



THE HR OF DEMOCRACY:

Understanding the
Election Workforce



CENTER FOR
DEMOCRACY AND
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



a research report and recommendations for
strengthening the **people and workplaces of
democracy**

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INTRODUCTION

Running elections in America is a massive undertaking involving hundreds of thousands of workers. Hardworking staff of local and state election offices nationwide handle a wide range of tasks, from warehouse management to media relations to cybersecurity. In many jurisdictions, the number of staff involved increases dramatically as Election Day approaches. Seasonal workers join for a few weeks to several months around elections to do tasks like logic and accuracy testing, preparing voting machines, processing mail ballots, answering phone calls and email messages from voters, and recruiting and training the poll workers who deliver in-person services to voters during early voting and on Election Day.

Recent attention to turnover, loss of institutional knowledge, and difficulty attracting talent to key positions in election offices has sparked research and policy proposals to support the election administration workforce. However, addressing the staffing challenges of election administration is a complex undertaking. The skills, compensation, and responsibilities of the tens of thousands of public servants who administer elections across the country are as varied as the geography they serve, from part-time clerks, for whom election administration is just one of their many responsibilities, to highly specialized teams of employees serving millions of voters. This variation matters. While much research focuses on chief election officials, understanding the election workforce requires looking more broadly at roles across the organizational chart and the distribution of work across permanent and temporary staff.

This report serves three primary functions:

- First, it offers a primer on how we staff elections: how jobs are structured and compensated, and what factors drive workload across jurisdictions.
- Second, it draws on field observations, interviews, and reviews of organizational charts and job descriptions from the 2024 presidential election to expand existing research and provide a more complete picture of workforce challenges in election administration.
- Third, it provides recommendations to help election officials and their partners pursue comprehensive election workforce strategies aligned with best practices in human resource management.

The goal of this report is to support informed dialogue and decision-making about election staffing in the United States, now and in the future. By better understanding how election work is structured, who performs it, and where workforce challenges emerge, stakeholders at all levels can best target their efforts to strengthen the election administration workforce.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The work of election administration is changing, often faster than election offices can adapt their staffing to meet evolving demands. Election officials are working longer hours, performing a wider array of tasks, and advocating for more resources, while managing the strain on themselves and their teams. This report offers a behind-the-scenes look at the workplace of democracy, the workforce challenges election officials face, and the solutions they are pursuing. It also offers recommendations to help election officials and their partners define their workforce needs and develop formal plans to strengthen their capacity.

To inform solutions, a multidisciplinary team of former election administrators, human resource management professionals, and academic researchers studied election staffing during the 2024 presidential general election. They reviewed academic literature and human resource management practices, conducted interviews and field observations, and analyzed organizational charts and job descriptions.

How We Staff Elections

Election offices vary widely in institutional authority, organizational structure, and staffing models. To manage a seasonally fluctuating workload, offices rely on a combination of strategies, including borrowing support from other departments, hiring contract labor, and mobilizing temporary employees. Formal organizational charts often show only part of the workforce needed to administer elections.

Key Election Workforce Challenges

Across interviews and observations, election officials described recurring workforce challenges related to:

- **Staffing.** Election officials described insufficient staffing, difficulty hiring for needed roles, and overreliance on overtime to complete essential tasks. They also described challenges recruiting and retaining employees with specialized skills and managing the hiring, training, and supervision of temporary workers.
- **Compensation.** Election officials voiced frustration with pay, classification, recognition, and leave, often tied to outdated job descriptions, expanded duties, and difficulty navigating formal classification, compensation, and budget processes.
- **Working Conditions.** Election officials described stressful working environments shaped by public scrutiny and distrust, lack of institutional support, limited resources, insufficient physical space, security concerns, and long hours.

- **Workload.** Election officials described rising workload expectations, frequent policy changes, and increasingly complex work that requires them to manage multiple major processes at once, often with little time or staffing to absorb new demands.

These challenges are connected. Staffing shortages increase overtime and stress. Outdated job descriptions and compensation structures make it harder to recruit and retain employees with needed skills. Rising workload strains workplace culture and contributes to burnout, turnover, and loss of institutional knowledge.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, this report offers recommendations to help election officials assess their needs, align staffing and support with the work being performed, and engage stakeholders in comprehensive election workforce planning:

- **Evaluate Workforce Capacity.** Mapping how work changes across the election cycle can help identify signs of strain, document changes in workload and complexity, and compare formal job descriptions with work performed in practice.
- **Clarify Skill Gaps and Development Needs.** Examining knowledge and skills across roles and career stages can clarify onboarding, training, knowledge transfer, succession planning, and advancement needs.
- **Examine Your Workplace Culture.** A review of workplace culture can show whether staff have the tools, space, information, security, supervision, and support they need, and whether expectations around overtime, scheduling, flexibility, recognition, and feedback are fair and sustainable.
- **Develop a Formal Action Plan.** A formal action plan can connect workforce findings to budget requests, human resource processes, staffing decisions, training plans, and policy discussions, with clear responsibilities and staged improvements over time.

The requests from the field point to the need for practical tools that help election officials describe the work being performed, identify gaps, and communicate needs to partners. One such tool highlighted in this report is a classification framework, which could help the field build a shared language for roles, tasks, and skill needs across different types of jurisdictions.

The report concludes by underscoring that burnout and turnover in election administration are symptoms of more than threats and harassment. Addressing the needs of the election workforce requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses the root causes of burnout and turnover and builds support among policymakers and stakeholders. Trust in elections is tied directly to how well we support the people and systems that make them work.



PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

This project brought together a unique partnership of academic researchers, former election administrators, and human resource professionals to examine how election offices are staffed and managed in practice. The goal was to document how election offices operate under real-world conditions, amid the pressures of a presidential election, and to identify opportunities to strengthen workforce capacity.

The project used a mixed-methods approach that combined a review of academic literature and public sector human resource management practices with field-based research, including interviews, direct observations, and analysis of job descriptions, organizational charts, and other documentation of staffing models. This approach was designed to bridge the gap between existing research, which has largely focused on individual public officials, and a broader examination of how election work is managed, how responsibilities are distributed, and who performs the work in practice.

Phase 1: Review of Existing Research and Practice

This phase grounded the project in both academic research on election administration and established public sector human resource management practices. It began with a foundational review of the academic literature on the election workforce, including the roles, responsibilities, and career pathways of election officials in the United States. In addition, experienced human resource management professionals provided guidance on public sector norms, including standards of practice for organizational analysis, workforce planning, competency modeling, job analysis, classification and compensation, employee development, and succession planning. This guidance informed the development of interview questions and observation protocols, shaping both the questions asked and the dimensions of staffing, roles, responsibilities and practices examined in the field.

Phase 2: Interviews and Observations During the 2024 Presidential Election

The team visited election offices across the country during the 2024 presidential election. They obtained organizational charts and job descriptions, and conducted semi-structured interviews to document how election offices are structured, the constraints and resources that shape staffing decisions, and how workload is managed over the full election cycle. The interviews included questions regarding career paths, challenges, and opportunities for growth and professional development. Site visits incorporated direct observation of supervisory, frontline and temporary election workers during the peak of the election season.

Site visits were scheduled for the busiest part of the election season to capture how election offices operate under peak workload conditions, including the use of temporary and other surge labor that is not always reflected in organizational charts or budgets. Observations focused on the relationship between formal structures, such as job descriptions and organizational charts, and the work performed in practice.

The use of former election officials as field researchers facilitated trust and access to offices and information that may not otherwise have been accessible to researchers, enabling observations to be conducted with minimal disruption. Their experience allowed them to ask more informed questions and make effective use of direct observation and semi-structured interviews to interpret workplace practices and organizational dynamics.

Observations were conducted at election offices within 30 jurisdictions across 17 states. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with election officials in an additional 10 jurisdictions without direct observation. While the study was not designed to be statistically representative, jurisdictions were selected to capture known differences in size, structure, workload, and management practices. Individual offices are identified in the report only where their experience is presented as a case study or example with permission.

