

The Quantities and Qualities of Poll Workers

Barry C. Burden and Jeffrey Milyo

ABSTRACT

Successful election administration depends on an army of poll workers who are responsible for front line interaction with voters at the polling place. Despite their important role in elections, we know surprisingly little about how recruitment and training of poll workers translates into performance. We review research on poll workers and present descriptive information about poll worker characteristics, recruitment, training, and evaluation. We suggest that widespread concern about the quantity of poll workers has distracted from examining the quality of poll workers. More systematic evaluation is necessary to understand how various inputs affect poll worker performance.

ELECTION OFFICIALS ARE TASKED with the recurring challenge of recruiting and training an army of temporary poll workers to assist the public in exercising the right to vote and to enforce the rules governing the voting process.¹ Success or failure in these endeavors is widely assumed to be crucial for voter satisfaction and confidence in the integrity of elections, which may in turn influence voter participation and trust in government generally.² Despite their critical role on the frontlines interacting with tens of millions of voters each election, poll workers typically decide to serve for little or no pay, so they may not be the most qualified. Further, poll workers are geographically dispersed across many jurisdictions simultaneously, so they may have discretion to shirk their duties.³

The Election Assistance Commission and other organizations have offered “best practices” and guidance on poll worker recruitment and training.⁴ However, these recommendations are not based on scientific evaluation studies of which practices actually impact voter satisfaction and confidence, or minimize problems at the polls. The recommendations

typically rely on case studies, focus groups, media coverage, and discussions with election administrators and other stakeholders without much vetting of the suggestions. To be sure, there may be important lessons to be gleaned from describing current practices and sharing of opinions of election administrators. But absent systematic study it is no simple task to discern which aspects of the conventional wisdom are correct and which are ill informed.

Given the present dearth of scientific evidence, our article focuses on descriptive information about poll worker characteristics, recruitment, and training, and identifies robust correlations among

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¹Between one and two million poll workers are employed in a presidential election (e.g., <http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf>). A popular estimate is 1.4 million (e.g., <http://library.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2007_06_ElectionDay.pdf>). That is roughly the number of active duty military members and translates to approximately one in every hundred voters serving as a poll worker.

²Thad E. Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2009. “The Human Dimension of Elections: How Poll Workers Shape Public Confidence in Elections.” *Political Research Quarterly* 62:507–22.

³R. Michael Alvarez and Thad E. Hall. 2007. “Controlling Democracy: The Principal-Agent Problems in Election Administration.” *Policy Studies Journal* 34:491–510.

⁴<http://www.eac.gov/election_management_resources/poll_worker_best_practices.aspx>.

these factors and several important outcomes. In doing so, we provide an agenda for future evaluation studies.

BASIC FACTS ABOUT POLL WORKERS

State law and local practices assign poll workers to a variety of roles. In most jurisdictions the largest numbers of poll workers are given the tasks of checking in voters, opening/closing polling places, and issuing ballots, in that order. These are followed by assisting with voting equipment, supervising, greeting voters/managing lines, and serving as troubleshooters or roving technicians.⁵

Poll workers are disproportionately female and significantly older than the average member of the public, but perhaps not as old as popular wisdom and anecdotes suggest.⁶ The largest groups of poll workers are in their 60s with the second largest category being over 70.⁷ A recent survey of poll workers in California found that 44% were retirees.⁸ Consistent with this older demographic, a 2006 study found that many did not use the Internet or computers on a daily basis.⁹ However, the same study indicates that poll workers are much more likely to have a college degree than the general public. Most poll workers are affiliated with one of the two major political parties and have served as poll workers before.¹⁰

The importance of personal interactions between voters and poll workers has led to concerns about whether the unrepresentative composition of poll workers has detrimental effects on the voting experience.¹¹ Multiple studies have observed that voter confidence or satisfaction is strongly correlated with positive evaluations of poll worker performance.¹² These results underscore the potential importance of descriptive representation among poll workers. However, while there is general agreement that poll workers are disproportionately older and female, at least one recent national study finds that poll workers are fairly representative of the general population by race and Hispanic ethnicity.¹³

POLL WORKER ATTRIBUTES AND THE QUALITY OF THE VOTING EXPERIENCE

The correlation of voter evaluations of poll workers and the quality of the voting experience suggests

that effective poll worker training may be an important determinant of voter satisfaction and confidence. This presumes a causal pathway from training to more competent poll workers, to higher evaluations of poll workers, and then to greater voter satisfaction. However, it may also be the case that voters with more positive attitudes simply rate both poll workers and their voting experience more highly. And while it is in principle possible to tease out the causal relationships, existing studies have not done so.

