

Poll Workers and Election Administration: The View from Local Election Officials

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Abstract

In this paper, we report the first results of a survey of local election officials in the United States. The survey includes several questions about how poll workers were recruited, trained, evaluated and compensated in the 2008 presidential election. With a highly decentralized system of election administration in the United States, there are dramatic differences in the number of voters served by different local jurisdictions. We find that highly populated jurisdictions face acute needs for poll workers while small jurisdictions have very little demand for poll workers. Consequently, large jurisdictions tend to take a more critical view of their poll worker operations. In addition, large jurisdictions engage in more extensive efforts to recruit, train and evaluate poll workers. Finally, election officials in large jurisdictions are more supportive of reforms that might reduce the demand for poll workers or make it easier to hire more poll workers. We discuss the implications of these findings in the conclusion.

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Election administration in the United States has received greater attention from scholars, journalists, advocates, and policy makers in the wake of the 2000 presidential election and the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-252). As the study of election administration moves forward, attention is shifting to election officials and poll workers who are at the front lines of elections in the United States. Even with the rapid growth in early and absentee voting, most voters in the United States still cast their ballots at a polling place on Election Day. Thus, the interactions between voters and poll workers remain a critical part of ensuring free and fair elections. However, we do not know much about those interactions. More fundamentally, there are many unanswered questions about how pollworkers are hired and trained.

In this paper, we report the first results of a survey of local election officials in the United States. The survey includes several questions about how pollworkers were recruited, trained, evaluated and compensated in the 2008 presidential election. With a highly decentralized system of election administration in the United States, there are dramatic differences in the number of voters served by different local jurisdictions. We find that large jurisdictions face acute needs for poll workers while small jurisdictions have very little demand for poll workers. Consequently, large jurisdictions tend to take a more critical view of their poll worker operations. In addition, large jurisdictions engage in more extensive efforts to recruit, train and evaluate poll workers. We discuss the implications of these findings in the conclusion.

The Importance of Poll Workers

Michael Lipsky (1980) uses the seamless phrase “street level bureaucrats” to describe many types of government workers (such as police officers or social service case workers) who routinely make on-the-spot interpretations of the law in their interactions with the public. These officials enjoy a level of authority and discretion in enforcing public laws that is sometimes underappreciated.

Poll workers are the street level bureaucrats of elections in the United States. When voters go to a polling place on Election Day, they rarely are served by their local election official or regular election administration staff in their jurisdiction. Rather, they are served by citizen poll workers who are hired just for that day. Among their many duties, poll workers open and close polling places, sign in voters, hand out ballots, troubleshoot registration problems, and make sure the voting equipment works properly. On Election Day, poll workers have a lot of discretion and make many judgments about who gets to vote and who does not (see Alvarez and Hall 2006; Baybeck and Kimball 2008). As a result, it is important to understand how poll workers are hired and trained.

Recent studies point to the importance of poll worker recruitment and training. Effective poll worker training programs can influence the performance of poll workers and their job satisfaction (Hall, Monson and Patterson 2007). Voter confidence in elections is influenced by voter assessments of poll workers and local election officials who serve them on Election Day (Atkeson and Saunders 2007). Another study compares voting to a customer service encounter and finds that voter evaluations of poll worker performance are shaped by conditions at the polling place and interactions with the poll workers (Claassen et al. 2008). In the same study, poll workers who were more confident

about their training were given higher performance ratings by voters (Claassen et al. 2008). Finally, a previous survey of local election officials noted some problems with poll worker performance and indicated a need to improve poll worker training (Fisher and Coleman 2008).

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has also taken more interest in poll worker issues, partly in response to HAVA requirements. In 2007 the EAC published a list of poll worker requirements for each state (2007a), a guide for recruiting college students as poll workers (2007b), and a best practices volume on recruiting, training and managing poll workers (2007c). The EAC reports are clearly aimed at encouraging local governments to improve poll worker operations.

These studies and reports indicate that poll workers are a crucial component of election administration. And yet we do not know much about the hiring, training and evaluation of poll workers in the United States. In addition, the EAC report tends to suggest that all local jurisdictions can improve poll worker operations by following the same guidelines. However, given the great diversity of local jurisdictions that administer elections in the United States, it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all approach to poll workers will succeed everywhere.

