, and the opinions of those who do the work on Election Day, the poll workers themselves. I determine that partisan parity and strict residency requirements inhibit local election administrators from finding adequate poll workers, that youth programs boost recruitment in non-metro counties, that the long 12- to 14-hour day is problematic for recruitment, that more people are wary of the job due to personal safety concerns, and that many counties are losing their long-time workers due to aging. Poll workers agree that the long day is a problem, but many are incentivized to work the polls out of a sense of community and faith in the system. Poll workers identify areas in which administrators could likely increase recruitment and retention rates based on their personal experiences.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Poll workers bridge the gap between what the government intends and what the citizen experiences."

Hall et al. 2009

Elections are the foundation of democracy, giving citizens of voting age an opportunity to choose their representatives at all levels of government. The United States' electoral system relies on its citizens to run smoothly and efficiently. Whether it is a national presidential election year or a local vote on stormwater funding, poll workers answer the call. Overstating the importance of poll workers is unimaginable; they provide a critical public service, with over a million people stepping up to staff polling stations in the 2020 elections (Hawkins 2019, 106; Kleinfeld 2022; Clark and James 2023; Burden and Stein 2024). The federal government places requirements on states concerning aspects of elections, including voter identification, provisional ballots, and voting machines (Liebschutz and Palazzolo 2005). Yet local governments handle the operation of polling stations, recruitment, and training across thousands of jurisdictions, creating different voting experiences for US voters (Burden and Milyo 2015; Barsky 2024).

The friendly people at your voting precinct have agreed to take on an important job; their dedication to the cause allows the United States to administer free and fair elections. Poll workers may be called judges, clerks, and precinct officials (Favreau and Hanks 2016), among other titles, and normally work twelve- to fourteen-hour shifts in which they set up and monitor the polling station for the duration of the voting period and stay late to dismantle the polling station and deliver ballots to the designated location (Hale et al. 2025). These citizen volunteers not only work on Election Day but also cover early voting periods, which vary by state (Burden

et al. 2011). This is all done for a small stipend and minimal recognition. Because the interaction between voter and poll worker is usually short-lived, citizens likely do not think about a poll worker's duties, but expect them to be at the polling station, nonetheless.

U.S. elections face a major hurdle, one that may create longer voting lines and a reduction in polling locations, leading to the possibility of disenfranchising citizens. Many election administrators report difficulty in recruiting enough poll workers to staff elections over the last several election cycles, yet others appear to have no problems filling open positions. Because poll workers are crucial for elections to run smoothly, it is imperative to determine what factors cause some administrators to struggle with recruitment while others do not.

This chapter will introduce the reader to today's poll workers, who perform a job often misunderstood or overlooked by voters. There is limited literature that focuses on poll workers rather than election administrators; election administrators incorporate hired, full-time bureaucrats who schedule elections, find adequate polling stations, print ballots, and recruit citizen volunteers; poll workers are those on the ground staffing the polling stations so registered voters may cast a ballot. The existing research on poll workers often involves the motivations of individuals who choose to work the polls or the outcomes of the voter-poll worker relationship (see MacDonald and Glasser 2007 and Erikson et al. 2007 for examples). Because of this, we know little about the role of poll workers and the importance they play in early voting and on Election Day.

Literature review

Poll workers are essential to free and fair elections (Jones and Stein 2021); poll work is unique in that it is voluntary, temporary, and supplemented through a stipend or an hourly salary, varying by state and even county (Clark and James 2023). Poll workers are neither volunteers in

the purest sense of the word (see Handy et al. 2000, for example) nor are they true government employees (Atkeson et al. 2014; Barsky 2024). Although citizen voters often assume they are unpaid and carry the label of volunteers in some states, such as California, they do receive a small stipend (McBride 2011; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2019). Yet, having the power to determine who may cast a ballot suggests poll workers have the discretion of a street-level bureaucrat.

Scholars such as Atkeson and colleagues (2014) and Hall et al. (2009) suggest that poll workers fit within the public administration space, seeing them as "street-level bureaucrats of the electoral process" (Barsky 2024; Hostetter and Atkeson 2026). Street-level bureaucrats, those public employees who deal with voters face-to-face, make decisions as proxies of the government (DeMora et al. 2022; see also Hall and Stewart 2012; Clark and James 2023), and the government may tax their earnings ("Election Workers," n.d.). Lipsky (1980) coined this term to describe government workers who deal directly with the public, such as teachers and firefighters. Street-level bureaucrats impact people's lives, and their actions and attitudes mold the expectations and attitudes that a citizen has toward the government (Lipsky 1980). Street-level bureaucrats traditionally serve the government in a full-time role, where administrators share professional norms and impact problem resolution at the street level (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Raaphorst and Loyens 2020), yet poll workers are not part of a government agency's organizational structure. Poll workers do share some of the same expectations and discretionary abilities of street-level bureaucrats, but in a temporary-worker environment, often only a few times a year (Atkeson et al. 2014). They are the final authority on "interpreting guidance in areas such as deciding who can vote and determining voter intent" (Alvarez and Hall 2006; Chen et al. 2021) and help form public opinions about the government based on the voter-poll worker interaction (Erickson et al. 2007; Hall et al. 2009; Atkeson et al. 2014). As voting

requirements vary by state, there are cases in which poll workers, with little supervision, use discretion to determine who may cast a ballot. In many cases, poll workers take on a huge responsibility after only a few hours of training (Gumbel 2008; King and Barnes 2019).

Clark and James (2023), however, specifically designate them as stipended volunteers, placing them in the broad understanding of volunteering. This definition allows for a stipend that is less than the fair market value of the hours performed (McBride et al. 2011; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2019) and considers those who perform work through "coercion," such as mandatory community service, as volunteers, whereas the pure understanding of a volunteer allows for no compensation and no coercion (Whittaker et al. 2015). While coerced poll work is rare, the state of Nebraska utilizes a draft system when it lacks enough willing citizens to work the polls (Arena 2024). Employers must pay regular wages (minus the stipend) and may not penalize employees for working the polls (McAuliffe 2009). Shachar and colleagues (2019) suggest that, based on recent research, there is a "mingling of actors, motivations, and logics [that] problematizes the fundamental properties of the 'pure' perception of volunteering." This is relevant, as state and local governments become more visible as actors in the utilization of volunteers, from citizen boards to National Parks and beyond. However, little scholarship addresses stipended volunteers in the public sector; most articles on stipended volunteerism, and volunteerism in general, are centered in the nonprofit literature. This makes defining the poll worker extremely difficult.

Without a scholarly definition of poll worker identity, the public may be unsure of how the recruitment process works and what exactly poll workers do. This is problematic, as election officials must rely on citizens to do this work every election cycle. This, on top of barriers such as college students registered in another county or state and individuals working full-time jobs, makes the recruitment tasks of election administrators daunting. Regardless of where they are

situated in the literature or how the public defines them, “poll workers bridge the gap between what the government intends and what the citizen experiences” (Hall et al. 2009) and are necessary for our democracy to flourish, but often, election administrators struggle to find enough willing participants.

Recruitment issues

Election officials claim that finding adequate individuals to work the polls is becoming more difficult, a trend mentioned by officials for more than a decade (Burden and Milyo 2015; Hyde et al. 2016; Clark and James 2023; Barsky 2024). In a conference paper by Burden and Stein (2023), the authors found that thirty percent of poll workers surveyed said they were “very unlikely” or “somewhat unlikely” to work the polls after the 2020 election. According to the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) report (2025), conducted by the U.S. Election Commission, recruitment was easier in 2024 than in 2022; however, states reported that more than fifteen percent of individuals were first-time poll workers. This confirms that many did not return, creating a deficit in institutional knowledge.

Recent events likely exacerbated the problem. COVID-19 created an environment in which many poll workers feared for their health—and their lives (see Manion et al. 2023, for example). As the average age of poll workers is over 60 (Barthel and Stocking 2021; Persily and Stewart III 2021), several were at a higher risk of infection during the 2020 presidential election (Mueller et al. 2020). Many dedicated poll workers chose not to work due to health vulnerabilities related to the pandemic (Lane et al. 2025), requiring a need for new, inexperienced workers.

The polarized political climate may also be a culprit. There has been a rise in instances of doxing and threats against election workers since 2020. Individuals and groups such as Q-Anon

spread rhetoric about a "stolen election" and rigged voting machines (Edlin and Noren 2024; Lorentz 2025; Stein et al. 2025), as did sitting politicians and several candidates running for election (Hancock 2024). Groups and individuals accused election workers of "stealing" votes, and many workers faced death threats (Hawley-Bates 2025; The Myth of Voter Fraud *n.d.*). Occasionally, these threats were so extreme that election workers went into hiding or moved their families for their safety (Halpert 2024). This issue pushed local and state lawmakers to pass new regulations concerning election polling centers, including 24/7 video surveillance, de-escalation training, and active shooter drills (Edlin and Nordon 2024). In fact, based on a study conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice, 92 percent of local election officials who responded to a survey have taken steps to improve both cybersecurity and physical security of polling stations and those who operate them (Tisler 2024).

Limitations of poll worker scholarship

Scholars have yet to determine where to center poll workers, leaving the poll worker literature without a home. One can find articles on poll workers in election administration, public administration, voting, and volunteerism literatures. Some scholars label them as extensions of the government as bureaucrats, while others consider poll workers volunteers who receive a small stipend. Yet others see them as contract workers.

Scholarship on recruitment is also a factor, as there are only a few peer-reviewed studies available in the United States (Burden and Milyo 2015; Hostetter 2020; Jones and Stein 2021). U. S. researchers rely on the Election Assistance Commission's *Election Administration and Voter Surveys* (EAVS) to help ascertain the difficulty or ease of recruiting individuals to work the polls; those who find it "very difficult" and "somewhat difficult" to recruit a sufficient number of people appear to be increasing (Jones and Stein 2021; see also Burden and Stein 2024). Data

show that in 2024, almost half of all jurisdictions reporting find difficulty filling all poll worker positions; this is prominent in urban areas where there are more registered voters to serve (see Kimball et al. 2009) and areas where partisan parity laws make recruitment more difficult (see Chapter 2). Part of this potentially stems from increasing tasks expected of poll workers, including same-day registration (James and Stein 2021; Burden and Stein 2024) and navigating new and updated technology (Czapiewski 2025). Additionally, even if administrations take measures to increase the number of individuals willing to work the polls, there is no guarantee of finding quality workers (Jones and Stein 2021; Burden and Stein 2024; see also Alvarez and Hall 2006), especially in their roles as street-level bureaucrats. Nor is there a guarantee that those recruited will show up on election day, as "no-shows" are common. Ten percent of jurisdictions report no-shows, as found by both Fischer and Coleman (2008) and Burden and Milyo (2015).

Because of these limitations of the poll worker scholarship, it is important to expand our knowledge of poll workers beyond motivation and the poll worker-citizen relationship. We need more practitioner-friendly data on what incentivizes citizen volunteers, how election administrators recruit poll workers, and what makes them stay once recruited. Additionally, since the current volunteer literature points to a reduction in volunteerism among late baby boomers as they retire (Einolf 2009; Hansen and Slagsvold 2020), we must focus on recruitment methods for non-traditional volunteers, such as students and full-time employed individuals. According to Carah Ong Whaley, Vice President of Election Protection with the bipartisan organization Issue One, elections would no longer function without the assistance of poll workers across the United States (Minkin et al. 2024).

Overview of dissertation

The purpose of this project is to determine best practices that enhance recruitment of poll workers and retain them for future elections, as well as determine barriers to recruitment. I look to explore the poll worker from three angles that may help election officials better recruit and retain poll workers for future elections: laws and procedures that affect the difficulty or ease of recruitment, the perspective of the election officials as to why they chose a particular level of ease or difficulty, and what incentivizes citizens to become poll workers and return in future elections. I utilize the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), the 2023 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, and data from the National Council of State Legislatures. By considering all the above, we have a more comprehensive understanding of barriers to recruitment and how to educate and inspire individuals to apply to do poll work, especially as current poll workers age out, and newer retirees may have less interest in giving their time to volunteering and civic engagement (Hansen and Slagsvold 2020). This adds to the literature on poll worker activity by tying certain regulations that vary across states to the difficulty of the recruitment and retention of poll workers and evaluating programs and tactics to entice citizens who have never worked the polls before.

Chapter Two of this project addresses recruitment and retention from the perspective of local election officials. Recruitment of new poll workers varies greatly across states, as U.S. elections are highly decentralized (Greenberger 2024; Bergeron-Boutin et al. 2025); there is even variation among counties within a state. Based on several years of data from the Election Administration and Voter Surveys (EAVS) (distributed to election officials after each federal election), nearly half of the administrators who complete the survey claim that recruitment is somewhat or very difficult, based on a five-point Likert scale. Since we currently know of the recurring difficulty of recruiting in some areas of the nation, identifying both inhibitors of

recruitment and laws and practices that increase the ease of filling positions on Election Day will assist with the recruitment process.

Chapter Two considers the use of vote centers, the recruitment of youth under the age of 18, partisan parity rules around who may work at a particular polling location, and laws concerning where a citizen volunteer must work based on their address. I also utilize the Rural Urban Continuum Codes from 2023 to determine differences in metro and non-metro areas. The scholarship often overlooks rurality in the election administration space, yet rural counties have their own set of barriers and successes in recruitment and retention of poll workers.

Chapter three takes the EAVS 2024 data a step further through content analysis of administrators' comments that align with the level of difficulty each chooses. Almost 500 local election officials provide useful information in the comments that aids in understanding their perceived struggles with or ease of recruitment. While Chapter Two discusses practices and laws that both assist and hinder recruitment efforts, these cannot explain what barriers or advantages formulated the administrators' choices. Many election officials give specific reasons for their ranking of difficulty or ease, while others provide vague reasoning, such as "no one wants to work anymore." I use these comments to compile a list of the most mentioned practices and regulations that both aid in recruitment and inhibit election officials from finding adequate individuals to cover open positions. While an administrator's choice of difficulty is subjective and may be based on life experiences, length of time on the job, and personal biases, analyzing their comments will bring us closer to understanding their perceptions around poll worker recruitment and retention.

Previous research explores the motivations of poll workers but uses surveys to gather data in most of these studies. In Chapter Four, I utilize personal interviews of poll workers to

determine their views about poll work, understand what incentivizes them to sign up for the job, and what keeps them coming back or stops them from returning. COVID-19, doxing of election workers, threats of violence, and questions about the integrity of elections pushed the job into the limelight over the last several years. The rhetoric around the 2020 election concerning fraud and rigged elections caused many to not return; others stepped up, knowing that most poll workers were likely to be more at risk for sickness due to their ages. I speak with individuals of all ages and backgrounds from across the United States to comprehend what drives them to perform community service in this manner. Some of the workers I interview only worked one election year; others have been doing the work for decades. Many are retired, but I also interview college students and people with full-time jobs. I conduct 28 interviews with poll workers residing in 20 states and 23 counties, ranging from West Virginia to Florida to California. It is imperative that we hear from those in the trenches to determine how to better recruit and retain workers, along with how regulations and expectations help or inhibit the job from the perspective of the poll worker.

As long as the United States has democratic elections, poll workers are essential to the process. Counties traditionally rely on retired persons to fill positions, but as these devoted public servants age out and newly retired citizens may or may not step up to fill in where needed, it is for election officials to find new and creative ways to manage the polls. Outreach to younger citizens is a must, but bypassing issues such as time off from work and school may prove onerous. Some counties have had success bringing in new recruits through social media and with material incentives, but state law also creates difficulties for administrators. This project addresses barriers to recruitment, the concerns of those who work the polls, and methods that have had success in counties across the country.

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Chapter 2: *The Struggles of Staffing Elections*

Abstract

Citizens of the United States are the glue that keeps our elections running smoothly. While they are not full-time government employees, they step up election after election to guarantee that every registered voter who wishes to cast a ballot may do so. In recent years, election officials have struggled to find enough workers to meet the needs of local election boards in almost half of the counties that report election data to the Election Administration and Voter Survey (EAVS), conducted every two years. Several factors may be at play. As our current workforce ages out and new retirees are not interested in long hours with little compensation, administrators are not finding enough individuals to fill those slots. Additionally, since the January 6th Insurrection (2021), threats and doxing of election workers have stifled the number of willing participants. Using data from the 2024 EAVS, along with the most recent data provided by the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCCS) from 2023, I examine five areas that may affect the ease or difficulty of acquiring the required number of poll workers necessary to run our elections. I find that partisan parity, a requirement that poll workers at any given polling station must come from a mix of the major parties, negatively and significantly affects recruitment. Vote centers also contribute to the dilemma of recruitment, while flexible residency requirements benefit rural counties but not metropolitan areas.

Introduction

Elections and democracy go hand in hand. Without free and fair elections, citizens could not voice their choices for their elected officials, amendments to their states' constitutions, or other issues put to a vote of the people. To keep the election process running smoothly in the United States, hundreds of thousands of our neighbors, friends, and other community members answer the call to become poll workers. Election administration officials must recruit and maintain enough poll workers for each election, whether it is a presidential election year, an election for city council members, or an issue that is unique to a municipality. Current poll workers recruit others from their networks, aiding election commissions with enlisting workers (McAuliffe 2009; Lamb et al. 2025a). Other individuals interested in serving may not know anyone who performs this work, leaving them to research the process on their own. Searching

the internet for information on applying is not arduous, but the messages citizens receive vary across states and sometimes counties within a state, including rates of compensation and which polling stations they may or must work.

Many poll workers are of retirement age. They are predominantly white and female, with an average age that exceeds 50; many are in their 60s and 70s (Hall et al. 2007; Burden and Milyo 2015). In fact, the 2018 EAC report suggests that less than a quarter of poll workers were under the age of 41during that election, and workers who were at least 61 made up two-thirds of those who served (Burden and Milyo 2015; Lamb et al. 2025a). It is also likely the poll worker served before, as previous research shows turnover is low. (Hostetter and Atkinson 2025; Stein et al. 2025). In fact, working in a previous election is a major indicator that a poll worker will return for future elections (Stein et al. 2019; Hostetter and Lebron 2024). When seasoned poll workers decide to leave for health or other reasons, local election administrations struggle to replace them (Lamb et al. 2025b).