An alternative to reports by voters is evaluation of poll workers by supervisors or third parties. This has been done in a limited fashion in surveys of local election officials responsible for poll workers. For example, a 2006 Congressional Research Service report found that poll workers “not understanding their jobs” was a problem for 21% of officials, while poll workers not reporting for duty was a problem in 10% of jurisdictions.¹⁴ A more recent survey of local officials asked for ratings of poll workers on several types of services, finding that they performed better on managing lines and following polling place procedures than on handling

⁵David C. Kimball, Brady Baybeck, Cassie Gross, and Laura Wiedlocher. 2010. “Survey of Poll Worker Recruitment, Training, and Evaluation Practices by Local Election Officials.” <http://www.umsl.edu/~kimballd/report_june112010.pdf>.

⁶Thad E. Hall and Kathleen Moore. 2011. “Poll Workers and Polling Places.” VTP Working Paper #104, CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project.

⁷2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey.

⁸Bonnie E. Glaser, Karin Mac Donald, Iris Hui, and Bruce E. Cain. 2007. “The Front Lines of Democracy: Who Staffs Polling Places and Does It Matter?” Election Administration Center Working Paper 0704, University of California, Berkeley. Presumably regular use of the Internet and computer technology has increased since then.

⁹Thad Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2007. “Poll Workers and the Vitality of Democracy: An Early Assessment.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40:647–54.

¹⁰Kimball et al. 2010.

¹¹Hall and Moore. 2011.

¹²Thad E. Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2009. “The Human Dimension of Elections,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 62:507–22. Ryan L. Claassen, David B. Magleby, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2008. “At Your Service: Voter Evaluations of Poll Worker Performance.” *American Politics Research*, 36:612–34.

¹³R. Michael Alvarez, Stephen Ansolabehere, Adam Berinsky, Gabriel Lenz, Charles Stewart III, and Thad Hall. 2009. “2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections Final Report.”

¹⁴Eric A. Fischer and Kevin J. Coleman. “Election Reform and Local Election Officials: Results of Two National Surveys.” Congressional Research Service. Updated February 7, 2008.

provisional ballots and registration databases. There was also substantial variation in ratings across jurisdictions of different sizes.¹⁵

The most recent and comprehensive study of the determinants of how voters evaluate poll workers is Hall and Stewart's analysis of the 2012 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ).¹⁶ Controlling for problems observed at the polls, they find that for in-person voting on Election Day, poll workers who were older or black were less likely to be rated as exhibiting "excellent" performance. Initial evidence thus suggests that the perceived quality of poll workers is variable and deserves further study.

THE QUANTITY OF POLL WORKERS

In 2001, the Carter-Ford Commission recommended a national voting holiday in part to facilitate recruitment of poll workers.¹⁷ But is there really a shortage of poll workers? Surveys of local election administrators are one means to investigate this concern. As Table 1 shows, data from the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) suggest that just under half of all jurisdictions report some difficulty in finding a sufficient number of poll workers, although only about one in ten found it to be "very difficult."

However, caution is in order in interpreting such survey responses. Some election administrators may have a higher tolerance for lines and confusion at the polls and so report no difficulties obtaining sufficient poll workers. Other officials might mean to convey that it was difficult to find a sufficient number of *competent* poll workers rather than the raw number needed. Finally, just because it was a difficult process to find poll workers does not necessarily mean that there was a shortage in the end.

To further examine the potential causes of poll worker recruitment success, Table 2 reports several

metrics by the reported difficulty of obtaining poll workers in local jurisdictions.¹⁸ In line with a recent study showing that election officials in urban locations routinely report more difficulty in recruiting,¹⁹ we find more difficulty in jurisdictions with more registered voters. The table also shows that a larger share of votes was cast on Election Day in jurisdictions where poll workers were most difficult to find. Those communities also had somewhat younger poll workers.