Data

The data for this paper come from a mixed-mode survey of local election officials (Internet and mail) conducted from December 2008 to February 2009. Election administration in the United States is highly decentralized. Most election functions, including hiring and training poll workers, are administered by local jurisdictions (counties, cities or towns). We identify 10,370 local jurisdictions in the United States with responsibility for hiring and training poll workers. These localities vary substantially in terms of the number of voters they serve and thus the number of poll workers they need to hire. The median jurisdiction served slightly more than 1,000 voters in the 2004 presidential election. Half of the local election jurisdictions in the United States are small towns or townships with very few election staff. At the same time, roughly 64% of the voters in the 2004 election were served by just 418 large jurisdictions (4% of the jurisdictions) with more than 50,000 voters. These large jurisdictions have much larger staffs and need to hire a lot of poll workers. We expect that the poll worker experiences in small jurisdictions are vastly different than in large jurisdictions.

We divide our sample into small jurisdictions (serving less than 1,000 voters), medium jurisdictions (serving between 1,000 and 50,000 voters), and large jurisdictions (serving more than 50,000 voters). The smallest jurisdictions are primarily in the upper Midwest and New England, with a smaller number in the Plains. Large jurisdictions are concentrated in the major metropolitan centers of the United States. We derived our sample from the universe of 10,370 elections offices. Most of these offices are quite small, so to ensure representation of the largest offices we drew a stratified sample. All jurisdictions with over 50,000 voters in the 2004 general election were included in the sample, of which there were 418. For those with between 1,000 and 50,000 voters in 2004, we randomly sampled 2,000 jurisdictions from the 4,931 meeting this population criterion. For those with less than 1,000 voters in 2004, of which there were 5,021, we randomly sampled 500 jurisdictions. All told, our sample frame was 2,919 jurisdictions.

For each jurisdiction in the sampling frame, we sent the survey to the top election official (usually an elected county or town clerk, or an appointed election director). The preferred mode was via a web survey. However, not all jurisdictions had an email address – some jurisdictions had only postal mail contacts. For those contacted by email they were given an opportunity to respond via a SurveyMonkey instrument. For those contacted by mail, they were sent a paper survey. For various reasons, some of the surveys sent initially via email were eventually sent via the mail instead. All told, 795 surveys (27%) were sent via mail, 2,104 (72%) via email, and for 20 we could not obtain any information and therefore no type of instrument was sent. The vast majority of paper surveys sent by mail went to small and medium-sized jurisdictions.

We received 894 surveys. The response rate for small jurisdictions (26%) is somewhat lower than the response rate for medium (31%) and large jurisdictions (37%). This pattern is similar to what we find when measuring efforts to recruit, train and evaluate poll workers in the United States.

Background Characteristics of Election Jurisdictions

We first examine some characteristics of the election officials in our sample. Overall, the demographic profile of our sample of local election officials in the United States (in terms of age, education, gender, education, and experience) is very similar to previous studies (Fisher and Coleman 2008). Officials in large jurisdictions tend to be more educated – a larger percentage of them have completed some post-secondary education. Election officials in large jurisdictions also tend to be younger. The mean age for officials in large jurisdictions is about five years younger than the mean age for officials in small jurisdictions. The vast majority of local election officials are women, for jurisdictions of all sizes.

Election officials in large jurisdictions are more likely to have worked in election administration in another jurisdiction before coming to their current constituency. Experience in election administration is similar, on average, for officials in all types of jurisdictions. However, officials in small jurisdictions have more experience, on average, in their jurisdiction than officials in large jurisdictions. Almost all of the experience for officials in small jurisdictions has come within the place they currently serve. In contrast, almost half of the experience for officials in large jurisdictions came outside their current constituency. Finally, officials in large jurisdictions are members of more professional associations for election officials, on average, than officials working in small or medium-sized jurisdictions. This translates to poll worker operations, for we also find that officials in large jurisdictions are more likely to use professional associations (as well as the EAC and local universities) as resources for poll worker recruitment and training. All of these differences suggest that a more professionalized culture of election administration tends to exist in large jurisdictions.

Table 1
Characteristics of Election Officials by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Age (mean years)	55.3*	52.4	50.8
Post-secondary education (percent)	11%*	12%*	26%
Female (percent)	79%	83%	74%
Experience in election administration (mean years)	13.4	13.4	14.7
Experience in current election jurisdiction (mean years)	12.6*	11.1*	8.8
Professional association memberships (mean)	0.3*	0.9*	1.4
N (min, max)	(64,117)	(471,507)	(117,146)

* Group value is statistically different from value for large jurisdictions, $p < .05$.

