



Election Day Front Line: Poll Workers

By Jeanette Senecal

The debacle of Election 2000 heightened the nation's awareness of the weaknesses in our voting processes. Six years later, after millions of dollars have been poured into improving election administration, voters are still experiencing problems.

After the most recent federal election cycle, stories abounded of polls opening late as poll workers struggled with new voting technologies; voters being turned away by poll workers over confusion about ID requirements; equipment malfunctions and paper ballot shortages; and voters walking away from polls as wait times became insufferable. While it may be easy to point the finger at poll workers for these problems, it's really the "system" that is letting down these dedicated public servants by not providing the tools necessary for success.

Today's Poll Worker System: The Challenges

Voters' election experience is largely shaped at the polling place—and successful opera-

tion of the polling place is largely dependent on the poll workers. State and local elections officials continually cite their struggle to recruit and train sufficient numbers of workers to cover the polls as their biggest challenge. What has caused this tremendous shortage of the workers who are, in their own way, a lynchpin in our democracy?

Minimal Training and Pay

A well-managed polling place with well-trained workers is vital on Election Day and as part of the early voting process in many states. In federal election years, the U.S. has approximately 200,000 polling places staffed by about 1.4 million poll workers. These poll workers are responsible for organizing the polling place, managing the equipment, assisting voters with new machines, ensuring the proper handling of provisional ballots, dealing with sometimes confusing check-in and verification procedures, and much more. Despite the extent of these responsibilities, poll workers today receive only modest training and minimal pay for their long hours of work.

Demographic Changes in the Volunteer Population

Over the years, the people willing and able to volunteer have been those with the time and income that allow them to perform this public service. Today, however, younger people are working full time or don't want to work the 15- to 16-hour day for so little pay. At the same time, the volunteers who traditionally do this work are becoming aged and many struggle with too many new or different procedures. Our experienced poll workers are "retiring," while the need for technologically competent Election Day workers is increasing. We can expect this problem to grow unless we change the experience of working at the polls.

State and Local Constraints

The options available to the state and local elections officials who are responsible for recruiting poll workers are often seriously constrained by state or local law or procedure. Poll worker laws and procedures vary tremendously from state to

state and even from county to county. For example, some laws require, prohibit, or are silent on issues such as allowing persons under 18 years of age or persons living outside the voting jurisdiction to work at the polls. The conditions under which poll workers are to perform, including pay, hours to be worked and the amount of training needed also vary widely. Lastly, elections officials function in an environment like no other—there are no “time-outs” or “instant replays”—making them understandably cautious about introducing factors that might result in mistakes or unintended consequences or lawsuits. Therefore, there is limited support for “testing” new poll worker recruitment and training mechanisms.

All of these factors are compounded by two other very real constraints—shoe-string budgets and limited permanent staff.

The Time for Change Has Come

Today, the advent of new election laws and procedures, an increase in public scrutiny of election administration, razor-thin margins of electoral victory in recent elections, and recent or anticipated demographic changes have served as agents for change. For the first time, elections officials are beginning to experience the impact of these changes on their poll worker practices.

While many possible approaches have been identified—from enabling more

youth to work at the polls to treating poll worker recruitment as a civic responsibility like jury duty, there is still uncertainty on how best to proceed, and research on best practices is limited.

League Findings on Effective Practices

After organizing numerous focus groups with various stakeholders (elections officials, poll workers and general members of the public) from diverse communities nationwide, the League has gained some very interesting insights into practices that might help improve poll worker recruitment and training.

1. **Information sharing among elections officials can be improved.** It is clear that many elections officials are implementing innovative management practices, but they do not have robust mechanisms for sharing their experiences with each other. Officials are too busy and resource-strapped to invest significantly in learning what others are doing.
2. **The public is unaware of the problem and its importance.** The public simply does not know there is a shortage of poll workers. Elections officials must repeatedly inform them of the need and also make it easy for them to participate by using as many different recruitment methods as their offices can support.
3. **The application of required but flexible training opportunities does have an impact.** While training is not currently required in every location across the country, changes in election administration practices will likely result in more demanding training requirements from more elections offices. Scheduling training at various times throughout the day (including evenings) and on different days of the week (including weekends) are preferred because this would provide more flexibility to potential poll workers.
4. **Timely payment and personal touches are vital to motivating poll workers.** The best way to retain poll workers is to pay them on time and include a

personal touch from elections officials. Many poll workers are motivated by the personal interactions they experience through working in the elections process. They appreciate a personal thank you for their time and effort.

The most important thing to remember is—there is **no “magic bullet”** or one-size-fits-all solution. A recruitment or training method that works wonderfully in one place may not be as successful in another. This means elections officials must get comfortable with experimenting to find the right balance for their jurisdiction’s needs.

What Can Be Done

Weaknesses in the poll worker system were neither created overnight nor will they be fixed overnight. However, through a sustained commitment from both the public and private sectors, and officials and citizens alike, progress can be realized. The “system” can work for elections officials, poll workers and voters.

Hopefully you are asking yourself: “What can I do?” Elections officials can reach out to a neighboring jurisdiction to learn what they are doing to recruit and train poll workers, and adapt those practices to fit their jurisdiction’s needs. Citizens can reach out to their local elections office and learn more about how to become a poll worker. League members are encouraged to meet with elections officials to discuss local practices, identify areas in need of improvement, and work with officials to implement changes. These are small but important first steps towards creating an election system that works effectively for everyone. ■

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New EAC Resource: Poll Worker Management Guidebook

In 2005, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) commissioned a multi-phase research project. The project was implemented through a partnership among IFES, the Pollworker Institute and the League of Women Voters and represents the first-ever national undertaking to research effective strategies and current practices for poll worker recruitment, training and retention. The guidebook that resulted from this research will be available on the EAC Web site—www.eac.gov.

VOTER LINKS

- www.eac.gov/eac_qs_guides.htm
- www.lwv.org