Hiring the enormous number of workers needed nationwide for an election can be daunting for election administrators. According to the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) of 2024, nearly fifty percent of county officials reporting data claim that the recruitment of poll workers is either "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" (EAVS 2025). This is not a one-time issue; officials have witnessed a decline in recruitment for years. The *Election Worker Recruitment, Training, and Evaluation* report from the Election Assistance Commission (2024) tracks levels of recruitment difficulty; the 2024 report provides data from 2008 through 2022. During those years, recruitment difficulty levels peaked in 2018, when 68 percent of counties reported that recruitment was either "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" (see also Hale et al. 2025). While 2020 and 2022 reports show a significant drop in difficulty levels, both years show

a difficulty rate of 52 percent and 54.1 percent, respectively (*Election Worker Recruitment* 2024). There was also a small drop in the level of difficulty in 2024 from 2022, which is not listed in the report but is available in the EAVS 2024 dataset.

Why are some counties able to fully staff their elections while others struggle? To answer that question, I consider several variables that may affect the outcome of recruitment. I utilize the 2024 EAVS data and the 2023 Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. I test for rurality, partisan parity, residency requirements for the individual wishing to work the polls, and whether the county has and utilizes a youth poll worker program and/or vote centers.

Although scholarly interest in poll workers is not new, there is still a need for better recruitment methods. This project adds to the literature by identifying additional barriers to recruitment. Researchers have previously addressed issues such as jurisdiction density and poll worker mobility (see Ritter and Tolbert 2024 and Hostetter 2020), but local election commissions have no control over these barriers. However, statewide implementation of certain programs could ease the burden at the local level. As we continue to see reduced citizen interest in poll work across the country, finding simple, inexpensive recruitment methods that have worked for counties in the past must be a priority.

This paper proceeds as follows: I begin with the purpose of this study and a brief overview of current literature concerning poll work and poll worker recruitment. Much of the literature on poll workers was written following the 2000 Bush/Gore presidential election fiasco, when poll workers were seen on television counting butterfly ballots in Florida for the Bush-Gore presidential election (Cheng 2005, 7), and again since the 2020 election, as election workers were threatened and doxed due to misinformation and disinformation concerning

election integrity (Hawley-Bates 2025). I then continue with methods and the data collected. I move on to my findings, which point to certain state and local practices that have a strong correlation with higher levels of poll worker recruitment difficulty, and discuss the implications of my findings. I share the limitations of this study and suggest paths of research that would contribute to a better understanding of poll worker motivations and how they will benefit election administrators.

Purpose of study

As election workers and the public perceive elections as becoming more dangerous and current and reliable poll workers age out, finding solutions to the poll worker shortage becomes even more challenging. Election officials have consistently dealt with low interest, reliable workers leaving for numerous reasons, and difficulty engaging younger generations. This project aims to determine what issues cause barriers for election officials in poll worker recruitment, and ways to overcome those obstacles. The literature that does address poll worker recruitment has focused on issues such as training, discretion, motivations, and voter satisfaction, and much less on avenues that may ease the dilemma of an inadequate supply of poll workers. The purpose of this study is to identify practices and procedures that inhibit election administrators in terms of staffing elections and to determine best practices for poll worker recruitment. This will add to the literature by providing both scholars and practitioners with methods to enhance poll worker recruitment where the law allows.

Literature review

While there has been a need for poll workers since voting machines became commonplace, scholars paid little attention to poll workers until the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, the closest election in modern history (Mann 2001). For

thirty-six days after the election, officials were unable to determine the winner. The election came down to Florida's electoral votes, but issues with the type of ballot machines used left many ballots nearly unreadable, tasking poll workers with determining voter intent (Hall and Moore 2014). Bush won the Florida election by 537 votes, giving him enough electoral votes to win the presidency. However, thousands of ballots went uncounted, exposing weaknesses in the United States electoral system (Erickson et al. 2007).

Soon after the debacle, Congress passed legislation that provided funding to improve the voting process and create a more streamlined operation. Known as the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, Congress mandated certain aspects of elections, including ending the use of punch ballots for federal elections and creating minimum voter ID requirements (Erickson et al. 2007; Hall and Moore 2014; *US Election Assistance Commission* 2023). However, states, and sometimes local governments, still have discretion over several aspects of the voting process, including the frequency of training poll workers, the training materials presented, the stipend offered, the use of citizens under the age of 18, and the partisan distribution of workers at each precinct (Hall et al. 2007; Favreau and Hanks 2016; Rinfret et al. 2018). These differences create an election system that not only varies across states but also within states.

Lipsky (1980) coined the term "street-level bureaucrat" to describe those government employees who have the most contact with the public, such as teachers and police officers, and use discretion in their actions with citizens. Often, the use of discretion is based on limited information about a situation (Tummers and Bekkers 2014). As implementers of policy, poll workers make decisions on Election Day, often with little supervision (Hall et al. 2007). Because they resemble bureaucrats in this way, some scholars suggest that poll workers fit Lipsky's description of street-level bureaucrats (Barsky 2024; Burden and Stein 2024). While they share

some similarities, such as being the face of the government during elections and having discretion when working the polls (Hall et al. 2007), they are generally not considered government employees (Barsky 2024).

Those considered street-level bureaucrats outside of poll work are normally full-time employees in government agencies or bureaus rather than temporary employees working sporadically throughout the year (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Atkeson et al. 2014). The organizational culture exposes full-time bureaucrats to its norms and customs, creating an environment of conformity that an episodic poll worker will not experience (Atkeson et al. 2014; Barsky 2024). Most full-time employees have a supervisor at the workplace, yet poll workers have little supervision throughout the voting period (Barsky 2024; Hostetter and Atkeson 2025). This may be problematic, since the use of discretion may come with a lack of comprehension of bureaucratic expectations. Even though most poll workers must attend training, the level of responsibility on Election Day can be overwhelming (Lamb et al. 2025a), and the use of discretion may create negative experiences for voters (Atkeson et al. 2014; King 2017). Poll workers must remember numerous state election regulations (which often change between elections), register people in counties that allow voters to register on the day of an election, deal with provisional ballots for citizens arriving at the wrong polling place, stay up to date on the latest technology, and make sure voters meet a state's identification requirements. Any personal preferences and biases a poll worker may have are other factors in which discretion may be harmful (Lamb et al. 2025a). Additionally, training varies across states and counties, from content to length of the training (Hall et al. 2007; *Election Assistance Commission* 2015; Gordon and Orey 2022), possibly accounting for differences in voter and poll worker experiences.

Although current literature does not focus heavily on the causes of recruitment difficulty, scholars have considered this problem in the past. Jones and Stein (2021) determine that limitations on where citizens may vote correlate with higher levels of recruitment difficulty. Counties that utilize voting centers combine multiple precincts, which reduces the number of poll workers necessary for an election and provides multiple locations for voters to cast a ballot (Manion et al. 2023). This expands the pool of potential poll workers, as it neutralizes strict residency hiring requirements for precinct-only voting and provides a more efficient distribution of workers (Jones and Stein 2021). Larimer County, Colorado, was the first jurisdiction in the United States to use vote centers in 2003 (*Use of Vote Centers* 2015). While Jones and Stein (2021) find an increase in recruitment difficulty as the share of votes cast in one location increases, they report no such issue in jurisdictions with vote centers. Although surveyed poll workers from a 2023 study report a preference for vote centers in Fresno (CA) and St. Louis (MO) counties, seventy-three percent of the sample are poll workers with at least two years of experience, and the study did not actually identify any quantitative data that considers recruitment ease or difficulty (Manion et al. 2023). Foltz (2014) found that this reduced election costs by seventeen percent. However, this study also did not consider the ease of poll worker recruitment. Additionally, there is conflicting information suggesting that some citizens prefer the traditional precinct system and complain about the high traffic and wait times at the centers (Chen et al. 2021).

Researchers have previously investigated the utilization of students under the age of eighteen for poll work. Kimball et al. (2009) found that many jurisdictions rely on recruitment at the high school level, especially in larger jurisdictions. Election administrators utilizing teens report that recruitment becomes less difficult when they can hire high school students (EAVS

2025). Most states have some type of youth worker program for those who are 16 and 17 years of age, which provides additional recruits and opportunities for young people to engage in the political process early in life. Of those that do not have a youth program, three of the six are primarily vote-by-mail states, leaving only Montana, Oklahoma, and South Dakota without a program to employ workers under eighteen (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). California has the highest rate of youth workers across the states, close to twice the number of youth poll workers in any other state (Booth et al. 2022).

Another study determined that allowing poll workers the opportunity to work in precincts or counties other than their own reduces staffing difficulties (Jones and Stein 2021). A separate study finds similar results when analyzing EAVS data from 2008 to 2018 (Hostetter 2020). Some state laws require poll workers to perform their duties in the precinct at which they vote, limiting election officials in their pursuit to fill positions. Other states may allow a poll worker to work anywhere in their county, or an adjacent county, and some requirements are extremely relaxed; a few states only require that the worker be a resident of the state. (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). Hostetter (2020) found that having "portable" poll workers, those allowed to work in any precinct in the state, shows a positive impact on recruitment; it also assists election administrators with last-minute cancellations, which can be a burdensome and stressful task.

Hypotheses

I consider four practices adopted in some states to determine their usefulness in the recruitment process, as well as measures of the rurality of the county reporting. Some states allow for vote centers, large centers that replace multiple precincts; voters may choose where they cast a ballot. Vote centers are found in larger, metropolitan areas, rather than in smaller towns. Currently, twenty-one states and Washington, D.C. allow their jurisdictions to use vote

centers on Election Day, and some also allow the use of vote centers for early voting (*Vote Centers* 2025). Previous studies evaluate the value of vote centers. Foltz (2014) and Chen et al. (2021) focus on the experience of voters and the reduction of election costs. Jones and Stein (2021) consider the ease of recruitment in areas that use vote centers, finding that more choices for voters correlate with ease in recruiting.

A second practice utilizes high school students for election work. Most states allow sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to perform duties on Election Day. Missouri allows for children as young as fifteen to perform poll work (*Youth Poll Workers* n.d.). Some states have specific programs, such as Youth at the Booth, to increase citizen participation; this allows people who cannot vote yet to experience the election process. Others allow for high school student participation, but the local election board is responsible for outreach events.

Third, most states require a mix of individuals affiliated with the two major political parties at each voting location, which may be difficult in counties where most residents are from only one party and areas with small populations. Residency requirements vary across states; often, poll workers may only work in the precinct for which they are registered voters, while others have much less restrictive requirements. These restrictions may lead to understaffed polling stations. Lastly, I consider rurality to determine if rural counties experience higher recruitment difficulty than urban and suburban counties. While rurality often gets overlooked when considering the administering of elections, almost two-thirds of counties in the United States are rural; as these populations continue to decline, fewer citizens are available for recruitment (Schur et al. 2025). Considering these five regulations and practices, I expect the following:

H1: I hypothesize that counties that do not utilize vote centers where anyone in the county may vote will see higher levels of recruitment difficulty than those counties with vote centers.

H2: I hypothesize that counties without a youth program that utilizes high school or college students for poll work will experience more difficulty recruiting sufficient workers than those with the ability to employ this younger demographic.

H3: I hypothesize that requiring partisan parity at polling stations increases the level of difficulty recruiting poll workers.

H4: I predict that those states that require a poll worker to live in the precinct or township will have greater difficulty in recruitment compared to states that allow for more relaxed residency requirements.

H5: I hypothesize that rural county election boards will have more difficulty recruiting poll workers due to the population and size of the county than those in more metropolitan areas.

Data and methods

This quantitative approach utilizes data from the 2024 Election Administration and Voter Survey (EAVS), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), as well as the most recent Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (2023). Combining the EAVS data with the RUCC data distinguishes rural counties from urban and suburban counties and provides a more detailed examination of differences in recruitment between community types. Every two years following a federal election, most counties assign an administrator to complete the EAVS survey so the government may maintain records about local elections.

The 2024 EAVS data provide recruitment difficulties by county or township, based on the perceptions of the administrators taking the survey. I eliminate counties with missing information in the survey; information was sometimes missing for an entire state. This reduced the number of observations to 2918 from the full data set of 6461 observations. In some cases, the state does not track the data; if counties do not provide feedback, there is no available data. This reduces the data set to 34 states and the District of Columbia. Although this eliminates multiple states, the remaining states represent all regions of the country (see the Appendix for the states used in this study).

Dependent variable: level of recruitment difficulty

The dependent variable is the level of difficulty a county or township has with the recruitment of poll workers, based on the 2024 EAVS survey data. Election administrators chose from a five-point Likert scale. The categories include "very difficult," "somewhat difficult," "neither difficult nor easy," "somewhat easy," and "very easy." Below is a breakdown of administrators' perceptions of recruitment difficulty concerning the 2024 election cycle by the percentage of respondents.

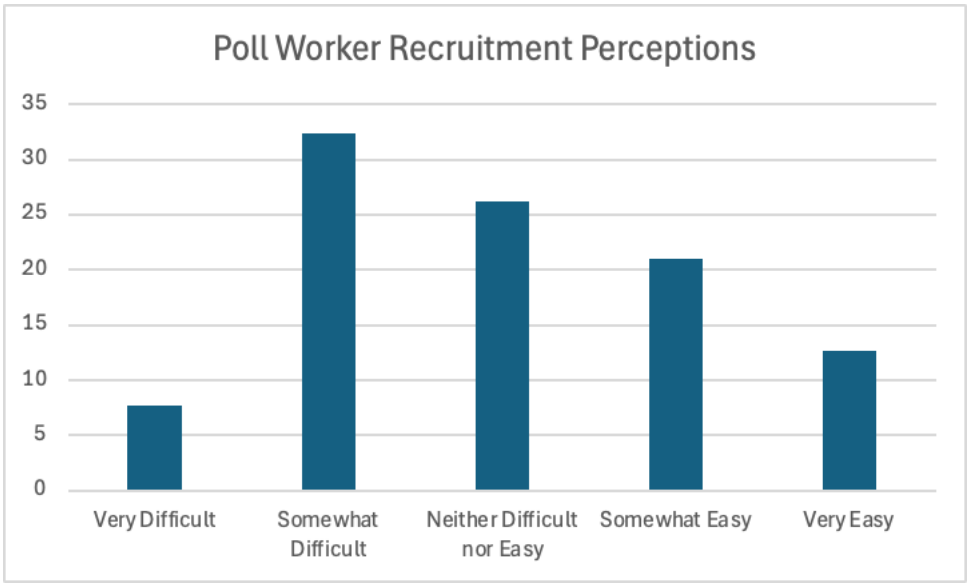


Figure 1: Perceptions of Recruitment Difficulty

As shown above, perceptions of how difficult it is to recruit adequate poll workers to fully staff precincts in their respective counties vary widely. While the most difficult category consists of the smallest percentage of respondents, this, combined with "somewhat difficult," is greater than the combination of "easy" categories, which should be of concern to election administrations and voters across the nation. How easy or difficult it is for a county administrator to recruit may be subjective, influenced by the election administrator's biases, stress levels, and experience. Other issues, such as election regulations at the state level, may be more objective,

such as whether a state allows poll workers to work outside of their voting precincts. While this data shows variation in recruitment difficulty, it does not explain the roadblocks to recruiting, which leads to a need to determine the practices, rules, and regulations that hinder poll worker recruitment.

Independent variables

I consider five independent variables for this project. These include whether a county utilizes vote centers, if the state has a youth worker program, if there is any type of partisan party requirement at the polling site, and how strict the state is in terms of working beyond one's own precinct. I also consider rurality in the full model, while I separate metro from non-metro counties in models two and three.

Vote centers are popular in many municipalities, allowing a citizen to vote anywhere in the county, rather than at the traditional precinct (Folz 2014). These may complement existing precinct-style polling stations, such as in Arkansas, or may replace them completely (*The Merits of Vote Centers* 2023). Other states have prohibited their use entirely (*Blocking Vote Centers* 2025). These centers are often near or in city centers and provide more location options for voters. Additionally, centers are better equipped for larger numbers of individuals (Chen et al. 2021). My sample reflects 1222 counties and townships that utilize vote centers (41.9 percent), and 1696 counties that do not (58.1 percent), for a total of 2918 observations.

Youth poll worker programs are popular among states. In 1990, Hawaii was the first state to implement a poll worker program that recruited those under eighteen (Nelson, 2019). Since then, most states have implemented youth programs, but with varying specifications. Although they have different age requirements and some are voluntary positions, the programs allow younger people to participate in the election process. San Mateo, California has a program titled

the Student Democracy Program and pairs with almost two dozen high schools. These students receive community service credits and a stipend. Indiana's Hoosier Hall Pass Program allows 16- and 17-year-olds to perform poll worker duties (Minkin et al. 2024). Pennsylvania offers the Governor's Civic Engagement Award to some students who participate in poll work. Additionally, some states work with nonprofits to help with the recruitment of young people, such as Youthwork Makes the Boothwork in Maine (Minkin et al. 2024). 45 states and the District of Columbia have some type of youth poll worker program (Nelson 2019), accounting for 2791 observations, or 95.7 percent of the sample. Only 127 counties and townships in the adjusted data set do not have a program that encourages high schoolers to participate in the election process in this way. According to the EAVS (2024) comments section, many election administrators mentioned the positive impact youth programs have on their ability to staff elections. I code this variable as either having a youth program or having no program to determine if the utilization of individuals under the age of eighteen affects recruitment.