We also can provide some background information on poll worker operations in our sample jurisdictions. Table 2 lists the median number of poll workers, polling places, election staff, and Election Day voters in the 2008 presidential election for each category of jurisdiction size. Table 2 also reports the median budget for poll worker operations in 2008 for each of the size categories. The scale of election administration and polling place operations is dramatically bigger for large jurisdictions than for small and medium-sized jurisdictions.

Table 2
Median Poll Workers, Staff, Voters and Polling Places by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Poll Workers	5	40	753
Polling Places	1	5	94
Staff dedicated to poll workers	1	2	5
Election Day Voters	351	3,330	66,623
Budget for poll worker operations in 2008	\$225	\$1,000	\$45,000
Poll workers per polling place	5	8	8
Voters per poll worker	70	83	88
Voters per polling place	351	666	709
N (min, max)	(109,125)	(540,608)	(138,148)

Even though large jurisdictions tend to hire more poll workers per polling place than small jurisdictions, there is an economy of scale with larger jurisdictions serving a higher ratio of voters per poll worker than small jurisdictions. In addition, large jurisdictions serve, on average, twice as many voters per polling place than small jurisdictions. Polling place operations place much bigger demands on large jurisdictions in terms of the number of locations and the number of poll workers needed. The professional background of election officials in large jurisdictions, and their greater need for poll workers, suggests that large jurisdictions engage in more activities to recruit, train and evaluate poll workers. Finally, large jurisdictions tend to pay poll workers more for a day's work, regardless of the poll worker's specific responsibility (see Table 3).

Table 3
Daily Wages for Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction

Poll Worker Job	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Greeting voters, managing lines	\$101*	\$102*	\$115
Checking in voters	\$112*	\$111*	\$121
Issuing ballots	\$113	\$111	\$119
Assisting with provisional ballots	\$103*	\$110*	\$129
Supervising polling place	\$115*	\$125*	\$157
Assisting with voting equipment	\$107*	\$113*	\$124
Troubleshooting problems	\$100*	\$120*	\$164
Opening or closing polling places	\$105*	\$114*	\$130
N (min, max)	(64,96)	(294,393)	(81,139)

Note: Cell entries are mean wages for working on Election Day.

* Group value is statistically different from value for large jurisdictions, $p < .05$.

We also asked local officials to prioritize a list of objectives related to poll worker recruitment and training (see Table 4). The results indicate that, by a wide margin, local officials rank poll worker training as the most important objective on the list, regardless of jurisdiction size. Similarly, poll worker pay was ranked as the least important objective among all three types of jurisdictions. Small jurisdictions rank recruiting as a lower priority than large jurisdictions. Small jurisdictions do not need to find nearly as many poll workers as large jurisdictions, and they spend less effort on recruiting than large jurisdictions. In addition, small jurisdictions rank poll worker retention as their second most important of the five objectives, while retention was ranked third by the large jurisdictions. The large jurisdictions have much more turnover in poll workers from one election to the next. In the median small jurisdiction, none of the poll workers on November 4, 2008 were working their first election. By comparison, the share of first-time poll workers is higher in the median mid-sized jurisdiction (ten percent) and the median large jurisdiction (twenty-five percent).

Table 4
Ranking Poll Worker Priorities by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Retaining Poll Workers*	2.4*	2.5*	2.9
Recruiting*	3.4*	3.2*	2.7
Performance Evaluation	3.1*	3.3	3.6
Training	1.8	1.5	1.5
Compensation	3.6	3.6	3.8
N (min, max)	(112,117)	(514,530)	(132,139)

Note: Election officials ranked each activity on a scale from 1 (“most important”) to 5 (“least important”). Cell entries are mean ratings.

* Group value is statistically different from value for large jurisdictions, $p < .05$.

Poll Worker Recruitment

We next turn to an examination of recruiting efforts for poll workers. The survey included questions about organizations and methods of recruiting poll workers. Jurisdiction size is strongly related to the degree to which election officials seek assistance from other groups and organizations in recruiting poll workers (see Table 5). Aside from municipal employees, most small jurisdictions did not report seeking help from other organizations in recruiting poll workers. By comparison, strong majorities of the large jurisdictions report assistance from each organization on listed in Table 5. Political parties are one of the most frequently used organizations for recruiting poll workers, for all sizes of jurisdictions. Many state election laws specifically designate a role for political parties to recruit poll workers (EAC 2007a).

