

**The Recruitment and Training of Poll Workers:
What We Know from Scholarly Research**

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Report prepared for the Presidential Commission on Election Administration

June 28, 2013

1. Introduction

In every election an army of temporary poll workers must be recruited and trained to both assist the public in exercising the right to vote and to enforce the rules governing the voting process.¹ These poll workers are geographically dispersed and serve as the front line workers interacting with tens of millions of voters. Principal-agent theory suggests that this is a difficult task for election officials. Because they are self-selected, poll workers may not be the most qualified. Because they are spread across many jurisdictions simultaneously, they have discretion to shirk their duties.² 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.³

Previous commissions have recommended increased funding for poll worker training and recruitment as a means to improve election administration and increase voter confidence in elections. Indeed, common sense suggests that “more and better” of anything is desirable, absent any consideration of costs. But to what end? How responsive is voter satisfaction and confidence to the number of poll workers? Does “better training” translate into measurably fewer problems at the polls? Without answers to these fundamental questions, it is impossible to inform policy makers about efficacy of different policy options.

The Election Assistance Commission and other organizations has reviewed “best practices” and offered 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 rely case studies, focus groups, media coverage, and discussions with election administrators and other stakeholders.

To be sure, there are important lessons to be gleaned from describing current practices and opinions of election administrators. But it is no simple task to discern which aspects of the conventional wisdom are correct and which are ill informed. Rational policy making requires systematic evaluations studies of policy interventions. These may take the form of true field experiments, or researchers may exploit differences in law or practice across jurisdictions and over time as natural experiments. But key to the scientific testing of hypotheses is the use of treatment and control groups for identifying causal effects on well-identified performance measures, such as voter satisfaction, waiting times, or the incidence of specific problems at the polls. The importance of experimental and quasi-experimental evidence has been recognized by policy makers in other areas, such as the evaluation of job training programs, public health interventions, and education reforms. In the absence of such studies, our report focuses mostly

¹ Between 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 serves as a poll worker.

² R. Michael Alvarez and Thad E. Hall. 2007. “Controlling Democracy: The Principal-Agent Problems in Election Administration.” *Policy Studies Journal* 34:491-510.

³ Thad 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.

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

on descriptive information about poll worker characteristics, recruitment, and training, and identifies robust correlations among these factors and several important outcomes.

2. 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

It is well established that poll workers are disproportionately female and significantly older than the average member of the public, but 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 of poll workers in Cuyahoga county in Ohio and the 3rd Congressional district in Utah found that fewer than half report using the internet or computers on a daily basis.⁹ However, the same study indicates that poll workers are more than twice as 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

3. Poll Worker Attributes and the Quality of the Voting Experience

⁵ David 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/~kimball/report_june112010.pdf.

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

⁷ 2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey.

⁸ Bonnie 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.

⁹ Thad 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.

¹⁰ Kimball et al. 2010.

¹¹ Hall and Moore, 2011.

¹² Thad 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.

¹³ R. 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."

The correlation of voter evaluations of poll workers and the quality of the voting experience also suggests that effective poll worker training is likely an important determinant of voter satisfaction and confidence. This conjecture 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. One possibility would be to substitute evaluations of poll workers made by supervisors or third parties in place of subjective voter reports. 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 and poll workers not reporting for duty 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 handling provisional ballots and registration databases. There was also substantial variation in ratings across jurisdictions.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 SPAE.¹⁶ All else constant, older voters tend to rate poll workers more highly, as do those who have similar political leanings as the majority of voters in their county. However, there is no significant difference in evaluating poll workers by the race of voters, or even when the race of the voter and poll worker differ. Idiosyncratic beliefs and experiences of voters matter as well. Not surprisingly, voters who experience problems at the polls or who worry about voter fraud rate poll workers lower, while voters that are personally familiar with a poll worker give higher ratings, a result also found in earlier research.

These findings must be considered with care. The authors control for problems at the polls, which may confound the identification of other causal relationships. For example, older poll workers may actually cause problems for voters, but this analysis would attribute the subsequent poor ratings of older poll workers to “problems” rather than age. Given the importance of personal interactions between poll workers and voters, the question of whether poll worker attributes such as age and race matter for the quality of the voting experience merits further investigation.

3. Recruitment of Poll Workers

Is There a Shortage of Poll Workers?

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

¹⁵ Kimball et al. 2010.

¹⁶ Thad 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.