The EAVS asks local officials to report the number of poll workers assigned to each polling place. For ease of exposition, we aggregate these figures to the state level. Figure 1 shows median number of poll workers per polling place.²⁰ The typical state deployment translates to between five and ten poll workers at each location, but with substantial variation. States such as Connecticut, Maryland, and Massachusetts have double or triple the number of poll workers per polling place found in states such as Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. Moving down from the state to the local level, the median ratio nationwide in 2012 was 6.3 poll workers per polling place.

This variation almost certainly reflects a range of factors such the ability of election officials to effectively recruit poll workers, minimum numbers set by state law, specific needs caused by the use of absentee and early voting, and the number of voters expected to participate in the election. The quantity of poll workers does not appear to be strongly related to how much early and absentee voting occurs in state, or other factors such as turnout, political competitiveness, or even voter turnout. We show this more systematically below.

Some of the variation in poll workers per polling place is due to differing numbers of voters served. We would naturally expect more poll workers in

TABLE 1. REPORTED DIFFICULTY OF OBTAINING SUFFICIENT POLL WORKERS

	2008	2010	2012
Very easy	15%	12%	12%
Somewhat easy	17%	18%	15%
Neither difficult nor easy	20%	24%	28%
Somewhat difficult	41%	36%	35%
Very difficult	7%	11%	11%

Source: 2008, 2010, and 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). OR and WA omitted.

¹⁵Kimball et al. 2010.

¹⁶Thad E. Hall and Charles Stewart III. 2013. "Voter Attitudes toward Poll Workers in the 2012 Election." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

¹⁷The National Commission on Federal Election Reform. "To Assure Pride and Confidence in the Electoral Process." <http://web1.millercenter.org/commissions/comm_2001.pdf>.

¹⁸We compute medians rather than means to minimize that influence of extreme values that might be unrepresentative or erroneous.

¹⁹Kimball et al. 2010.

²⁰Using either the total number of polling places or only the number of Election Day voting locations does not alter the substantive conclusions. The two measures are almost perfectly correlated.

TABLE 2. OTHER FACTORS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF OBTAINING POLL WORKERS IN THE 2012 ELECTIONS

	<i>Median number of registered voters</i>	<i>Median number of registered voters per poll worker</i>	<i>Median percentage of votes cast on Election Day</i>	<i>Median percentage of poll workers over age 70</i>
Very easy	3,185	139	78%	25%
Somewhat easy	7,528	149	75%	22%
Neither difficult nor easy	12,434	170	76%	23%
Somewhat difficult	10,427	171	75%	29%
Very difficult	12,681	174	86%	19%

Source: 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). OR and WA omitted. Thirteen states did not report data for question D5.

polling places that have larger numbers of voters participating. Figure 2 reports the ratio of poll workers to voters in 2012 elections. In contrast to the number of poll workers per polling place, this graph shows that states are strikingly uniform (aside from Connect-

icut). Despite substantial differences in voter volume, geography, polling place environments, budgets, and other aspects of election administration, most states deploy about one poll worker for every 100 voters, with most states ranging between 75 and 150 voters per poll worker.²¹ We should consider whether these differences have consequences for the voter experience. The states with higher ratios (again, aside from Connecticut) appear to be the same ones that make heavy use of early or absentee voting, and that might allow them to deploy fewer Election Day poll workers.

One metric that could be influenced by the deployment of poll workers is the level of satisfaction that voters express about the poll workers who serve them. Although this measure could well reflect factors beyond the immediate control of poll workers, the SPAE question provide a general evaluation that permits comparisons across states.²² Before examining variation across states, we note that the overwhelming majority of respondents are pleased with poll worker job performance. Two-thirds of respondents gave a rating of “excellent,” another quarter of respondents chose “good,” with only five percent selecting “fair” and less than one percent selecting “poor.” Figure 3 also reports the percentage of voters who rate their poll workers’ performances as “excellent.” While the average is around 70%, some states reach above 80% and others are below 60%. In general it appears