Table 5
Seeking Assistance in Recruiting Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

Sought help from:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Local colleges*	20%	28%	66%
Local high schools*	22%	45%	77%
Local news media*	29%	47%	83%
Political parties*	34%	67%	86%
State employees*	28%	33%	65%
County employees*	31%	49%	77%
Municipal employees	63%	57%	67%
Local Businesses*	23%	34%	60%
Nonprofit groups*	24%	35%	66%
N (min, max)	(117,119)	(540,556)	(127,130)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percentage of jurisdictions reporting the activity.
 * Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Among the jurisdictions that reported recruiting assistance from a group or organization, we also asked them to rate how helpful the organization was. Small and medium-sized jurisdictions rated municipal governments as most helpful in recruiting poll workers, with county government and political parties well behind in a tie for second place. This is not a surprise since most small jurisdictions are municipalities. Large jurisdictions rated county government and the local news media as most helpful, with political parties and local high schools following closely behind. With the exception of municipal governments, each of the organizations in Table 5 was rated as more helpful by medium and large jurisdictions than by small jurisdictions. The biggest differences between jurisdictions are that large jurisdictions rated nonprofit groups and local high schools and colleges as much more helpful, on average, than small jurisdictions. Overall, large jurisdictions are more enthusiastic about efforts to cultivate outside organizations when recruiting poll workers.

Table 6
Poll Worker Recruiting Methods by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

Recruiting method:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Asking previous poll workers	90%	95%	99%
Cold calling voter lists*	42%	40%	51%
Internet advertising*	13%	24%	67%
Newspaper advertising*	17%	37%	58%
Radio advertising*	11%	16%	48%
Check-off on registration cards*	42%	45%	71%
Asking poll workers to recruit*	65%	87%	95%
Recruit at community events*	27%	38%	72%
Ask polling place chiefs to recruit their own personnel*	35%	37%	59%
Increase poll worker pay*	63%	68%	79%
Non-cash incentives*	9%	12%	30%
N (min, max)	(116,119)	(540,560)	(126,130)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percentage of jurisdictions reporting the activity.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

The survey also asked election officials about their use of specific recruiting methods (see Table 6). Once again, large jurisdictions are much more likely to use the recruiting methods listed in Table 6 than small jurisdictions. The differences are quite large. In particular, large jurisdictions rely more heavily on media advertising (Internet, newspapers, and radio) to recruit poll workers. Large jurisdictions are also more likely to use other broad-based efforts to cast a wider net for poll workers (such as community events, and voter registration cards).

We also asked election officials to rate the effectiveness of each of the recruiting methods in Table 6. All types of jurisdictions tend to rate recruiting methods involving current and former poll workers as the most effective. Large jurisdictions are notably more enthusiastic about advertising to find more poll workers.

These differences in recruiting suggest very different poll worker cultures in small versus large jurisdictions. For small jurisdictions, where the need for poll workers is small, a friends-and-parties recruitment strategy is probably common, since there is little evidence that officials in small jurisdictions cast a wide net into the community. As a result, poll workers in small jurisdictions are more likely to be political insiders (such as local government officials and political party activists) who have previously served as

poll workers and who already know the election officials or are recruited by other poll workers. As a result, poll workers in small jurisdictions are likely older local political elites. In large jurisdictions, election officials rely on a broader set of organizations and methods to recruit poll workers. In particular, large jurisdictions recruit more first-time poll workers. Thus, in large jurisdictions we suspect that poll workers are likely younger, on average, and more similar to the socio-economic profile of the voters they serve.

Table 7
Methods for Screening Potential Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

Screening activity:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Telephone interview*	18%	39%	62%
Review prior performance*	75%	82%	88%
Questionnaire before training*	11%	21%	46%
Must pass a test after training*	13%	19%	35%
Interaction during training*	62%	82%	94%
N (min, max)	(114,115)	(545,549)	(127,130)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percentage of jurisdictions reporting the activity.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

We also asked election officials about methods to screen potential poll workers. Again, the picture we see is a more extensive and formal process for hiring poll workers in large jurisdictions and a more informal process in small jurisdictions. Large jurisdictions go to greater lengths to screen poll workers. Each of the screening activities listed in Table 7 is more commonly used in large jurisdictions. Since small jurisdictions typically retain poll workers from previous elections, their screening tends to boil down to a review of past performance and the training session.