In 2001, the Carter-Ford Commission recommended a national voting holiday in part to facilitate recruitment of poll workers.¹⁷ The Commission’s report did not focus directly on poll workers, but it did make several references to the shortage of able poll workers. However, the report does not describe the basis for the claim that there is a chronic shortage of poll workers.

Surveys of local election administrators are one means to investigate whether there is a shortage of poll workers. The EAC provides the most comprehensive nationwide data on the deployment of poll workers via its Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), which is distributed to state officials following each federal election.¹⁸ The EAVS suggests that most jurisdictions do not report difficulty finding a sufficient number of poll workers, although difficulties are acute for a small number of officials. Shortages may also be more severe in mid-term elections.

Table 1 shows that in 2008 only 7% of localities reporting that finding poll workers was “difficult” and more than 75% found it “very easy” or “somewhat easy.”¹⁹ In 2010 the “easy” categories fell to under 30% and the “somewhat difficult” and “very difficult” categories comprised almost half of local officials. This difference might be caused by political parties offering up more poll workers in more engaging presidential elections. A recent study also shows that election officials in urban locations routinely report more difficulty in recruiting.²⁰

Table 1. Difficulty of Obtaining Sufficient Poll Workers in the 2008 and 2010 Elections

	2008	2010
Very Easy	36%	12%
Somewhat Easy	40%	18%
Neither Difficult Nor Easy	11%	24%
Somewhat Difficult	6%	36%
Very Difficult	7%	11%

Caution is in order in interpreting such reports. For example, when a respondent states that it is easy to obtain sufficient poll workers, how does the respondent interpret what is meant by “easy” or “sufficient”? Different people might report identical situations differently, depending on their understanding of the question. Some election administrators may have a higher tolerance for lines and confusion at the polls and so report no difficulties obtaining sufficient poll workers when an outside observer may conclude otherwise. Similarly, complaints about difficulties may be driven more by self-serving biases than some causal relationship to relevant performance benchmarks. Finally, just because it was difficult process to find poll workers does not necessarily mean that there is a shortage.

To better understand the value of these self-reports, we examine whether reported difficulty in finding poll workers is related to how many poll workers are deployed. Table 2 reports the number of voters per poll worker, separately by the reported difficulty of obtaining poll

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

¹⁸ The 2012 EAVS data are not available at the time of this report, so analysis is focused on the 2008 and 2010 elections.

¹⁹ Percentages are computed after omitting “balance” and “not enough information from Table 40 of the 2008 report and Table 41 of the 2010 report. Number of states reporting varies from 24 to 36.

²⁰ Kimball et al. 2010.

workers.²¹ The precise cause and effect of this relationship deserves more study, but it seems plausible that greater difficulty in obtaining poll workers would result in having more voters per poll worker. The data from 2008 provide mixed support for this view. Aside from the highest (and smallest) category of “very difficult,” the median number of voters per poll worker generally increases as difficult increases. However, this relationship does not hold for 2010. This might be because the need for poll workers varies much more across states in mid-term election, as some have highly visible statewide races to manage and others see little public interest in the election.

Table 2. Median Number of Voters Per Poll Worker by Difficulty of Obtaining Poll Workers in the 2008 and 2010 Elections

	2008	2010
Very Easy	92.6	94.3
Somewhat Easy	91.0	80.0
Neither Difficult Nor Easy	106.7	77.2
Somewhat Difficult	114.3	91.3
Very Difficult	86.8	76.8

A more objective and systematic way to gauge the sufficiency of the number of poll workers deployed in elections is to estimate whether additional poll workers would significantly improve the voting process. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of systematic studies of whether additional poll workers “matter”; this is clearly an area of high priority for future research. However, in the next section, we provide some preliminary analysis to demonstrate the need and feasibility of such research.

Does the Number of Poll Workers Matter?

There is substantial variation in the number of poll workers employed across jurisdictions. This variation can be exploited to identify the treatment effect of poll workers on relevant performance benchmarks. It is beyond the scope of this initial review to conduct extensive new research, but we can provide some basic facts and correlations to underscore the importance of and offer guidance to future evaluation studies in this vein.

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 mean number of poll workers per polling place.^{22,23} The figure shows that the typical state deployment translates to between five and ten poll workers at each location, but with substantial variation. States such as Connecticut and Massachusetts have double or triple the number of poll workers per polling place found in states such as Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah. Dropping down from the state to the local level, the mean ratio is 6.8 poll workers per polling place. Localities with ratios in the top 10% (over 14 poll workers per polling place) are concentrated in Maine, Virginia, Maryland, and Tennessee while the lowest 10% (below 3.7) are found in Texas, Oklahoma, and (again) Maine.

