

Volume 5 · Issue 1

April 2026



# Journal of Election Administration Research & Practice

**Blending theory and practice  
to advance the field**

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**ISSN 2835-5962**

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# Editorial Team's Introduction

JEARP Editorial Team

Stop us if you have heard this one before. “The upcoming election cycle may be among the most consequential in American history.” OK, do not actually stop us because this will be the shortest introduction in history. After hearing declarations like this for several election cycles, one might think the gravity of these statements would lose some cachet. Yet, that does not feel like the case, does it? The 2026 elections will once again carry huge significance, and election officials and election processes will once more be under scrutiny. *JEARP* is here to help.

Take, for example, this issue's first article. Artificial intelligence is here whether you find it terrifying, exhilarating, or a little of both. The author team of Lester, Pyche, and Timmons have been collaborating with election officials on how to harness this new tool and offer some sage advice based on what they have learned. Also, Pam Anderson shares how state election official associations throughout the country can be a practitioner's best friend on multiple fronts. Furthermore, we are treated to learning about a unique initiative developed by Samantha Alfaro in Loudoun County, Virginia, where everyday election administrators are developing communication skills to convey more effectively how they carry out fair and efficient elections. This journal issue also contains an article from Ramón A. Pagán on the cost benefits of providing voter education programs, Karen Brinson Bell's recollection of running an election at the state level mere weeks after the devastation of Hurricane Helene, and an explanation of an innovative new program Washington, D.C., is carrying out to provide incarcerated district residents the opportunity to participate in civic life.

Issue 1 includes several intriguing research articles as well. A lack of competitive salaries is an evergreen complaint among local election officials, but is it true? Check out the creatively titled article from the team of McGowan, Hines, Mohr, and Kropf to find the answer, at least for one state. William P. McLean and Cameron Wimpy dive deep into the often-overlooked Mississippi Delta region to find out what administering elections is like in a rural area with a declining population. Last but not least, the research team of Djanogly Garai, Baltz, Gross, Merivaki, Suttman-Lea, and Stewart details the evolution of

election officials' use of Twitter over the course of a decade. All three research articles are supplemented by insightful feedback from practitioners.

Everyone can agree the 2026 elections will be important, but those of us committed to elections on a daily basis recognize that all elections are crucial whether media correspondents are parachuting in to cover them or only a few dozen people turn out to vote in a special election for a local school board seat. Each election decides who the people most trust to wield the power that government provides in deciding our present and our future. It is a blessing that election stakeholders at all levels and capacities have not lost sight of this and dedicate themselves to ensuring every ballot is counted while every rule is followed in every single election.

The viability of the American experiment, officially begun 250 years ago, relies upon all of you. Maybe you heard that before, too, but we hope it feels just as consequential as the first time you heard it because it is no less true.

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April 2026

# Artificial Intelligence in Election Administration: Literacy, Governance, and Responsible Adoption

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Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly moved from a niche technical topic to a mainstream operational reality, including in election administration. Since the public release of widely accessible generative AI systems in late 2022, election officials have been confronted with the promise and the risks of these tools. Through our workshops, trainings, and direct support of the AI + Elections Clinic at Arizona State University's Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory, we have observed how election administrators are approaching AI with caution, curiosity, and professional judgment. This article draws on those engagements to explore how AI literacy, governance, and responsible adoption are shaping the future of election administration.

Imagine a student who has read every book in the world's largest library but does not actually "know" what a cat is. That is essentially what large language models (LLMs) are. At their core, early LLMs were highly advanced prediction systems. They worked by analyzing the words a user types and predicting what word is most likely to come next based on patterns learned from billions of sentences across the internet. While the architecture and training methods have evolved since those first public releases, these systems are still not "thinking" in the human sense. They are pattern-recognition engines operating at extraordinary scale.

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b TJ Pyche is a vice president at Ready for Tuesday. He advises public institutions and civic organizations on trusted communications, operational resilience, and workforce development in high-stakes environments. A former county-level election administrator, Pyche brings frontline experience to conversations on how institutions adapt under pressure. He serves on the AI + Elections Clinic Advisory Board and is a senior fellow at the University of Maryland's Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement.

c Trevor Timmons is a vice president at Ready for Tuesday where he provides training, support, and consultation to state and local jurisdictions in the areas of information security, cybersecurity, and technology management. Prior to that Trevor served as the chief information officer and in other roles at the Colorado Secretary of State's Office for 30 years.

In the election administration context, that distinction matters. AI tools can assist with routine, language-based, and analytical tasks common to election administration. Need help refining a press release? AI can offer draft edits. Want to outline a 90-day communications strategy with concise social media posts explaining key deadlines? AI can generate a starting framework. Drafting training materials, summarizing public comments, organizing procedural manuals, or proofreading ballot language are all areas where AI-enabled tools may offer efficiency gains. These are practical, lower-risk applications often referred to as “green-light” uses of AI.

When we talk to election officials, we offer a traffic light as a guide for thinking about AI use in their offices. In addition to the green-light examples above, some applications warrant greater caution. Yellow-light uses—such as deploying public-facing chatbots or automating workflows where errors carry real-world consequences—demand controls, audits, and human-in-the-loop processes before proceeding. Red-light uses include relying on AI for legal interpretation, final proofing of ballots, or any application where an unchecked error could damage public trust or institutional integrity. They require pause, skepticism, and—in many cases—prohibition.

The traffic light is a starting point, not a policy. No external framework can replace the judgment of the officials who understand their jurisdictions, legal obligations, and communities. Election administrators remain responsible for every output produced under their authority, including those generated with AI systems. What works in one office may be inappropriate or unlawful in another. The purpose of frameworks like this one is to offer shared language and structured questions that support thoughtful decision making. Ultimately, the responsibility stays with the practitioner, prompting a set of ethical considerations of “if? when? and how?” If I use AI, when does it make sense, and how will it be used responsibly?

But understanding what AI is—and what it is not—is only part of the equation. Equally important is understanding how election officials themselves are approaching these tools. Across workshops, presentations, and informal feedback surveys conducted in 2025, we observed a wide range of reactions from election administrators. Some officials expressed interest in using AI to streamline document creation, communications, and data analysis. Others voiced hesitation,

citing concerns about job displacement, environmental impact, misinformation, over-reliance on automation, or reputational risk. This variation is not surprising or problematic. It reflects a profession accustomed to balancing innovation with caution.

Importantly, even modest educational interventions appeared to increase confidence and readiness. In post-session surveys following introductory AI briefings, participants reported measurable gains in their understanding of AI tools and their ability to begin thinking about practical implementation. These findings suggest that basic AI literacy—clear explanations, concrete examples, and transparent discussion of limitations—meaningfully shapes adoption readiness.

AI adoption in election administration is unlikely to be driven by hype. It will be driven by clarity, guardrails, and demonstrated utility. Officials do not need promises of transformation. They need plain language, practical examples, and space to evaluate risks.

And, those risks are real. AI is a tool, and like any tool, it can introduce vulnerabilities if used carelessly. Election offices must consider data privacy implications, particularly when entering sensitive information into publicly available systems. Some AI models may retain or learn from user inputs depending on their configuration and usage policies. Officials should understand whether the tools they use store prompts, train on submitted data, or share information across users.

Beyond internal use, AI also changes the external threat landscape. Generative systems can produce highly convincing, long-form phishing emails, automate malware scripts, or rapidly generate deceptive materials at scale. These risks do not create entirely new categories of threats, but they can amplify existing ones on a larger scale.

Accordingly, responsible adoption requires both literacy and governance. Offices should establish clear internal policies regarding permissible uses, data handling standards, and review procedures for AI-assisted outputs. They should also coordinate AI discussions with existing cybersecurity, communications, and legal frameworks rather than treating AI as a standalone issue.

Used thoughtfully, AI-enabled tools may help election offices improve efficiency, documentation, and communication. Used uncritically, they can create operational, reputational, and

security risks. The question facing election administrators is how deliberately and responsibly AI will be incorporated into the work of administering elections.

## **Teaching AI Literacy in Election Administration**

AI literacy is often discussed as a technical skill set that entails understanding how AI works, how to prompt systems effectively, and how to evaluate outputs for accuracy. In election administration, this framing is incomplete. Election officials operate in a context defined by legal mandates, public records obligations, risk sensitivity, and intense public scrutiny. Within this environment, AI literacy functions less as tool fluency and more as professional judgment.

For election administrators, AI literacy involves understanding what AI systems can and cannot do; how outputs are generated; and where errors, bias, or misalignment with statutory requirements may occur. It also requires the capacity to assess when AI use is appropriate, what data should never be input, and how human review must remain embedded in workflows. These competencies reflect longstanding professional expectations in election administration, including chain-of-custody awareness, documentation discipline, and transparency. AI literacy, in this sense, is an extension of existing professional norms rather than a departure from them.

Importantly, election administration does not offer space for experimental or speculative AI use. The consequences of error are public, reputational, and institutional. Training approaches that emphasize novelty, automation, or efficiency without governance considerations are poorly suited to this context. Instead, effective AI literacy education for election officials must be grounded in ethics, law, and operational reality. It must foreground caution alongside curiosity and frame AI as a support tool rather than as a decision maker.

Adult learning theory further reinforces this approach. Election officials bring deep domain expertise, situational awareness, and contextual knowledge to AI learning environments. Instruction that respects this expertise and situates AI within familiar workflows increases relevance and uptake. Rather than asking officials to adapt to AI, AI literacy instruction must adapt to election administration.

Teaching AI literacy in this space, therefore, is about building shared language, risk awareness, and confidence so that election officials can evaluate AI responsibly, communicate clearly with internal and external stakeholders, and make informed decisions that protect public trust.

## **Observations from the AI + Elections Clinic Bootcamps**

Observations from the 2025-2026 AI + Elections Clinic bootcamps in Phoenix, Arizona, reveal a field that is highly attentive to risk, responsibility, and relevance. Participants consistently approached AI with cautious curiosity. Initial concerns centered on accuracy, data security, public records exposure, and reputational risk. These concerns did not diminish over the course of the sessions. Rather, they became more precise as participants developed a clearer understanding of how AI systems function.

As officials engaged with hands-on exercises, a shift occurred from abstract concern to applied evaluation. Participants began asking more targeted questions about governance such as what inputs are permissible, how outputs should be reviewed, and where AI use should stop. This progression suggests that exposure, when paired with contextual framing and ethical grounding, supports informed judgment rather than uncritical adoption.

A recurring theme across participants was the desire for autonomy. Participants expressed strong interest in learning how to build, adapt, and maintain AI-supported tools internally rather than relying on opaque external systems. This aligns with election administrators' broader preference for transparency and control over mission-critical processes. AI was most favorably received when positioned as a customizable support for training, documentation, and quality assurance rather than as a replacement for human expertise.

Another consistent observation was the demand for policy clarity. Many officials reported inconsistent or nonexistent guidance from IT departments, legal counsel, or state authorities regarding AI use. This ambiguity has resulted in uneven experimentation across jurisdictions with some offices prohibiting AI entirely and others proceeding without formal guardrails. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for clear internal policies and public-facing statements to preserve trust.

Finally, the bootcamp surfaced a strong appetite for community. Officials expressed interest in shared examples, prompt libraries, and peer-to-peer learning spaces where successes and failures could be discussed openly. This desire reflects the collaborative culture of election administration and highlights the importance of communities of practice in supporting responsible innovation.

Taken together, these observations suggest that effective AI literacy initiatives must prioritize governance, peer learning, and contextual relevance. When election officials are given space to question, test, and reflect together, AI becomes a more manageable component of modern election administration.

### **Case Study: AI-Supported Emergency Site Planning under Severe Weather Conditions**

Faced with a fictional scenario of an impending severe weather event, which could result in flooding and transportation disruptions, one participant from a large and heavily populated urban and suburban local election office utilized help from an AI system. Using polling location data, estimated turnout data, and fictional storm impact data, this participant leveraged publicly available geospatial datasets and prompted the AI model to recommend alternate polling sites based on “best fit” analysis to replace locations that could suffer severe impacts from the storm. The exercise demonstrated how AI can rapidly synthesize disparate datasets to support time-sensitive operational planning under changing conditions.

### **Case Study: Predictive Turnout Modeling to Improve Staffing and Ballot Allocation**

In Arlington County, Virginia, general registrar Gretchen Reinemeyer experimented with using AI as a forecasting assistant to predict early voting turnout more accurately and to inform staffing, ballot ordering, and equipment allocation decisions. Because jurisdictional policy restricted uploading sensitive data into the AI system, she instead used prompts to receive step-by-step guidance on structuring Excel datasets; identifying anomalies, such as pandemic-era outliers; and calculating turnout percentages. By applying a historical proportional forecasting approach, she generated turnout projections with a reported R-squared of .990001. While not replacing expert judgment, the model provided actionable

insight that informed midcycle ballot order adjustments and improved operational planning. This case illustrates AI's role as a guided analytical assistant rather than a decision maker.

### **Case Study: Building a Controlled, Source-Grounded AI Knowledge Base for Election Administration**

Fred DeCaro III, registrar of voters in Greenwich, Connecticut, developed an AI-enabled knowledge assistant built exclusively on trusted, jurisdiction-specific election materials. Using a Google Gemini "Gem," he restricted the model's source material to curated Google Docs containing official manuals, Title 9 of the Connecticut General Statutes, locally produced training materials, and archived email interpretations from the Connecticut secretary of state. By explicitly instructing the system to refresh from these linked documents before answering questions, he created a shareable, refreshable tool that limits outputs to authoritative sources. This approach demonstrates how AI can function as a controlled retrieval system, improving internal training and development of frequently asked questions while preserving institutional oversight and legal fidelity.

### **Case Study: Eva and Retrieval-Based Decision Support at the State Level**

The Ohio Secretary of State's Office addressed operational bottlenecks in navigating its 500-page *Election Official Manual* by developing "Eva," an internal AI assistant. Built within an Azure environment, Eva uses a retrieval-based model strictly limited to the manual and the state's election calendar. This allows county officials to receive plain-language, source-grounded answers in seconds, replacing time-consuming PDF searches and manual inquiries.

By automating routine procedural questions, Eva enables legal staff to focus on complex, high-value issues rather than basic information retrieval. This targeted application of AI proves that meaningful public-sector innovation stems from solving specific workflow constraints. Ultimately, Eva serves as a scalable decision-support tool that preserves professional expertise while significantly reducing internal friction across 88 counties.

## **Conclusion**

AI in election administration is neither a panacea nor an existential threat. As the case studies demonstrate, its most promising applications are neither flashy nor transformative. Instead, they are pragmatic. Practitioners can use AI to forecast turnout more accurately, structure knowledge more accessibly, plan contingencies more efficiently, or reduce friction in navigating complex manuals.

A consistent pattern emerges across jurisdictions. AI is most useful when narrowly scoped, source-grounded, and embedded within existing governance frameworks. It performs best as an analytical assistant, retrieval engine, or workflow support tool.

The future of AI in election administration will not be defined by technological capability alone. It will be shaped by professional norms, policy clarity, and the continued insistence on human judgment. When literacy, governance, and operational realism guide implementation, AI becomes an extension of its longstanding commitment to precision, transparency, and public trust.

# The District of Columbia's Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020 and Community Engagement

Scott Sussman<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Washington, D.C.*

In the United States, voting rights for people with felony convictions vary dramatically depending on where they live. In some states, voting rights are restored automatically upon release from prison. In other states, individuals must complete parole or probation, pay outstanding fines, or petition the government in order to regain their rights. A small number of jurisdictions go even further, permanently disenfranchising people with felony convictions unless executive clemency is granted.

The District of Columbia (D.C. or the District) took a more expansive approach with the passage of the Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020<sup>1</sup> (RTV). The RTV extended voting rights to all otherwise eligible incarcerated D.C. residents regardless of their conviction status or the criminal offense that led to incarceration. The law did more than change eligibility rules. It also required the District to actively build systems that allow incarcerated people to register easily, receive ballots, and vote—both inside the D.C. Jail and in federal prisons across the country.

The RTV offers an example of how voting rights policy can provide not only enfranchisement but also potentially result in outsized community engagement by a normally underserved portion of the population. One of the drivers behind the law is the idea that voting fosters engagement, accountability, and personal investment in community.<sup>2</sup> Alienation between the incarcerated and the communities to which they will return is

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<sup>a</sup> Scott Sussman is the program manager for the Restore the Vote Division of the D.C. Board of Elections.

<sup>1</sup> [D.C. Law 23-277. Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020.](#)

<sup>2</sup> These themes are presented in testimony shared in the [Council of the District of Columbia Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety: Report on Bill 23-0324, the "Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020."](#)

reduced by allowing them to participate in decision making through voting. It reinforces their continued membership in society even though they have been physically removed from it.

One distinctive feature of the District's criminal justice system shaped the RTV's design. Most people in D.C. convicted of a felony do not serve their sentences in a District-run prison. Instead, under federal law, they are transferred to facilities operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and often serve their sentences far from Washington, D.C. As a result, developing outreach and other mechanisms to avail voting required coordination not only with the D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC), which operates the D.C. Jail, but also with the BOP.

While the RTV now legislatively mandates that incarceration does not impact voting rights, the D.C. Board of Elections (DCBOE) has a long history of outreach to populations with unique voting access needs, including the incarcerated. The DCBOE previously made voting available to those in the D.C. Jail who were not yet convicted or who were only convicted of a misdemeanor. Eligible registrants in the jail known to the DCBOE were provided ballots through a modified curbside ballot-on-demand system. Ballots were printed for eligible registered residents and provided to the residents for immediate voting. However, the same could not be said for those in the custody of the BOP. This was due to geographical reasons, and—more importantly—because all were convicted of a felony barring them from voting. Since the passage of the RTV, almost all barriers<sup>3</sup> to voting have been removed.

The RTV was initiated by the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety and was meant to do more than simply restore voting rights. The bill received testimony and was debated in the context of broader discussions about criminal justice reform and reentry. The Council passed the bill in October 2020, and the mayor signed it into law on November 16, 2020. Although the law did not become effective until April 27, 2021, the Council had passed and implemented similar legislation on a temporary and emergency basis during the COVID-19

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<sup>3</sup> A person cannot vote if found by a court to be legally incompetent to vote: [Code of the District of Columbia 1-1001.02. Definitions. Sec 2\(E\)](#).

pandemic before the 2020 general election.<sup>4</sup> Five years after the law took effect, data reveal a clearer picture of how the law works in practice and what its early impacts may be.

## **What the Restore the Vote Act Does**

At its core, the RTV removes incarceration for a felony conviction as a barrier to voting for otherwise eligible D.C. residents. But the law goes further by addressing the administration of how incarcerated residents can participate. Recognizing that eligibility alone does not guarantee access, the RTV establishes several operational requirements presented as follows.

- Automatic voter registration: the DOC was designated as an automatic voter registration agency, meaning that eligible individuals entering DOC custody are offered registration unless they opt out. Residents are provided an opportunity to register during the intake process. Because intake can be a difficult experience and registering to vote may not be a priority at that moment, additional registration opportunities are offered at subsequent meetings with case management staff. Completed documents are then transmitted to the DCBOE. As the BOP is not a subordinate agency in D.C. government, mandating automatic registration was an impossibility. The majority of D.C. residents in the BOP do, however, pass through the DOC.
- Distribution of voter education and registration materials: basic educational materials on voter rights and registration forms are provided by the DOC at intake and a subsequent meeting with case management. Materials are also provided on unit bulletin boards and on tablets available to the DOC population. These same materials are mailed to known D.C. residents in BOP facilities throughout the nation. Determining “known” residents in the BOP’s custody is particularly challenging and will be discussed later in the article. Local advocacy groups also provide

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<sup>4</sup> [D.C. Act 23-382. General Election Preparations Emergency Amendment Act of 2020. Sec 2\(b\)\(1\).](#)

welcome support by affording additional voter education and registration opportunities in the DOC and BOP, although outreach is limited to the mail in the BOP. It is noteworthy that the legislation also mandates that the DOC employ personnel whose responsibility shall be the civic engagement and enfranchisement of eligible individuals in its custody.

- Ongoing reporting: after each election year, the DCBOE and the D.C. Corrections Information Council<sup>5</sup> (CIC) are to publish a joint report detailing registration and voting data, implementation challenges, and recommendations for improvement. This reporting requirement is particularly important as it ensures the RTV and its implementation are continuously evaluated and revised. The reports also provide an opportunity for improvements based on actual evidence.

## **Voting While Incarcerated in the D.C. Jail**

For individuals held at the D.C. Jail, the RTV has translated into multiple voting options that closely resemble those available outside of custody. Like all voters in D.C., registered residents in the jail automatically receive a mail ballot. More importantly, they are also provided the opportunity to vote in person. The DCBOE sets up two vote centers that operate for three days<sup>6</sup> during early voting. Eligible residents are provided an opportunity to come to one of the centers and not only cast their votes but also same-day register if they are not already registered to vote. Approximately 37 percent of voters at the jail over the course of the 2022 and 2024 elections used same-day registration prior to voting. For the units whose residents are unable to go to one of the vote centers for security reasons, DCBOE staff visit the units and ensure those residents have an opportunity to vote a mail ballot. It should also be noted that the vote centers are staffed mostly by incarcerated residents, which has proven to be a valuable aspect of the process. The election workers are provided the same training and stipend as any other election worker in D.C. It also bolsters registrations, as one must be registered in order to work the election.

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<sup>5</sup> The D.C. CIC is an agency whose mandate is to report on the conditions of confinement for D.C. residents.

<sup>6</sup> The vote center(s) may remain open additional days if some units were unable to vote because of security or other concerns.

A unique aspect of voting in D.C. is the city is divided into 46 Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs). Each ANC encompasses approximately 2,000 residents and is represented by an elected advisory neighborhood commissioner. A recent change in ANC borders created one entirely made up of the D.C. Jail facility and a nearby homeless shelter. Therefore, that commissioner is most often a resident of the jail. Not only does this provide direct representation for the jail's residents but it also provides opportunities for that population to run for office. Those who register using the jail as a home address may vote for the commissioner of that ANC or may even run for the commissioner position. The RTV plays a significant impact on the number of people and the ease at which they register and vote while at the jail, thereby ensuring high levels of civic engagement while voting for their commissioner.

Registering people in a jail setting has its challenges even after the registration is complete due to the transient nature of its population. Residents often transfer or are released quickly. Therefore, those who use the jail as a home address and fail to provide an update when they leave will not have accurate home addresses to which the DCBOE can mail a ballot. Yes, the resident still benefits from registering and can vote in person upon release from custody, but this type of situation does lead to inaccuracies on the voter roll and makes it difficult to provide an accurate number of registrants at the jail at any given moment.