Phase 3: Analysis of Organizational Charts, Job Descriptions and Interviews

Following the completion of interviews and observations, the multidisciplinary team analyzed organizational charts, job descriptions, classification and compensation plans, and other documentation as well as interview responses to identify staffing patterns across election offices, as well as shared challenges and cross-cutting themes. The analysis focused on documenting the relationship between formal organizational structures and the work performed in practice, as well as identifying shared workforce challenges and the strategies being used to address them.

Phase 4: Debrief and Report Development

In the final phase of the project, members of the study team convened to synthesize findings and develop recommendations, including structured debriefs with the former election officials who conducted field observations. The team also held a workshop with staff of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to explore the development of a workforce classification framework for election administration and its potential applications. The report reflects structured input and discussion from across the study team, with final analysis, framing, and recommendations developed by the lead authors.



WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

There was relatively little research on election officials prior to 2000. Scholarship tended to address election officials in descriptive and institutional terms, often in the context of broader work on voting behavior, voting rights and access, and the laws and rules governing elections. Following the 2000 presidential election, the Help America Vote Act of 2002 and related state reforms increased scholarly attention to those responsible for administering elections during an active period of policy change.

Much of the subsequent literature focuses on the role of election officials in implementing policy and how administrative decisions may affect voter access and the voting experience. Research has also examined the demographic characteristics of those who oversee election administration in their jurisdictions and their perspectives on their responsibilities. In recent years, work in this area has increasingly focused on rising levels of turnover, threats and harassment faced by election officials, and efforts to support training, certification and professionalization.

This research has largely focused on the positions at the top and the bottom of the hierarchy, focusing on the chief election official for their jurisdiction or on the poll workers who serve voters casting their ballot in person. Less has been revealed about those who serve in other positions in the organizational charts of election offices across the country. A substantial body of research has examined technical election systems and processes, but there has been less examination of the election workforce as a system. As a result, there is limited understanding of how election offices are staffed in practice, how responsibilities are distributed across permanent and temporary workers, and how organizational structures shape the delivery of election services. In particular, little attention has been paid to the role of public sector human resource management systems in shaping the capacity of election offices to meet growing demands.

Our review of the academic literature identified the following:

- **Demographics:** The public officials formally responsible for administering elections are predominantly white, female, and over the age of 55. Survey data also show that election officials are older and more disproportionately female than they were 25 years ago. While the complexity of work associated with administering elections and the size of election budgets have changed dramatically, election officials are paid less than other executive department heads, with gender and pay patterns more

consistent with administrative support roles than with executive leadership positions in local government. Overall, despite some narrowing of the racial diversity gap, the vast majority of election officials are white, even in jurisdictions that serve racially diverse populations.

- **Career Pathways:** There is no standardized entry into election administration. Historically, election administration was not considered a specialized profession, and those who managed elections often did so as a secondary responsibility within local government. This is still true in many jurisdictions today. Examinations of the professional backgrounds of election officials by the Bipartisan Policy Center and the Elections and Voting Information Center have shown that many chief election officials gain some election administration experience prior to taking on the role, but they do not necessarily begin their careers in election administration. More often, they enter the field after having previously worked outside of election administration, either elsewhere in government or in the private sector.
- **Turnover and Strain:** Turnover among chief local election officials has increased significantly over the past two decades. This upward trend is observed nationwide, affecting various regions, jurisdiction sizes, and both elected and appointed officials. Measures of job satisfaction are flat or declining, with fewer saying they are proud to tell people they work for their department, that they are able to leave their problems at work, that they feel they can balance their work and home priorities, or that they would encourage their own child to pursue a career in local election administration.
- **Professionalization:** Researchers at Auburn University have been central to describing the professionalization of local election administration within the context of broader trends in public service, reflecting increased development of specialized knowledge, skills, and norms, along with increasing availability of formal training and credentialing. National and statewide training programs have contributed to raising professional standards in the field, but participation remains inconsistent and the extent of professionalization among local election officials varies significantly.

Despite this growing body of work, there is little systematic analysis of the election workforce beyond chief election officials and poll workers. This report builds on existing research by examining how election work is managed, how responsibilities are distributed among permanent and temporary workers, and how public sector human resource practices shape staffing, compensation, training, and workforce planning.



PUBLIC SECTOR HUMAN RESOURCES

Election workers are hired, compensated, and trained within the framework of public sector human resource management systems. These systems operate in a wide range of organizational settings. In larger counties serving many people, work is divided among staff within large departments. In smaller counties and municipalities, work may be performed by a single constitutional officer who is responsible for multiple functions of government. Across these settings, public sector human resource management follows established processes for creating positions, setting compensation, and managing performance.

Compensation and benefits for public employees are governed by legal requirements, budget processes, and, in some cases, collective bargaining agreements. In larger jurisdictions, responsibility may be divided among human resources, budget, and finance offices; in smaller jurisdictions, the process may be less specialized, but decisions still require approval from governing bodies and compliance with public sector requirements.

Formal Job Descriptions

Formal job descriptions are a central tool in public sector human resource management. They document the duties, qualifications, supervisory relationships, working conditions, and level of responsibility associated with a position. They are used to recruit candidates, set performance expectations, and determine how a position fits within the classification and compensation structure.

When job descriptions are accurate, they provide a foundation for hiring, supervision, training and compensation decisions. Outdated job descriptions may incorrectly characterize the complexity, skill requirements, or level of responsibility involved in doing the work. When employees routinely perform duties outside their written job description, that can be a sign that the job description no longer reflects the work and should be reviewed.

Position Classification and Compensation

In government, jobs are typically assigned to formal classes, grades, or pay bands. Positions with greater responsibility, more specialized duties, supervisory authority, or more advanced qualifications are generally placed in higher grades or bands. Each grade or band has a salary range, often with a minimum, midpoint, and maximum, which limits how much flexibility a hiring manager has to negotiate pay for a particular role. Classification systems also rely on benchmarking, comparing positions with similar roles to support consistency, equity and competitiveness.

The chart below uses selected positions in Prince William County, Virginia, a jurisdiction with approximately 330,000 registered voters, to illustrate how election roles are classified alongside comparable positions elsewhere in county government. This kind of comparison is one way that public sector employers evaluate whether a position’s duties, responsibilities, and required skills align with its classification and pay.

Figure 1: Classification of Selected Positions in Prince William County, Virginia

<u>Prince William County election office positions</u>	<u>Comparable positions in same county pay grade</u>
Assistant Director of Operations; Assistant Director of Voter Services	Chief Deputy Court Clerk; Engineering Manager; Assistant Director of Housing and Community Development
Information Technology Manager	Principal Fiscal Analyst; Senior Environmental Analyst; Senior Registered Nurse
Training Manager; Election Operations Supervisor; Mail Voting Manager; Finance & HR Manager	Lead Deputy Court Clerk; Senior IT Specialist; Senior Paralegal
Communications Specialist	Procurement Specialist; Emergency Management Specialist; Historic Preservation Specialist
Election Officer Staffing Coordinator; Facility/Supply Coordinator; Early Voting Coordinator; Voter Registration Coordinator; Mail Voting Coordinator	Solid Waste Supervisor; Animal Services Specialist; Title Researcher
Election Officer Staffing Assistant; Voter Registration Assistant	Police Cadet; Library Assistant; Code Enforcement Assistant



Salary structures are part of the public budget process and may also be shaped by collective bargaining agreements or other policies. Changes to classification or compensation usually require more than approval from an immediate supervisor; they must be made through established human resource and budget procedures.

Budgeting for Personnel Needs

Public sector workforce decisions are closely tied to the budget process. Salaries, new positions, temporary labor, training, and other personnel costs must be projected in advance and justified through procedures used by the jurisdiction. Because these decisions affect public spending, they often require review by budget or finance staff and approval by governing bodies. Difficult choices must be made among essential functions, as government departments compete with one another for limited resources. Adding positions or increasing pay in one department can mean fewer resources for other priorities, such as library hours, police vehicles, road maintenance, or child welfare services.

Comprehensive Workforce Planning

Public sector jobs are not static. Over time, our expectations for government services shift, and policy choices change the nature of work for public employees. As duties shift in scope, complexity, pace, and the skills required to perform them, agencies may need to update job descriptions, create new positions, reclassify existing roles, review compensation, and evaluate training needs.