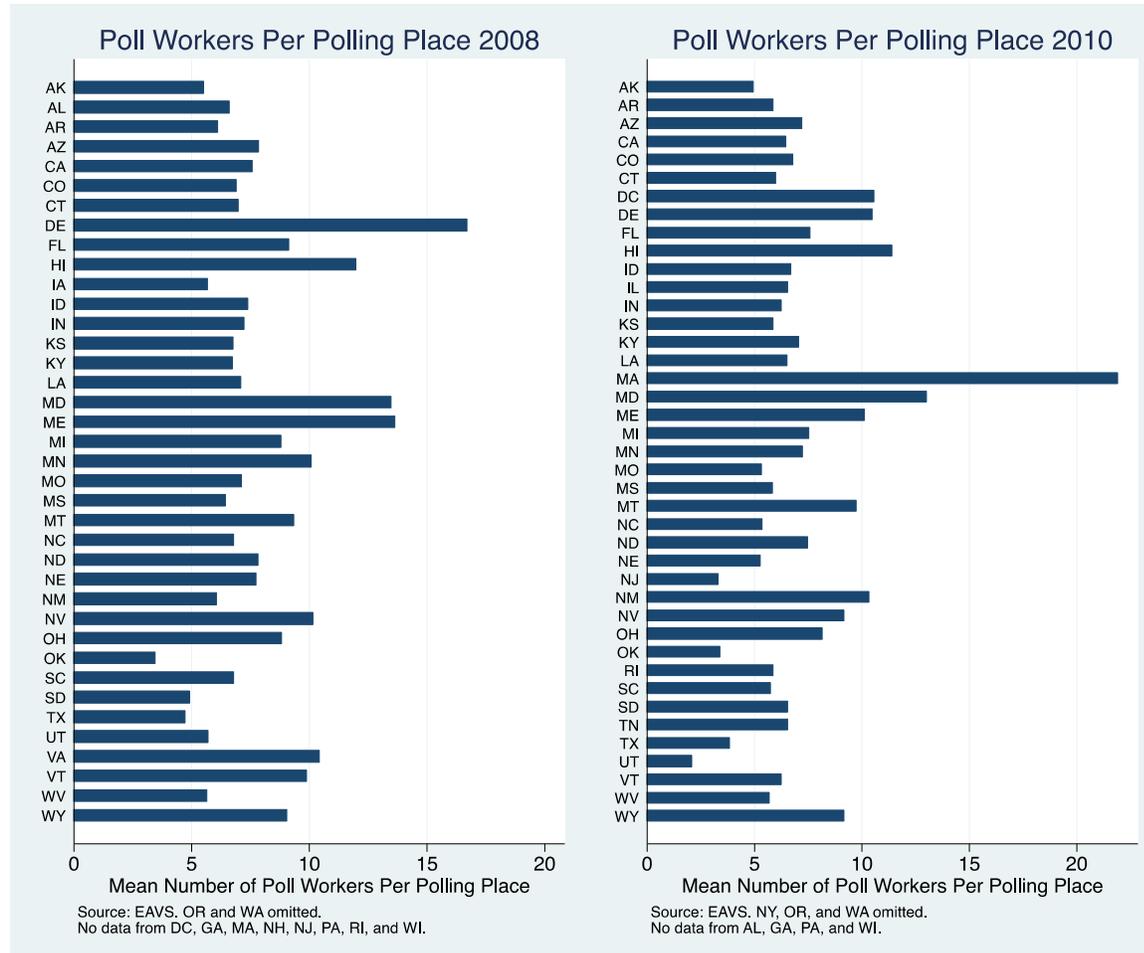
²¹ Because of their unique vote-by-mail systems, Oregon and Washington are omitted.

²² Oregon and Washington have been omitted..

²³ Using the median rather than the mean, to avoid skew due to outliers, does little to change the results.

This variation almost certainly reflect a range of factors including the ability of election officials to effectively recruit poll workers, state law mandated minima for the number of poll workers, specific needs caused by the use of absentee and early voting, the number of voters expected to participate. For now we observe that the abundance of poll workers does not appear to be strongly related to how much early and absentee voting occurs in state. We show this more systematically below.