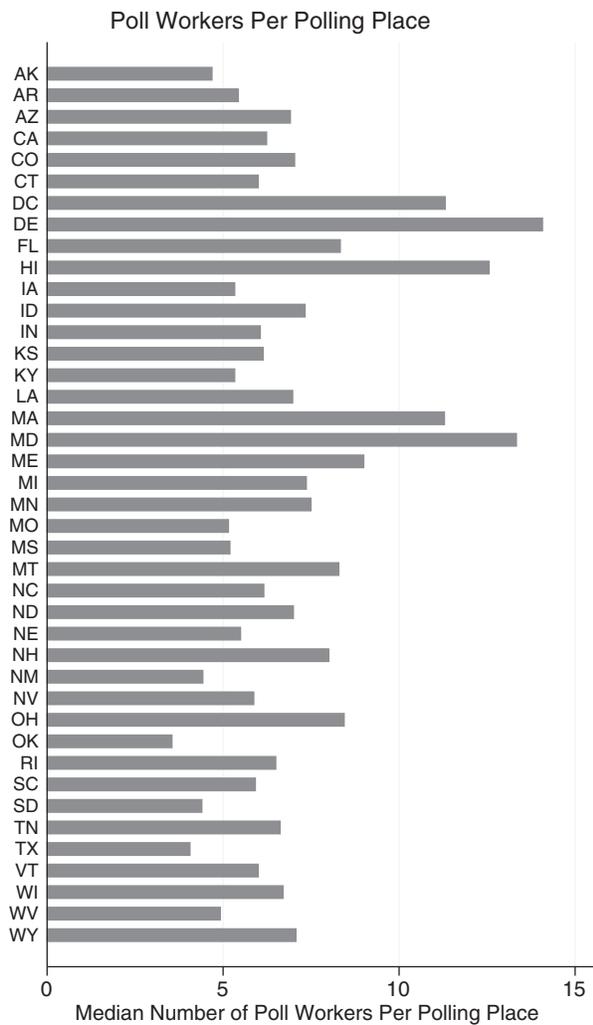


FIG. 1. Poll workers per polling place. Median number of poll workers per polling place. Source: 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). IL, OR, and WA omitted. No data from GA, NJ, and PA.

²¹Computing this measure based only on Election Day voters rather than including early and absentee voters does not alter the substantive conclusions significance. The two measures are correlated at approximately .91.

²²The situation may be analogous to a restaurant customer at the end of a meal evaluating a waiter or waitress (to calculate an appropriate tip). Judgments about the wait staff’s performance will be affected by factors outside their control such as competence of the kitchen staff and atmosphere in the dining room, but the tipping system assumes that customers can also determine the unique contributions of the wait staff amidst the “noise” of other influences.

that less populous, more rural states show higher levels of satisfactions. Exceptions such as Arizona, Florida, and Texas suggest that other factors are at work beyond the simple distribution of the population.

We now consider relationships among several measures. These can be divided into “inputs” such as the number of poll workers and use of in-person and early voting affects as well as “outputs” such as voter wait times, confidence that their voters were counted as intended, and voter ratings of poll workers. Figure 4 presents evidence of these relationships using scatter plots of 2012 data. Correlations are listed where they are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Remarkably, the difficulty of obtaining poll workers, the number of poll workers per polling place, and the number of voters per poll worker are unrelated to any outcomes. Ratings

of poll workers as “excellent” are negatively correlated with the time it takes to vote but positively correlated with voter confidence that their votes would be counted appropriately. Confidence increases when there is more in-person voting and less early voting. Among other “inputs,” the age of poll workers appears to have little influence. Poll workers are rated more poorly when there is a higher ratio of voters to poll workers, suggesting that the voting experience is negatively affected when there are too few poll workers to deal with the volume of voters. However, the number of poll workers per polling place is negatively related with their ratings, suggesting that there can be problems of “too many cooks in the kitchen” that are not a function of the number of voters. Alternatively, this unexpected correlation may be a proxy