### **Voting While Incarcerated in Federal Prisons**

Voting from federal prison presents a different set of challenges. D.C. residents incarcerated in BOP facilities are often housed hundreds or thousands of miles from Washington, D.C., and do not have access to in-person voting or same-day registration. Instead, voting in federal custody relies entirely on mail-based voting. Eligible individuals must be registered in advance (potentially while at the D.C. Jail), receive their ballots via the mail, complete their ballots according to instructions, and return their ballots in time to meet postmark deadlines. While this resembles voting by mail like anyone else in D.C. can do, being incarcerated presents unique issues. The first is that of educating and registering those who are not already registered or who may not even be known to the DCBOE. Identifying D.C. residents in the BOP can be difficult, as the BOP does not provide data to the DCBOE on the whereabouts of D.C. residents within its system. The DCBOE works with the CIC, the courts, and other partners to

accomplish this, but no one entity has a comprehensive list. Once an eligible resident is identified, the DCBOE sends communications through the mail. These communications along with other correspondence normally include a plea for residents to help find other potentially eligible residents using word of mouth, which seems to be an effective strategy.

A second challenge involves emergent communications between the residents and the DCBOE, specifically when an election is near. While the BOP population can communicate via physical mail or email,<sup>7</sup> questions about how to fill out a ballot or report a missing ballot may not be answered in time.

A third issue is one of accessibility. The DCBOE is unable to provide assistance for those who may have sight impairment, difficulty reading, or other disadvantages. These residents must rely on the BOP to provide services as they normally would for those individuals' day-to-day activities. The BOP's solutions, however, likely will not afford the privacy a voter may desire. The DCBOE maintains a short list of those who may need assistance because of a visual impairment. No difficulties or complaints about a lack of privacy have been reported to date.

The BOP's population, like that of the jail, can also be transient, although to a lesser extent. The issue still proves to be another challenge as residents are transferred regularly for security or programmatic reasons. Each transfer creates an opportunity to lose track of a resident. It is incumbent on residents to communicate their new addresses. Although the DCBOE regularly uses the BOP's inmate locator website to track registrants, this can be a time-consuming process. That said, transfers still prove impactful when they occur close to an election. Of course, if a resident is released from custody before an election, the resident will have the opportunity to vote in person.

## **What the Numbers Show So Far**

Since the RTV's passage, data reflect steady participation by incarcerated voters. Five years into implementation, data show that hundreds of incarcerated D.C. residents are registering and voting in each major election cycle both in the D.C. Jail and in federal prisons. Registration figures also provide context. For

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<sup>7</sup> The BOP provides email access to its population with a system called Corrlinks. The resident must reach out to the recipient prior to establishing correspondence. This means the DCBOE cannot use email to correspond unless the relationship is already established.

**Table 1. Data on Voter Registrations in DOC and BOP**

	Number Registered to Vote in DOC <sup>8</sup>	Number Registered to Vote in BOP
General Election November 2020	data not collected <sup>9</sup>	562
Primary Election June 2022 <sup>10</sup>	405	824 <sup>11</sup>
General Election November 2022	767	920
Primary Election June 2024	477	1,097 <sup>12</sup>
General Election November 2024	655	1,173

**Table 2. Data on Voting in DOC and BOP**

	Number Voted in DOC	Number Voted in BOP
General Election November 2020	333	264
Primary Election June 2022	218	257
General Election November 2022	241	403
Primary Election June 2024	257	373
General Election November 2024	544	654

example, in the 2022 general election, 767 people in DOC custody and 920 people in BOP custody were registered to vote. That same election saw 241 DOC voters and 403 BOP

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<sup>8</sup> Some residents use the jail address as their home address and then subsequently transfer or release without providing an update. This leads to an increased number of registrations at the jail.

<sup>9</sup> The data collection system for DOC was created and implemented in March 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Under the District of Columbia's closed primary system, only those voters registered with one of the major political parties—Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, and D.C. Statehood Green—may vote in that party's primary election to determine that party's candidates in the general election. All registrants are eligible to vote in a general election. Therefore, there are more eligible voters for general elections. The reader may note the Libertarian Party lost its major party status because candidates received too few votes during the 2022 general election.

<sup>11</sup> There were 83 electors registered as "unaffiliated.;" Therefore, they were appropriately not mailed a ballot for the primary. They were mailed a ballot for the general election in November 2022, however.

<sup>12</sup> There were 128 electors registered as "unaffiliated." Therefore, they were appropriately not mailed a ballot for the primary. They were mailed a ballot for the general election in November 2024, however.

voters cast ballots. Participation increased substantially in both systems in the 2024 general election as 544 voted in the DOC and 654 voted in the BOP. This is a 126 percent and 62 percent increase, respectively. It is worth noting there are approximately 2,000 people at the D.C. Jail and an estimated 2,600 to 3,200 D.C. residents in the BOP. The following tables display more comprehensive results.<sup>13</sup>

Currently incarcerated voters represent only a small fraction of D.C.'s total electorate, but the steady increase in registrants in the BOP shows it may be possible to one day reach a similar percentage of registered residents as compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts. This may not be possible at the jail due to the extremely transient nature<sup>14</sup> of residents, however, many registrants are still provided the benefit of registering and voting for the first time.

What these figures do not represent is something much more difficult to quantify: community engagement. Statistical measurement of community involvement and its impacts is difficult and not within the purview of the DCBOE or this paper. That stated, anecdotal evidence reveals many who voted through the RTV program are more engaged with their communities because of voting, accomplishing one of the goals of the legislation.

For example, the DCBOE regularly receives correspondence with questions or comments like, “What does each candidate stand for?” or “Who should I vote for?” The DCBOE cannot provide answers to such questions as it must remain neutral, but it illustrates residents’ interest in how their votes can be impactful to their communities, their families, and even themselves. The DCBOE’s responses to these types of questions encourage them to do their own research by reading local newspapers or speaking with family and friends in D.C. Subsequent communications oftentimes show they did just that. Other correspondence often includes impactful statements such as, “Thank you for letting me vote,” or “It’s nice that D.C. cares what we think,” or “I feel like I matter,” and numerous variations thereof. One BOP voter even stated, “It was my first time voting, and it made me feel like a man!”

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<sup>13</sup> From joint Thematic Report by DCBOE and CIC: [Implementation of Recommendations Regarding Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020 as of 2024 General Election](#) dated April 2, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> In 2024, the median length of stay for men was 26.7 days, and the median length of stay for women was 17 days, as determined by the [Washington, D.C. Department of Corrections](#).

Staffing the jail's vote centers with incarcerated residents was not part of the original RTV but was later added by the DCBOE and DOC partnership to provide the residents a greater opportunity for civic engagement. The practice continues based on feedback from the residents. The residents take the job seriously and perform it with enthusiasm. While it requires a significant amount of coordination with the DOC, it has become quite a sought-after assignment and remains a worthwhile endeavor. This benefits the DOC as it can also be used as an incentive for its population. The popularity of the program is but one more measure that shows improved civic engagement.

The Restore the Vote Amendment Act of 2020 was created to enfranchise the often-underserved incarcerated population with at least one extra goal: ensuring participants remain an active part of the D.C. community. The data illustrate increased participation each year by this population. More importantly, while voting—in and of itself—does not establish a person as an active part of the community, the increasing number of registrants and voters coupled with anecdotal evidence certainly suggest that D.C. has made strides towards that goal.

# The Crucial Role of State Election Official Associations in Strengthening Our Elections Administration Ecosystem

Pam Anderson<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *ElectionLand*

The past few years have put immense pressure on election officials, from administering elections during a global pandemic to navigating increasingly complex technical and legislative environments. This period has also spotlighted the need for strong election official associations. These organizations have the capacity to expand institutional knowledge, foster a sense of community and support among their members, and advocate for the needs of election officials to state legislatures and other stakeholders.

The election administration space is evolving more rapidly than ever with increased turnover among election officials and a pressing need for continuous improvement. In this context, state election official associations stand out as vital organizations that provide essential support and resources to enhance the elections ecosystem. My first experience with such associations came from serving as an election official in Jefferson County, Colorado, which later led to my becoming executive director of the Colorado County Clerks Association for several years. The time I spent in those positions has guided me in my current role as an adviser and partner to the elections community. My many experiences with election associations have underscored their significant contributions not only to individual states but also to broader public perceptions of our democratic processes. Associations offer significant advantages, including fostering collaboration and professionalizing our field.

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## **Building a Collaborative Professional Community**

Associations can provide the necessary infrastructure to facilitate continuous improvement amidst ongoing turnover in the election profession. By bringing together seasoned professionals and new entrants, they create an opportunity for mentorship and collaboration, ensuring knowledge is passed down and institutional memory is preserved. This communal approach fosters a rich environment for problem-solving and innovation.

One of the benefits of state election official associations is their ability to create a professional space for peer collaboration. Whether you are an experienced election official or a newcomer, having a network of colleagues allows you to share experiences and best practices that can help each official better serve voters and meet ever-changing challenges. The importance of peer interaction and collaboration cannot be underestimated, particularly in moments of uncertainty or when navigating new legislative changes. In my experience, the support network that state associations have provided—not only to me during my tenure in Colorado but also to countless other election officials across the country—has been invaluable.

By leaning into these collaborations, associations can elevate their members' collective knowledge. Workshops, training programs, professional certification programs, visits to other offices and jurisdictions, and strategic planning sessions provide spaces for officials to learn from one another and adopt the most effective solutions to shared problems. In my capacity as director of the Coalition of Election Association Leaders (CEAL), a project of Election Center, our team has been working with the Texas Association of Election Officials (TAEО) in a collaboration among TAEО, Election Center, and the Houston Endowment Institute.<sup>1</sup> The CEAL team has supported the association through ongoing changes and maturation by encouraging the expansion of management and administrative staffing; offering training scholarships; and developing bylaws for financial, operational, and governance structures. This has included working with the new executive director of TAEО who was instrumental in hosting strategic planning sessions with the association board and its members. These sessions

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the Coalition of Election Association Leaders (CEAL), a project of the Election Center, can be found at <https://electioncenter.org/ceal/>.

strengthened the association's bylaws, expanded the board to include an at-large member, and expanded advocacy mechanisms within the state.

The new leadership and policies helped to expand the association's reach in Texas as new election officials with diverse perspectives joined the association. CEAL's and Election Center's work with TAEO has been instrumental in defining the formal model of an association, utilizing an executive director supporting operations and day-to-day administration. Still, the executive director model is by no means the only way to strengthen an association as demonstrated by the California model.<sup>2</sup>

### **Harnessing Resources for Shared Success**

In the spring of last year, I attended a visioning session in California where three association boards came together to discuss a shared services model to alleviate financial burdens, improve operational efficiency, and enhance administration. During the visioning session, the leaders discussed the benefits, trade-offs, and possibilities of creating this new model of governance and voted to move forward with the shared services model.

This type of innovative resource sharing opens the door to collaboration that can benefit the entire election ecosystem. Innovative tools and training modules can be disseminated more widely, significantly raising performance standards across the field.

The value derived from enhanced staffing models for an association extends beyond mere resource sharing. It frees up officials from routine day-to-day operations to focus on policy-driven association goals. It equips officials with a voice, enabling them to advocate effectively for policy changes. Associations can act as trusted liaisons to legislatures, representing the interests of election officials in discussions on funding, legislation, and election administration policies. They also allow election officials to communicate with the public as a unified voice.

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<sup>2</sup> The CEAL team will be releasing a case study on California's shared services model that will be available at <https://electioncenter.org/ceal/>.

During my tenure as president and later as executive director of the Colorado County Clerks Association, we strategically brought on communications specialists to enhance our outreach and better inform our constituents about electoral processes. This evolution in services reflects many associations' ability to adapt and meet the changing needs of their members.

## **Promoting Professionalism and Trust in Election Administration**

One of the persisting challenges facing election officials is the assumption that we may be unduly influenced by political agendas. This misconception can undermine our credibility and erode public trust. State election official associations play a critical role in combating these false narratives by reinforcing the professionalization of our field. By standing united, these associations can highlight election officials' commitment to upholding the integrity of electoral processes and emphasize the importance of ethical standards and public service.

Despite the often-contentious political landscape, it is crucial to remind the public of our dedication to fair and impartial elections. The strength of our democracy relies on the unwavering integrity of those who oversee its processes. By formally developing, adopting, and training in professional standards, associations can bolster confidence in election administration through codes of ethics and by upholding our values as election officials.<sup>3</sup> This helps to ensure that our work as stewards of democracy remains transparent and valued by the communities we serve.

Furthermore, by reinforcing professionalism associations can counteract narratives that suggest electoral fraud or misconduct. This proactive approach not only protects the reputation of election officials but also strengthens the overall electoral system. In doing so, we reinforce the field's professionalization, reaffirming our commitment to voters and our shared objective of maintaining a democracy that is strong, fair, and inclusive.

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<sup>3</sup> Election Center's Standards of Conduct is one such example of an ethical code or standard for election officials and can be found at <https://electioncenter.org/standards-of-conduct/>.

## **Enhancing Skills and Fostering Community Among Election Officials**

Another crucial aspect of the work carried out by state election official associations is their role in training and development. As the election landscape evolves, the competencies of those who administer these elections must also adapt. The field is expanding creative solutions for training, certification programs, and collaborative mentorship programs that support professional growth at a time when turnover has increased. Workshops, training programs, and resource-sharing initiatives are essential for officials in combating the loss of institutional knowledge as retirements and changing workplace demands bring new people into the field. These learning opportunities not only enhance individual skills but also contribute to the overall efficiency of election operations across different jurisdictions.

For instance, associations have highlighted effective practices from states such as Colorado and California, known for their innovative approaches to mail-in voting and automatic voter registration. By organizing sessions focused on these real-world examples, associations equip their members with practical tools and insights to address the changing demands of electoral processes. Continuous professional development is vital for staying ahead of the curve and ensuring that election officials can meet the expectations of the voters they serve.

Additionally, the feeling of isolation among election officials can be a significant challenge, especially during times of political pressure or scrutiny. The formation of state associations provides a sense of belonging and camaraderie, reinforcing our commitment as election stewards. When officials gather to share experiences and challenges, it fosters a collective advocacy that extends beyond their individual capacities. This collaborative atmosphere not only strengthens professional bonds but also ensures that diverse voices are heard, ultimately enriching the dialogue on electoral practices and policies.

## **The Indispensable Role of State Election Official Associations**

State election official associations are essential to the functioning of our democracy. They create a supportive environment for professional collaboration, resource sharing, and effective advocacy. As we navigate the complexities of

modern elections, these associations emerge as centers of resilience, reinforcing the professionalism and commitment of election officials to serve democracy and the public.

By investing in our associations and the invaluable work they provide, we not only strengthen the fabric of our electoral processes but also foster trust and understanding. It is through these collaborations that we can ensure a focused, innovative future for our elections by demonstrating the power of unity amid the challenges we face. As election officials, we must continue to lean into these associations, embrace the support they offer, and use the collective expertise to advance the democratic ideals we hold dear.

# The Cost of Not Voting: Why Voter Education Must Become a Core Administrative Function

Ramón A. Pagán<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Passaic County, New Jersey*

Elections in the United States are a publicly funded democratic infrastructure and the cornerstone of its representative democratic system. However, voter participation remains below 70 percent in presidential elections, and below 50 percent (United States Elections Project n.d.) and 40 percent (Hajnal and Green 2024) in midterm and local elections, respectively, which undermines the efficient use of taxpayers' resources to administer elections. In response to the problem of a persistent low rate of voter electoral participation, this article asserts that voter education strategies grounded in voter segmentation and targeting practices—supported by building cross-sector partnerships and performance measurement practices—may improve cost efficiency by increasing electoral participation and reducing the cost per voter.

The administration of elections is a costly operation. Local governments in the United States are expected to spend more than \$53 billion over the next 10 years (Stewart 2022). A substantial portion of the average \$5.3 billion a year to fund elections will continue falling on local government jurisdictions—namely municipalities and counties—spending taxpayers' money (Stewart 2022). From the substantive perspective of efficiency, election entities still have the capacity to deliver valued outputs such as legitimacy, transparency, accountability, representation, and democracy (Rutgers and van der Meer 2010). Yet election administrators still face the challenge of overcoming persistent low voter turnout, which—when viewed through the lens of technical efficiency through input-output ratio—renders election administration inefficient in some jurisdictions.

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The seriousness of the situation becomes evident when comparing the cost per voter in Indiana's municipal elections with the cost in midterm and presidential elections from 2018 through 2024. According to the calculations, the data estimate the cost per vote for the 2022 midterm and 2024 presidential elections at \$5.26 and \$5.47, respectively. By contrast, in the 2023 municipal elections the cost per vote increased to \$15.62, a difference of \$10.36 compared to the midterm elections and \$10.15 compared to the presidential elections (Bonilla Muñiz 2025). Another worthwhile illustration of low voter turnout in municipal elections is Broward County, Florida. In 2023, Broward County held municipal elections with an allocated budget of \$500,900 (All Voting Is Local 2023) structured to serve a total of 185,867 (Broward County Supervisor of Elections 2023) registered eligible voters. If all registered voters had turned out for the municipal election, the cost per vote would have been \$2.69. However, only 7.1 percent of registered voters turned out (Broward County Supervisor of Elections 2023), increasing the cost per vote to \$37.94. If unregistered but eligible voters been included in the calculation, the cost per voter would be even higher.

These facts show that low voter turnout increases election administrative costs and undermines technical efficiency. For this reason, voter education programs should not only be encouraged but also institutionalized as a core administrative function. Voter education programs support the historic expansion of the franchise, keep voters informed, and cultivate voters with an accurate and reliable understanding of the electoral process (Hochschild 2010).

In the field of election administration, the challenge of low voter turnout is well-documented and widespread, but some jurisdictions are taking cost-effective steps to increase turnout. For instance, in 2024 voter education and outreach efforts in Yolo County, California, caused the county's turnout to exceed the statewide turnout by 9 percentage points (Salinas 2024) through the formation of partnerships with nine local nonprofit, community-based organizations that supported the county's efforts in canvassing, door-knocking at tens of thousands of voters' residences, and implementing a social media campaign. Partners employed voter segmentation and targeting—using accurate, nonpartisan voter information—to reach and educate voters about when, how, and where to vote in the 2024 elections. Yolo County and its partners focused on voters by age, using culturally and linguistically tailored outreach

specifically for the 18-to-21-year-old segment in areas with historically low voter turnout. Using voter segmentation and targeting allowed election administrators to implement their voter education programs more efficiently and, after implementation, measure the effectiveness of the activities. The county's election data show that in several targeted communities voter turnout increased by 4 percent. In five of the 16 neighborhoods selected for receiving voter education, their voter turnout matched or exceeded that of the other neighborhoods (Salinas 2024). The efforts were possible and successful by matching county funds with philanthropic support and partnerships with community organizations.

In 2024, Yolo County—with help from the San Mateo Voter Engagement Fund (SVCF)—developed and implemented a program resembling SVCF called the Yolo Voter Education Grant program. In this instance, the Haas Jr. Fund—a private family foundation based in San Francisco—awarded \$50,000 to be regranted to Yolo County nonprofits to educate voters and increase voter awareness over the next two election cycles (Hazelton 2025). Following this award, the Yolo County chief election officer matched \$25,000 per election cycle and tasked the Yolo County Community Foundation with administering the grant funds. In addition, county staff developed a mobile and web-based app to be used with partners to target potential voters and measure the performance of their efforts (Hazelton 2025). As a result, the voter education efforts increased voter turnout without incurring the costs of expensive programs or adding election office staff.

Similarly, election entities may form partnerships with private organizations and academic institutions—such as corporations, universities, and colleges—to develop nonpartisan voter education and outreach programs focusing on increasing electoral participation. In 2024, Time to Vote—a coalition of over 2,200 companies—employed strategies such as providing information about early voting and vote by mail, offering paid time off to vote on election day, and creating a no-meeting policy to provide employees more time to vote in elections (Schmidt 2024). These strategies aimed to increase voter awareness and electoral participation.

As another example, Wayne State University encouraged its students and campus community members to participate in federal elections through the Warriors Vote Campaign. In the time between 2018 and 2022, the students' voter registration

rate increased from 80.9 percent to 87.1 percent, and voter participation during the same years increased from 52.2 percent to 56.6 percent (National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement 2024), 4.4 percentage points higher. The efforts of the Warriors Vote campaign included providing the necessary resources to reduce obstacles that may prevent students from voting and to raise voter awareness of the importance of voting in the election process (Wayne State University 2022).

Extending these cross-sector efforts, human service nonprofit organizations provide an additional pathway for cross-sector partnerships, particularly to educate economically vulnerable citizens and underserved and underrepresented populations. Specifically, research on human services nonprofit organizations shows an 11.1 percentage-point increase in voter turnout among these populations (LeRoux and Krawczyk 2014). The more organizations invest in educating their clients on voter turnout, the higher the likelihood of increasing turnout in an election (LeRoux and Krawczyk 2014). Among the most effective efforts in the study were voter registration and personal voter reminders, which increased voter awareness and led to higher voting rates in those elections (LeRoux and Krawczyk 2014, 286).

While these cross-sector efforts provide election administrators with viable practices for creating technically efficient voter education and outreach programs, they still need a practical tool to monitor and improve these efforts across election cycles. Performance measurement is the tool. A successful performance measurement implementation requires that election administrators and stakeholders involved in voter education efforts define and coordinate the criteria for assessing program performance (Newcomer 2015).

Effective performance measurement requires administrators to define what should be measured during the planning process and how often it should be measured. Potential areas for performance measurement include the input or resources, outputs, and outcomes. Among the inputs to be measured are the resources available to create and implement voter education programs. These can include data and staff members with the skills and knowledge to gather, interpret, and process voter data. The outputs include the number of voters reached, the voter materials distributed, the differing voter populations—for example, voters who speak languages other than English—served, and the number of community

partners involved in the process and their performance in implementing the program. Lastly, the outcomes aim to measure changes in turnout among targeted populations and districts, reductions in voter email and telephone inquiries, and reduced use of provisional ballots. Typical reasons for voters receiving a provisional ballot can include voters being registered to vote by mail who try to vote in person or voters still being registered at previous addresses. Therefore, election administrators should be mindful of having clear expectations for the voter education program, which activities will be measured during the program implementation phase and after the elections, and—most importantly—be open to learning from the process, whether the experience is positive or negative.