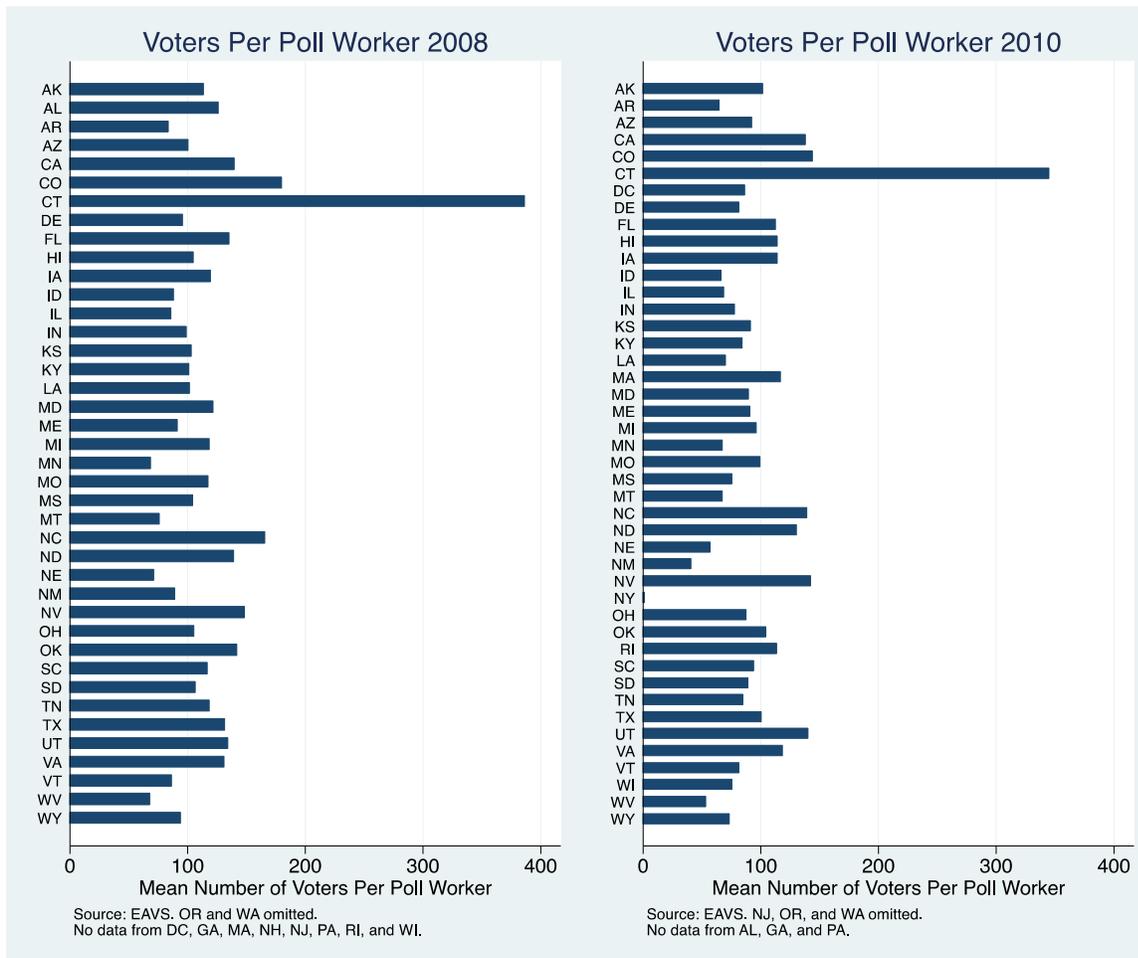
Figure 1. Number of Poll Workers Per Polling Place in the 2008 and 2010 Elections



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 polling places that have larger numbers of voters participating. Figure 2 reports the ratio of voters to poll workers in the 2008 and 2010 elections. In contrast to the number of poll workers per polling place, this graph shows that states are strikingly uniform. 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. There is some variation around this central tendency, with states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, and West Virginia reporting closer to 75 voters per poll worker and California, Colorado, Nevada, and North Carolina

closer to 150 voters per poll worker.²⁴ We should consider whether these differences have consequences for the voter experience. Based on casual knowledge, the states with higher ratios 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. We provide more systematic evidence on this point below.