Responding to these changes requires comprehensive workforce planning. Updating job descriptions, reviewing classification and compensation, creating positions, evaluating training needs, and securing budget approval are connected decisions, not isolated personnel actions. A comprehensive approach can help agencies use available data to identify and address conditions that affect retention, support knowledge transfer, prepare employees for future responsibilities, and anticipate the skills needed as the work changes. Taken together, these practices help align the work being performed with the people, skills, compensation, and resources needed to perform it.

HOW WE STAFF ELECTIONS

The section of this report entitled *What Research Shows* described existing research about election officials, including their demographics, career pathways, professionalization, and sources of strain. *Public Sector Human Resources* described the practices that govern how public agencies define, support, and plan for their workforce needs. This section turns to how those factors shape election staffing in practice: how offices are structured, what drives workload, and how staffing models expand and contract over the course of an election cycle.

Institutional Authority

In the United States, responsibility for administering elections is distributed across state, county, and municipal governments, with significant variation in how authority is assigned. Counties may administer elections only for federal, state, and county offices, or they may also administer local elections for cities, towns, townships, villages, and smaller units of government like water districts. In most of New England, Michigan, and Wisconsin, elections are administered by cities, towns, villages, or townships. Delaware and Alaska primarily administer elections at the state level. Hybrid arrangements are common, with states, counties, and municipalities providing intergovernmental support to one another, including funding and specialized expertise. States generally provide oversight and some funding, and exercise administrative authority over areas such as voter registration and voting equipment.

The local official responsible for elections may be elected directly by voters or appointed by an elected official, a county commission, or a bipartisan board. Titles and responsibilities also differ across states and jurisdictions. While the term “local election official” might suggest a standardized role, responsibilities vary widely. A county clerk in one state may oversee all aspects of an election, while in another, those duties may be divided among multiple offices. Duties may also be assigned by statute to one entity but reassigned to another through an intergovernmental agreement or delegation of duties.

Organizational Structure

Differences in how election offices are structured can often be seen in their organizational charts, which provide a representation of size, hierarchy and functional responsibilities within an election office. As a management tool, they help define responsibilities, clarify workflow, and support efficient election administration. As a communications tool, they provide transparency to the public. However, organizational charts often provide only a partial view of how election offices operate in practice, particularly during peak election periods.



Case Study #1: Complexity and Uniqueness of State Structure

State of Alabama

In Alabama, responsibility for administering elections is divided across multiple offices, illustrating how authority can be fragmented within a single jurisdiction.

County-Level Election Boards: Each Alabama county has a *Canvassing Board* and an *Appointing Board*, both composed of the Probate Judge, Circuit Clerk, and Sheriff. These boards do not have dedicated staff; any needed support comes from the officials' existing offices.

Probate Judges: Probate Judges serve a variety of judicial and administrative functions, only one of which is serving formally as the chief local election official. Their role in elections tends to be limited to overseeing Election Day operations and managing post-election recounts and challenges. They may or may not have dedicated staff for elections.

Circuit Clerks: These officials are primarily responsible for the proper administration of court functions. Their responsibilities also typically include administering the absentee voting process before Election Day. They may or may not have dedicated full-time staff or use temporary staff, especially during high-turnout elections.

Sheriffs: Sheriffs are typically responsible for election security and overseeing the chain of custody for ballots and election materials. They generally do not hire extra staff for election duties.

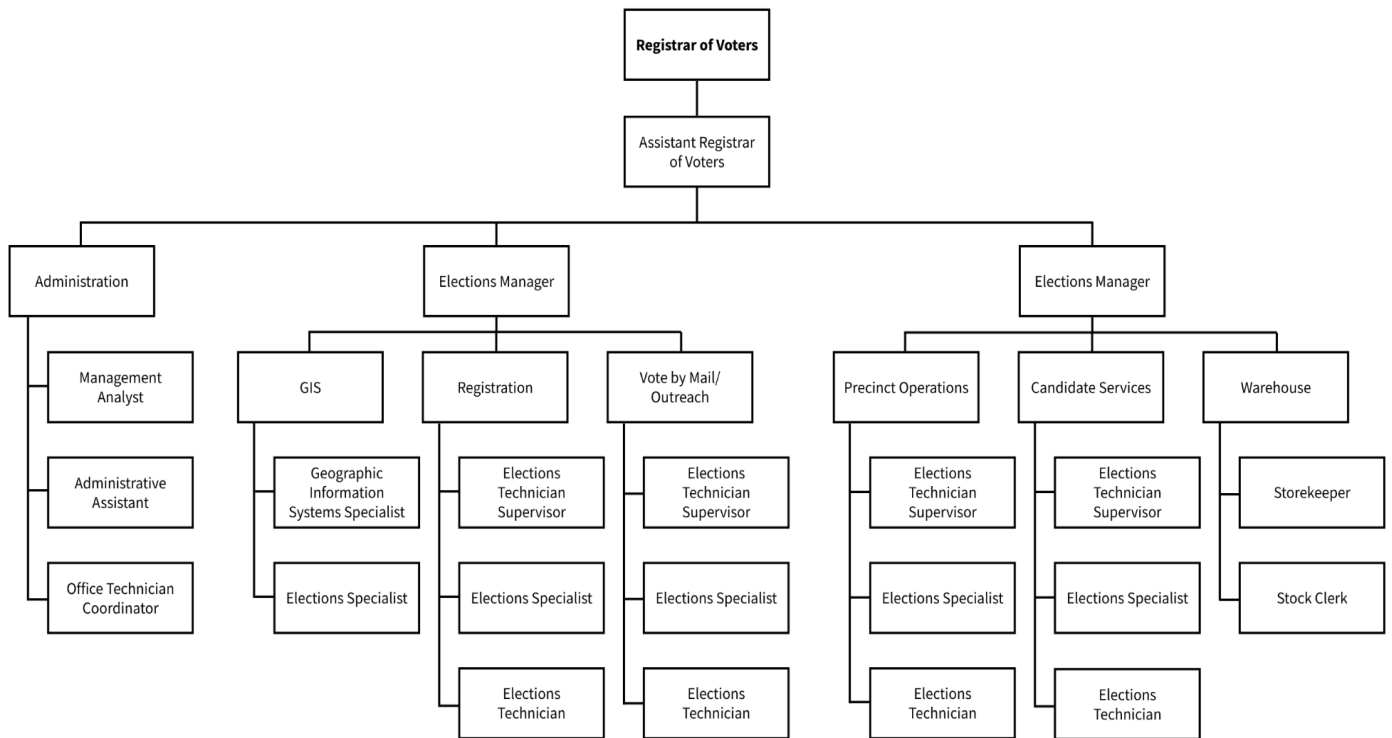
The Board of Registrars: This is typically a three-member board in each county appointed by state officials. The board is not an oversight body but handles voter registration data entry directly, unless additional staffing is approved by the county.

Other Roles: In some counties, the County Commission or a County Manager may directly perform election functions, often in coordination with the Probate Judge. At their direction, other county officials, such as a County Engineer, may provide logistical support.

Larger election offices typically use organizational charts as a formal management tool, depicting the chain of command and grouping staff by function.

San Joaquin County, California, with approximately 400,000 registered voters, provides an example of a formal organizational chart used to show functional specialization. Staff are grouped by function, illustrating a degree of specialization that is not evident when simply looking at job titles like “elections specialist” and “elections technician”.