Partisan parity is yet another variable that is at the states' discretion. This is a requirement to have at least one person working at a precinct who is from each of the major parties (Gordon and Orey 2022). There are variations of regulations across the country; some are very specific about how many election workers must be from each major political party, others require at least one from each major party, such as Alaska, and some states, including California, Delaware, and Georgia, have no requirement (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). In Iowa, "no more than a simple majority may be members of the same party (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). A few have parity requirements based on the position at the polling station, including Arizona. Some states do not allow for an Independent or unaffiliated voter to serve as a poll worker (Reilly et al. 2025). This is the case in Kansas and Illinois (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2023). For coding

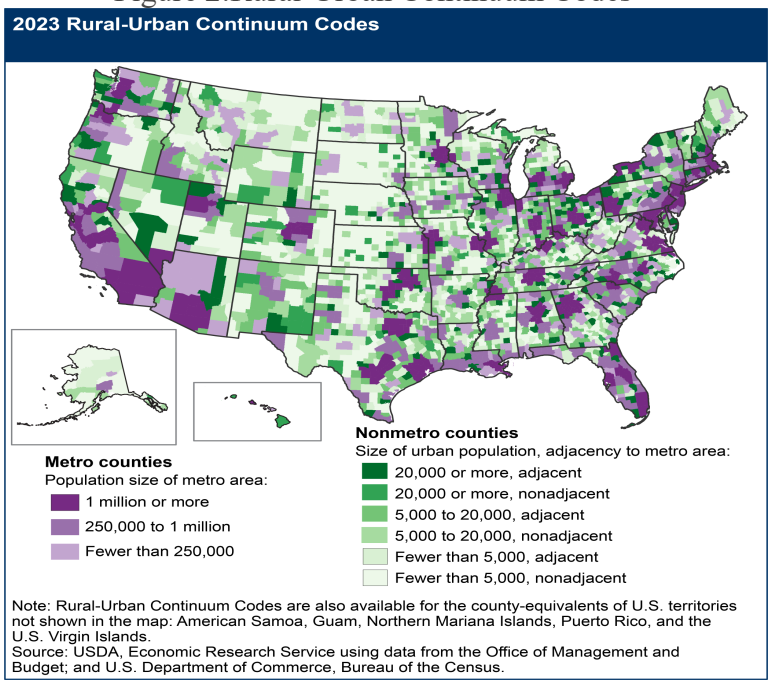
purposes, a state either has no law or code requiring parity, or they require a partisan distribution of poll workers at some level. Of the 2913 observations, less than ten percent (285) do not require any type of mix of political affiliations among poll workers at any given precinct.

Each state determines residency requirements for poll workers. Some only allow an individual to work at the polls in his or her own precinct. Kentucky requires poll workers to live and work in the same precinct unless the administrators cannot recruit enough to cover the precincts (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). Others may work at any precinct within the township or county, such as in Massachusetts. Yet other states have more flexible options, such as working in an adjacent county or even any jurisdiction within the state. For example, Georgia has "no partisan distribution requirement for poll workers" (*Election Poll Workers* 2025). I wish to determine if flexibility in residency requirements aids in recruitment. I label states that require a poll worker to be a resident of the precinct or town in which they reside as the most difficult for recruitment and code these as a three out of three. States that allow poll workers to reside anywhere in the county to work at any polling place have less difficulty, and I code it as a two out of three for level of difficulty. A few states allow a resident to work at the polls anywhere in the state. This is the most relaxed requirement, and I code these observations as one out of three in the level of difficulty. I find 299 observations for counties within the states that allow a registered voter of their state to work the polls anywhere in that state, regardless of residency. This accounts for almost eleven percent of the counties reporting. 1239 observations fall into the middle category. These are more restricted than the first group but still allow considerable flexibility, such as being able to work anywhere in their county of residence. Approximately 45 percent of the counties reporting fall into the middle category. Finally, the EAVS data indicates 1200 county responses that fall into the strictest category in which the poll worker must live in

the precinct or township, for a total of 2738 observations. The mean for residency requirements is 2.33. I then create three dichotomous variables to further explore the effects of residency restrictions on recruitment in greater detail.

Rurality is determined by the latest RUCC codes from 2023; scores are based on the population of a county, starting with the largest metropolitan areas and categorized into nine groupings. Categories 1-3 are metropolitan areas, while 4-9 are non-metropolitan counties or townships. I run three models to determine if rurality affects poll worker recruitment. I run the full model, a model with metropolitan counties only, and a model with categories four through nine, representing non-metropolitan counties.

Figure 2:Rural-Urban Continuum Codes



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Results

Before discussing the variables individually, a comment about the R-squared in all models is in order. These models only explain a small percentage of variation. It is not extremely surprising, as so many factors could be in play. For example, election officials do not take the

survey immediately following the election; time may cause perceptions to change. Also, the level of perceived difficulty is based on the administrator completing the survey, which is subjective. Recruitment may be "somewhat easy" to one administrator, while the same situation could be "neither easy nor difficult" to another. Other factors, such as job satisfaction, experience, stress levels, and biases, could affect how an election administrator chooses to score the level of recruitment difficulty for an election.

Table 1: OLS Results

Difficulty of Recruitment	Full Model	Non-metro	Metro
Partisan Parity	-.254***	-.270**	-.297**
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Has vote centers	-.356***	-.322***	-.368***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.08)
Has youth program	.149	.197*	-.193
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.28)
Strict residency	-.001	-.048	-.118
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)
Flexible residency	.0173**	.319***	.060
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.12)
RUCC_2023	-.012	-	-
	(0.01)	-	-
_cons	3.29	3.15	3.65
	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.30)
N	2601	1639	899
R-squared	0.035	0.037	0.037

*Significant at 0.1
**Significant at 0.05
***Significant at 0.01

Vote centers

Hypothesis One considers the ease of recruitment when utilizing vote centers. As previously mentioned, 21 states and Washington, D.C. use vote centers. These centers are typically found in larger cities, often near high-density populations and work centers. Forty-one percent of the U.S. population lives in states that allow for vote centers (*Availability of Vote*

Centers 2026); Los Angeles County alone is utilizing 524 vote centers for the 2026 primary elections (*County of Los Angeles* 2026). Yet some states, such as Oklahoma, passed legislation to prohibit the use of vote centers (*Blocking Vote Centers* 2025). Vote centers should allow for more flexibility when voting, but past studies have produced mixed results (Stein and Vonnahme 2012; Chen et al. 2021). States that allow for mostly or all mail-in balloting also use these centers as information hubs; poll workers in these states are responsible for processing mail-in ballots, collecting ballots from drop-off points, and, in some states, registering voters (*Vote Centers* n.d.). Although previous research suggests that vote centers assist in lowering the cost of elections by reducing the number of workers needed and that vote centers aid in poll worker recruitment (Jones and Stein 2021), the EAVS data from 2024 show that vote centers are significant and negative in all three models ($p < .01$ for all models). This is the opposite of my expectations concerning Hypothesis One. Even though some administrators commented on the usefulness of vote centers, the data suggest otherwise in terms of poll worker recruitment for the 2024 elections.

Additionally, there are mixed results among studies that show negative voting outcomes with vote centers. For example, one study determines that the further a vote center is from a citizen, the less likely he or she will vote (Cortina and Rottinghaus 2023). Folz (2014) found no changes to voter turnout in a separate study. While voting centers' usefulness in recruitment is up for debate, it could negatively impact voting, and more research may be necessary.

Youth programs

Hypothesis Two considers state programs that allow youth to participate in poll work. These programs appear to aid in reducing the burden of recruiting only in non-metro areas ($p < 0.1$) but do not meet the standard $p < .05$. This is an unexpected result, as numerous administrators commented that they would not have had enough poll workers without high

school students. Six states have no program that allows individuals under the age of eighteen to be part of the election process on Election Day. States with no youth programs are Hawaii, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, and Washington. However, three of these states utilize mail-in balloting and need poll workers at a few designated sites used primarily as voter information sites. I exclude Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington from the dataset, leaving Hawaii, Montana, Utah, and South Dakota as states without a youth program.

Partisan Parity

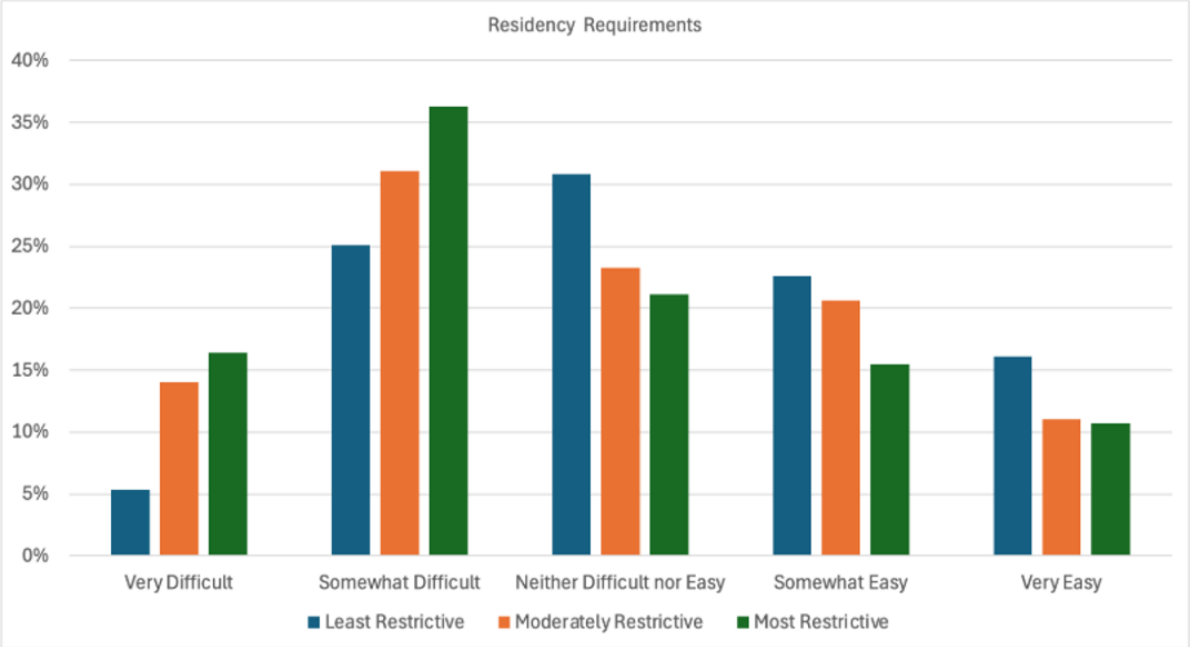
Partisan parity rules differ among states that require at least one poll worker from each major party to work at the same precinct. Some requirements are extremely specific, while others allow some flexibility in pairing registered Republicans and Democrats and, in some cases, Independent and unaffiliated voters. As mentioned previously, many states do not allow citizens to work the polls unless they are Republicans or Democrats, limiting the pool of potential poll workers and excluding many registered voters from participating in the electoral process (Gordon and Orey 2022). I code any type of partisan requirement for staffing polling locations as a partisan parity requirement. The results show that partisan parity increases the difficulty of finding adequate numbers of poll workers in the full model, significant at $p < 0.01$. The metro and non-metro models both show partisan parity as significant, but at $p < 0.05$. These findings are consistent with Hypothesis Three.

Residency requirements

More relaxed residency requirements indicate greater ease in recruitment. Of the counties with either no restrictions or those that allow a poll worker to be from anywhere in the state, approximately 30 percent found recruitment to be either “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult.” Those who found it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” accounted for approximately 39 percent of

the counties reporting. Data from counties in which residency requirements are stricter than the previous ones but still allow some flexibility beyond the precinct show that approximately 45 percent reporting fell into one of the two "difficult" categories, whereas only 32 percent claimed that recruitment fell into an "ease" category. 33 percent of responses from counties requiring poll workers to live and work in the same precinct reported difficulties; only 13 percent stated there was some level of ease in finding enough individuals to work the polls. The table below provides the breakdown by percent reporting.

Figure 3: Residency Requirements by Restrictions



These findings complement Hostetter (2020). Based on earlier EAVS data, Hostetter found that election administrators were better able to staff precincts across the state when there were no restrictions on where a citizen poll worker could perform the job. This is especially helpful in states that require at least one poll worker from each major party to be at any given precinct.

After analyzing residency requirements by least restrictive, moderately restrictive, and most restrictive, I then turned residency into three dichotomous variables to take a deeper look into the effects of these restrictions. I label these "flexible residency" and "strict residency," using the "moderate" category as the comparison group. In the full model, residency requirements are not significant. However, once I split the counties between metropolitan areas with at least 250,000 residents and those with fewer, there is significance in both the metro and non-metro models. Flexible residency requirements are both positive and significant for non-metropolitan areas ($p < .01$), yet I find the opposite for metropolitan areas; the finding for flexible residency requirements is still significant at $p < .01$ but in the opposite direction, meaning flexible residency requirements are helpful in recruitment for non-metropolitan areas but may cause recruitment issues in large, metropolitan ones. While strict residency requirements are negative across models, they are not significant.

Rurality

Rurality is not significant in the full model. However, it positively affects outcomes in the non-metro model for youth programs and increases significance with flexible residency requirements from $p < 0.05$ in the full model to $p < 0.01$ in the non-metro model. This shows that rurality does matter, but only under certain circumstances. Scholars should place a greater focus on the unique needs of rural counties and poll worker employment.

Discussion

I argue that, due to poll worker shortages in major elections, election administrators should consider practices by other states and county election administrations that ease recruitment. This project considers five areas in which practices vary across states: the use of vote centers in place of traditional neighborhood precincts, youth poll worker programs, partisan

parity at polling stations, and residency requirements for poll workers. Additionally, I consider rurality to determine if the needs of rural communities differ from urban communities.

Scholars have previously studied vote centers, but this literature mostly focuses on the voter experience and voter turnout (see Stein and Vonnahme; Folz 2014; Chen et al. 2021). While Jones and Stein (2021) determine that vote centers positively correlate with easier recruitment based on the EAVS data from 2008 to 2018, my findings indicate the opposite; incorporating numerous precincts into vote centers correlates with higher levels of difficulty in the recruitment of poll workers and is inconsistent with Hypothesis Two and previous research. While I have no explanation for the change, perhaps workers feel more comfortable working close to home in smaller precincts since the 2020 election or may feel overwhelmed by the number of voters casting ballots at vote centers.

Data on youth programs show mixed results. The use of young people under the legal voting age appears to ease recruitment issues in non-metro areas but is only significant at $p < 0.1$. The findings show no significance in the full model or metro areas. While these programs may not significantly address recruitment issues, there is the benefit of providing civic engagement opportunities to future voters. By equipping them with knowledge of the election process, this may encourage younger generations to step up in future elections. The greatest predictor of a future poll worker is one who has worked in a previous election (Stein et al. 2019), making this a prime opportunity for election administrators. Additionally, research shows that young people from rural areas are more likely to see themselves in "civic deserts," where there are limitations to both learning about civic engagement and finding engagement opportunities. (Booth et al. 2022). Providing young people in rural areas with opportunities to serve as poll workers will allow them to be "good" citizens and participate in the electoral process.

Dr. Kevin Lorentz, a professor and election canvasser, has determined yet another benefit of utilizing younger people to work the polls. His efforts to recruit college students for the 2020 election resulted in the training and use of over 50 students as election workers. Although feedback from his students is anecdotal, the results suggest that working the polls in an election reduces the belief that voter fraud and rigged elections exist (Lorentz 2025). Students who participated in the training and worked on Election Day, regardless of party affiliation, as well as students who chose to take on auditing duties, were more likely to reject claims of fraud than those students who did not participate (Lorentz 2025). Another program sponsored by the Help America Vote College Poll Worker Program (HAVCP) provides civic engagement skills to students. Smith (2020) found that working at a polling station increases youth's interest and involvement in future political activities, including voting, seeking out political information, posting online about an issue, and the desire to serve again.

The results of Hypothesis Three suggest that states and local governments should consider easing their partisan requirements for poll workers. While parity is another layer of checks and balances, more young individuals are choosing to register as Independents or nonaffiliated voters. Some states do not allow individuals who are not from one of the major parties to participate in poll work (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2023), limiting the pool of individuals who may serve and creating restrictions on citizens' participation in the election process. If administrators wish to expand their pool of potential workers, all states should allow Independents and nonaffiliated voters to work the polls. Membership is declining in the Republican and Democratic parties, while the number of citizens registering as Independents grows. In fact, the U.S. is seeing a record number of citizens registering as Independents, with Gallup citing 45 percent in 2025 (Jones 2026).

Most other democratic countries have elections governed by independent entities insulated from political influence (Tokaji 2022); the United States, however, is one of a few in which elections are organized and administered by a partisan administrative system (Gaughan 2017; Ferrer et al. 2023). Historically, this did not create substantial issues if there was some balance among the political parties, and parties acted in good faith (Reilly et al. 2025). Unfortunately, many states have become politically unbalanced within their governing bodies, and some states have supermajority legislatures or "trifectas," a situation within a state in which one party occupies the governor's seat and has a majority in both houses. Because Republicans and Democrats have substantial influence as to who may serve from their respective parties, reducing that power may prove difficult (Gaughan 2017). The intent of parties is to win elections; states often tailor election administration rules to maximize the influence of the major party, which may entail keeping out all others of different political affiliations (Reilly et al. 2025).

At first glance, the results on residency requirements do not support Hypothesis Four. However, after creating three dichotomous variables ("flexible" residency, "strict" residency, and the comparison group of "moderate" residency rules), there is a positive and significant finding for the most flexible residency requirements in the full model and the non-metro model ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively). It may behoove states to ease their residency requirements to assist with filling positions, especially in states with a high percentage of rural counties.

Finally, rurality does not appear to play a major role in election worker recruitment difficulties in the full model. The non-metro model does show some significance for youth programs, but only at $p < 0.1$. However, data on flexible residency is significant and positive at p

< 0.01 in more rural areas when I split the RUCC categories between metro and non-metro, thus providing mixed results for Hypothesis Five.

Limitations

While researchers frequently use EAVS data, the information provided comes from election administrators rather than poll workers themselves. The election official reporting makes assumptions as to why individuals do not work the polls on election day. Even in the comments section, "no one wants to work anymore" does not explain why citizens are not signing up to be poll workers. Burden and Milyo (2015) warn of problems utilizing the EAVS five-point survey measure of recruitment difficulty, as administrators may base their decisions on different understandings of what constitutes difficulty. An example would be administrators addressing the inability to recruit *competent* workers, rather than hiring enough individuals to cover the precincts or vote centers. With many seasoned poll workers getting too old to handle the long day and may not feel capable of keeping up with new regulations and technology, election administrators are looking for younger voters to step up. As many individuals have full-time jobs, they are already working on Election Day in a different capacity. Focusing on the perspectives of election boards only provides part of the story.