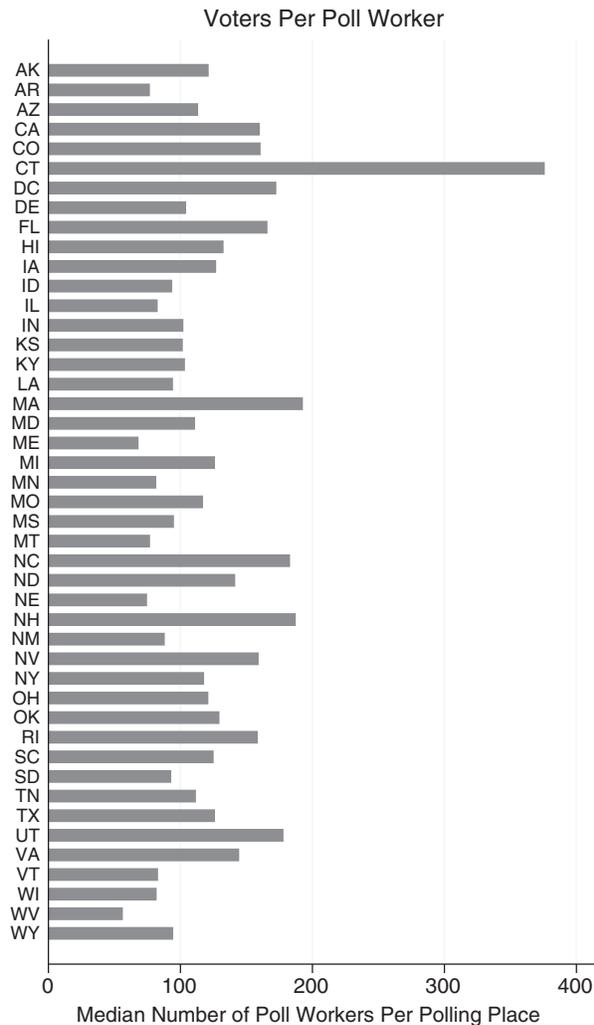


FIG. 2. Voters per poll worker. Median number of voters per poll worker. Source: 2012 EAVS. OR and WA omitted. No data from GA, NJ, and PA.

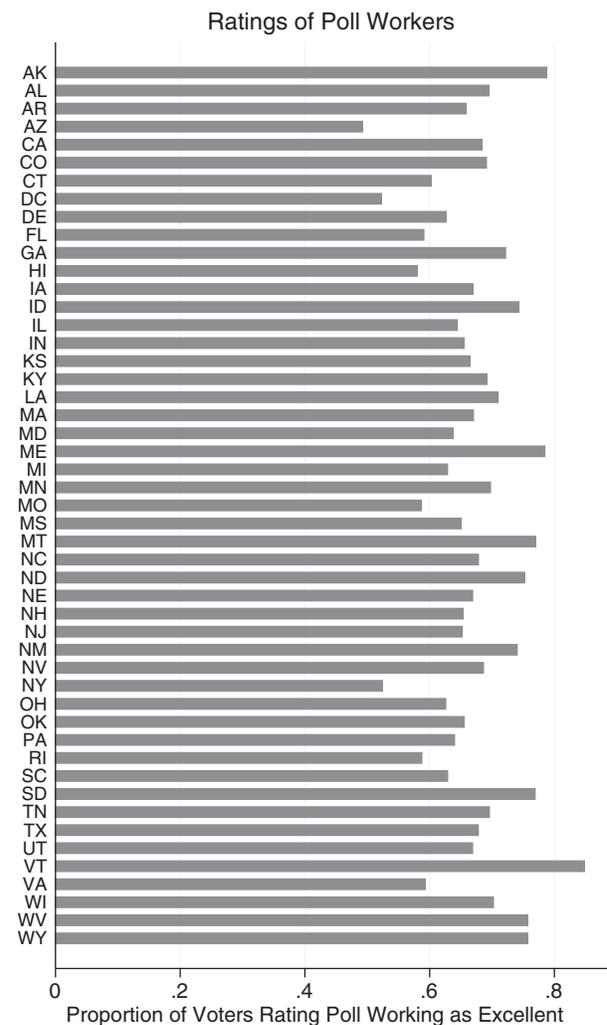


FIG. 3. Ratings of poll workers. Proportion of voters rating poll working as excellent. Source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAEE). OR and WA omitted.