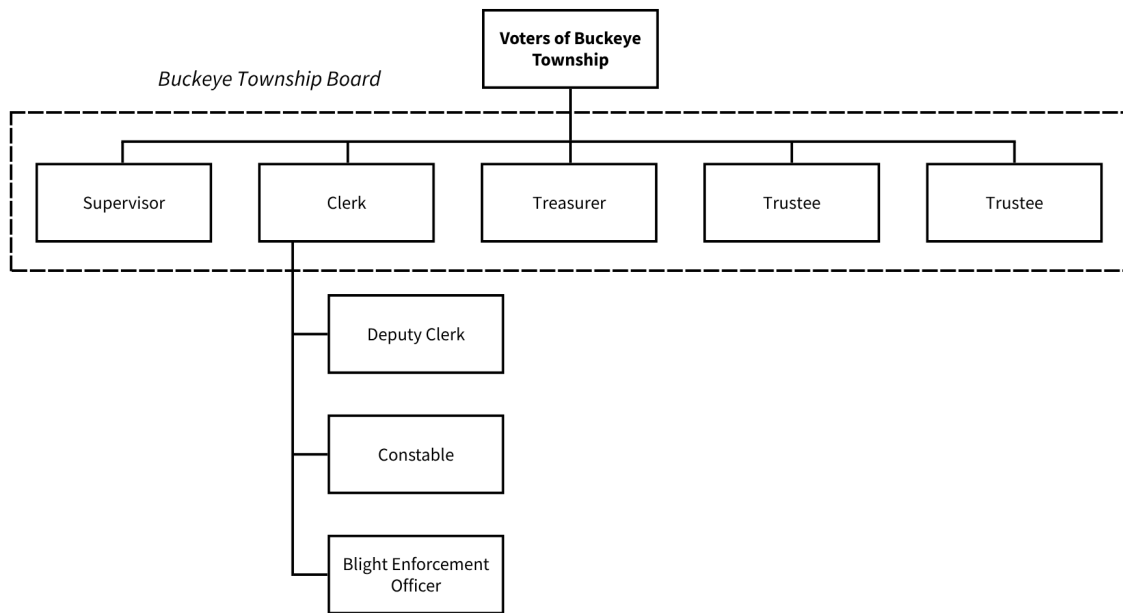
Figure 2: Organizational Chart for the Registrar of Voters in San Joaquin County, California



Election offices with only a few employees typically have little to no middle management. In Figure 2 below, the organizational chart for Mercer County, Pennsylvania, which has approximately 70,000 registered voters, shows the contrast between larger and smaller election offices. The office performs the same core election functions for voters in its county as the Registrar of Voters performs in San Joaquin County, California. Tasks are spread among fewer positions with broader job descriptions in Mercer County, while positions in the larger San Joaquin County demonstrate more specialization.

Election offices of one person may think of their organizational structure primarily in terms of their role within the broader county or municipal government. The organizational chart below depicts the clerk, the member of the township board who is responsible for administering elections, in their role within the broader structure of the township.

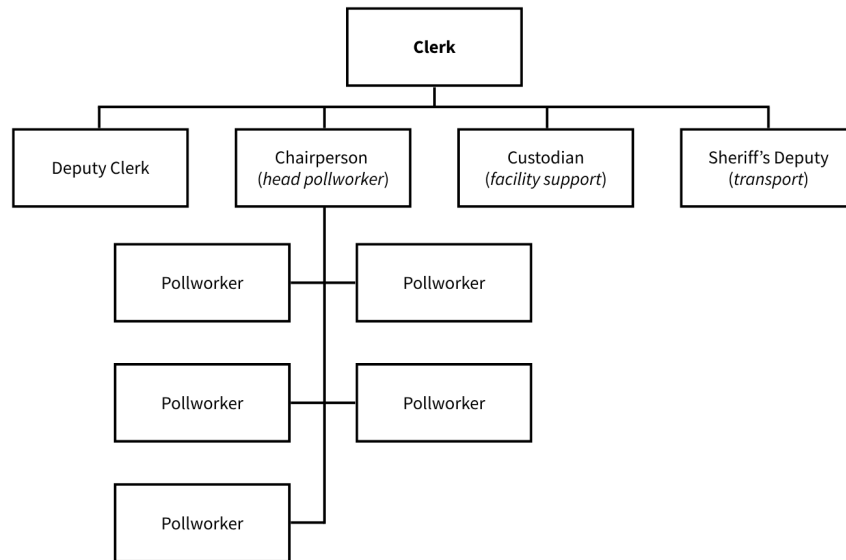
Figure 5: Organizational Chart for Buckeye Township, Michigan



However, on Election Day, a visitor would see that not all tasks are being performed by one individual. Instead, in a jurisdiction like Buckeye Township, with approximately 1,200 registered voters, they would see an office in action like the following:



Figure 6: Informal Organizational Chart for a Michigan Township Clerk



Jurisdictions where election responsibilities are split among multiple offices may have separate organizational charts that reflect the internal structure within each office. Election office organizational charts vary widely, reflecting differences in both formal office structure and the way charts are used as management and communication tools. Some charts emphasize teams grouped by function. Some election offices place voters at the top of the chart to illustrate that public servants are accountable to the people. Boards may or may not be shown. Some election offices include temporary employees and even poll workers. Others do not.

Organizational charts in election offices often do not reflect:

- Temporary or seasonal roles
- Cross-functional relationships
- Informal supervision chains during elections
- Dependencies on outside departments or vendors

Case Study #2: Whole of Government Coordination

Montgomery County, Maryland

Registered Voters: Approximately 700,000

Overview: The Montgomery County Board of Elections coordinates with representatives from other county departments to clarify roles and plan for necessary, timely support.

Strategy: Boris Brajkovic, the Election Director in Montgomery County, describes the role of the Board of Elections as coordinating the governance of an election, not performing every task that makes it happen. He describes the surge workforce as including not only those hired by his office, but also employees throughout county government who support the election as part of their regular duties.

When poll workers need access to a school building, it is not the Board of Elections that unlocks the door but an employee of the school system. The Department of General Services provides vehicles, equipment and support, from picking up mail, to setting up generators for emergency backup power, to providing teams of employees who retrieve polling place supplies from vehicles on election night. Partners from many departments provide staffing, equipment, and support, from the police to the procurement office to library staff.

Outcome: By treating election administration as a shared responsibility, and communicating continuously with partners across county government, the Montgomery County Board of Elections aims to prevent duplicated efforts and surprises from occurring.

Replicating This Strategy: Election officials should take time to reflect on who else within their jurisdiction provides services that affect, or are affected by, the election and ensure proactive communication and teamwork

What Drives Workload

Elections are not a single event, but a process that begins long before Election Day. Preparations can begin years in advance, as election officials prepare lease agreements for facilities, negotiate contracts for supplies and equipment, develop budgets, allocate resources, and develop workforce plans. Months before an election, staff may be reviewing candidate petitions, conducting acceptance testing on voting equipment, performing voter registration list maintenance, packing supplies and materials, or preparing training materials for poll workers.

Election administrators plan their work around predictable tasks, a legal calendar of immovable deadlines, and responsibilities that vary for each election. Each election brings familiar phases, including planning, registration, ballot design, early voting, Election Day operations, and certification, but the workload can be highly reactive to external factors such



as new laws, campaign tactics, current events, legal developments, and the spread of rumors about the election process.

Election administrators must manage these overlapping processes within fixed legal deadlines, while maintaining a high standard of accuracy under intense public scrutiny. To do so, they allocate workload strategically and remain flexible as conditions change, often using formal project management tools and methods to visualize workflow, allocate resources, align deadlines, manage dependencies, mitigate risks and monitor operational readiness.

These demands are experienced differently across jurisdictions. Differences in office structure, staffing capacity, and policy choices shape both how work is assigned and how it is carried out. In some jurisdictions, responsibilities may be distributed across specialized staff, while in others, a limited number of individuals must manage a wide range of tasks. Offices also vary in their flexibility to respond to changes in workload. Some can expand staffing or reallocate resources as demands increase, while others operate with little margin for adjustment.

What Makes Elections Different

Election administration is one of many essential functions carried out by county, municipal, and state government. Like public safety, social services, transportation infrastructure, and other public services, elections are administered under the constraints and with the resources available in each jurisdiction.

At the same time, election administration is a specialized function that requires specific knowledge, skills, and operational judgment. In larger jurisdictions, the work is often carried out by teams of employees serving in specialized roles, while in smaller jurisdictions, fewer staff, or even elected officials themselves, may perform a wider range of duties.

In their conversations with election officials, members of the study team heard officials frequently characterize elections as being different from other functions of government. They did not point to any one task. Rather, they described a combination of responsibilities, timelines, and expectations that, taken together, create a distinct operating environment:

- Complexity of the election calendar
- Standard of perfection with real-time scrutiny
- Immovable deadlines regardless of resources
- Impartiality in a politically contested environment

In Their Words: Election Officials Describe What Makes Elections Different

Complexity of the Election Calendar

Election administration requires managing multiple overlapping processes within fixed legal deadlines, often juggling more than one election at a time. This creates a compressed and highly interdependent operating environment.