In 2025, the Orange County Registrar of Voters (OCROVs) planning team developed and published the Voter Education and Outreach Plan, including performance measurement metrics (Orange County Registrar of Voters, n.d.). The plan outlines the resources/inputs needed to achieve the goals. For outputs the plan relied on key performance indicators as outputs to track progress on voter education activities, strategies to achieve the goals, and evaluation methods to determine whether the efforts are meeting the intended purpose. According to the plan, goal one focuses on expanding OCROV's reach to diverse communities across the county through consistent outreach. The objectives emphasize increasing visibility, encouraging voter registration, providing essential election information, and engaging low-propensity voters. In the plan, the team measures progress by tracking previously established targets for large and small community events. The strategies tailor outreach activities to specific groups, strengthen partnerships, and ensure early planning, whereas evaluation methods track locations, audiences, interactions, and event quality to refine future outreach. Moreover, the plan outlines four additional goals that apply the same performance measurement framework as goal one.

The analysis poses the reflective question: what actions should election administrators take to turn voter education into a core administrative function and make election administration more technically efficient? Some suggestions follow.

- Use demographic data to conduct voter segmentation and targeting to identify voters and develop voter education programs that align with voters' voting needs and improve technical efficiency.
- Expand and formalize voter cross-sector partnerships and planning with community-based organizations, private organizations, colleges and universities, and nonprofit organizations.
- Leverage philanthropic and private funding to reduce the cost of voter education programs.
- Implement performance measurement for the voter education program open system to track input, output, outcomes, and cost per vote cast.
- Be open to learn from the voter education program development and implementation process and from successful jurisdictions.
- Take the necessary steps to institutionalize voter education as a core administrative function by communicating this need to local governing bodies and state legislators, and initiate legislation to embed it in the state's election code.

In summary, the data and information presented throughout this analysis establish that low voter turnout goes beyond a democratic concern and is a technical efficiency issue that increases the cost of election administration. Voter education and outreach programs, when developed through segmentation, are strengthened through cross-sector partnerships and monitored through performance metrics, offering elections administrators a practical pathway to increase participation while reducing cost per voter. To meet the needs of the electorate and ensure the efficient use of public resources, jurisdictions should institutionalize voter education as a core administrative function within elections administration.

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# Election Resilience in the Face of Disaster: Lessons from Hurricane Helene

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On September 27, 2024—just 39 days before the general election—Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina with 30 inches of rain, flooding the rivers and collapsing mountainsides when the water had nowhere else to go. The storm caused widespread power outages, loss of internet, and limited-to-no cell service. As days passed, essential supplies like food, gasoline, and cash were scarce or nonexistent.

Twenty-five of the state's 100 counties were declared federal disaster areas. These counties represent a quarter of the counties in our state and approximately 1.3 million registered voters. Absentee-by-mail voting was underway, and ballots were already in the mail stream. For most of the first week, 14 county election offices remained closed. North Carolina election officials struggled to contact these offices and were sometimes unsure of staff safety.

Thankfully, careful planning allowed state and local election officials to act quickly, having built strong partnerships and response plans with federal, state, and local entities well in advance.

Disasters are inevitable, yet the nation's election calendar is immovable. Ensuring safe, secure, and accessible voting—regardless of weather or crisis—is both a legal mandate and a civic promise. It has been more than a year since Hurricane Helene's unwelcome arrival in Western North Carolina, yet there are still many critical lessons for election officials, policymakers, and emergency managers nationwide. Our experience underscores that the strength of democracy is

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tested not in fair weather but in the storm's fury. It demands foresight, resilience, and sustained investment in election infrastructure.

## **Planning and Preparation: Advance Strategies and Partnerships**

North Carolina's resilience was not accidental. Rather, it was the result of rigorous, ongoing planning and intentional partnership across local, state, and federal agencies.

Recognizing our swing state status, we engaged in years-long buildouts by conducting state and local tabletop exercises with emergency management, hosting statewide virtual trainings, and collaborating through a dedicated emergency response working group. Election officials trained to pivot from digital operations to manual methods such as printed rosters, emergency radios, and paper forms. These plans were informed by prior experiences with hurricanes and the global pandemic, embedding an "all hazards" approach into the core of election operations.

Helene's onset tested these preparations. The day following Helene's wrath, the state emergency management director called me to say that he knew voting was underway and assured me that election operations were being prioritized alongside essential infrastructure and services. His call proved that we had learned each other's language, and the muscle memory developed through the tabletop exercises was now bearing fruit. North Carolina Emergency Management rapidly deployed the portable toilets, drinkable water, satellite devices, fuel, and personnel we identified as essentials necessary to operate county election offices. The financial needs exceeded the regular operating budgets for both the State Board of Elections and the county election offices, but North Carolina Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) covered critical gaps while legislative relief was authorized for additional support and outreach. Within a week, all county offices were operational, no equipment or ballots were lost, and—most importantly—no election worker lives were lost.

Internal and external communication was maintained through stand-up meetings, daily reports, media alerts and interviews, and numerous press conferences. When power and internet were unavailable, local radio broadcasts—particularly AM radio—and informational flyers posted at disaster relief centers became lifelines.

Legal flexibility played an equally important role. The State Board of Elections and the North Carolina Legislature authorized county boards to adjust voting sites, reassign poll workers, and expand absentee voting—even allowing ballots to be returned across county lines. These adaptations, enabled by pre-established emergency authority to the State Board of Elections, were the difference between a system that bends and one that breaks.

### **Outcomes: Preparedness Pays Off—Voter Turnout and Staff Resilience**

The results were remarkable. By the start of early voting, just 19 days after the storm struck, 76 of the planned 80 sites in the disaster region opened with power and sufficient staff. Temporary roads and alternate routes connected isolated communities, minimizing the need for polling place consolidation and bringing voting directly to the people. Only seven tents served as replacement sites. Western North Carolina outpaced the rest of the state by two percentage points in turnout, demonstrating the power of resilient operations and community resolve. Election staff, despite personal losses, showed up for work and embodied dedication to democratic principles and public service. Citizens, surrounded by destruction, insisted on exercising their right to vote as an act of normalcy and hope.

### **Lessons Learned: Key Takeaways for Disaster Election Management**

- Build, exercise, and maintain partnerships. Relationships with emergency management; information technology (IT) services; the National Guard; and federal partners including the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), the United States Postal Service (USPS), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were critical for rapid response and operational continuity.
- Integrate operations. With each election, large or small, the State Board of Elections staff along with two members of the State Board and our federal partners were on hand at the North Carolina Emergency Operations Center on election day. Many counties have adopted a similar practice either on site or through WebEOC, a web-based

crisis management tool. We also met monthly and created dedicated working groups as needed. They learned our language, and we learned theirs. The integration allowed us to respond quickly and effectively to Hurricane Helene.

- Maintain continuous vendor engagement. Established communication between state officials and election service providers through quarterly meetings and inclusion in exercises facilitated readiness to replace equipment or ballots if needed. Since equipment and ballots were spared, vendors instead provided meals to workers in effected counties to show their support.
- Know manual methods. Without power, internet, and phone services, Helene required the county offices to pivot to manual and backup processes. Prepare for worst-case scenarios by maintaining printed rosters and contact lists with addresses and phone numbers for emergency partners and election workers. Also maintain hard copies of manuals and procedures. Anticipate and practice backup processes, including testing phone numbers and checking for current email addresses.
- Remember communication is key. Internal updates and external outreach, including paid statewide advertising campaigns, ensured that voters knew their options and could participate. Consider requesting exemptions in disaster situations to remove bid or proposal requirements for education and outreach efforts.
- Develop all-hazards preparedness. Cultivate continuity of operations and crisis communication plans and regularly exercise them. Deploy Attack Response Kits<sup>1</sup> to enable temporary operations when digital infrastructure is compromised.

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<sup>1</sup> Initially assembled by the North Carolina State Board of Elections in 2021 through HAVA funds, Attack Response Kits (ARKs) are elections offices in a box. They are staged in strategic locations across the state, allowing deployment within 90 minutes. During an event that requires network isolation, ARKs allow county boards of elections to continue operations securely while not relying on infrastructure that may be impacted by a cyber incident. Each ARK includes laptops, accessories, a tactical rapid communications kit (TRaCK), and security software. Following Helene, satellite communication devices were added to the ARKs.

- Appropriate emergency funding. Secure legislative and emergency management funds, either within annual budgets or by advance discussions on the necessity for election operations, to be included in general emergency funding. You should also know how to access such funds when necessary.
- Be human. Support all staff and poll workers affected by the disaster. Collocate voting sites with relief centers. Recognize voting's role in restoring normalcy.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

- Enact emergency legal authority to election officials to enable immediate response and flexible operations during crises.
- Establish and regularly practice contingency plans, including manual backup methods for voting and communication.
- Maintain robust, ongoing partnerships with emergency management, IT services, law enforcement, and other agencies that support critical infrastructure. Integrate election operations into broader emergency response frameworks.
- Establish in advance legal authority among election officials, and identify partners for chain of custody and access to ballots, equipment, facilities and voting sites, and data.
- Sustain and protect funding for election infrastructure through all election cycles to ensure readiness and the resources needed to respond.
- Ensure legal provisions exist for flexible voting, such as exceptions to Voter ID requirements or absentee ballot return options, during disasters.
- Invest in communication strategies that reach voters under all circumstances by using multiple channels, including radio, print, digital, and physical postings.

- Support the wellbeing of election staff and poll workers, and recognize the personal challenges they may face during disasters.

## **Conclusion: Vigilance, Investment, and the Promise of Democracy**

The experience of North Carolina during Hurricane Helene stands both as a warning and as a guide. It is not a matter of if an emergency will occur. It is a matter of how and when an emergency will occur. No election jurisdiction is immune to a disaster situation. The ongoing need is clear. Maintain investment, strengthen partnerships, and exercise vigilance so that elections may proceed, and every eligible American's voice is heard, regardless of circumstance. Only through sustained commitment do we honor the promise of government by the people, for the people—come rain or shine.

# Empowering Your Staff to Tell Their Story

Samantha Alfaro<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Loudoun County, Virginia*

As I am sure you are all aware, there is a never-ending to-do list when you work in elections. Over this past year, I added one more thing to my staff's to-do list. I asked them to host an open house. I know what you are thinking; this is just another useless task in a sea of useless tasks. Let me tell you, though, we needed to do it because we had to get creative in telling our story.

We hosted our first ever open house in April 2025. During the open house, our staff covered several aspects of how elections are conducted in Loudoun County. We gave an overview of voter registration and list maintenance; election officer assignment and training; election technology and security; voting early, by mail, or on election day; and post-election processes—including results reporting and verification. Attendees were guided from room to room to learn about each of these topics, which were presented by the people who oversee each process. We had demonstrations of our voting equipment and of how we staff precincts. We created fact sheets that were handed out to address any further questions about each topic. And we even had some hands-on demonstrations on how we schedule election officers and how we secure our voting equipment. In all we had over 130 attendees—including local and state elected officials, department heads, teachers, election officers, members of the public, and members of the media.

The feedback we received was tremendous. Elected officials were asking how they could better support our office. Department heads stated they had no idea how much goes into an election. A member of the public felt as if it was an exhibition of taxpayer dollars at work. Based on this feedback, we decided that we will do some form of public education like this every year going forward.

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This event not only highlighted the importance of telling your story to the public but also displayed the importance of empowering your staff to be able to tell their story. So, I added something to my to-do list: help my staff build confidence in their public-speaking skills. It was rewarding to watch my coworkers share all the hard work they do and see the public learn how the process works from subject matter experts. In the past, we have received feedback from public officials that it is nice to see so many people in the office feel confident in talking about their job. This made me think about what if we took that skill set and really built up the staff's confidence. In doing this, we could further build trust with the public as well as help develop our staff.

One detail I have not yet mentioned is that I am an adjunct professor on the side. I built a course on public speaking for my coworkers based on my experience. We focused on the basics such as structuring a message, delivery techniques, and putting it all together into practice.

My coworkers and I met once a week for an hour and a half. I covered some basic concepts with them via PowerPoint slides. We then applied these concepts by giving impromptu speeches along with other activities. My plan was simple: present concepts and have them practice the concepts in each session; give them a little bit of "homework" to apply what we covered; and then, ultimately, stretch their comfort zones in a way that would boost their confidence.

The first time we met, I asked my coworkers to write down what they were afraid of when it came to public speaking. Their fears included being embarrassed or making a mistake, the usual fears people have when it comes to public speaking. I tapered some of my in-class activities based on these responses.

In the first session, I provided an overview of the goals of this working group and gave them an outline of what to expect each week. Then I presented the first set of concepts. I focused on basic techniques for reducing nervousness, building confidence, and improving nonverbal communication. After we covered the concepts, I asked my coworkers to stand in front of the room and present an item they brought with them to the group. After each person presented, I asked the group what this person did well and how this person could improve. Then, I asked the presenter about how did it feel to present this item and if the presenter noticed anything about his or her body during the presentation? I asked these questions to tie in what

the slides covered earlier on how to reduce the body's physiological response to public speaking. This reflection helps people name that feeling when speaking in public and helps them recognize that their confidence can be projected in their nonverbal skills. Their homework was to prepare to introduce themselves to the group through a two-minute introduction speech for the next time we meet.

In the second session, we started with their 2-minute introduction speeches. Once we finished our feedback and discussion, we discussed the components of a powerful speech and how to engage the audience. Then we covered how to effectively use storytelling, which seemed to come naturally to my coworkers. We built upon the nonverbal skills we discussed in our first session and practiced using nonverbal skills to reinforce your message.

In the third session, my coworkers gave a 4-minute presentation that was supposed to be organized and engaging. We practiced voice control, public gestures, postures, and facial expressions. A fear that was brought up in our first session was handling questions and answers, so we practiced that as well. I saw how practicing these skills helped them feel more capable when presenting. For their final homework assignment, they had to present a 5-minute speech and utilize a visual aid. After our session was over, I emailed them a link to watch their recorded presentations along with feedback sheets from everyone in the group.

Finally, in our last session, we began by discussing how it felt to watch themselves present. They all chuckled and remarked how awkward it was watching how their bodies moved as they presented. After that it was time for their final presentations. To build upon our last session, each presenter had to answer questions after his or her speech. Once everyone finished presenting, we had a small graduation ceremony. I gave everyone a paper graduation hat, and I asked them to write what they were most proud of on it. We discussed meeting again and even doing challenges every so often to continue to sharpen this tool.

Over the course of four weeks, I watched my coworkers challenge themselves and grow. Coworkers who were timid and shy now presented with authority and conviction. I was excited to see my long-winded coworkers tell more succinct stories. My coworkers who are natural public speakers became more confident. I grew myself by finding ways to challenge my

coworkers without being burdensome. This is something we plan on doing again with another group. I want to find ways to connect the content more to our day-to-day jobs as well as have more bite-sized activities to demonstrate key concepts. This is something any office can do! It takes a little bit of time, but the reward is worth it.

While this project was not solely focused on elections, it helped with our administration of elections by reaffirming the participants' abilities to speak about what we do here when interacting with the public. The success of this program provided confirmation that we are on the right track when it comes to empowering our people to tell our story, and there is a vital need to continue to do so. Looking at my time in elections, I have come to realize that the action of telling our story is not natural for many election administrators. It feels like for so many years elections have occurred without the need for a public relations person to explain the process to the public. Now it feels like a vital need to be strategic in telling the public about the process, because if we are not telling the public what we are doing to make the process secure, someone else is. As administrators we take so much pride in securing the vote for our voters. It is imperative that we use that pride to educate our communities on what goes on behind the scenes.

I am not an expert, but I have used my communication skills to help my office move our processes from the private sphere into the public sphere. I implore you to do the same. It has dramatically improved the relationships we have with our community and voters. I would argue that doing something as simple as this will pay off in the long run for your office too. And, the time spent working with colleagues on how to better tell their and our stories will only serve to strengthen public trust and, perhaps more importantly, increase their confidence in what they do and how they do it.

# Does Leslie Knope Make More Than Election Directors? Analysis of Election and Other County Directors in North Carolina Counties

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## ABSTRACT

Election directors have long stated they are the least-paid personnel in their states or counties. Given that election administration has long been considered as a mere administrative position, this supposition seems correct. This paper utilizes North Carolina salary data from 2012 through 2021 to understand the differences between election director salaries and the salaries of other county program directors. After controlling for county size, education, income, political factors, time, county director experience, and the unchanging characteristics of the counties, this study finds that election directors are significantly and substantively the lowest paid of any director-level position. Because election directors are an important institution for democracy, understanding their salary situation allows for better understanding of what factors affect the salary decisions.

Keywords: election administration, local election officials, salary, county program directors

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d Martha Kropf is a professor of political science and public policy at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on election administration and the effects of election policies. Mohr, Kropf, and McGowan are coauthors of *A Republic if You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer Elections?* a publication in the Cambridge Elements series.

## Introduction

*“... a key aspect of election infrastructure— workforce, staff, and training—has been given scant attention by many policy makers. This all creates ripe conditions for policy drift, as LEOs attempt to adapt and respond to a changing environment, but without the laws, tools, or budgetary authority to do so”*  
(Manson and Gronke 2025)

Since the 2000 election, election administration has received increasing attention as some perceive the work of election administrators as becoming more “political” (Adona et al. 2019; Gronke et al. 2025). American elections in most states changed dramatically since 2000 with states passing newer and more complex legislation. Election officials are under more scrutiny and are responding to ever-increasing public records requests (Gronke et al. 2025). Starting around 2020, threats and harassment became a larger problem, and many local election officials (LEOs) left their positions (Ferrer et al. 2024; Roberts and Greenberger 2024). As the job has gotten more complex, a key question is whether the salaries of LEOs compensate for the increase in workload, especially in comparison to other public administrators within their own counties.

Repeatedly, election administrators complain that they are among the worst-paid workers within county governments (Sher 2024).<sup>1</sup> This study considers county program director salaries, including election directors, from 2012- 2021 in North Carolina. County program directors include managers of programs such as parks, health, social services, elections, finance, and others. The study finds support for election administrators’ claims of lower pay. Election directors are the lowest paid program directors in North Carolina’s counties after controlling for county-level characteristics. On average, they are paid \$7,980 less than this paper’s eponymous parks and recreation director.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on North Carolina because of the availability of the salary data across North Carolina’s 100 counties and could serve as a springboard for future research into director-level salary gaps.

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1 Since the counties are the local election jurisdiction for North Carolina, county is considered synonymous with local election jurisdictions for this study. Not all elections everywhere are administered at the county level. The interested reader on local-level election jurisdictions should see National Conference of State Legislatures (2018).

2 It is true that the fictional character Leslie Knope is the parks and recreation director for the fictional city of Pawnee in the television show “Parks and Recreation” and not a county. She merely provides a well-known example of a parks and recreation director.

This research is vital because many election administrators left their positions leading up to 2024 (Ferrer et al. 2024). Luckily, the 2024 election went smoothly. Concern remains, however, that turnover of election administrators leaves jurisdictions with too few workers, or at least too few experienced workers, leading to a loss of organizational information (Moynihan and Pandey 2008) and knowledge (Llorens 2008). This became a concern in 2024 when many of North Carolina's county election offices were run by newcomers (Ferrer et al. 2024). In survey research among North Carolina election directors, Roberts and Greenberger (2024) show that election directors might stay if salaries and benefits were higher. Yet, no scholar, to the authors' knowledge, has compared salary data across county directors to understand the context of election director salaries.

## **Careers in Election Administration in North Carolina and Nationally**

The 8,000-plus LEOs across the country do a variety of different jobs to administer elections in their states with variation in jurisdictions as well as workload and pay (Adona et al. 2019; Gronke et al. 2025). In most jurisdictions, expenditures for elections also vary greatly (Mohr et al. 2024). What is likely similar across jurisdictions is that LEOs have limited budgets that are simply inadequate for the complex job they must perform (Shumway 2023; Stewart 2022). What does that mean for the salaries/pay that LEOs draw? Examining election director salaries in counties across North Carolina from 2006 to 2021, McGowan et al. (2025) find that election director salaries vary by jurisdiction size and that partisanship appears to play a role. When Republicans control county commissions and the constituency is Republican, salaries are higher for election directors in North Carolina (McGowan et al. 2025). While important, the study by McGowan and colleagues does not put this in context of other county administrators. The authors would expect if partisanship played a role that all county administrator salaries would vary in similar ways.

In addition to salary, a North Carolina statewide report by Roberts and Greenberger (2024) found three main areas of concern among election officials—the pandemic, macroeconomic conditions, and threats to election workers. They focus on the macroeconomic conditions of the salaries paid to election officials by comparing election administrator salaries to the county median salary in which they work and found the average election staffer makes \$3,139 less than the county median (Roberts and Greenberger 2024, 8). Concerns

over salary are not isolated merely to paying workers more but also affect retention of skilled election workers. A Bipartisan Policy Center report (Ferrer et al. 2024) finds election official turnover is increasing, growing from 28 percent in 2004 to 39 percent in 2022. Gronke et al. (2025, 10) report 40 percent of LEOs “are eligible for and considering retirement,” and, of those individuals, 60 percent are thinking about retirement before 2028. Turnover decreases the knowledge base on how to run elections successfully, leading to potential issues during the election period.

Roberts’ and Greenberger’s report supports the Bipartisan Policy Center’s work finding:

[o]verwhelming majorities [of election workers] report that workload, job stress, and threats to elections workers are up, while compensation has not kept up in many North Carolina counties. If that is the case, then perhaps all county election directors are facing county fiscal restraints? Majorities of election directors reported that enhanced salary and benefits are the item that would most likely encourage them to continue working in elections (Roberts and Greenberger 2024, introduction).

Of those that responded, 53.8 percent said a pay raise would incentivize them to stay in their position.

## Literature on Salaries and Expenditures in Counties

One might argue that counties have little to do with LEO salaries. North Carolina statutes<sup>3</sup> are vague on election administrator pay stating:

Compensation paid to directors of elections in all counties maintaining full-time registration (five days per week) shall be in the form of a salary in an amount recommended by the county board of elections and approved by the Board of County Commissioners and *shall be commensurate with the salary paid to directors in counties similarly situated and similar in population and number of registered voters*<sup>4</sup> [italics added by authors].

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<sup>3</sup> [North Carolina General Statutes, § 163-35\(c\)](#). “Compensation of Directors of Elections.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

But nothing in the statute advises counties to pay the election directors similarly to other public service program directors within the same county. The only comparative measure is across counties and makes no differentiation between the complexity of the county or the complexity of the work. This means that state law dictates benchmarking LEO salaries to nearby counties and not to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are needed to conduct the job effectively. If election director salaries are already low, then the election directors will face a classic collective action problem (Olson 1965) and may continue to receive low pay based upon history or tradition and not upon the current demands of the job.