Table 8
Challenges in Recruiting Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

Type of recruitment challenge	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Finding poll workers of a certain party*	2.3	2.7	2.8
Finding poll workers for a certain area*	1.5	2.1	2.8
Finding poll workers for the entire day*	1.9	2.0	2.1
Finding skilled poll workers*	1.8	2.2	2.5
Finding poll workers to operate voting equipment*	1.9	2.1	2.4
Finding enough poll workers for all polling places*	2.0	2.3	2.7
Finding poll workers who can manage a team*	1.8	2.2	2.7
Poll workers who are no-shows*	1.3	1.5	2.4
Having enough staff for recruitment*	1.8	2.1	2.4
N (min, max)	(102,112)	(525,548)	(124,129)

Note: Election officials rated each recruitment challenge on a scale from 1 (“not at all difficult”) to 4 (“very difficult”). Cell entries are mean ratings. Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

We also tried to examine the attitudes of election officials toward the recruitment process. The survey included a set of questions about the level of difficulty posed by a variety of recruiting challenges. Large jurisdictions rate each of the challenges in Table 8 as more serious than do small and medium-sized jurisdictions. Finding poll workers of a certain political party is rated as the most difficult of the recruiting challenges listed in Table 8. This is likely a function of state laws. Seventy-eight percent of the survey respondents reported that they are legally required to assign poll workers teams that are politically balanced in terms of partisanship. Large jurisdictions also note a frequent difficulty in finding poll workers to serve in certain areas of their community.

Table 9
Support for Proposed Changes to Aid Poll Worker Recruiting by Size of Jurisdiction

Proposed change:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Hold elections on weekend or holiday*	9%	21%	54%
More election staff for recruiting*	22%	45%	72%
More resources for year-round recruiting*	24%	48%	79%
N (min, max)	(108,111)	(529,538)	(123,126)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percentage who rated the proposed change as “somewhat helpful” or “very helpful.”

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

The final assessment of recruiting is three questions about proposed election reforms that might assist in recruiting poll workers (see Table 9). Small and medium-sized jurisdictions tend to be satisfied with the status quo and thus are not supportive of changes that might aid in recruiting more poll workers. In contrast, large jurisdictions tend to support changes that might help recruit more poll workers. A majority of election officials from large jurisdictions even support moving Election Day to a weekend or making it a holiday.

The survey included questions about other reforms that might reduce the demand for poll workers. On those items we observe a similar pattern of greater opposition from small jurisdictions. For example, conducting all elections by mail was supported by 45 percent of officials in large jurisdictions, 34 percent of officials in medium-sized jurisdictions, and only 25 percent of officials in small jurisdictions. Switching to vote centers (thus reducing the number of polling places) was supported by 79 percent of large jurisdictions, 42 percent of medium-sized jurisdictions, and 28 percent of small jurisdictions. Increasing the use of early voting was supported by 77 percent of officials in large jurisdictions, 48 percent of officials in mid-sized jurisdictions, and 32 percent of small jurisdictions. Again, officials in small jurisdictions are more supportive of the status quo.

Poll Worker Training

We next turn to an examination of poll worker training. The survey included a number of questions about poll worker training methods and requirements. Table 10 provides some basic information about poll worker training in the United States. In smaller jurisdictions, poll worker training is often required just once a year or once every two years (often before a big general election). In contrast, large jurisdictions tend to require training before every election. The number of hours of training required in 2008 for first-time poll workers and for polling place supervisors was fairly similar for all types of jurisdictions.

Table 10
General Poll Worker Training Characteristics by Size of Jurisdiction

Poll worker training:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Required before every election*	36%	60%	80%
At least 2 hours required for first-time poll workers in 2008*	81%	76%	89%
Done by local election staff*	23%	31%	62%
Done by local official	56%	57%	48%
Done by state election staff*	44%	16%	3%
N (min, max)	(65,111)	(479,505)	(115,146)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percent that meet the criteria in the first column.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Table 10 also indicates important differences in who conducts the training. Election officials in small jurisdictions are more likely to teach poll worker training sessions themselves. In addition, small jurisdictions tend to rely more heavily on state election staff to conduct poll worker training sessions for them. Large jurisdictions tend to rely more on their own staff to conduct training sessions. Since small jurisdictions have very little staff, the election official does a lot of the work in finding and training poll workers. In contrast, large jurisdictions have more staff, allowing the election official to assume more of a managerial role in overseeing election operations.