Figure 2. Number of Voters Per Poll Worker in the 2008 and 2010 Elections



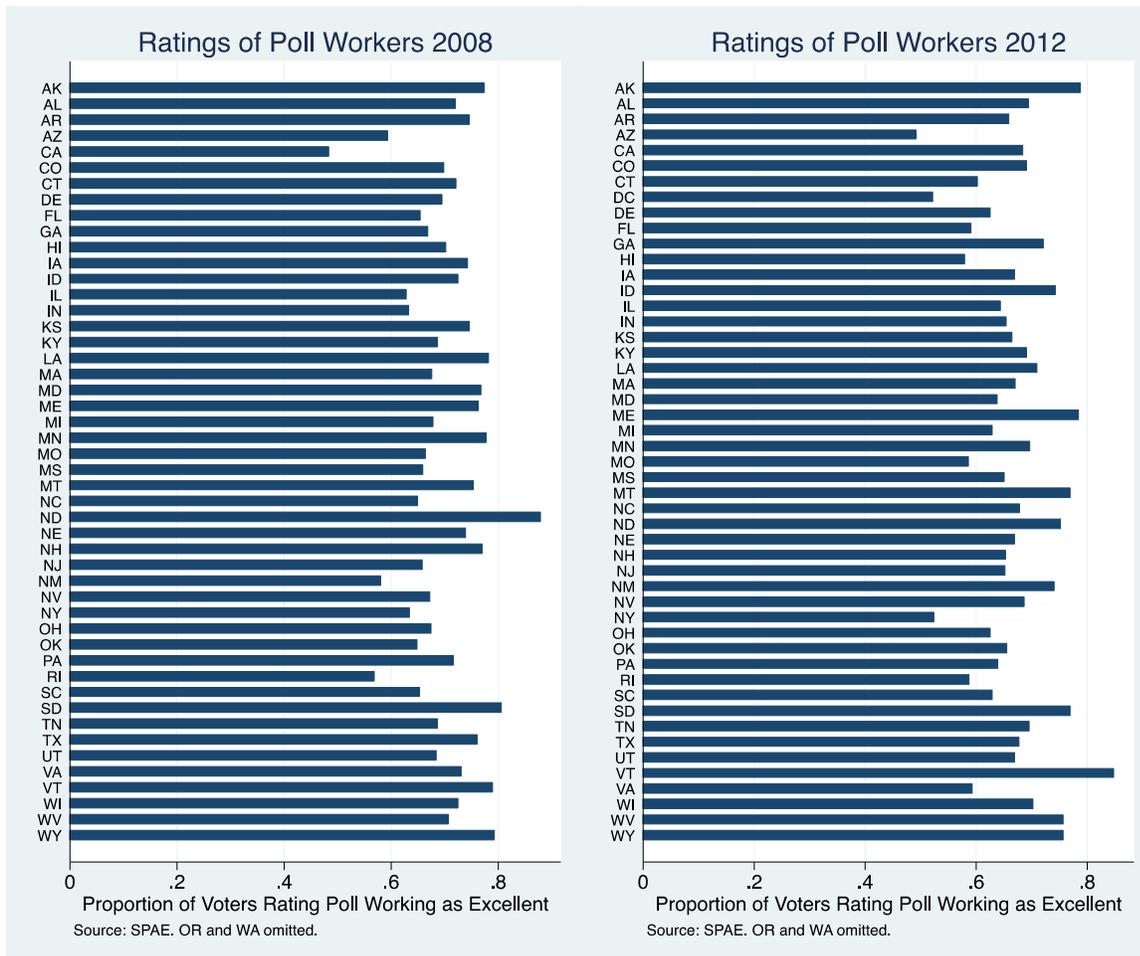
One metric that could be influenced by the deployment of poll workers is the level of satisfaction that voters express about the poll workers who serve them. Although this measure could well reflect factors beyond the immediate control of poll workers (see first sections of this report), as a general evaluation the responses to a question about poll worker performance provides a general metric for comparisons across states from the SPAE.²⁵ Before examining variation across states, we note that the overwhelming majority of respondents are pleased

²⁴ Connecticut reports having over 300 voters per poll worker. One might suspect that this figure is erroneous, but the state reports high ratios at the local level and in both the 2008 and 2010 elections, suggesting that it is valid.

²⁵ The situation may be analogous to a restaurant customer and the end of a meal evaluating a waiter or waitress (to calculate an appropriate tip). Judgements 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.

with poll worker job performance. For example, in the 2012 survey two-thirds gave a rating of “excellent,” another quarter of respondents chose “good,” with only five percent selecting “fair” and less than one percent selecting “poor.” Yet even with this high level of support, there is notable variation across the states. Figure 3 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 that less populous, more rural states such as Alaska, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, and Vermont show higher levels of satisfaction while more populous, more urban states such as California, Maryland, New York, and Rhode Island show lower levels. However, exceptions such as Arizona, Florida, and Texas suggest that other factors are at work beyond the simple distribution of the population. Below we explore these further.