Missing data is another issue I faced when utilizing EAVS data. A local government official is usually the provider of the survey data, but for some, state officials list the same response for all counties and townships (for example, all responses from Wisconsin say "poll worker data is not tracked by the state") (EAVS 2025). Other comments are left blank, denying researchers important information.

Due to the use of mail-in ballots in some states, the job of the poll worker is not consistent across states and counties. The county administrators place poll workers in voting centers for voter information sources and utilize them for ballot counting or other tasks. These

states require a much smaller pool of poll workers as there is no need to staff every precinct. Based on this, some of my independent variables did not have complete data for certain states, primarily Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington State.

Future studies

Previous studies have reported mixed findings concerning poll worker pay. The amount of stipend received varies across states, and even across counties in the same state. According to McAuliffe (2009), the stipend awarded to poll workers has little impact on recruitment levels. However, other studies show that poll workers mention stipends, even small ones, as important (Jones and Stein 2021; Clark and James 2023). Because local governments often regulate the pay rate, determining the effect of stipends from the EAVS data is onerous. However, several election administrators did mention the low pay as a barrier to recruitment in the comments section of the EAVS data (2025). If election administrators continue to struggle with covering the needed positions, a closer look at stipends and their value to poll workers may be a necessary next step for research on poll workers, including the recruitment ease compared to the level of stipends. For more information on the perceived impact of poll worker pay, see Chapter Three.

While Foltz (2014) finds that vote centers reduced costs by reducing the number of poll workers necessary and Jones and Stein (2021) see a positive and significant relationship between the ease of recruitment and vote centers, scholars fear that combining precincts into a more centralized system may discourage voters, especially if any travel is involved, and wait time may be longer due to more voters using the centers (Chen et al. 2021). As these experiences may ultimately lead to fewer citizens voting in elections, it is important to identify any negative implications before implementing this in states that currently do not have vote centers. Sacrificing votes may outweigh the benefits of erecting additional vote centers. Additionally,

there should be more research on the value of vote centers, as the results from the 2024 EAVS do not correlate with those of Jones and Stein (2021).

Conclusion

In a society that relies on a million individuals to give a large portion of their day so that every citizen of voting age may voice his choice, we must understand what barriers keep election administrators from recruiting adequate numbers of poll workers. Some of these barriers may be necessary for transparency and fairness as well as fulfilling state law, such as partisan parity requirements; others may be available and not utilized, such as youth worker programs. Determining what policies hinder or help a state recruit is imperative in today's political climate. Practices that show promise for easier recruitment of poll workers within the 2024 EAVS quantitative data include the creation and use of youth work programs in non-metro areas and more relaxed residency requirements. States that currently require a poll worker to live and vote in the same precinct or township could adjust policies to ease restrictions. Allowing citizens to work anywhere within a county or an adjacent county would increase the pool of poll workers, as administrators could assign workers outside of their precinct and quickly find last-minute replacement workers. Additional conversations around the use of Independent and unaffiliated voters may also ease recruitment problems.

Election administrators provide additional practices listed in the comments section that could ease difficulty in recruitment. These include the use of social media, news media (such as public service announcements on local radio), and billboards, providing information tables at city events, universities, and high schools where individuals may sign up for poll work, the use of a temporary employment agency to fill positions left open, and allowing community groups, such as churches, civic groups, and neighborhood groups to "adopt" a location and make sure all positions are covered. Many of these options would not incur any additional costs to the county

or municipality, while others would require a fee. Choosing methods from this list will depend on state regulations and local budget constraints.

The United States needs poll workers now more than ever. Many dedicated poll workers are leaving without guarantees that the next generation of retirees will step in to fill that void. Because Election Day is not a federal holiday, many younger, able-bodied individuals cannot take a day off from work, either due to losing a day of pay or literally losing their jobs. Additionally, states that do not allow Independent and nonaffiliated voters are not only limiting their pool of available poll workers, but they are also limiting those citizens' ability to perform an important community service. Elections without sufficient staffing may create more than long lines and frustrated voters; there may be more mistakes and less trust in the electoral system. In today's polarized atmosphere, democracy may go by the wayside without these dedicated poll workers who are necessary for the election process.

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Appendix 1A: states that provided sufficient data for analysis

Arizona	Kansas	North Carolina
Arkansas	Kentucky	Ohio
California	Louisiana	Pennsylvania
Colorado	Maine	South Dakota
Delaware	Minnesota	Tennessee
District of Columbia	Missouri	Texas
Florida	Montana	Utah
Georgia	Nebraska	Virginia
Hawaii	Nevada	West Virginia
Idaho	New Jersey	Wyoming
Illinois	New Mexico	
Indiana	New York	

Chapter 3: *Perceived Administrative Challenges to Recruitment and Retention*

"Poll workers are the Achilles' heel of the elections process."
(Election official to Lush 2004)

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I determined that several factors affect both the ease and difficulty of recruiting poll workers, based on a five-point Likert scale from the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey that local election officials are asked to complete after federal elections. The data help us better recognize the impact that residency, vote centers, youth programs, and partisan parity requirements in both metro and non-metro areas have on recruitment, however, the data do not explain why an election administrator from Coconino County, Arizona determined recruitment was "somewhat difficult," or the administrator in the township of Sedgewick, Maine determined it was "very easy" to staff enough poll workers for the 2024 general election. These bureaucrats do the foundational work of running an election, including the hiring of poll workers. Each county election administration has its own struggles and successes in running elections. Population, state restrictions, and demographics may help or hurt in the recruitment and retention of poll workers. In this chapter, I use the administrators' own words from the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), the most recent EAVS data available. By analyzing administrators' comments, I determine what additional struggles administrators face in filling those job positions for early and Election Day voting. I also consider programs and other efforts that are positively associated with the recruitment and retention of poll workers.

Citizens of the United States vote every two years for their U.S. Congressperson and every three years for one of their two U.S. Senators, and local election boards manage these elections. These bureaucrats must also administer local and special elections, often several times

a year. Elections in the United States are highly decentralized compared to many other nations (Czapiewski 2025), with the planning and execution of elections left to local governments (Shanton 2019). It is also unusual that there is variation among "administrative units within the same national framework" (Partheymüller et al. 2022), as states vary in election regulations. There are strict guidelines for some aspects of elections that are imposed at the federal level, such as minimum voter identification requirements, types of balloting machines, and regulations around provisional ballots (Liebschutz and Palazzolo 2005), however, legislation such as the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 and the Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act (ECRA) of 2022 still allow states room to enforce additional regulations. Outside of federal requirements, states create their own policies concerning elections and task local election officials with the responsibility of implementing these regulations (*Who is in Charge* 2025). No two states run elections the same, creating inconsistent voting experiences for voters across states and even within states.

According to Benson (2008, 343-344), elections are the foundation of democracy, and our election officials serve as "our masons." Even though voters in general know little about election administrators, they are a critical component of government (Clark and Barsky 2026). These dedicated bureaucrats oversee all elections in their respective counties and are responsible for ensuring elections are free of fraud, partisan influence, and discrimination (Benson 2008). Money matters, as well. Past studies show that election administrations lack necessary finances (Montjoy 2010). This, on top of other issues administrators must face, creates a heavy administrative burden on these government workers.

Although election officials face numerous challenges, including regularly updated technology, budgeting, accessibility, and a contentious political environment (Hale et al. 2015a,

143), one of the most difficult aspects of running elections is the recruitment of poll workers (James and Garnett 2024). Survey data from the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), administered every two years following federal elections, consistently shows a trend over multiple election cycles: election administrators have difficulty recruiting enough poll workers. While COVID-19 and safety concerns in the form of threats and violence against election workers and their families have become a greater concern in recent years (Montellaro 2022; Watters and Gottlieb 2022; Hawley-Bates 2025), the interest in poll work began declining for more than a decade prior to the events following the 2020 presidential election

This chapter is organized as follows: I begin with the purpose of this study and the importance of understanding what administrators face in their daily jobs. I follow the purpose with a review of relevant literature concerning the job of the election administrator as a poll worker recruiter. I discuss the theoretical framework; I then present the methods and data, my findings, and their implications for administrators, poll workers, and future elections. I then discuss the limitations of this project and areas of study that researchers could build on to assist election boards with future recruitment and retention.

Purpose of study

The literature suggests that election administrators regularly deal with difficulties recruiting the necessary number of poll workers for early voting and Election Day voting (Jones and Stein 2021; Clark and James 2023; Greenberger 2024). Without knowing the reasoning behind an election administrator's survey answers, the EAVS data does not aid in rectifying difficulties. Quantitative methods can detect patterns and trends in the data, but qualitative data may enhance our understanding of what an official perceives as the reasoning behind ease or difficulty of recruitment. I aim to determine the perceived barriers and incentives that hurt or

assist election administrators when recruiting poll workers. Content analysis of the comments provided by those who plan and organize elections allows for both scholars and practitioners to gain a better understanding of the day-to-day struggles election officials face. This analysis will also allow administrators to adjust recruitment tactics when allowed to increase poll worker recruitment and retention.

Literature Review

Government workers who oversee elections have the important job of planning and running elections, normally quietly and without scrutiny. These professional bureaucrats must be skilled in problem solving, able to communicate effectively with both subordinates and the public, and effective at running elections (Clark and Barsky 2026). They are necessary for a democracy to flourish, but many citizens are unaware of what these civil servants do election after election. Although the United States' election process usually runs with only minor issues, a lack of management skills may reduce confidence in the process (James 2019), leading to lower voter turnout, suspicion of elections, democratic backsliding, and even violence (Elklit and Reynolds 2002). Additionally, poor management may also result in difficulties recruiting adequate numbers of poll workers necessary to run an election (Harris 1934, 8).

Before this century, election administration did not garner much interest in the public eye (Tokaji 2011), yet there is a record of election management issues noted in the literature. The United States government has a history of putting elections into the hands of "frequently ill-equipped, poorly trained" election administrators (Alvarez and Hall 2006). As far back as 1934, researchers have recognized the difficulties faced by election administrators, when the Brookings Institution claimed that the management of elections was likely the worst-managed area of public administration in the United States (Harris 1934, 1). Harris commented on this due to the

influence of political parties, minimal federal regulations, and a lack of uniformity across states (Alvarez and Hall 2006; Sitaraman and Stack 2023). Regardless, those tasked with running elections and those involved in recounts were basically the only individuals interested in the electoral process, leading to neglect of the system (Tokaji 2011).

Historically, election administrators and poll workers were "not quite considered public workers in the traditional sense" despite being vital to the electoral process (Clark et al. 2023). However, high-profile events over the last two decades have pushed county election employees and citizen volunteers into the limelight, proving that they are more than government employees, but also street-level bureaucrats with autonomy to decide who may vote (Kimball and Kropf 2006). Election administrators must maintain electoral registers, keep an updated list of organizations that allow the county to operate as polling stations, and make sure there are adequate staff for the counting process (James 2019). They also represent the face of government during the election cycle (Barsky 2024).

2000 presidential election and its consequences

Election administrators and other election workers took center stage in 2000, when the people of the United States waited five weeks to know if George W. Bush or Al Gore would be the next president in the closest presidential election in history (Mann 2001). The election came down to Florida's electoral votes; the media covered poll workers and election administrators counting butterfly ballots, as they worked to determine voter intent for those that were difficult to read (Cheng 2005, 7). The country had to wait for more than a month to know who the next president would be, as the case made its way to the United States Supreme Court. The Court eventually declared Bush the winner despite many votes going uncounted, leading to a loss of

trust in elections and questions concerning the neutrality of the Supreme Court to this day (Gey 2001; Elving 2018).

Election reform

The 2000 election created concern about future presidential elections, and lawmakers wished to close any loopholes that would allow for another contested election. Attention to the matter was swift, with a slew of reports conducted to consider issues such as technology at the polling stations, ballot security, issues around voter registration, and other aspects involving election administrators (Tokaji 2011). Congress quickly passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), revising some election laws to create uniformity across the United States. This included minimum voter identification guidelines, how election officials handle provisional ballots, and restricting the use of certain ballot machines in federal elections (Hall and Moore 2014; Election Assistance Commission 2023). It also required the creation of the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and provided over three billion dollars in federal funding (Montjoy 2010). However, states determine the bulk of election rules, while bureaucrats at the county and township levels are responsible for the execution of these laws and regulations (Hale et al. 2015b, 53).

Violence and fraud in US elections

Although HAVA made improvements to federal elections, the Act did not address all the country's electoral woes. The 2020 presidential election highlighted another concern that election workers have previously faced but was not well known to the public; public sector employees face more violence and threats of violence than those working in the private sector (Fischer et al. 2016; Thomas et al. 2019). This problem has surged since 2015 (*New Data* 2025); examples are the failed insurrection on the U.S. Capitol against Congress, the attempted kidnapping of

Governor Whitmer of Michigan (Kleinfeld 2021), and the murder of Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband in 2025. A 2023 survey reports that almost half of the responding election officials fear for their safety and that of their coworkers, with more than ten percent of those surveyed reporting personal threats against them (Sitaraman and Stack 2023). The fear of violence also spills over to the very people administrators must rely on to run elections—poll workers who are highly visible and serve as the face of the government on Election Day.

Citizens associate claims of fraud with the 2020 election; however, just as electoral violence is not a recent phenomenon for the U.S., neither is election fraud. Prior to the secret ballot, also known as the Australian ballot, election fraud was more prevalent. (Harris 1934, 17). Voting was "public, visible, and deliberately exposed" (D'Angelo 2024). The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw voter suppression through tactics such as literacy and "good citizen" tests, kidnapping, and street brawls (Gumbel 2008). While the secret ballot greatly reduced fraud and violence, the reports of misconduct continued.

Election fraud is difficult to define and prove; often what one sees as fraud may be incompetence, inexperience, or simple error (Alvarez et al. 2009, 2). Allegations of fraud are often not clear and depend on the context, and scholars have not determined the amount of fraud needed to constitute a "fraudulent election" (Alvarez et al. 2009, 2-3). It may present itself in a variety of ways, including through voter impersonation, the tampering of voting equipment (*Election Fraud* n.d.), false registration, and ineligible voting (*The United States has...* n.d.). Claims of rigged elections since 2020 create doubt in the eyes of the public about elections and put election workers in the crosshairs of conspiracy theorists and those buying into misinformation and disinformation touted by the media, politicians, and everyday voters (Albertson and Guiler 2020).

While lawmakers have put forth and passed election reform laws such as HAVA, most of these focus on changing the current electoral process without considering the effectiveness of the current election model (Alvarez and Hall 2006). Little legislation, especially at the federal level, addresses how to protect those working elections, an issue that since 2020 has plagued election officials in terms of recruitment and retention of poll workers. Even though Congress passed new legislation shortly after the January 6, 2021, insurrection, state and local governments had to create legislation to increase penalties against those who threaten or harm election workers (Gordon and Orey 2022). Currently, 39 states have extra protections for their elected officials and poll workers; 24 states either enacted legislation or updated their laws after 2020 (*State Laws* 2025).

Turnover

In today's political environment, election officials and poll workers face numerous issues that have pushed many to leave the job. These include new technology (and the difficulties of teaching poll workers how to use it), added scrutiny of their performance (Rinfret et al. 2018), anger toward election administrators, doxing and violence, and even pressures from elected officials and candidates (Elden and Norden 2023; Clark and Barsky 2026). There has been dissatisfaction among election administrators for years, leading to increased turnover, a reduction in institutional knowledge, and loss of social capital that previously drove poll worker recruitment. This trend increased following the 2020 election, when threats rose significantly; there were over one thousand reports of threats against election workers the year after the election, and the number of legitimate threats is likely underestimated due to the perception of what qualifies as a threat (Clark and Barsky 2024).

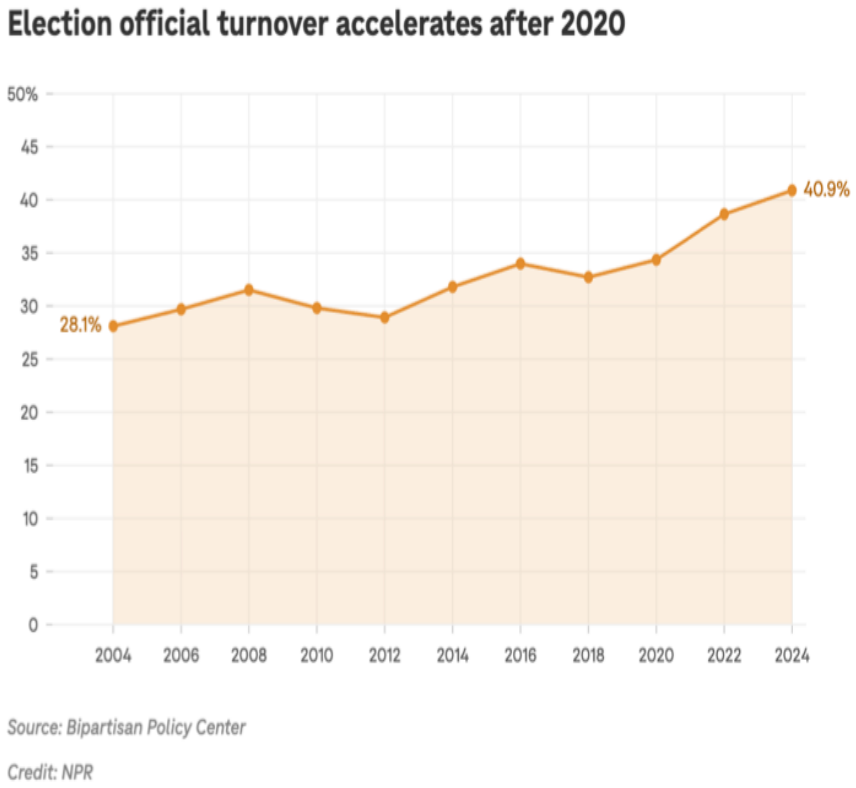


Figure 4: Election Official Turnover

In this new era of politics and political divide, public administrators now must do their jobs under greater scrutiny by poll watchers, politicians, and the public who have bought into the idea that our elections are no longer legitimate. Both external and internal pressures can create a stressful environment; responsibility for hiring adequate poll workers adds to the complications of the job, especially as year after year, administrators report struggles associated with hiring enough poll workers to get through an election cycle (Clark and James 2023; Barsky 2024).