Interviewing local election officials in Oregon, Manson and Gronke (2025) recently advanced the argument that “policy drift” affects the polycscape of election administration. Election administration is often a policy arena “... where past commitments in policy increasingly move out of sync with the policy demands or expectation of various actors, but where institutional commitments prevent easy adjustments” (Manson and Gronke 2025, 3). LEO salaries not keeping pace with the responsibilities of the job is a prominent example. They document that LEOs in Oregon compete with other county departments to retain their workers (see also Gronke et al. 2025). Their qualitative interviews revealed that enough of the tasks among differing departments in Oregon are similar enough that election workers can move to other departments. In the meantime, salaries for election workers remained static.

These internal challenges to counties were often tied to issues of job classification. Many election office positions have either not been reviewed in a position or compensation analysis, or if they have been, the review treated them as more clerical positions. This is despite the important legal and regulatory obligations required by these positions (Manson and Gronke 2025, 8).

Theory surrounding “policy drift,” they argue, explains many election administration issues but particularly those in workforce and staffing. In the past, election administrators may have had few transferable skills, but as election administration increased in complexity LEO skill levels also increased, as Gronke et al. (2025), demonstrated with their qualitative

interviews. However, the institutional constraints of the salary laws and the lack of natural constituency likely keep the election administrators pay low.

## Theory

Prior research on expenditures and salaries in election administration indicates that partisanship plays a role in election spending and salary. Mohr et al. (2019) find that the partisanship of the county commission matters to the total amount spent on elections and interacts with the county voters' partisan preferences. Importantly, in examining budget priorities McGowan et al. (2025) find evidence that election salaries vary across counties, with election directors who reside in counties with a Republican majority commission and a majority Republican constituency making higher salaries. This relationship may not be unique to election directors but rather may explain director-level salaries generally. The first hypothesis reflects that partisan preferences of the county likely influence the salaries of the program directors at the county level.

H1: Partisanship will influence county program director salaries.

While partisan political preferences may play a role in civil service reforms (Brewer and Kellough 2016), much of the reviewed research does not single out particular types of public employees. In an intragovernmental setting, each program director should face the same context for marketable skills. In other words, the parks and recreation manager should face the same salary constraints as the election director. What can explain the differences found? One difference between a parks and recreation manager, a county transportation manager, and an elections director is the customer base. Arguably, in this context parks and recreation and transportation have marketable goods and services in that their customers—meaning voters and citizens—demand good parks and roads (Tiebout 1956). As McGowan et al. (2021) argue that election administration lacks a constituency, it also lacks a market for its services—except semiannually when elections are held. Whereas roads, police, teachers, parks are everyday services citizens' demand. As counties grow—and all North Carolina counties were growing during this period—counties face strains on their resources as demand for services outpaces revenues in the short run. Residents expect and demand the more visible and basic services like policing for public safety,

teachers for education, and good roads for transportation. These services have visible and loud constituencies where elections do not (McGowan et al. 2021).

Delayed changes to salary classification or salary increases are delays in democratic maintenance that may operate similarly to governments' tendency to defer infrastructure maintenance. While widely recognized that infrastructure maintenance prevents costly repairs (Srithongrung et al. 2019), studies show that state (Jimenez and Pagano 2012) and local (Ebdon 2004) governments find asset maintenance to be challenging. Within the public finance literature, it is almost a truism that unflashy, responsible capital projects can be pushed to the side in favor of new and shiny projects due to political factors (Kim and Ebdon 2021; Pagano and Perry 2008). This dynamic plays out in real life. At the 2025 Election Assistance Commission Elections Data Summit, Florida election administrator Paul Lux recalled how elections employees missed out on raises enjoyed by other departments after the 2008 recession. While many county departments were reclassifying employees into new<sup>5</sup> jobs to secure pay increases and get around salary freezes, Lux's elections office was unaware of this practice and missed out on initial salary increases (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2025).

This problem compounds with collective action problems posed by the law and the transaction costs associated with an election director trying to reskill and move to other work. If election directors' salaries are benchmarked to their peers whose salaries are low due to deferred democratic maintenance, then election directors will collectively continue to be underpaid as their salaries are tied to the historic pay for the position rather than the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to do the work (Olson 1965). This is troubling because research shows that running elections involves specialized skills (Llorens 2008), meaning that LEOs have skills that are not transferable to other public sector jobs or vice versa. This inability to transfer skills can create transaction costs (Williamson 1985) to transferring jobs and may limit the ability of election directors to command higher salaries. Together, the lack of a natural constituency for elections, the deferral of democratic maintenance, the historic low pay of election

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<sup>5</sup> The jobs are not actually new. They are created or retitled to secure pay raises. These opportunities are not available for election workers at this time.

directors, and the inability to costlessly change jobs may lead election directors to have low pay. This leads to a second hypothesis.

H2: Election directors make less than other county directors.

County program directors may also differ in experience level for their jobs, which would likely affect their salaries. Unfortunately, data are unavailable in North Carolina on the education levels or experience levels of county program directors. The authors expect that as program managers remain in their positions, they gain experience, knowledge, and skills for their jobs. This study uses the number of years served as a program director as a proxy measure for the experience level in these positions to form a third hypothesis.

H3: Experience will influence county program director salaries.

## Data

The data are from the voluntary, self-reported, annual County Salary Survey which collects salary and other data from county government administrators in North Carolina. The survey is sponsored by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Government (n.d.). While the data include many positions, this study's data only include the director-level salary in each division within county government. The dataset covers the 2006 to 2021 period, but certain years only have a few director salaries listed. To account for this, the most complete years are used which form an unbalanced panel of North Carolina counties covering fiscal years 2012 through 2021.<sup>6</sup> [Table 1](#) contains the salaries for the 9,029 directors in thousands of 2023 dollars with the 14 county director positions broken out.<sup>7</sup> The average election director makes approximately \$71,200, which is lower than the average salary of about \$105,900 for all observed director level positions.

The salary averages in [table 1](#) only tell part of the story. The distributions of salaries for election directors and parks and recreation directors are visualized in [figure 1](#). As the histogram shows, there are election directors working in more urban

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<sup>6</sup> The salary data years from 2012 to 2021 are post Great Recession and pre-COVID as the 2021 survey includes data from 2020 salaries, which were set in 2019.

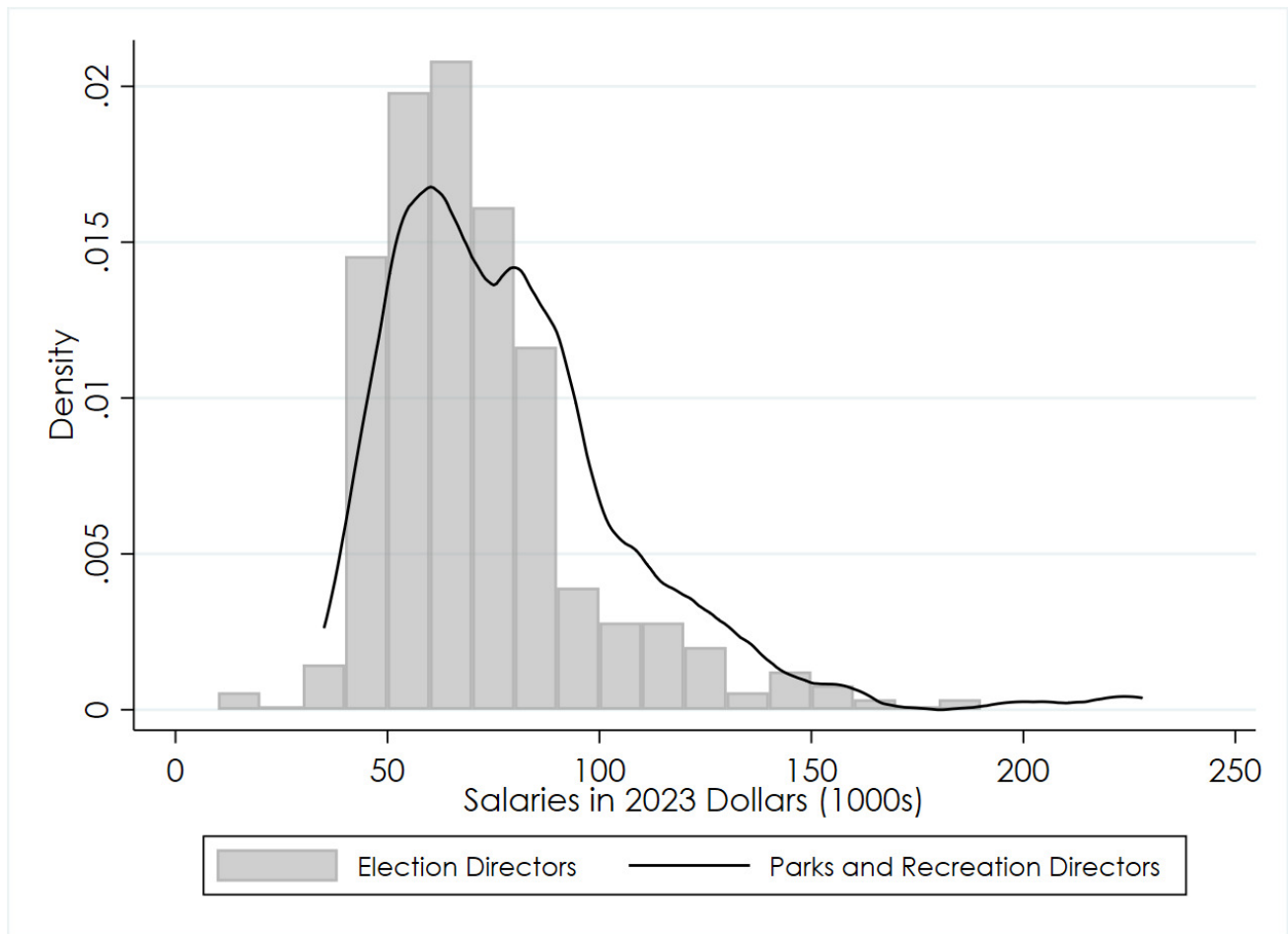
<sup>7</sup> Missing salaries, zero salaries, 17 possible transcription errors where the nominal salary was equal to or less than \$100, four possible transcription errors where the recorded salary exceeded \$400,000, and 24 entries missing information on the partisanship of the county commission were removed. Inflation was calculated in Stata using INFLATE (McCulloch 2024).

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for County Director Positions**

	Obs.	Mean	S.D.	Q1	Median	Q3
Director Salary	9029	105.9	44.5	76.4	96.4	125.1
Election Director Salary	893	71.2	24.6	55.1	65.8	80.8
Senior Services Director Salary	329	68.1	22.8	53.3	60.9	79.6
Parks and Recreation Director Salary	585	79.2	29.9	58.5	73.2	90.9
Library Director Salary	499	96.8	31.2	76.5	88.0	108.9
Emergency Medical Services Director Salary	495	90.6	28.7	73.5	86.4	101.1
Emergency Services Director Salary	576	95.0	31.7	75.6	90.1	106.8
Human Resources Director Salary	722	99.4	33.4	75.9	93.8	114.1
Planning Director Salary	624	100.6	30.2	79.0	94.4	115.1
Public Utilities Director Salary	327	97.3	30.9	76.4	88.9	111.9
Information Technology Director Salary	738	108.0	40.0	80.4	97.1	127.2
Social Services Director Salary	859	114.5	31.1	92.6	108.1	129.4
Finance Director Salary	834	117.5	37.5	90.5	110.1	134.4
Public Health Director Salary	667	127.2	41.6	100.2	115.8	143.4
County Administrator Salary	881	169.3	57.4	126.2	156.6	205.7
Total Population (1000s)	9029	110.6	167.2	32.8	60.5	127.8
Pseudo Graduation Rate	9029	0.2	0.02	0.2	0.2	0.2
Real Per Capita Personal Income	9029	49.5	9.0	43.1	47.4	54.1
Percent Republican Vote	9029	56.4	13.2	47.5	58.4	65.9
Commission Partisanship	9029	0.6	0.5	0	1	1
Years in Position	5076	8.2	8.2	2	5	12
Observations	9029					

*Notes:* all financial variables given in thousands of 2023 dollars

Figure 1. Election Director and Parks and Recreation Director Salaries



counties, like Mecklenburg, who make substantially more than the average salary. However, in general, election directors appear underpaid. When compared with the distribution of election director salaries in the histogram to the kernel density plot of parks and recreation director salaries, represented by the black line, it is apparent that there are relatively fewer parks and recreation directors in the lower portion of the salary distribution than there are election directors. Also, relatively more parks and recreation directors appear in the upper portion of the salary distribution than do election directors.

## Controls

According to North Carolina law,<sup>8</sup> each county commission makes decisions to determine the salaries of election administrators based on a salary comparison to like counties. To study the effect of partisanship, data from Log Into North

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<sup>8</sup> [North Carolina General Statutes, § 163-35\(c\)](#). "Compensation of Directors of Elections."

Carolina (LINC) were obtained concerning the percentage of total voters voting for the Republican presidential candidate (North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, n.d.).<sup>9</sup> The authors control for whether a county has a Republican majority on its county commission (North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, n.d.), and the interaction between the Republican presidential vote percentage and the dummy variable coded 1 for a Republican county commission.

The authors control for demographic and economic factors that could influence program directors' salaries. First, more populated areas are likely to pay program directors more at a diminishing rate. Therefore, the authors control for the natural log of population through LINC (North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, n.d.). Second, more educated counties may have more competitive employment markets and may have populations more willing to pay for elections. Following Mohr et al. (2019), pseudo high school graduation rates calculated from LINC data are used to control for this. Third, the authors control for counties' per-capita personal incomes (U.S. Department of Commerce (BEA n.d.)) to adjust for the fact that counties with higher wage levels may pay election directors more. Finally, the authors control for directors' years of service in an alternative specification even though the control has missing values.

## Results

To estimate the effect of partisanship, the salary gaps between election directors and their director-level colleagues and the effect of experience, the authors estimate a fixed-effects linear regression using ordinary least squares (Wooldridge 2010).<sup>10</sup> The regression coefficients and their cluster robust standard errors are presented in [table 2](#).<sup>11</sup> After controlling for county level characteristics, it is clear that election directors are significantly and substantively the lowest paid of any director-level position. Overall, the findings bear out that partisanship does not generally influence program directors' pay. However, years served does.

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<sup>9</sup> LINC is a general repository for administrative data in North Carolina (see also Mohr et al. 2019). The data reflect the partisanship immediately after the election and do not consider any changes that may have occurred between elections due to deaths or resignations of sitting commissioners.

<sup>10</sup> County-level fixed effects are employed to control for county-level unobservables and year dummies control for the effect of time.

<sup>11</sup> Note that all statistical tests are based on a typical Huber/White cluster-robust covariance matrix with clustering done at the county level (Wooldridge 2010).

Table 2. Statistical Results

	Full Sample		Experience Model	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<b>County Partisanship</b>				
Percent Republican Vote	-0.244	(0.316)	-0.410	(0.314)
Commission Partisanship	-6.170	(9.934)	4.702	(12.15)
Republican Commission x Republican Vote %	0.0982	(0.184)	-0.0844	(0.213)
<b>Director-Level Pay Gaps</b>				
Senior Services Director	1.618	(1.862)	9.569**	(2.185)
Parks and Recreation Director	7.977**	(1.712)	8.428**	(1.846)
Library Director	14.60**	(1.617)	15.67**	(1.609)
Emergency Medical Services Director	18.38**	(1.668)		
Emergency Services Director	21.72**	(1.663)		
Human Resources Director	23.44**	(1.678)	26.61**	(1.933)
Planning Director	24.82**	(2.157)	26.31**	(1.988)
Public Utilities Director	33.17**	(3.183)	35.19**	(3.317)
Information Technology Director	32.17**	(2.284)	34.28**	(2.344)
Social Services Director	43.62**	(1.259)	44.88**	(1.461)
Finance Director	47.01**	(2.129)	49.31**	(2.212)
Public Health Director	50.57**	(3.320)	50.60**	(3.495)
County Administrator	97.97**	(3.749)		
<b>Experience</b>				
Years in Position			0.676**	(0.0984)
<b>County Level Control Variables</b>				
Total Population (Ln)	19.22+	(10.53)	18.89+	(10.33)
Pseudo Graduation Rate	-17.88*	(7.646)	-4.607	(8.165)
Real Per Capita Personal Income (1000s)	0.0916	(0.232)	0.134	(0.295)
Constant	-129.1	(124.9)	-126.6	(123.3)
Observations	9029		5076	
Within County R-Squared	.66		.55	
Joint Significance Test of Director Salary Gaps	F(13, 99) = 124**		F(10, 98) = 129**	
Overall Significance Test	F(28, 99) = 85**		F(24, 98) = 85**	

Notes: significance stars assigned as follows: + p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<.01; year effects are omitted; the models controlling for experience covers years 2014-2021 and is missing Stokes County, whereas the full sample model covers years 2012-2021.

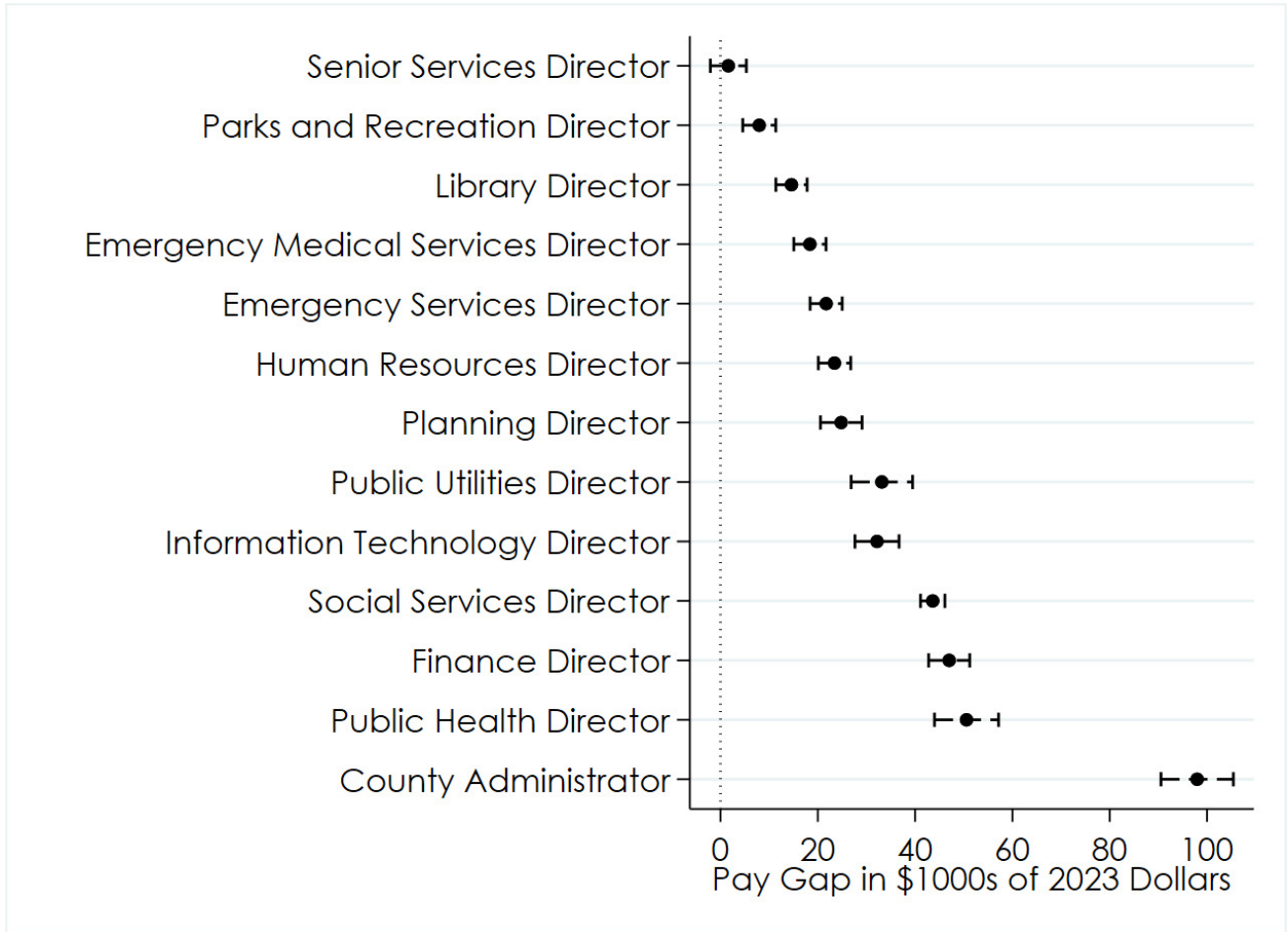
First, the findings do not support hypothesis 1. Partisanship, broadly speaking, does not appear to influence program directors' pay significantly. The county's percent Republican vote, commission partisanship, and their interaction are all individually insignificant, and the variables are jointly insignificant (F-statistic of .51, p-value of .67). Thus, McGowan's, Mohr's, and Kropf's (2025) findings seem limited to election directors. Partisanship may influence election directors' salaries, but it does not predict program directors' salaries generally. Elections are unique.

Second, to quantify the average pay gap faced by election directors, dummy variables for each position other than election director are included in the regression model. Since election directors serve as the reference category, the coefficients for the director-level positions are the average amount more a program director in the given position is paid than an election director. The salary gaps are listed under the "Director-Level Pay Gaps" heading in [table 2](#) and are given in thousands of 2023 dollars. There are highly significant differences in the pay among director-level positions (F-statistic of 124, p-value < .0001). As shown in [table 2](#), the election director position is the lowest-paid director position in county government. Among all positions, only senior services directors fail to make significantly more than election directors. On the low end, election directors make about \$7,980 less than parks and recreation directors. On the high end, election directors make approximately \$47,010 less than finance directors. The pay gaps without years in position controls being applied are visualized in [figure 2](#), which shows that directors make less than other county-level directors in North Carolina.

As a result of the observed pay gaps, the model predicts that election directors are the lowest paid director-level position in county governments as shown in [figure 3](#). The average predictions tell what the average program director in this dataset would make if the director moved into each of the director-level positions after accounting for this study's controls. On average, directors would make the least amount of money if they switched from their roles to the role of an election director.