All jurisdictions report that virtually all of their poll workers in 2008 attended a training class. We also asked election officials about the topics covered in poll worker training sessions (Table 11). Larger jurisdictions seem to cover more in their training sessions. Large jurisdictions are more likely than small jurisdictions to have mandatory training sessions on polling place procedures, voting equipment, provisional ballots, and voters with disabilities. Furthermore, registration databases are not frequently covered in any mandatory poll worker training, regardless of jurisdiction size. Many states have yet to reach the final stages of developing a computerized registration database, so it is probably not a surprise that many jurisdictions do not offer training on those databases.

Table 11
Mandatory Topics in Poll Worker Training Sessions by Size of Jurisdiction

Topic:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Polling place procedures*	74%	84%	93%
Voting equipment operation*	56%	68%	70%
Provisional ballots*	38%	54%	67%
Serving voters with disabilities*	64%	72%	84%
Off-year briefings or training	10%	11%	14%
Registration databases	17%	11%	17%
N (min, max)	(109,112)	(496,510)	(117,122)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percent of jurisdictions that require the topic in all poll worker training sessions.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

To continue a familiar pattern, we also see evidence of greater innovation from large jurisdictions when it comes to materials and methods used in poll worker training sessions (Table 12). All jurisdictions, regardless of size, rely heavily on traditional methods such as classroom presentations and hands-on use of the voting equipment. Experience with the voting equipment is important since many jurisdictions have adopted new voting equipment in the last few years. However, large jurisdictions are more likely to use newer training methods such as online materials and role-playing exercises. In addition, large jurisdictions are more likely to use a quiz as part of their poll worker training sessions. Finally, in terms of assessing training effectiveness, large jurisdictions are more likely to ask poll workers to fill out an evaluation of their training sessions. All of the methods in Table 12 were rated as at least somewhat effective, on average.

Table 12
Materials and Methods in Poll Worker Training Sessions by Size of Jurisdiction

Material or method:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Classroom presentation*	85%	94%	100%
Hands-on use of voting equipment	90%	94%	99%
Online training materials*	26%	19%	42%
Quiz or test*	26%	33%	51%
Role-playing*	34%	51%	63%
Printed handouts	92%	97%	99%
Videos	59%	58%	52%
Comprehensive training manual*	84%	86%	98%
Evaluation of training session*	10%	19%	43%
N (min, max)	(106,114)	(495,508)	(119,123)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percent of jurisdictions using the material or method for training poll workers.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Evaluating Poll Workers

Finally, we examine evaluations of poll worker performance. The survey included several questions about the methods officials used to evaluate poll worker performance (Table 13). Large jurisdictions use more extensive methods to measure poll worker performance. Aside from in-house staff discussions, each method listed in Table 13 is more likely to be used to evaluate poll workers in large jurisdictions than in small jurisdictions. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that large jurisdictions tend to seek out more information than small jurisdictions in order to get a handle on how their poll workers are doing.

Table 13
Methods of Evaluating Poll Workers by Size of Jurisdiction

Evaluation method:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Surveys of poll workers*	4%	12%	29%
Feedback from voters	49%	59%	62%
Analysis of polling place performance*	46%	37%	51%
Feedback from election observers*	23%	31%	46%
Evaluations from polling place leaders*	29%	36%	53%
Written feedback from poll workers*	7%	35%	60%
Poll worker training quizzes	2%	6%	15%
In-house staff discussions	48%	48%	53%
N (min, max)	(61,71)	(491,515)	(143,146)

Note: Cell entries indicate the percent of jurisdictions using the material or method for training poll workers.

* Group differences statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Election officials were also asked to rate the performance of their poll workers in the 2008 presidential election (see Table 14). In general, election officials thought their poll workers did a very good job in the 2008 election. Two newer areas of election administration, provisional ballots and registration databases, generated significantly lower average poll worker evaluations than the other areas. This is understandable given that both election features are new and the law is still rather vague about how provisional ballots and registration disputes are supposed to be handled in many states. As a result, there have been several election lawsuits involving provisional voting and registration databases in recent years (Hasen 2005; Tokaji 2005; Foley 2008).