Figure 3. Percentage of Voters Rating Poll Worker Performance as “Excellent” in the 2008 and 2012 Elections



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 and well as “outputs” such as voter wait times, confidence that their voters were counted as intended, voter ratings of

poll workers, and voter judgements about how well run polling places were. Figure 4 presents evidence of these relationships using scatter plots of 2008 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 positively correlated with voter perceptions of how well the polling places were run and their confidence that their votes would be counted appropriately. Confidence increases when there is more in-person voting and less early voting. A well-run polling place is also positively related to confidence and negatively related to waiting times. It appears that more important than the sheer number of poll workers is their performance and the degree of traditional polling place voting. We note that while the precise causal paths among these variables are unclear – for example, do polling places run well because of good poll workers or do poll workers function better when a polling place is better managed, the relationships identified in Figure 4 tend to hold up even in multiple regression models that control for many factors simultaneously.

The lack of a relationship between “input” variables and wait times might be surprising. It does not necessarily mean that poll workers have no impact on how long it takes to process voters; anecdotal information about egregious problems in recent elections suggest just the opposite. But it does suggest that poll workers are not the primary or systematic culprits. Consider a survey conducted by the Election Center that asked local election officials for their professional opinions about what caused long wait times.²⁶ Fifty-eight percent named the length of the ballot, 20% blamed a shortage of ballots or equipment, and 18% identified a shortage of poll workers.

One “input” not included in the scatterplot is how these measures relate to who is responsible for poll worker training. We coded whether poll worker training is conducted primarily by a state official or is mainly a local responsibility.²⁷ Those indicators were largely unrelated to any outcomes in Figure 4. It appears that the quality of training depends on more than simply who does it. We will return to the issue of training below.

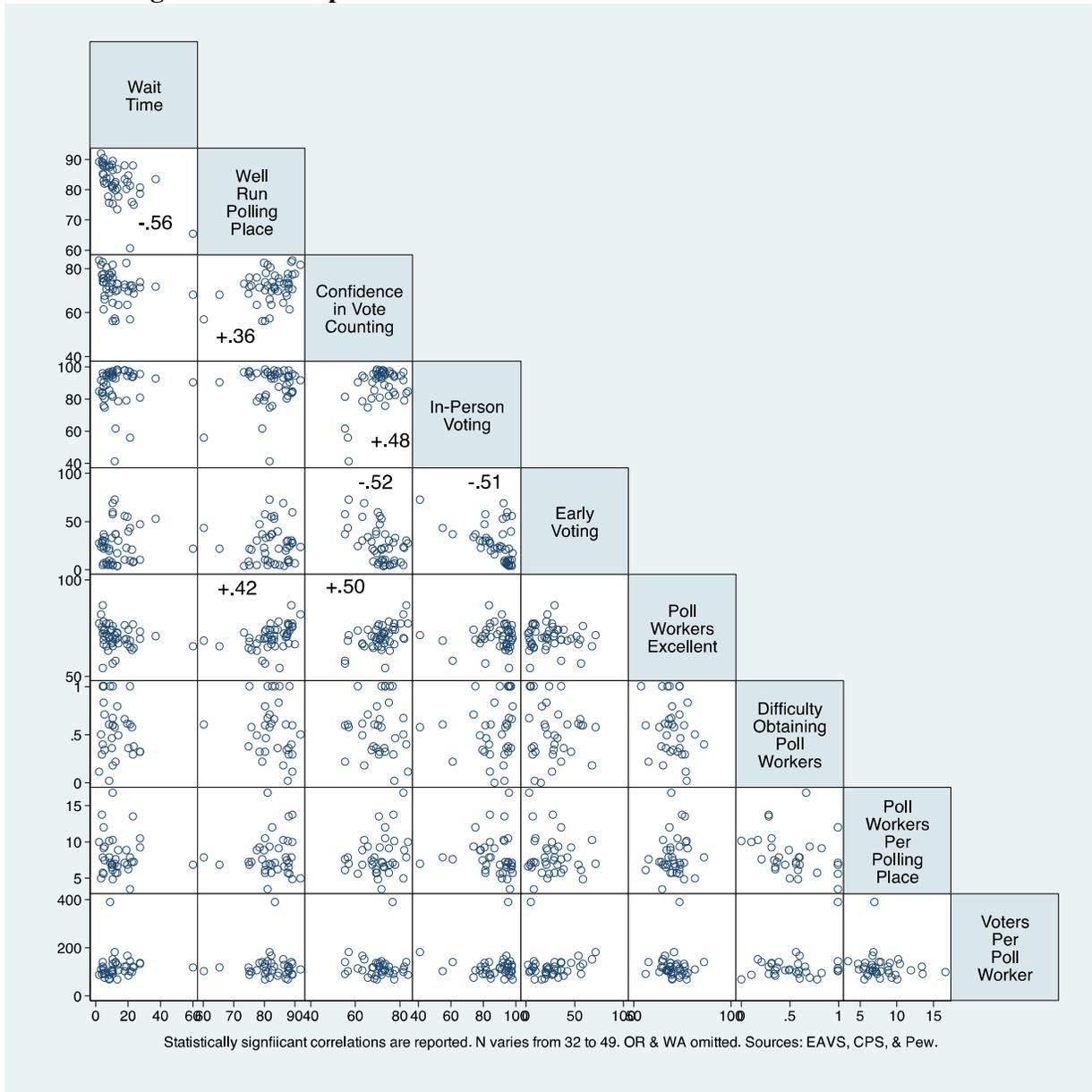
This points to the limitations of using state-based measures. Extreme problems such as hours-long waits at polling places are usually localized. These kinds of outliers cannot be detected by indicators collected at the state level.²⁸ Some voters have discouraging experiences and some poll workers botch their tasks. Our data identify broad conditions that could well set the stage for local disasters. Getting the right number of poll workers is important for the efficient and effective function of a polling place. The addition or subtraction of just a couple of front line workers in a government office or retail business may affect the success of those operations. The consequences of the observed variation in poll worker deployment deserves much more study. Future research should endeavor to identify the causal impact of poll workers on problems at the polls and other evaluations of the voting experience. Only then will policy makers have sufficient information to determine whether there is a shortage of poll workers.