Finally, [table 2](#) also shows a model that includes years in position. While predictive of salary levels generally, controlling for experience appears to have little meaningful impact on the salary gaps for positions other than the senior service director. After controlling for experience, election directors are paid

Figure 2. Director-Level Pay Gaps in North Carolina Counties



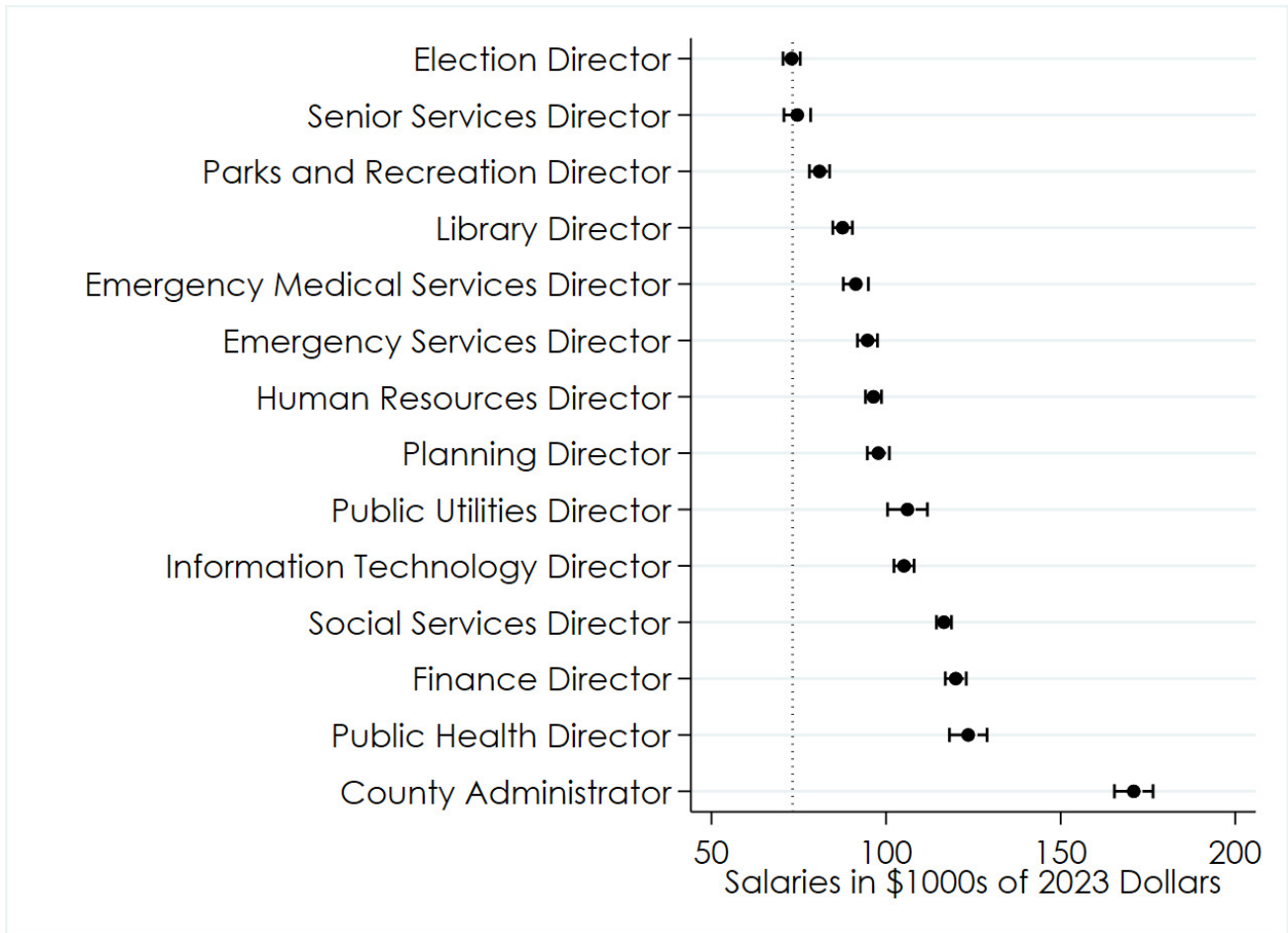
Notes: 95 percent confidence intervals in brackets

much less than senior service directors. Given this control is missing for 2012 and 2013 and for some director-level positions, the full model is the preferred specification.

## Conclusion

This study finds local election directors make a smaller salary than other county program directors. While this analysis does not find that partisanship plays a role in this pay gap, counties are paying election directors less than other program directors, possibly because it is easier to pay for new and shiny projects while delaying democratic maintenance on elections, which most constituents only encounter once or twice a year. Election administrators are historically viewed as little more than clerks. While the job now involves much more regulation, technological skill, and public scrutiny, the laws in North Carolina do not factor in these increasingly important knowledge, skills, and abilities and leads to a collective action problem. When discussing this with election administrators, they noted positive examples where state associations made

Figure 3. Average Predicted Pay by Director Position



Notes: 95 percent confidence intervals in brackets

politicians aware of the increasing demands of their jobs and were able to raise salaries for the entire group. Data from other states are not currently available. A comparison with other states and a comparison where LEOs are categorized as clerks or even elected officials would build a better understanding of LEO salaries in general.

Low pay for election administrators is concerning given the importance of elections to American governance. In the past two decades, election administration became a new area of research. Elections have also been designated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as critical infrastructure, which are “[s]ystems and assets, whether physical or virtual, so vital to the United States that the incapacity or destruction of such systems and assets would have a debilitating impact on security, national economic security, national public health or safety, or any combination of those matters” (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2017). As critical infrastructure, elections

are important institutions that safeguard democracy, given that elections are the conduit through which all other policies and governmental decisions are made.

In essence, elections are the foundation of democracy. Given this level of importance, one could assume that elections workers would be among the higher-paid employees in any state or election jurisdiction. However, this is far from the case.

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# Response to “Does Leslie Knope Make More than Election Directors?”

Olivia Hale<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *San Joaquin County, California*

Compensation and classification issues are among the most persistent structural challenges in election administration. Workload, statutory compliance, public scrutiny, cybersecurity demands, and operational complexity have expanded dramatically, yet compensation is often lagging. Research that examines salary disparities is directly relevant to recruitment, retention, succession planning, and institutional stability. What makes this topic especially meaningful is that practitioners have been describing this issue anecdotally for years. Seeing it examined through systematic data analysis gives the discussion greater credibility in policy and budget conversations.

The findings are highly useful even though the study focuses solely on North Carolina. The central conclusion is that election directors are compensated at lower levels relative to similarly situated county directors. This aligns with patterns many directors observe nationally.

From an operational standpoint, this type of research is valuable in several ways. It provides an evidence-based framework for compensation discussions with county administration, human resources (HR), and local government boards. It helps contextualize turnover, burnout, and recruitment difficulties. It supports broader conversations about professionalization in the field. While the numerical gaps themselves are not transferable to California, the structural dynamics absolutely are. The idea of “democratic maintenance” is particularly useful language for explaining why elections funding behaves differently from other county services.

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<sup>a</sup> Olivia Hale serves as the registrar of voters for San Joaquin County.

There are some practical limitations in how the research can be used. The study relies on a voluntary, self-reported salary survey, which introduces potential reporting bias and missing data issues. That does not invalidate the research, but it does require caution in interpretation.

More importantly for practitioners, North Carolina's governance structure differs significantly from California's. Many California election officials are elected rather than appointed, although we are seeing more California counties move to appointed models. Classification systems, bargaining units, and compensation authorities vary widely. Due to these differences, the findings are best used as illustrative rather than predictive. The research highlights a pattern, but it should not be treated as universally generalizable without multistate validation because natural jurisdictional constraints exist.

The study of several of the following practitioner realities could deepen the analysis.

#### *Total Compensation Versus Salary*

Salaries alone rarely tells the full story. Benefits, retirement formulas, deferred compensation, overtime eligibility, and leave structures significantly influence retention decisions.

#### *Classification and Civil Service Structures*

Pay disparities are often driven less by policy neglect and more by classification frameworks that mischaracterize elections work as clerical rather than technical, regulatory, logistical, and managerial. In San Joaquin County, we are in an active classification study with our labor team as it relates to our election series positions, which supports this exact argument.

#### *Episodic Workload Cycles*

Election administration is cyclical. Staffing models must absorb dramatic workload spikes, which complicates compensation comparisons with departments that have steadier demand curves.

#### *Risk and Accountability Factors*

Election administrators operate under unusually high legal exposure, reputational risk, and public scrutiny. That risk profile is rarely reflected in compensation analyses.

#### *Labor Market Distortion*

Private-sector competition—particularly in areas such as cybersecurity, geographic information systems (GIS),

information technology systems, and project management—increasingly affects elections offices, yet many compensation systems only set benchmarks internally.

Several additional research areas could be extremely valuable on this topic, including:

- multistate compensation comparisons for appointed administrators versus elected administrators;
- turnover cost modeling on topics such as institutional knowledge loss, training costs, or error risk;
- classification studies on subjects such as how election positions are defined versus the actual knowledge, skills, and abilities required;
- burnout and workload metrics tied to election cycles;
- succession planning risks in jurisdictions with aging leadership;
- impact of technology modernization on staffing structures; and
- recruitment pipeline studies on themes like why younger professionals do or do not enter the field.

Practitioners struggle to quantify workforce challenges. Research that translates staffing instability into measurable fiscal and operational risk would be especially persuasive for policymakers.

The conclusions are highly plausible. Most practitioners would recognize the patterns described. However, real-world utilization depends on:

- availability of comparable state-specific data,
- local governance structures,
- collective bargaining frameworks, and
- budget authority constraints.

Research like this is most influential when it becomes a tool for policy framing, not merely an academic observation. The “democratic maintenance” concept is particularly promising because it translates elections funding into language policymakers already understand—e.g., infrastructure maintenance, deferred investment, and risk accumulation.

Utilization may be limited when:

- salary decisions are political and structural, not purely analytical;
- data gaps across states hinder direct replication; and
- compensation reforms require HR studies, union negotiations, and/or board approvals.

Still, the article contributes something critically important as it moves long-standing practitioner concerns forward.

Overall, the study reflects the reality election officials frequently encounter: elections are universally essential yet often fiscally invisible outside of election cycles. The research does not solve the problem, but it meaningfully strengthens the conversation.

# Response to “Does Leslie Knope Make More than Election Directors?”

Lori Edwards<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Polk County, Florida*

This study offers a fulsome compilation of information related to an important topic—election directors’ salaries in North Carolina—including the statutory framework for determining their salaries. The authors also incorporate findings from the national Local Election Official Survey conducted by Paul Gronke and Paul Manson through the Elections & Voting Information Center. This topic is of interest to practitioners and, with more study, can provide substance to efforts to increase workforce stability and institutional resilience in the field.

The authors hypothesize that partisanship will influence salaries of all program directors within a jurisdiction but conclude there was no evidence for this in the North Carolina data they evaluated. Jurisdictional partisanship corresponds heavily to many local characteristics, including population density as well as education level and income. These variables cannot be overlooked. Of course, the statutory framework specific to North Carolina may allow partisan effects on compensation, but the conclusions are limited in scope because of the variety of configurations of salary requirements among states.

The authors speculate that election directors are paid less than other county directors and offer data supplied by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Government to support this hypothesis. It is easy to see how delayed changes to salary classification contribute to this disparity, as the authors suggest, but the authors’ support for the argument that election administration lacks a constituency and market for their services is troublesome to me. Election officials’ constituencies are all eligible voters within their jurisdictions. There is no evidence that election services are not needed in the “market.”

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Their third hypothesis—experience will influence county program directors' salaries—is plausible but not well supported by the supplied data. Further research into factors that contribute to retention and turnover not related to financial compensation could be helpful to practitioners.

The information would be more accessible to practitioners if the figures had captions that were easier for nonscientists to understand. Additionally, a shorter introduction might improve engagement.

# Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta

William P. McLean<sup>1</sup><sup>a</sup>, Cameron Wimpy<sup>1</sup><sup>b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Arkansas State University*

## ABSTRACT

Less than one-fifth of the voting-age population lives in rural areas, yet nearly two-thirds of elections occur in jurisdictions classified as rural by the U.S. government. This study examines election administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta, a unique rural region with distinct socioeconomic and geographic challenges. Through qualitative interviews with local election officials (LEOs) across 17 counties in six states, this research identifies key challenges—including communication barriers due to declining local media, difficulties in recruiting poll workers amid population decline, issues with vote-by-mail delivery, and challenges in maintaining bipartisan poll worker balance. Conversely, LEOs report opportunities such as enhanced voter access due to smaller populations, high local trust, and robust federal and state support—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings highlight the interplay of rurality and election administration, offering insights for LEOs, policymakers, and researchers.

Keywords: rural, election administration, Mississippi Delta, local election officials

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As early as 2002, there was recognition of a potential urban-rural spectrum in how elections are administered in the United States. With that recognition, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was passed and created the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC). HAVA charged the EAC, among other tasks, to examine factors that may differentially have an impact on elections administration in urban and rural areas (Ramsberger and Van Trieste 2013). This charge was the genesis for some

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<sup>1</sup> This work was funded by support from the MIT Election Data + Science Lab and the Election Trust Initiative.

early scholarly work on that divide (Rachlin 2006; Gronke and Caudell-Feagan 2008) highlighting the variance in challenges local election officials (LEOs) face across the urban-rural continuum. That early work culminated in 2010 with the EAC staff convening a working group made up of rural and urban LEOs and scholars to focus on four primary areas: voter outreach, personnel, polling places, and technology.

Considering the possibility of an urban-rural divide, there has been limited scholarly research with respect to the broad topic of rural election administration since that time. Employing case studies, Creek and Karnes (2010) found significant variation in the implementation of HAVA between rural and urban jurisdictions. Much of the background literature for that study came from broader findings and expectations in the bureaucracy, federalism, and policy application literatures. This background is almost entirely unrelated to the substantive topic of election administration. Only recently has higher-quality data at the local jurisdiction level—e.g., the Election Administration and Voting Survey—created opportunities to examine this previously unexplored aspect of election administration. It should come as no surprise that much of the analysis of U.S. elections happens at the state level where data are much more easily analyzed but also aggregated such that broad conclusions on the impact of rurality are difficult to draw. Surveys such as the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAEE) provide uniquely rich state-level findings (see Stewart (2020) for an example) about the voter experience but are almost impossible to utilize when it comes to getting representative samples below the state level. However, this provides the prospect of employing the high-quality data that are available, creating additional datasets from coding, and developing additional context through qualitative methods.

When discussing elections and electoral outcomes, the focus is often on urban areas and large population centers. Yet, rural America is neither monolithic nor static. An increasingly small fraction of the population is employed in agriculture (Hart et al. 2005). Towns range from regional centers of several thousand to communities with single-digit populations, and proximity to urban cores varies dramatically. Some rural residents travel a few miles for services while others face trips of hundreds of miles. The 2013 EAC Urban-Rural Study documented this variation, identifying 293 jurisdictions that were completely rural yet adjacent to metropolitan areas and 449 that were

completely rural and nonadjacent. These distinctions in geography, economics, culture, and demography have major implications for policy and research on elections.

Over the past century, the nation has evolved from a largely rural, agrarian society to one dominated by urban population centers (Lichter and Johnson 2023). Still, nearly two-thirds of the nation's counties are rural, as is at least 75 percent of its landmass, underscoring the continued importance of rural populations and their resources.<sup>2</sup> As scholars have noted (Hart 1998), policy analysts who treat diverse rural locales as uniform—or who assume rural problems mirror urban ones—may fail to identify distinct election administration challenges and effective solutions. Only by attending to this variation can differences in outcomes both across rural areas and between rural and urban jurisdictions be discerned.

LEOs operate in unique surroundings that differ exponentially both across rural areas and between rural and urban areas. Indeed, LEOs who practice in smaller and more remote areas in the Mississippi River Delta govern in a system characterized by financially limited organizations; small, shrinking, and aging populations; lack of partisan diversity; lack of regular access to collegial support; somewhat limited access to advanced technologies; historical and systemic challenges; and relatively high fixed costs per delivered service. This potentially creates challenging circumstances for rural LEOs and residents. As a result, rural LEOs share a different set of concerns than their urban contemporaries. The authors recognize there are many commonalities between urban and rural election practitioners, but it is the plethora of substantive differences in challenges and opportunities that are highlighted here.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised previously unforeseeable questions related to participation in public events, especially those related to elections. In the period preceding the 2020 general election, election officials across the country were concerned that the pandemic could suppress voter participation or, alternatively, that crowded polling locations might facilitate viral transmission—resulting in increased cases, hospitalizations, and mortality. As a result, many states and jurisdictions modified their voting laws by adopting automatic voter registration, eliminating excuse requirements for

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<sup>2</sup> Some U.S. government estimates place the total rural landmass as high as 97 percent.

absentee voting, and expanding early voting periods. These reforms were intended to promote electoral participation while safeguarding public health but were often costly, politically contentious, or both. These modifications, along with other systemic differences listed earlier—e.g., lack of internet and media access, limited postal infrastructure, and lower election infrastructure—have the potential to have far-reaching impacts in the more-impooverished local jurisdictions in the Mississippi River Delta.

This paper provides evidence from a series of in-person interviews conducted in May 2023 with LEOs in the Lower Mississippi Delta region. Outside of a few metropolitan areas, the Delta is a particularly rural and underexamined area of the country when it comes to election administration. The region also offered significant analytical leverage because it spans six states with varying election codes and administrative structures, allowing observations on how similar rural conditions interact with different institutional arrangements. Interviews took place shortly after the 2022 midterm elections—the first post-pandemic federal election—allowing officials to reflect on both the unique challenges of the COVID-19 period and their experiences with returning to more normal operations. This timing allowed exploration of the impacts of this unique period in addition to the broader subjects related to rural election administration.

Three primary research questions are explored as part of a broader project on rural election administration. These questions drove the development of the research design and the discussion guide for the interviews referenced later.

1. How does rurality affect election administration?
2. What are the unique challenges of election administration in the Mississippi River Delta region?
3. What are the effects of COVID-19 on the experiences of local election officials in rural jurisdictions?

This paper proceeds in the following manner. first, “rural” is defined. Next, the research design and sampling frame within the lower Mississippi Delta region is explained. findings and the

themes that emerged are then presented. finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion of the research and suggests paths forward for this project.

## **Rural Election Administration**

### *Defining Rural*

It is notably challenging to define where an urban area ends and a rural one begins (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). Indeed, dictionary definitions typically define rural somewhat inexactly as anything related to the countryside and not the town. This, in its basic form, is the definition used by the U.S. Census Bureau. “Rural encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area” (U.S. Census Bureau 2024). Across the various agencies of the U.S. government, there are no less than 33 definitions of rural (Childs et al. 2022). Although most definitions include some measure of population, others include descriptions like geographic isolation, adjacency to metropolitan areas, commuting distances, and land use, among others (Nemerever and Rogers 2021). Simply put, there are many ways to capture the various elements of rurality.

The ways in which rural and urban areas differ are myriad, ranging from higher proportions of elderly people and children to lower population density with higher percentages of poor and less-educated residents. This is compounded by diseconomies of scale and longer travel distances, which translate to higher costs for engaging in electoral behaviors. Access to proximate electoral services has the potential to have far-reaching impact on electoral outcomes, especially when exacerbated by circumstances such as a global pandemic.

With respect to election administration, the unit of measurement for the urban-rural spectrum presents the most significant challenge as these can vary across states—e.g., counties in one state versus towns in another. The authors sidestep this issue of measurement since all the states included in this study administer elections at the county level. Using counties as the level of analysis also allowed for the employment of clearly defined scales for measuring rurality. To select counties in the Delta region that were sufficiently rural—i.e., low population density and/or not adjacent to large urban centers—the Rural-Urban Continuum (RUC) code measure from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) was used (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service 2025). This approach is consistent with recommendations from Nemerever and Rogers

(2021) who advocate for using USDA ERS codes at the county level for political science research. The RUC codes run from one, representing most urban, to nine representing most rural. The authors exclude all counties <3 and limit the inclusion of 3s and 4s to counties with large rural areas despite having modest county seats or that receive a higher score due to larger urban areas in a neighboring county.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Lower Mississippi Delta Region*

The study's focus is the Lower Mississippi Delta, a region running from southern Illinois through the Deep South along the Mississippi River. All counties in the sampling frame fall within the service area of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), a federal-state partnership targeting persistent poverty in the region.<sup>4</sup> This region was selected for both substantive and practical reasons.

Substantively, the Delta offers significant analytical leverage. First, it is among the most economically disadvantaged regions in the country with poverty rates well above national averages and decades of population decline. These conditions intensify the resource constraints and workforce challenges that characterize rural election administration more broadly. Second, the region spans six states—Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee—each with distinct election codes, administrative structures, and state-local relationships. This variation allows for observation of how similar rural conditions interact with different institutional arrangements. Tennessee, for example, employs appointed professional election administrators who focus exclusively on elections while officials in the other states are elected clerks with dozens of additional duties ranging from vehicle registration to deed recording. Third, the region's counties vary considerably in their degree of rurality, ranging from micropolitan counties adjacent to regional centers like Memphis, Jackson (Mississippi), Jonesboro, and Paducah to remote counties with no incorporated municipality exceeding 2,500 residents.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the RUC code measure, see <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation>.

<sup>4</sup> The DRA includes 255 counties and takes a broad definition of the delta. See <https://dra.gov/map-room/>.

Practically, the region's accessibility from the authors' home institution allowed for in-person interviews across multiple states within reasonable travel constraints.

## **Research Design**

The goals for this project were to learn in depth about the experience of election administrators in the Mississippi Delta region. This mostly ruled out conducting any type of large-scale quantitative analysis and extending the study's reach to other rural areas of the country. Although there is important variation within the rural counties visited, the study is limited by issues that may be unique to this region. There are also issues of convenience and participation. For example, the authors were unable to secure participation from any parishes in Louisiana despite including several in their broader sampling frame.

This study's methods are qualitative. Formal interviews were conducted with the LEOs in each jurisdiction using a structured discussion guide.<sup>5</sup> All interviews were conducted in person in May 2023. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were either recorded for transcript analysis or documented with extensive notes in the event the LEO was not comfortable with recording. The recordings and notes were then analyzed to identify the themes and trends discussed in the next section.