Theoretical Framework—principal-agent and civic engagement

Election administrators, while responsible for the oversight of elections, must rely on citizen volunteers to make elections happen. Hundreds of thousands of citizens work the polls

each election to keep our democracy functioning. Election administrators face difficulties because they must hire poll workers without knowing much about their work ethic, knowledge of the process, ability to work technical equipment, motivation by self-interest, and ability to complete tasks. Principal-agent theory suggests that principals and agents may not share the same goals and that agents have more information than the principals (Waterman and Meier 1998). Some local election boards manage hundreds of precincts with thousands of workers, creating extensive principal-agent problems for the administrators. Principal-agent theory helps us understand the relationship between the administrator (principal) and the agent (poll worker), and it is useful in the inquiry of accountability in public institutions (Gailmard 2014).

Normally, a principal would monitor the agent to the best of his or her ability, but because poll workers often make decisions without management present, their use of discretion during an election may produce an outcome that is not preferable to the administrator (see Waterman and Meier 1998). An example of this would be discretion in who must show identification at the polls (Alvarez and Hall 2006). Many election officials cannot screen poll workers and turn away those that may not be the best fit due to time, money, and a lack of participation, creating adverse selection problems (Alvarez and Hall 2006); this exacerbates the problem, as unqualified applicants will have discretionary powers. This, along with the decentralized nature of elections and a high level of delegation, can increase information asymmetry (Alvarez and Hall 2006).

Because election administrators cannot observe poll workers at the polling station, they are at a disadvantage. This may affect their perception of how difficult or easy it is to recruit, but also their perception of the workers themselves. Some administrators mention the lack of quality workers; others have a very negative view of young workers. A few administrators complain about poll workers being picky about who they work with, even though these citizens are

offering their time for only a small stipend. Principal-agent theory may explain these attitudes toward certain poll workers.

While administrators have a disadvantage in terms of observation over poll workers making little money for a difficult job, they must first be able to recruit them to the job. Recruitment requires citizens to be civically engaged. The Civic Engagement Model, or Civic Voluntarism Theory, explains that political engagement and participation in political and civic life require resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al. 1995; Hoefer 2021). Resources of older adults may be time, civic skills such as effective communication, and enough money to take off from work if still employed (Verba et al. 1995, 271). Engagement requires some interest in civic life and politics as well as political efficacy that provides the impression of making a difference (Verba et al. 1995, 272). Recruitment involves networks; these may be church congregations, work connections, or other civic associations such as Rotary. Younger citizens likely lack the resources, engagement experience, or networks that provide information about and opportunities for participation (Hoefer 2021). Without a strong sense of civic duty or political efficacy, it is unlikely that citizens will take part in election work, especially since many counties provide little compensation (Hostetter 2020).

Several studies point to civic duty as a primary motivator for adults volunteering to work the polls (MacDonald and Glasser 2007; Lamb et al. 2025). Young people are concerned about their communities and wish to be engaged but may not know how to do so; they are also unsure if their service will positively impact the community (Watson 2025). As mentioned above, younger people likely do not have the same level of resources and networks as older adults. Generally, they also lack the political efficacy and knowledge (Schur et al. 2025). Additionally, they are not fond of the two-party system and see neither major party addressing the needs of

younger generations. Because of this, many younger citizens are registering as Independents or are unaffiliated with a political party due to a lack of connection with either major party. Over two-thirds believe the two-party system is not working for them or for the interests of the United States (Reilly and Hunting 2025). This is problematic, as 45 states have party-affiliated restrictions or privileges associated with the employment of poll workers, inspectors, and registrars (Reilly et al. 2025), limiting their ability to build civic engagement skills and better knowledge of the electoral process through poll work.

Expectations

Past data reflect that partisan parity requirements are problematic, as is the age of many poll workers. Political parties like having control over elections, but this can be difficult for election officials in terms of staffing (Reilly et al. 2025). As more individuals register as Independents or are unaffiliated voters, recruitment difficulty grows for states with a partisan parity requirement (Reilly et al. 2025). The departure of elderly poll workers who no longer can or wish to perform the duties on Election Day (EAVS 2025) has exacerbated the issue. Many can no longer sit for the approximately 14-hour day required. Since 2000, poll workers have been much more aware of the dangers of the job, as they witnessed threats and doxing (Lamb et al. 2025). I expect to find that partisan parity, aging, and the long day will be major factors in the perceived difficulty of recruitment of poll workers, as well as safety since the 2000 election and the events that followed. Based on previous research, I also expect that administrators will cite issues with last-minute cancelations and no-shows, based on the research of Fischer and Coleman (2008) and Burden and Milyo (2015). Because people who work the polls once are likely to return (Stein et al. 2019), I expect that returning workers will assist election officials in filling positions. Past research shows that vote centers require fewer workers, so I expect to find

that election administrators in counties with vote centers will perceive recruitment to be easier than in counties without them. Based on interviews conducted in Chapter Four, wishing to be part of the electoral process appears to be another motivation for individuals.

Methods and data

This study utilizes the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) from 2024. The Election Assistance Commission distributes this survey every two years following a federal election and is "the most comprehensive source of state- and local-jurisdiction-level data about election administration in the United States" (*A Guide to the Election Administration and Voting Survey 2024*). While Chapter One focuses on the difficulty levels of recruiting poll workers based on rurality and four other state regulations and programs, Chapter Two takes this one step further by analyzing administrators' comments as to why each county or township representative chose the level of difficulty or ease. This will not only assist scholars and practitioners in understanding how difficult it is to recruit but also give the reader an explanation of the perceived reasoning behind the choice provided.

I first determine which states do not provide adequate data in the EAVS survey and eliminate those states. After deletion of those, I analyze the remaining twenty-one states. Appendix A provides a list of these states. Most states have election officials at the local level take the survey; some states, however, "speak" for every county. For example, the state of Oklahoma gives the same answer for each county in the state. "The passing of SB 290, which increased pay for poll workers, aided in recruiting and retaining poll workers, however recruiting and retaining poll workers has historically been very difficult, and while improved, remains so" (EAVS 2025). After removing counties that provided a general answer at the state level or provided no comments whatsoever, 3210 observations remain from the original 6457 (after

removing U.S. territories). These account for county officials' responses to why they chose the answer to "*How difficult or easy was it for your jurisdiction to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers for the November 2024 general election? Please select one option."* Choices were based on a 5-point Likert scale, from "very difficult" to "very easy."

I search for themes using the sorting function in Excel. I then utilize STATA to analyze these themes to determine the frequency of use and the relationship between themes and the category of difficulty listed by the administrator. I have a colleague check a small sample of the observations to determine if my coding scheme is reliable. I then take a second look at the data to look for missed observations.

I find multiple recurring themes in the EAVS comments. Issues that negatively affect recruitment include partisan parity requirements, the aging out of poll workers, workers either canceling close to the election or do not show up for duty, small or rural communities with a limited number of available workers, individuals with safety concerns, the length of the day, low pay, a negative attitude toward young people, work barriers, lack of qualifications to perform the job well, staffing for early voting, the lack of bilingual workers, new technology, and "no one wants to work." I also code issues that create interest or assist election staff with hiring. These include a high return of past poll workers, greater interest in a presidential election, youth programs that allow high school students to work on Election Day, the use of social media and advertising methods, interest in being part of or learning the electoral process, and the use of vote centers that reduce the number of precincts that need staffing.

I search for multiple words to cover each issue. Search words for those topics that inhibit recruitment include "party," "Republican," "Democrat," "affiliated," and "parity" for partisan parity. This problem will likely continue for election officials, especially since there has been an

increase in independent and unaffiliated voters while membership in both major parties is declining (Jones 2022). For aging out, I search for "aging," "old," "older," "over," and "elderly." Words associated with canceling close to elections include "no-show," "cancel," "sick," "emergency," "drop out," "commit," and "backed out." I search for "rural," "small," "population," and "community" for issues with small populations that create limitations in terms of the number of available individuals. I search "safety," "scared," "threat," and "political climate" as concerns about the safety of elections. I consider "length," "long," "day," and "hours" for comments suggesting that the day is too long to acquire enough poll workers. "Pay," "low," "compensation," "wages," and "amount" are search words for the stipend being too low to attract poll workers. Some administrators appear to not have a positive attitude toward young people; I search for "young," "younger," and "generation" for this category. Work barriers also seem to be an issue, as many people cannot take off from work. I search for "work," "job," "employ," and "take off" for this issue. Lack of skilled workers is yet another theme, and I search for "skill," "qualified," and "unqualified." For issues concerning interpreters, I search for "bilingual" and "language." Many administrators state that people do not want to work during early voting, due to the number of days (the number of early voting days varies across states). I search for "early voting" for this category. New technology may inhibit some poll workers, especially those who are older. I search for "tech," "technology," "equipment," and "machines." Finally, administrators comment that "no one wants to work." I search for "no one," "interest," and "work" for this category.

There are also themes that election administrators mention as helping with staffing. Returning poll workers appears to be the number one reason election administrators perceive ease in recruitment. I search for "returning," "repeat," "past," and "retain." 2024 was a

presidential election; according to many survey respondents, this helps with acquiring the required number of poll workers. I search for “presidential election” for this category. Social media, advertising, booths, and other forms of outreach are also methods of recruitment; I search for ”social media,” “advertising,” “ads,” “booth,” and “outreach.” While not as prevalent, some administrators mention greater ease with recruitment when the state allows for vote centers, and I search for “vote centers.” Wanting to return due to a positive experience with staff is another category mentioned. For this, I search for “staff” and “good.” Although many administrators have a negative view of younger people, others mention that high school students cover positions not filled by adults. Most states have a youth program, allowing students 16 and 17 to perform duties at the polling station (age and duties vary by state). In order to determine the impact of youth programs, I search for “high school,” “students,” and “youth.” Finally, some administrators mention the desire of citizens to be a part of the electoral process. I search for “electoral process,” “democratic,” and “democracy.”

By analyzing the content of the comments in the EAVS 2024 data, researchers and practitioners can better determine the barriers to recruitment and retention of poll workers. They can also recognize and implement practices that aid in finding enough poll workers for an election. While changes at the state or federal level are the only way to lessen some barriers, programs that promote better recruitment, such as outreach programs, can bypass some of those barriers.

Findings

After omitting counties without usable data and comments that did not fit into one of the often-mentioned categories, I analyze 469 comments that mention at least one of the 21 categories. Within those comments, I code 713 observations within the categories. Fourteen

categories help explain barriers to recruitment, while seven are seen as issues that contribute to better recruitment. Table 1 shows the percentage for each category based on the 469 usable comments.

Table 2: Perceived Barriers and Assists in Recruitment and Retention

Perceived Reasons for Difficulty or Ease of Recruitment	Percentage of Mentions
Partisan Parity	20%
Aging	16%
No-show/Cancels	13%
Rural/Small	10%
Safety	5.3%
Youth-Negative	5.5%
Day Length	17%
Pay	6.8%
Work Barrier	7.9%
Qualifications	3.2%
Bilingual	1.9%
Early Voting	3.0%
No One Wants To	4.1%
Technology	1.1%
Returning	16%
Pres Year	9.0%
Social Media/Ads	5.1%
Vote Center	1.1%
Good Staff	0.4%
Youth Good	4.7%
Process	1.1%

Partisan parity is the issue most mentioned by election administrators who complete the EAVS survey for the 2024 election. The biggest barrier to recruitment, according to election officials, is the need for a mix of representation of the two major parties at each polling station. States determine how many workers registered with each of the two major parties are needed at each polling station; for some, it is as close as possible to an equal number of Democrats and Republicans at each polling station. For other states, it may be based on the party that currently

occupies the governor's mansion; in this case, a state with a Republican governor would staff precincts with an extra Republican if the precinct called for an odd number of poll workers. A total of 93 election administrators mention partisan parity as a barrier to recruitment (mentioned in 20% of the 469 usable comments).

The long day is the second most-mentioned issue (seventeen percent), followed closely by the loss of poll workers due to aging out (sixteen percent). Administrators mention the length of the day along with the issue of low pay, but they do not mention pay nearly as often. Poll workers aging out is the third most common reason administrators bring up as a detriment to recruitment. Administrators mention the loss of workers due to aging in 16 percent of usable comments. Another issue involves not showing up once committed. Between sick or emergency calls after receiving a poll station position or people simply not showing up on election day, administrators often struggle to fill vacated positions. Administrators bring this up in 13 percent of usable comments. Being in a rural or small county is another problem for recruitment; while some small county administrators pride themselves on working in a civic-minded community, many deal with small populations in which the elderly are having trouble performing the duties, and the young people who are still there work full-time and cannot take off for early voting and Election Day. Ten percent of respondents mention difficulties with recruitment due to population size; this does not always refer to rural counties; some administrators mention that only certain outlying precincts are difficult to staff.

In terms of boosting recruitment and retention, individuals returning to work the polls is the number one reason some administrators did not struggle with staffing. A poll worker who has worked a previous election is extremely likely to return and work in future elections (Stein et al. 2019). 16 of participants mention having enough poll workers returning from previous elections

to ease recruitment burdens. Additionally, presidential election years receive more public interest and are apparently easier to staff, but this does not always carry over to early voting, according to the comments. Nine percent of the comments mention greater ease in recruitment due to 2024 being a presidential election, suggesting that more exposure to presidential candidates creates more interest.

Next, I compare the responses to the five-point Likert scale that determines perceived difficulty and ease of recruitment and retention. This provides a clearer picture of the severity of each problem area, and the level of assistance programs provide. Many comments covered multiple issues; in some cases, election administrators mention issues within the same comment section that are both positive and negative. I provide a table of counts for each category in Appendix B.

Election officials mention the long day most in the "very difficult" category with a total of twenty-one mentions. Poll workers aging out follows with thirteen mentions. "No-shows" and rural or small counties tie with ten mentions each. Multiple categories show high numbers of mentions in the "somewhat difficult" category, including partisan parity (fifty-six mentions), the long day (fifty-two), current workers aging out (forty-two), "no-shows" (thirty-six), rurality (twenty-nine), and work barriers (twenty-five). Partisan parity and returning workers top the list for "neither difficult nor easy" in terms of recruitment. Returning workers are also the number one response for administrators choosing "somewhat easy" when asked about recruitment, with thirty-five mentions. 2024 being a presidential election year follows with twenty mentions. Administrators only provide a total of two comments from the barriers listed when considering the "very easy" category—one mention of rurality/small community and one mention of issues

due to work commitments. Returning poll workers receive the most comments for this category, closely followed by 2024 being a presidential election.

Finally, I run an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationship between difficulty levels and the twenty-one issues that administrators mention in the comments section. The dependent variable is the perceived difficulty level of recruitment, as mentioned above. Lower values indicate greater difficulty in recruitment. The model points to multiple predictors associated with perceived difficulty of recruitment and retention of poll workers. Specifically, partisan parity, canceling early or not showing up for a shift, the long day, and safety concerns are negative and significant at $p < .01$, indicating that election administrators perceive these issues as the top barriers to recruitment. Problems due to rural or small communities, a lack of qualifications of those applying to be poll workers, and the perception that "no one wants to work" are also significant, but at $p < .05$. Issues that do not show significance at conventional levels in the OLS model include the problem of workers aging out, a negative opinion of young people, the amount of pay received, barriers due to full-time jobs, difficulty finding bilingual workers where necessary, problems staffing for early voting, and concerns over working with new technology.

Table 3: OLS (significant variables only)

Difficulty of Recruitment	Coefficient	P> [z]
Partisan Parity	-.407 (.12)	0.001***
No-Show	-.520 (.16)	0.001***
Rural/Small	-.435 (.17)	0.013**
Safety	-.666 (.24)	0.006***
Day Length	-.630 (.15)	0.000***
Qualifications	-.664 (.32)	0.039**
"No one wants..."	-.667 (.27)	0.011**
Returning Workers	.862 (.14)	0.00***
Presidential Year	.909 (.18)	0.00***
Youth Good	.667 (.26)	.009***
N	3210	
R-squared	0.061	

***p < .01, **p < .05

I also consider topics mentioned in the comments that promote positive outcomes for the recruitment of poll workers. The two with the greatest statistical significance include utilizing poll workers from past elections (returning poll workers) and the fact that 2024 was a presidential election year. According to multiple administrators, more people show interest when it is time to vote for a new president. Returning workers, being a presidential election, and using individuals under the age of eighteen are all positive and significant at $p < .01$. Vote centers and individuals wishing to be part of the electoral process are not significant in the model. Social media, ads, or other outreach programs, as well as workers liking the election administration staff, are both negative but insignificant.

I also run an ordered logit as a robustness check. Four variables change in significance in the ordered logit model, but the differences are small. Aging moves from significant at $p < 0.1$ to not significant. Rural or small communities show $p < .013$ in the OLS model but move to $p < 0.009$ in the ordered logit. Both a negative outlook on youth and low pay are significant at $p < 0.1$ in the OLS model but become significant at $p < 0.05$ in the ordered logit model (0.056 for both youth negative and low pay in the OLS model; they are .043 and .044, respectively, in the ordered logit model). Lastly, "no one wants to work" is significant at $p < 0.05$ to significant at $p < 0.01$. See the Appendices for both full models.

Limitations

The use of the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) provides insights into what election administrators perceive as issues or assets to recruitment. Because individuals will have a different perception based on their experiences, satisfaction with the job, and personal biases, no two administrators will likely reach the same conclusions concerning recruitment. While the administrator may assume why recruitment was difficult, easy, or neither, there is no record of each potential recruit's reasoning for taking on the job or choosing not to perform the tasks associated with poll work. Internal validity is reduced based on the subjectivity of the dependent variable, the difficulty or ease of recruitment.

Additionally, not all county administrators provide an answer for why they chose a certain level of difficulty or ease. In fact, data are missing for several states, as some states provided the same answer for every county (examples are "poll worker data is not tracked by the state" in Wisconsin and "it is very difficult to hire poll workers in all CT municipalities due to long hours and low wages" in Connecticut (EAVS 2025). This limits the voices of the election administrators, leaving fewer responses to analyze.