²⁶ Election Center. “Election 2012 – Long Lines.” PowerPoint presentation at the January 2013 meeting of the Joint Election Officials Liaison Committee. (www.electioncenter.org/JEOLC/.../Election2012-LongLines.ppt)

²⁷ http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf

²⁸ Although measures from EAVS can be analyzed at the local level, data from the CPS and SPAE surveys generally cannot due to the small number of respondents in each jurisdiction.

Figure 4. Scatterplot of State Measures Related to Poll Workers in 2008



Do Methods of Recruitment Matter?

Although there is some variation in how much poll workers are paid,²⁹ poll workers generally receive low pay for long hours.³⁰ Given the 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,³¹ so there is reason to doubt that the supply of poll workers will be highly responsive to marginally more money. 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, or may even cause more problems at the polls. This is an area ripe for more systematic analysis, so we offer this concern only as a caveat.

Most state laws require that poll workers are selected by the two major political parties, or at least 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 the most common sources for recruiting poll workers, ahead of government employees, students, and local businesses.³² In Pennsylvania party-sponsored poll workers are even popularly elected in municipal elections. Although some states allow unaffiliated voters to serve as poll workers, no state law explicitly prefers non-partisan individuals.³³

This party-based process is a doubled-edged sword. On the positive side, having representatives from both parties working at the poll 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 one party generates many more workers than the other, so balance is a concern.³⁴) At the same time, loyal party activists are not necessarily the most objective or competent poll workers available. A non-partisan selection system focused on skill might well produce a better crop of front line workers. Our review suggests that the *quantity* of poll workers is not a major problem for most jurisdictions but the *quality* of those poll workers might be. This shortcoming may be due to principal-agent problems that include party-based selection, insufficient screening mechanisms that only sometimes involve interviews or questionnaires,³⁵ and incomplete training to ensure uniform administration.

3. Training of Poll Workers

There is a broad consensus among scholars that training is important for the ability of poll workers to perform effectively. Nearly every state requires some form of training, although a

²⁹ “Helping Americans Vote: Poll Workers.” 2007. http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/ERIPBrief19_final.pdf

³⁰ Karin 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.

³¹ Glaser 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.

³² Kimball et al. 2010.

³³ U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

³⁴ Kimball et al. 2010.