“People see elections as like planning a wedding, a single event. It’s more like organizing a series of massive festivals. You need to lease the venues, rent the equipment, hire and train the workers, make sure everyone gets where they need to be. Except you are juggling deadlines for more than one festival at a time, each with hundreds of performances going on at once.”

- election official from Maryland

Standard of Perfection with Real-Time Scrutiny

Despite the complexity of the work and the number of external dependencies, perfection is expected. Errors are visible in real time and often judged without full context.

“If the county treasurer deposits a check into the wrong account, they catch it and fix it. If I make a mistake, I can address it, but I’ll still be on the national news that night.”

- election official from Missouri

Immovable Deadlines Regardless of Resources

Election officials must meet fixed and immovable deadlines, regardless of available resources, external dependencies, or unexpected disruptions.

“We’re expected to flip on a dime when legislation changes, but no one adds time or staff to make that happen.”

- election official from Michigan

Impartiality in a Politically Contested Environment

Election administration is carried out within a political system, but the work itself depends on a high standard of nonpartisanship. Impartiality is reinforced through clear rules, transparency, and processes that incorporate oversight.

“A healthy level of skepticism is fine. Come learn about our processes, come learn what checks and balances are. Learn that these decisions are performed by your neighbors in a bipartisan way. I just care about you getting your voice heard.”

- election official from Colorado



Surge Staffing

Election officials meet fluctuating demands by drawing on labor sources that expand and contract over the course of an election cycle. Rather than relying solely on permanent staff, they often combine full-time employees with temporary workers, reassigned staff, contractors and other forms of short-term support.

These approaches allow offices to respond to peak workload periods while maintaining a smaller permanent workforce for much of the year. Each approach involves tradeoffs related to cost, reliability, expertise, and administrative burden.

Figure 6 illustrates common surge staffing practices in election administration, noting that each approach may be chosen in different circumstances and may carry different risks. Each presents distinct management challenges, including evaluating short-term staff, ensuring appropriate compensation for evolving tasks, and balancing the demands placed on employees reassigned from other duties. While often essential to meeting spikes in workload, surge staffing can also place significant strain on the managerial capacity of election offices.

Figure 7: Surge Staffing Practices Across Election Administration

Labor Source	Best For:	Risks:
Permanent Position	Critical, specialized and year-round tasks	Can be difficult to create positions and hire quickly as needs arise
Temporary Staff	Short-term, entry level tasks	Cost to hire, replace and retrain
Temporary Agency	Outsourcing hiring process	Higher cost than temporary staff
Contract Labor	Short-term tasks requiring specific expertise	Cost and difficulty of procurement
Internally Reassigned Staff	Assigning short-term tasks when primary job duty can be set aside as needed	Primary duties may suffer
Staff Borrowed from Another Department or Agency	Assigning short-term tasks when primary job duty can be set aside as needed	Primary duties may suffer, and external department or agency may be unwilling to make long-term commitment
Vendor Support	Tasks specific to contracted services or operation of vendor equipment	Cost and narrow range of duties
Poll Workers	Short-term tasks permitted by law to be performed by poll workers	Limits on duties and compensation under employment law
Volunteer Support	Short-term tasks with high volunteer motivation to perform	Labor availability and risk management concerns

Case Study #3: Leveraging Available Sources of Surge Staffing

Ada County, Idaho

Registered Voters: Approximately 300,000

Overview: Ada County reevaluated its surge staffing strategy, resulting in a formal labor-sharing arrangement with another division of the Clerk's office.

Challenge: Managing seasonal increases in workload during an election.

Strategy: Ada County Elections uses temporary employees for a variety of surge staffing roles, from preparing supplies in the warehouse to answering phones in a call center. However, they found it consistently difficult to recruit and retain high-performing temporary workers for certain key tasks, such as timely and accurately processing a high volume of same-day registration applications. Meanwhile, the division had positive experiences borrowing specialized staff from another division of the Clerk's office on an ad hoc basis.

The Election division began by assessing past experience with different labor sources and the skills needed for each role. They identified specific roles that they wanted to fill with staff from another division, then developed a formal labor-sharing arrangement with budgeted periods, adjusted for each election, during which staff are loaned from one division to another. Over time, some borrowed staff have become adept at election tasks through cross-training and experience. The entire records and retention team was given a pay increase of \$1 per hour, and their job duties were formally expanded to include assisting in elections when required.

Outcome: The election team has leveraged existing county labor to expand its capacity with a pool of eight support team members who are highly skilled in certain tasks and trained to step into a variety of roles when extra help is needed.

Replicating This Strategy: Adopting a formal labor sharing arrangement, as Ada County did, requires careful planning to balance the demands of the election with the core duties staff in another division or office are otherwise required to perform. However, the arrangement can provide skilled support to the election office while enhancing job satisfaction for employees who have the opportunity to perform varied tasks and potentially earn extra pay.



ELECTION WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

During interviews with election officials around the country, the study team heard repeated accounts of expanding workload and its accompanying human strain. Election officials in large and small jurisdictions described pressure to provide more services, and explain their processes more fully to the public while meeting a range of expectations that challenged their capacity.

Four broad themes appeared consistently across interviews:

Key Challenge #1: Staffing

Election officials described staffing challenges resulting from several factors, often in combination, including:

- Insufficient funding to pay for needed staff
- Not having authority to hire for enough positions
- Overreliance on overtime to accomplish essential tasks
- Difficulty recruiting and retaining employees with necessary skills
- Competition with neighboring jurisdictions and seasonal employers for staff
- Difficulty managing hiring and onboarding logistics

Staffing Shortages

Key consequences of staffing shortages included stress, long hours, and concerns about service quality and productivity. This aligns with the Elections and Voting Information Center's Local Election Official Survey, which found that workloads over 40 hours per week were routine, with some offices reporting a median of 60 hours per week during peak periods that can last eight to twelve weeks.

Outside of the field of election administration, extensive research links long working hours with poor work quality and adverse health outcomes. While many fields rely on overtime to boost productivity in the short term, working excessive hours for weeks at a stretch can lead to diminishing productivity and reduced quality of work.

In election administration, overtime can begin early in an election season. Employees in a resource-constrained election office may begin working long hours months before an election, and the workload can compound as they shift their efforts to meet deadline after deadline. Excess overtime early in an election season can be an early warning sign of increased error risk in later weeks.

Skill Gaps

Turnover in an election office can reveal gaps between the work an employee was performing and the duties reflected in their job description. Election officials may find it difficult to replace the skills a departing employee brought to the position without reclassifying the role or increasing pay. Even without turnover, rising expectations can require election officials to develop new skills or hire candidates with specialized expertise to whom they can delegate specific tasks.

Skill gaps cited in interviews included project management, crisis management, data analysis, financial management, legal interpretation, and specific knowledge of election software and geographic information systems. Leadership, strategic thinking, organization, problem-solving, conflict resolution, supervisory skills, and effective communication were also cited as important skills often missing from existing job descriptions.

Shared Public Sector Workforce Pressures

Recruitment and retention aren't just election office concerns. Election administration is part of a broader public sector workforce and many of the pressures facing election officials are shared by their peers elsewhere in government. Across the public sector, agencies are working to recruit, retain, train, and support employees, while managing increased service demands with constrained resources.

Contrary to stereotypes about public sector employment, many government jobs involve high stress, public scrutiny, constrained resources, and limited flexibility. The public sector workforce also has a higher concentration of older employees than the private sector, raising concerns about knowledge transfer, succession planning, and service continuity. Lower compensation, burnout, and job dissatisfaction further fuel turnover, especially in mission-driven roles. These shared pressures extend beyond elections, but they pose particular risks to the capacity and resilience of the election system.