## *Sampling and Selection*

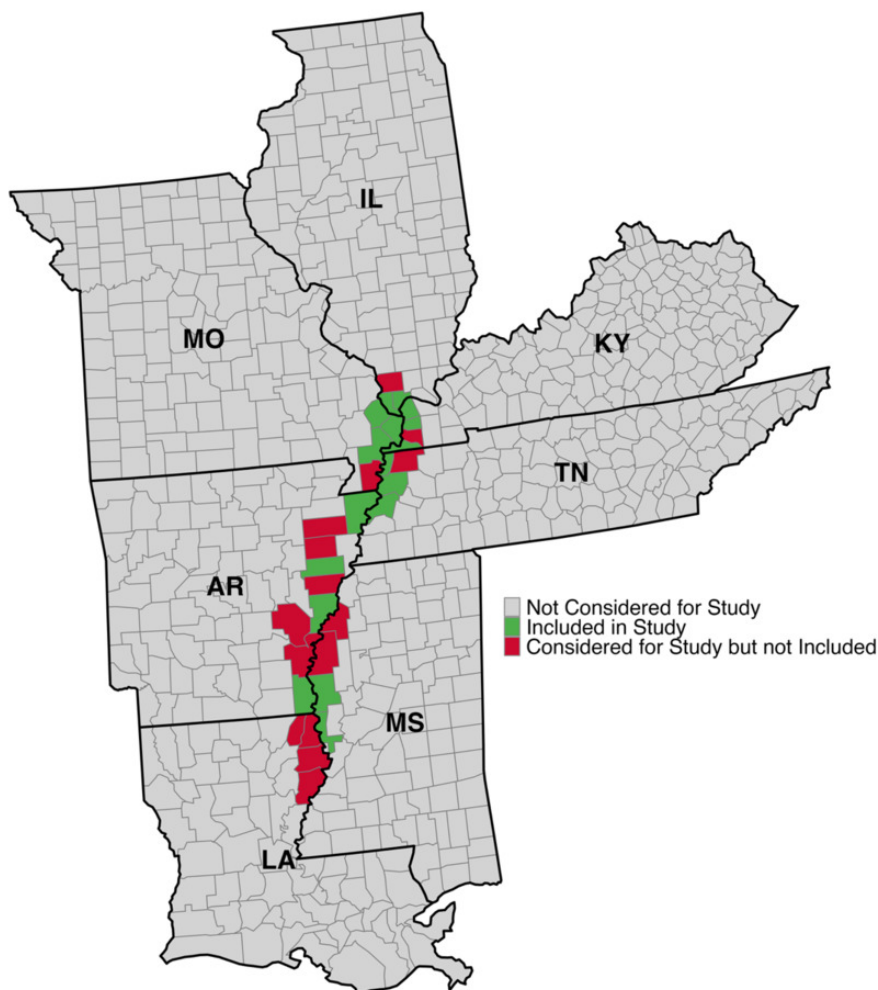
The sampling process began by identifying reasonably reachable counties in the region that fit the study's definition of rural and by collecting contact information for the associated election officials. From there the authors invited the officials to participate in our study via email and phone. This yielded a sampling frame of 32 counties in seven states. From that frame, the researchers were successful in sampling 17 counties in six states. The counties included in the study are shown in [figure 1](#).

Most of the interviewees were the chief election officials in their respective counties. The one exception was the inclusion of a chief deputy. There were significant distinctions in duties of the officials, especially across state lines. In Tennessee, for example, the election administrators work only in elections and report directly to their county boards of elections. In the other states, the titles varied—e.g., county clerk versus circuit clerk—but the responsibilities included a range of duties. These included

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<sup>5</sup> This design was approved by the Arkansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Figure 1. Counties Considered and Counties Included in Study**



automobile registration, legal recordkeeping, tax collection, filing involuntary mental health commitments, deeds, and more. Officials in the sample were generally experienced administrators. Among elected officials, most were serving beyond their initial terms. Only two—one in Arkansas and one in Illinois—were in their first terms. The appointed administrators in Tennessee were all established in their roles. Although precise tenure data were not collected, the interviews reflected substantial institutional knowledge across the sample with most officials having administered multiple election cycles for their jurisdictions. This creates an extremely varied landscape when it comes to administrative capacity and

**Table 1. LEO Duties and Demographics of Counties Included in Study**

State	Administrator	Other Duties	County	Population	Change	Median Age	African American	Square Miles	RUC Code	
AR			Chicot	10,208	-13.5%	43.5	53.8%	691	9	
AR		Bookkeeper, Recorder	Mississippi	40,685	-12.5%	36.9	36.0%	920	4	
AR			Phillips	16,568	-23.8%	40.8	62.6%	727	7	
AR			St. Francis	23,090	-18.3%	39.3	52.5%	643	6	
IL			Recorder, Taxes, Vital Records	Alexander	5,240	-36.4%	47.5	30.8%	253	3
IL	County Clerk		Pulaski	5,193	-15.7%	44.3	30.1%	203	8	
KY		Automobiles, Recorder, Taxes	Ballard	7,728	-6.3%	44.7	3.8%	274	3	
KY				Carlisle	4,826	-5.4%	42.3	1.9%	199	3
KY				Fulton	6,813	-4.4%	41.1	24.3%	231	9
MO		Budgets, Taxes, Recorder	Mississippi	12,577	-12.4%	40.4	22.6%	429	8	
MO				New Madrid	16,434	-13.3%	42.1	16.2%	697	9
MO				Scott	38,059	-2.9%	39.6	12.3%	426	4
MS		Circuit Clerk	Court, Jurors, Licensing	Issaquena	1,338	-4.8%	37.6	65.3%	441	9
MS					Washington	44,922	-12.2%	38.5	73.0%	761
TN			None	Dyer	36,801	-4.01%	39.3	15.1%	527	6
TN	Election Administrators	None	Lake	7,005	-10.6%	40.2	26.9%	194	9	
TN				Lauderdale	25,143	-9.6%	39.2	34.8%	508	6

elections in rural jurisdictions.<sup>6</sup> The counties in this study; their characteristics, including population in 2020; change since the last census (2010); median age; percent African-American; size; and their degree of rurality, as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2025), are displayed in [table 1](#).

## Results

As noted in the introduction, there were several expectations regarding the administration of elections in rural jurisdictions. The study’s findings are explained from the authors’ interviews with local election officials through the lens of challenges and opportunities in the rural Mississippi River Delta region. Through these interviews several common themes were identified across most jurisdictions. Many were positive and counter to the experiences reported in the extant literature for more urban election offices. However, there were some exceptions to these positive trends, and they are unlikely to reverse anytime soon. There were four primary challenges and four primary opportunities consistently identified by the rural local election officials. These are presented in the next sections.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that, while the chief county official is uniform within states, larger counties can often afford to hire a dedicated elections official even when the chief official is an elected clerk.

## Challenges

1. As noted in the 2013 U.S. Election Assistance Commission Urban-Rural Study final Report, difficulty in communicating with voters was consistently identified as one of the primary problems encountered by LEOs (Ramsberger and Van Trieste 2013). The more rural the area, the more acute the challenges became. Extreme rurality presents systemic challenges that their more urban counterparts are less likely to encounter in effectively communicating required information to the dispersed constituencies. The following quote from one LEO sums up well one of the many challenges of communication. “All our little-town newspapers have died, and it’s the law to run information. We must find another way to communicate information.” The Local News Initiative at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism produces the *State of Local News Report*, which has documented the acute decline of newspapers over time. As an example, between the prepandemic months of late 2019 and the end of May 2022 more than 360 newspapers closed (Abernathy et al. 2022). Since 2005, the country has lost more than 40 percent of its newspapers (Metzger and Franklin 2025). Furthermore, most of the communities that have lost newspapers do not get a print or digital replacement. It is estimated about 7 percent of the nation’s counties, or 213, now have no local newspaper (Metzger and Franklin 2025). Recent research (Jennings and Rubado 2019) shows voter participation declines in communities without a strong print or digital news organization, further exacerbating other challenges for rural LEOs. This—along with the lack of radio station coverage, intermittent to no consistent internet service, and lack of other print media sources—severely hinders all but word-of-mouth communication of most basic information and leaves many LEOs out of compliance with mandates related to the posting and dissemination of election information.

2. The second major challenge, but one that is not necessarily unique to rural jurisdictions, is the difficulty in recruiting and retaining election workers. This phenomenon has been well documented in the 2013 Urban-Rural Study final Report mentioned earlier and subsequently included in the EAC's EAVS 2022 Comprehensive Report (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2023). However, this problem has one unique rural aspect, a shrinking population due to lack of economic and educational opportunities. The average population loss for the 17 counties included in this study over last decennial census was 12.1 percent. With a shrinking pool of eligible workers, rural LEOs often have trouble meeting, or are forced to ignore, state requirements regarding minimum standards for election administration in terms of required poll workers. The second part of that equation is an aging population with a few LEOs mentioning that some of their more-reliable elderly workers were unable or unwilling to work during the pandemic. As one official commented, "It's getting harder and harder to find [election workers], and the stakes keep getting higher and higher." Again, this is not surprising given the ongoing work of Burden and Stein (2023).<sup>7</sup>
3. While not widespread, the third challenge is related to vote-by-mail and is troubling and could become more extensive. There is broad recognition that mail voting was an important method to cast a ballot during the 2020 presidential election because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, scholars had taken an interest in alternative voting procedures (Burden et al. 2014; 2017; Ritter and Tolbert 2020). While expanding mail voting was new for several jurisdictions and served as a response to anticipated challenges with in-person voting, an additional issue emerged that likely affects rural areas differently than their urban and suburban counterparts. Several LEOs encountered

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<sup>7</sup> Burden's and Stein's work in this area can be found at <https://electionlab.mit.edu/articles/opting-out-recent-challenges-recruiting-and-retaining-poll-workers>.

issues with the U.S. Postal Service being slow to accommodate vote-by-mail ballots that must arrive by election day. With many rural jurisdictions relying on urban mail centers often located two hours or more away by ground transportation, there are ballots that are not being counted because they arrive late. Given recent consolidations in mail service, this issue could become more problematic in rural jurisdictions in the future.

4. The fourth and final challenge identified by LEOs was the issues created by shifting party and demographic dynamics. This trend was first reported in the 2013 Urban-Rural Study final Report where 45 percent of LEOs responded that the requirement for having equal numbers of poll workers from each political party was either a moderate or big problem in poll worker recruiting. With the increasing number of local jurisdictions with voters increasingly identifying primarily with one party, Republican, it is more difficult for LEOs to meet the requirement for utilizing bipartisan election judges. Some are already in violation of that statute. A cursory review of state statutes reveals that many states require a partisan balance of poll workers with those restrictions varying greatly.<sup>8</sup> Given the federal approach to elections in the United States, these requirements are implemented and enforced at the local level but are particularly problematic in rural communities as what is left of a shrinking younger cohort of voters is also choosing not to register with a party. As that group grows, there will be even fewer potential candidates to balance polling places. This is a trend that has begun and is accelerating with no clear solution in sight under current election law.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, [Iowa Code § 49.12](#) does not allow more than half of the poll workers in a precinct to be registered with the same party. New Mexico [Statute §1-2-12](#) restricts the ratio to two-thirds from the same party. Massachusetts [General Laws chapter 54, §13](#) states two-thirds of poll workers must be equally split between the two major political parties.

In sum, the challenges identified by Mississippi River Delta LEOs reflect structural realities of rural election administration. Declining local media, population loss, geographic distance from postal distribution centers, and increasing partisan homogeneity all stem from broader rural demographic and economic trends rather than administrative failures. While these challenges are not unique to the Delta, the region's acute population decline—averaging 12.1 percent across the sample of counties over the 2010-2020 period—intensifies workforce and communication difficulties. Notably, with the exception of recruiting elderly poll workers during the height of the pandemic, LEOs reported that COVID-19 did not meaningfully exacerbate these challenges. The obstacles they face are chronic rather than acute, rooted in long-term rural decline rather than emergency conditions.

### *Opportunities*

While rural LEOs face many challenges, they are largely positive in their outlook about their jobs and the election landscape in general. LEOs identified several opportunities they are privileged to have.

1. The introduction outlines the plethora of challenges that rurality presents, from socioeconomic challenges to longer travel distances to polling places, all resulting in higher costs incurred to engage in electoral behaviors. Theoretically, all these issues should increase the cost of voting and lead to higher rates of vote abstention (Li et al. 2018). Yet, the rural LEOs were uniformly committed to access and were prideful in how they feel rurality translates into a smaller and more resourceful workforce equipped to provide more and easier access for voters in addition to allowing for more responsiveness to individual voters. They often mentioned the ease of registering and voting in their localities with particular emphasis in how they often know all the voters. Furthermore, they indicated the lack of population density translates into shorter waiting times to vote, ease of parking with no traffic concerns, and a host of other advantages.
2. There are several extant studies that have documented an increasing attrition trend among election officials (Edlin and Norden 2023; Gordon

et al. 2024; Ramachandran 2022; Waldman 2022). A cursory view of national election coverage of election officials reveals reports of increasing hostility and even threats of violence toward election officials. However, the environment for LEOs in rural jurisdictions seem to defy this trend. There was broad consensus that negative national discourse had no discernible impact on them and their counterparts in the Delta region in terms of administering elections. The general perception tended to be that local voters often had things to say about elections elsewhere, but these same voters trusted their own LEOs. One official put it this way, “[The voters] trust their county and nobody else’s.” The center-periphery relationship appears to be beneficial to rural areas in this instance, and the LEOs felt they were afforded a level of trust that often did not exist for their more urban counterparts, often even in their own states. Further, the LEOs did not experience any issues related to compliance with pandemic safety protocols from the voting public.

3. It is a widely accepted tenet of democracy that system stability is dependent upon acceptance of electoral outcomes as legitimate (Anderson et al. 2005). These LEOs believe that they had the confidence of voters in their jurisdictions that elections were open and fair. With respect to both accepting election outcomes and maintaining the confidence of their voters, most LEOs in our study had not experienced any official accusations of unfair practices, and none had received any threatening or menacing communication nor had their staffs. It appears that rural jurisdictions have been spared some of these more-alarming concerns expressed by their urban counterparts. This fits well with scholarly research that finds personal experiences have the potential to affect confidence in elections (Alvarez et al. 2021; Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Claassen et al. 2013; Kerr 2013; 2018).
4. LEOs in the Delta region were extremely positive in expressing their gratitude for federal and state funding and the positive impact it had brought to

their jurisdictions. This was expressed mostly in terms of assistance in funding new and improved voting equipment. Also, LEOs were highly complimentary of local, state, and federal officials for their advocacy in providing an overabundance of protective supplies and assistance during the pandemic. Every LEO interviewed had a very positive experience in terms of how the pandemic voting process was managed—whether it was with protective equipment, new policies, or expanding access through policies like extended operating hours or allowing vote by mail. By and large, with the one exception mentioned earlier concerning poll worker recruitment, the perspective of the LEOs in this study was that the COVID-19 pandemic had no discernible impact on the conduct of elections in the rural Mississippi River Delta region. Whether that is a byproduct of rurality, lower population density, or other factors is not immediately apparent from the qualitative interviews that were conducted. All six states were judged by the LEOs interviewed in this study as highly supportive with supplies and materials during the pandemic. Much of this can be attributed to HAVA's passage in 2002 that established the EAC and has been instrumental in providing needed funding and technology. Since 2003, over \$4.2 billion in HAVA funds have been distributed.<sup>9</sup> During the 2020 federal election cycle, the EAC also distributed \$400 million in grant funds provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to help states prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative interviews reveal a unique environment where rural LEOs share some of same challenges and opportunities as their urban counterparts but also diverge significantly in some of their experiences. Even inside their rural ranks, the experiences of the LEOs are not uniform, whether it be their state's design of the election bureaucracy or the partisan

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<sup>9</sup> See more about the EAC at [www.eac.gov/about-the-useac](http://www.eac.gov/about-the-useac).

makeup of the electorate. While their jobs are not static, many of the challenges faced by LEOs are, at best, fixed and, at worst, likely to accelerate in the future. As populations decline, tax bases shrink and the populace ages as younger generations migrate. Rural LEOs face headwinds that will present constant and emerging challenges requiring ever more inventive and potentially increasingly expensive solutions.

This study is not without limitations. First, it took place in a unique area of the country at a unique time. Although the authors hesitate to theorize strong differences between this study's rural area and those elsewhere, differences cannot immediately be ruled out without further analysis. The post-pandemic period was just beginning when these interviews were conducted, and the most recent election at that time—2022—was still very much impacted by pandemic procedures, emergency funds, and temporary policies. Thus, the most important limitation is generalization. On the other hand, this study's in-depth analysis of this unique time and place presents a deviation from much of the ongoing work in election science. This can be considered a strength of the study.

Future iterations of this project should involve both further in-depth exploration of other rural areas of the country and analyses of quantitative data to further explore the impact of rurality on election administration. State policymakers should continue to explore more avenues to support local election offices and should consider avenues for bolstering communication, technology, and workforce infrastructure in rural areas like the Mississippi Delta.

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## **Appendix**

### *RURAL ELECTIONS PROJECT – INTERVIEWS WITH RURAL ELECTION OFFICIALS*

#### **MODERATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE**

**Research Objective:** Conduct IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS with election official in rural jurisdictions to better understand their experience.

NOTE TO REVIEWER: Question probes are italicized below each main question and may change or be invalidated based on participants' responses. These are suggestions for the interviewer to follow and will be used as deemed relevant and necessary in the natural flow of discussion. The discussion guide is developed for a 90-minute session. As necessary, if /me constraints are present, the discussion guide will be adapted for 60-minute sessions. The order of ac/vi/es in the discussion guide may be altered in the case of a 60-minute interview. Moderator instructions are highlighted in yellow.

#### **INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW (5 MIN.)**

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. My name is [Moderator name], and I'll be conducting this interview. In-depth interviews are a type of research used to gather opinions on a specific topic. We are going to discuss election administration in rural jurisdictions, a topic for which you have expertise.

Before we get started, I want to say a few things:

- You were selected because we are specifically interested in the experience of election officials in rural jurisdictions near the Mississippi Delta Region.
- I do not represent any government, political, or policy perspective. This means I am not looking for any particular responses, and you are perfectly free to be honest. Your responses won't affect me either way.
- There are no wrong answers. Our whole purpose for being here is to hear what you think, so please feel free to speak freely and openly. You may represent what a lot of other rural elections officials think.

- Everything we talk about here is confidential. That means your individual responses will not be reported and your name will not be associated with anything you say in our reports.
- You've probably noticed there are a couple of extra people in the room. They are here to observe and take notes—that way I don't have to worry about writing everything down. Also, we would like to audio record the interview but that's just so we can go back and make sure we captured all your thoughts correctly. If you uncomfortable with being audio taped, we will not record the session. Any objections?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **INTRODUCTION (5 MIN.)**

Well now that we got that out of the way, let's jump right in. I already mentioned that I am going to ask about your experiences as an election administrator in a rural jurisdiction. To get started, I have a more general question.

- *What is one thing about being an election administrator in a rural jurisdiction that you wished everyone knew?*

### **THE RURAL ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE (50 MIN.)**

[Complete as many of the following questions as time allows, follow up as needed]

Now we are going to talk specifically about your experience as an election official in rural jurisdictions. Let's start by discussing how you came to be in this role.

- *What was your path to becoming an election official in your county/parish?*
- *How long have your served in your role?*
- *Is there a standardized transition process when one official leaves your office and another takes over?*

Now that we know more about how each of you started in your role, let's talk a bit more about what else you do besides elections.

- *What are your primary duties for your current position?*
  - *What percent of the time would you say you spend on elections in a regular (non-election) year?*
    - *What about an election year?*

Let's also take a minute to discuss the people you work with on elections.

- *How many people are employed by your jurisdiction working specifically on elections, even if they have other duties?*
- *About how many volunteers working on elections would you say you have in your jurisdiction?*

Now that we have learned about the people in your office let's talk about funding.

- *About how much does your office spend on election administration during a regular (non-election) year?*
  - *What about during an election year?*
  - *Do you have a separate budget for elections? [If unclear, make sure they understand we are asking if it is a budget item or something they just have to manage as part of a general budget.]*
- *Do you think your elections-related funding is adequate?*
  - *Has it increased or decreased over time?*
  - *Has anyone in your state or jurisdiction called for a reduction in your funding?*
    - *Do they give reasons for this?*

Now let's talk about the voters in your jurisdiction.

- *How would you say the public perceives your office and the quality of elections in your jurisdiction?*
  - *Has that perception changed over time?*
- *Do voters in your jurisdiction have distinct experiences from those in more urban areas?*

Let's briefly talk about how elections work in your state.

- *What percent of election-related policies and procedures would you say are determined at the state level?*
- *Do you have autonomy on any of these? [Probe what type if so.]*
- *Do state elected officials (such as the governor, secretary of state, or state legislators) ever interfere or threaten to interfere in your administration of elections? [Probe how if so.]*

Before moving to the next section, let's talk a bit more about how being in a rural area affects elections in your jurisdiction.

- *What would you say is the biggest challenge facing rural election officials?*
  - *What about election officials in general?*
  - *Are there issues that you face that your urban counterparts do not?*
  - *Are there any parts of federal legislation related (e.g., HAVA) to election administration that you feel either neglects or affects rural jurisdictions negatively?*
  - *Do any of these help rural jurisdictions better conduct elections?*

### **PANDEMIC ELECTIONS (15 MIN.)**

Now we are going to discuss your experiences conducting elections in 2020 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, there are no right or wrong answers, and our goal is complete honesty.

- *What was most different about conducting an election during the pandemic?*
  - *What was your own biggest concern?*
- *What, if anything, did your jurisdiction receive from the CARES Act and how was it spent?*
- *Did you feel you had adequate support and supplies for the pandemic elections(s)?*
- *Are there any specific reforms you would like to see that relate to running elections during a pandemic?*
  - *Conversely, are there reforms put in place during the pandemic that you would like to see end?*
- *Now that the pandemic is being declared over at the federal level, how do you think that will impact the conduct of elections in your jurisdiction going forward?*

### **CURRENT ELECTIONS CLIMATE (15 MIN.)**

Recent elections have brought about significant political discourse with respect to election integrity and fairness. Let's spend some of our remaining time on that and how any of this current climate has affected your ability to run elections in your jurisdiction.

- *Does the national discourse surrounding election integrity affect elections in your jurisdiction?*  
[Probe for how.]
- *How do recent elections compare to previous elections you've run?*
- *Have you personally received any threats (physical or otherwise) during the previous two election years?*
  - *What about any of your staff or volunteers?*  
[Probe for nature of the threats as applicable.]

- *Are there specific reforms that you think should be implemented as a result of the current climate?*

**CLOSING (10 MIN.)**

We are nearing the end of our time together. Before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask if there was anything about conducting elections in rural areas that we did not discuss that you would like to share.

- *Is there anything else about conducting elections in rural areas that you would like to share?*

Thank you very much for participating in this interview I have enjoyed getting to know you and appreciate your time. This discussion has been extremely interesting. If you have any questions or want any additional information, please don't hesitate to come see me or one of the study staff before you leave.