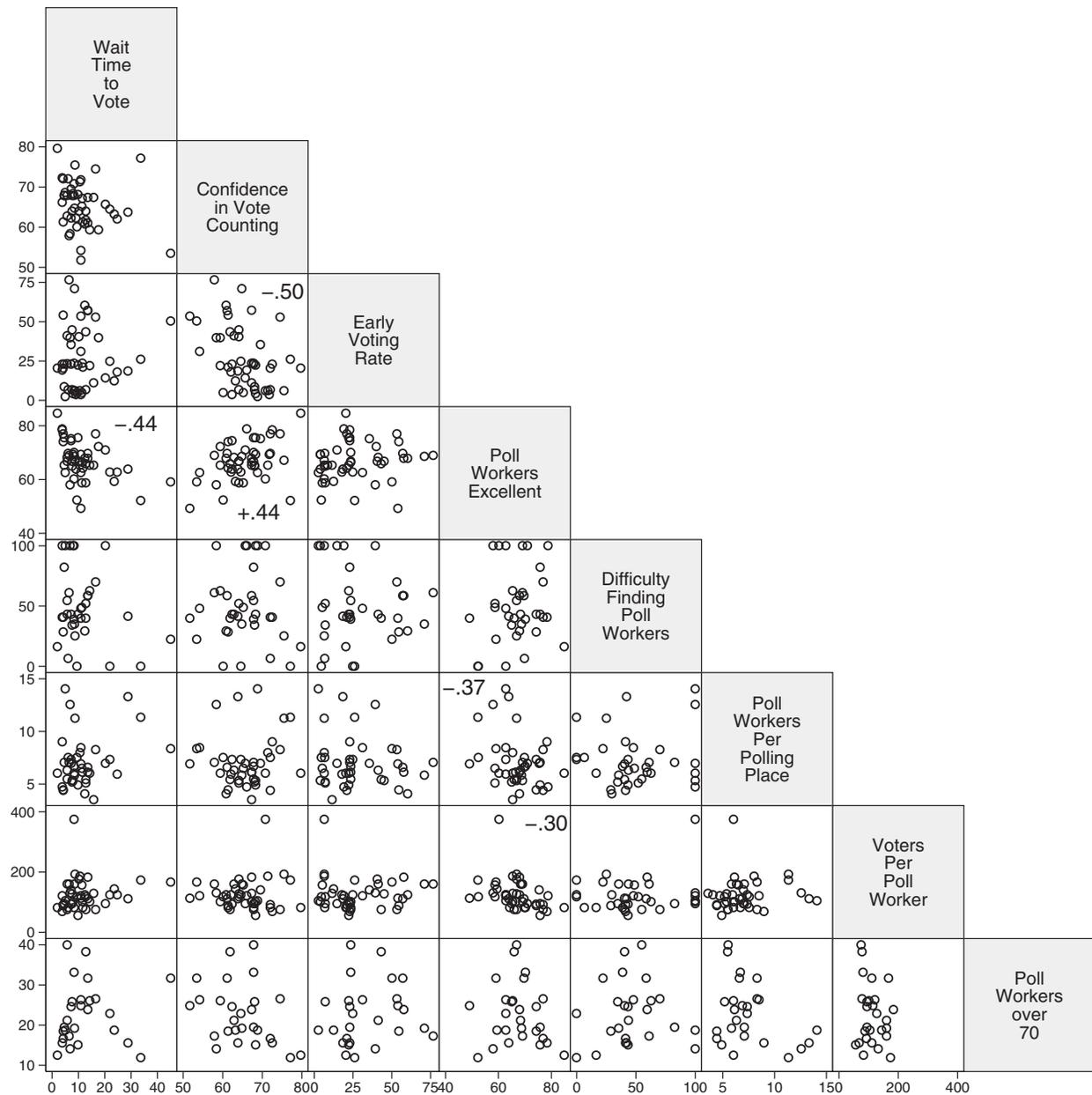


FIG. 4. Scatterplot of state measures related to poll workers in 2012. *Notes:* Number of observations varies between 26 and 51. Displayed correlations are significant at $p < .05$. OR and WA are omitted. *Sources:* EAVS and SPAE.

for more populous jurisdictions where more poll workers are mandated, or it might indicate an errant emphasis by election administrators on quantity over quality in the recruitment, selection, and training of poll workers.

QUALITY: RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Although there is some variation in how much poll workers are paid,²³ poll workers generally receive low pay for long hours.²⁴ Given the

²³“Helping Americans Vote: Poll Workers.” 2007. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf>.