Table 14
Ratings of Poll Worker Performance by Size of Jurisdiction
2008 General Election

Type of service:	Jurisdiction Size		
	Small	Medium	Large
Polling place procedures*	6.4	6.2	5.8
Voting equipment operation*	6.2	6.2	5.8
Provisional ballots*	5.5	5.3	5.0
Serving voters with disabilities*	6.3	6.2	5.8
Registration databases*	5.8	5.6	5.2
Managing lines of voters*	6.3	6.3	6.0
N (min, max)	(94,113)	(425,506)	(93,120)

Note: Election officials rated each area of poll worker performance on a scale from 1 (“very poor”) to 7 (“excellent”). Cell entries are mean ratings.
Mean difference between small and large jurisdictions statistically significant, $p < .05$.

Another pattern in Table 14 is that poll workers are rated more favorably, on average, in small jurisdictions. This is despite the fact that large jurisdictions cast a wider net to recruit and screen poll workers, cover more topics in their training sessions, and use more extensive methods to evaluate their poll workers. Even though Table 10 indicates that smaller jurisdictions are less likely to require mandatory training on many of the topics listed above, smaller jurisdictions nevertheless rate poll worker performance in those same areas more positively than larger jurisdictions. Election officials in small jurisdictions are quite happy with their poll workers and generally do not see the need to critically examine or modify their poll worker programs.

Conclusion

When it comes to recruiting and training poll workers, there are two very different types of election jurisdictions in the United States. On the one hand, largely populated jurisdictions need many poll workers and face many challenges in hiring and training them. Large jurisdictions also have much more extensive recruitment and training programs that tend to involve the broader community. Election officials in large jurisdictions tend to apply a more critical lens when assessing their poll worker operations, and they use a wider array of methods to evaluate poll workers. Officials in large jurisdictions also report higher levels of difficulty in managing poll worker functions. Finally, large jurisdictions tend to support reforms that would assist them in finding more poll workers to serve on Election Day. On the other hand, smaller jurisdictions are happy to support the status quo. They have little demand for poll

workers, and they can afford to rely on friends and insiders to fulfill their limited poll worker needs. In addition, small jurisdictions tend to avoid innovative methods of training and evaluating poll workers.

One may view these differences merely as a function of local context. Large jurisdictions have to serve a lot more voters, so it makes sense that they have to do a lot more when it comes to managing poll workers. In addition, large jurisdictions receive a disproportionate share of scrutiny from partisans, journalists, and reform advocates since administrative features may affect a lot more voters (and thus influence election outcomes) in large jurisdictions. This provides another incentive for large jurisdictions to constantly look for ways to improve poll worker operations. Finally, with a staff available to carry out most election administration tasks, officials in large jurisdictions may have more time to collect data and assess the performance of their staff.

There may be a cultural difference between large and small jurisdictions as well. We see some evidence of this when comparing the background of election officials in Table 1. Officials in large jurisdictions tend to be younger, more educated, with a more diverse experience in election administration. Our impression is that officials in large jurisdictions have grown accustomed to scrutiny and data requests from academics, advocates, and policymakers. As a result, they tend to welcome these interactions. It gives them a chance to help others understand the challenges they face, and they might learn something.

In contrast, our impression is that election officials in small jurisdictions feel like they are under siege from those same constituencies. Among smaller jurisdictions there is hostility to federal and state regulation of elections. Many election officials from small jurisdictions have expressed frustration with the new requirements in HAVA. As a result, while there are frequent collaborations with outside constituencies to improve election administration in large jurisdictions, these collaborations are rare in small jurisdictions.

This may be a growing problem. There is evidence that election administration is more professional and more effective in large jurisdictions. For example, voting errors occur more frequently in smaller jurisdictions (Kimball and Kropf 2005; Stewart 2006; Ansolabehere and Stewart 2005). Small to medium-sized jurisdictions dominate the community of local election officials in the United States, but they serve roughly one-third of the voters. Large jurisdictions are small in number but they serve a majority of voters in the United States. In election reform debates, the views expressed by local election officials may be dominated by small jurisdictions.

Finally, the vast difference in the size of local election jurisdictions means that a one-size-fits-all approach to election reform is not likely to succeed. For example, the cases of innovative poll worker programs highlighted in the EAC best practices report (EAC 2007c) are almost all from large jurisdictions. It is hard to imagine that small jurisdictions will adopt many of those poll worker practices. Perhaps there should be separate associations of election officials to address the different needs and interests of small versus large election jurisdictions.

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