³⁵ Kimball et al. 2010.

few do not.³⁶ Local election officials, especially those in large jurisdictions, rate training as their highest priority, higher than recruitment, evaluation, and compensation.³⁷ 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. To take one contentious area of election administration as an example, several studies have shown that requests for voter identification are highly uneven. 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.³⁸ In 2008 a quarter of photos in states where any form of ID is acceptable were nonetheless asked to show photo ID.³⁹ Further, voters from some demographic categories report receiving more scrutiny from poll workers.⁴⁰

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 training and rate the training as higher quality. Importantly, experienced poll workers also produce lower residual vote rates.⁴¹

We know some things about training based on surveys of local election officials. As of 2006, the average training was 3.5 hours, but much longer in some jurisdictions and less than one hour in 10% of jurisdictions. Poll workers are almost uniformly trained on topics including how to assist disabled voters, follow election laws, secure ballots, operate equipment, and verify voter identification. Training is less even on subjects such as how to administer provisional ballots and resolve conflicts with voters.⁴² Surprisingly, in small jurisdictions only a third of poll workers are training on provisional ballots and just over half are on the operation of voting equipment.⁴³

Despite the general agreement that training is vital, there is some evidence that training may not be done in the most effective manner. Poll workers in Ohio and Utah frequently reported that 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 the training.⁴⁴ For example, in some jurisdictions, a majority of poll workers

³⁶ U.S. Election Assistance Commission. 2007. *Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC.

³⁷ Kimball et al. 2010.

³⁸ Charles Stewart III. 2013. "A Voter's Eye View of the 2012 Election."

³⁹ R. Michael Alvarez et al. 2009. "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections: Final Report."

⁴⁰ Rachel 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.

⁴¹ Bonnie 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.

⁴² Kimball et al. 2010.

⁴³ Kimball et al. 2010.

⁴⁴ Thad 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.

receive at most one training session, but workers that attend multiple training sessions actually report more problems on the job.⁴⁵ Of course, it may 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. Once again, this demonstrates the need for objective or third party performance indicators for evaluating poll worker performance and the efficacy of different training methods. However, evaluation of poll worker performance is a low ranked priority for election officials.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ However, these existing evaluation measures have not been exploited to formally test training methods or recruitment strategies. Again this is an area in need of additional research.

4. Recommendations

Many of the recommendations offered by the EAC and earlier election reform commissions continue to be reasonable advice today. We do not yet have strong evidence to contradict these “best practices,” which are typically drawn from firsthand polling place observations, media reports, and discussions with state and local election officials. At the same time, we strongly encourage more systematic experimental or quasi-experimental research to determine what recruitment methods, training regimes, and deployment strategies best meet the needs of voters.

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, evidence suggests that poll worker *quality* – meaning both selection and training – is a more pressing concern than poll worker *quantity*. Poll workers are largely self-selected and face limited screening aside from what the major political parties use in creating lists 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 does not translate into uniform administration of procedures at the polls. 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.

Alternatives to selection by the two major political parties should be considered. These could build on options that have already been selectively used in some places. Nebraska permits counties to draft poll workers in a manner akin to jury duty.⁴⁸ It has been used in Douglas County, where the poll worker ranks are a combination of draftees and volunteers.⁴⁹ Other areas of election administration have relied on citizen-driven models that rely on a combination of random selection from a pool of self-selection nominees. Arizona and California now staff statewide redistricting commissions in this way. Another model is that used in 2012 by the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board when it hired staff to review petitions to hold a statewide

⁴⁵ Hall, Monson, and Patterson. 2007.

⁴⁶ Kimball et al. 2010.

⁴⁷ Kimball et al. 2010.

⁴⁸<http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Successful%20Practices%20for%20Poll%20Worker%20Recruitment%20Section%201%20Recruitment.pdf>

⁴⁹ <http://www.votedouglascounty.com/faqs.aspx#poll>

recall election. Applicants applied for positions, but anyone donating to a campaign in the previous year was prohibited from being hired. However, there have been no evaluation studies of whether different methods of recruiting poll workers have any impact on the quality of the voting experience. And while random selection avoid potential biases in who signs up to be a poll worker, it has the liability of not making best use of experienced or motivated poll workers who would otherwise volunteer repeatedly.

Our review has identified a number of important open questions regarding the recruitment and training of poll workers. 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. We suggest that grants-in-aid to localities for election administration be leveraged to encourage localities to cooperate in the systematic evaluation of different practices. To guide this work, our review indicates that disproportionate emphasis has been placed on the number of poll workers rather than on selection and training on the most competent workers who provide high levels of service and uniform administration. Additional compensation might assist with poll worker recruitment, but the evidence suggests that other motivations are more important. Selection by parties helps to ensure partisan balance and sufficient numbers of poll workers, but it does not necessarily maximize quality or competence. The challenge for election administrators is to balance the benefits and concerns of a party-driven self-selection process, and then to provide high quality training to prepare all poll workers for the realities of Election Day.