²⁴Karin Mac Donald and Bonnie E. Glaser. 2007. “The Attraction of Working from 6AM to 9:30PM for a Fraction of Minimum Wage: Poll Workers and Their Motivation to Serve.” Presented at the Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL April 12–15, 2007.

modest compensation offered in most jurisdictions, it is tempting to infer that poll worker pay should be increased. However, most studies of the motivation of poll workers find that pay is a minor factor.²⁵ Another reason for caution is that an increase in payments to poll workers will result in additional workers who are motivated more by monetary reward than civic duty. It is possible that such workers will require more training and supervision.

Most state laws require that poll workers are selected by the two major political parties, or that local officials must at least give priority to hiring those poll workers who are recommended by the parties. Surveys of officials show that parties are in fact the most common sources for recruiting poll workers, ahead of government employees, students, and local businesses.²⁶ Although some states allow unaffiliated voters to serve as poll workers, no state law explicitly gives preferences to non-partisan individuals.²⁷ Having representatives from both parties working at the polls helps prevent any bias in administration by ensuring that each side is monitoring the other. Because the parties are motivated to have representatives at the polls, they are likely to provide election officials with sufficient numbers of workers, thus mitigating the difficulty of finding enough poll workers. (In some places this is not true; one party generates many more workers than the other, so balance is a concern.²⁸) Party-sponsored poll workers are also more likely to be experienced, having served as poll workers in previous elections.

At the same time, we might hypothesize that loyal party activists are not necessarily the most objective or competent poll workers available. This shortcoming reflects principal-agent problems caused by party-based selection, insufficient screening mechanisms that only sometimes involve interviews or questionnaires,²⁹ and incomplete training to ensure uniform administration. Kimball et al. (2006) observe that more provisional ballots are cast and counted in jurisdictions where the party vote share is in concordance with the party of the local election administrator.³⁰ A non-partisan selection system focused on skill rather than political connections might well produce a better crop of front line workers.

There is a broad consensus among scholars that training is important for the ability of poll workers to perform effectively. We know some things about training based on surveys of local election officials. As of 2006, the average training was 3.5 hours, but ran much longer in some jurisdictions and comprised less

than one hour in 10% of jurisdictions. Nearly every state requires some form of training, although a few do not.³¹ Poll workers are almost uniformly trained on topics including how to assist voters with disabilities, follow election laws, secure ballots, operate equipment, and verify voter identification. Training is not as uniform on subjects such as how to administer provisional ballots and resolve conflicts with voters.³² Surprisingly, in small jurisdictions only a third of poll workers receive training on provisional ballots and just over half on the operation of voting equipment.³³

Local election officials, especially those in large jurisdictions, rate training as their top priority, higher than recruitment, evaluation, and compensation.³⁴ However, there are a wide variety of training schema and no direct tests among them to determine what works best. This is an area that deserves much more attention and analysis. Current training practices do not appear to translate into uniform administration. Surveys of voters suggest that ID is requested of voters in states that do not require it and not requested of voters in states where it is mandated.³⁵ In 2008 one quarter of people voting in states where any form of ID is acceptable were nonetheless asked to show photo ID.³⁶ Further, voters from some demographic categories report receiving more scrutiny from poll workers.³⁷

²⁵Glaser et al. 2007. Elizabeth W. McAuliffe. 2009. "The Unexamined Element of Election Administration: Why Citizens Choose to Serve at Poll Workers on Election Day." Ph.D. dissertation. Florida State University.

²⁶Kimball et al. 2010.

²⁷U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

²⁸Kimball et al. 2010.

²⁹Kimball et al. 2010.

³⁰David C. Kimball, Martha Kropf, and Lindsey Battles. 2006. "Helping America Vote? Election Administration, Partisanship, and Provisional Voting in the 2004 Election." *Election Law Journal* 5:447-61.

³¹U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

³²Kimball et al. 2010.

³³Kimball et al. 2010.

³⁴Kimball et al. 2010.

³⁵Charles Stewart III. 2013. "A Voter's Eye View of the 2012 Election."

³⁶R. Michael Alvarez et al. 2009. "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections: Final Report."

³⁷Rachel V. Cobb, James D. Greiner, and Kevin M. Quinn. 2012. "Can Voter ID Laws Be Administered in a Race-Neutral Manner? Evidence from the City of Boston in 2008." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7:1-33. Lonna Rae Atkeson et al. 2010. "A New Barrier to Participation: Heterogeneous Application of Voter Identification Laws." *Electoral Studies* 29:66-73.