Key Challenge #2: Compensation

Election officials described several compensation challenges, including:

- Lack of competitive pay for temporary and entry-level positions
- Inability to recruit staff with desired skills for specialized roles at existing pay levels
- Turnover and fear of losing employees with skills that would be difficult to replace
- Feeling that election work is undervalued compared to other public sector roles
- Compensation based on outdated job descriptions and requirements
- Difficulty persuading stakeholders or navigating formal classification and compensation processes
- Limited authority to compensate staff with non-monetary support such as flexible scheduling and professional development opportunities



Election Officials Earn Less Than Other Public Leaders

Research using Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data shows that election officials are often classified and compensated more like administrative support staff than executive-level managers, despite carrying substantial leadership responsibilities. Local election officials earn an average of \$50,000, well below the \$70,000 median for executive roles. That gap can affect recruitment, retention, the profile of candidates who apply or run for the position, and how the role is perceived. Accurate job classification is not merely an internal personnel matter. It affects the capacity to run elections well.

What It Takes to Increase Pay for Election Positions

Increasing employee pay in the public sector can be complex, time-consuming, and politically sensitive. Where election officials are elected to their office, their pay may be set in state law, county statute, or municipal charter.

In smaller jurisdictions, election officials may be paid a stipend rather than a salary. They may not receive employment benefits such as retirement contributions or health insurance. Processes for evaluating compensation may not involve specialized human resource professionals, although a salary survey or compensation study may be commissioned on an ad hoc basis.

For career positions in larger offices, increasing pay typically begins with a formal position evaluation by a human resources professional, who assesses the duties, responsibilities, and required qualifications to determine the appropriate job classification and pay band. This evaluation is often accompanied by a salary analysis for comparable positions. Budget considerations also play a critical role, because departments must work within allocated funding and follow jurisdiction-specific procedures to justify proposed changes.

Once a classification or compensation adjustment is proposed, it may need to pass through a multilayered approval process involving the human resources office, finance or budget department, an election board, or other governing bodies. Compensation for other positions is also considered, as adjustments are reviewed to ensure they do not create disparities among similar roles within the office or across departments. If the position is covered by a union contract, collective bargaining may be required. Finally, all changes must comply with legal and regulatory frameworks, including equal pay laws, ethics rules, and nondiscrimination policies. These layers of review and compliance help explain why election officials often face significant barriers when trying to align staffing, roles, and compensation with the realities of modern election work.

Considerations for a Successful Compensation Study

When advocating for or participating in a compensation study, election officials can seek a tailored approach that includes cross-sector comparisons and accounts for the local labor market.

- Bring data to the conversation, including examples of other jurisdictions that have recently reclassified positions with similar job descriptions.
- Request comparison with similar roles in the nonprofit, academic, or private sectors when those employers are part of the competition for talent.

Challenges of Compensation Studies: Former and current election officials consulted for this report described mixed experiences with compensation studies. Compensation studies often benchmark against similar roles in nearby counties or within the same jurisdiction. This can have a circular effect, reinforcing existing compensation levels rather than correcting them.

Time frame for conducting a public sector compensation study: Conducting a compensation study for an entire office can take six months to a year, depending on the scope and complexity.

The phases of a compensation study include:

1. **Planning & Scope Definition** – The human resources professional or consultant responsible for the compensation study defines objectives, gathers input from the employee, supervisor, and others who are requesting or may be affected by the study, and outlines the methodology.
2. **Data Collection & Analysis** – Salary data must be collected, along with job descriptions for both the position and comparable positions within or outside of the office.
3. **Review & Validation** – Findings of the compensation study are typically validated through internal review and stakeholder discussions.
4. **Report Preparation & Recommendations** – A formal report with recommendations is prepared and may be modified or appealed.
5. **Approval & Implementation** – Budget processes and other timetables may affect the timing of approval and implementation.
6. **Ongoing Review** – Classification studies are often part of an ongoing process. New legislative or regulatory requirements may affect the duties that positions must perform, and decisions to reclassify or modify pay for one position may lead to requests to evaluate compensation in other positions or departments.

Key Challenge #3: Working Conditions

Election officials reported high levels of stress and burnout, driven by long hours, limited resources, and sustained pressure. Many described exhaustion, anxiety, and stress-related health issues that affected their decision-making and their ability to support their teams.

Many described feeling undervalued and frustrated by a lack of institutional support. Public distrust and perceptions of political interference added to the strain. Some election officials



described a helpful role for political leaders in rebutting conspiracy theories and explaining election processes to their political supporters. Others felt that political leaders amplified counterproductive messaging or applied undue pressure. Harassment and hostility were significant and compounding factors, but election officials also described other workplace challenges, such as insufficient office space to hire needed temporary staff to perform tasks resulting from new legal mandates.

These findings are consistent with the Elections and Voting Information Center's Local Election Official Survey, which showed declining job satisfaction since 2020, particularly among officials in smaller jurisdictions.

Case Study #4: Improving Voter Service Delivery

Scotland County, Missouri

Overview: Scotland County consolidated polling places to reduce staffing demands.

Challenge: Maintaining and improving service delivery without increasing staffing.

Strategy: Former Scotland County Clerk Batina Dodge identified a way to improve service by reducing polling places and focusing resources on each remaining location. She used public messaging and data transparency to explain the cost and service-efficiency benefits of consolidation, while promoting other in-person and by-mail opportunities to vote.

Outcome: Despite concerns that consolidation would be unpopular, voters were open to the strategy, and the change was accepted with minimal complaints.

Replicating This Strategy: At times, streamlining services can enhance the voter experience, especially when election officials clearly explain why changes are being made.

Key Challenge #4: Workload

In interviews, election officials described new legislation and rising workload expectations as a distinct workforce problem, related but not identical to their concerns about staffing shortages, pay, and stress. They talked about:

- Working long hours to keep up with the demands of simultaneously administering voting by mail and in person early voting, while preparing for both Election Day and post-election processes
- Feeling that their voices are not heard in decisions about policy changes and implementation

- A seemingly constant posture of change management
- Inability to expand staffing to keep up with an expanding workload
- Turnover burdens, including succession planning and training new staff

“So much of our time is spent figuring out what legislation means for us. And if there are no clear procedures that have been put out, or they're put out at the very, very last minute, which leads us banging our heads against the wall to train people, to disseminate the information, and to complete the processes. That adds a ton of stress, a ton of time, a ton of work. If legislation was cleaned up as opposed to just being rammed through, by people who knew what the process looked like, that would save a lot of time and I think would go a long way to eliminate turnover at all levels, because it causes a lot of burnout to be changing and defending processes that may not be fully understood or may not be the best.”

- election official from Michigan

Case Study #5: Reorganizing and Redefining Roles

Cobb County, Georgia

Registered voters: Approximately 550,000

Overview: The Cobb County Elections and Voter Registration Office completed an organizational restructuring to meet immediate operational needs and position the department to be more adaptive and resilient.

Strategy: Election Director Tate Fall spearheaded a comprehensive reclassification and staffing strategy after recognizing that the office had not grown in more than 20 years, despite significantly increased operational complexity.

The purpose of the effort was to create more specialized roles and additional management capacity. By transitioning experienced temporary employees into part-time permanent positions, the department preserved critical expertise and reduced the onboarding burden for new employees.

Outcome: New roles were established to meet specialized needs, including division managers for absentee voting and voter registration, a full-time GIS systems analyst, and a communications specialist.

Replicating This Strategy: Getting buy-in from decision-makers for new positions can be difficult and requires persistence. Fall says that “you have to try” and that the 2024 presidential general election would not have been as successful in her county without the new positions. She recommends focusing on recurring pain points and identifying where new roles or resources can address them.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of existing research and practices, field observations, interviews, and organizational analysis, this report offers four recommendations. Each recommendation is paired with strategies and tips to assist election officials as they evaluate their needs, articulate a comprehensive workforce plan, enlist institutional partners, and advocate for the funding and support needed to strengthen capacity.

In pursuing each of these recommendations, election officials are encouraged to:

- **Take a strategic and collaborative approach.** Commit the time needed to engage the right partners from the beginning, including policymakers, human resources professionals, budget staff, department heads, frontline staff, and governing authorities. Smaller jurisdictions may not have dedicated human resources offices or frontline staff, but they still have decision-makers and partners who should be involved in defining staffing needs and developing an action plan. Early and ongoing collaboration can build shared ownership and commitment to problem solving.
- **Think in both the short and the long term.** Election officials often need to focus on short-term needs when preparing for the next election. However, pursuing a comprehensive workforce plan requires a staged approach that balances urgent needs with steady effort and long-term thinking.
- **Articulate value.** To advocate effectively for needed funding and support, election officials must be prepared to articulate how additional resources will better equip them to meet the needs of voters. Acknowledging missteps and shortfalls, particularly when an office is understaffed or overwhelmed, can be the first step toward securing funding and personnel to prevent future problems. Effective advocacy from election administrators is often necessary to help policymakers understand that the reliability and quality of election administration depend on the strength of the workforce.