Future research

Many of the barriers and programs utilized at the county level are not measurable in the EAVS data. For example, few administrators report how many high school students worked in an election or how many individuals refuse to work for low pay. The data are subjective, and each election administrator will see the ease of recruitment differently. Tracking numbers will help determine the severity of the problem or the ability to increase participation. The Election Administration and Voter Survey editors could accomplish this by adding questions to the survey. Researchers may also create additional surveys for distribution among poll workers and election staff with specific questions addressing these issues, as well as questions specifically for poll workers concerning how they heard about poll work, the ease of the application process, and the amount of money they received for each day of work and training. Although the Election Administration and Voting survey is an important tool in understanding poll worker recruitment, more details and questions specific to recruitment could assist researchers in forming best practices for practitioner use.

Another area of study for future research involves the impact of social media, public service announcements, outreach events, and other advertising methods. This includes Vet the Vote and Youth at the Booth. Election administrators who mention outreach report that these methods increase recruitment (EAVS 2025). Determining the significance of these recruitment methods will help administrators determine best practices for their county demographics.

Finally, encouraging local administrators to adopt award-winning training programs, such as the one in Pima County, AZ, could create more confidence among poll workers going into an election. Pima County presents simulations during poll worker training that mimic what workers may experience during early voting and Election Day, using small class sizes and opportunities

for hands-on learning. This would potentially reduce no-shows and last-minute cancellations and contribute to the retention of recruits, as it did in Pima County, Arizona, for the 2024 presidential election (*Pima County Pairs In-Person Simulations n.d.*). However, programs like this cost money to implement; an increase in federal funding would likely be necessary to boost training programs across counties.

Conclusion

For multiple election cycles, county election administrators have warned of recruitment difficulties for poll workers, yet little has been done to improve the long day, low pay, and safety concerns. U.S. elections have come under scrutiny for the second time in two decades, leaving many voters questioning the integrity of elections and those who work for county election boards. After the 2000 election, Congress took measures to improve the system but left many problems to the states. The 2020 election exposed additional flaws in the system, flaws that caused harm to people working the elections and to the integrity of our electoral process. While procedures remain secure and fair, the public continues to believe misinformation and disinformation, creating hostile environments for election administrators and those they hire to work the polls (see López 2023, for example). This distrust comes from multiple sources, including political elites, the decentralized system where a problem in one precinct may be exacerbated by the media, and the ”partisan media environment” (Bergeron-Boutin et al. 2025).

The U.S. electoral process is, for the most part, secure and fair, yet many citizens have lost faith in the system. Research shows that exposure to the electoral process, specifically working in some capacity for a county election board, increases trust in elections and is the number one predictor of an individual returning to work in future elections (Stein et al. 2019). Government, from the federal level to the local level, must work together to determine best

practices for running elections in which all citizens—Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and unaffiliated voters—may participate and wish to participate in the process. Until the federal government makes Election Day a national holiday, administrators will likely continue to contend with staffing issues, which may lead to overworked citizens who may make mistakes and poll workers who are fed up with long hours, low pay, and angry citizens.

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Appendix 3A: States with comments falling within at least one of 21 categories

Alaska (1)	Colorado	Indiana	Nebraska	Ohio	Utah
Arkansas	Florida	Kansas	New Jersey	South Dakota	
Arizona	Hawaii	Kentucky	New Mexico	Tennessee	
California	Illinois	Montana	Nevada	Texas	

Appendix 3B: Frequency of responses based on recruitment difficulty

	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	Total
Parity	9	56	16	12	0	93
Aging	13	42	11	7	0	73
No-show	10	36	10	4	0	60
Rural/Small	10	29	4	5	1	49
Safety	8	14	2	1	0	25
Youth (Neg)	6	16	3	1	0	26
Day Length	21	52	8	0	0	81
Low Pay	9	21	1	1	0	32
Work Barrier	6	25	4	1	1	37
Quals	4	11	0	0	0	15
Bilingual	2	5	0	2	0	9
Early Voting	0	13	1	0	0	14
"No one"	4	14	1	0	0	19
Technology	0	3	2	0	0	5
Returning	0	7	23	35	10	75
Pres. Year	0	6	7	20	9	42
Advertise	3	4	7	7	3	24
Vote Centers	1	2	0	0	2	5
Good Staff	1	0	1	0	0	2
Youth Positive	0	3	9	6	4	22
Process	0	0	2	3	0	5
Total	107	359	112	105	30	713

Appendix 3C: Ordinary Least Squares Model

	Coefficient	P>|z|
Partisan Parity	-.407	0.001***
	(0.12)	
Aging	-.281	0.068*
	(0.15)	
No-show	-.520	0.001***
	(0.16)	
Rural/small	-.435	0.013**
	(0.17)	
Safety	-.666	0.006***
	(0.24)	
Youth Negative	-.464	0.056*
	(0.24)	
Day Length	-.629	0.00***
	(0.15)	
Pay	-.432	0.056*
	(0.23)	
Work barrier	-.311	0.128
	(0.20)	
Qualifications	-.665	0.039**
	(0.32)	
Bilingual	-.565	0.155
	(0.40)	
Early voting	-.033	0.920
	(0.33)	
“No one wants...”	-.700	0.011**
	(0.27)	
Technology	.080	0.886
	(0.56)	
Returning workers	.862	0.000***
	(0.14)	
Presidential year	.909	0.000***
	(0.18)	
Social media	-.013	0.958
	(0.25)	
Vote center	.163	0.759
	(0.53)	
Good staff	-.918	0.283
	(0.86)	
Youth (good)	.667	0.009***
	(0.26)	
Process	.593	0.274
	(0.54)	
N	3210	
R-squared	0.061	

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, * p < 0.10

Appendix 3D: Ordered logit model

Variable	Coefficient	P>|z|
Partisan Parity	-0.544	0.002***
	(0.18)	
Aging	-0.364	0.104
	(0.22)	
No-show	-0.728	0.001***
	(0.22)	
Rural/Small	-0.669	0.009***
	(0.26)	
Safety	-0.991	0.007***
	(0.37)	
Youth Negative	-0.714	0.043**
	(0.35)	
Day Length	-0.973	0.000***
	(0.22)	
Pay	-0.673	0.044**
	(0.33)	
Work Barrier	-0.398	0.174
	(0.29)	
Qualifications	-1.002	0.028**
	(0.46)	
Bilingual	-0.887	0.148
	(0.61)	
Early Voting	0.130	0.775
	(0.45)	
“No one...”	-1.013	0.009***
	(0.39)	
Technology	0.248	0.741
	(0.75)	
Returning	1.187	0.000***
	(0.20)	
Presidential Year	1.256	0.000***
	(0.26)	
Social Media	-0.067	0.854
	(0.37)	
Vote Center	0.073	0.936
	(0.91)	
Good Staff	-1.587	0.209
	(1.26)	
Youth Good	0.971	0.007***
	(0.36)	
Process	0.737	0.293
	(0.70)	
N	3210	-
Pseudo R^2	0.0202	

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05

Chapter 4: *"An Army of Volunteers" (Hansen and Slagsvold 2020): What Incentivizes Citizens to Work the Polls?*

Free and fair elections don't just happen by accident; it takes work to make those things happen, and it takes people" (Oregon resident, November 25, 2025).

The electoral administration literature is vast, yet the people who make elections successful, the poll workers themselves, have no true home in the literature. Articles on poll workers can be found among multiple subfields, including election administration, public administration, and the volunteerism scholarship. With a few exceptions, studies focus on motivations of poll workers, and researchers use surveys to determine the attitudes and experiences of this unique group of individuals who sit somewhere between temporary employees and government volunteers. This project takes it one step further by asking in-depth questions to working and former poll workers; understanding their point of view on the work entailed, the barriers they see on Election Day, and considering their ideas for better recruitment can provide vital information to election administrators struggling to fill all the vacancies for any given election. I find that working the polls for elections is very personal for many. They wish to be civically engaged, learn the process, and help keep democracy alive for citizens of the United States. Being a poll worker creates more faith in the electoral system, as participants understand the process and see, firsthand, how difficult rigging an election is. Many are inspired to work again, regardless of the amount of the stipend, to continue their community involvement, make new friends, and feel accomplished.

Introduction

Poll workers are the workhorses of the electoral system, arriving before the sun rises and staying long after dark. States and counties use a plethora of names to describe poll workers, including judges, inspectors, super poll workers, clerks, and precinct officials (Favreau and Hanks 2016; Gordon and Orey 2022); regardless of how they are identified, fourteen-hour days are the norm, and they do it for little to no pay and minimal recognition. While voters expect to see smiling faces greet them at their precinct and assist them with casting a ballot, most voters have little knowledge of poll workers beyond the few minutes of interaction at the polling station on Election Day. Many are not aware that these dedicated citizens set up polling stations, monitor their precincts for twelve hours, then dismantle the equipment, handle provisional ballots, and return everything to a secure location (Hale et al. 2025). They may also work during early voting, which varies based on state and local laws. Depending on the location, the stipend

may only cover transportation and food costs for the day. One thing is certain: without poll workers, county election officials would not have the manpower to run successful elections.

Most poll workers are of retirement age (Burden and Milyo 2015; Barthel and Stocking 2020), as their schedules allow for greater flexibility than other age groups. This is especially true as Election Day is not designated a holiday in the United States. However, many are having to "retire" from poll work, as they are no longer physically or cognitively able to work twelve- to fourteen-hour shifts (Gerton 2026). Although the number of volunteer hours has increased in recent years, the nation is seeing a decline in overall numbers of people volunteering for nonprofits and government institutions (*Where are America's Volunteers?* 2018).

Understanding why citizens participate in poll work is critical. Data show poll worker recruitment has fallen short over multiple election cycles. Election administrators struggle to recruit the number of poll workers needed to run elections, and little research focuses on the reasons behind the decrease in interest. Past surveys provide knowledge regarding poll worker motivations and recruitment (see Clark and James 2023; Lamb et al. 2025), and a few studies have utilized interviews to gather data. McAuliffe (2009) conducted interviews and found that democracy, responsibility, and public service were key motivations for poll workers, but interviewed only four participants. Suttmann-Lea (2020) interviewed 24 poll workers, but her participants were all from Chicago and focused on the interpretation of vote eligibility through signature comparisons. This project takes on a larger sample of past and current poll workers, part-time and full-time trainers, and election administrators across multiple states. It aims to capture what incentivizes them to participate in election work and what keeps them returning, especially since COVID-19, fears since the January 6th insurrection, and the aging out of retired, dedicated poll workers. Election officials maintain a robust candidate list, lest the United States

lose the ability to have fair, impartial elections. Understanding how incentives entice poll workers may bring about the discovery of best practices for recruitment and retention for future election cycles.

Purpose of study

According to Stein et al. (2025), there is a need to determine which methods of poll worker recruitment work best for a particular audience. This study takes on that challenge by hearing directly from those who do the job. Surveys of poll workers have provided valuable insight into recruitment, retention, and motivation; however, previous interviews either did not have variation in location or consisted of a small number of poll workers (see McAuliffe 2009 and Suttmann-Lea 2020). I speak with election workers from different parts of the country to hear a variety of voices of those "in the trenches" during early voting and on Election Day. Poll workers themselves are the best subjects to provide this information in an interview format, allowing for more complex answers than those from a survey. These interviews give us a look into a poll worker's day, hours worked, technical issues faced, the poll worker-voter relationship, and why poll workers do what they do despite low pay, long hours, and the possibility of harassment, or worse, from the public. This project seeks to determine what incentivizes poll workers to do the job, whether it be once to cover positions during COVID-19 or over multiple years and election cycles. The information gathered through these interviews will assist election administrations in recruitment strategies, retention of previously trained poll workers, and factors that can improve both the perceived and actual safety of all election workers in future elections. It is also imperative that we understand what events or circumstances would keep them from returning to work the polls. In this polarized climate, it is critical that we find ways to keep the polls open.

This project is constructed as follows: I begin by reviewing literature that covers the rise in interest in poll workers by scholars and election administrators and studies conducted concerning their motivations and behavior. Following this, I discuss theory that helps explain why poll workers would spend fourteen hours of their day being of service to the government. I then cover the methods and data utilized for the project, along with my findings. I conclude with a discussion of the limitations of my research and future issues around the subject of poll workers that scholars should address.

Literature review

There is a lack of information on the history of the poll worker, but election administrations have utilized citizen volunteers since the early 1800s (King 2017). Scholarly literature has overlooked these dedicated servants for years. Much of what we know about elections comes from the election administration literature, which is based on the processes, regulations, and efforts of the full-time bureaucrats who conduct these elections (Atkeson et al. 2014; Suttmann-Lea 2020). Additionally, voting literature is heavily focused on citizens' preferences and behaviors (Hostetter and Lebron 2024). Most of what we know from the scholarship on poll workers involves training, motivations to work, and the poll worker-voter experience (see Erickson et al. 2007; Favreau and Hanks 2016; Clark and James 2023; Barsky 2024).

Literature that posits poll workers as street-level bureaucrats focuses on the use of discretion at polling stations and the relationships with voters as the face of the government (Hall et al. 2009; Barsky 2024). Lipsky (1980) first coined the term "street-level bureaucrat" as the government worker who works directly with citizens, and designated police officers, teachers, and other individuals who work in a government capacity and deal directly with the public as

such. Kimball and Kropf (2006) and Hall et al. (2007) have associated this term with poll workers, as they are the direct connection between citizens and the government during elections (Erickson et al 2007). However, without the norms, expectations, and experience of full-time bureaucrats, as well as a lack of close supervision and short training sessions, this may be problematic due to these "bureaucrats" being one-day workers only a few times a year who have great responsibility but little incentive to perform the tasks well, other than their own work ethic and dedication to their country.

The rise of poll worker scholarship: HAVA

Poll workers began to catch the attention of scholars soon after the 2000 presidential election, when the public became aware of issues of counting votes with "hanging" and "pregnant" chads in Florida (see Harris 2004), giving George W. Bush enough electoral votes to defeat Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore. Voting machines used at this time did not completely punch through many of these infamous "butterfly ballots," leaving poll workers and election administrators to interpret the intent of the voter. For thirty-six days, Americans waited for the outcome, ending with a Supreme Court ruling in favor of Bush (Hall and Moore 2014). Following the 2000 presidential election debacle, Congress quickly passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to assist in streamlining federal elections. HAVA provided voter identification requirements, created regulations for provisional ballots, and eliminated the use of punch-card voting machines for presidential and congressional elections (Liebschutz and Palazzolo 2005). It also provided funding for the purchase of new voting machines (King 2017). Unfortunately, HAVA did little else to ease any burdens poll workers face, such as low wages, long hours, and a lack of legal protections to take time off from work to perform a community service like those associated with jury duty.

2020 and the ECRA Act

HAVA was meant to improve national elections, but there were still flaws in the law. Nearly 20 years after the federal government implemented HAVA, the United States found itself in another election crisis, one that may forever taint the trust in its electoral system. Misinformation and disinformation concerning the 2020 election spread across social media platforms, news outlets, and by both sitting officials and political candidates that the upcoming elections would likely be "rigged" and fraught with fraud (Park-Ozee and Jarvis 2021; Wagoner 2021).

After the attempted insurrection on January 6, 2021, Congress quickly passed additional legislation to close the loopholes used in the effort to overturn the election. However, the Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act (ECRA) provided little improvement in the safety and security for poll workers. Some states took it upon themselves to craft legislation protecting election officials and poll workers from violence and doxing (Clapman 2023), including creating emergency response plans with local law enforcement, security training, and enhancing physical security at polling stations (*Local Election Officials Survey* 2024). Maine and Colorado are two states that created specific protections against intimidation of or interference with the official duties of election staff and volunteers (Gordon and Orey 2022).-Even so, many poll workers still deal with confrontational voters at the polls, who continue to question election integrity, often in a threatening manner. (CNA013; NCW014 interviewed by author December 1, 2025; OHK201, interviewed by author January 5, 2026).

Problems of recruitment and retention

News organizations reported that there was a shortage of poll workers in multiple counties across the country in 2022 due to events that occurred during the 2020 election,

including COVID-19 and threats on workers' lives and those of their loved ones (Hamilton 2022; Montellaro 2022; Watters and Gottlieb 2022; Lamb et al. 2025). According to Clark et al. (2023), Reuters found and recorded more than 800 threats against election workers and their loved ones. This exacerbated the already existing issue of poll worker recruitment. Additionally, election administrators have been leaving for some time (see Chapter 2); turnover of paid staff accelerated from 2020 to 2024, which lead to a reduction in institutional knowledge.

Another issue surrounding elections and recruitment involves the average age of the poll worker. As many are elderly, there are concerns that staffing will become even more difficult as they age out due to physical abilities or illness (Barsky 2024), and there are contradictory predictions as to whether the newest generation to retire will be as willing to work in this capacity as their predecessors have (McAuliffe 2009). Less than one-fifth of poll workers are under the age of 41 (Nelson 2019); according to Barthel and Stocking (2020), 58 percent of poll workers were over the age of 61 during the 2018 general election, with 27 percent of those being over the age of 70. On Election Day, poll workers are on duty for a twelve-hour day, plus an hour each for setup and tear down. Within the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS 2025) data, administrators mention the length of the day frequently as a reason they struggle to fully staff elections, as fourteen-plus hours is difficult for those who are elderly or have full-time employment.

With so much uncertainty, understanding what incentivizes an individual to do the job of a poll worker is critical to recruitment and retention. The literature already shows that many motivations of poll workers can look like those of volunteers in general, which often include altruism (Clark and James 2023). However, past studies point to civic duty as being a primary motivator for poll workers (McAuliffe 2009; James 2019). A 2006 survey of poll workers found

that community service and civic duty are top motivators for individuals to become poll workers, followed by being part of the electoral or democratic process (MacDonald and Glasser 2007). Lamb et al. (2025) surveyed over 5000 poll workers and found that those not recruited by family or friends cite civic duty as the number one priority for working the polls.