A study of California polling places suggests that fewer votes are lost (i.e., the residual vote rate is lower) when poll workers are given reference material to take home and when they rate the training as higher quality. Importantly, experienced poll workers also produce lower residual vote rates.³⁸ However, there is also some evidence that training may not be done in the most effective manner. Poll workers in Ohio and Utah frequently reported that they did not spend enough time practicing on the equipment, found the sessions difficult to understand, and generally felt ill prepared when their Election Day experiences differed significantly from their training.³⁹ For example, in some jurisdictions, a majority of poll workers receive at most one training session, but workers who attend multiple training sessions actually report more problems on the job.⁴⁰ Of course, it may simply be the case that the most conscientious poll workers are the ones that both attend multiple training sessions and take note of and report problems. This reinforces the need for objective indicators for evaluating poll worker performance and the efficacy of different training methods.

Even so, evaluation of poll worker performance is a low ranked priority for election officials.⁴¹ The most common forms of evaluation of poll workers are in the form of feedback from voters or poll workers themselves, although larger jurisdictions also utilize measures of polling place performance of evaluations from supervisors.⁴² However, these existing evaluation measures have not been exploited to formally test training methods or recruitment strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The received wisdom on poll worker recruitment and training emphasizes a national shortage of poll workers above all else. However, the received wisdom is not founded on systematic evaluation studies. Therefore, we call for systematic research to critically examine popular claims that more poll workers, or better descriptive representation among poll workers, will meaningfully enhance the voting experience. But perhaps even more important are evaluation studies of the methods employed to recruit and train poll workers.

In some contrast to the prevailing wisdom in the election administration community, we propose thinking about poll worker recruitment in slightly different ways. In particular, existing evidence sug-

gests that poll worker *quality*—meaning both selection and training—is at least as pressing an issue as poll worker *quantity*. Quantity is more salient because it is easier to assess and is governed by statutes that mandate minimum values. Quality is more difficult to evaluate and is frequently not assessed because statutes seldom require it.

Poll workers are largely self-selected and face limited screening aside what the major political parties use in creating lists of potential workers for local officials. Indeed, the main criteria for selection might be that a person is available and loyal to a party. Training is scant in some jurisdictions and poll worker evaluations are even rarer. Obtaining sufficient poll workers will continue to be a significant problem for a small number of jurisdictions, but finding—or producing through training—highly competent poll workers appears to be a problem facing a larger number of localities. We do not yet know precisely what makes for a successful poll worker, although the evidence we have presented suggests that raw numbers deployed are not as important as previously thought. More research is needed to determine which “inputs” most strongly relate to “outputs” of concern. For example, what challenges do the length of the polling day and the period for early voting have on poll worker recruitment?

Existing research has focused on the determinants of easy to measure “outputs” such as survey measures of voter satisfaction or the subjective opinions of election administrators. This may limit the value of existing research for practitioners, because it is not yet clear whether such indicators are good proxies for outputs that matter most in the field. In evaluating poll workers, election administrators may care more about the timely opening and closing of polling locations, the accuracy of ballot accountability reporting, the number of errors in recording voters, proper completion of provisional ballot information, or accuracy in following procedures for sealing and secure transport

³⁸Bonnie E. Glaser et al. 2007. “Explaining Voting System Performance: Do Technology, Training, and Poll Worker Characteristics Matter?” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

³⁹Thad Hall, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson. 2007. “Poll Workers and the Vitality of Democracy: An Early Assessment.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40:647–54.

⁴⁰Hall, Monson, and Patterson. 2007.

⁴¹Kimball et al. 2010.

⁴²Kimball et al. 2010.

of ballots and election materials.⁴³ However, election administrators can play an important role in improving the practical value of future research by recording these or other more objective indicators of success. Even a small scale study demonstrating that there is a correlation between these types of indicators and the more easy to obtain survey measures would provide greater confidence that the latter are useful proxies for gauging the success of election administration. Consequently, practitioners can play a crucial role in improving future evaluation research

by developing and recording the kinds of indicators that they consider to be important “outputs.”

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⁴³We are grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this point.