Recommendation #1: Evaluate Workforce Capacity

Identify where staffing gaps exist and what kinds of capacity are needed.

1. **Map the work across the election cycle:** Create multiple organizational charts or other visuals showing how staffing needs change at different stages of the election process. Identify what work must be completed, when it occurs, what skills it requires, who currently performs it, and how responsibilities shift during peak periods. These visuals

can help show whether the office needs additional entry-level task support, supervisory capacity, specialized expertise, or cross-department assistance at different points in the election cycle.

Case Study #6: Rewriting Job Descriptions and Benchmarking Salaries

Clackamas County, Oregon

Registered Voters: Approximately 300,000

Overview: Clackamas County revised job descriptions to more accurately reflect staff duties and responsibilities and support improved compensation.

Challenge: Securing raises for personnel whose expanded job duties had not been matched with additional compensation.

Strategy: Upon taking office in 2023, newly elected County Clerk Catherine McMullen began working to increase pay in the office. Factors used to evaluate whether positions should be more highly compensated included the degree of independent decision-making, complexity of assigned duties, and responsibility for coordinating with external partners.

Specifically, she was able to make the case that positions in the office met the criteria for classification as higher-paying Analyst positions, rather than the previous Senior Specialist role.

Outcome: Working with the classification and compensation director in Human Resources, she aligned job descriptions with upgraded classifications by documenting that positions met the criteria for a more highly compensated category of employment.

Replicating This Strategy: When seeking higher pay for a position, emphasize characteristics of the work that align with the criteria for higher grades, such as independent judgment and policy influence. These factors can be valuable in building a case for reclassification.

- 2. Look for indicators of strain:** Compile and review data on overtime, performance struggles, turnover, onboarding challenges, missed deadlines, bottlenecks, and other signs that the current staffing model is under stress. Consider whether collecting new data, such as time-and-task tracking, would help document workload demands, staffing gaps, or management burdens that are not otherwise visible.
- 3. Document what has changed:** Identify the causes of changes in workload and complexity, such as new laws, new technology, changing voting patterns, public information demands, administrative requirements, or changes in available expertise.



This can help answer the “why now” question when explaining why existing staffing models, job descriptions, or compensation structures may no longer fit the work.

4. **Compare official roles with work performed in practice:** Examine the gap between written job descriptions and the work staff actually perform, especially during peak workload periods. Identify responsibilities being performed outside official roles, outdated job descriptions, informal workarounds, and duties that may require training, reassignment, reclassification, or additional staffing.
5. **Identify available sources of labor and expertise:** Explore options for expanding capacity, including permanent positions, temporary staff, reassigned employees, shared staffing arrangements, consultants, vendors, interns, fellows, and cross-department partnerships.

Recommendation #2: Clarify Skill Gaps and Development Needs

Identify the knowledge and skills the office needs to meet rising demands.

1. **Examine skill gaps and training needs by role and career path.** Temporary staff, entry-level employees, technical specialists, supervisors, managers, and senior leaders may need different kinds of support. Knowledge gaps for leaders who were promoted from within the office can be very different from those hired from outside of election administration. Identify what skills are needed for each role, and where staff may benefit from training, coaching, mentoring, or other development opportunities.
2. **Clarify onboarding needs for temporary and entry-level positions.** A solid onboarding process can mitigate many of the risks of scaling up staffing during peak election periods. Identify what new workers need to know to perform their roles successfully, and what repeatable onboarding would look like across election cycles. Strong onboarding can reduce errors, improve confidence and quality of work, and help temporary or entry-level workers see their role in supporting accurate, accessible, secure elections.
3. **Identify knowledge transfer and succession risks.** Determine whether critical tasks, relationships, or decision points depend on a small number of people. Look for places where documentation, shadowing, mentoring, and cross-training could help preserve institutional knowledge. This can also reveal opportunities to improve processes and prepare employees for future responsibilities.

4. **Explore ways to create room for advancement.** Advancement often depends on promotion into a vacant position. Even in small offices, though, election officials can examine whether positions can be restructured as a promotional series, allowing more senior titles, expanded responsibility, and increased compensation as employees gain experience and training. Recognition, networking opportunities, and clear expectations for advancement can help employees understand what skills they will need to develop over time.
5. **Treat skill development as part of the work.** When offices are constantly under pressure to meet immediate deadlines, skill development can be treated as a “nice to have.” Consider whether learning opportunities are built into how the office does its work, or whether they happen only when time allows. Over time, this can strengthen capacity, improve consistency, and help employees see a future for themselves in election administration.

Recommendation #3: Examine Your Workplace Culture

Consider whether your workplace culture helps employees do difficult work well.

1. **Identify where working conditions are not serving employees well.** Leaders should examine where workplace conditions can be improved to better support their teams in performing their work. This includes examining whether staff have the tools, physical space, security, information, and leadership needed during periods of intense pressure. It also includes examining how workplace policies, management practices, and internal expectations address external pressures such as public scrutiny, false information, and threats or harassment.
2. **Take a critical look at overtime and unused leave.** Long hours are often treated as unavoidable in election administration, but excess overtime and unused leave are signs of strain that should be measured and reviewed. Offices should examine when overtime begins, how long it lasts, who carries the burden, and whether sufficient recovery time is available after peak periods. This can help leaders understand where workload, staffing, scheduling, or cultural expectations may be contributing to burnout, lower job satisfaction, or increased risk of errors.
3. **Review scheduling and flexibility practices.** Review whether work location, scheduling, blackout periods, and leave approval are administered fairly and consistently, and whether informal practices align with formal policies. Where informal flexibility has developed as an ad hoc approach to compensating employees for the demands of



peak election periods, consider whether those practices should be formalized, changes, or replaced with more sustainable approaches.

Case Study #7: Mentorship Programs and Consulting Support

State of Colorado

Overview: The Colorado County Clerks Association coordinated a mentorship and consulting support program to leverage the experience of retired clerks and support new clerks after widespread turnover in the 2024 election.

Strategy: After a third of clerk positions turned over leading into the 2024 election, and a primary election recount exposed gaps in training, the state clerks' association launched a mentorship initiative that included structured assessments, rapid response support, and peer coaching.

Most county clerks signed up for the program, including both veterans and newly elected clerks. The program began with on-the-ground assessments using a checklist of priority support areas, from election security and canvass procedures to observer management.

Outcome: A team of five former clerks provided coaching and real-time operational support as needs arose, including when ballot printing errors required counties to dramatically scale up hand duplication of ballots.

Replicating This Strategy: Turnover among election officials can create an opportunity to enlist retired professionals in mentorship and consulting support roles.

4. **Examine how the office recognizes effort and supports employees.** Mission-driven employees may take pride in doing hard work under pressure, but they still deserve recognition and support. Leaders should consider what their practices communicate: whether long hours are treated as heroism, whether mistakes are treated as learning opportunities or personal failures, whether recovery after intense periods is respected, and whether employees feel supported when pressure is high.
5. **Assess feedback systems and follow-through.** Leaders should examine how employees are expected to raise concerns, identify problems, and contribute ideas, and whether those channels work in practice. Effective feedback systems make clear where concerns should go, prepare supervisors to respond, allow employees to raise problems without fear of blame or retaliation, and communicate what can and cannot be changed. Following through where possible is invaluable to strengthening workplace culture.

Recommendation #4: Develop a Formal Action Plan

Work with partners to decide what needs to be done, when it can happen, and who will be responsible.