Theoretical framework

In this study, I consider how incentives offered by county governments entice citizens to work the polls during early voting and on Election Day. Clark and Wilson's 1961 Incentive Theory is an organizational theory that considers why individuals join organizations and is based on three types of incentives—material, solidary, and purposive. Few organizations can focus on more than one incentive (Clark and Wilson 1961). Election administrations, however, rely on all three, as motivations differ across ages and demographics (McBride et al. 2011), and therefore, so do their preferences for incentives. While Clark and James (2023) previously made a connection between incentives and poll work, their sample is composed of English citizens and the use of surveys, and the findings are more than 10 years old. Since then, we have seen extreme political polarization in the United States, including an attempted insurrection against the government. As election officials have reported recruitment difficulties for more than a decade (see Burden and Stein 2021), understanding how citizens respond to incentives is critical for future recruitment.

Material incentives are just that: material rewards received for participation in an organization. Organizations such as the National Rifle Association and the American Association of Retired People may offer items such as car decals, mugs, magazines, and discounts with partners such as hotels and entertainment (see Knoke 1986). Mancur Olson places great emphasis on material and solitary incentives, as he sees humans as rational beings who are self-

interested and are likely to free ride without them (Olson 1971, 71). Studies have shown that for some demographics, a stipend, even a small one, is an incentive to volunteer (McBride et al. 2011; Barsky 2024). This is especially true for older adults; they tend to stay longer with an organization when a stipend is involved and report "higher perceived benefits" than those who do not receive one (McBride et al. 2011). Monetary incentives also broaden the pool of potential poll workers from diverse populations (McBride et al. 2011).

Solidary incentives provide individuals with friendship and social status. Many poll workers, especially those who are retired, may benefit greatly from the social aspects of seeing friends and family during their shift at the polling station. Iskandarsyah and Setyowibowo (2020) find that having strong ties to family, friends, and community can create a greater quality of life for those who have retired, as does having a role in the community and feeling useful. Participating in activities that allow for social interaction decreases the likelihood of loneliness and depression (Suparmi et al. 2024). Solidary incentives may also benefit those who have yet to retire, as Yamashita and colleagues (2019) show that young and middle-aged individuals often volunteer to increase social networking opportunities.

Lastly, many of these individuals work the polls for the purposive incentives offered. Purposive incentives do not necessarily benefit the individual participating in organizational activities; they are more concerned with serving for the greater good by contributing to some goal or purpose (Smith 1981). Organizations that use purposive incentives often focus on the service the organization provides (Clark and Wilson 1961). In the case of the poll worker, purposive incentives may include helping people vote, serving their communities, or "doing their part" to maintain a strong democracy through elections (Clark and James 2023). Purposive incentives have proven useful in the nonprofit and voluntary literatures, showing that these

"intangible satisfactions...[are] a means to some valued end" (Smith 1981; see also Lamothe and Lavastida 2020).

I argue that a parallel can be drawn between Clark and Wilson's (1961) theory of organizational incentives and why citizen volunteers work long hours for only a small stipend. As I will show in this chapter, all three types of incentives motivate individuals to work the polls. Considering Clark and Wilson's incentive structure as a means of recruiting individuals provides researchers and practitioners with a clearer awareness of what drives people to serve and provides an opportunity to create recruitment strategies that will garner the attention of those with different incentives to participate.

Methods and data

This study is qualitative in nature, relying on semi-structured, open-ended interview questions from twenty-eight poll workers, poll workers who also serve as part-time trainers, and full-time election administrators from twenty states and twenty-three counties across the nation. I conduct personal interviews from August 2025 through January 2026 by telephone, in person, and over Zoom. I message approximately 127 individuals on the social network platform LinkedIn who mention "poll worker," "election judge," or "election worker" in their profile or in a post. Those I interview chose their preferred method of communication. From that list, I interview eighteen LinkedIn respondents. I also interview four personal acquaintances. The remainder is a snowball sample, for a sample size of six individuals. I perform eleven interviews over the telephone, fourteen over Zoom, and three in person. I assign each interviewee a code consisting of a number and letters to protect his or her identity. While this is not a representative sample of current poll workers or the general population, I interview college students and recent graduates, individuals working full-time jobs, and those who have retired; I also interview

workers of varying race and ethnicity, although white individuals make up the largest percent of respondents.

Because I contact individuals through a social media platform, I interview those who responded, regardless of demographics. I talk with individuals from both blue and red counties across multiple states. I utilize Audacity, Apple Voice Recorder, and Zoom to record the interviews before transcribing them. While this study focuses on poll workers, I also interview three full-time administrators (included in the total count). One administrator is a full-time trainer for her county who received an award for her training program but has never served as a poll worker. Another is the assistant director of elections who trains and recruits poll workers and performs other election-related business in her county, such as serving as a liaison for political parties and the Secretary of State. This individual was an election observer in multiple countries and worked the polls in U.S. elections, as well. The third full-time employee was also a poll worker for many years before taking on a full-time position as the poll worker coordinator in her county. All three are currently employed in these roles by their respective county governments.

Table 4: States Represented in Interviews

Alabama	Georgia	New Jersey	Pennsylvania
Arizona	Iowa	New Mexico	Texas
California	Kentucky	Ohio	Wisconsin
Colorado	Michigan	Oklahoma	West Virginia
Florida	North Carolina	Oregon	Wyoming

Questions asked in the interviews include what incentivizes individuals to become poll workers and what makes them return, or if someone worked only one election, why the individual did not return. I also inquire about experiences witnessing any kind of fraud and how they feel about elections being "rigged." As conspiracy theorists and sitting politicians continue to push claims of fraud, I ask these workers about their personal experiences at the polling stations during their shifts. Lastly, I ask participants to share their thoughts on what would keep them from returning to work the polls on Election Day. For the administrators, the questions are slightly different to capture the voices of those employed at the county level. The questions focus on how they recruit, what recruitment methods work best for their counties, what issues hamper their ability to recruit, and what they would change about the processes in their counties. The wording of the interview questions is in Appendix C.

Table 5: Approximate Age Ranges of Participants

Interviewee Age Ranges	College/Early Career	Mid-career	Late-Career/Retired
	5	15	8

Findings

Several themes quickly became apparent as I transcribed the interviews. Most interviewees show interest in purposive incentives, those that focus on helping or being a part of something important to society. One answer that stands out when asked why they continue to work at the polls is a desire to make sure all registered voters may cast a ballot. An interviewee from Wisconsin stated, "I'm playing my part and helping all these people to vote. Helping people vote is really important" (2PEW, interviewed by author October 2, 2025). Another often-

repeated theme that is closely related to the previous finding is helping people more generally. This appears to be why many of those interviewed continue to work the polls. One retired teacher from Florida stated that her purpose is always to "take care of the voters," who all deserve respect (1REF, interviewed by author August 29, 2025). A poll worker from the Upper Midwest stated, "I think everybody is doing it because they want to make voting easy and they want to help people vote" (1PXO, interviewed by author October 29, 2025). Even some of the younger participants who specifically signed up to receive compensation also mentioned the desire to help. A recent college graduate from the Midwest said, "I think it was...helping voters in town, you know, cast their ballots" (1KMI, interviewed by author September 9, 2025). This is in line with the findings of Hopkins and Dowell (2022), who surveyed volunteers from the nonprofit sector; they determined that more than fifty percent of those 16-24 and 25-64, and over forty-seven percent of participants over sixty-five claimed wanting to help others as a motivation to volunteer.

Understanding and participating in the electoral process is another purposive incentive brought up by numerous poll workers I interviewed. Nine poll workers and one administrator across all age groups mentioned understanding the process as a reason for being involved in elections. A new college graduate who saw an ad for poll workers commented: "that could be interesting [to] see kind of how the process works from the inside" (1KMI, interviewed by author on September 9, 2025). A retired participant suggested that "everyone should help with the political process" (2LPN, interviewed by author September 5, 2025); a woman from the central part of the United States found it fun and exciting to learn about and understand the process better (1HDO interviewed by author January 5, 2026).

Based on past research and findings on civic duty, I expected to find that civic duty was a top motivation of the poll workers I interviewed (McAuliffe 2009; Hostetter 2020; Clark and James 2023). Eight participants mentioned civic duty; at least two participants in each age group use the term during the interviews. Perhaps the conflicting results between past studies and my interviews are due to the nature of these studies; most used surveys to gather data. Because the surveys listed "civic duty" as an option, this may have prompted respondents who might not have used the term as a primary reason for volunteering for an election. McAuliffe (2009) also identified civic duty as an important factor, but her interview sample included only four individuals. There is the possibility that, without a prompt, civic duty did not immediately come to mind. Another possibility is that individuals define civic duty differently; I asked the few who mentioned civic duty how they define the term. One defined it as "any job that helps any of the government and its service to the community" (2PEW, interviewed by author on October 2, 2025). A similar definition of civic duty comes from a worker from the Southwest as "doing something that helps the government function well" (1YDN, interviewed by author September 8, 2025). Another did not give a definition but explained it in these words: "don't talk about it, be about it" (1LKN, interviewed by author September 3, 2025).

Another factor concerning civic duty may be generational. One group of researchers sees Millennials as selfish, narcissistic, and materialistic (Twenge et al. 2012; Ertas 2016), while others see them as having an attitude of "community first," and a positive outlook on life (Greenberg and Weber 2009). While Millennials may not be as politically active as older generations have been, their rates of volunteerism resemble those of past generations (Ertas 2016).

Battocchio et al. (2023) suggest that members of Gen Z "share a view of citizenship that entails a decreased experience of duty and obligation, [and a] decreased identification with and trust in parties." Instead, young people are performing acts such as participating in community activities and volunteering (Battocchio et al. 2023). According to the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, nine out of 10 members of Generation Z feel a need to get involved in their communities, but 37 percent are not sure how to do so (Watson 2025). Statistics also show that 33 percent of Gen Z think that their community service will not make any difference (Watson 2025). Older generations tend to have a higher degree of internal efficacy than the youngest generation (Andersen et al. 2021). Tatar (2017) finds there are generational differences among groups concerning civic action and participatory citizenship, but all generations interviewed for this study reported a great desire to make their communities better. Few young people used the words "civic duty" in the interviews, but giving time to their communities seems to be extremely important. One recent college graduate sees the importance of getting involved in the community, while another still in college expressed, "I wanted to sort of feel involved and connected with my community (1WMN, interviewed by author November 18, 2025). Perhaps younger people see civic duty and civic engagement as separate activities; one being an expectation and the other being one of choice. It also may involve how they have been educated about civic engagement; Clark and Barsky (2026) list numerous phrases that teachers may use to describe it, including "citizen participation," "community organizing," and "democratic citizenship."

Interestingly, the material incentive of the stipend was a priority only for the young people interviewed. Several people I spoke with were not even aware of the stipend before inquiring about the task and assumed it was an unpaid position; they discovered they would

receive a stipend at training (2PSO, interviewed by author on September 2, 2025; 1PXO, interviewed by author on September 29, 2025). One participant who was not initially aware of the pay mentioned that "everyone says that their first election," referring to the assumption that poll work is unpaid (2MRF, interviewed by author on August 20, 2025). Another interviewee said, "I was going into it thinking it was a volunteer opportunity" (2BRW, interviewed by author on November 25, 2025). A retired participant said, "I'd probably do it for free, but the money is very helpful" (1YDN, interviewed by author on September 28, 2025). Many others agree. Participants from the working/middle-age and retiree groups repeatedly stated that they would likely do it for no pay, suggesting that a stipend is helpful for some, but rarely necessary to recruit and retain workers other than those who are younger and those currently searching for work. Several participants, especially the younger ones, said that they believe most of the individuals they worked with at the polls did not do it for the stipend. Only one person currently looking for full-time employment mentioned that in her experience, "most people seem to be doing it for the money" (1LKN, interviewed by author September 3, 2025), which may reflect her own attempts at finding employment.

Issues concerning retention

Most individuals I interview are returning poll workers. Those who have only worked one election or have stopped returning have quit because they cannot get time off work or because they are away from their precinct, such as students attending college in another state during elections. Retention is normally high; the best predictor of returning poll workers is having worked the polls in the past (Stein et al. 2019). However, administrators mention in the 2024 EAVS data that older poll workers are aging out due to both physical and cognitive decline. Articles on both volunteerism and elections mention this issue (Einolf 2008; Barsky 2020).

Capturing the late Baby Boomers, those currently reaching retirement age, is no guarantee, even though previous generations have stepped up to volunteer on a mass scale (Einolf 2009).

When asked what problems or events would deter them from being poll workers, participants provided only two answers. Some mentioned personal safety, which is no surprise, since the misinformation and disinformation about rigged elections and voter fraud convinced many citizens that poll workers were tampering with elections. Many have a heightened sense of concern but have yet to experience any threats of bodily harm. The only other reason for not returning that I received was "obvious" fraud at the state level, specifically the Secretary of State. All other respondents feel confident that elections are not rigged due to the bipartisan nature of the work at the polling stations (as most states require some form of partisan parity) and the number of individuals involved in the process.

The question of rigged elections

The topic of rigged elections and voter fraud made headlines prior to the 2020 election and continues today. The media reported claims of rigged elections and fraud by sitting elected officials, political influencers, and others spreading conspiracy theories to question the integrity of U.S. elections. Because this is such a hot topic, it is important to determine how poll workers feel and understand their lived experiences. The United States has decentralized elections, with numerous layers of protection. Poll workers, poll watchers, ballot machines and counters, and election administrators are involved in each county or township. Both veteran poll workers and first-time workers discuss this in the interviews. One young poll worker from the Midwest states: "I don't see how anyone [can] really try to perpetrate any type of fraud" (1KMI, interviewed by author September 9, 2025). Another poll worker from West Virginia responded that "there was always a Republican and a Democrat next to each other" (2BRW, interviewed by author on

October 31, 2025), implying that the political parties keep each other in check. Another interviewee commented that they are "low-level" workers who do not have the capacity to rig an election (2MRF, interviewed by author August 20, 2025). A participant from the Pacific Northwest shared his issue with claims of fraud with this statement, "it's such a big myth and such a big issue...that we spend a lot of time and energy [on]. I felt like we could have been doing other work if those fears weren't amplified" (2HJO, interviewed by author October 31, 2025). All suggested that nothing even vaguely looks like fraud at the county level, although two participants mentioned the fact that there are gray areas when it comes to the state level and the Secretary of State, in which votes or voters could be manipulated. She used the wording of a state question on a ballot as an example (1PXO, interviewed by author October 29, 2025). Conversations about fraud between voters and poll workers vary based on the state's regulations. For example, New Jersey and New Mexico do not require identification except when a voter first registers in the state ("State Voter ID Rules" 2025). This seems to be a bone of contention for many voters, and poll workers were often on the receiving end of their anger. "There's a certain party that comes in, and they want to fight. Why don't you take my ID? How do you know I am who I say I am?" reported one worker from the northern part of the country (1LKN, interviewed by author September 3, 2025). North Carolina recently struck down a bill that required identification to vote. Poll workers there experienced the same type of issue. One voter slammed down his identification and yelled "don't you need to know who I am?" at one worker I spoke with (1WMN, interviewed by author November 18, 2025).

There is also the false rhetoric that voting by mail increases the risk of "illegal" voting and fraud. States that allow for mail-in balloting have been doing so for years, and some states allow counties to choose this option. Recently, President Trump issued an executive order

demanding that states no longer count mail-in ballots that arrive after Election Day; although a federal judge barred the administration from enforcing parts of the order (Brams 2026), the United States Supreme Court is currently considering the legality of counting late ballots (Totenberg 2026). Oregon is one of the states targeted, even though it has used mail-in balloting since the 1990s (*Oregon Vote by Mail Timeline).* One poll worker from the Pacific Northwest expressed how robust their system is, even though he understands why there are fears over voting by mail (2HJO, interviewed by author October 31, 2025). "There are weaknesses, there are shortcomings...[but] we've been doing it since the late 90s, and it works."

Recommendations from poll workers

Several interview participants, especially those who are veterans of the job, have suggestions for how to improve recruitment and retention of workers. The top suggestion among respondents is to find ways to involve young people. A total of ten participants from all age groups mentioned the importance of recruiting this demographic. Suggestions include setting up booths at high schools and colleges and asking history and government teachers to promote poll work in the classroom. California law excuses both high school and college students from class to work at the polls on Election Day, as well as receive the stipend offered in their county (1NCC, interviewed by author October 29, 2025). Based on the responses from younger interviewees, providing students with a stipend incentivizes them to participate in elections; this may turn them into future poll workers, especially as their incentive preferences change over time and the stipend becomes less important. Another suggestion from an election administrator from Arizona involves a tax exemption for those who work on election day; this would ease the burden of filling positions last minute, as administrative burden around paperwork and tax filing

can be difficult, and would provide yet another material incentive (1WJA, interviewed by author December 12, 2025).

Other suggestions include promoting a "day of service" at large corporations to allow their employees to work the polls or promoting an "adopt a precinct" at churches, synagogues, and social clubs in which the group leader requests a commitment from its members. This will likely attract those looking for solidary incentives as they work alongside their friends, co-workers, and fellow congregants. One individual suggested providing public service announcements at college and professional sports events on the big screen with a QR code that allows them to sign up from their phones (1PXO, interviewed by author October 29, 2025). Others suggest that states make poll work like jury duty, requiring employers to give time off for the poll workers without penalty. Nebraska already has a lottery system in place to do exactly this. While I reached out to one of two county election administrations that often utilize the "draft," he informed me that they were working with other researchers and declined my request for an interview.

Poll workers also expressed retention ideas. In California, poll workers receive a unique lapel pin for each election worked. Some poll workers wear these on their IDs; others have too many pins from years of service and may display their pins at the sign-in table. Workers take great pride in the pins they have earned. This, again, falls into the material incentives category. By providing a small trinket of appreciation, poll workers feel valued and seen. Another suggestion is post-outreach of poll workers to determine what did not go well, what worked, and how the administration could better the position.

Lastly, several workers mention better public education to promote recruitment. Some had no suggestions on how to do so, while others mentioned bringing civics back into schools or

developing college programs that would allow for either class credit or extra credit for participating in elections. As there are pilot programs concerning college classes and credit (See Smith 2020 and Lorentz 2025), universities and colleges could easily duplicate these programs, not only to offer class credit but also to foster civic engagement in younger generations. These young people will be the face of elections in the future; we must encourage them to participate now.