# Response to “Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta”

Rodney W. Allen<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *York County, South Carolina*

I have served in county election administration in South Carolina for almost 22 years, serving in Colleton, Pickens, Greenville, and now in York County. Pickens and Colleton are rural counties while Greenville and York are urban counties. The authors conclude the article by saying their study “took place in a unique area of the country and at a unique time.” While I do not dispute the Mississippi Delta being a unique place and the study taking place at a unique time—just two years after the COVID-19 pandemic—the authors’ findings of both challenges and opportunities in rural counties do largely resonate with my own experiences here in South Carolina with a few exceptions.

The first challenge the authors describe for local election officials (LEOs) of rural counties is communicating with voters due to lack of availability of local newspapers. Local newspapers are, indeed, disappearing. This certainly complicates matters for LEOs who may be required by law to run election notices in newspapers of general circulation. That said, there are ample other communication tools available to LEOs that can be used to communicate effectively with rural voters such as websites, social media posts, direct texting/emailing, and postal mailings. Laws requiring legal advertisements in newspapers would need to be amended to allow for these alternative means of communication if they do not already authorize them.

The second challenge raised by the authors states that recruiting and retaining election workers is an ever-daunting task that seems to have become more difficult for many election officials since the pandemic. In the article, the authors say rural counties face “a shrinking population due to lack of economic and educational opportunities” and that recruiting election workers is even harder because the pool to pull from is decreasing. While neither of the two rural counties in which I have served faced population decline, I am certainly aware of

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<sup>a</sup> Rodney W. Allen is the deputy director/election information security officer for the Board of Voter Registration and Elections of York County.

places in South Carolina where this has occurred and is a very serious issue for LEOs. Future studies should be conducted to gauge the feasibility of a more-compulsory form of election worker service similar to that of jury duty. Studies should also gauge public interest of participating if the pay of voluntary election workers is increased. Ultimately, for elections to happen LEOs require a certain number of election workers.

The third challenge the authors list concerns delivery of absentee-by-mail ballots and inefficiencies in the U.S. Postal Service. Slow delivery could conceivably result in ballots being delivered after election day even if they were mailed in sufficient time to arrive by election day. While mail is a bit slower now than in the past, it has been the experience of LEOs in South Carolina that the U.S. Postal Service does its absolute best to expedite ballot delivery as long as ballot envelopes have the “official election mail” logo. This applies when mailing ballots to the voters and when voters mail the ballots back. We have had postal officials make a special trip over to our offices on election days to deliver ballots they received even though mail had already been delivered for the day. I would argue this issue merits further study as it is likely largely dependent on the local and regional management of the U.S. Postal Service.

The fourth challenge the authors describe is the effects of uneven party membership on recruiting sufficient workers from both major political parties. In South Carolina, we do not register voters or hire election workers based on political party affiliation. All election office employees and election workers are nonpartisan. As a result, I am unable to comment from firsthand experience on this matter. However, I can certainly understand the dilemma faced when the law requires a certain ratio of party affiliation in the workforce, but the recruits who volunteer overrepresent one political party. As referenced earlier, a more-compulsory jury-selection style may need to be evaluated for election workers using the party designation on voter registration records.

The authors also described four positives for rural counties. Only one stood out to me, the lack of attrition of the rural LEO. Since the authors’ study focused on one unique region, it could certainly be just a regional trait. I know in South Carolina, of the 46 county election directors who served during the 2020 general election, only 14 remain in an election director role. Sixty-eight percent of the counties have a new election director.

South Carolina is a largely rural state with only a few truly urban areas. I would largely agree with the authors' other findings in regard to positives for rural counties.

Overall, I think the authors' work is intriguing and merits further research using a more-representative and regionally diverse sample of rural counties. This would eliminate the possibility that findings are tied to a specific region and/or a potentially unique population that do not accurately represent rural counties in the U.S. in general.

# Response to “Rural Election Administration in the Lower Mississippi Delta”

Uri Peters<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *U.S. Virgin Islands*

As an elections administrator working in the U.S. Virgin Islands, my experience is relatable with the challenges found in rural areas across the United States. The authors point out how there are structural, demographic, and logistical constraints that shape election administration in rural areas.

The discussion of communication challenges caused by the decline of local newspapers and limited broadband access reflects a persistent obstacle in rural election administration. My district of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John often experience delays in the election process because travel by ferry between islands can be time consuming as can the occasional impact of adverse weather conditions. In addition, the smaller and less-developed island of St. John is commonly affected by poor internet service, resulting in communication challenges. As a rural jurisdiction, it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain poll workers for reasons such as an aging population and many people opting to relocate to urban areas.

One of the most valuable contributions of the study is its discussion of trust. As a practitioner, I recognize the importance of trust between voters and local election officials. While national narratives often emphasize hostility and skepticism toward election administration, my experience aligns with the article’s findings that rural voters frequently place a high level of confidence in their local officials. This insight is important for policymakers and researchers as it highlights that election integrity is often reinforced through personal relationships and community familiarity, not solely through top-down reforms.

The authors were transparent about the qualitative nature of the study and the geographic focus on the Lower Mississippi Delta. They also acknowledge the limits of generalization, which is appropriate and responsible. While the sample is small, the

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<sup>a</sup> Uri Peters is an elections assistant for the Election System of the Virgin Islands.

themes identified are consistent with challenges I observe in my own professional environment, making the findings credible and applicable with reasonable caution.

From my perspective as a practitioner, one area that could have been explored further is the long-term sustainability of election administration in rural jurisdictions now that temporary federal funding has expired. While pandemic-related support is discussed thoroughly, rural election offices continue to face chronic underfunding, increasing compliance demands, and rising costs. Additionally, more attention to regional collaboration, shared services, and cross-jurisdictional support networks could provide practical insights for officials seeking scalable solutions. Overall, the results and recommendations of the article are both plausible and likely to be utilized in real-world settings. The study reflects the realities of election administration as it is practiced, rather than as it is often assumed to function, making it a meaningful and practical contribution to the field.

# From Nuts-and-Bolts to Crisis Response: The Transformation of Election Officials' Communications on Twitter, 2012–2022

Zachary Djanogly Garai<sup>1</sup><sup>a</sup>, Samuel Baltz<sup>1</sup><sup>b</sup>, Joelle Gross<sup>2c</sup>, Thessalia Merivaki<sup>3</sup><sup>d</sup>, Mara Suttman-Lea<sup>4</sup><sup>e</sup>, Charles Stewart III<sup>1</sup><sup>f</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study traces the transformation of public communications by American election officials, noting their shift from focusing on administrative “nuts-and-bolts” matters to crisis response. Research finds that the messages conveyed by election officials can shape voter behavior and public trust in election integrity. However, there are limited data on the themes election officials emphasize. Over the past decade, election officials have increasingly adopted online communications. This overlaps with major changes in voting practices, COVID-19, and rising skepticism around election results. Using all 404,550 tweets from American election officials from 2012 to 2022, the topics discussed are analyzed. While officials continue to address

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b Samuel Baltz is a former research director for the MIT Election Data + Science Lab. He is now the research director for GoodParty.org and works to improve and reform electoral institutions.

c Joelle Gross is assistant director of data science and analytics at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also pursuing a master of science in engineering in data science through Penn Engineering.

d Thessalia Merivaki is an associate teaching professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy and is an associate research professor at the Massive Data Institute. Her research interests lie in the intersection of election science, voter behavior, and political communication. She works with academics, federal and state agencies, election officials, and prodemocracy stakeholders to understand how both accurate and false information flows in the election information ecosystem as well as how communication campaigns can help build trust in the integrity of elections.

e Mara Suttman-Lea, associate professor of government at Connecticut College, studies American politics and is primarily interested in the relationship among election laws, political parties and campaigns, and political participation with a research focus on developing concrete ways to improve the electoral process and increase access to participation in politics, particularly for vulnerable populations.

f Charles Stewart III is the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science at MIT where he has taught since 1985 and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2017, he established the MIT Election Data + Science Lab, which applies scientific principles to how elections are studied and administered.

administrative matters, they have also adapted to ongoing crises by emphasizing election security and public health. While discussions around public health receded by early 2022, election security remains a dominant topic, signaling that at least one crisis has left a lasting impact on election officials' public communications.

Keywords: social media, trust in elections, COVID-19, election security

## **Introduction**

A dramatic evolution in the complexities of election administration and voting technologies over the last decade has coincided with two concurrent crises: a movement to deny the results of American elections and the COVID-19 pandemic (Kousser et al. 2021; Persily and Stewart 2021; Stewart 2022). In addition to administering elections (Ferrer et al. 2024), these officials are suddenly prominent communicators (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2024) whose messages can encourage voter participation (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023; Merkley et al. 2022), bolster voter trust (Gaudette et al. 2023; Lockhart et al. 2024), and increase public knowledge about elections (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023b). After a barrage of violent threats (Eisler et al. 2021) largely attributed to internet discourse (Gronke and Manson 2023), election administrators find themselves in a bind similar to other local and regional officials: how to deliver useful online communications and how much to engage with national political events against the backdrop of increasingly salient threats of political violence (Das et al. 2022; Herrick and Thomas 2023). Therefore, this study asks how have election officials responded to rapid changes in voting along with multiple, simultaneous crises? These developments have turned online communication into an essential task.

This research will show that public communications by election administrators have undergone a series of dramatic transformations over the last decade. Using a dataset of all 404,550 tweets posted between January 2012 and March 2022 by the 324 official U.S.-based local or state election administration accounts on Twitter, this study charts a clear evolution in election officials' public personas from nuts-and-bolts administrators to crisis communicators. Election officials traditionally centered their posts around routine elements of election administration designed to communicate essential information to constituents about topics including voter registration processes, candidate filing deadlines, polling place

hours, and general public communications. Other routine topics include ballot tracking, announcements of final election results, election calendar notifications, special information regarding overseas ballots, and announcements of public meetings or new policies. Tracing the prevalence of different topics in election officials' posts, this study finds that in the span of a single presidential election cycle, from 2016 to 2020, administrators suddenly adjusted their public communications to address two compounding crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent shifts in public trust in elections.

These shifts were felt around the country. While tweets pertaining to public health appeared suddenly and disappeared almost as quickly, election security discussions have steadily increased, becoming one of the most-discussed topics by election officials in the leadup to the 2022 election cycle. All the while, election officials have faced at least as large of a burden to communicate about election administration. The research results speak to three pressing questions about American democracy and politics. First, they show, empirically, that the most important considerations for the institution of election administration—as reflected by its public communications output—have substantially evolved over the last decade. The logistical information that must be communicated to the public has changed rapidly and so has the need to defend and explain fundamental features of American democratic practice. These communication patterns are shaped by a movement that has targeted election officials and resulted in a drop in job satisfaction as well as a spike in stress, trauma, burnout, and turnover (Gronke and Manson 2023).

Second, the findings serve as a case study in political communications. They show how the frontline workers of a nonpartisan institution, who are notoriously overburdened and under-resourced, respond to an increasingly polarized environment. This environment places greater emphasis on far-reaching questions of legitimacy and democracy while taking on additional roles as public health communicators and election security experts. Third, election officials' tweets provide a unique window into the major storylines of a tumultuous decade in American politics, offering unique glimpses into when election security and public health became central concerns for many Americans.

## **Election Officials, Social Media, and the Public**

The job of administering American elections has, in recent years, significantly departed from relatively low-profile communications of how American elections operate and how people can engage in election processes. Local and state election officials, whether elected in partisan or nonpartisan elections or appointed by elected officials, now engage in extensive voter education efforts online (Suttman-Lea 2022; Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2021). More than two-thirds of local election officials in jurisdictions of more than 5,000 people report that their use of social media specifically includes voter outreach efforts (Gronke and Manson 2023, 26).

Many of these communications center around election integrity as in the case of Verify Ohio, the Ohio secretary of state's rapid response unit.<sup>1</sup> Others—like the county recorder of Maricopa County, Arizona, and the Colorado secretary of state accounts—communicate about routine administrative functions, educate voters, defend election officials' role in the democratic process, and explain suddenly contentious administrative practices.<sup>2</sup> These communication choices respond to changes in public trust in elections following concerns regarding foreign interference in 2016 and election integrity in 2020. Surveys of American voters conducted during this pivotal period highlighted three sets of concerns: 1) foreign interference in U.S. elections, 2) voters' abilities to successfully participate in elections affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and 3) the integrity and security of elections amidst pandemic-related election policy changes.<sup>3</sup> In response, election administrators began tweeting about key public health measures. [Figure 1](#) depicts examples of security and public health tweets.

The online presence and activity of election officials is found to benefit voters in areas ranging from successful voter registration (Merivaki and Suttman-Lea 2023) to mail-in ballot acceptance (Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2023a) to voter confidence in elections (Suttman-Lea and Merivaki 2023b). At the same time, many election officials have met a contentious

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1 See <https://x.com/VerifyOhio>.

2 See [https://x.com/stephen\\_richer](https://x.com/stephen_richer).

3 For example, a September 2017 Bright Line Watch survey found that only around 40 percent of public respondents believed there was no foreign interference in U.S. elections while Pew found that many American voters were concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic impacting the presidential election in 2020 (Gramlich 2020).

**Figure 1. Example Tweets from @COSecofState and @MissouriSOS<sup>4</sup>**



reception online. Beginning in the period leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election and its aftermath, far-right campaigns of intimidation against election workers culminated in explicit and often violent threats that personally targeted those workers (Eisler et al. 2021). This phenomenon persisted into the next presidential election cycle (Brennan Center 2025).

<sup>4</sup> The pictured tweets are archived at the following links: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201030221124/https://twitter.com/COSecofState/status/1322299956540051457>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20200817004624/twiter.com/MissouriSOS>.

Replies to election officials' tweets have also become harsher over the last decade (Gross, Baltz, and Stewart 2023; Gross et al. 2023).

Recent scholarship has underscored the role government officials have played throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s in constructing and sharing their online messaging on salient topics. Within the realm of regular administrative communications, there is variation in the reach, styles, and topics addressed by different accounts representing the same kind of official or agency (Gong and Lane 2020). Differences can become more notable in moments of crisis. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the social media communication approaches of and receptions to different kinds of officials—especially of different parties and different levels of government—were highly varied (Heseltine 2023; Stone 2024). Partisan differences in public communication on Twitter became particularly stark among elected officials when the legitimacy of the 2020 U.S. elections was being prominently challenged (LaPlant et al. 2023). So, while it is clear that what election officials say matters, less is known about what they choose to say beyond the nuts and bolts of election administration.

## **Data and Methods**

The authors constructed a database of 404,550 tweets from 324 Twitter accounts of state or local American election offices or officials.<sup>5</sup> These accounts represent all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Every tweet that was made by these accounts over the course of a decade—January 1, 2012, until April 1, 2022—is included.<sup>6</sup> State election officials posted 139,613 tweets from 77 accounts,<sup>7</sup> comprising about 34.5 percent of the corpus with the remainder coming from local election officials' 24/7 accounts. For further information about the data, see the appendix.

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5 Suttman-Lea (2022) identified all social media accounts of U.S. local election officials, and a dataset consisting of all replies to these accounts was previously assembled by Gross, Baltz, and Stewart (2023) and Gross, Baltz, Suttman-Lea, et al. (2023). In this article the dataset of *replies to* election officials is supplemented with a dataset of all *posts by* election officials.

6 Data were collected using the Twitter API in April 2022 before the change of Twitter's ownership was announced later that month. This dataset reflects the official accounts and tweets that existed at that time. An API, or application programming interface, enables software developers and programmers to access web data, such as by scraping online content for research purposes.

7 A state may have multiple accounts because the election office and the election official each have an account or because one of them maintained multiple accounts either simultaneously or sequentially.

The corpus is analyzed in three ways. First, the descriptive stage is set by identifying the most common topics in each election year in the corpus using BERTopic. This tool, the predominant Python package used for topic analysis, breaks text into “tokens” and then divides the corpus of tweets into different topics based on the frequency of particular tokens within each topic (Egger and Yu 2022; Grootendorst 2022; Landowska et al. 2023; Rachel et al. 2024; Xu et al. 2022). These topics are described by keywords that appear frequently in the associated tweets, enabling a user to label relevant topics. For example, tweets sorted into a topic described by the keywords “filing,” “candidate,” “candidates,” “file,” and “filings” can be inferred to be about candidates filing for office. BERTopic has additional functionality for illustrating the frequency of various topics over time, describing these frequencies within subsets, and depicting the relationship between closely linked topics. Comparing the most prevalent topics in each election year shows when topics relating to the two crises—COVID-19 and public perceptions of election insecurity—became prevalent.<sup>8</sup> While there may be some overlap between these crisis topics and subjects of routine election administration, the model identified that tweets within these two categories were sufficiently discrete and distinguished from other subjects as to be worthy of their own topics.

Then the prevalence of those crisis-related topics is compared to the prevalence of a more mundane administrative question, both as a baseline and to examine whether crisis communications supplemented or replaced nuts-and-bolts administrative communications. Finally, the share of tweets about each crisis is mapped by state to assess whether crisis communications were geographically concentrated or were a nationwide concern. A predetermined seed is used for all models.

## **Results**

[Table 1](#) summarizes the 15 most prevalent topics identified in each national election year from 2012 through 2020.<sup>9</sup> Tweets from these even-numbered years comprise 51.4 percent of the corpus.

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<sup>8</sup> Tweets classified as relating to “security” include words like “security,” “cyber,” “integrity,” “disinformation,” and “manipulate.” Some words classified as relating to public health include “pandemic,” “masks,” “sanitizer,” “COVID,” and “health.”

<sup>9</sup> For the output of BERTopic showing how the automatic classifications are manually summarized, contact the authors.

**Table 1. Summary of Each Election Year’s Most Prevalent Topics**

Rank	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
1	Registration	Engagement	Registration	Registration	Absentee
2	Early voting	Early voting	Engagement	Engagement	Early voting
3	Engagement	Registration	Early voting	Early voting	Engagement
4	Information	Filing	Absentee	Filing	Engagement
5	Polling places	Offices	Poll workers	<b>Security</b>	Registration
6	Filing	Absentee	Polling places	Poll workers	Spanish
7	Legislation	Absentee	Absentee	Turnout	Results
8	Young voters	Results	Filing	Engagement	Filing
9	Provisionals	Vehicles	Results	Absentee	Offices
10	Engagement	Engagement	Polling places	Offices	Poll workers
11	Absentee	Sample ballot	Engagement	Polling places	Ohio voting
12	Results	Polling places	Offices	<b>Audits</b>	19th Amend.
13	Offices	Marriage eq.	Drop boxes	Absentee	<b>COVID19</b>
14	Sample ballots	Turnout	Sample ballots	Young voters	<b>PPE</b>
15	Marriage eq.	Politicians	Young voters	Engagement	Stickers/photos

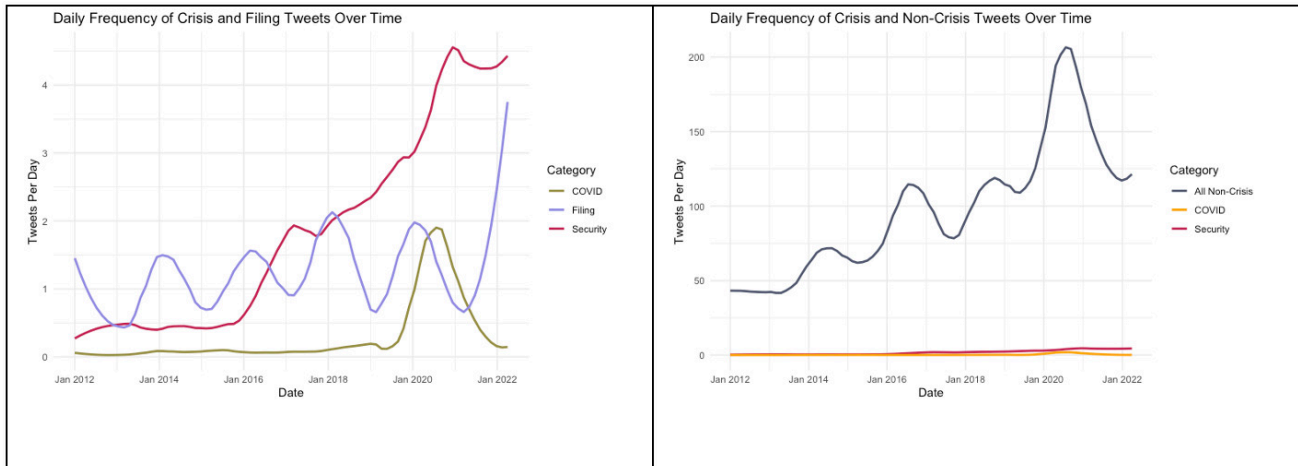
Notes: notable topics relating to crisis communication are bolded.

As [table 1](#) illustrates, the most prevalent topics throughout the dataset tend to relate to the nuts and bolts of election administration. The bulk of communications are routine matters such as candidate filing, voter registration, and polling place locations and hours as well as election administrators’ more direct engagement with the Twitter community. Topics related to crisis communication, such as public health and election security, only break into the list of the 15 most prominent topics in 2018, and topics relating to public health only appear in 2020.

[Figure 2](#) compares the prevalence of tweets relating to the two crises with a mundane topic in election administration: deadlines for candidate filings or petitions. Election officials tweet more during elections (Gross et al. 2023), and a reasonable expectation is that most routine topics should tend to spike during election years and subside in other years. [Figure 2](#) shows this comparison over the whole decade, looking at filing tweets, in particular, but also at all non-COVID, nonsecurity tweets.