1. **Leverage expertise and engage stakeholders.** Election officials, human resources professionals, budget analysts, policymakers, advocates and staff all have expertise to contribute when identifying workforce needs and developing solutions. Bringing partners into the process early can help define feasible options, clarify tradeoffs, and build support. A strong partnership with human resource professionals can be particularly important in aligning workforce strategies with jurisdiction-wide structures, practices and vision.
2. **Use data and visuals for advocacy:** Use workforce data, organizational charts, workload measures, and other visuals to make workforce needs easier to understand. Effective visuals can help explain staffing gaps, seasonal workload demands, retention concerns, onboarding time, and the consequences of informal workarounds.
3. **Compare the costs and tradeoffs of different staffing options.** Evaluate the relative costs of overtime, reassigned staff, contract support, temporary labor, training, and other options. Consider whether the office needs more entry-level support, supervisory capacity, or specialized expertise. Include not only direct costs, but also hidden costs such as recruitment, training, supervision and coordination.
4. **Connect past challenges to future needs:** Speak directly to the challenges your office faces. Show how proposed changes could reduce overtime, prevent service delays, close skill gaps, improve working conditions, or lower the risk of errors. This can be especially valuable in making the case for “why now” and engaging stakeholders who have been critical in the past.
5. **Formalize essential support arrangements:** Where staffing or operational support depend on informal agreements, borrowed staff, or ad hoc support from other offices, identify what needs to be documented in budgets, interdepartmental agreements, job descriptions, or other formal commitments.
6. **Stage improvement over time.** Determine what can be done before the next election, what may require several budget cycles, and what will require longer-term policy or structural change. Account for stakeholders’ timetables. A formal plan can help election officials prioritize what is achievable now without losing sight of what is ultimately needed, especially when leaders’ own capacity is strained.



Case Study #8: Advocating for the Needs of Your Office

Loudoun County, Virginia

Registered Voters: Approximately 300,000

Overview: The Office of Elections and Voter Registration in Loudoun County, Virginia, has successfully advocated for additional resources. The office has grown from seven to seventeen full-time employees, reclassified positions, and created a flexible funding pool for temporary employees.

Strategy: Ricky Keech, the Deputy Director of Elections, has been persistent in making sure decision-makers understand the needs of the office and what it takes to deliver services. While he describes the atmosphere of mistrust as challenging, he also believes it is important not to waste any opportunity to earn an ally. He emphasizes spending the time to answer questions, build relationships, and explain processes, costs, and opportunities for improvement and efficiency.

He prioritizes efficiency, process improvement, and delegation of duties. The office has built a tiered staffing model with increasingly specialized roles played by permanent and temporary personnel in the office.

Outcome: The department has reduced overtime while expanding services. Keech is also a resource for others in the state and conducts a regular training session at the statewide registrars' conference to help other election officials present information on staffing gaps and needs in ways that build support.

Replicating This Strategy: Effective advocacy requires sustained effort. It requires knowing the office's processes and needs, thinking strategically about goals and how to achieve them, and communicating consistently with decision-makers and advocates.

“In one of our municipalities, the clerk went to her board the night that they were approving three fire department positions and funding the fire chief at a \$100,000 a year salary, and she was told there was no money to conduct early voting. At some point, fire protection is really important, but it's not a constitutional responsibility of the municipality. There needs to be an investment.”

- election official from Michigan

REQUESTS FROM THE FIELD

Across interviews, election officials consistently identified similar challenges and opportunities for support. Their insights point to practical ways partners can support election workforce capacity. The following themes emerged most clearly and repeatedly in these conversations:

- **Support for staffing needs**, including funding for new positions and guidance on conducting classification and compensation studies.
- **Specialized resources and training.** Election officials bring different skills and experience to their roles. They want training opportunities targeted to specific segments of the workforce, including new election officials and experienced staff taking on specialized duties or leadership roles.
- **Funding.** Election officials want consistent, predictable funding. Insufficient resources contribute directly to long hours, burnout and turnover in the field.
- **Civic education about the election process.** Election officials described the strain of spending significant time addressing mistrust and combating false information. They take pride in this work but want more information campaigns and educational efforts that rebut false allegations and accurately explain how elections are run.
- **A “first do no harm” approach from federal, state and county policymakers.** Election officials are invested in making policy solutions work. For many, burnout stems in part from feeling that their expertise is not valued. They want lawmakers to consult them on what it will take to administer changes in policy.
- **Job resources.** Election officials spoke broadly about the value of checklists, toolkits, and guides. They also expressed interest in human resources-specific tools, such as sample job descriptions, organizational charts, and resources for onboarding, skill development, mentoring, and succession planning.
- **Technical training.** Election officials want more training on technology, from the testing processes for voting equipment to using state voter registration systems. They want opportunities to learn more about the tools and practices that have received best-practice recognition.
- **In-person training.** While generally positive about online resources, especially for the purpose of getting temporary and entry-level staff up to speed quickly, election officials also wanted funding to send staff to in-person training opportunities.



DEVELOPING A NATIONAL ELECTION WORKFORCE CLASSIFICATION FRAMEWORK

The findings in this report point to the value of a shared workforce classification framework for election administration. Many professions use workforce frameworks to improve workforce planning and support professional development across a sector.

Election offices vary widely in size, authority, staffing model, and organizational structure, but they perform a common set of core functions. A single-person office and a large county department may look very different on an organizational chart, but both must perform the work required to administer elections. A workforce classification framework is designed to establish a shared way of describing the roles, tasks, knowledge, skills, and levels of responsibility associated with those functions.

Developing such a framework could expand on the “competency wheel” previously developed by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Rather than translating the competencies in that wheel into job titles, which vary significantly across jurisdictions, a framework could describe the specific tasks associated with each function and the knowledge and skills required. A national framework can also support standardized competency development, leadership development, career pathway mapping, workforce analytics, and professional certification efforts for the election administration profession.

Election managers often coordinate work across permanent staff, temporary workers, reassigned employees, vendors, poll workers, and partners in other departments, especially during peak election periods. A framework could help managers describe the core duties being reassigned or supplemented, identify the knowledge and skills required for those duties, and select staffing approaches suited to the work.

A workforce classification framework would make it easier for election officials to apply the recommendations in this report. It could support evaluation of workforce capacity by helping offices compare formal roles with the work actually being performed. It could support workforce planning by giving election officials, human resources professionals, budget staff, and policymakers a shared way to describe staffing gaps, skill needs, workload changes, and classification and compensation concerns. It could support training by clarifying the knowledge and skills associated with different roles and career pathways. It could also support stronger workplace culture by making the work of election administration more visible, more recognizable, and easier to connect to opportunities for growth and advancement.

CONCLUSION

Burnout and turnover in election administration are symptoms of more than threats and harassment.

While negativity in the public sphere contributes to poor job satisfaction, election officials also point to workload demands and inadequate staffing as major sources of stress, contributing to burnout and turnover. In interviews and observations conducted during the 2024 presidential general election, they often linked these concerns to a lack of institutional support and difficulty navigating processes for requesting and justifying more positions and higher pay.

Recruiting and retaining election officials requires a comprehensive workforce strategy.

Tackling the root causes of burnout and turnover is difficult, but possible. This report offers recommendations grounded in research and aligned with best practices in human resource management. It encourages election officials to evaluate workforce capacity, clarify skill gaps and development needs, assess workplace conditions and culture, and develop a formal action plan to strengthen the election workforce over time.

Election resilience depends not only on laws, systems, and physical infrastructure, but also on the ability to attract, develop, support, and retain the people with the skills needed to meet changing demands.

Through a comprehensive, strategic and collaborative approach, election officials can advocate for their needs and build support among policymakers and stakeholders for workforce priorities.

Trust in elections is tied directly to how well we support the people and systems that make them work.

This report calls for comprehensive election workforce planning with formal action plans, customized to the needs of each jurisdiction. By supporting these recommendations, policymakers and advocates can demonstrate that they are listening to the professionals who conduct elections and are committed to strengthening the workplaces of democracy.

ABOUT THE ELECTION RESILIENCE LAB

The Election Resilience Lab is a hub for research that identifies and demonstrates what works to strengthen the people and workplaces of democracy.

Our research is led by former election officials, workforce development experts, and academic researchers within the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement at the University of Maryland.

Our goal is to build evidence that election officials can use in managing their work and in shaping policy that strengthens election staffing, management processes, processes and infrastructure.

For more information and resources on the topics addressed in this report, visit cdce.umd.edu/erl



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