Discussion

Several themes appeared as I coded interviews with poll workers across the country. Helping others, helping people vote, and participating in the community were all mentioned frequently during interviews. Participants across age groups and employment statuses mentioned helping others (both help in general and help with voting). Almost half of the poll workers interviewed indicated helping others as a reason for doing the job. College students and younger people, middle-aged and employed, and those retired mentioned a desire to help, as well as those who want to help the community, although most of the respondents who mentioned helping the community came from the middle-aged and working crowd. Participating in and understanding the electoral process is another theme discussed by interviewees in all age categories. Other reasons for participation that stood out are helping democracy flourish, someone asks, and the person needs the money (although only two participants mentioned this, and both were in college or just out of school).

A few workers were unaware there was a stipend until either they signed up or they learned about it when they attended training. They assumed it was voluntary. Working and retired citizens mentioned that they were unaware of the pay; younger people knew there was a stipend

involved. Even so, six participants mentioned outright that they would do the work again even if no pay was involved.

Civic duty does not appear to be a major reason for most of the workers I interviewed, although both male and female participants in all age groups cite civic duty. Are we seeing a generational shift in attitudes around civic duty and civic participation? Discussions with young people focus more on helping others and being part of a community rather than having any kind of duty to their country. It is possible that this is less of a change in attitude and more of a shift in the definition of what it means to be helpful to society, from civic duty (I should do this) to civic engagement (I want to be part of something bigger).

Based on both literature around volunteering and responses from poll workers, it may be time for the volunteerism scholarship to take ownership of poll workers as stipended volunteers. Studies show that stipended volunteering promotes more diverse participation, including those most often underrepresented, without differences in motives (McBride 2006; McBride et al. 2011). Hopkins and Dowell's (2022) study of not-for-profit volunteers shows similar motivations to those of citizens who work the polls, including helping people, meeting people, community need, assistance with future employment, and the importance of the cause (democracy, electoral process, free and fair elections, etc.). In one study, volunteers who received a stipend reported more perceived benefits than those volunteering without one and served longer than those who did not receive a stipend (McBride et al. 2011). They may also take their role more seriously. Tschirhart et al. (2001) found that the goals and outcomes of volunteers receiving a stipend may be generalizable to those who do not, another reason for researchers to consider poll workers as stipended volunteers. As difficulties of recruitment continue to plague election administrators,

tying poll workers to the volunteer literature may provide a more robust awareness of where poll workers should be represented and a better understanding of their layered motivations.

Limitations

I reached out to approximately 130 individuals on LinkedIn who mentioned poll work or election work. I chose this method in hopes of randomizing the selection as much as possible, and I reached out to the individuals that LinkedIn chose based on my search ("poll worker," "election worker," "election judge," etc.). Most of the LinkedIn respondents were either students or working adults. The average poll worker is retired and less likely to have a profile on this platform. Although some of the older respondents have LinkedIn accounts, most of the retired participants are from the snowball sample.

Generalizability is another limitation, as my sample is neither representative of the U.S. population nor of the current makeup of poll workers. As mentioned previously, they are predominantly white, female, and well over 50. However, I did my best to interview respondents from across the United States and of differing ages, years of service, and backgrounds to compile a range of opinions and experiences.

Subjectivity is also a limitation. People's personal experiences, age, time as a poll worker, where they live, and other issues contribute to their perspectives. One participant looking for work assumed most everyone she met in training was doing it for the money. A younger adult still in college expressed the opposite. Another poll worker who had worked in security in the past was less intimidated by angry voters who were not required to show ID than others who were older and had less experience with confrontation.

Future studies

There has been a rise in interest in poll workers in academic circles, yet there is still room for further study. The stipended volunteer literature focuses heavily on formal nonprofit

volunteering rather than public sector volunteering, yet a few scholars have promoted placing poll workers within the stipended volunteer literature (see Clark and James 2023). Public-sector volunteering continues to grow; at least one-fourth of local governments rely on volunteers for delivery of services (Nesbit and Brudney 2013). It would behoove the scholarly community to fully incorporate all stipended volunteering into the volunteerism scholarship.

McBride et al. (2011) suggest that the stipend may attract individuals from underrepresented communities and groups, such as minorities and low-income communities. This would be of great value to election administrators and voters alike, as studies have shown that a representative bureaucracy creates more faith in government and elections for minority and marginalized groups (King and Barnes 2019). Finding methods to recruit from these groups could promote greater voter turnout and provide minority groups with more opportunities to engage with their local governments and communities.

Small case studies have shown the value of college courses involving civic engagement and poll work. The work of Kevin Lorentz (2025) and Robbin Smith (2012) shows an increase in civic engagement among college students who took a class and performed some type of poll work—from early voting to administrative tasks. Additional programs on a larger scale will not only expose young adults to poll work but will likely shape their community involvement as they age, either through poll work or other volunteer work. Poll workers expressed iterations of this, from boosting civics classes in high school to offering a day off school plus the stipend for high school and college students.

Conclusion

More than ever, the United States needs to have safeguards in place to protect free and fair elections. Although Congress has passed legislation to streamline U.S. elections and put protections in place to limit loopholes, citizen volunteers are still the lifeblood that makes

elections happen. Individuals put aside their partisan differences for a day so that they may guarantee citizens the ability to vote. As volunteering appears to be dwindling in the United States, democratic elections may be in jeopardy. It is imperative that election officials find effective methods for recruiting and retaining quality workers to perform this important job.

Interviews of those doing the work on Election Day provide a wealth of information concerning what incentivizes them to provide a service to the government and ideas for boosting recruitment for the job of the poll worker; from community events to high school visits, to social media, administrators may wish to take note of what their workers suggest, not only to draw in more poll workers, but also to maintain those that have worked in the past. These individuals working on the ground during early voting and on Election Day have unique perspectives; they know what draws them to work the polls, they discuss problems with their fellow poll workers, and they speak with potential poll workers on Election Day as citizens cast their ballots. As current poll workers age out, elections will rely on younger people to step up. If today's young people view their duty to country differently than past generations, practitioners will need different ideas and tools for recruitment.

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Appendix 4A: IRB approval letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: August 11, 2025 **IRB#:** 18808

Principal Investigator: Vicki Moore Lavastida

Approval Date: 08/07/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: Volunteer or Street-Level Bureaucrat? Poll Workers and the Space "In-Between"

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix 4B: Informed consent form

University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study (Telephone Interview)
Project Title: Women's Rights in the Era of Trump.
Principal Investigators: Meeyoung Lamothe and Vicki Lavastida
Department: Political Science
Hello, my name is _____. I am a researcher calling from the University of Oklahoma. I am trying to reach _____
(name of the potential participant) for a phone interview for our study.
(Once the potential participant is on the line) You are being asked to volunteer for this research. You were selected as a possible
participant because of your position and knowledge on the subject. First, I would like to briefly explain the purpose of our study and
ask you whether you would agree to participate in our research.
Purpose of the Research Study:
The purpose of our study is to examine whether and to what extent the levels of support for women's rights and other civil rights
advocacy organizations have changed since the election of Donald Trump. Our study also explores how these advocacy organizations
might have changed their strategies to attract and maintain support in the era of Trump.
Length of the Interview:
The interview will take approximately thirty minutes.
Compensation/known risks and benefits:
You will not be reimbursed for you time and participation in this study. And there are no known risks or benefits in participating.
Confidentiality and Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Written papers or presentations generated from our study will not include any information that identifies you or your organization
without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers will have access to the records.
In order to preserve your responses, they will be recorded on an audio recording device:
1) Do you agree for your interview to be audio recorded? _____ (note response)
2) Do you agree to being quoted directly? _____ (note response)
3) Do you agree to your organization's name reported with quoted material? _____ (note response)
4) Do you agree that I can use your interview in future studies? _____ (note response)
5) Do you agree that I can share your interview with other researchers? _____ (note response)
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation before or during the interview, you will not be
penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and
may choose to withdraw at any time. Finally, if you would like a printed copy of the information I have just read to you, I can send
you a copy of this statement.

Contacts and Questions
If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to
someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of
Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu. For all other questions, you
may contact the principal investigators of this study (mlamothe@ou.edu; vlavastida@ou.edu).
Upon your request, we can provide a written version of this information to keep for your records. Based on what I discussed
regarding our study so far, are you willing to participate in this interview?
IRB NUMBER: 9622

Appendix 4C: Interview questions

For poll workers:
The purpose of this interview is to learn more about how you as a poll worker feel about the job, how elections are run in your state, and what factors make you come back election after election. Poll work is both underappreciated by the public and not well understood in terms of how poll workers come to be and exactly what their jobs entail. This project is to help understand the job from your point of view and how election administrations can improve elections based on your personal experiences.

1. What factors caused you to apply to be a poll worker the first time? (When was that?)
    a. What keeps you coming back to work the polls?
2. I've looked at several state and county recruiting websites, and it seems that the classification of poll workers varies—some sites consider it voluntary work, others treat it more as a job with the county, while others mention other factors rather than a job description. When thinking of yourself and your coworkers, how would you best describe your role as a poll worker?
    a. (If civic duty mentioned) what does civic duty mean to you?
3. There has been a lot of talk concerning voter fraud and rigged elections. What is your opinion about this as someone "in the trenches?"
4. Based on your experience, what suggestions do you have to improve the recruitment process for poll workers?
5. Talk to me about the "good" and "bad" of poll work.
    a. What types of issues would keep you from returning to do the work?
6. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think would help the public better understand the selection process, duties and expectations, and other important issues surrounding poll work?

For election administration:
The purpose of this interview is to gather data concerning how you and your colleagues recruit and retain poll workers. I wish to determine what recruitment methods seem to be most successful across US counties. (I don't like this but will work on a better opener).

1. What changes, if any, have you seen in the recruitment of poll workers since becoming an election administrator?
2. What have you found to be the best methods of recruitment?
3. Thinking of the regulations surrounding poll workers, what types if issues hamper recruitment, based on your experience?
4. If you could make changes to current procedures that you personally think would boost recruitment, what would they be?
5. Is there anything I haven't asked that you think would be beneficial to my research?

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*

Without poll workers, democracy in the United States would likely suffer. These dedicated citizens work long days for little compensation, yet many show up every election, including those at the state and local levels that fall outside of federal elections. The average poll worker is of retirement age, many over the age of seventy (Barthel and Stocking 2020). As these loyal civic volunteers get too old to work 14-hour days, whether because of physical limitations, cognitive decline, both, or are no longer willing to be targets of intimidation and threats that have increased since 2020, there is no guarantee the next generation of retired people will step in to fill their shoes.

Generational issues

There are mixed research results as to whether the late Baby Boomers, born between 1955 and 1964 and also known as Generation Jones or Trailing-Edge Boomers (*Age Range by Generation* 2026), will collectively participate in poll work and other volunteering. Some scholars predict that they will follow past generations and step up to fill positions left by those aging out (Freedman 2008); others suspect that travel and other hobbies will occupy their spare time, as medical advances allow people to live longer, healthier lives, they are generally more educated and tend to have less debt than their predecessors (Phillipson et al. 2008). Freedman writes, "America now possesses not only the largest and fastest-growing population of older adults in our history but also the healthiest, most vigorous, and best educated" (2008, 16). Yet other scholars realize that many older individuals are unable to retire due to past financial decisions and other financial barriers (Yamashita et al. 2017) or work part-time by choice (Einolf 2009), reducing the pool of potential citizen volunteers. While the jury is still out as to whether late Boomers will take part in poll work as a generation, we do know that generational volunteering increased over the two decades from the 1990s through most of the 2000s (Einolf

2009). Even so, the concerns and history over the last several election cycles should raise the alarm that there may be troubled waters ahead for U.S. elections.

On the other hand, Millennials and Generation Z seem highly interested in community engagement, even though many election administrators claim that young people do not want to work the polls (EAVS 2025). It is unknown if they do not want to participate, do not know how, or cannot take off for work or school. Ertas (2016) finds that Millennials (born 1981-1996), while not as politically active as older generations, still volunteer at similar rates. They look for jobs that can help them make a positive impact on others (Ertas 2016). Other researchers suggest Millennials tend to be more conservative (Burlea-Schiopoiu and Dodoc 2025). Some suggest that Millennials may be less prone to volunteer than their younger counterparts (Nieburr et al. 2018).

Generation Z feels less attached to the two major parties but also shows skepticism toward political institutions (Battocchio et al. 2023); they expect the government to be more involved in solving society's problems (Parker and Igielnik 2020; Reilly and Hunting 2025). Issues drive Gen Z's voting behavior, especially those involving social justice, individual expression, mental health, and equality (Battocchio et al. 2023, 175; Burlea-Schiopoiu and Dodoc 2025), as pessimism grows concerning their future (Reilly and Hunting 2025).

The young people interviewed in Chapter Four seem engaged in community activities but may not see civic engagement as a "duty" that makes them a "good citizen." The good news is that research shows young people who work the polls believe in the integrity of elections after serving (Smith 2020; Lorentz 2025). If states wish for more young people to participate, they will need to encourage and recruit more high school-age students and create incentives for participation; loosening partisan restrictions to accommodate the growing number of individuals not affiliated with the Republican and Democratic parties will likely be necessary as well.

Another consideration for election administrators is a greater focus on outreach through social media. While the findings were weak, Leyva (2017) found a relationship between political engagement offline and exposure to political issues on social media. Social media may be the best means for attracting younger generations to civic engagement and for providing information about applying for poll work and the importance of participation.

Worker ineligibility

A group that has not received much attention in the conversation concerning the decline in poll worker participation is immigrants who are not eligible to vote. While this may seem radical, let us not forget that most states allow young people who have not yet reached voting age to participate in the electoral process through poll work. Albertsen and Lever (2025) have proposed incorporating non-citizen residents into the eligible pool of poll workers, as they may wish to find non-voting ways to participate. While this is normative in nature and would require changes to both laws and political party control, this benefits the community through greater engagement and increases the pool of potential workers in a society that is experiencing diminished electoral interest (Albertsen and Lever 2025).

Rise in episodic volunteering

While the number of volunteer hours has increased over the last several years, the number of people volunteering is declining (Grimm and Nathan 2018). In addition, the rise of episodic volunteering over traditional volunteering has grown. Cnaan and Handy (2005) define an episodic volunteer as "an individual who engages in a one-time or short-term volunteer opportunity" (Cnaan and Handy 2005) intended to be a "one-off" occurrence. Although not a new concept, episodic volunteering has been on the rise across the globe, as work and other commitments restrict volunteers from doing more formal volunteering (Ellis 1996; Cnaan et al.

2022). Fewer people are making long-term commitments to organizations. In fact, a study conducted in 2000 found that almost half of all volunteers surveyed between the ages of 50 and 59 mostly volunteered for one-time activities (Harris Interactive 2000). Many want to give their time to projects that have specific beginning and end dates so they may plan other activities around them (Cnaan and Handy 2005). While poll work is episodic in nature, it is still a huge commitment. This is especially true as states increase the early voting period. Finding ways to tap into the pool of citizens who are more prone to episodic volunteering is a must for election administrators as this trend continues to grow.

With the rise of political violence and media coverage of threats and doxing against election workers, some long-term poll workers have decided not to return; others shy away from participating at all. The Brennan Center for Justice found an eight-point increase in threats and other types of mistreatment against election officials between 2023 and 2024. In the same survey, poll workers show concern not only for themselves, but for their family members as well (Zhu 2024). Last year, the federal government made cuts to election security support (Edlin and Norden 2026); this has required states to step in to protect their workers, such as the security measures proposed in Colorado (Ventrelli 2026). Thirty-six states have updated their security protocols since the 2020 election; the eleven remaining states did not have statutes as of 2025 (*State Laws Providing Protection* 2025).

The above issues affect the availability of individuals as well as the desire to perform the job of the poll worker. Federal, state, and local governments should work together to determine solutions to the continuing issue of poll worker recruitment and retention. A closer look at current practices in counties that consistently have no difficulties recruiting and retaining poll workers may lead to best practices that could benefit all local election administrations so the

United States may continue to be a functioning democracy where citizens can cast their ballots freely and without fear of violence or intimidation. These include outreach at festivals and sporting events, social media ads and public service announcements, small tokens of appreciation such as pins for each election worked, and the specific recruitment of youth and veterans. High schools and universities should promote poll work, perhaps through excused time off and some type of class credit. Pima County, Arizona, implemented an award-winning training program that creates scenarios of issues that poll workers may experience during the voting period (*Pima County* n.d.), preparing them for issues that may arise and giving them the confidence to perform necessary tasks such as how to handle provisional ballots and conflict resolution. In 2024, a Pima County election representative commented that they "had far more applicants than positions" (EAVS 2025) and decreased no-shows on election day (*Pima County* n.d.).

This dissertation also determines that election officials see some state regulations as inhibitive to poll worker recruitment. Chapter One looks at the state regulations of partisan parity at the polls and requirements as to where an individual may work, whether in his or her own precinct, anywhere in the county for which he or she is registered to vote, or across the state. Although partisan parity is a top reason election administers perceive difficulties in recruitment, states with partisan parity rules for poll workers will likely not make changes. Not only does it serve as a method of checks and balances for democratic elections, but the two major parties also maintain significant control over running elections and will likely not willingly give up that power easily. However, there are arguments for allowing citizens to work anywhere across the state to aid counties that have more difficulty recruiting than others (Hostetter 2020); states could easily implement this with little controversy.

Lastly, by listening to what poll workers perceive as "plusses and minuses" of working elections, we go beyond what issues administrators consider to better grasp why the poll worker does the work, why they return, or why they decide to "retire" from poll work, whether it be age, life circumstances, or negative experiences. The interview participants in Chapter Four provide a personal understanding of what happens on Election Day, how they navigate difficult situations, and why they do the work. Successful recruitment and retention rely on understanding the needs of local administrators' struggles and successes, but also the experiences and needs of those who are "in the trenches" during early voting and on Election Day.

Together, the data paint a clear picture of the current situation election administrators and poll workers face. Recruitment and retention difficulties will likely persist for many counties as long as our elected officials continue to promote, or at least refuse to deny, election fraud, and the country remains highly polarized. Working the polls appears to be a great neutralizer of misinformation and disinformation, so promoting poll work and finding creative ways to get citizens involved is a must for the United States to maintain a stable and robust democracy.

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