[Figure 2](#) shows that the discussion of topics related to election security was not prevalent before the 2016 general election at which point the topic began to grow in prominence through early 2022. Security spiked around the general election in November 2020 and remained high into 2022. In relative terms, around 1 percent of tweets were classified within the security

**Figure 2. Daily Frequency of Tweets by Category over Time**



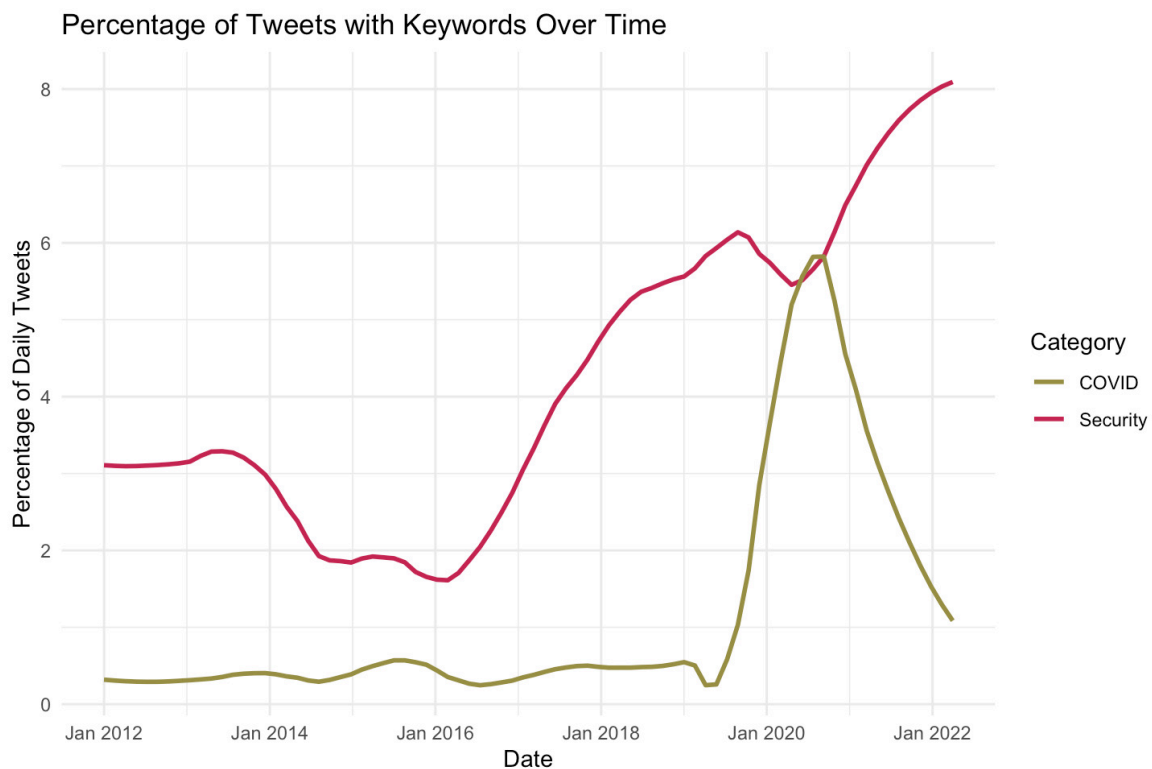
Notes: the number of security-related and COVID-19-related tweets sent each day compared to the number of filing tweets is depicted in the left side of the figure and total non-crisis topic tweets is depicted in the right side of the figure.

topic prior to 2016. This rose to around 2 percent between 2016 and 2019 and climbed to 3.5 percent thereafter. Topics related to public health follow a much more dramatic pattern, starting at negligible levels in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to spiking suddenly to comprise 1 percent of total tweets at the beginning of 2020. The frequency then sharply declined immediately after the 2020 election, soon reaching its pre-2020 level. Importantly, the routine election administration topic of filing represented here did not noticeably rise or fall over the course of a decade, and election-cycle variation was consistent over five federal election periods. This suggests that in addition to communicating about the logistics of administration election officials have added crisis response to their communication skillset.<sup>10</sup>

Since BERTopic sorts text into the single most relevant topic, it provides conservative estimates. This is especially the case when an election official's tweet contains routine content in a crisis framing, such as when announcing pandemic-related mail ballot changes. To validate the topic model's findings, a keyword analysis using two lists of 20 relevant phrases shows similar tweeting patterns regarding COVID-19 and security topics. [Figure 3](#) illustrates the substantial rise in security tweets beginning in 2020. This decreased slightly as a percentage of total tweets in 2020 as public health-related tweets surged to

<sup>10</sup> This pattern is robust to selecting different routine features that would be expected to matter in every election. The authors selected only one to display for the sake of clarity.

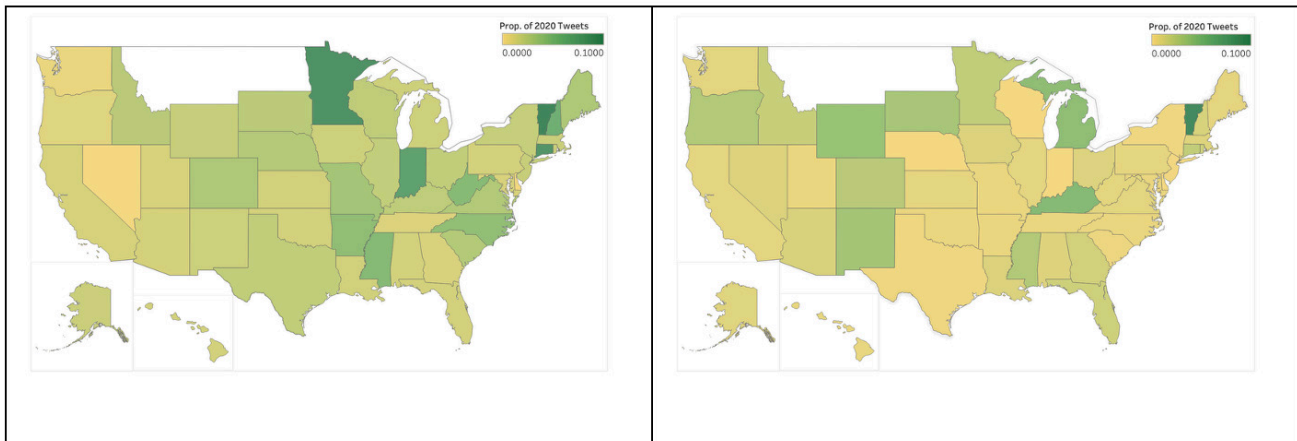
**Figure 3. Percentage of Daily Tweets Containing a COVID-19 or Security Keyword**



nearly 6 percent of daily tweets but then continued to increase as coronavirus concerns dwindled. By early 2022, more than 8 percent of election officials' tweets related to election security in one shape or form. While COVID-19 represented a finite disruption to officials' usual communication patterns, security and election integrity concerns have garnered sustained and increasing focus.

The substantive importance of these patterns would be limited—and the chance they are only an artifact of one election office's tweeting behavior would be elevated—if these patterns were limited to just one part of the country. So, this study next examines whether the shift from administrative logistics toward crisis communication was limited to a few accounts from a few states or regions or whether it was widespread across the country. The left side of [figure 4](#) maps the distribution of tweets about public health in the year that it became a crisis, 2020, while the right side of [figure 4](#) maps the

**Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of Tweets about Public Health and Security in 2020**



Notes: the map on the left displays the frequency of tweets on public health in 2020 by election officials in each state while the map on the right does the same for tweets on security-related issues.

percentage of tweets sent in 2020 about election security.<sup>11</sup> While salience varied from state to state, the data show that officials across the country engaged with these topics.

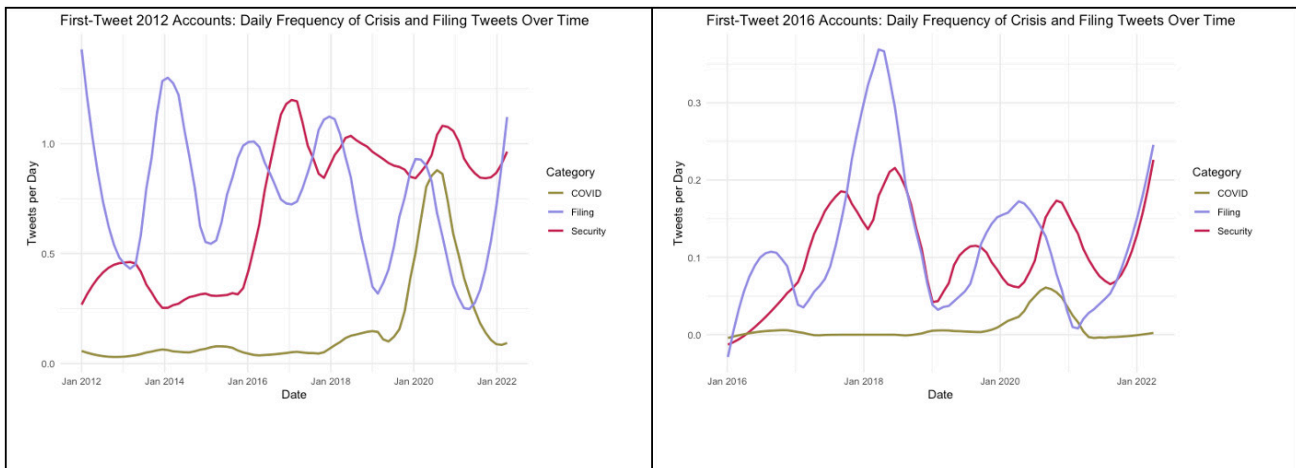
[Figure 4](#) shows that discussion of public health by election officials was not limited to any particular region. In states as varied as Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, and Vermont, as much as 5-10 percent of election officials' tweets were related to COVID-19—a sizeable component of their communications. The security-related topics included around 10 percent of all tweets from 2020 by election officials in Vermont followed by several states in the Midwest and West. Partisanship also does not appear to be decisive. Student t-tests comparing states won by the Republican candidates for president between 2012 and 2020 and those that voted for the Democratic candidates in the same elections establish that state partisanship played no role in the prevalence of security ( $p=0.505$ ) or COVID ( $p=0.898$ ) social media communications.

A last concern is the data could be skewed by Twitter accounts that were created or entered the dataset later in time. When comparing the topics discussed by accounts entering the dataset in 2012 and 2016, similar trends in COVID, security, and other topics—represented here, as they were earlier, by candidate filing tweets—are observed. This is depicted in [figure](#)

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<sup>11</sup> No tweets by election officials were recorded in Montana and North Dakota in 2020.

**Figure 5. Comparing Topic Frequencies for Accounts Entering the Dataset in 2012 Versus 2016**



Notes: the left side of the figure represents election official accounts that began tweeting in 2012 while the right side of the figure represents election official accounts that began tweeting in 2016. The frequency of tweets on topics not related to public health or election security is represented here, as it was earlier, by candidate-filing tweets.

5. The transformation of election officials into crisis communicators was not limited to a few accounts, new accounts, or to any obvious grouping of states.

## Conclusion

Recent evidence shows that the manner in which election officials use their platforms can influence peoples' knowledge about and trust in elections. While attempts to understand the impact of election officials' communications are beginning, there is little evidence about what they communicate. In a decade that saw rapid evolution in the logistics of running an election, culminating in a period of low job satisfaction and increasing turnover, this study demonstrates that these frontline election workers evolved from nuts-and-bolts communicators to crisis responders. When the public health crisis faded out of their tweets, a focus on election security that began back in 2016 only increased. This case study suggests how crises can stretch the mandates of administrators and may provide a numerical suggestion of when election security became one of the foremost concerns in the minds of the American public.

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## **Appendix: Further Details on the Dataset and Methods**

The corpus of local election official (LEO) communications includes 261,117 tweets shared from January 1, 2012, to January 1, 2023, across 35 states.<sup>1</sup> There were 143,433 tweets from state election officials (SEOs), which includes chief state election officials and state boards of election, from 49 states spanning from January 1, 2012, to April 1, 2022. The authors selected 2012 as the beginning of the corpus because it marked the first presidential election where Twitter became broadly used within political circles. Since many U.S. secretaries of state—the chief election officials in 40 states—hold office for four-year terms, the SEO data only include tweets sent by secretaries of state who were in office in 2019. The methods used to collect the data are the same as those previously described in Gross, Baltz, and Stewart (2023); Gross et al. (2023); and Suttmann-Lea (2022). While those three papers only concerned the replies to election officials, the original posts by the officials themselves—as discussed in this paper—were collected using exactly the same approach. The resulting corpus chronicles a decade of American electoral history told by those administering contests from the presidential level to city council seats and local resource boards.

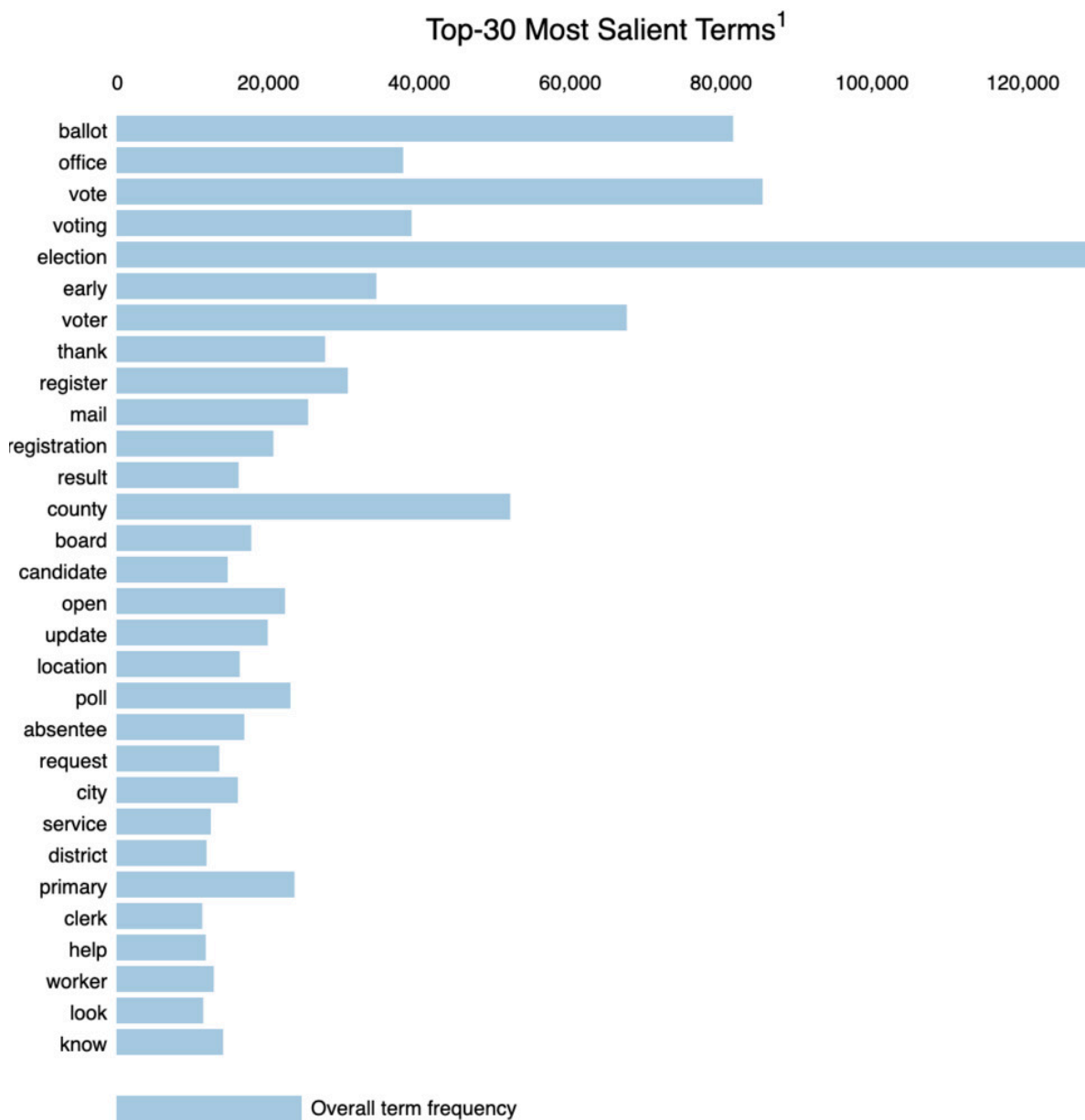
Not all jurisdictions are equally represented in the dataset. California and Florida have the largest number of tweets—over 35,000 in each state—while Montana has 19 and North Dakota only has one. Forty-six accounts hail from Ohio versus 29 from California. There are ten states that only include data from one account. Federal election years and more-recent years are overrepresented in the dataset. This is partly because Twitter was adopted by election officials gradually with more accounts opening and extant accounts used more frequently over time. Also, a greater volume of tweets is sent in election years. Over 77,000 tweets were sent in 2020 alone, comprising 19 percent of the corpus. The next highest tweet counts came in 2021 and 2018. Only 16,025 tweets were recorded in 2013, the fewest of any year.

Each tweet in the dataset is accompanied by a username linking it to the Twitter account that posted the tweet and the timestamp of when the tweet was posted. First, all tweets

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<sup>1</sup> Only 35 states were used because many election officials did not have Twitter accounts at the time or did not have accounts with enough tweets to be included.

**Figure A1. Histogram with Most Salient Terms in Tweets Dataset**



1. saliency(term w) = frequency(w) \* [sum\_t p(t | w) \* log(p(t | w)/p(t))] for topics t; see Chuang et. al (2012)

Notes: this figure is a subset of a genism histogram displaying the most salient terms in the tweets dataset.

including fewer than 11 words were omitted as were those that only included links or stop words. Text was converted to lowercase and punctuation was removed. All data were preprocessed and tokenized for analysis using the spacy (Řehůřek and Sojka 2010) and gensim (Řehůřek and Sojka 2011) packages in Python while following best practices for text analysis and topic modeling. The following figure displays a histogram produced with gensim illustrating the 30 most salient terms in the corpus.

Topic modeling was conducted using BERTopic, yielding unlabeled topic clusters, which were manually assessed. BERTopic was used to produce a topic model run on tweets from each election year from the beginning of 2012 through early 2022. These individual models, run on subsets ranging from 16,000 to 78,000 tweets, produce lists of the most prevalent topic for each year. These include several recurring topics associated with key facets of election administration such as voter registration, candidate filings, and polling places. Also included are topics with a more-specific focus, relating to a particular state or a key subject during an election cycle. In order to study topics' persistence over time and geography, this study uses BERTopic's "topics over time" module. Tweets were classified by the official's or the office's state to facilitate geographic analysis. To analyze the prevalence of topics over time, the authors aggregate the data by using "bin the span" from 2012 to 2022 into 60 identical time periods with each time period corresponding to roughly 60 days. Results are robust and visible to variations on bin size, which affects how smooth or jagged the time series curves are but not the content of the model itself.

# Response to “From Nuts-and-Bolts to Crisis Response”

Fred DeCaro III<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Greenwich, Connecticut*

As an election administrator holding the same position for 17 years, the adjustment in topical tweets—and in all forms of outreach—outlined by the authors resonates with my personal experience and those of my colleagues.

Most in the election field are familiar with the Election Assistance Commission’s Election Administrators Competencies Wheel. While illustrative of all the duties an election office must perform, it does not reflect the proportion of time an administrator may spend on public relations. This study illustrates that the time spent conveying essential information has grown substantially during the time period of this study.

In addition to the time spent conveying information, the study shows election administrators have been confronted with a significant adjustment in our definition of what constitutes essential information. The data confirm that while we still manage nuts-and-bolts tasks like voter registration and candidate filing, we now have expanded the essential information to include public health and election security.

In fact, as the authors stated, the analysis is conservative as the BERTopic tool used to categorize the tweets may underestimate crisis response tweets “when an election official’s tweet contains routine content in a crisis framing, such as when announcing pandemic-related mail ballot changes.” I would suggest that the surge in the “Absentee” topic in the 2020 analysis in table 1 is directly attributable to the pandemic and, in that context, should also be considered a crisis communication topic.

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<sup>a</sup> Fred DeCaro III has served as the Greenwich Republican Registrar of Voters since 2009. He holds the CERA designation and has a certificate in election administration from the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He also serves on the board of directors of the Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut.

It would be useful to extend the research to include 2023-2025 to see if the election security topic levels off and to determine the effect of 2025 proposed legislation, such as the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act, and presidential executive orders. Did citizenship make the top 15 topics in 2025?

In addition, do longer-form messages change the topics discussed because they allow for more explanation? In 2017, Twitter doubled its message size from 140 to 280 characters. TikTok's popularity began its surge in 2018. Instagram added reels in 2020, and Facebook followed suit in 2021. Do these longer-form multimedia posts follow the same trends as the shorter tweets, or do they skew in a different direction?

Finally, what could we learn from the comments/responses to these tweets? How is the public reacting to the messaging? Are election administrators receiving favorable responses and retweets, or is their messaging diluted like a teabag dropped in the ocean? An analysis of the volume and tone of the responses would provide a counterpoint from which election officials could learn in terms of what has resonated with the audience that the tweets are reaching.

# Response to “From Nuts-and-Bolts to Crisis Response”

Kyla Doyle<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cache County, Utah*

This article makes an important contribution by documenting how the public communications of American election officials have evolved over the past decade, shifting from primarily administrative “nuts-and-bolts” messaging toward sustained crisis-oriented communication. The authors’ analysis shows that election officials are now routinely required to defend fundamental features of democratic practice while administering elections under heightened scrutiny. At the local level, this aligns with lived experience. Security and legitimacy concerns are no longer thought of as reactive messaging used on an as-needed basis but as ongoing responsibilities embedded in the daily practice of election administration.

The authors convincingly document a recognizable shift in election communications, though a Twitter-centered dataset captures only one dimension of that evolution. Twitter offers insight into national election discourse but reflects only a narrow segment of election officials’ communications to their voters. In Cache County, most of our 70,000 registered voters receive election information through community Facebook pages, local media, mailed notices, and direct outreach. As one of three full-time staff members administering the county’s elections, our office’s approach is preventive and locally focused. We invest in transparent procedures, documented safeguards, ballot-tracking tools, and consistent, locally targeted messaging.

I would also argue that the article’s framing of public health and security messaging as discrete crisis responses tied to distinct yet overlapping events may underestimate the lasting impact of how these crises were experienced simultaneously by the public. While the data show public health messaging spiking and then dropping, mirroring the initial spread and decline of COVID-19, the institutional effects of the pandemic

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<sup>a</sup> Kyla Doyle is the senior deputy clerk/election specialist for Cache County.

did not dissipate. For many voters, the pandemic marked a rapid and historic expansion of government authority across multiple domains of daily life. Schools were closed, businesses shuttered, and citizens were barred from public places—in some cases this even included walking in their own neighborhoods—due to local or state stay-at-home orders. Regardless of the policy justifications, this period served as a legitimacy shock—testing the public’s trust and assumptions about government authority and constraints. In this environment, emergency changes to election procedures and even long-standing voting practices were interpreted through a wider lens of institutional skepticism. The persistence of election security messaging may reflect not only a response to election interference and integrity concerns but also the aftereffects of a broader erosion of public trust that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could make the differentiation between the two messaging categories more complicated than the results might imply.

The authors rightly emphasize that this transformation extends beyond messaging volume to the expanding scope of responsibility placed on election officials. Their findings show how administrators are now expected to pair technical capability with crisis communication and public trust-building as part of routine practice. From a local perspective, this reflects an evolution in the profession toward officials who are communicators and systems thinkers as much as clerks of record. If these expectations are now embedded in the role, the professional preparation of election officials must evolve alongside them. Training pathways and certification programs will play an important part in equipping administrators with the interdisciplinary competencies increasingly required in modern election administration. With sustained attention to professional development, this period of disruption may ultimately strengthen institutional capacity and reinforce public confidence in the systems that sustain democratic governance.

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